

# First Contact

The Newsletter of the Irish Science Fiction Association

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## TV News

### Heeere's Stephen

Stephen King, who has been quite vocal in the past on his opinion of the adaptation of his novel *The Shining*, plans on rectifying matters by writing as six-part miniseries for Warner. The series, which won't star Jack Nicholson – despite being called *Jack* – will appear later this year.

## X-Files Novelisations

Given the remarkable success of the X-Files spinoffery – the third (and shite) novel, Kevin J. Anderson's *Ground Zero* sold even faster in hardback than the latest Star Trek paperback – it's no wonder HarperCollins are releasing the junior novelisations of a few episodes next month. Look for the pilot and Darkness Falls, as well as what was unquestionably the worst episode by far, Fearful Symmetry, real soon now.

## No X-Files Film

Ah well. After hopes were raised, it now looks as if the X-

*Files* film will have to wait another year after David Duchovny signed up to make the film *Playing God* during his holidays. Disappointing though it is, the news hardly comes as a surprise, as Duchovny has long stated that he doesn't want his big cinema break to be an *X-Files* feature.

Of course, as soon as the new got out, people concentrated on the possibility of a B5 movie, which will be made for a straight-to-video release. J. Michael Straczynski described the plans for the movie as “not finalised,” but the fact that he said anything at all must make the story at least slightly plausible.

## Lee to Speak in Capitals

It may seem the obvious choice, but it's definitely a cool one. Coming soon, the Cosgrove-Hall animated version of Terry Pratchett's *Discworld*®. And who better to play Death but Christopher Lee, who's unquestionably got the voice.

## Editorial

Ah, the joy of another editorial. Where I get to give my opinion on all things science fictional, where I pontificate on the nature of the universe, where I give another feeble excuse for the tardiness of the magazine you hold in your hands, and promise that next month all will be different.

Actually, you don't want to know why it's late, or why you're now holding in your hands another double issue. But you'll be ecstatic when you hear that all is well in the editorial domain, now that I've decided that Pagemaker is incompatible with Windows 95. Actually, *I'm* incompatible with Windows 95, but I'm stuck with it. This issue of First Contact was brought to you courtesy of Microsoft Word, a word processor of which I'm inordinately fond. However, I've never used it for layouts before, so I beg your indulgence while I figure out what shaketh. Next month. I promise, I'll have a totally nifty-looking – and early – newsletter. Maybe.

But now that printing problems are a thing of the past (he prayed), the time has come to say goodbye to another year of happy editing. It seems that I've been editing this newsletter every second year since its inception lo, those many years ago, but it's still fun. Of course, it would be considerably less fun if I had to do much more of the writing, so my thanks must go to all those who actually sent stuff in during the year. Special thanks must go to James Bacon, Michael Carroll, Adam Darcy and Bob Neilson, all of whom have been kind enough to cough up the odd article or review whenever asked. Without them, etc, etc.

Hugs must also go to Michael Carroll and Brendan Ryder, without whose printers there would be no magazine (except on my hard disk).

Which raises an interesting question. Is there anyone out there interested in an on-line version of First Contact? Of course, it'd be without all the lovely formatting and stuff that makes each issue of the magazine a pleasure to look at, but what the heck.

If you've got an opinion, let me know.

Robert, Man of Destiny  
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You know, I was going to write this indicia (which I've just discovered the Word spell checker doesn't recognise) in the form of a Limerick, but it's damned difficult thinking of rhymes for copyright. I mean, there's Poppy Brite, which I could use with justification, but I reckon I'd be stretching it if I tried to use 'Floppy shite' or some such phrase. So let me just say that First Contact is ©1996 the Irish Science Fiction Association. The contents are ©1996 their respective creators.

Those who write for me  
See print, but more than just that  
I'm glad to thank them.

### No More seaQuest

Even before all the filmed episodes of *seaQuest 2032*, or whatever the frag it was renamed as, were shown, the series was cancelled, with any remaining episodes shelved, to be shown only as twentieth-generation copies in conventions, ten years hence. Even though there are a few benighted individuals who didn't think the show sucked donkeys, the general consensus is that this was a mercy killing, with the bullet being put in about a year and a half too late.

