

FIRST CONTACT

The Newsletter of the Irish Science Fiction Association

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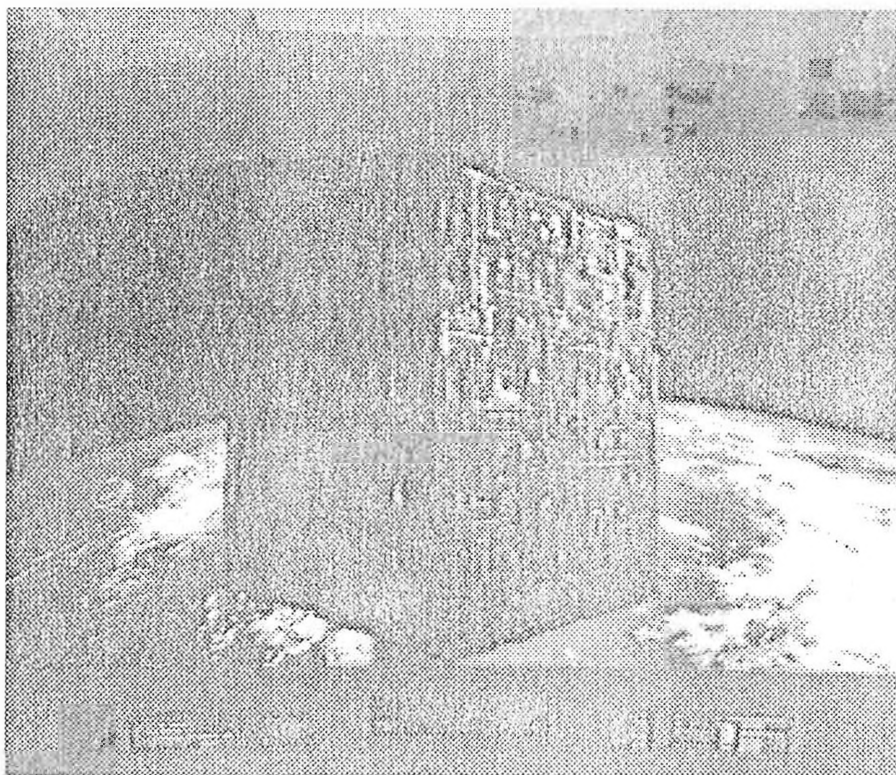
July, 1995

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In a packed Program tonight...

- Roger Zelazny Dies
- Star Trek VIII - Plot revealed
- Red Dwarf VII & VIII confirmed
- Forthcoming Books to end of year

See Page 4 for more details



Editorial

You've doubtless noticed that the newsletter you hold in your hand is, shall we say, smaller than the average bear this month. This is due to several reasons, most of them culminating in the fact that last month's newsletter was late in going out, giving people little or no chance to respond. I could have filled another eight pages myself, but I figured that I'm only the editor, and no-one wants to read a magazine that's been written almost entirely (eighty-three percent, in this case) by one person. If I'm wrong, and you don't mind one person's view of the world of science fiction, let me know. But to be honest, gratifying to my ego as it may be, I'd much prefer if other people wrote the stuff. After all, I'm an ISFA member too, and this month I'm getting the equivalent of a four-page newsletter. C'mon, people. I want value for money too, you know.

Next month (I promise) we'll be back to at least twenty-four pages; I'm hassling people for submissions already.

On the subject of what people want from the newsletter, a few people have mentioned that I'm concentrating too much on TV and related media, and not enough on books. Looking back over the last few issues I can see what they mean, but confess to being a trifle stuck as to what to do about it. One can only print so many book reviews before they become tedious, and I don't like any one article or topic dominating an issue. So if you've got a problem with the contents of the newsletter, let me know; but I'd also appreciate it if you can suggest a solution. At the moment I rely pretty much on Locus, Science Fiction Chronicle and catalogues from publishers to provide me with information on books, and I confess to being at a bit of a loss on how to cover them further. Any suggestions to the ISFA address, please.

Roibert, Man of Destiny
Editor

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If you don't want the editor coming
around at four in the morning looking
for taxi fare home because he got
lost, please place a tick in this box.



First Contact, Volume 2, Issue 6, ISSN 0791-3966. *First Contact* is published monthly by the Irish Science Fiction Association. But does the ISFA print it? No. And who has to staple the bastard? Me. Well, no more. I give up. Never again. Well, maybe one issue. As long as you agree to my demands. 1. All the material within is Copyright (c) 1995 the respective authors. *First Contact* is copyright (c) 1995 The Irish Science Fiction Association. 2. No reproduction by any means, known or unknown, blue or any other colour, is allowed without written permission. There. If these demands aren't met, we start wedging hostages.

News

Book News

Roger Zelazny Dies

Roger Zelazny, author of the Amber series, died last month. At the moment, I've no other details available, as none of this month's magazines carries the story; I'll have more details next month. Zelazny was probably best known for his Amber series of ten books, but he was also a great short story writer; his story 'The Last Defender of Camelot' was made into a *Twilight Zone* episode. Unlike most other writers who've been around for years and years, his writing never deteriorated, and his latest novel, *A Night in Lonesome October*, was nominated for several awards.

Hugo Nominations

The Hugo Nominations for best novel are...

Mother of Storms, John Barnes

Brittle Innings, Michael Bishop

Mirror Dance, Lois McMaster Bujold

Beggars and Choosers, Nancy Kress

Towing Jehovah, James Morrow

I won't tell you who I think should win.

