

FIRST CONTACT

The Newsletter of the Irish Science Fiction Association

December 1993

£1 (and worth every penny)

MERRY CHRISTMAS



Editorial

As the year comes to an end, I complete what may be our last edition of the newsletter. I initially took over editing it merely because no-one else was willing to do the job, but since then it's become an entertaining pastime. In the six or seven months that I've been doing it, I've had people say nice things about the job Eimear and I have been doing, but I've also had people say they preferred it before I took over.

Depending on the opinions of the members and the new Committee, Eimear and I may well still be editing this next month, but if we're not, what the heck. It's been fun. Because of the fact that this may be our last issue, combined with the fact that 'tis the season to say 'humbug', we've got an issue which I believe is traditionally described as a "bumper Christmas issue." May it bring you many hours of happiness, and I hope you appreciated all the work that went into drawing a few lines here and there in an attempt to give the magazine a new "look". Some may think it a little late to start experimenting with new styles, but that's the kind of wild and crazy guys we are.

Robert D. Elliott
Editor (maybe)

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CHRISTMAS SPECIAL

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It's funny that PageMaker, a program for designing magazines and newsletters, wouldn't have the word "Indicia" in its spell checker. Ah, well. On with the Indicia (I'm using the word "Indicia" lots of times before I add it to the spell checker, just to annoy the program. I like to imagine the elf in my 486 hopping mad every time I use the word "Indicia"). Anyway, First Contact is copyright (c) 1993 the Irish Science Fiction Association. The contents are copyright their respective creators. All opinions expressed in First Contact are the opinions of the individuals, and are not the opinions of the Irish Science Fiction Association unless expressly specified as such.

Hovercraft found full of eels -- Film at Eleven. But for now, It is with greatest pride and deepest pleasure that the management proudly presents...

News

Eurocon in Dublin in 1997?

Some people never know when to quit. After some small initial prompting, some of the people who brought you the first four Octocons are teaming up to bring you Octocon 8 - The Eurocon. As you might be able to guess from the name, Eurocon is a biggie, bringing fans from all over Europe and America. It could be fun; more details when I get them.

Anime on BBC

If you're interested in Anime at all, you'll be tuning in to the BBC this Christmas; BBC2's Def 2 will have a programme -- tentatively scheduled for 20th December -- telling us all about Anime in general and Manga Video's releases in particular. There'll also be interviews with such people as **Katsushiro Otomo**, whose *Akira* sparked off the current Anime craze. *Akira*, by the way, will also be shown by the beeb some time over Christmas.

As If We Hadn't Enough...

So, me hearties, you were all wondering about the upcoming sequel to *Star Trek: The Next Generation*? Well, wonder no more. *Star Trek: Voyager* will be the latest in a long line of clichés; this time, it seems, we've got *Lost in Space*. *Voyager* will be set on the USS

Voyager; a starship that sailed through a wormhole while chasing a bunch of renegade Starfleeties and is now lost, zillions of light years from home, leaving both crews united on the Quest to Find Earth. Maybe they'll run into Commander Adama or the Robinson family or Dave Lister or Moonbase Alpha or something.

The crew is said to include one familiar face -- the series takes place in the same timeframe as *The Next Generation* and *Deep Space Nine* -- and legend has it that the captain's chair will be moulded to **Amanda Donohue**'s bottom. Those of you who want to star in this ultra-PC show, apply to Paramount now. You won't be captain, but you can settle for one of the lower posts, as there'll be an Asian and a Native American on board, as well as a couple of guys from a never-before-seen race, a Vulcan and a Hybrid Klingon/Human. You can also send in your CV if you're corporeally challenged; this series' "alone in the universe -- will I ever meet more of my kind" person is not an android, not a morph monster, not even Phineas Bogg; the crew will include a hologram. I can see the script now. "Ensign Rimmer, set a course for your local library. It's all in books." *Star Trek: V'jer* will be premiering in January 1995, assuming that 'premiering' is a verb.

More Star Trek

It's been confirmed that *Star Trek VII* will be a crossover between the original and next generations, although at the moment it's looking like Picard and Co are a trifle reluctant to partake of the festivities. As I speak, the only two people to sign for the film are **William Shatner** and **DeForrest Kelley**. Any rumours that this is because Shatner wanted to be first to get top billing are probably libellous or something, and therefore won't be repeated here.

New Stanley Kubrick Film

Years since his last movie (*Full Metal Jacket*, if memory serves), and years more since his last good one, **Stanley Kubrick** will begin work next year on *AI*. Lest you all wonder what the great man can say on the subject of artificial insemination, let me reassure you that he's referring instead to Artificial Intelligence. His new opus will be set in a future world where the greenhouse effect has melted the polar ice-caps, flooding most of the world. He'll be packing his swimming trunks early next year when production begins.

Harl Seldon, Harl Seldon, Seldon Seldon, Harl Harl.

You've all heard that it was coming, but it's been recently confirmed (recently to me, anyway) that the director of the adaptation of **Isaac Asimov's Foundation** will be none other than **Jean-Jacques Annaud**. The film,

which will be based on the first three books of the trilogy, may have sequels if it makes enough money for TriStar.

New Godzilla Movie

Tokyo will be shuddering once more next year as **Godzilla** makes his return to the big screen. Those nice people at Tri-star will be bringing the big guy to the screen in time for Christmas 1994.

More Remakes

What's wrong with all these people that they can't come up with original scripts? Granted, when the director is **Oliver Stone** "only ever made one half-decent movie" he's probably better off going for one of the classics, but can even such an excellent film as *Planet of the Apes*, of which Stone is currently trying to get the rights, survive the mauling of the director of *JFK* and *Platoon*?

New Interviewer

After the untimely -- and ultimately ironic -- demise of **River Phoenix** from an apparent drug overdose last month, the part of the interviewer in **Neil Jordan's Interview With the Vampire** is now going to **Christian Slater**.

ConFrancisco Second Biggest Worldcon Ever

The recent World Science Fiction Convention was the second biggest ever, attracting a whopping 8,122 people. This is second only to 1984's LACon which attracted 8,365.

Encyclopaedia Galactica

Those of you who are without gainful employment or who possess a VCR might be interested in a wee programme being shown daily on RTÉ 1. Although a mere ten minutes long and at the somewhat awkward hour of 13:55 (give || take 5 minutes), *Encyclopaedia Galactica* tells you not about the effect of alcohol on certain carbon-based life forms, but about pretty much the rest of the universe. Although aimed primarily at the young of the species, humans of all ages with an interest in space will find the blend of animation, live action and computer graphics that goes along with the series informative and entertaining. Honest.

B5/Outer Limits Tie-In?

Remember *Demon With A Glass Hand*, that episode of *The Outer Limits* written by Harlan Ellison and starring Robert Culp? Well, it seems that Ellison, creative consultant to *Babylon 5*, and J. Michael Straczynski, the series' creator, are interested in having Culp reprise his role in an episode of the forthcoming series. Apparently, if he can survive hundreds of years to the 22nd century, he should have no trouble lasting until the timeframe of *B5*.

Speaking of Babylon 5...

If you were wondering exactly what Babylon 5 is about, I've just been given the Star Trek type introduction to the series. I'm going to feel a real tit if this was in the pilot and everybody know it

already, but what the heck. Anyway, in the words of Sinclair...

"It was the Dawn of the Third Age of Mankind, ten years after the Earth/Minbari War. The Babylon Project as a dream given form, its goal: to prevent another war by creating a place where humans and aliens could work out their differences peacefully. It's a port of call, home away from home for diplomats, hustlers, entrepreneurs and wanderers. Humans and aliens wrapped in two million, five hundred thousand tons of spinning metal... all alone in the night.

"It can be a dangerous place, but it's our last, best hope for peace.

"This is the story of the last of the Babylon stations.

"The year is 2258.

"The name of the place... is Babylon 5."

By the way, Channel 4 have bought the British rights to *B5*. It'll be a while before we see it -- it won't be airing in America until the end of January -- but it only took *seaQuest DSV* six weeks to arrive, so there's some hope of a March showing.

Bill Bixby Dies

Known and loathed for his roles in *My Favorite Martian* and *The Magician*, Bill Bixby, who also played David Banner in the TV series *The Incredible Hulk*, died of cancer last month. Banner starred in many movies (*Kentucky Fried Movie* was my favourite), but will be best remembered for his role as Banner (which went some way to redeeming his

appearances in the first two) in the adaptation of the Marvel comic.

Spiderman Script Drafted

James Cameron has recently completed the first draft of the script for his upcoming Spiderman movie while on the set of his Amie flick, *True Lies*. The villain of the piece will be **Venom**, and it's hoped to have the film finished in time for a release in the summer of '95.

Obligatory Batman Piece

We couldn't go a whole issue without the latest rumour about *Batman 3*. This month's *Empire* magazine avers that **Tim Burton** isn't directing the film not because he doesn't want to, but because Los Bros Warner don't want another macabre depiction of the dark knight that'll scare all the kiddies. *Empire* also reported that the position of Riddler is still being contested by **Robin Williams** and **John Malkovitch**. However, [smug mode ON], they did report lots of stuff that you've been reading here for the last six months. [smug mode OFF] When the film comes out, I'll probably republish all the rumours and "news" that's appeared here to see how much of it is actually true.

Oh, and if you're interested in the Feats of the Dark Knight, you might be interested in knowing that not only is he re-taking on Judge Dredd, but he'll also be up against/with* **Spawn**, in an Image/DC teamup brought to us by **Todd McFarlane** and **Frank Miller**.

*kapow as applicable

Judge Dredd Movie

It seems that **Sylvester Stallone** is getting fond of new directors. After bowing to the megaphone of first-timer **Marco Brambilla** in *Demolition Man*, he'll be working on *Judge Dredd* with the 25-year old **Danny Cannon**, whose first offering, *The Young Americans*, can be seen even as we read. The film will be written by **William Wisher**, the copen behind *Terminator 2*, and is due for release in December 1994.

Prisoner : The Movie

Imagine the sound of hundreds — nay, thousands — of *Prisoner* fans cringing and groaning at the same time as they hear the news of the upcoming *Prisoner* movie. After the success of the *Fugitive* movie, it seems that our American chums are eager to snap up old British TV series and convert them into blockbuster Films. **Harrison Ford** may have been very good in *The Fugitive*, but ask yourself: will the new number six be as good? **Kevin Costner**, for it is he, will allegedly be donning the badge 'n' blazer, and **Danny De Vito** is said to be playing the butler. Other interested parties include **Bruce Willis** and **Mel Gibson**. Where, you ask, will the movie be set? Well, not in Portmerion, it seems. Nor will **Patrick McGoochan** have more than a cameo role in the film. What else can they do? Maybe they'll eschew the numbers as well in favour of a more up to date system. I can see it now. "I am a free man!" "You are bar code thin thick

thick thick thin thicker thin!"