### Space, Nowhere Man Given Series

Despite less than awe-inspiring ratings, both *Space - Above and Beyond* and *Nowhere Man* have been given the go-ahead for complete series. I've yet to see *Space - Above and Beyond*, but *Nowhere Man* is pretty nifty, and well worth a watch.

### Bravo to Show Manimal

Why did I mention that? I've no idea; probably so I can mention how painful it was watching that show. And I did. Every week. Could Bravo have picked a worse show? Only one exists. Expect *Automan* on a satellite dish near you any day now.

### Spiderman On (again)

It seems that all it takes to get a movie nowadays is the near-collapse of the company that owns the rights. Carolco, who own the rights to Marvel's Spiderman, look set to sell the rights to Twentieth Century Fox as they're a bit short of cash at the moment. If this is the case, it looks like we might actually get to see the movie before the millennium. Another possibility is *Terminator 3*, as I seem to be the only person alive who didn't really like the second one.

### Doctor Who Movie on (again) (again)

In the latest in a series of decisions that surely beats Spiderman's production problems into the ground, the Doctor Who movie is on, with Sylvester McCoy getting more than the couple of minutes originally slated for a regeneration sequence. Next month, I'll probably be reporting that the movie's been cancelled again.

### Alien IV : Star Trek

Or something. It seems that the fourth *Alien* movie, starring a cloned Ripley, will go by the snappy title of 'Resurrection.' Which is an interesting coincidence, as the eighth Trek movie is currently being called *Star Trek : Resurrection*. Which

will make it to the screen? Possibly both, possibly neither, but I'd say we'll see *Alien IV* first, which gives it fightin' chance at nabbing the title. During the meanwhile, Patrick Stewart has signed up for *Star Trek : Whatever*, which will begin filming towards the end of March. Unfortunately, it looks as if the film – which will feature the Borg and the inevitable split timeline – will be written by those who inflicted *Generations* upon us. As long as Fincher doesn't get anything to do with *Alien*, I suppose we can't complain too much.

### Comics News DC Trades Licenses

You can just see the speech; "I like to think we didn't so much lose a *Star Trek* as gain a B5" Well, DC have done both, as Paramount pulled the license for its *Trek* comics. Word around the

campfire is that it was only due to Paramount's pressure that DC stopped publishing the Babylon 5 comic, rumours that have been substantiated somewhat by the fact that as soon as they lost the *Trek* license, DC decided to start their B5 comics up again.

### Opera News Lessing & Glass Team Up Again

What, you say. Again? 'Tis true. If you didn't know that Doris Lessing and Philip Glass had co-written an opera based on her novel *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*, then be now informed that they did. Now they're teaming up again to operaise another of Lessing's SF novels, *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*. I suspect that the reason *Shikasta* was left alone is that it's got too short a title.

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### Next Month (really)

*The fact that this issue is so late in leaving the computer means that I can let you know what's happening soon. So, coming next month (or the month after) are all (or some) of these...*

#### Internet Cafes

*They're suddenly trendy; but are they worth using? And what cool SF stuff is there once you're on them?*

#### Customisable Card Games

*We have a look at *Star Wars*, *Middle Earth* and, inevitably, *Magic**

#### Other Stuff

*Don't worry, I'll think of something.*

*'What the heck,' I thought. 'It's been a while.' Not entirely uncoincidentally, I recently found the list Larry Cloake gave me, oh, ages ago. If you disagree with this list, by the way, you can tell Larry himself; he owns The Book Mark in the Blackberry Fair, Rathmines; Sat & Sun, 11 to 6.*

## Top Ten Books

### 1. Books of Blood, Clive Barker

Devilish, divine and deviant. Everything from wholesale slaughter to the homoerotic. Barker shows us the dark alleyways and grungy backstreets of man's mind. Check the sheep-like mentality of the story 'In the Hills, In the Cities,' and the wildest aphrodisiac ever put on paper, 'The Age of Desire.' Just two of the gems awaiting the intrepid delver of this collection.