Star Trek is up for two nominations in the Dramatic Presentation category: *All Good Things* (ST:TNG) and *Generations* were both nominated. It's been suggested (ok, by me) that the names of all who nominated *Genera-*

tions be published, and we should go around to their houses armed with stout sticks.

Cadigan Wins Clarke Award

The Arthur C. Clarke Award for best novel published in 1994 has gone to Pat Cadigan for her novel *Fools*. Although I liked it a lot, I was surprised to see it win, as a number of people to whom I recommended it thought it was crap. Still, there you go.

Banks Wins BSFA Award

Iain M. Banks won this year's BSFA award for his novel *Feersum Endjinn* ("great stuff" — nearly everybody; "shite" — me).

American Book Prices to Increase

It's beginning to look as if American paperbacks will be increasing in price in a few months; a typical paperback will cost \$5.99, with best sellers going as high as \$7.50. At the moment, most stores in Dublin charge for American books at a straight dollar-for-pound conversion, with Waterstones being cheaper than most (if not all), but it's unlikely that this will continue. I can't imagine anyone paying £7.50 for a paperback; I certainly wouldn't pay that myself.

Blue Mars Still Unfinished

As anyone who's ever worked in For-

bidden Planet will tell you, most customers don't say "hello," they say "Is *Blue Mars* in yet?" To all those people, and to all of you who were wondering, let me say that Kim Stanley Robinson is currently working on the book, and expects to have it finished by August. This means it should be in the shops around March in hardback. Meanwhile, he's written a sidebar short story collection called *A Martian Romance*, which will be published by HarperCollins; no date is available as yet.

Jammy Bastard

Terry Goodkind has sold the rights to volumes three, four and five of his *Wizard's Rule* series for Tor for a cool million bucks. As anyone who's read the first volume will tell you, it's an average fantasy, and nowhere nearly as good as the likes of Dave Duncan et al.

Third Ringworld Novel Finished

Larry Niven has handed in to Del Rey the third book in the Ringworld cycle, *The Ringworld Throne*. There's no word as yet as to a publication date.

Blade Runner 2 Finished

K.W. Jeter has handed in *Blade Runner 2 : The Edge of Human*. Will it suck? Probably not, but people will complain anyway.

Ringpull Folds

Ringpull Press, who published Jeff Noon's award-winning *Vurt*, has gone

into receivership, mainly because it had to pull one of its books due to alleged copyright infringement. The sequel to *Vurt*, *Pollen*, only recently came out in hardback, but future sales of the book look doubtful.

Movie News

Hey na Hey na

The Borg are back. *Star Trek VIII* is currently being written by Bannon Braga and Ronald Moore who also wrote the execrable *Star Trek : Generations*. Precisely how the Feds are going to beat the unbeatable this time remains to be seen, but I suspect a rather silly ending is in store. Maybe Sisko will lend a hand with the Defiant.

Indy 4, Star Wars 1

The fourth Indiana Jones move, *Indiana Jones and the Lost Continent*, is all set to go, with the usual suspects (Lucas, Spielberg, Ford respectively) producing, directing and starring. Rumour has it that Sandra Bullock will also star, as will yet another member of the Jones family, Indy's brother Kevin Costner, who'll doubtless be named after the goldfish.

But George Lucas isn't resting there, oh dearie me no. He's also currently working on storylines for the first three movies in the Star Wars sequence with Frank Darabont, and is set to direct the first movie himself. As reported previously, all three films will be shot back to back, and the first will be released in 1998.

Superman 5

Despite the fact that Christopher Reeve is currently relaxing in hospital with a broken neck, plans are going ahead for the filming of Superman 5, set to be the most hi-tech and ultra cool of the films yet. Given that three and four sucked, I don't hold out much hope; I'd much rather see a Lois and Clark movie, with Dean Cain donning the underpants.

TV News

Red Dwarf VII Confirmed (again)

After confirming and denying several times that the new series of Red Dwarf would go ahead, it now seems that the BBC and Grant Naylor have finished negotiations, and Red Dwarfs VII and VIII will be shot back to back, along with two Christmas specials. Despite persistent rumours that Chris Barrie is reluctant to return to the show, Grant Naylor have said that they expect all four main characters to return. It's possible that Hattie Hayridge will return as Holly, if the as-yet-unwritten scripts call for Red Dwarf being found. Meanwhile, the BBC are planning the release of Smeg Outs, a follow up to the hugely successful and hugely crap Smeg Ups. More hilarious bloopers, with such classics as "Watch out for that... what was my line again?" I can't wait. Finally on the subject of Red Dwarf, there are rumours (again) that a film is being planned.

Elizabeth Montgomery Dies

Elizabeth Montgomery, best known
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for her role as Samantha in the 60s sitcom Bewitched, has died of cancer. You can remind yourself of what the programme was like every day on RTE, and I must say that it's not as bad as some of the crap that was around at the time (the Brady Bunch is on RTE shortly afterwards, for example).

Space heads to Sky

Glen Morgan and James Wong, names familiar to any fan of the X-Files (and who isn't?) are behind what will be Fox's most expensive production ever, Space. The series will be about a bunch of space cadets who fight alien baddies, and is expected to be quite good. Sky, as one of the show's backers, will get their hands on it soon after its release in America.

Babylon 5 to Return... Maybe

Check out any one of a hundred science fiction magazines and they'll all tell you the same thing: Channel 4 said Babylon 5 won't be returning until they buy the new series, and will show the last four episodes along with series 3. However, when we contacted Channel 4, they stated quite categorically that the series would be returning RSN; in fact, after the Tour de France was finished on July 27th. As yet, I'm not sure who to believe, Channel 4 or, er, Channel 4, so keep your eyes glued to the TV listings for late July.

