

# First Contact

The Newsletter of the Irish Science Fiction Association

August 1996

ISSN 0791-3966

## Inside First Contact This Month...

### News

Sawyer, LeGuin win Nebula  
Awards

Dick, Clarke, Lambda  
Awards announced

Travolta to produce  
*Battlefield Earth*

Millennium – New series  
from Chris Carter

*Wheel of Time* – a never-  
ending story?

*American Gothic*, RIP

*Netrunner* Expansion  
Announced

### Babylon 5

We continue our look at the  
best TV programme around.  
And we'll find a few other  
excuses to mention it, too.

### Reviews

Savage Dragon CD-ROM (I  
mean it this month)

*Apollo 13* – I finally found  
someone who didn't like it.

### Other Stuff

New Venue for ISFA  
Meetings -- It's the Ormond  
Hotel on the first Tuesday.

### Gaelcon '96

Yep, it's here again. The games con that's been going now for oh, ages will be taking place in the traditional venue – the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham – on 24<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> October. Guest of Honour will be John Tynes, the founder of Pagan Publishing. He is also known, so it is said, as the man who was censored by TSR. What does this mean? Find out. Membership for the three days is £13, and is available from **The I.G.A., PO Box 4345, Dublin 1.**

### Octocon Online?

After last year's attempt at getting a rake of computers into the convention, it looks as if this year there'll be proper net access for those who want to surf while they congo. Although details from the committee are sketchy at the moment, it seems that there'll be guides to how to find the best SF on the net, as well as the other more usual use for a bunch of computers in one room (can you say Deathmatch?).

Of course, you can check out Octocon while you're online at the moment: point your browser at <http://arrogant.itc.icl.ie/octocon> for the latest information. So nifty is the setup that Harpercollins' totally cool Voyager page points to Octocon's profile on Michael Marshall Smith in their author run-down (check out <http://www.harpercollins.co.uk/voyager> if you don't believe me).

Oh, and it seems I wasn't reading my documentation properly last month when I informed you of the details of this year's Octocon. Had I been paying more attention, I would have realised that the email address is not what it seemed: in fact, I can't even claim it was a typo as [imago@indigo.ie](mailto:imago@indigo.ie) is nothing like what I typed. I beg forgiveness from all at Octocon, and promise to be more careful in future. The snail mail address is unchanged (I hope) at **Octocon, 30 South Circular Road, Dublin 8.**

### Planet Sci-Fi – ComedyCon

After changing its name – and presumably its focus – it looks as if one of the most interesting events of next year will be Planet Sci-Fi. March 8<sup>th</sup> will see Robert Llewellyn (or Kryten, as *Red Dwarf* fans the world over know him) and others (including Chris Dennison, a Klingon martial artist) converge in the Writers' Museum, Parnell Square for two days of SF that will include – but not focus on – Star Trek. Unlike Trek cons, this is being planned as a small event, and will have a maximum capacity of about 400, so book early. Up to 1<sup>st</sup> September it'll cost you £19 (or £15 if you're under 16). Email [cj@iol.ie](mailto:cj@iol.ie) or write to **Planet Sci-Fi, P.O. Box 30, Navan, Co. Meath** for more information.

*More news on page 3 (and 4, come to think of it. In fact, you'd better check 5 as well, just to be sure).*

## Editorial

Ah, the untrammelled joy that accompanies each editorial. It's always the last thing I write (I've taken to writing the contents last, too, so for the first time this year they're an accurate reflection of what's actually inside), so the fact that I'm writing this means that another issue is mere seconds from completion. Okay, a couple of minutes. I can't type *that* fast.

This month, I'll avail of these few words to mention something that I swore would never appear in this magazine, but has been seen regularly over the last few months: computer games.

The argument went thus: 'Doom' is unquestionably science fiction (okay, fantasy), but once we accept that and review one game a month, we head down the path of *The Irish Times'* Gamezone; a column that no-one reads, is fundamentally flawed and of no interest to anyone except advertisers.

Unfortunately, technology has caught up, and it's no longer feasible to exclude games from our brief. They've become so sophisticated (take *Wing Commander IV*) (please) that to ignore them in favour of films like *Mesa of Lost Women* is sheer folly. Thusly, you'll see an computer games having an increased presence from now on. Assuming, that is, I can find people willing to play the fifty bucks for the damn things. *Sam 'n' Max Hit the Road* is cool, by the way.

Oh yeah. I've noticed a distressing fall in the number of book-oriented submissions to this august journal; while we try not to differentiate between media too much, it is still the considered opinion of your humble servant that the ultimate form of science fiction is the written word. *Babylon 5* may be convincing everyone\* that television is where it's at, but it's people like David Brin who are giving us the best the genre has to offer. It'd be a terrible shame if this magazine became a magazine of the visual arts; there are too few magazines that deal with books and I'd like First Contact to continue to be one of those

few. So send in your book reviews. Send in your top ten. And read some more books.

Robert Elliott  
rde@irelands-web.ie

## Contents

Front Cover	1
Back Cover	18
Middle Cover	9
Under Cover	[classified]
Editorial	to your left
News	see front cover
More News	3
Top Ten Books	
Deirdre Ruane	7
Babylon 5	
Adam Darcy	9
The X-Files	
Michael O'Connor	14
Graphic Novels	
Robert Neilson	15
CD-ROM Review	16
Video Review	
Michael O'Connor	17

**First Contact**  
is a publication of  
**The Irish Science Fiction  
Association**  
30, Beverly Downs  
Knocklyon Road  
Dublin 16

e-mail [bhry@iol.ie](mailto:bhry@iol.ie)  
newsletter : [rde@irelands-web.ie](mailto:rde@irelands-web.ie)

*If you don't know by now that First Contact is ©1996 The Irish Science Fiction Association, then you need to stay in more. The contents, as ever, are © the people that penned them. Unauthorised reproduction is strictly a no-no. In fact, there's only been authorised reproduction once, but I don't recall giving written permission. Woo, I'm going to sue Sproutlore. Cool. This month's magazine was assembled with my ancient, single-speed CD-ROM playing The Divine Comedy, Tom Lehrer, Tanita Tikaram, Tori Amos, Sophie B. Hawkins Chopin, (the first 8 Polonaises) and Joni Mitchell. This issue dedicated to Bonka coffee, which not only has a cool name but without which this issue would be about sixteen pages smaller.*

\*except Sid

## News

### Punctuation Watch

One of these days, he's going to make it to a hundred, you know. Glenn Danzig, whose singing ability is rivalled only by his talent at writing comics, has entertained for months with tales based on the characters painted by Frank Frazetta. Check out *Death Dealer #2* which is now on sale; it contains no fewer than 94 ellipses and eighty exclamation marks. Our congratulations go to the innovative Danzig, who is surely the first to combine the two in the phrase "...and there it was! ... The horse..." which I quote verbatim.