### 2. Dragonsbane, Barbara Hambly

One of those delightful (there, I've said it again) one-off fantasy novels. Everything my good friend Patrick Mellet does not like in the novel. However, this really is a well-crafted twist book, with a lovely feel of the haphazard and being slightly frayed around the edges. As to the plot, I hate it when people destroy the magic.

### 3. Liege Killer, Christopher Hinz

Again we have a great twister novel, full of super beings and killer twins. The Earth is dead and Man is dependent on space stations for survival. Heavy on atmosphere and light on hi-tech, with alien invasion imminent. Good stuff for someone like me who doesn't have a degree in technology.

### 4. Ender's Game, Orson Scott Card

Brings out the 'Ender' in all of us. The little boy lost, pushed around the proverbial playground. Add a heavy dash of military academy, a plentiful stir of alien invasion and now we have a human interest story, using future space as the backdrop. The kind of book where one can really identify with the central character.

### 5. The Master of Whitestorm, Janny Wurts

Normally I would not touch the multiple-quest-in-single-volume form. I was nicely surprised by this page-turning delight (oops), especially considering she had no help from Feist. The enigmatic stranger that strides across these pages is wholly satisfying. Altogether a neat and tight book.

## 6. Cujo, Stephen King

This book, to me, proved that King was a master story-teller. Using a simple storyline, a rabid dog and a mother and child trapped in their car. King can enthrall even the most jaded of readers; namely me. This must stand out as one of his best.

## 7. The Anubis Gates, Tim Powers

This must stand out as the definitive example of how to do it. Comparable to Vance's *Lyonese* in complexity and control. There is very little to say except thanks to Pádraig my very good friend (sic) for the recommendation, who said 'go out and buy this book now.'

## 8. Anno Dracula, Kim Newman

This is the one that wrong-footed me. A glorious over-the-top steampunk novel that is full of Hansom cabs, vampires run riot, flowing black cloaks and an over-abundance of London's pea-soup. Sink yourself into a world where Jack is one of the good guys and give yourself a treat.

## 9. Tale of the Body Thief, Anne Rice

*Interview* hooked me, but *Lestat* and *Queen* were not in the same league. Finally, Rice has shown herself to be a force to be reckoned with. A mortal vampire with a bad head cold pitched against his immortal self seems like an insurmountable problem, but then here is the essence of human endeavour. An excellent read. See for yourself.

## 10. Santiago, Mike Resnick

I should have seen this one coming. Resnick weaves a wicked tale and as such blurs the obvious outcome. Space pirates and bounty hunters with a large helping of bad guys proliferate this wonderful adventure story. I don't know about you, but I grew up

on this and it's the type of book that enticed me to Dublin in the first place. Whether that's a good thing or not remains to be seen.

Some solid books to build a collection on. The *Lyonesse* trilogy by Jack Vance. Michael Scott's *Tales of the Bard* is an exceptional hour-killer. Morgan Llywelyn's historical fiction is enough to drive me back to school; history was never as good, or as much fun, under my stuffy old teacher. And finally, Brian Lumley's *Necroscope* to continue that indulgence of vampires.

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*Has it really been two years since we published Gerry Doyle's seminal Sine of the Times, the critically-acclaimed (and short) treatise that linked forever pubs and quantum mechanics? Gosh. Well, its postscript is long overdue; don't blame me. Blame the fact that I only got it in the post two days ago.*

### Postscript to Sine of the Times

At a police station in England recently, police were alarmed to discover a suspicious parcel on their doorstep. The Bomb Squad were duly called in and the parcel blown open in a controlled explosion. Inside were found the remains of several kittens, quite dead. In a statement, officials said that there was no way to know whether the kittens had been alive or dead before the explosion.

Armed with the new equations provided by this, nuclear physicists are confident of producing cold fusion by next Tuesday.

This is also a true story. Really!