Oh Yeah...

Remember I said that *The Avengers* was coming out on video? Well, rejoice, for 'tis here! However, for some reason known only to the gods, they've come out in a really strange order, with one b&w and one colour episode on each cassette (at least, for the first couple). Why? Answers on a carrier pigeon.

Beetlejuice II

It's been a while in coming, but Geffen have finally decided that *Beetlejuice II* is a good idea. Will Michael Keaton return? Let us pray to all the relevant gods that he does. The film will be written by Pamela Norris, and there's no hint of a release date as yet. Last I heard the plot was *Beetlejuice Gets Married*; I've no idea whether this is still the case.

New Irish Publisher

Those nice people at *Albedo I*, not content with a regular SF magazine, have decided to set up their own publishing company. Set up with the aim of giving exposure to new Irish writers of speculative fiction, Aeon Press plans to have its first novel published by August 1995 in time for the Worldcon in Glasgow. But not only do they plan on giving you new SF for your shelf; they're also planning on expanding your share portfolio. If you're so inclined, you can send them money, which they plan to give back to you (plus a whopping 20%)

on publication of the first novel. Interested? Drop unto them a note at *Aeon Press*, 2 Post Road, Lusk, Co. Dublin.

Local Authors Make Good

Michael Scott and Morgan Llywelyn have sold a two-volume fantasy series to an American publisher for the now legendary "undisclosed six-figure sum" Volume one of the series -- provisionally titled *The Staff and the Stone* - will be appearing at Christmas 1994. Despite his happiness at the sale, Michael Scott didn't buy me a single drink at Octocon.

World Fantasy Awards

This year's World Fantasy Awards went as follows...

Best Novel

Last Call (Tim Powers)

Best Novella

The Ghost Village (Peter Straub)

Best Short Story (tie)

Graves (Joe Haldeman)

This Year's Class Picture (Dan Simmons)

Lifetime Achievement

Harlan Ellison

Rumours Abound

Some of the more interesting rumours to be heard from various sources. Note that these come under one of three

categories; 1) Preliminary leaks of what will be announced later, 2) misheard interpretations of something completely different or 3) downright lies. Make up your own mind. This month's batch includes...

-**Jane March**, last seen in *The Lover*, will play Molly Millions in the film version of **William Gibson's** short story, *Johnny Mnemonic*. However, that won't be the name of the film, as our American chums find it too difficult to pronounce.

-Speaking of Gibson, **Ridley Scott** is interested in turning *The Difference Engine*, the book he co-wrote with **Bruce Sterling**, into a film.

-Goremeister **Paul Verhoeven** is, it seems, willing to turn **Robert A. Heinlein's** *Starship Troopers* into a movie. Is it just me, or could that have a distinct Japanese flavour about it? Mobile suits, guys jumping fifty feet in the air and blasting people... but will **Sylvia Stingray** lead them?

-In an upcoming episode of the US Best-in-the-ratings-but-alas-is-as-yet-unseen-over-here romanticish series *Lois and Clarke*, a distraught Lois hires leading detectives from the "first few series were good" *Moonlighting* agency. Her beloved Clarkie, it seems has flown into the wild blue yonder and can't be traced, so it's up to the Blue Moon Detective Agency to trace him. The episode will be co-plotted by **Bruce Willis**, who is rumoured to be getting huge wedges of cash for appearing in the feature-length episode. It is not yet known whether **Cybil Sheppard** will be ap-

pearing.

-**Stephen Spielberg** is interested in making a **Dr. Who** film. Good news? Hah. You haven't heard who's going to play the Doctor. To break it to you gently: Lots of German pop fans will be happy, as will all watchers of *Baywatch* and *Knight Rider*.

-Conflicting news? I've heard from a couple of different sources that **Cameron's** Spiderman flick will have **Johnny Depp** as Spidey, and **Marlon Brando** as the Kingpin. The bit I mentioned earlier about *Venom* was a definite, though. Who's lying?

-One the subject of the Spiderman move, speculation on who would play the part of J. Jonah Jameson was halted when someone remembered **Stan "The Man" Lee** once saying he'd like the part.

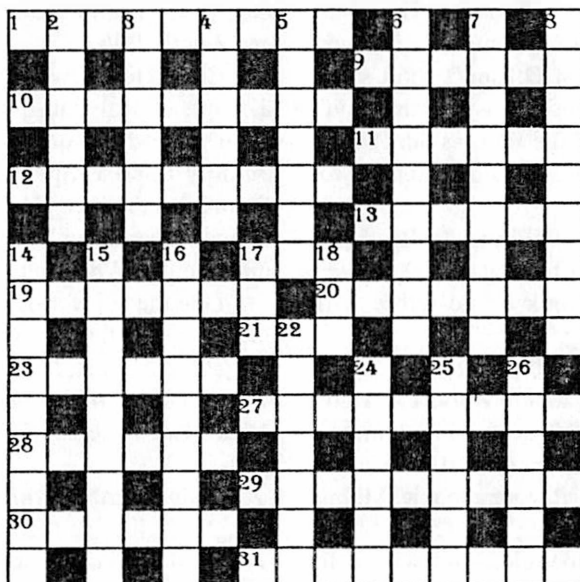
-This month's *Anisble* by **Dave Langford** gives us the unsubstantiated snippet that **Geoff Ryman** is writing a *Star Trek* novel.

This just in: The godzilla movie will co-star the crew from seaQuest DSV as they try to find a cure for their dolphin, who's been eating luminous dinosaur dung and has been hypnotised by the evil rich megalomaniac. Rumours that this is because the editor can't find any more news are totally founded.

TTFN, RDE

This month, a signed copy of Robert Rankin's *They Came and Ate Us* will wing its way to the first entry out of the sock on the 30th November. Hugs to **Sproutlore**, **The Now Official Robert Rankin Fan Club** for their donation.

Crossword #3



Across

1. Author of *Daughter of Regals* (9)
9. Disentangle what sounds like a double negative (6)
10. Constantine's tragic tee can be quite addictive (9)
11. I've Utah -- Made of Mars? (6)
12. See, Java Neck wrote *Servants of the Wankh* (4, 5)
13. Mysterious Sri Lankan (6)
17. How many can there be? (3)
19. Teacher or author of *Soul Rider*? (7)
21. Vagrant accused of arson (3)
23. God of moon landings (6)
27. They eliminate spies and napples? (9)
28. I'll be disappointed if you this finish this (4, 2)
29. Author of *Jannisarles* -- lives in Chaos Manor (9)
30. Adjectival 22 down
31. Singularly turdine enemy of our uncle knocks for the secret keyhole (3, 6)

Down

2. R. Daneel -- Voila! Double you, robot (6)

3. Sounds like I'll find out if she knows where *North-em Exposure* is set (6)
4. What A.J. Rimmer can't without mentioning fish (2, 4)
5. There've been four so far (7)
6. The study of short story collections? (9)
7. A studio -- hardly of paramount Importance (9)
8. Remote ocular capability implies inattentiveness (5, 4)
14. Author who's a-draggin' on a fey farm? Sil! Sil! (9)
15. Sounds like a lot of work -- definitely describes some of these clues (9)
16. They leeks tons of bones (9)
17. This IT publisher -- not Sphere (3)
18. Chez Fredcky -- the street (3)
22. Eggs can't approach this beast, even though there's a point going on ahead (7)
24. Ghostly gin (6)
25. The only way to ascend the throne (2, 4)
26. Billy Goats' Nemeses (6)

The biggest event on the science fiction calender must surely be Octocon. What was it like? We asked a few people.

Octocon '93

Once again we were in the Royal Marine Hotel, and it was October so it must have been Octocon. The weekend began with collecting Mr. Robert Rankin, famous author and very natty dresser from the airport. We brought him to the hotel and deposited him in reception. While the great man himself was booking into his room, the Committee passed me by, totally ignoring me and so began the trend for the weekend.

The only times a member of the Committee deigned to speak to me was while inquiring where my boyfriend was (of course there are exceptions to each rule and Pádraig and James Bacon did acknowledge my existence, which was more than the majority of the committee did).

The Con itself comprised the usual debates, panels and videos. I must admit that I didn't make it to the video programmes at all, but then you don't really pay the Con attending membership just to watch videos. You pay the money to see the panels, meet the guests and have some fun. The guests were very approachable and pleasant, Mr. Rankin was ever entertaining, and the fun was what you made of it.

Overall the Con seemed to be quite successful, people seemed to enjoy themselves and nobody seemed to object to the free kegs at the disco. Of course, the occasional person (myself included) had their misgivings about a number of things, but I suppose that

nothing and nobody (including the Committee) can be perfect.

It might have been nice if the Co-Chairs had seen their way clear to actually thanking the guests for attending. I mean people like Anne McCaffrey and Peter and Diane didn't get any recognition at all that I (or anyone else who was at the closing ceremony) know about, and they do attend each year and at least deserve to be acknowledged.

From my own experience at con-running, I realise how hard it can be to keep body and soul together, but the first rule of con-running must always be to try and see that everyone enjoys themselves as much as possible. From this point of view at least I think that more could have been done by the Committee, but at least the convention went ahead and there was no bloodshed that I saw.

Basically I think of my £10 and wonder why I bothered.

Leonía Mooney

You will read in these pages praise for the Octocon committee, and various platitudes about what a swell con it was. The praise is deserved. For getting up off their bums and doing it, for avoiding disaster on the weekend, the committee should be praised; the ISFA is one of the few places left where you can still get something for virtually nothing.

But platitudes aren't going to help correct mistakes. The fact remains that

- from the point of view of the consumer - O4 was the least of the Octocons so far, and the best con in recent times is still Trincon.

Wandering through the empty corridors of the Royal Marine on Saturday afternoon, I felt almost nostalgic for the hordes of trekkies who plagued O1 and O2. Throughout the con, there was no atmosphere. Not even downstairs in the bar. Not even with the free Harp in the disco. Things that seemed incidental last year - showdowns at the registration table, confrontations in the corridors, rumours of sexual misconduct - turn out to have been an essential part of the con. This year was about as much fun as an Amish media studies course.