### Helix – DC SF

DC Comics have just brought out a new imprint – Helix – which will feature a number of science fiction titles; presumably without the spandex that litters their regular comics. The first release was *Cyberella* by Howard Chaykin and Don Cameron; I must confess to finding it less than inspiring, though a number of people have mentioned that they enjoyed it. I, however, am looking forward to the offerings of Christopher Hinz, the man who wrote the ultra-amazing *Leige-Killer* and its two sequels.

### There's nothing like a good idea...

When I first heard that Marvel were going to be publishing *Star Trek* comics, I mentioned – in jest, I hasten to add – that there was going to be a *Star Trek/X-Men* crossover. It seems that there are people in Marvel who don't find the idea as patently dumb as I do, and you can expect sixty-four pages of crossover in time to celebrate Marvel's 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary. "I'm very, *very* excited!" quoth Marvel's ed-in-chief Bob Harras. "I'm very, *very* depressed!" responded *First Contact*'s ed. me.

### Dick on the Rise

One of these days I'm going to be able to mention Philip K. Dick without lowering the tone... but not today. Anyway, a trawl through your local bookshop will reveal oodles of previously out of print novels by the great man, including *A Scanner Darkly* and *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said*. Kudos to Waterstone's for adding to this tally; they're publishing the ultra-nifty *Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* as part of their SF promotion. It's only available in Waterstone's, and costs

£7.99. You can get two quid off, though, if you buy one of their selected SF or fantasy titles.

### Battlefield Earth – 50% Off

Ah, for the days when we could buy a copy of L. Ron's epic tome emblazoned with the phrase "soon to be two major motion pictures!" and be suitably impressed by its scope (if not its content). Alas, although it's soon to arrive on the big screen – courtesy of producer John Travolta – it seems that it'll be a single picture. I know what you're thinking; can a single film hold that much shit? Only time will tell.

### Nebula Winners

Our congrats to this year's Nebula award winners...

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

Best novella : "Last Summer at Mars Hill," **Elizabeth Hand**

Best novelette : "Solitude," **Ursula K. LeGuin**

Best short story : "Death and the Librarian," **Esther Friesner**

### Bethke Wins Dick

Actually, he did win something; he won the Philip K. Dick Award for best SF paperback original for his first novel, *Headcrash*. Although flawed, it's a darn good book, but not (IMHO) as good as rival nominee Greg Egan's *Permutation City*. But no-one listens to me.

### McAuley Wins Clarke

Darn, this is the second time in two paragraphs I've disagreed with award winners. However, congratulations to Paul J. McAuley for winning the Arthur C. Clarke award for his 1995 novel *Fairyland*. Although his best book (except maybe for *Pasquale's Angel*). I preferred Ken McLeod's *The Star Fraction*.

### Griffith Wins second Lambda

"So what did you think of *Slow River*?" I asked.

"That's the lesbian novel, isn't it?"

"Well, I wouldn't call it a *lesbian* novel."

Three weeks later, Nicola Griffith won the Lambda Literary Award for the best gay and

lesbian science fiction or fantasy novel. Just goes to show what I know. This is her second win, with her first novel, *Ammonite*, winning last year. This year she shares the award with Melissa Scott, who was a finalist last year. This year's *Shadow Man* fared better than last year's runner up, *Dreamships*.

### Baxter Wins Campbell

Damn. I'm going to have to come up with a more imaginative headline than that. If there's one more award to talk about, I'll do something drastic. Anyway, Stephen Baxter has won this year's John W. Campbell Memorial Award for his novel *The Time Ships*, a sequel to H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. I've been somewhat trepidant about approaching it despite the calibre of Baxter's other books, so I'll forbear from commenting.

### McDaid Wins Sturgeon

No, really. John D. McDaid entered a raffle and won a fish. Coincidentally, he also won this year's Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award for best short story of the year for his story "Jigoku no Mokoshiroku," which has also been nominated for a Hugo. Interestingly, this is his first (and so far, only) story published.

### Kinnison Returns

We all have our deep, dark secrets; it's time for me to come out and admit that I've got a complete set of Lensman novels by E.E. Smith. But I need no longer be alone; from early next year, you too can start collecting these fine examples of space opera from the man who made 'intestinal fortitude' a household phrase (in my flat, anyway).

One thing; publisher Mark J. Walsh said that he'll be publishing all six novels. Does this mean that my copy of *Masters of the Vortex* – the seventh – doesn't count?

### Satisfaction Guaranteed

Gosharoonie, those nice people at Del Rey, not content with bringing us the nifty Discovery programme of first-time novelists, are now giving us novels that have Satisfaction Guaranteed. If you don't like Tara K. Harper's *Grayheart* (which is a dollar cheaper than average), send it back to Del Rey and they'll send you a different title. Check out <http://www.randomhouse.com/delrey/> for a sample chapter.

### New Julian May Tomes

Julian May is working on the first volume of her *Rampart Worlds Trilogy*, but her next book will be *Sky Trillium* in January of 1997.

### Mythago Wood – The Movie

It's happening: Robert Holdstock's nifty fantasy is being turned into a film. It'll be directed by Brian Henson, but will be without Muppets (this is a Good Thing).

### Costner as The Postman

Rumours have been flying for years now about the filming of David Brin's cool tome, *The Postman*. When he was interviewed a number of years ago by your humble servant for this organ (or was it *FTL*? Who can remember?), Brin was deeply unhappy with the script, but said recently in *Sci-Fi Weekly*, the rather nifty on-line SF magazine, that he was happier but still less than ecstatic with the latest revision. However, with Kevin Costner set to star and possibly direct, there are those of us who worry that he may be a trifle too optimistic.

### Eight? Hah!

So you thought there were only going to be eight books in Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time*, eh? Not a bit of it. In a letter to fans posted on the Tor home page, Mister Jordan said "There will be at least ten. I do not know the final number. I know the final scene of the final book – I have known where the tale is going since before I started writing *The Eye of the World* – but I don't see clearly yet every bend and curve in the road from here to there. So the best answer is, there will be some more books. A few. Not too many." Judging by the reaction to the seventh, though, it looks as if there'll be a lot of people unwilling to read that far.

### Speaking of Jordan...

They haven't been saying so directly, but all the indications are that Voyager will be going after the Jordan audience with the publication this month of *A Game of Thrones* by George R. R. Martin. Publicity galleys have been sent far and wide, and it's looking pretty nifty, even for those of us who never reached the third part of *Wheel of Time*. It'll be released by HarperCollins *Huge Fantasy Series* on 5<sup>th</sup> August.