# Comics Reviews

James Bacon

*Bone #1, Jeff Smith, Image, \$2.95*

At last, a chance to rectify a mistake I made a long time ago. I neglected to pick up *Bone* #1 when it first came out, oh fool me, but thanks to Image and the power of Money, all of the previous *Bone* issues are being reprinted. Why? Well simply, to make money. Also because *Bone*, published by Cartoon Comics, has joined Image because the owner/creator Jeff Smith is capitalising on its success and ensuring that the comic can now reach a wider market. Coupled with the fact that small, independent companies are being squeezed out of business, association with a heavyweight like Image brings a lot of security.

So that all Image readers are not left without the first twenty-six issues that have already been published, Image are reprinting at the rate of two a month so everyone can catch up.

The comic itself has a huge reputation, and rightly so; the first issue shows so much promise with its excellent draughtsmanship and intriguing story it's easy to see how this comic is now so popular.

The characters are a bit different, but nonetheless are very funny and one can really feel for them, and the lack of colour is very attractive for a change. I thoroughly enjoyed this, my first issue of *Bone* and would recommend it to any comics reader as a chance not to be turned down, it is rare indeed that you can know that the next twenty issues are all really good. So buy it now.

*Preacher #9, Ennis/Dillon, Vertigo, \$2.50*

*Preacher* is fast becoming one of the most popular comics within DC's Vertigo (Mature readers) line. Hard-hitting and unforgiving, the story and dialogue are extremely articulate, with bizarre characters that include an Irish vampire, Arseface, a failed hitwoman and our star, ex-preacher Jesse Custer who now has more power than the Lord himself, thanks to Genesis, a spirit which is now sharing his mind.

His mission, to seek out the Lord and ask him what the fuck he's playing at. Unfortunately, there are one or two people/entities out to stop him, and so far the storyline has forced Jesse to take some serious action against some of these foes.

The stories so far involved some excellent twists and revelations, and have been most entertaining. With #9 some family troubles have turned up, and Jesse's seedier relatives have overcome his

power, and intend to do him some serious physical damage. Not for the fainthearted, Steve Dillon's art complements Garth Ennis' writing, recreating facial reactions with sincere clarity. There are some nice turns of phrase with Garth slipping in the odd bit of European dialogue, so the Yanks are probably a bit bemused by certain abusive words. This comics will continue to entertain, as Steve, Garth and Glenn Fabry are the creative owners, so the better it is, the more they cash in.

*Astro City #4, Busiek/Anderson, DC, \$2.25*

This for me is currently the most innovative superhero comic book on the shelves. Busiek, who also did the acclaimed *Marvels*, shows a new perspective of superheros and villains in Astro City. He is creating his own world and his own super beings, but the people who see them are very real and it's from their viewpoint the story is told.

It seems that with each, stand-alone story more background is added. With issue four, a suburb of the city is introduced as being in the shadow of some mountains. Apart from the lack of light, there are also dark and frightening entities who co-inhabit the area with the highly superstitious people, who go to great lengths to protect themselves, with talismans, runes, herbs, etc. Most people don't go down to the city, and no city dweller ever goes to "Shadow Hill."

The artwork is fairly good, and Alex Ross' covers extremely attractive; the whole package is a decent buy. I've always appreciated the superhero comics since the *Watchmen*, and Busiek does an excellent job. For those who like to see things differently, this is the superhero city for you.

*The Horrorist #1 (of 2), Delano Lloyd, Vertigo, \$5.95*

David Lloyd is a renowned artist since *V for Vendetta*, but that doesn't mean *The Horrorist* deserves to be a softback instead of a story in *Hellblazer* as it should have been; Delano was the original writer for John Constantine and Lloyd also did a couple of issues.

I was expecting something good from *The Horrorist*, and didn't get it. The story is and the art is nice, but nothing special.

The story is about a woman who has the power to bring pain and visions to the average Yank. She leaves a trail of suicide, murder and destroyed lives in her wake as she travels. John Constantine gets affected by her power and sets out to find her, finding out more about her as he goes.

The story was all right, but not worthy of the elevation to softback. Of course, there are those who particularly like Lloyd's work who will see it as a necessity; I doubt many people collect Delano's stuff, though.

*Hellblazer #96, Jenkins/Phillips, Vertigo, \$2.25*

Hellblazer has gone through many changes, but as it comes close to its centenary, I wonder if it's time to call it quits.