While we speak of Babylon 5, the (still tentative) narration at the beginning of series 3 will be uttered by none other than the redoubtable Commander

Ivanova, and will go...

"The Babylon Project was our last, best hope for peace." It failed. But, in the Year of the Shadow War, it became something greater; our last, best hope for... victory. The year is 2260. The place: Babylon 5."

Robocop Returns from Dead

Despite being cancelled (and quite deservedly, in my humble opinion), Robocop is set to return in four two-hour TV movies. An American two-hour TV movie, by the way, is only an hour and a half long; our chums in the US insist in factoring in ad breaks.

Avengers & New Avengers to Reappear

After Babylon 5 finishes its run (there are four episodes left to show), Channel 4 are planning on showing the colour Emma Peel episodes of The Avengers in its stead (and its time slot). Meanwhile, BBC2 are planning on reshowing The New Avengers later this year; no definite slot has been scheduled, though. Emma Peel and Purdey both; what more could one ask for?

While I'm talking about The Avengers, I was hoping to be able to dispel a previously-mentioned rumour that Mel Gibson will be playing Steed in the forthcoming movie. 'Twas not to be, however, and he's still hot favourite in the movie that it now seems will be directed by Nicholas Meyer. However, I've been getting used to the idea, and reckon he might not do a bad job at all at all. No-one believed me when I said Tom Cruise would make a good

Lestat, either.

Lois & Clark, seaQuest to Return

Both seaQuest : DSV and Lois & Clark : The New Adventures of Superman will be returning for third seasons, although seaQuest for only thirteen episodes. The consensus on this is that it's thirteen episodes too many, unless something drastic is done like shooting everyone who scripted an episode during series 2. It seems that Roy Scheider agrees; he'll be appearing in only five episodes, the minimum his contract allows him. It's suspected that he'll be promoted to admiral to accommodate this change, and the most likely candidate for new captain is Clancy Brown. He was wonderful as the Kurgan in Highlander, you may recall.

Lois & Clark, on the other hand, has been getting better and better, and is now almost on a par with Babylon 5 and The X-Files.

Speaking of Lois & Clark, did anyone catch the episode "Whine Whine. Whine" on RTE at the end of June? It guest-starred Adam West and Frank Gorshin, who (as if I needed to tell you) played Batman and the Riddler respectively in the old series of Batman.

Chris Carter in Scotland

Chris Carter, the man behind The X-Files, will be telling 'em all about it at the International Television Festival this August. Also in Scotland this August (24th-28th to be precise) is the

World Science Fiction Convention. I mention this merely as a coincidence, and not as another reason for signing up for the Worldcon (as if you needed another reason).

Kolchak in X-Files

Because I can't let an issue go by without at least one item about the X-Files, I'll have to tell you that Darren McGavin is currently negotiating with the producers about a guest spot in the show. As you may know, Kolchak : The Night Stalker is supposed to be Chris Carter's inspiration for The X-Files, and while short-lived, it was a programme I enjoyed immensely. Let us pray that he'll appear in the third season.

Video News

Voyager Released, Deep Space Nine Deferred

CIC have just released the pilot episode of Star Trek : Voyager, and called it cassette 1.1 in line with the new ST:DSN numbering system. The programmer in me says it should be called 1.0, but I guess nobody buys version 1.0 of anything. Anyway, to make up for this new series, they've deferred any releases of Deep Space Nine for six months, as it was being released too soon after the episodes' airing in America. Across the pond, I don't think that all of The Next Generation is available on video yet, so don't complain.

Blake's 7 Released

After deleting the original run when I

needed one cassette to complete my collection (#20, if any kind soul knows where it can still be bought), the BBC will be rereleasing the first thirteen cassettes this October at a trifling £7.99 each. That's sterling, now; expect to pay up to a pound more here.

Another Dr Who Documentary

The BBC have been fair churning out the Dr Who documentaries, lately; the latest is to be called Dalekmania and will be released at the end of this month. Like the others, it'll be directed by Kevin Davies. I haven't seen his Dr Who stuff, but he also directed The Making of The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy, which is great stuff.

Random Stuff

Neutrinos Gain Weight

Just finished that novel about aliens hiding in the Dark Matter halo that surrounds the galaxy? Well, I'm afraid you're going to have to think of something else. It seems that our American chums have discovered that neutrinos -- previously thought to have zero mass when at rest -- actually aren't massless after all. And considering that there are approximately 2^{23} gazillion neutrinos in the universe, they account for pretty much all the weight big bang theorists figure is needed for the theory to work. Hence, no more dark matter. This, combined with the discovery recently of the diffuse intergalactic gas left over from the big one, means that any steady state heretics should be ready to recant.

Forthcoming Books

The following is a list of some of the books that you can expect in the next six months or so, as gleaned from Locus. This is by no means an exhaustive list, and is very arbitrary, consisting as it does of books that either I'm interested in or I figure most people want to know about.