### SFX on CD

Gosh, has it really been a year since *SFX* arrived on the scene? The magazine has been

getting better and better since its initial issue, and now it's gone further: *SFX CD* is an electronic SF magazine that'll come out quarterly as a companion magazine to *SFX*. The first issue is pretty good, even though my outdated system had trouble handling bits of it. Check it out, and you too can wonder why something that's been advertised as for over 15s contains the word s\*\*t.

### CD-X

No, nothing to with a clipper typo; rather a cunning link...

Speaking of CD ROMs, it looks as if we're going to be blessed with an *X-Files* CD-ROM early next year. It'll feature Duchovny and Anderson in footage unique to the game, and could very well prove to be decent. Filling up the six hundred meg of disk space will be a ton of reference material on the show.

### American Gothic Axed

Okay, so it had about as much of a sense of direction as *Nowhere Man*, but it had Sheriff Buck, one of the coolest characters on television. And despite some individual episodes that sucked, it managed a higher hit rate than most programmes: the fact that *Sliders* is being renewed makes its cancellation particularly galling. This has to be right up there with the demise of *Brisco* as one of the great tragedies of our time.

### Millennium

It's the new series from Chris Carter, so it's a must-see. Say what you will about the shitty third season, the first two years of *The X-Files* mean that we'll all have to watch at least twenty-two episodes of this series about a hunter of serial killers. It'll appear on ITV late at night (10:40, probably), making it the first SF programme on that channel in many a moon.

The series takes its name from the fact that the aforementioned loonies are all coming out of the woodwork in response to the approaching Millennium year. That's 2001, not 2000. But you knew that.

### Feinnes as Steed

And Nicole Kidman as Emma Peel. I swear, Emma Thompson would have been perfect. Ah well; we'll just have to hope that director Jeremiah Chechik (who?) will do a decent job.

### Disney Acquires Yamato

It's been hailed as one of the anime classics. About a heroic bunch of Earthers who sail in the space battleship Yamato to the planet Iscandar, the story – translated as *Star Blazers* – was remarkably silly, and the only good thing to be said about it is that you can have fun counting the number of scientific errors in it. Well, that and the ultra-macho, testosterone-laden theme music. What can Disney do with such a show? They can't make it worse, but I doubt it'll be much better.

### Sequels from Manga – Finally

It's been a long wait (at least a couple of years), but Manga Video have finally got around to publishing the third part of *3x3 Eyes*. They're also releasing on the same date – August 12 – the first part of *Bubblegum Crash*, follow-up to Anime Projects' totally cool *Bubblegum Crisis*. Unfortunately, being a Manga title it'll be dubbed, but we can't have everything.

### Proteus – a Netrunner Expansion

You know, since I started playing Netrunner I've barely had a single game of Magic, so you can understand that I'm leaping for joy with the news that an expansion set is on the way. It'll introduce a few new ideas and card types to the game: bad publicity cards can undermine the confidence of the Corporation's customers and investors, and if the Corporation receives enough bad publicity counters, it loses the game. In addition, a new class of cards, "hidden resources," gives the Runner access to a tactic previously reserved for the Corporation: to play cards face down and reveal their function as a surprise move.

### X-Files CCG

By the time you read this, the *X-Files* Customisable Card Game should be in the shops. Of course, if NXT games are anything like *Wizards of the Coast* it may be months before it arrives, but until I hear differently, I'll believe the July 1996 release date.

The *X-Files* CCG will be released in a limited edition set with an unlimited edition appearing later this year. The set will be around 300 cards, and it'll be possible to play one-on-one or multi-player games. It looks as if the game will focus more on conspiracies than on UFO stuff, and the object of the game will be to find out who's conspiring against whom; you can use FBI agents (including Mulder and Scully) in your investigations.

## We May Be Alone After All

God bless the Internet. There are those who will tell you that it's a medium for global communication and understanding, but I know in my heart that its main function is to send around the world stuff like this, which I received from several people. So it must be true.

*In August, Ottawa biologist David Brez Carlisle told a meeting of geologists in Waterloo that the exotic amino acids found in several rocks from space, which are considered evidence that extraterrestrial life exists, are not what they seem. Carlisle said the space rocks he has examined contain not the exotic amino acids but flakes of human dandruff, which have a similar chemical makeup to the amino acids. Carlisle said he knows a lot about dandruff because he has had a severe, lifelong case.*

## The Aliens are Coming!

If you happened to see the Weekend supplement to the Irish Times on July 13<sup>th</sup>, you'll have noticed the above headline emblazoned in colour above a piece by Brian Boyd in which he almost, but not totally, missed the point.

It's inevitable, I suppose; rarely, if ever, has a newspaper covered SF with any degree of accuracy. Mr. Boyd didn't seem to know what he was writing; he plundered a few magazines such as the Fortean Times to bring

us a piece of such astonishing inanity that it's a wonder I got to the end.

## B5 on C4

It's been confirmed – after some doubt – that Channel 4 will be showing the last five episodes of the third season of B5 before our American chums. It seems that Warner were extremely reluctant to let C4 have the episodes, but a contract is a contract, and so we'll see the first of the episodes towards the end of August. There'll be a one-week gap after "War Without End, Part 2" (which, if you've seen it, you'll have to agree is astonishing), presumably so that there'll be no clash with the BBC's SF weekend (I'm unsure at the moment whether it's all SF or merely Star Trek).

I realise that I'm talking to the converted here, but if there's anyone out there who isn't watching the programme, please, please, please start. It's cool. It's... but I go through this every month. And every month, a few people tell me they've started watching and that yes, it's cool. Watch it.

Oh, while I think of it; I've mentioned in previous issues that everyone likes B5. While this is nearly true, I've been informed (several times a day) by Sid Daly in Forbidden Planet, Dublin that he doesn't like the programme and is sick of hearing about how good it is. In future, please assume that 'everyone' means 'everyone except Sid.' We in *First Contact* apologise to Mr. Daly, and deeply regret any discomfort caused to him or his family as a result of this misunderstanding.

## Coming this Month

### Some books you may want to watch out for...

*(caveat : this list, as usual, reflects your editor's tastes more than anything else)*

*The Widowmaker*, **Mike Resnick**

*Gibbon's Decline and Fall*, **Sheri S. Tepper**

*Desperation*, **Stephen King**

*Treasure Box*, **Orson Scott Card**

*Children of the Mind*, **Orson Scott Card** (The last Ender book)

*Sandman : Book of Dreams*, **Gaiman & Kramer** (eds)

*Servant of the Bones*, **Anne Rice**

*The Fall of Sirius*, **Wil McCarthy**

*Exquisite Corpse*, **Poppy Z. Brite**

*The Galactic Gourmet*, **James White**

*Slippage*, **Harlan Ellison**

*Red Star Rising*, **Anne McCaffrey**

*Son of Soup*, **Grant Naylor**

# Top Ten Books

Deirdre Ruane

*Well, Robert, you asked for it. You want another Top Ten list? You got one.*

*I'm a brand-new ISFA member, lifelong bookworm, appreciator of all things SF and recovered Trekkie (I've been sober for a year and a half now; thank you for listening to me). And if anyone starts me talking about books, it's impossible to shut me up. As witness the length of this list. Well, here goes nothin'...*

*In no particular order:*

## **1 The Wind from the Sun, Arthur C. Clarke**

The first adult SF book I ever read, and still the best collection of short stories I've come across. Reading at the tender age of fifteen, the grandeur of "Maelstrom II," the tension of the title story, the whip-crack ending of "Food of the Gods" and the tragedy of "Transit of Earth" showed me there was more to life than teenage soap opera. Shame about "A Meeting With Medusa," though...