Storm Constantine may be a very good writer and a favourite of one or more committee members, but is she a crowd-puller? The interview with the guest of honour covered a list of books that most people probably hadn't read. Was I the only one there who didn't feel knowledgeable enough to ask a question? Maura McHugh conducted a fine interview, but Storm had neither the reputation nor the entertainment value that one expects from a guest of honour. Robert Rankin, who sat with her on at least one panel, emerged as a far more typical guest of honour.

The panels that I attended were generally lacklustre, poorly-attended, and with fuzzy topics. The one on Sex in Science Fiction drifted into a bizarre and boring discussion of androgyny in the works of Ursula leGuin, or something like that. And "that prat", as Robert Rankin rightly called the prat with the beard in the front row who thought "any questions?" was his cue to start a private conversation with the

panel, should be barred.

Other topics were "Humour in Science Fiction" and "Horror in Science Fiction". I'm surprised that they didn't have one on "Science in Science Fiction." Oops, sorry, they did. And where oh where was the quiz?

The topic of a panel should preferably not sound like the title of a polytechnic course. It should be a challenge. It should stir things up. My suggestions are: Alien languages; Who cares if space explosions make a noise?; How to make a lot of money; Pro- celebrity Scrabble; Was the Bible the first sf book?; Authors quizzed on their knowledge of sf.

The best panel was How I Got Published, which at least got across some solid advice. The rest consisted mostly of half-assed opinions, nudge-nudge comments, and "questions" from the audience that sounded like school essays.

Lastly. The video programme. Was it for real? If you're going to break the law, couldn't you at least nip out to Xtravision and get a £2.20 new release, instead of another goddamn fucking chance to see Aliens? With membership at £18 on the day it is nothing short of scandalous that most of the video programme was made up from one member's private collection. Not even Super Channel would show some of the shite that was shown.

Next year, why not forget about the videos and simply have a TV room?

Michael Cullen

Octocon '93 was run by a committee with virtually no experience in running a convention. And, sadly, it showed. In the time-honoured tradition, I shal begin at the beginning.

Arriving at the Royal Marine Hotel bright and early on Saturday 30th October, I found the registration desk purely by chance. Not even a hint of a signpost. Having registered, I proceeded to examine my Convention pack -- and discovered to my delight that this was a mystery convention! Reading through my beautifully laid-out con booklet, ignoring the numerous typos, I knew what was going to happen, and when. Unfortunately, our committee had neglected to say where these events were to take place. Full marks for organisation there. Handwritten signs and a hastily-drawn map began to appear later in the day after most people had found the appropriate rooms for themselves. Another, more serious, failing was the lack of a first aid officer.

The first four hours of the convention I spent attending panels. These had some interesting topics, but I felt that the same people were being overused on these panels -- especially when members of the audience knew more about the subject than some of the panelists. Checking out the dealers' room was next on the agenda. Another disappointment. The room used was far too small to be used as a fan room as well. But I did enjoy the raffles organised by the various groups -- particularly the one where I became the proud owner of Scottie!

The video rooms were, as always, very popular. The use of a projector in one room was an excellent idea. Having a separate Star Trek room was also an excellent idea -- except for the fact that I missed all the pathetic trekkies roaming about complaining that it wasn't much of a Star Trek convention.

Saturday ended with the traditional

fancy dress competition, followed by a disco. I didn't spend a lot of time at this. There was no need, as I could hear the music perfectly from my room -- three floors up, on the far side of the hotel.

There followed the nigh legendary sit-in-the-hotel-bar-and-talk-until-the-wee-hours session, which I believe ended at about 5a.m.

Sunday consisted of lots more panels -- again using the same people repeatedly. There was a distinct lack of big screen movies at the convention, which was a pity. The closing ceremony tonight was one of the highlights of the entire weekend. It was entertaining, the winners of the Aisling Gheal competition were announced, and there was communal heart failure every time a ticket was pulled out for the grand raffle prize -- one hundred pounds worth of books from Transworld publishers.

And so ended another convention. Not the best Octocon I have attended, but I still enjoyed existing on junk food, having virtually no sleep and trying once again to avoid being barred for life from the Royal Marine Hotel. God knows why.

Theresa O'Conner

I'd looked forward to the convention for months, but I wondered how it would measure up to the previous one considering the inexperience of the committee. Overall I think the weekend was a success. There were times when it seemed to drag a little but also several times when I fervently wished for the gift of bilocation, since wherever I was I was missing something good elsewhere. Not everything ran smoothly, and there are a couple of things that

should be looked at for next year. I don't mean the occasional event that never took place as hiccups will always happen, but rather the weaknesses in some of the things that did run according to plan.

I didn't attend all or even most of the panels, but those I was at all seemed to suffer somewhat from imprecise titles; the first ten minutes or so would consist of the panel floundering around trying to establish what exactly they were supposed to be talking about, so it be in full swing just when it came time to finish up. Quite a number ran well over time. One that I was on suffered from this problem; the title was "How a fan should spend a tenner", and the panel consisted of representatives of various societies, e.g. Star Trek groups, Octarine, the ISFA. Not everyone on the panel seemed to know that the idea was for us all to say why somebody should spend money joining our particular group. Certainly the title wouldn't have been very illuminating to anyone checking the programme book to see what was on.

Some of the variations or innovations on previous years' programming worked well, but some failed. The idea of interviewing the Guest of Honour Storm Constantine instead of having her make a speech was effective; Maura McHugh had obviously put a lot of thought into her questions, which were interesting and pertinent, and elicited worthwhile answers without her being in any way sycophantic. The debate - "That fantasy is killing off science fiction" - turned out to be not such a good idea in practice. I suspected that most of the participants could easily have

swapped sides since the writers and readers of the respective genres didn't have the requisite hostility towards their counterparts and quite a few either wrote or read both. Their opinion seemed to be that the real enemy to all innovative or well-written science fiction or fantasy as opposed to formulaic schlock was the publishers, or more specifically the marketing departments thereof. It ended up not being a debate at all.

One innovation that was definitely very popular was that three free kegs of beer were secured for the disco, lubricating the festivities without any cost to the attendees, at least those who were prepared to drink Harp.

Having said all that, what I enjoy about conventions is not the scheduled events but the conversations you have with people you've never met before or that you only see once or twice a year, who happen all to be gathered in the one place. I hate to use that over-abused phrase 'the crack', but I can't find anything more suitable to describe the atmosphere, which was excellent. Someone whose main interest is in the panels, etc, and who doesn't easily strike up conversations probably would have felt dissatisfied with the weekend, and I think that the committee should bear that in mind for next year. I had some of the best fun I've had all year, and was really reluctant to go home on the Sunday night.

Eimear Ní Mhéalóid

Well, only one, really

Letters

Dear Editors,

Once upon a time it was seriously believed in this country that condoms caused sex. Rather than look around for more plausible factors - ignorance, peer pressure, the sex drive - it was easier to accept the equation condoms = unwanted babies, thus no condoms = no unwanted babies. Condoms, after all, could simply be banned. For politicians to address the problem of ignorance would upset the church, and lose votes.

It took another myth, that of the AIDS epidemic, to finally bring those little pieces of rubber to the newsgagents. Our politicians, who presumably gave wholehearted consent to the condom ban of the 60s and 70s, are now just as adamant that condoms are good. Does anyone smell a bandwagon?

Now the scapegoat for all our ills is the video nasty. The parallels with the sexual debate are clear. Rather than address the problems of poverty, of broken homes, of child neglect and abuse, it suddenly occurs to our politicians that all we have to do is ban certain videos, and Bob's your uncle. This kind of thing is a surefire vote-winner, and videos are tangible things, and tangible things can easily be banned.

Whether there is a link between horror videos and crime, the nastiest thing about this whole affair is the motives of those involved. Did the Evening Press report that there was a link between Child's Play 3 and the James Bulger murder in order to warn the public of a clear danger, or because (a) It

was a sensational story in a slow week, (b) Headlines that state facts sell more papers than ones that say "There may be a link, but it hasn't been proven yet", and (c) The makers of Child's Play 3 aren't likely to sue?

Similarly, if films like this are banned by the Minister for Justice, will it be because first and foremost she knows they affect young children, or will it be because (a) She wants to be seen to be doing something, (b) Horror videos are an easy target. The makers can seldom afford to appeal against an injunction, and (c) The audience for these videos do not yet have a political lobby?

In March 1984 the same hysteria led to the infamous Bright bill, introduced into the House of Commons by Graham Bright MP in order to stem what many saw as a flood of video nasties. At the time, the Guardian film critic Derek Malcolm commented "An extraordinary level of ignorance pervades these actions from top to bottom: from the policeman who seizes Apocalypse Now instead of Cannibal Apocalypse to the MPs who are shown only a reel of the worst bits of film spliced together. These MPs never see a video nasty at all. Many haven't entered a cinema in years; and they are acting for an audience three times as young as them."

If a positive link is to be proven between horror videos and the Bulger murder, then it must be shown that the two boys who carried it out, Jon Venables and Robert Thompson, came from backgrounds where

there were no other factors which might contribute to their delinquency. If there are such factors, then we can assume that if the boys hadn't been influenced by horror videos, then they would have been influenced by the Nine O'Clock News, or 2000AD, or The Simpsons.

According to the new book on the affair by David James Smith, it turns out that, in the case of Jon Venables, his parents divorced when he was four, in 1986, after which he first became disruptive. By 1990 he was uncontrollable in class. One day he grabbed another boy and held a ruler to his throat. In an area where truancy was relatively rare, both boys missed one-third of lessons in 1992.

The book also claims that Robert Thompson's father used to hit his mother. His brother was put on the child protection register after being seen with a black eye and a cigarette burn. In 1988 his father met another woman, and left the home. His mother then began to drink heavily, and the family fell into debt. The older brothers were left in charge of the younger ones, and sometimes hit them. Then two of the boys were taken into care.

If watching Child's Play 3 was one of the things that led to the crime perpetrated by these two boys, it must come very far down the list.

The simple fact is that these two boys were bored - they had spent the morning stealing from shops. An infant strayed into their hands. Coming from violent homes, with warped authority figures, the boys didn't do

what most people would have done, and return the infant to its mother.