- Salmon of Doubt, Douglas Adams, Hutchinson, Oct.
Brightness Reef, David Brin, Bantam Spectra, Oct (vol. 1 of a new Uplift trilogy).
Cetaganda, Lois McMaster Bujold, Baen, Jan '96.
Alvin Journeyman, Orson Scott Card, Tor, Sep.
Rider at the Gate, C.J. Cherryh, Warner Aspect, Aug.
Stalking Tender Prey, Storm Constantine, Creed, Nov.
Jurassic Park 2, Michael Crichton, Knopf, Sep (the man with more money than God sells out)
The Gap into Ruin, Stephen Donaldson, Bantam Spectra, Mar '96 (last volume in Gap series).
Past Imperative, Dave Duncan, AvoNova, Oct.
Belgarath the Sorcerer, David Eddings, Del Rey, Aug.
Slippage, Harlan Ellison, Mark V. Zeising, Aug.
Testament, Valerie J. Freireich, Penguin, Aug.
The Sword of Flame, Maggie Furey, Legend, Oct.
Hawk Eternal, David Gemmell, Legend, Oct.
Travelling with the Dead, Barbara Hambly, Del Rey, Oct.
Hammer and the Cross 3, Harry Harrison, Legend, Dec.
Common Threads, Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Raven, Dec(?).
Djinn Rummy, Tom Holt, Little, Brown, Aug.
The Crown of Swords, Robert Jordan, Tor, Mar '96.
Two Crowns for America, Katherine Kurtz, Bantam Spectra, Feb '96.
Four Ways to Forgiveness, Ursula Le Guin, HarperPrism, Sep.
Marks of Our Brothers, Morgan Llywelyn, AvoNova, Jul.
A Diversity of Dragons, Ann McCaffrey, Simon & Schuster, Oct.
Dragons, Anne McCaffrey, Bantam UK, Nov.
Bible Stories for Adults, James Morrow, Harcourt Brace, Feb '96.
The Bloody Red Baron, Kim Newman, Simon & Shuster UK, Oct
Maskerade, Terry Pratchett, Gollancz, Oct.
The Garden of Unearthly Delights, Robert Rankin, Doubleday, Oct.
Memnoch the Devil, Anne Rice, Knopf, Jul.
The Ganymede Club, Charles Sheffield, Tor, Nov.
Endymion, Dan Simmons, Bantam, Jan '96.
Star Wartz, Patrick Tilley, Orbit, Aug.
Elves & Muskets, John Whitbourne, Gollancz, Nov.

Book Reviews

The X-Files : Whirlwind, Charles Grant, HarperCollins, pp264, £4.99

The X-Files : Whirlwind is the second X-Files novel and along with the first and third (due in August) is written by Grant. In the past -- indeed, in the first X-Files novel -- I've found Grant to be an above-average horror writer, with decent characterisation and a plot that moves along nicely. Sadly, this is not the case with Whirlwind. A lot of things went wrong with this novel, not least of which is the title.

The point of the novel is Scully & Mulder investigating a number of bizarre deaths in New Mexico (or Arizona, if the back of the book is to be believed). Each of the victims was mutilated horribly, and in each case there is no obvious murder weapon. So it goes for most of the book with the reader puzzling along with Scully and Mulder as to the nature of the killings. Unless, that is, you happen to read the blurb, which gives it all away. If you missed the blurb, then the title of the book will do just as nicely.

In a typical episode of the X-Files, about fifteen minutes in we're usually given some manner of clue as to who (or what) is perpetrating the crime of the week. Grant cheerfully ignored this, giving no clues, making it more of a typical novel. However, some bright spark in the publishers obviously decided differently, and gave it all away.

If that were the only thing wrong with the book, I wouldn't mind so much. Alas, the problems go much deeper. In the first portion of the book we're introduced to a typical FBI scene, where Mulder's deductive abilities are called on by other agents in

an attempt to solve a case on which they were working. These chapters seem extraneous, only added in so that they can alternate with the happenings in New Mexico. However, they're well-written, and capture Mulder very well. Grant also does a great job of portraying the ambiguous nature of Assistant Director Skinner; you never know exactly who's side he's on. Scully, however, comes off less well. Grant seems to have a problem portraying Scully as someone more than a fed assigned to keep Mulder in line; throughout the book she's portrayed as a backup for Mulder. She's given the same role she has in the series, but watered down to a great extent. It seems that Grant is aware of this, as he keeps reminding us what a strong character Scully is. But instead of showing us, he says "what a strong character Scully is."

Once our dynamic duo get to New Mexico, the action slows to a crawl. Grant gives up any pretense of Scully & Mulder being based on established characters (god, I almost wrote 'real characters.' I'm going to have to give this programme up.), and gives them the dialogue and mannerisms of any two agents. The investigation itself proceeds half-heartedly, and when it's eventually solved (through an even more implausible leap of logic than Mulder usually manages), I viewed it with relief, thinking that I could now get on to reading a decent book.

As I said, Grant is usually much better than this, and Goblins did a much better job of depicting the agents. Grant is writing the third book, but rumours have it that that will be his last, because of disagreements with the publishers. After Goblins, I would

have been disappointed. After this, I'm a little relieved.

Robert Elliott

Left to His Own Devices, Mary Gentle, Orbit, pb, 378 pp, £ 5.99

The third book in the White Crow series, "Left to His Own Devices" centres on the exploits of two renegade computer programmers. Valentine Branwen, former simulation designer for the U.S. military, has returned to her native London - now a fortress against invasion by refugees from war-torn Europe. There she makes a living writing VR games and organising re-enactments of medieval battles, and believes that she has severed all ties with her bigamous ex-husband, Balthazar Casaubon. Casaubon, an overweight hypermedia link-architect whose wit and charm compensate for his questionable personal habits, manages to track her down, and reveals - in the presence of Miles Godric, a live-news reporter - that, with her assistance, he can solve the problem of compiling human knowledge fully, by a process called direct neural input. Human memory could be transferred directly to a computer in a matter of hours, and the information would be fully cross-referenced, as it is in the brain. Of course, there are problems. The programs used in the system are the property of the U. S. Defence Department, while the Pan-European Ministry of Defence - headed by Branwen's mother - wants to prevent the resulting flood of information and the breach of security with it. Casaubon arranges a public demonstration of DNI, with Godric as the subject, to auction the system to major corporations. However, he becomes the target of a smear campaign, and, in retaliation, uses his hacking skills to destroy all information secu-

rity systems. Meanwhile, the DNI process has an unusual result - the creation of an Artificial Unconscious...