## **2 The Neverending Story, Michael Ende**

Don't be deceived by the series of tacky German films. As a child I literally loved this book to bits, but unlike many other childhood favourites it hasn't lost its magic. Surreal and dreamlike, but with an emotional depth sadly lacking in many "grown-up" books, this is an incredible work of fantasy.

## **3 The Fionavar Tapestry, Guy Gavriel Kay**

A flawed but brilliant jewel. Admittedly, it's highly derivative, with a bad guy lurking under a mountain and elves heading west to name but a few jarringly familiar aspects, and some of the plot holes are big enough to fly a winged unicorn through. But don't let that put you off. These three books contain some of the most powerful, poetic and emotionally involving fantasy writing I've ever come across – which more than makes it worthwhile. A highly underrated series.

## **4 Good Omens, Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman**

For someone who used to read the Book of Revelation for thrills, this book was a true Godsend. Even on fourth (or is it fifth?) reading, I'm still helpless with laughter. A book packed with classic moments and characters - the holy water scene, the Buggre Alle This Bible and the Four Bikers of the Apocalypse spring to mind. And somehow, as with all Terry's books (and Gaiman's comics, for that matter), it also manages to say a great deal of serious things. Anyone who still hasn't read this book deserves a visit from Hastur via their phone line. Repent and redeem yourselves while there is still time!

## **5 Spock's World, Diane Duane**

Okay, it's trekfic, but it transcends the limitations of the genre. I'm no stranger to dodgy Trek novels; in the benighted days before I discovered the wider world of SF I read an embarrassing number of the damn things. This, however, is in a completely different league; in my not-so-humble opinion, it can stand up to any anthropological SF novel in existence. The Vulcan-history chapters drew me inescapably into their harsh world and their surprisingly dysfunctional psyche. Not to mention that this book (and indeed all of her Trek books) brought the Enterprise crew as a whole to vivid working, playing life, as opposed to what we generally get in on-screen Trek: as the creator of a certain other SF show put it, "five guys on top and nothing but flunkies beneath."

This book can be enjoyed even if you hate Star Trek. And that's saying plenty.

## **6 Raising the Stones, Sheri S. Tepper**

Like everything this author has produced, on the Food for Thought scale this was a four-course meal. A highly unusual, richly textured, occasionally tragic and always fascinating book, even if you don't agree with all of Tepper's forcefully stated opinions. Worth reading for the hilarious account of the Baidee religion alone. "Don't let them fool with your heads..."

## **7 The Wheel Of Time, Robert Jordan**

Another deeply flawed one: Jordan is hopelessly long-winded (hence the recent arrival of book 7!), and the writing style is workmanlike at best. Still, as a multi-layered tapestry of a world full of diverse

people and moral ambiguity, or just as an epic account of the seemingly hopeless war against the Shadow (sound familiar?). this is a deeply engrossing series. Spice is added by Jordan's trademark, "ironic foreshadowing". There are rich rewards here for the patient reader.

### **8 *Rendezvous with Rama*, Arthur C. Clarke (him again!)**

Okay, this one was on Adam's list and I meant to have ten different books, but it must have sneaked in the back door as I was struggling to keep out *A Canticle for Leibowitz* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*. What the hey, it deserves another plug. As Adam said, the humans are merely stick figures: the real central character is the fifty-kilometre-long spacecraft with its silent cities, its capricious weather and its Cylindrical Sea. Gentry Lee made a pathetic attempt to flesh out the humans in the execrable sequels, causing them to read like airport novels; but here the awe-inspiring hugeness of Rama reigns supreme. An incredible moment which never fails to make me shudder is Norton's "fly on the ceiling" shift of perspective on the ladder at Rama dawn. I remain fascinated with cylindrical habitats, my finger constantly on the still picture button during the core-shuttle scenes in B5's "The Fall of Night"...

### **9 *Dune*, Frank Herbert**

Another one I couldn't keep out of this list. This was an unforgettable book; I relished the vivid picture of Fremen life and rituals, and I loved the ominous sense of impending doom. However, I was unequivocally warned off the sequels by a friend. Was he right? Answers on a postcard, please.

### **10 *Consider Phlebas*, Iain M. Banks**

My first Banks novel - I only read it last week! - and I suspect my first of many. I'm still trying to work out what the point was, but that in itself is refreshing (I love grey areas). Still, what really awed me was the visual power of the description, especially the heavy-duty tech: Orbitals, Megaships, GCUs with their internal atmosphere. And don't you just *love* those ship names? My favourite: *Prosthetic Conscience*.

*Well, that's it. Great to have a chance to plug the obscure ones and further exalt the classics. And by the way, A Fire Upon the Deep would have been here, except that at time of writing I haven't quite finished it. Top Eleven, anyone?*



Just to be sure it's not too late to catch up, we proudly present part 2 of our cool guide to

## **Babylon 5**

Adam Darcy

### **The Station**

**Babylon 5:** A five-mile long space habitat, consisting of several rotating sections to produce gravity. The station is powered by a fusion reactor located to the rear, and twelve vanes radiate any excess heat produced. There are two docking ports - one at the hub of the rotating section, which leads to the main docking bays, and one on the stationary section for zero-g cargo loading. The various regions of B5 are colour-coded: Blue sector is the location of station operations and officer quarters, Green sector is the diplomatic section, Red sector is the business section, Grey sector is the alien section - with gravity and atmosphere tailored to the needs of its inhabitants - and Brown sector has low-price accommodation and entertainment. There are hydroponic gardens in the main cylindrical section, with open-air restaurants looking out over them. Babylon 5 can have as many as 250,000 individuals aboard, but many of those would be in transit.

### **Deathwalker**

The Dilgar scientist Jha'dur, known as "Deathwalker" for her experiments with biological weaponry, arrives on B5 having been given sanctuary by the Wind Swords, one of the oldest clans in the Minbari Warrior caste. The League of Non-Aligned Worlds demands that she be brought to trial for her war crimes, but Jha'dur has developed an immortality serum, and Sinclair is ordered to send her to Earth. However, the Vorlons intervene, destroying her ship, saying that humanity is "not ready for immortality".