There are supposed similarities between the actions of the boys and the plot of Child's Play 3. It is known that the boys threw stones. If the last film the boys had seen had been Jesus of Nazareth, with its stoning scenes, would that film had been withdrawn from Xtravision? And if the idea of kidnapping a toddler was somehow implanted in their minds by watching Child's Play 3, then how do we know the same idea wasn't implanted in a million other children's minds by hearing news reports of the kidnap?

One voice of reason amid the hysteria comes from the redoubtable James Ferman, the director of the British Board of Film Classification. "Spurious links with Child's Play 3 are totally in the minds of journalists," he says. "There are no wicked children in Child's Play 3. It is a ghost story. Surely we are not going to ban ghost stories?"

The head-in-the-sand attitude of so many of our citizens is reminiscent of that seen in America, where until recently it was reckoned that banning rap records was a better answer to violent crime than passing gun control laws.

The chief irony of the affair is that Child's Play 3 is, above all, a pretty dull movie. And if Xtravision continue their puerile ban, you'll just have to take my word for it.

Yours,

Michael Cullen

David Gemmell

Interviewed by Robert Elliott and Elmeare Ní Mhéalóid

David Gemmell's fantasy books include Legend, The King Beyond the Gate, Ghost King, Last Sword of Power, Last Guardian, Nights of Dark Renown, Quest for Lost Heroes, Lion of Macedon, Dark Prince and Morningstar. He was in Dublin recently to publicise the launching of Waylander II and The Chronicles of Druss the Legend as well as the graphic novel of Legend.

RE I'll start with the graphic novel of *Legend*. Were you happy with letting someone else take your book and adapt it?

DG Nobody else did. What happened with the graphic novel is that I'd been getting letters for seven or eight years asking about a graphic novel. Graphic novel fans tend to be fantasy fans; there's a lot of overlap. So what I wanted to do was do it myself. I couldn't *paint* it, but I wanted direct control. So I went to Random House, and sold them the idea, and they paid for it. And I commissioned the artist, I commissioned the script writer and it was all done through me from the start so I could be sure the novel would be done in the best way possible.

Obviously, you can't impose too much control, the artist has to have a feeling for it. You can't be going to the artist every five minutes saying "that character has a rounder face, I want shorter hair, longer hair, I want white hair, green hair, whatever. He's going to get severely pissed off, and his work will lack spark. So there are elements to *Legend* where I let the artist go, but yeah, I'm delighted with the result.

RE Fangorn is very well regarded; was he your own choice for artist?

DG Fangorn had never done a graphic novel, so I wasn't thinking about him. The man I wanted was John Bolton. Actually, this killed me at the time. As far as I was concerned, I never met John Bolton, although I loved his work. So when they asked me who I wanted, I said John Bolton. So I found his telephone number, and gave him a ring. I said "Hi, this is David Gemmell" and he said "Hi, Dave, how are you?" Not just friendly, but like someone I knew. It's an awful shock, you're there thinking "when did I meet him?" So I said "I'm very well. And you? John?" And there's this pause, and he said "you don't remember me, do you?" And I said "I've got to be honest,

I didn't think we'd met." And he said "Well, in 1987 at a fantasy convention, I walked up to you and offered to do *Legend* as a graphic novel for nothing." And it all came back to me; this young artist had offered to do *Legend* for nothing. Then he said "I took your advice." The advice I gave him was never

do anything for nothing. If you've got the talent, just hawk the talent and someone's going to say "we'll use it."

I'm disappointed
with *Lion of
Macedon* be-
cause it's the
one big copout I
ever had

So I had this the most famous graphic artist saying to me "what can I do for you?" I said "well, I'm looking for someone to do *Legend*, actually." And he said there was a three-year waiting list, and it would cost me lots of money. He's been very helpful throughout the project, which is why his name is in the acknowledgements. We sent him original artwork, and we got his advice on a *lot* of stuff. It just shows; when somebody offers to do something for nothing, you

should just say "yes."

RE We were talking earlier about your signings. Are you still the record holder for the most signings?

DG Yes I am, but it won't be in the Guinness Book of Records. What they told us when we did it was that it would go in when someone else says "we've done 4,300 or 5,200", then it'll go in, unless someone beats it. God, that was a killer. It took something like sixteen hours; you wouldn't believe you'd forget how to sign your own name. Your hand moves, and suddenly forgets where it's going.

RE Is it something you'd be willing to do again?

DG No. Actually, the first one was a disaster. We did *Wolf in Shadow* and it was the most appalling day I think I've spent, ever. They'd never done anything like it, so when I'd turned up at the printers to sign 5,000 copies of *Wolf in Shadow*, I said "I'm David Gemmell, I've come to do a signing." They said, "Well, the books are over there, mate." There were these enormous pallets with books on them. I asked who was bringing the books over, and he said "bringing the books over?" "I need someone to bring them over, open them up, take them away, stack them, it's going to take hours." "Oh, I dunno about that. No-one told us about that. Who's paying for that, then?" Then I asked where I could get some coffee. "There's a machine over there, takes 10p pieces." So it was a great day. The second time they did it we got a team of people from publicity, and it was ten women; they were superb. Apart from being

fabulous looking, they were very funny, and the whole day became a drinkfest, and it was a very good day. If they got the same team together, I'd do it.

RE One of the perks of being a famous author is being surrounded by beautiful women all day, then?

DG Yeah. No! (*leans into microphone*) No. Not at all.

ENM You've said before that you would have liked to write historical novels if it weren't for the research, but a lot of people have commented on how well done the military scenes are in your books, so you must have had to do a lot of research for them.

DG When I say research, I mean basic stuff. Some of it I love, the military stuff, strategies, battles, all my life, so I've got a wealth of information there. It's other research, like on *Lion of Macedon* I needed architecture, clothes, you know, they way the society was run, how they worked, the role of women. There are so many things you don't know. With *Lion of Macedon* I had a researcher to do it for me which meant that I could write in a year a book that otherwise would have taken three years.

I'm disappointed with *Lion of Macedon* because it's the one big copout I ever had.

I went to the publisher and said I wanted to do a straight historical novel and he said "marvellous idea," because he's really clever, this guy. "What sort of novel?" he asked. "Alexander the Great." "Even better," he said. "I've always liked that period. What name will you write it under?" "Well I thought I'd do it under Gemmell."

"Oh, no," he said. "That gets confusing because the historical section is always way away from the fantasy section. Best if we build a new name." "OK," I said. "Ross Harding." "Ross Harding? I like that. Three books?" "Yes, three books." Then he said "So, Mr. Harding, what I can offer you is this." "What?" "Well, let's face it, Mr. Harding, nobody knows you. Is there a problem?" So I asked him what if there was a tiny bit of fantasy in it. "Oh, no problem. We'll put it out under your name." So *Lion of Macedon* has fantasy in it where it probably shouldn't. I'm still happy with the book, but the more I thought about it since, Philip of Macedon is such a fantastic character, he's really worth a strong historical novel.

RE You've also said previously that you won't read other fantasy books in

God, it was
vile. I've got it
in hardback
and paperback.
I was a loyal
reader.

case you subconsciously nick their ideas.

DG It's not just the ideas. You get a real problem as a writer which is that if you read a book that is better written than yours — and there are enough of those around — you get depressed, thinking "Christ, I'm doing the best I can, and this guy or this woman is so much better." On the other hand, if you read a book that's worse than your's — and there are enough of *those* around — you think "why am I working so hard?" So those two things you can't actually win on. The other thing is that when we read for pleasure, we fall between the lines. You don't actually know that you're reading — it's like you're inside a movie. It's only when you notice you're reading you get up to make some tea or something. Well, I can't fall between the lines. Whatever I read I think "that's a good hook. That's a clever piece of characterisation." I can only enjoy the books on a technical level.

RE Is that all books, or just fantasy?

DG I can still reread old Louis l'Amour books. I've got two hundred of those.

ENM He must be the classical author with seventy thousand careers before he ever wrote anything. Lumberjack, boxer...

DG ...a short spell in the French foreign legion before he deserted. The guy's incredible. Anyone who can write two hundred novels with exactly the same storyline and get somebody like me to buy them all; he's sold about four hundred and fifty million copies in sixty languages. He's the twentieth century's biggest selling author. I go back over his old stuff now and get enjoyment out of it not because I can fall between the lines; it's because I *once* fell between the lines, so I have the memory of reading.

ENM He wrote a western with fantasy elements in it set in California about the Indians...

DG *Lonesome Gods*. He also wrote a fantasy/science fiction novel called *Haunted Mesa*. God, it was vile. I've got it in hardback *and* paperback. I was a loyal reader.

ENM Westerns are not unlike fantasy in that they both have the epic showdown between good and evil.

DG Fantasy has replaced westerns. For my generation, we were western fans. But Hollywood then got the idea of real westerns. I used to watch Wyatt Earp, with this guy in a beautiful white hat, marshal of Dodge City, he

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brothel

never did a bad thing in his life, and he certainly never swore. I don't think he ever kissed a girl he didn't marry, and he never married. Then Hollywood shows us that Earp was a pimp and an extortionist, and all these other things that Earp did, and so I think a lot of people said you can't hero-worship those characters, and we need heroes. So people linked into fantasy; no-one is ever going to show that Frodo Baggins took dope or ran a brothel, so when it comes down to it, no-one can shine a dark light on a fantasy character.

RE I've only read about seven westerns in my life, and I couldn't tell you who wrote them. They were about this lonesome cowboy riding into town and meeting a beautiful woman...

...he hands me
the unstrung
longbow and
asks me to lie
on the floor
and string it.

DG That was Louis l'Amour. I like him for the sheer pace of his storytelling. He's very good for that. You've also got to respect anyone who can write 200 books. I'm hoping to catch up with him some day, if I live that long.

RE You're writing what, a book a year?

DG Well, I'm writing thrillers now under the name Ross Harding, so I'm at three a year.

RE Is it easier, writing thrillers?

DG In one respect it's easier; if you have a character walking out of a house, putting a key into a car, we can identify with that. We have a definite sense of reality. When you're writing fantasy and you're including things that are magical or mystical or weird, you've got to work much harder to create credibility in the character. It's easier to do it in thrillers. But in fantasy, you can get more drama, a more epic feel in fantasy *because* it's magical or mystical; that's the sort of thing you can't do in a modern-day thriller. It's a nice contrast.

RE You wrote a couple of books that got bounced...