Paul Jenkins hasn't done anything radical since he took over the story from Garth Ennis, who redefined John Constantine. He tried to, though, with the current story – Critical Mass – and he has taken the story on a pretty unoriginal journey, bringing back the First of the Fallen who will again do battle with Constantine. It would have been better to find new foes rather than reinvent old ones.

Sean Phillips, on the other hand, is definitely not a boring artist, and his style, the way he plays with shadows, gives a broody feeling to the comic. His covers are nice too, showing a true taste of what is to come.

The next issue may have a new writer, and will have a new story, so it's a good jump in point, and previously the antics of British-born John Constantine have been very amusing. This issue, though, will not be one to remember.

*Martha Washington Stranded in Space, Miller/Gibbons, Dark Horse*

This is the worst of all the Martha Washington stories, with no depth and being too short to have any of the effective impact that Miller and Gibbons usually induce. It's also a big advert for The Big Guy and Rusty the Robot.

Gibbon's artwork is always quite beautiful, with his computer graphics enhancing a stunning piece of art. The story is where this team effort falls down. It's OK in comparison with other stories in comics of the same price, but for Miller this must be one of his most dreadful.

It's unfortunate, but with Frank Miller my expectations are high and with this one comic I question some of his own outspoken statements about being ripped off.

There is another Martha Washington out soon; *Martha Washington Saves the World*. If there is no improvement I'll rely solely on *Sin City* for my Miller dose of comics.

Oh dear, I seem to have neglected to tell you the story, well it's not worth bothering about. Lovely art, but not great content.

# It's All Done With... Toasters?

Adam Darcy

One of the more recent developments in visual effects is that of computer-generated imagery (CGI). These effects once only formed the gimmicks of numerous commercials and music videos, but now they are increasingly becoming the mainstay of visual effects companies such as Lucasfilm's Industrial Light and Magic.

Awards given for visual effects seem to reward innovation, and perhaps this is why the 1993 Emmy for visual effects was awarded to *Babylon 5*. B5's stunning visuals were then created completely by a network of Commodore Amigas (which have since been replaced by PCs) together with a box of tricks, bizarrely named the Video Toaster (made by NewTek), and running a program called Lightwave 3D. B5 undoubtedly owes its cost-effectiveness to this technology, as it allows Ron Thornton's team at Foundation Imaging to produce high-quality images and achieve effects which would be far more expensive if done conventionally. In fact, Thornton estimates that if the visual effects for the pilot alone had been done using miniatures, they would have cost \$2 million - the entire budget for that TV movie. Warner Brothers are simply not willing to invest the same level of resources into B5 as Paramount are for their 30-year-old SF franchise, *Star Trek*, especially since Warner's previous venture into SF television was *V*, which went wildly over-budget.

Thornton's background is in miniature animation, and he cites Gerry Anderson shows such as *Thunderbirds*, *Stingray* and *Fireball XL-5* among his influences (he is currently at work on a children's TV show, *Hypernauts*, featuring vehicles with long launch sequences a la *Thunderbirds*, but using CGI). His approach to CGI effects is coloured by his experience with models - but instead of building a model out of plastic, he builds them from pixels.

When Steven Spielberg saw the results on B5, he immediately set about signing up NewTek to provide Video Toaster effects for *seaQuest DSV*. *Robocop : The Series* also used Video Toaster effects, as did *The X-Files* in its first season. The majority of the SF shows that have appeared in the past two years use CGI – *The Outer Limits*, *Earth 2*, *VR 5*, *MANTIS*, and *Space : Above and Beyond*, to name a few. The *Star Trek* shows are a notable exception, using more conventional techniques for most of their effects. B5's biggest rival for that 1993 Emmy was probably *Star Trek : Deep Space Nine*, whose impressive visual effects in its first season were mainly due to a large budget and the talents of Robert Legato, who previously won the 1992 Emmy for visual effects. *DSN* and its sister show, *Voyager*, do use CGI, as did *TNG*, but in conjunction with motion control shots and miniatures. Phaser beams, transporter effects, and the various "energy beings" that have appeared on these shows are all done with computer animation. In addition, two computer-generated effects make regular appearances on *DSN* - the wormhole and Odo's shape-shifting. *Voyager's* Emmy-winning opening sequence features a large amount of CGI, which was produced by Amblin Imaging, Spielberg's effects company.