Meanwhile, Ambassador Kosh hires Talia for some strange business negotiations, which are a ruse to allow him to record her most unpleasant memories "for the future".

### **Signs and Portents**

Londo is visited by Lord Kiro and his aunt, Lady Ladira, who are *en route* to Centauri Prime to return "The

Eye", an ancient symbol of Centauri power. Meanwhile, a polite stranger called Morden returns from the Galactic Rim, and visits the alien ambassadors in turn, asking them "What do you want?".

G'Kar is irritated by the question, but eventually gives an answer: The destruction of the Centauri, but once Narn is safe, nothing more. Delenn's response is one of fear. Her markings as a *Satai* appear, and she sees Morden darken to a silhouette, or shadow. Morden tries to avoid Kosh, but they encounter each other in a corridor. Kosh says: "Leave this place. They are not for you. Go. Leave. Now." Morden seems unimpressed by the warning, and the lights black out. Later, Kosh requests tools to repair damage done to his encounter suit. Finally, Morden meets Londo. In response to his question, Londo replies that he wants things to go back to the way they were - when

## Terminology

**Core shuttle:** A monorail system running along the axis of the station.

**Command and Control (C&C):** Also known as Babylon Control or the Observation Dome, this is the centre of operations Babylon 5. Its main function is to monitor entry and exit of ships through the **jumpgate**, and to oversee docking procedures. In battle situations, it also controls the **defence grid**.

**Data crystal:** The standard information storage system among humans and aliens.

**Defence grid:** The weapon system of B5, hidden under protective panelling.

**Hyperspace:** Non-Einsteinian space, which ships enter via **jumpgates** in order to travel faster than light.

**ISN:** InterStellar News network, the twenty-third century equivalent of CNN.

**Jumpgate:** The device used to generate a vortex into **hyperspace**. Ships enter the vortex, automatically paying a fee to the owner of the jumpgate, and  
(ctd...)

the Centauri were a glorious power in the Galaxy. Morden is satisfied by this answer, and promises to return.

A cargo vessel sends a distress signal after being attacked by Raiders. Ivanova leads Delta wing to assist. The attack was a decoy - soon after, a jump-point forms near B5, and a large ship deploys its fighters to attack. The remaining Starfuries engage in a firefight. Kiro is taken hostage, along with The Eye, by a Raider agent who brings him to the Raider mothership, which then enters hyperspace.

Kiro receives The Eye from the Raiders, whom he had hired for the purpose of stealing the artifact. But a black, insectile ship appears out of the darkness and destroys the Raider ship with a powerful beam weapon.

Morden visits Londo again, and hands him a charred box, containing The Eye, saying it is from "friends you never knew you had." Ladira shows Sinclair a vision - as a shuttle powers away, Babylon 5 explodes. He asks if this is inevitable, and she replies that the future can always be changed by one's

actions.

## *Legacies*

The body of a great Minbari warrior, Brarmer, is brought to the station for display before its burial. However, the corpse is stolen, and the Warrior caste leader, Shai Alit Neroon, threatens to start a war. A young telepath, Alisa Beldon, is encouraged by Ivanova to explore her options rather than join the Psi-Corps. When she speaks to Delenn, she accidentally scans her mind and discovers that Delenn had stolen the body to give him a burial in accordance with Religious caste rituals. Alisa also tells Sinclair of a thought she felt in Delenn's mind - the word "chrysalis".

## *A Voice in the Wilderness*

When Epsilon III shows unexpected seismic activity, a survey team is sent down, and is attacked by an automated defence system. Meanwhile, a revolt has broken out on Mars.

An alien projects an image to the crew, asking for their help. While Starfuries draw the defence system's

(...ctd)

can then travel vast distances in minimal time. Large ships can create their own jump-points.

**Link:** The crew's communication device, worn on the back of one hand.

**MedLab:** In addition to larger infirmaries, Dr. Franklin has a laboratory with a hermetically sealed isolation room to treat infectious cases or non-oxygen-breathing aliens.

**Phased Plasma Gun (PPG):** The main weapon used by the crew of B5 fires a burst of superheated plasma.

**Psi-rating:** The levels assigned to telepaths by Psi-Corps according to the strength of their ability. Psi-ratings range from 1 to 12. Those with a rating of P3 or higher must become members of Psi-Corps. P5 is the average rating of a telepath, while instructors are P10 or higher, and Psi-Cops are P12.

**Starfury:** The Mitchell-Hyundyne SA-23E fighter craft designed specifically for optimum manoeuvrability in zero-g. It consists of an ejectable, snubnosed cockpit mounted on a cross-wing bearing four multi-directional

(ctd...)

fire, Sinclair and Ivanova land in a shuttle, and discover a massive machine buried three miles below the planet surface. At the heart of the machine is a cybernetic alien, Varn. Varn is five hundred years old, and has begun to die - hence the earthquakes, as he begins to lose control of the machine. He is brought to the station, where Dr. Franklin attempts to treat him.

Earth Force sends the starship *Hyperion* to take the planet, and outcasts from Varn's race attempt to do the same. Varn himself warns that the planet must not fall into the wrong hands, as it "belongs to the future". As a battle for the planet rages, Londo, Delenn, and her mentor Draal bring Varn back to Epsilon III. Varn dies, but gives custody of the planet to Draal, who dispels all those trying to capture the machine, and forbids any contact with the planet until the time is right.

### *Babylon Squared*

Unusual tachyon readings signal the reappearance of Babylon 4. It and its skeleton crew, led by

Major Krantz, have spent the last four years in a time-warp. The space around B4 is still unstable, so B5 mounts a rescue attempt. As Sinclair, Garibaldi and Ivanova oversee the evacuation, they experience strange "flash-forwards" into the future, including one where Garibaldi is taking a stand against an invisible enemy, and making sure that Sinclair leaves B5 before its reactor explodes.

Meanwhile, Delenn is summoned before the Grey Council, who have chosen her as their next leader. She declines, saying that her interpretations of certain prophecies have led her to believe that her place is on Babylon 5. She is given the triangular device used to scan Sinclair, known as a Triluminary.

Sinclair encounters a mysterious alien called Zathras, who appeared on B4 just as it rematerialised. Zathras speaks of a Great War in the future, and he is looking for "The One", who leads the Army of Light in the War, and who has been lost in time. The Army of Light are pulling B4

(...ctd)

thrusters. There are four squadrons assigned to B5. The fighters are housed in the "cobra bays", mounted on the first rotating section of the station.

**Transport tube:** The elevator system between levels.

**Universe Today:** The newspaper of the Earth Alliance. It is printed on a recyclable paper-like substance rather than using electronic media. Subscribers can receive personal editions according to their interests.

through time to use as a base of operations. As B4 becomes more unstable, a space-suited figure appears, and Zathras recognises him as The One, and gives him a device to return him to his own time. With the evacuation complete, Sinclair and the others return to B5. Zathras remains, trapped.