Also included in this volume are three fantasy short stories: "Black Motley", a tale set in a society co-habited by intelligent rats and men, where the written word is forbidden; "What God Abandoned", a shape-shifting, gender-bending story set during the Age of Reason; and "The Road to Jerusalem", an alternate-history story where the Crusades have continued into the twentieth century. It was only after I agreed to do this review that I discovered that this book was part of a series, but I soldiered on, and found that it wasn't really necessary to have read the previous two novels. Gentle has an arresting style - she mixes past and present tenses, nearly always unnoticeably, and this gives an almost cinematic immediacy to the action. While one of her characters denounces the idea of cyberpunk dystopias, and Gentle avoids the now clichéd idea that corporations will control everything, cyberpunk's influence is evident in this story. The characters are mostly streetwise technophiles, and the climax takes place partly in what could be described as cyberspace. The dogma of cyberpunk is that information technology will irrevocably change the power structures of our society, but Gentle leaves this as a matter of debate. This leads to an unsatisfactory impression that nothing has really changed at the conclusion of the story, though this may also be attributable to a need for some form of status quo to be maintained for the series to continue. But these are minor quibbles, and Gentle more than makes up for them through the originality of her vision of the future. The mingling of interests in both past and future, in the form of Branwen's "swords

and software" company and the first communication from the Artificial Unconscious (a Marlovian style play, written in perfect blank verse), is unique in this type of story, and details such as the leisurewear clothing of bureaucrats, and the rolling-news reporters continuously searching for stories make the setting more believable. If Mary Gentle is as interesting in person as she is in her writing, she should make one of the more memorable guests at any Octocon.

Adam Darey

The Hallows, Michael Scott, Creed, pp353, pb, £1.99

The Hallows, I was reliably informed, was a horror book. Indeed of you look at the back of the tome, there's the little description, 'horror', just above the price. But everything else about the book screams 'Dark Fantasy.' The cover has ornate Celtic knotwork bordering it, and the spine, far from being black, is a pastely white. Reading the book, it seems more like a fantasy novel with the odd evisceration thrown in for good measure. Dark fantasy is an appalling neologism, first used for (I suspect) Clive Barker to make his more literary works more palatable to the mainstream. It's a plan that works, and doubtless will work for this novel as well. The Hallows of the title are thirteen artefacts, each of which contains great power. But when the thirteen are brought together, only one man can control them; the mysterious Ambrose. During World War 2, he brought together thirteen war evacuees, and gave each one an artefact, warning them that they must never come together, nor must they leave Britain.

The novel takes place in the present day, when the keepers of the artefacts are all quite old. Someone is killing off these

keepers, and it's only through chance that Greg Matthews manages to prevent one of these murders taking place. He pays a high price for helping her, though; his entire family is murdered and he soon finds himself on the run for the police, who think he's guilty of the crimes.

Greg soon teams up with Elaine Powys, the niece of the woman he (temporarily) saved, and soon the pair find themselves heading for Wales, and the site were it all started fifty years ago. On the run from both the police and the Dark Man who is after the artefacts, Greg is forced to behead the odd skinhead in an attempt to keep ahead, a fact that hardly endears him to the police. The chase culminates in an attempt to stop the Dark Man, rescue the artefacts and somehow clear Greg's name. As I said earlier, this is much more of a fantasy novel than a horror novel. The scenes where keepers and others are ritually killed are quite nasty, but more horrifying is the casual, almost incidental violence of the Dark Man as he tortures his victims. The blood and guts take up only a small percentage of the book, with most of the story concerning the artifacts which, with names like the Sword of Rhydderch, require mouthfuls of phlegm should you ever want to read this book aloud.

The Hallows is an entertaining, fast-moving tale that keeps the reader going right up to the end. I had a few very slight problems with the end of the book -- the nature of which I can't reveal without giving more of the plot away -- which seem like the sort of effort at heightening tension that one would find in a TV horror movie. The Hallows treads a fine line between horror and fantasy, and risked pleasing followers of neither camp. Happily this didn't happen, and the result is a book with a very wide appeal.

Robert Elliott

Persistence of Vision, Suspension of Disbelief, Pretension of Title

Michael Carroll

Oooh! There's some good SF on TV these days. What happened? No, I mean, *really* what happened? Ten years ago there was very little decent SF on the box. Ten years before that (roughly) there was a great deal of utter tosh. Now, we have *Babylon 5*.

Myself, I put it down to cosmic rays. Somehow, the powers that be have been influenced in their TV producing decisions. Instead of churning out the usual load of utter crap, they've managed to find people who actually *know* something about SF. Okay, so we still have some rotten SF on TV, but I'm tempted to say that even bad SF is better than none. In fact, I'm even more tempted to encourage you to ignore the previous sentence and act like you never read it.