The advantage of the Video Toaster is that standard desktop PCs can be used, eliminating the need to buy specially-built hardware, such as the leader of the CGI field, the Silicon Graphics Reality Engine. This machine is often described as "20 supercomputers in a box", and is expensive accordingly. Most computer animation companies, such as Abel and Associates, Rhythm and Hues, Digital Magic and the computer effects teams at ILM, use banks of these custom-built graphics computers.

The use of CGI for visual effects dates back to 1982. A company called Digital Productions worked on Disney's *Tron*, creating the abstract backgrounds for the action taking place within a computer. These effects seem quite dated today, but

the virtual reality scenes of *The Lawnmower Man*, and, more recently, *Johnny Mnemonic* are a more impressive version of a similar idea. Meanwhile, *Star Trek II*'s "Genesis" sequence was also produced using computer animation, by a team working at ILM. The same team developed this effect for the stained-glass knight in *Young Sherlock Holmes*, and then went on to set up their own company, using their computer animation expertise to design a new surgical tool. They produced 3-D anatomical models, generated using X-ray photos and CAT scans, which were animated so that surgeons could plan their operations. Digital Productions also produced the effects for a puerile piece of junk, *The Last Starfighter*, in 1984. This film was remarkable only for the fact that computer-generated effects were used in the space scenes, as opposed to motion-control shots (which had been embraced by Hollywood since the invention of the technique by John Dykstra for *STAR WARS* in 1977). The use of a Cray supercomputer was required, and each frame took three minutes to produce, involving trillions of mathematical operations. Since each second of film requires twenty-four frames, this process was a lengthy one. Even so, Digital Productions claimed that their techniques were less expensive than model animation.

Digital Productions were also employed on Peter Hyam's *2010* in 1984, but their work was more sparingly used than in *The Last Starfighter*. This time they generated the images of Jupiter (based on photographs from the Voyager probes) and of the black monoliths replicating.

Perhaps the most spectacular computer-generated effect developed in recent years has been the technique of "morphing". This has become something of a cliché due to its overuse in advertising - it sells everything from cars to All-Brands - but it is a godsend to SF filmmakers, being the first realistic method to portray shape-shifting. Indeed, that is why ILM invented it, back in 1988, for *Willow*. The effect then made a couple of appearances in *ST:TNG*'s second season (for Trek buffs, it was used in "The Dauphin" pretty obviously, and in "Q Who?", for

the Borg ship's regeneration), as well as in *ST VI* and now *DSN*. The most memorable uses of morphing were in two of James Cameron's movies, *The Abyss* (which won a visual effects Oscar in 1990) and *Terminator 2*. The technique was used in creating the "pseudopod" in *The Abyss* and Denis Muren's team used it excellently for the T-1000 in *T2*. Since then, morphing seems to have been used whenever an unimaginative effects team gets the slightest opportunity.

The 1993 Oscar for visual effects was awarded to Robert Zemeckis' *Death Becomes Her*, which utilised computer modelling and animation to great effect on its leading ladies. A year later, the Oscar went to *Jurassic Park*, for its computer-generated effects, again by Denis Muren from ILM, which produced the most believable dinosaurs in cinematic history. For example, when the T-Rex moved, every flex of muscle and stretch of sinew was visible, something which is not possible with the traditional technique of stop-motion photography. After the tragic death of Brandon Lee on the set of *The Crow*, it was announced that computer techniques would be used to complete the movie. This led to a certain amount of media speculation as to whether CGI could replace live actors, or resurrect dead ones, like Marilyn Monroe or James Dean. Such speculation turned out to be premature, since DreamQuest Images used computers to digitally composite previously-shot footage with the required scenes, and to touch up the images. However, two of last summer's blockbusters, *Batman Forever* and *Judge Dredd*, used computer-generated "synthespians" for some of their more dangerous stunts. This seems to be the main application of the type of effects used in *The Crow* - either placing a CGI representation of the character into an action sequence, or incorporating an actor's face onto a stuntman's body.