DG The first book I ever wrote was in 1972, and I sent it to a big agency. I got a letter back saying "we're not normally this forthright, but when someone sends us something so badly structured, with so little characterisation and so little understanding of plot constraints, we felt we had to write back and say 'find yourself another job'." So that was the first one. Years later, after *Legend* was accepted, I wrote *Druss the Legend*, which they rejected, then I wrote *The King Beyond the Gate*, which was even worse. I asked them for anything they

liked about the book, and they said the title. So I wrote a different book called *The King Beyond the Gate*, and they accepted it.

RE Do you get much by way of fan mail?

DG Yeah. It's getting complicated now. I used to answer them all, then I got too many to deal with in a week, so now I make a list of all first-timers, and I'll write to them, and I have an assistant who writes to all the rest. It's getting a bit tight now, though. I'm getting a lot of delays, so some people don't get a reply for two to three months. I think you you're going to take the time to write to an author, you deserve a reply. But I also do talks, give workshops and with replies and three books a year as well, it's getting very tight.

ENM Do you get any of the "on page 26 the horse has one white leg, and on page 64 it's black" type of letters?

DG I get them turning up at the house. I had a man turn up at the house recently with a longbow, and he says "can I have a word?" and who's going to say no to a man with a longbow standing at their door? So I said "sure, come on in" and he hands me the unstrung longbow and asks me to lie on the floor and string it. He said "I like your books, but I make these longbows. In *The Quest for Lost Heroes*, your character is being chased, he leaps over a tree trunk, lies down behind it and strings the longbow, and shoots the first guy over. I just wondered if you'd like to try stringing this longbow." I said that I wasn't as strong as the him, and he says "no-one's that strong."

RE Do you never feel like telling these people to go and get a life?

DG No. Most of the people who say this will have read all my books. They pay my wages, they pay for my holidays, they build my house. I won't say I have a responsibility to the readers, my responsibility is to make the books the best I can. But when somebody reads and enjoys your work, they look on you rather like a friend; they actually want to like you. They tell you these things not to bring you down, partly they're telling you that they've read your books so closely that they've noticed these things. So you can't really say "piss off, get a life." I watched an author who used to be one of my heroes, and he was coming from a signing, and he was late, he was moving quite fast. A young guy was coming, holding about five of his books, and he saw him coming down the corridor. He said to him "excuse me, but would you mind..." and the guy just rushed past him saying "no time" and he bumped into the kid, and the books went flying and this guy was off down the stairs. I saw this and helped the kid pick the books up, but the funny thing is he didn't seem to want the books back. You've got to be careful about disappointing your fans.

Here endeth the interview. Our thanks must go to David Gemmell for agreeing to the interview, and to Century Hutchinson for arranging it.

I'm an open-minded guy. Just because I think it's the biggest pile of bullShit to grace the screen doesn't mean I won't publish favourable reviews. But did we get any? Find out...

seaQuest DSV

I have to admit, before going on, that I haven't put myself through the torture of a whole episode of SQ:DSV. However, I've seen enough.

Roy "- Hey! Isn't he the guy out of *Jaws*? -I don't know about that, but he was good in *2010*" Schieder plays a sort of retired exciting person, now left to a life of leisure and Scientific Research and the like. Thing is, the crew of the seaQuest have other things in mind. This is total crap. Basically. He *extremely* reluctantly becomes the captain because "you're the best there is". Actually it's more because the crew kidnap him by launching whilst he's on board. Only on TV eh? It's just such a cliched idea that it's downright sickening. Other gems this piece of popular SF offers (yes it's happened, and yes it's crap) are a genius teenage boy ("Golly! That's a good idea!" - a rather sarcastic Gene Roddenberry turning in his grave), a genius Dolphin (sort of a cross between Wesley Crusher and Flipper, and with all the irritating qualities of both...) and so the list goes on. This Dolphin is no mean piece of fish, actually. He managed to sneak onto the seaQuest without his owner (Roy) knowing about it. He also, incidentally, designed the DSV and subsequently the

ship has water tunnels built throughout so that he can get around.

All this is pretty fantastic considering the communication device (invented and built by our favourite genius kid) only gets working at all after the whole thing is built. But who cares about little things like this? Apparently not Spielberg or any of the other idiots involved with this series.

Perhaps I should mention that I'm probably a little bit biased in all of this. I don't like any of Spielberg's work, certainly not his latest offerings, and I find anything under water extremely boring (oer) [*hey! only editors can oer! - RDE*].

To close, I think the best description of this series is that it's got all the bad points of ST:TNG, and none of those odd good points that creep into TNG every once and a while. That is to say, all the formal (and feeble) military dialogue (affirmative, negative, sir, ensign, <incomprehensible, and meaningless, technical jargon>, etc), the initial character explanations, a little development, and then stagnant positions for months, and worse of all, an attempt to be Prime Time material. The latter is actually not such a bad idea, look at *Babylon 5* for instance (well, you can't

yet, so take my word and opinion on this). It's excellent SF, good TV, and just plain fun to watch for everyone from computer buffs, to er..., people who like watching TV merely for a short distraction (I did my best).

And what do they do in the first episode? Save a colony of humans under water. That's it. I've had enough. If I go on any longer with this I'll just get myself into ones of those high-blood pressure states...

Robert Byrne

I accidentally watched TWO entire seaQuest episodes a few weeks back. Giving it a chance, with no prejudice of any kind, I flicked on the TV, poured myself a large glass of seven up and played the beginning of Pink Floyd's Echoes to add a bit of atmos.

So, was seaQuest any good? Is Zeppo your favourite Marx brother? Is the Pope Ian Paisley's drinking buddy? Can an arm amputee join the masons? Unfortunately, seaQuest DS9 doesn't even manage to look as impressive as the *Dirk Gently* and *Long Dark* two-in-one.

plotQuest stars Roy Scheider -- not Rod Steiger (isn't it eerily easy to get those two mixed up? In Britain there's a similar confusion between Rod Hull and Roy Hudd. And in Ireland it's Pat Kenny and soggy toast. But I distress).

In fact it's all very like Starfish Trek. Roy Scheider's Jean Luc Pilch-ard character is very reminiscent of things that it reminds me of. But if I wanted to see a combination of Next Gen and truly awful acting, I would've watched Next

Gen.

It must be remembered though that seaQuest is in what used to be called the Godslot, with Spielberg replacing Harry Seacome as an executive prod. It's incredible how these things can sneak up on you. You'd almost have to have eyes in the front of your head. By anyone's flag, it is a bum deal to swap the man from the Goons for the man from the Goonies. seaQuap is God's revenge for axing seaCome.

The best that can be said for it is that though the acting isn't as good as the inimitable Jack Warner, seaQuest puts The Blue Lamp firmly in the shade.

Just because it's set underwater though doesn't mean it has to have sub-plots. But Spielberg's certainly keen. The episode about the bio warfare criminal had a sub-plot about a member of the crew trying to sell thermal underwear. Get the level of smarts it's aimed at?

The episode about the giant sea creature was also bunkum, though I must admit I did enjoy the Rik Mayall ad for Nintendo. But with all this underwater detective work, it just adds to the disappointment that there isn't a character called Jacques Clouseau. Looked up to throughout the world by people shorter than him, Steven Spielberg's obviously just trying to copy the guy who directed *Jaws*.

While watching *seaQuest* I didn't have to be Stephen's Green's very own Madame Mulhoney to predict what was going to happen. It's a bit like watching a very small child pick up a pencil

and look at it for about forty-five minutes before realisation hits him and he announces: "Pencil." That waiting is *seaQuest*.

To be fair it's about as well-written as *Extra! Extra! Read All About It* is, when written by someone who's rather good at calligraphy. In fact one could be waiting until *Heartbeat* for some sort of story to start.

I could go into detail about what was wrong with the TWO entire episodes I watched, but I've managed to tuck the storylines into my subconscious with a little therapy, and I don't want to undo the good work Dr. Blablah did during my stay at the John Ford Clinic for unfortunate film-related experiences.

Beaten red in the British TV ratings by *Lose a Million* and *Strike it Lucky*, I think it's clear that *seaQuest* isn't popular with the public because it's not a trashy game show. Just being trash isn't enough these days. But could there be other reasons for *seaQuest*'s apparent failure? Let's look at the facts. Spielberg's a kiddies' director. Always had been, don't reckon he'll change his spots now. But shouldn't we presume that he's gonna go all intellectual in *seaQuest* 'cause he's a co-executive producer? Presuming this is mistake number A.

Roy Scheider and Stephanie Beacham are tried and tested talented actors, so putting them in *seaQuest* makes it a brilliant bit of TV no matter what the scripts are like. This is mistake number B. Scheider and Beacham are not talented actors. They are third-

rate human beings who just happened to star in a few successful movies. Roy hit it big time with *The Curse of the Living Corpse* (1964) and, of course, *The Seven-Ups* (1973), and what sort of pervert could forget the wonderful Ms Beacham in the classic *Dracula AD1972* (no year available)?

Chris Tarrent, Michael Barrymore and now Roy Scheider. There are definitely too many tits shown on TV.

But let us not forget *seaQuest*'s trump card: Darwin the dolphin who dabbles in the English language. This puts a new edge on the old Lassie scenario: "I think he's trying to tell us something." "Of course I am, you dumb shite." When not performing on the show, Darwin is usually to be found in his dressing pool chatting to a Geiger counter.

When the end came at last and the birds began to sing and there was optimism for the world once again, this git appeared onscreen, right beside the credits, and tried to convince me that *seaQuest* is an excellent series. He also told what audience remained what DSV stands for. I won't share the information in case it's the twist at the end of the next episode, but needless to say I was way off the mark with "Delia Smith's Van" (I think I've just been censored).

One could cudgel one's brains figuring out what drug-crazed state of America Spielberg was in when he put his name to this turkey. And indeed *seaQuest* is suspiciously like a bottle of tablets.

Whether they be vitamins or pills for those varicose veins, the similarities to *seaQuest* is very discernable. Presented to the public in expensive packaging, you open it to discover a disappointingly plain bottle. Unscrewing its lid reveals a lot of cotton wool padding and very little tablet substance. And when you do get to the tablet, it's oh so hard to swallow. And should you actually manage to gulp it down with success and seven up, the real shame is that it's bound to be repeated.

You take another swig of your seven up and still there's a nasty taste in your mouth. It's a disgrace that *sevens* *seaQuest* is not on prescription only.

Still, I'm sure no matter how few watch and enjoy it, *seaQuest* will be added to Spielberg's successes. He just seems to get away with it. Steven Spielberg tries to present his work as a dazzling exclamation mark. *seaQuest* just ends up as a bloody period.