We all know, of course, that TV SF will never be as good as the real thing, proper SF - real, proper SF when it's done to perfection - should be on paper and between two covers. At *least* two covers: six seems quite acceptable these days, and even more than that isn't a problem, but there should always be at least two... Because if there was only one cover, then nothing could be between it. Anyway, to get to the point, it really does look like TV SF is getting much closer to the real thing. And though many people may disagree with me on this one, it's all thanks to the original series of *Star Trek*.

Without *ST:TOS*, there would have been no *Next Gen*, and *Next Gen*, I firmly opine, is directly responsible for the recent surge in popularity of TV SF. Of course, *Star Trek* itself isn't usually good science fiction, entertaining though it is. However, *Babylon 5* (the only true rival to *Trek* on at the moment) is good SF. Darned good, in fact.

So what's my point? Simple: *B5* succeeds in being good SF because the creators *actually worked it all out in advance!* A novel approach to a TV show, but not a novel approach to a novel. In fact, all the best SF is carefully plotted before the writer gets on with the actual writing. Tell me that this is so with shows like *seaQuest*. Tell me that they knew exactly what was going to happen before they start filming. Oh, sure, they have the episodes worked out a few months in advance, but there's no-one looking at the overall picture.

Now, I admit to being a pretty big fan of *Deep Space Nine*. I think the show is better than *TNG* or *TOS* - it's certainly much better than *Voyager* (though every series starts off a little shakily) - but I don't believe for a minute that the creators decided from the start exactly where the characters were going and what the season cliff-hangers would be. No, they more or less made it up as they went along. This is pretty easy to tell: in a recent episode, a minor recurring character dies. This upsets a lot of people, as you might imagine, but next episode there wasn't a mention of it. No reaper-cushions.

Can you imagine what *Babylon 5* would have been like if JMS has just developed the basic characters and the background, and let the writers have the freedom to do whatever they wanted? Within half a season the station would have been fitted with matter transmitters and holodecks, because they're handy crutches for unimaginative writers. Sinclair would have had a different girlfriend every week. Deleem would not have undergone the change. Talia Winters would have been reduced to nothing more than a Deanna Troi clone. The Narns would have become Klingons, the Minbari would have become Vulcans, and the Centauri would have become Ferengi (the *Star Trek* comparisons here are not meant to be taken illiterally: I'm simply using them to illustrate the lack of depth available to the writers who would be - for all practical purposes - working in isolation).

Look at *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. The show ran for seven seasons, and only *one* character (Tasha Yar) underwent a major change, and that was because she wanted to leave the show. The final two-parter, "All Good Things..." came and went, and made not a bit of difference. You can watch most episodes of TNG in any order you like without missing anything. I'm not saying that characters should die, but I am saying that I believe the name "Star Trek" is rather misleading: A trek is a journey, and Picard and crew spent seven years boldly going absolutely nowhere. And I apologise for the corny use of that phrase.

Imagine if *Babylon 5* came to the end of its five year run, and nothing of consequence had happened. Okay? Now imagine if Piller, Berman and Taylor had worked out - in advance - exactly what was going to happen to the USS *Voyager*, its crew, and the various supporting characters. Makes a big difference to both shows, doesn't it?

"Caretaker", the pilot of *Star Trek: Voyager*, ends with Neelix offering his services as a guide though the Delta Quadrant. There *has* to be a better excuse to keep Neelix on board. I can think of one right now... Neelix also originates from the Alpha Quadrant, and stays with the *Voyager* because it's his best way of getting home.

But *Babylon 5*'s pilot, "The Gathering", ends with someone telling Sinclair "You have a hole in your mind." Right there we have an insight into the way J. Michael Straczynski has plotted his show: Sinclair realises that there is much more to his twenty-four hour blackout than he ever imagined.

If you're not convinced, look at it like this: It's three or four years from now, and both series are finished. You are unfathomably wealthy, and decide to sit down and watch every episode of one of the series in a marathon session. Which would you choose? The series where each episode's events mean nothing to the overall story, or the series where *every* episode means something?

And, of course, Claudia Christian is a babe.

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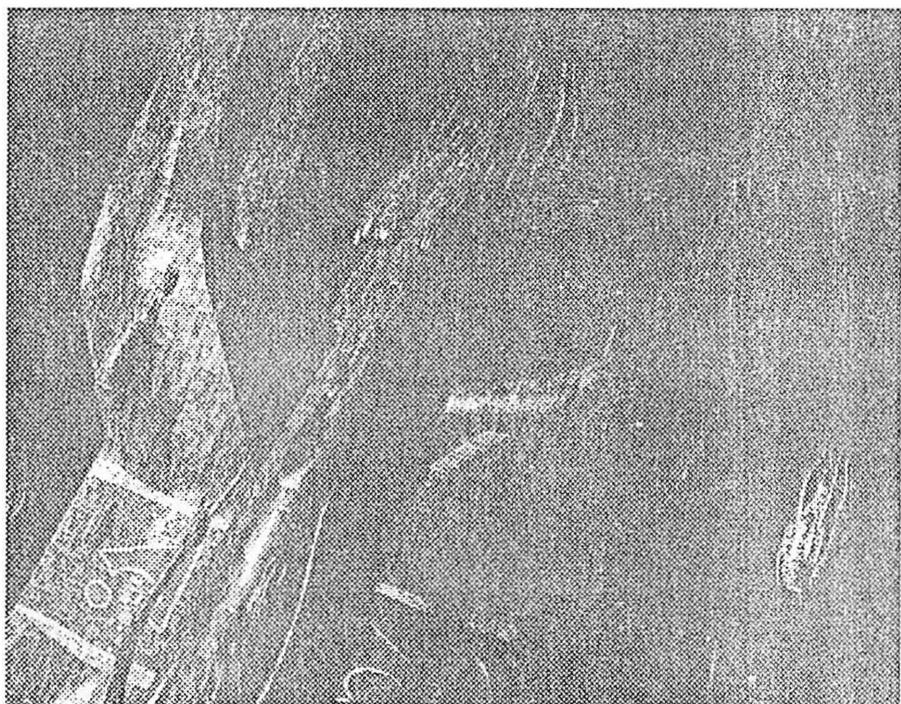
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My Top Ten Favourite Books Ever