On B4, The One removes his helmet, revealing an older Sinclair, aided by someone who sounds like Delenn, though she is unseen.

### *The Quality of Mercy*

Dr. Franklin discovers a disgraced physician, Dr. Laura Rosen, running an illegal clinic Down Below, using an alien healing device. The device works by removing "life-force" from one person and giving it to another. Dr. Rosen has been donating her life-force because she is terminally ill.

When a serial killer, Karl Mueller, escapes and holds her daughter hostage to force her to treat his injuries, Dr. Rosen uses the device to kill Mueller, and in so doing, restores her health. Dr. Rosen is cleared of charges, but

Dr. Franklin confiscates the device.

### *Chrysalis*

It is approaching the end of 2258. Garibaldi's informant, Petrov, is killed, and he starts an investigation which leads him to discover smuggled jamming equipment, bound for Io. Realising what this is for, he calls an ultraviolet alert. However, he is shot in the back by his right-hand man.

The Narn and the Centauri are in conflict over the Narn outpost in quadrant 37, and Londo is forced to concede the region. However, Morden calls, and offers to solve his problem.

Delenn is busy at work completing a crystalline device she has been working on throughout the year. Lennier relays a question to Kosh and returns with the answer: simply, "yes". Delenn is shocked by this and visits the Vorlon in his quarters. She asks to see him to confirm what she believes to be true. As the encounter suit opens, a bright light shines on Delenn, who looks on in awe.

The Narn outpost in quadrant 37 is attacked

by the black ships which destroyed the Raider mothership, and is completely destroyed, along with its ten thousand inhabitants.

At the stroke of midnight on New Years' Day, Garibaldi is found bleeding and comatose in a transport tube. Delenn shows Sinclair the Triluminary, and confronts him on his regained memories. She promises to explain everything to him.

In Medlab, Garibaldi regains consciousness momentarily, and tells Sinclair that the President, who is due to give a speech from

Io, is about to be assassinated. Sinclair tries to contact Earth Force, but all channels are jammed. Earth Force One explodes, with no survivors. When Sinclair manages to contact a Senator to tell her about Garibaldi's suspicions, she dismisses them as scaremongering. Vice-President Clark, who had stayed on Earth with a viral infection, is sworn into office.

Londo is shocked when he hears of the attack on the Narn outpost, but Morden points out that the Centauri elite have now noticed him. Later, Morden is alone with a group of shadowy

figures. "When the time comes. Ambassador Mollari will do exactly as we want. Destiny is on our side," he tells them.

G'Kar is convinced that none of the major races are capable of, or willing to carry out, this attack. He leaves to investigate.

Delenn's device is completed by the Triluminary. Kosh reminds Sinclair of his appointment with her, but he is too late. The crystalline device has formed a chrysalis around the Minbari ambassador.

*(To be continued)*

---

## Next Month...

### In the ISFA

Be in **The Ormond Hotel, Ormond Quay** on **Tuesday, 3<sup>rd</sup> September**. Why? Because it'll be cool. One word: Newgrange. Sorry I can't say more, it's on a need to know basis, and you don't. All you need is a time (which you've got), a place (which you've got) and a reason for coming (which, ancient sites notwithstanding, includes the usual mania and general funniness). Be there or else.

And don't forget that we've changed the venue. Well, I say *we*. Nobody actually asked me, but then I'm not on the committee, so why would they?

### In First Contact

*Babylon 5* will be finishing its third season in September; we mourn its passing and look forward to a fourth year. Adam Darcy continues his rundown.

We'll have another list of someone's favourite books. I'm running out of people here, so you might want to send me your list.

Independence Day looks soooooooooooooo cool. I don't care how many people tell me it's supposed to be shite. Read all about it... here. Well, not necessarily page thirteen, but it'll be in here somewhere. Look, I'll try to make it page thirteen, but I can't promise anything.

*The fact that your editor considers "Jose Chung's From Outer Space" to be the best hour of television ever doesn't mean disagreement in general with the suggestion that*

## **The X-Files Still Sucks**

Michael O'Connor

In a recent **First Contact**, I wrote a slightly critical article about *The X-Files*. I will deal with the fans' reactions later, but first a quick look at some of the episodes shown in the past month or two. Please remember that this is only my humble opinion and if you wish to point out the error of my ways, write to the editor.

Anyway, I watched the two-part episode, the name escapes me at the moment (perhaps the editor knows), [*"Nisei" and "731" - rde*] in which Mulder and Scully come across an alien autopsy video and thus begins another search to find the truth. After much running around and meetings in dark corners, Mulder jumps on top of a secret train and runs up and down the carriages before finally meeting an alien, or is it really an alien? Scully meanwhile gets involved in a women's knitting group or something, they all claim to have a sickness brought on by being consistently abducted. Then she visits a secret leper colony and runs around some dark buildings. The whole thing ends by telling us that the alien abductions may not so alien after all and the truth may be much more down to earth. I hope this is a double bluff on Chris Carter's part, as I will vomit if we are told that it is merely humans doing the rectal probing. Oh, and our heroes end up with no evidence, again. Despite the dubious ending, it was a small improvement over previous episodes.

The next week's episode was rubbish. Much, much better was the cockroach show. Right from the start we could feel this was good stuff, it had great one-liners, believable secondary characters, wild theories, even wilder theories, a brilliant and beautiful entomologist called Bambi and it was funny as well. If you only see one X-file this year, see this one.

For one reason or another I missed the next three episodes and did not bother even recording them, so they may have been the best ones of all, but I doubt it.

During the Chinese Ghost show, the phone rang about fifteen minutes from the end and I had no problem talking to my friend while Mulder and Scully went through their paces and wrapped up the mystery. Yawn.

The trouble with *The X-Files* seems to be that the producers have got lazy, the show has a huge following, the merchandising is selling well, so Carter keeps giving the fans more of what they expect. Take the video for Mark Snow's "Theme From *The X-Files*." The 30 second music that opens each episode is stretched out over three minutes with no development or progression, just the same music repeated over and over. The video itself is composed of straight edits of scenes already shown. With all the resources they have at their disposal it's a cheap and lazy way out. Shit, most of us could do exactly the same thing with only two video-recorders.

Like I said, lazy.

The reaction from readers to my last piece was surprising and swift; some felt it was their duty to explain the various plotlines, or to tell me in no uncertain terms that I was a fool and a knave to write what I wrote. Some even went as far as questioning my mental health, or lack of it. I found this amusing.