Simon Webster

Okay, I've only seen one episode of *seaQuest*, so I'm not going to judge the entire series on that: if I did that sort of thing, I would have decided that *Star Trek: The Next Generation* was awful just because I didn't like the first episode I saw (and here the reviewer wisely forgets that he thought *Red Dwarf* was rubbish because he saw half an episode in 1987 and didn't laugh).

The episode concerned concerns the discovery of an ocean liner that had been sunk over a century before. It turns

out to be inhabited by ghosts. Our heroes solve the problem and the ghosts find release. The end.

Right! said the reviewer, rubbing his hands with glee. Now for the nit-picking... A submarine that has little vases of flowers in the captain's cabin? An engineer who's so incredibly superstitious he'd look a primitive fool on the *Santa Maria*? A high-tech projector of two-dimensional holograms? A clever kid with a baseball cap on backwards? Nah... I just can't believe in that sort of thing. I'm thanking God that the episode didn't feature that bloody dolphin.

seaQuest is a *ST:TNG* rip-off, and it really shows, and not just because they call the captain "Captain" and they have a genius kid and a middle-aged female doctor. The atmosphere is very startrekian, and I'm put in mind of the awful SF movies that were churned out after *Star Wars* was released.

As far as I can tell, they're also trying to cash in on everything that's currently popular: ecological awareness, virtual reality, computer graphics, sexual, racial, and social equality (they have a couple of women, a black man and - shock! a man with long hair and a beard). They didn't have any dinosaurs or fractals, but I suspect it's just a matter of time.

But the most tacky thing is the little lecture during the end credits. I was laughing too hard to make out what the chap was on about, but if they do this every week I'll never be able to take the show seriously.

In my opinion, *ST:TNG* worked because

even before they began they had a lot of background (from the original series) to help the writers create something a bit more real. *seaQuest* has none of this at the moment, but it might just make it. If it gets to a second series, they might loosen up and start making good episodes.

Roy Scheider became famous as the policeman in *Jaws*. Maybe he should have left the sea alone after that. I'm tempted to paraphrase Spike Milligan:

"I must go down to the sea again,
to the lonely sea and the tide
I'm only watching *seaQuest*
While I'm waiting for *Babylon 5*"
Michael Carroll

The current trend in old tinseltown at the moment is to take a big name film director to develop television series or take a film and turn it into a network series. For instance we had George Lucas and his young *Indy*, there was *Highlander*. Now there is a new wave of series; Oliver Stone's *Wild Palms*, Barry Levinson with his 'new Hill Street Blues' *Homicide* and we have Steven Spielberg with the highly publicised and pricey *seaQuest DSV*, the latter trying to take the ratings mantle from the *Star Trek* series.

Now let's concentrate on *seaQuest*, a show really after *Star Trek*'s heart and money. The show uses essentially the self-same format as *Trek*, that being the *seaQuest* and the Enterprise are both 1. flagships, 2. exploration vessels which have an unusually high degree of military hardware and 3. they are both peacekeepers for the federations they serve. Also, there is a hint of romance between the captain and the ship's

doctor and they have a Wesley clone (but the clone isn't as irritating).

But is *seaQuest* any good? Well in my well-spoken yet humble opinion it is the most unadventurous turgid pile of luminous blue fish poop that was ever aired on television. Why? For me, good science fiction drama doesn't include half-rate storylines, like devoting entire episodes to sick dolphins or luminous blue fish poop. This series really breaks my heart as the only major fault lies in the scripts, everything else is absolutely spot on. I haven't ever seen sets of the standard set in DSV, the acting is of a better than the norm calibre, the computer-generated FX (courtesy of a fleet of Amigas and the Video Toaster) really show that this is where the future of effects is heading. Yet it really is for nought as it doesn't matter how good the production values are or the acting standard if the story happens to be so diluted and amateurish that what looks to me to be unholy months of effort and peace of mind on the part of the technical crew is flushed down the chemical toilet.

I can only hope that if this show makes it to a second season that the current scripting team are put to pasture and that the producers really think on what direction this series heading in because it's heading down a very deep trough. We can only hope that *Babylon 5* and the new *Robocop* series don't join this real clinker.

James Mason

Books. Doncha just love 'em? Anyway, if you're stuck for something to read, then read First Contact again. If you're still stuck, then you might want to try out one of the following.

Book Reviews

Unwillingly to Earth, Pauline Ashwell, Thor, pp280, \$3.99

Unwillingly to Earth is my introduction to the writing of Pauline Ashwell for which I will say thank you. The writing is swift, clear, first person writing that takes the reader immediately into the story. The storyline itself is clearly spelled out with an amount of sympathetic understanding for the predicament in which the heroine finds herself. The style lends itself to fast reading with the words flowing into one another. The meaning is always clear with the science understandable for even the most inhibited SF fan (if such a description is not ambiguous) to understand.

Ashwell takes a young lady from an agricultural background on the mining planet Excenus 23 and sends her to Earth to finish her education. Lizzie Lee is a most unwilling student and finds the Earth an alien place. She is transported out of her normal world into a world completely different, not only in space but in social matters as well.

The book is 280 pages long, and I found it to be a good, quick read. I delighted in the manner in which Ashwell arranged Lizzie Lee's difficulties. With the eternal knowledge that we carry our own problems with us wherever we go, she has the heroine face, tackle and of course settle these problems in a most satisfactory manner.

One might say that the amount of fe-

male characters appearing in the present wave of feminist writings will give the female her rightful place within the framework of SF imagination. I loved Lizzie Lee.

A good read.

Nu Lyons

Dark Voices 5 - The Pan Book of Horror, Eds. David Sutton and Stephen Jones, Pan, pp380, £4.99

What is modern horror for? Those who remember the old Pan books of horror might think that it is to send a shiver down the spine, to make you glad that you're indoors, to make you pull the bedsheets up close around your neck.

On the evidence of this most recent collection, modern horror has only one purpose: to *utterly depress*.

The pattern is the same in practically every one of the 20 stories. An unpleasant main character has a miserable existence, and comes to a nasty end. For some reason this end usually involves graphic description of the intestines.

Given these criteria, there is some leeway in terms of quality. The absolute worst story on offer is, surprise surprise, from Brian Lumley. It's called "Back Row":

"It dawned on me that I was a voyeur. Without even looking at them I was party to their every action. But an unwilling party ... wasn't I? I had come here to watch a film, not to be caught up in the animal excitement of lusty lovers. And yet I was caught up in it!"

And that's one of the better bits. The only reason for the inclusion of a hack like Lumley is that the editors wanted his name on the cover. This may help sell their book to Lumley fans, but it does nothing for the public perception of their integrity. I mean, if these guys will publish Brian Lumley, they'll publish anything, right?

Another name on the cover is Kim Newman's. The story, "Where the Bodies Are Buried", is not his best, but it is probably the best in the book. Unlike most of the efforts, which compete pathetically to out-gross each other, there is a sense that the most horrible things in Newman's story will occur after the last line.

A local councillor, Robert Hackwill, discovers he is the namesake of a Freddy Krueger-like character in a slasher film, *Where the Bodies are Buried*. He becomes obsessed with the film, and gradually, wouldn't you know it, he comes to resemble the character.

The most curious story in the book is Brian Mooney's *The Lady of Dubhán Alla*. Gaelgóiri in the audience will immediately know what the final twist is. But hey, this story is aimed at English people. Boy, is it aimed at English people. A British soldier patrolling the border questions an old woman at her door:

"The woman shrugged. 'You know how it is around here, nobody is absolutely sure of how it lies. If the Garda come, I tell them that I'm in Ulster; and if the RUC or military show up, then the house is in the Republic. None of them want to cause a political incident and so they all accept what I say.'"

I think it is only right that in the interests of horror fiction, and so as not to cause a political incident, the ISFA should take up a collection, buy a map of Ireland, and send it to Brian Mooney (who is a customs officer in Wales). Something which did

arouse some interest was an item at the back of this book headlined "Are you one of tomorrow's masters of horror?" This was a competition, with prizes to be presented at Eastercon 94, for a horror story of 3,000 words or less. First prize, £100 and publication in the next anthology of this series. Great! Except for one thing. The very last in a list of eleven rules states "The competition is open to residents of UK and Northern Ireland only".

Please, please, somebody emigrate to Britain before the end of January and enter the competition, so that the next time a *Dark Voices* story is set in Ireland, at least the geography will be right.

Michael Cullen

Ye Gods!, Tom Holt, Orbit, pb, pp296, UK£4.99

Tom Holt seems to have become famous. Not only does he get his hardback garnished by someone other than Josh Kirby, but Orbit have brought out all those books that he wrote when he was twelve, and probably thinks everyone's forgotten about. None of which concerns us here, but I thought I'd mention it anyway.

Holt's latest paperback, *Ye Gods!*, chronicles the life of Jason Derry, champion. It seems that Zeus still hasn't quite gotten over his fascination with mortals, and after trysting the night away with a suburban housewife, Jason was born. He fits the usual pattern; defender of the weak, goer-on of quests, thick as shit, the sort of things that make him easy to manipulate, both by the gods and those who sit in shadow; the elder beings. Whatever they're called.

Because of the nature of the book, dealing with gods and stuff, it's very easy to draw parallels to That Man's *Discworld* novels. This is unfortunate, but there are only so many jokes one can make about

the gods, and Pratchett made them all. Most of the humour that doesn't come off as Pratchettian relies too heavily on bathos, so overall the book gives the impression in places of being laboured.

But, I assure you, this is not the case! Nay, in fact this is my favourite of Holt's recent books, possibly better than *Flying Dutch*, but at least as good. Dealing as it does with the gods of ancient Greece, some knowledge in that area might be handy, but overall anything you need to know — the legend of Prometheus, for example — is elucidated upon in the book.

If you've never read a Tom Holt book before, I urge you to rush out very quickly and buy one. Holt writes individual books, not trilogies, so you can start wherever you like; *Ye Gods!* is as good a place as any to start.

Robert Elliott

The Kruton Interface, John De Chancie, Ace, pp185, US\$4.50, 0-441-14227-3

And you thought it was only in *Married With Children* or the *Paul Hogan Show* that people got called Wanker. Well, my book-loving chums, let me introduce you to Captain David L. Wanker of the U.S.S. Repulse.