Michael Carroll

In reverse descending alphabetical order according to whichever comes first:

10. *Speaker for the Dead* - Orson Scott Card

A wonderful novel, easily Card's best to date. Ender Wiggin arrives on Lucitania to investigate the death of a research scientist at the hands of native aliens. Slowly, Ender begins to uncover not only the mystery of the killing, but also the secrets of the planet's human settlers. A totally mind-blowing story.

9. *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* - Douglas Adams

The novel which led one ex-ISFA member to believe that wordprocessors are dangerous because they can scramble your novel, Adams' first break from the Hitchhiker's series is a superb departure from the accepted linear plotting of a detective novel. Adams packs this book with so many jokes and so much detail that every time I read it I realise that there is so much I didn't pick up last time.

8. *Darkest Day* - Christopher Fowler

This book has one of the most complex plots I've ever encountered. I won't even begin to summarise it here. While not strictly a horror novel, there are scenes in *Darkest Day* that still make me shiver. Packed with realistic characters, gruesome deaths and Fowler's mischievous sense of humour, this is one of those books that you just can't do without. I've had nightmares based on the events in *Darkest Day*. Buy it now. And buy Fowler's new novel *Spanky* while you're at it.

7. *Who Goes Here?* - Bob Shaw

This, the first novel to feature Shaw's Warren Peace, is probably his best book, though the sequel *Dimensions* comes close. The plot is seemingly simple: Warren joins the Space Legion to forget. However, the brain-wipe was only supposed to remove the memories relating to whatever he wants to forget; Warren can't remember *anything* but his name. This is a genuinely funny book, with some wicked twists.

6. *Towing Jehovah* - James Morrow

Another winner from the man who brought us the World Fantasy Award-winning *Only Begotten Daughter*. As with Morrow's other books, *Towing Jehovah* is packed with great characters, sharp dialogue, stunning ideas ... The plot? God dies and falls into the sea. He must be towed to a special cavern in the arctic before his two-mile long body begins to rot or gets eaten by sharks.

5. *Cerebus: Church & State* - Dave Sim & Gerhard

Two volumes, containing twelve-hundred pages of pure perfection. Following on from *High Society*, *Church & State* shows Cerebus still climbing the social ladder. From Prime Minister there can only be one step up: Pope. Cerebus finds himself torn between his own desire for gold and President Weishaupt's manipulations. If you've even the tiniest interest in religion, politics, humour or just plain violence, then I urge you: Buy Cerebus.

4. *The Brentford Triangle* - Robert Rankin

Rankin's second novel, and — just barely — his best. The battle for domination of the Earth begins, as a lost squadron of Cercans return to our system, only to find their planet missing, and a suspicious-looking asteroid belt in its place. Only Pooley and Omally (with the aid of Professor Slocombe, Neville the part-time barman and the spirit of Edgar Allen Poe) can save us. This book features a darts match, a camel, a diminutive postman and the now-legendary Captain Laser Alien Attack video game.

3. *Mission of Gravity* - Hal Clement

The only book in my list that was written more than fifteen years ago, and also the only 'hard' SF book in the list. Real science, realistic aliens, the biggest damn planet you ever imagined ... The only other thing I'm going to say is: if you only ever read one 'hard' SF book, make sure it's this one.

2. *Watchmen* - Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons

The best superhero book ever written. If you're one of those people who thinks that comics are for kids, then read *Watchmen*, and you'll think again. Like *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*, this is a book that requires more than one reading to get the full value.

1. *Bugs* - John Sladek

Every time I read *Bugs* my brain goes funny for a couple of days, and in fact it's never quite returned to its original state. Now, I can't look at American television without laughing. I giggle whenever I hear stories about office politics. I break down in uncontrollable fits when I see a shelf full of fantasy novels. And I am never, *never* going to live in New York.

There it is, my top ten favourite books ever. Except, of course, that it's not exactly accurate: If I really included my favourite books, then the list would be pretty much dominated by Stephen King, Harry Harrison and Terry Pratchett. In the interests of preventing overexposure, I've decided to give these other authors a break.

TV Review

Bugs, BBC1, Saturdays, 8:05
seaQuest DSV, RTE 1, Sundays, 8:00

When defending the BBC's record of producing science fiction recently, a spokesperson mentioned Dr. Who and Blake's 7. He didn't mention Bugs, which probably explains its great success; people don't think of it as science fiction. To be sure, it's more of a hi-tech drama than SF, but enough of the technology is extrapolated (and some of it's just made up) to justify the label.

Bugs is the story of three security people who, for large wedges of cash, will test your security and install measures that'll keep out the smallest of flies. Roz is the brains of the outfit; she can hack into everything, and is also quite nifty in the microelectronics fields. Ed is either a gung-ho action man or comic relief, depending on how you view him. He's always breaking into and out of various buildings, and each episode we learn something else he can't do ("click the mouse, Ed!" "What's a mouse?"). Finally, we have Beckett, a cool-headed guy with covert ops training. He's pretty much the fifth wheel of the programme, rarely getting anything to do except follow Roz around and ask her to ex-

plain how her gadgets work.