All of these *X-Files* fanatics reminded me of another group of fans, whose rabid devotion to their show will not allow for any criticism, no matter how mild and timid it may be. A number of these fans berated me for using *Star Trek* in the same sentence as *The X-Files*. This gross error on my part was typed in the heat of battle and I wish to grovel and plead for the fans' mercy. It was never my intention to drag their beloved *Star Trek* down to the level of *The X-Files*. Sorry.

## Too Many Mutants

### Graphic Novel reviews by Robert Neilson

It seems that the more graphic novels I review, the more confused I become. The problem seems to be that you need to read everything connected to a comic in order to fully understand what is going on. Bail out for a while and they change the ground rules, or at the very least, the characters. Trying to keep abreast of the X-Men line-up changes is worse than Neighbours. I was just about coming to terms with what I considered to be the core groupings when *Generation X*, written by Scott Lobell, drawn by Chris Bachalo (Boxtree, Graphic Novel, UK£9.99) hit the doormat.

Well, at least I seem to have come in at the beginning for once because what we've got here is the creation of a new sub-X-Men team of teens who are being taught how to be superheroes at Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters under the tutelage of headmaster, Banshee. The method of introducing the new team is episodic. We are introduced to a core group of students, their talents are graphically illustrated, a short piece is supplied on their lives before coming under Xavier's wing and we are, naturally, introduced to their potentially-fatal character flaws and weaknesses.

In a way it's a bit like the old movie, *The Magnificent Seven* except that the team, once it is pulled together and trained - which should be in a mere ninety-seven or so issues of the new comic series - will be saving more than just a puny Mexican village. Some days they'll save the world. Probably. And Mom and apple pie. If communism rears its ugly head again, they'll take care of that too. At least, when the X-Men aren't doing it.

The question must be raised though, just how many mutants can one tiny universe handle? Are there plots enough and villains enough to go around? Are all the hero-mutants interesting and viable? Who can tell after only four issues (that's what the G Novel is comprised of)? I feel I must pose more questions: Will we able to warm to Penance - body atrophied to the point of diamond razor hardness (so it says); or M, who is apparently a cross between Jean Grey and Rain Man (the idiot savant played by Dustin Hoffman in the movie of the same name or am I missing something here?); or Mondo who hails from Samoa, absorbs living mass and needs to

develop battle instinct; or Skin, who has more skin than his body needs ( I kid you not).

Whatever else, this is a well written and nicely illustrated introduction, entertaining in itself and well worth a look. If you like wall to wall mutants.

More wall to wall mutants in *X-Men, Alterniverse Visions* (Boxtree, Graphic Novel, UK£9.99, 143pp). This time we are presented with a series of what if? scenarios, including *What if Storm had remained a thief* or *Rogue possessed the power of Thor* or *Wolverine battled Weapon X* (instead of becoming Weapon X).

Each of the individual scenarios is intriguing and shows alternatives that could so easily have become reality, had the writers but willed it. Interestingly enough, two of the scenarios, *What if Wolverine had led Alpha Flight* and *What if Stryfe killed the X-Men* actually entail wiping out the X-Men. Obviously, these are questions that can only be posed hypothetically, though in both cases the alternate universe could still support an X-Men title, though in severely altered circumstances.

As with all X-Men titles, *Alterniverse Visions* contains far too many characters, far too many diverse plot strands picked up from other story lines of other Marvel titles, too few humans and too little character development. Still, for balls-out action and adventure, the X-Men are hard to beat. I just wish they could be confronted by problems that are less than Earth shattering and that some of their enemies could be less than omnipotent (sic).

Boxtree have recently repackaged some of the early work of 'comics superstar' Todd McFarlane. Two of the volumes available are *Chance Encounter* (Graphic Novel, UK£8.99) and *Silver Sable is Back* (Graphic Novel, UK£8.99). So what have we got? Well one gets a thumbs up and the other a thumbs down based upon their suitability to be called graphic novels. Now you know as well as I do that these Marvel re-treads are no more 'graphic novels' than *Space: Above and Beyond* is science fiction. And that is a tragedy. The graphic novel format can do a lot to legitimise the art of the comic book. There are plenty of talented artists and writers working in comics who deserve the opportunity to flex their muscles and produce a novel which tells its story through the

comics medium. And several of the Marvel stable of super heroes have matured into characters who could justify such treatment. Unfortunately graphic novels are used mainly as a marketing device, a way of reselling old scenarios and story lines to a new audience.

*Chance Encounter* gets the thumbs down. We're presented with two two-parters one of which has a cliff-hanger ending, and the other contains not a single reference to Chance, the cover villain. Why did they use an incomplete story in a format which would have allowed them to continue the story they began? Are they expecting readers to rush out looking for the completion of the episode elsewhere? Should anyone who cares already possess the concluding episodes in another format? Do they really give a shit?

At least the Silver Sable issue contains a single storyline which is satisfactorily concluded. Apart from Silver Sable herself we've got vengeful Nazis, Sandman, an aging Techno super villain and a Kansas family man who was bitten by a radioactive Jack Rabbit and now possesses super speed and legs that could kick you into the middle of next week. Hell, make that next year.

As usual Peter Parker's problems dominate. He still needs a job, even though his wife is a super model and could easily keep him in the luxury to which he could soon become accustomed. But Peter is an old-style macho man. He's got to bring home the bacon. Anyway, what sort of a superhero lives off his mot? (A broke superhero.)

In the middle of his Sable adventure, though he thinks it's over, a job offer takes Peter to Kansas. It seems too good to be true, an answer to all his problems, both esteem-type and financial. However its not that straightforward. How many modelling assignments is Mary Jane (Mrs. Spidey) likely to pick up in Nowhere, Kansas? Could he expect her to give up her career, and her social life, family and friends, so that he can take a job opportunity in Kansas?

It is this sort of social dilemma that sets Spider Man and a number of other Marvel titles apart from the pack and hopefully will continue to do so. It's the sort of dilemma that makes *Silver Sable is Back* worth picking up. And by the way, the Todd McFarlane artwork ain't half bad either.

## CD-ROM Review

*The Savage Dragon Comic Book Anthology, Image Comics*

Since its inception, Image has been a company that rivalled Marvel in its inanity, and brought implausible characters and ridiculously-proportioned women to a new extreme. However, against all the odds it's also brought us a few decent comics. These were usually limited series, but one of the best has been *The Savage Dragon*, an on-going title written and drawn by Erik Larsen.

When I heard that a CD was coming out, I had visions of the shitty Avengers cartoon that infests our television screens from time to time; nothing but stills with maybe a mouth or an eyebrow animated. Surely we'd get nothing along the lines of Sam 'n' Max, with cool animation and nifty sounds?

Actually, no. But that's because the writers of this CD avoided animating the stories, and settled for simply bringing us the comics, page by page. No attempt has been made to enhance the stories, or to use the multimedia aspects of the computer in any way. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it is kind of disappointing, as I – and doubtless many others – expected something that exploited the capabilities of a multimedia machine more than this does.