Captain Wanker (pronounced *Vahn-ker*, natch) is not one of the fleet's best captains. In fact, the only thing to beat him in number of screw-ups is his new command, the U.S.S. Repulse, dubbed the Repulsive by its crew. His nemesis (apart from Admiral Dickover) — the alien Krutons, a race of lawyers heck-bent on suing the human race. Their plan is simple; have a Kruton ship aimlessly wander around human space until it hits something, and then sue the entire human race for Negligence. Will Captain Wanker be able to stop their evil plot?

To be honest, I've actually no idea why I bought this book. Of all the myriad American humorists I've read, the one factor they share is an inability to write anything funny. Craig Shaw Gardner? Pshaw. Esther Friesner? I didn't realise she wrote funny books until they came out with Josh Kirby covers. Lionel Fenn? I'll probably never read another *Kent Montana* book.

But I was pleasantly surprised by Mr. De Chancie. I've seen his *Castle* books lying around Forbidden Planet for many a moon now, so when I saw this stand alone, I said to myself "What the heck." So, with my heck well and truly whatted, I wended my way to the counter and purchased what I fully expected to be another miserable two hundred pages.

What I found was a funny book. Granted, P.G. Wodehouse has nothing to worry about, and Noel Coward can rest easy, but then again, I've never described my humour as sophisticated. Give me knob jokes or give me death.

Carry-On humour, with a liberal amount of Marx Brothers thrown in, is what this book is. In fact, one of the characters is Groucho Marx; his name's Rufus T. Strangefinger, for god's sake. This is a trifle *too* unsuitable for me, but sod it. It's still good fun.

In these troubled times, with so much on your mind, what you need is mindless waffle to keep you occupied. *The Kruton Interface* won't win any awards, but if, like me, you're fond of the phrase 'ooer', as well as the films of the Marx Brothers, you'll like this book.

Robert Elliott

The Rising of the Moon, Flynn Connolly, Del Rey Discovery, pp392, US\$4.99, 0-345-38289-7

This is a strange book. I read it in one sitting, but periodically interrupting my-

self by yelling abuse at the author. Sadly, I don't think she heard me, but to the people in the flat downstairs, I apologise.

The Rising of the Moon is set in Ireland of the future, and the author is American. That alone was nearly enough to put me off, but I prevailed, primarily because of the fact that it was part of Del Rey's Discovery series, which has produced some real gems. Anyway, enough of this idle twittering; on with the book.

Nuala Dennehy returns to Ireland from Scotland, where she was teaching Irish history. She left because she wasn't allowed to teach true history; only that as laid down by the Catholic church. Ireland, as you may have guessed, has become dominated by the church. Contraception is not only forbidden, any woman entering the country has to give up anything currently being used. Mass is compulsory, and all details about the alien race with whom humanity has made contact are suppressed. Women are second class citizens; the misogyny of the present church is nothing to what they get up to in the book. They have two options; become a nun or become a baby factory. Nuala unwittingly becomes involved in the women's struggle for freedom, and becomes the leader of their resistance. Will she win? I'll leave that answer to those who buy the book.

The story is very well told; as I said I didn't want to put the book down once I started it. However, the repellent politics caused me no small annoyance, and Connolly's small attempts at fairness were belied by her acknowledgements page. My favourite example in the book was "I do not *idolize* the IRA. You *know* how much I detest violence of all kinds. But..." Bobby Sands and Mairead Farrell are cited as heroes, despite the fact that the latter did nothing but get assassinated on the way to

blowing up a band.

OK, let's ignore the politics. What we have here is yet another book about a backlash against women, albeit somewhat unconvincing given the timeframe and the setting. However, this is an American book written by an American (who "lives in Seattle but wishes she were in Ireland"), so the image of Ireland is very much the mythical one perpetuated by romantic exiles and Hollywood producers. As such, it'll probably seem plausible to those who don't know much about the country. Also, for some reason, the majority of the men in the book are portrayed as total bastards whose main delights seem to be torture and rape of women to keep them in their place. Maybe it's just my happy nature, but I'd like to think that this isn't the case.

The research seems to be very well done; Connolly knows her Irish history and includes the details where necessary, although it seems strange that there are no Irish patriots later than the twentieth century. The Irish language is used very frequently in the book, and is usually correct; in fact I only noticed one mistake, and that's a fada on the word *meanscoil* whenever it appears.

Given all this knowledge of the situation, it becomes all the more bemusing as to why Connolly can suggest that the IRA were instrumental in a British withdrawal from the North; one of the few silly and/or naive ideas that pop up on occasion.

As a science fiction story, *The Rising of the Moon* is very good. Its main characters are well presented, and the plot holds together very well. It's well paced, and told in such a way that lets us know that Connolly has a great future as a writer. If this was set in a country other than Ireland, I'd have no hesitation in recommending it very highly. However, because of

some very silly ideas, I can only say that if you can ignore the politics, pick this book up. If you can't, then wait for her second novel. If it isn't set in Ireland, it should be well worth reading.

Robert Elliott

Galatea in 2-D, Aaron Allston, Baen, pp257, £4.99

For Roger Simmons it's been one of those weeks. Yet another customer has turned down his commercial art because of his screw-up reputation, he's up to his eyes in unpaid bills, he bumps into his ex-partner, Kevin Matthews, signing yet another best-selling art book and to top it all two Greek heroes try to push him into hell! Roger discovers he has a special gift. He can make things he paints come to life — demons, zombies, elves, anything. Unfortunately he has a problem. Kevin can do it too and he wants Roger dead.

Everybody who has ever put pen to paper must have wished at some time to visit their illustrated worlds. This is the book for them. Allston develops the central idea in clever but logical ways in a straightforward adventure story (thankfully without the forced humour that could so easily have sneaked in). For instance: what if that nubile wood nymph you draw turns out to be a rebellious teenager who prefers hanging out with her beach bum buddies to staying home with 'pop'?

Galatea is what a fantasy novel should be — a clever well developed that leaves you thinking at the end. I've never heard of Aaron Allston before (a pseudonym?) but I'll watch out for him in future.

Paul McKinley

Lady of the Forest, Jennifer Roberson, Zebra Press, UK£4.99

The legends of Robin Hood did not

contain any aspect of fantasy or the supernatural until Richard Carpenter got his hands on the Hooded Man and gave us that fine series *Robin of Sherwood*. This book then I would more properly regard as historical fiction, or myths and legends; but since Jennifer Roberson is already known for her fantasy series *Chronicles of the Cheysuli*, I guess the publishers thought that her public could be more easily reached through the specialist shops, and that's where I found this, in *Forbidden Planet*. Roberson describes this book as a 'prequel' to the more familiar stories found in popular books and television series, an explanation of how such a disparate group of characters from all the social classes could come together to fight for a common cause. In this context the book succeeds, but because the legend is so well known, I feel that the reader may be left wanting more.

Robin is Robert of Loxley, son of the Earl of Huntingdon, newly returned from the Crusades where he was a favourite of the Lionheart, and once a captive of the Saracens. Marion is Marion FitzWalter of the manor of Ravenskeep, whose father served with Lionheart in the same campaign and who was killed in Robert's presence by those self-same Saracens. Much of the book revolves around the emotional and physical hurt Robert feels after being subjected to the degradations inflicted by his captors, and his guilt over FitzWalter's death. It is on this aspect that I find the book lingers too long, and I ended up skipping over some of the extensive and repetitive self-analysis. Marion is alone and vulnerable — and uncannily beautiful — and her plight as she is pursued by her father's friend the Sheriff of Nottingham, his seneschal Sir Guy of Gisbourne and Prince John gives rise to some interesting com-

mentary about the double standards of sexuality in the Middle Ages. Her kidnapping by a murderous Saxon villain, William Scathlocke and the drawing in of John Naylor of Hathersage; Much the miller's son; Alan-a-Dale; and the sherrif's chaplain, the tremulous Brother Tuck, culminates in a fine attack on the sherrif in a bid by Robin to thwart Prince John's plans against his brother, held captive in Austria.

Sound familiar? Well it should, for Roberson has drawn well upon the resource materials available, from the original *geste* to Professor J.C. Holt's *Robin Hood*, as well as a good background in medieval buildings, castles and way of life. As a version of the legends, with good flavouring of the period, I recommend it.

Helen Ryder

Anti-Ice, Stephen Baxter, Harper Collins, hb, pp280, UK£14.99

The world as portrayed by Stephen Baxter is a Victorian World that has been radically changed by the discovery of a substance known as Anti-ice. The only source of this rare substance is a large meteorite found at the South Pole by British explorers who soon discover its properties the hard way; it explodes, killing and maiming several members of the expedition.

Anti-ice can be best described as frozen nuclear fission without the radiation; all you have to do is melt it too quickly and instant explosion. If it is thawed slowly you get a controlled reaction which will produce a lot of useful energy and in this other "maybe" world it has advanced the industrial revolution by leaps and bounds.

The prologue of the book takes the form of a letter from a soldier with the British army besieging the Russians in the city

of Sebastapol during the Crimean War. In it he describes the first military use of Anti-ice when a single shell containing it is fired at the city. The resulting devastation of not only the Russian city but the British camp are very like descriptions of Hiroshima and the anti-nuclear message is clearly visible throughout the book.

Several things annoyed me about the whole storyline, such as the whole concept of a land liner trundling across the plains of northern Europe on wheels ripping and gouging the landscape in its wake. And if Anti-ice explodes so violently when heated how did it survive the heat of entering the atmosphere and land safely at the South Pole?

Stephen Baxter has tried to write a book in the style of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. It was a fair attempt but unfortunately it failed to impress.

Edward Stafford.

The Dragon on the Border, Gordon R. Dickson, Grafton, pp393, £5.99

At least this novel is an improvement on the other *Dragon* books but still does not measure up to Dickson's earlier *Dorsai* series. The *Dragon Knight* books lack the spark of genius found in the *Dorsai* and I find reading them is rather like opening a can of coke expecting it to go cold and fizzy only to find it warm and flat, disappointing to say the least.

I thought that the plot of this story was far too thin for a novel (*Invisible Man* meets *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*); a problem that had existed for years (the *Hollow Man*) could be solved in five minutes by Jim exerting a little common sense. This probably would have made a good short story.

The element of the plot that I especially disliked was that whenever a hollow man was "killed" (again), he would only stay

dead for 48 hours before coming back to (un)life. If these soldiers were so evil in life that not even death could end their "lust for wine, gold and plunder," why will killing them all at once stop them?

I also felt that these stories would be improved if more use was made of Angie and how she copes with being Lady of the Castle, and of 14th century life in general.