Coming as it is from Brian Clemens (the story consultant on the programme), I was expecting more by way of Avengers-type silliness, but was disappointed in that. The programme's biggest drawback is that it's so po-faced, with all the main characters taking themselves far too seriously. Occasionally the guest villain will try for something a little over the top, but this only serves to show how straight everyone else is playing it.

Of the plots, I have little complaint. They usually involve our team coming up against some hi-tech, ruthless individual who's happy to shoot people and threaten life as we know it; to this end the series is very James Bondish, right down to the way that they never kill any of our heroes when they capture them, they set them up in an elaborate trap so that they'll be dead in twenty minutes. Which, of course, they never are.

Bugs has just been renewed for a second series, and I'm looking forward to it. There are a number of things wrong with the programme that need to be addressed, but it

remains a good, fun programme that's well worth an hour of your time.

Alas, the same can't be said for seaQuest DSV. I've mentioned in the past how fans of the programme were petitioning to have it cancelled, and any episode of the second season will tell you why. It's not just bad; it's terrible. It sucks donkeys. It's... I could go on. But let me elucidate.

After the boat was destroyed at the end of the first series, Cap'n Bridger built a second sub, and called it seaQuest. I guess he was stuck for a name. This new sub has mostly the same old crew, but with enough new faces to convince watchers that they were attempting a revamp of the show. There a telepath and a genetically created human called Dogbert or Dilbert or something (we'll call him Mongo for now). And of course, we've still got Darwin the talking dolphin.

The basic problem with this show is the scripting. The acting's OK, and if you can put up with the dolphin there's nothing really wrong with the characters; even the genius kid isn't as annoying as Wesley Crusher. But the scripts suck. Two episodes in a row had their plots taken directly from B-movies; one from *The Navy versus the Night Monsters* and one from *Frankenstein*. The former was just

ridiculous. The latter — intended, I think, as some manner of *hommage* — was the worst example of script writing I've ever encountered. Mongo is accused of murder, and it looks to the whole world as if he's guilty. But he escapes (accidentally, of course, poor Mongo is too dumb to realise what he's doing), and soon whole populations are running in fear from this 'monster.'

Every cliché ever seen in a *Frankenstein* movie is packed into forty-five minutes. What could have been a fun, somewhat silly episode was transformed by miraculous script-writing into an embarrassment.

Granted, that episode was worse than most. But not by much. Subsequent episodes involve zillion year-old crocodiles and strange undersea caverns, and each of them manages in its own special way to be crap. The chances of every episode being crap are fairly low, so I suspect the fault lies with some central script editor. If s/he can be locked in a barrel and shot into the sun, there's hope for the next season. Meanwhile, seaQuest DSV is worth watching only if you want to see how truly bad SF television can be.

Hyperspace, the Final Frontier

Perhaps, gentle reader, you can help me with a small problem. You see, I've been a science fiction fan for a while now. Years and years, in fact. And in all the time I've been reading SF and watching it on the box, something has bothered me.

You see, I've never read or seen an adequate description of hyperspace.

This may seem like a silly request, especially from someone with as feeble a grasp as I on the laws of physics. Therefore, I'm probably wrong in at least one of the following assumptions. If I am, please feel free to write in and gloat.

My contention is this; all previous examples of hyperspace or FTL travel are inconsistent with current theories. Why? Well, let's take a few examples...

The most common method is to leave this universe, and head into another where the rules of the space/time continuum are different. You travel through this other universe/dimension, and pop back out into your own. This has two problems; the first of which is common to most solutions. That problem is the Law of Conservation of Energy. This states that energy (or matter, if you prefer) cannot be destroyed, just have its form changed. But by entering another dimension, you are effectively removing matter from the universe, which is destroying it by any other name. Only if your ship reappeared instantaneously at its destination would the Law be happy. And that ain't going to happen. "Aha!", you're thinking. But what if some energy from the other universe traded places with the ship from this one?" Alas, it wouldn't work. Or rather, it would work, but the amount of energy would be so vast to make up for the mass of the ship ($E=mc^2$) that it'd probably destroy half a solar system.

Problem number two isn't really a problem, but it raises some interesting (for me) questions. If you're able to enter hyperspace and re-enter your own universe instantly, surely you're able to travel through time as well? In an Einsteinian universe such as ours, there are four dimensions, and it seems ludicrous that upon entering the universe one could control one's co-ordinates to only three. Therefore, time travel is a doddle (relatively speaking, har har). I'm assuming that the self-same law of conservation of energy wouldn't stop you from leaving your own time frame, by the way.

Star Trek favours the static warp shell (or something). The problem with this is that the ship never leaves the universe, and therefore is subject to the constraints of relativity; it can't accelerate to light speed.

My own solution? I don't really have a complete one. But it involves finding a universe in which the speed of light is lower than our own (higher wouldn't work unless it was by a factor of about twenty zillion), and entering that universe at a speed greater than that of light. You'd effectively be built of tachyons at that point, and could accelerate to your heart's content, after which you can re-enter your own universe at the right coordinates.

As you can see, this is only a partial solution, and I'd be most eager to hear from anyone who could expand on it. Whoever comes up with the best idea can not only have it published in this august organ, they can build the machine that will take humanity to the stars, win the Nobel prize, and be generally all-round popular.