So what have we got? Well, there's the limited series that introduces Dragon and the first eight issues of the on-going series. Each of these comics appears in its entirety, with nothing added and nothing taken away. There's also an interview with Erik Larsen, some fancy opening pages and... nothing.

If you're a Larsen fan, then doubtless you'll want this for the interview. If you've only recently discovered the delights of *The Savage Dragon*, this is a quick way of catching up, but with Image reprinting the first issues at 80p a pop, it's not as economical as once it was.

I enjoyed the CD, and doubtless you will too. But it's by no means as good – or as worth the money – as it could have been.

**Robert Elliott**



## Video Review

*Apollo 13. A film by Ron 'Saefways' Howard. With Tom Gump as The Astronaut.*

The last line in this review was originally the only sentence I wrote after seeing this film, but the editor wanted more words, so if you are in a hurry just go to the bottom.

I'm going to take a stab in the dark and assume that all our gentle readers know the story of the Apollo 13 mission. If by chance you don't, I suggest you read a back issue of this august journal, in fact the mission is so well documented you can get information from any amount of sources.

So than, with all this info available why make a movie at all? Well one reason is money, another is entertainment, still more are a need to inform the public about NASA, show the triumph of the human spirit in extreme conditions, etc., but most of all because Ron Howard willed it to be so.

Ron is a much beloved filmmaker in his own land, his films have consistently got good reviews and shifted lots of units. When one looks at his past work, one can see certain patterns and threads surface time and time again in his work. And this is how it should be for an artist, he should have the freedom and choice to explore in any direction he chooses. As indeed I have a choice and I will exercise my right. I never want to watch another movie by him ever again.

Of course I said the very same thing after Cocoon. But people kept telling me to see Apollo 13, 'its great' they said 'wonderful, best movie of the year' and such like comments. Well I've just watched it on video and what a waste of two hours it was. How can people be so dazzled by the great SFX work, they forget about the appalling lack of depth in this film. A tip for all those who told me to see this film. It's the nineties now, great SFX are not the exception anymore, every Sci-fi movie from now on will have great SFX. let's look at the stories. This story has been told before, on film, in books and newspapers.

And that's the trouble with Apollo 13, there is no tension, we all know what the problem was, we know the men got back home in one piece. So, what is the hook? what keeps us watching? Howard offers us a possible avenue to explore, the families who were left behind. The all-American family as defined by Ron Howard is a unit of mutually supportive people who may have their differences but they always pull together in a crisis.

So what if daddy is in a crippled spacecraft somewhere between the earth and moon, with all of his systems crashing around his ears. A hug from mummy and a visit to grandma will help them deal with it. Then mum can gaze up into the sky and say a silent prayer while dad looks down on the earth.

It's all hogwash and I hate Howard even more. The man has no backbone, his worldview is so narrow I find it hard to believe he looks left and right before crossing the street.

I suppose it was too much to ask that he should give us some insight into the mission, why NASA allowed it in the first place, what were the after effects of such a disaster. Come to think of it, it was too much to ask.

Look, take my advice - watch four episodes of Coronation Street instead, it's a damn sight more entertaining than this tripe.

**Michael O Connor**

## Book Reviews

*The Burning Alter, Frances Gordon, Headline, pp311, £16.99*

According to the blurb, Frances Gordon is the daughter of an Irish actor. She has written two previous horror novels (plus for fantasy novels under the pseudonym Bridget Wood). No fantasy tale this, *The Burning Alter* is pure horror.

Long ago, in Old Testament times, a tribe of Egypt flees their homeland, taking with them ten stone tablets known as the Maleficarum Decalogue or – to put it more bluntly – Satan's Ten Commandments, which the Evil One – apparently in a fit of pique at Moses – carved out and threw down in response to their rather more publicised counterparts.

In 1888 a character by the name of Patrick Chance stumbles across the secret of the Decalogue in Tibet. His descendent, Lewis Chance, takes up the trail in the 1970s. The Vatican also has, of course, a vested interest in all of this so priests and cardinals naturally become involved. Finally, at some time in the 1990s, the entire store races to its climax. It's all here – sex, religion, London, Tibet, sex, crime, horror and more sex – all stirred up in a great big melting pot of evocative and atmospheric writing.

There are two main flaws in the telling of this rather convoluted tale. Firstly, and I'm slightly nitpicking here, the author is over-reliant on cliché. For instance, in describing how a character's neighbour "just never knocks on her door," you just know the author is going to add "not even for the proverbial cup of sugar." That sort of thing grates on the nerves after a while. Secondly, suspense is at times forced (by unnecessary repetition) to the point of being boring. At times this reviewer startled the daylights out of those around him by suddenly crying out, "aw cut the build-up and get to the point!" This is a sure indicator that pacing is a problem here, and yes it is – particularly at the start. Once the story takes off, however, the interweaving of complex plotlines and crisscrossing timelines is brilliantly handled. This novel is a surefire page-turner once the story gets going. Gordon's command of language is excellent and, for what some might regard as a 'mere' horror novel, the writing is of a very high calibre indeed. Recommended.

**Dave Murphy**

*The X-Files Declassified, Frank Lovece, Hodder & Stoughton, tpb, £9.99, pp419*

"This book has not been authorized by any entity involved in creating The X-Files," boasts the cover. This can mean only one thing... the book is crap. To be sure, there are many good unauthorised books on many subjects, but none of them needs to emblazon the cover with statements such as this. Only when the book has little to recommend it is it necessary to try and con us into thinking that we're getting something that the producers don't want us to read, because it contains... something.

So what have we got? 420 pages of nothing. Written in a huge typeface to pad out the book, the largest section deals with each episode, giving us a detailed synopsis written in a style that leads us to believe that the author is a failed detective novelist. We're also given 'X-otica' and 'X-actitude,' snippets of such profundity that we wonder how we enjoyed the show without knowing them. 'Worcester, MA is real town.' 'TV Station with news report : Channel 5.' In an attempt to provide us with something not given in the myriad other X-Files books, the author simply wastes his time and ours.

Okay, so the book has to have something going for it, right? I mean, it's so unauthorised, it's got to point out the bad bits in each show, yeah? Not even the most ardent of X-Philes (and for two years, that was me) will be able to deny that most episodes had some distinctly dodgy ideas or plot devices, but in this book, we get... nothing. Well, there are five pages of nitpicks, but these don't even begin to scratch the surface. And those that it mentions are simply continuity errors, nothing whatsoever is said about bad writing, silly plots or character inconsistencies.

All in all, it's hard to think of a more senseless way of wasting a tenner. As per usual, in the copyright page we are told that Lovece asserts his moral right to be identified as the author. If I'd written this piece of shit, I'd deny everything.

**Robert Elliott**