Despite what it says on the back cover, neither Piers Anthony nor Terry Pratchett will have to worry about Gordon R. Dickson for some time to come.

Edward Stafford

Retro Review

Swan Song - Robert R.

McCammon (1987)

At 950 or so pages, this is a big book, one of the biggest I've read in a long time. Clive Barker's *Imajica* was a hundred pages shorter, and took me about three times as long to read. Perhaps this is because *Imajica* takes place in so many strange worlds, but I doubt it. *Swan Song* is an easy read because the author *made* it easy.

There are lots and lots characters in *Swan Song*, as you would expect in such a large book, but McCammon wisely concentrates on only a few. Josh Hutchins is a huge black professional wrestler, Swan is a young girl with a gift for gardening, Sister Creep is a bag lady living on the streets of Manhattan, Roland Croninger is a young boy with a serious fixation on computer games, and Colonel Macklin is an ex-army hero who runs Earth House, a huge nuclear shelter in which subscribers pay for two weeks holiday a year,

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science fiction fantasy horror

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supposedly in the hope that the impending nuclear holocaust won't occur when they're not inside it.

The sixth major character travels under different names throughout the book. He has no need to eat or sleep, he simply... waits. We see him at the start of the book, sitting in a cinema watching the same movie over and over: a montage of film clips from major disasters and wars, and in each clip he is there in the background, often with a different face, but always there.

As *Swan Song* opens, the cold war has reached the stage where the president of the US has no choice but to bomb the shit out of the Ruskies. The ensuing nuclear war devastates the planet, leaving handfuls of survivors killing each other over the dwindling supplies of food.

Josh and Swan find themselves trapped in a basement beneath an isolated store. They have plenty of food, and somehow there is air getting to them, but they have no light. Swan's mother is with them, dying of radiation poisoning, as is the store's proprietor, an old man called Pawpaw.

Earth House, which should have been perfectly safe from attack as it was not situated near any military targets, is almost completely destroyed by a faulty American missile. Roland Croninger is one of the few survivors, and he's enlisted to help free the trapped Colonel Macklin. For all his wimpy appearance and slight build, Croninger is a tough little bugger:

Macklin's right hand is almost crushed to nothing in a fissure that opened and closed on it, and Roland is required to take an axe and a burning torch, chop through Macklin's wrist and cauterise the wound.

Sister Creep was saved from the direct attack on Manhattan by being deep within the subway system. When she emerges, she soon discovers a strange, large glass ring, studded with diamonds, rubies, emeralds and strands of gold and silver. The crystals in the glass pulse and glow in time with her heartbeat, and she realises that it's something special.

And that, pretty much, is how it begins. Comparisons with Stephen King's *The Stand* are inevitable, as both deal with a post-holocaust situation (in *The Stand* it was a plague), and both deal with a strange "dark man" who appears to be evil personified. The old "trek across a devastated America" plot has been done many times before, but McCammon has done his research into the aftermath of a nuclear war, and what we see through the characters' eyes is pretty disturbing stuff.

The nuclear winter is killing off the survivors quicker than the radiation, stores of food are almost impossible to locate, and there is very little fuel of any sort. To cap it all, each of our five heroes (and many other minor characters) discover strange black warty growths on their faces. The warts grow as the weeks progress, and McCammon does an excellent job of showing us characters who become in-

creasingly ugly as the situation grows more desperate.

Swan Song is much more bleak than *The Stand*. There's little humour, and a lot of very negative things happen to our heroes. But they have a lot of hope, and it's easy to find sympathy for them (well, for the nice ones, anyway). Sister Creep is by far the most interesting: She starts as a half-crazed, penniless would-be alcoholic, but she finds inner strength through the magical glass ring, and soon realises that she's on a mission to locate someone special, someone able to bring life back to the Earth.

The evil guy is also on the trail of this person, and his journey is made easier by his lack of need for food or warmth. Of course, we all know that the person that everyone is looking for is Swan (mainly because of the title, but also because it says so on the back of the book), but their journeys are compelling, and at times rather scary.

Josh, however, could have been so much better. We never really know what he's feeling or thinking. Just before he and Swan escape from the basement, the old man Pawpaw dies, and his corpse sits up, burning with some kind of ethereal fire, and instructs Josh to "Protect the child". Up to that point Josh is shown to be a good, independent man with a strong will to live, but as soon as he learns of his mission, it takes over completely and he's more or less just carried by the plot. Occasionally we see a spark of the old character, but not often enough.

Young Roland Croninger turns out to be a complete bastard. He and Colo-

nel Macklin make their way to Utah, and take over a settlement of survivors, forming them into a vicious army. Seduced by the evil around him, Croninger becomes the Harold Lauder of the book, though much more dangerous than that character from *The Stand*.

Well, like I said, a comparison with King's piece-de-resistance is inevitable. I first read *The Stand* waaay back about 1981, and it's always been one of my favourite books, so I was intrigued with the idea of reading something so similar to it. And in all honesty, I wasn't disappointed with *Swan Song*. But there's no doubt in my mind which is the better of the two books... The one that was written first.

That said, I don't want anyone to think that McCammon is simply a Stephen King clone. *Swan Song* stands up on its own (in fact, at 950 pages it's hard to knock over, har har), and was a completely engrossing book, a real page-turner, as they say. The cover boasts that it's "the year's most frightening book", which is a complete lie as the horror elements are quite scarce, but that doesn't matter. If, like me, you stopped buying Stephen King books after *Pet Sematary* came out, then *Swan Song* is an enjoyable way to get back into the horror genre. And there's not a single mention of Maine in the entire book.

Michael Carroll

Once more, comics guru **Susan Plerrot** peruses the selection of comics available and offers her opinion.

Comics Review

Star Trek: Deep Space Nine #1, Malibu, Barr, Purcell & Pallot
Marvels #1 (of 4), Marvel, Busiek & Ross

Ordinarily, I'm not a great fan of comics based on television series; they tend to constrict the writers in what they're able to do. Nonetheless, I've seen quite a bit of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, and I've got that affinity to anything with #1 written on it known to comics collectors the world over. For these reasons I thought I'd give the *Deep Space Nine* Comic a try.

Deep Space Nine is a space station belonging to the planet Bajor, and is run by the Federation. Its most interesting feature is its proximity to a stable wormhole which links the Alpha quadrant to the Gamma quadrant, saving the people who travel there a journey of about sixty-five years. It's this wormhole that provides the basis for most of the television series and, presumably, the comic as well.

There's no question that this comic is aimed at fans of the television series. Despite the introductory page where we're told who the various characters are, the rest of the comic is filled with references to the series that will mean nothing to

anyone who hasn't seen the series. In most cases this doesn't matter, but in one or two instances there are scenes that seem to be there simply as a sort of in-joke for the viewers. These scenes are extraneous and, I suspect, would be bemusing to anyone who didn't see the series. This probably isn't a problem in America, but over here only those with satellite access can watch the series on TV; the only other way is to hope that your local Extravision stocks the tapes. Mine does, but I know of several branches that don't. Of the plot itself, there's nothing original. Despite the references to things that happen in the series, the comic still acts as a sort of introduction to the characters, and have very little by way of action. What is there is ultimately uninteresting. Deep Space Nine isn't a comic worth getting unless you're a fan of the series, and maybe not even then.

Just as I don't normally read comics based on TV series, I tend to read very little by way of Marvel's standard superhero fare. Despite their attempts at characterisation,

Marvel superheroes, more so than their DC or Image counterparts, tend to be stereotypical ideals with one fatal flaw that crops up ever few issues as a subplot. Marvel's idea of a plot twist, too, stretches the bounds of credibility beyond any resemblance of coherence, and that's why I stopped reading both *X-Men* and *Fantastic Four*, among others.

For this reason, I was surprised — and delighted — to find *Marvels*. Although ostensibly a superhero comic, *Marvels* tells of the emergence of superheros in New York not through the eyes of someone realising that with great power comes great responsibility, but through the eyes of an ordinary human. Reporter Phil Sheldon sees the (original) Human Torch and the Submariner for the first time, and his reactions are quite believable. There is a sense of a man who, instead of controlling his own life, is swept away by the tide of current events; not just his impending marriage, but the arrival on the scene of super-powered beings and the imminent joining of battle; the story takes place around 1942, when

America became involved in World War II. There are reminders that this takes place in the Marvel universe — both J. Jonah Jameson and Willie Lumpkin make appearances — but this is unlike any Marvel comic I've ever read.

Probably the best thing about *Marvels* is the fact that the superheroes are totally incidental. They're there, and they take a significant part of the comic, but only in their roles as people who affect the life of Phil Sheldon.

The only other time I've seen anything like *Marvels* is DC's *Gotham Nights* limited series. *Marvels* is superior to that series on every level; artwork, plot and above all, atmosphere. A lot of the reason for this is the fact that each issue of *Gotham Nights* concentrated on a number of people, possibly diluting the effect of intimacy we share with Sheldon. However, a lot of credit (and I mean a *lot*) must go to Alex Ross' amazing artwork. His painting turned *Marvels* from a good comic into the best I've read this year.

Congratulations to Joanne Conaty on her fine win of Witches Abroad, the latest hardback to come from the Dandelion Books Prize Fund. Sadly, there are no answers to crossword #2 presently, as the late despatch of last month's newsletter means an extended deadline therefor, and to give the answers would take out all the fun. Stay tuned next month, when you can find out who won crosswords #s 2 and 3!

ISFA Will Accept New Member (one only)

It seems that one of our members has been kidnapped by Elvis, and as we can't afford the postage to the planet Skyron, we've decided to cancel that poor unfortunate's membership and instead let someone else join. Be warned, however, that we won't let just anyone join. They have to be interested in reading a monthly newsletter filled with reviews, news, previews, interviews and emus. The applicant must also be interested in reading a quarterly magazine with the best of Irish science fiction, fantasy and horror. They must have the good taste to demand free entry to the ISFA's monthly meetings, and to expect a 10% discount on purchases in Dandelion Books. They must also have £13 which they want to send to

ISFA, PO Box 3762, Dublin 6

**Please let me join. I'm dead keen,
and to prove it I've included a
cheque/po for £13.**

**Discerning? That's me. To prove it,
I'm sort of very interested in...**

My name is _____

and I live at _____

Because you want opinions to show
how qualified i am to join, I demand
you consider articles in First Contact
on _____

Phone : _____

**I used to be a member
(number _____), so I'll
tick this box.**



Go on. Let me join. Please.