Back in '84, you could count the number of films which had used CGI on one hand, but it would be impossible to list all the movies which have used CGI over the last couple of years. In many cases the effects are not even noticeable (this has

always been the goal of the effects artist - to blend real footage and camera trickery seamlessly). But CGI is not only being used to produce photo-realistic effects, it is also used in pure animation. *The Mask* turned the rubber-faced Jim Carrey into a living Tex Avery cartoon, while Disney have gone one further than its previous features, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, and *The Lion King* (all of which used CGI alongside cell animation), in producing *Toy Story*, the first animated feature to be completely computer-generated. This film was co-produced by Pixar animations, a company set up by George Lucas in 1979, which had previously produced commercials and short animations such as *Luxo Jr.*, and the Oscar-winning *Tin-Toy*. But while *Tin-Toy* was five minutes long, *Toy Story* runs 77 minutes, requiring 550 gigabytes of memory and 800,000 hours of rendering-time. A common assumption is that the use of such powerful technology means less work and less artistry goes into the film, but 30 animators worked on *Toy Story*, painstakingly programming each second of animation, and the result is a film which has just as much character as a hand-painted cartoon.

So, what's next? Well, Stanley Kubrick had shelved a proposed film, thinking that effects techniques were incapable of handling it, until he saw *Jurassic Park*, and re-evaluated his opinion. He is currently working on this project, entitled *AI*. The sequel to *Jurassic Park*, *The Lost World*, is being developed by Steven Spielberg for release in 1997. 1997 will also see the theatrical release (at least in America) of an updated version of *Star Wars*, followed by new video versions of *The Empire Strikes Back*, and *Return of the Jedi*, and the production of the new *Star Wars* trilogy of prequels, all of which will use CGI techniques created by ILM. With the release of *Johnny Mnemonic* in this country in January, one might ask a question that would have seemed laughable only five years ago: what about a film version of *Neuromancer*? With the technology behind visual effects developing at such an enormous rate, the only limiting factor is the imagination of the artists using it.

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# The Third Star Wars Collectors' Day

10<sup>th</sup> December 1995, Wolsey Hall, North London  
James Bacon

When I awoke on the Sunday morning of the event, I looked out my window and saw a picture of tranquillity. Well, in the front garden at least, a couple of inches of snow covered all that was in sight. 'Tis true that not much was in sight though, as a murky sea of fog had decided to descent over this part of North London.

Now I'm well aware that most cons thrive on good weather, so I had my doubts as we crawled in our van towards Wolsey Hall. Previously, the Falcon Society's two Collectors' Days had up to 1,500 people in attendance, but would the four guests and all the events be enough to drag the paying punter out onto the treacherous roads? Yep.

I reckon wives, mothers and boyfriends of the hard-core Star Wars fans thought they were bidding a final farewell with the words "May the Force be With You" as our 900 such people dared to travel on the day that saw a 100-car pile-up on the A1 and the most car accidents of the year.

Was it worth it? God damn it was.

\* \* \* \* \*

The day was based around four Star Wars guests; Declan Mulholland who played the original Jabba in Star Wars (which was edited out of the final version), Michael Speer, who played Admiral Pett, the guy who got his apology accepted from Darth Vader, Peter Diamond, who was stunt coordinator on the films, as well as being stormtroopers, sandmen and various other characters who fell or got hit, and of course Jeremy Bulloch, who played Boba Fett, and who helped events along as the chair of the Q&A.

This time instead of a toy room, there was a prop room, with C-3PO's head, replicas of various other masks and bits and pieces from the movies. On the stage there was an art show, with all types of paintings, mattes, comic covers, posters, concept sketches and Cam Kennedy's comic art. In the games room there was the arcade version of Star Wars – I wasted a fortune there – the Star Wars Pinball machine, and Leigh Oakley, guru of Star Wars RPG and some fellow fans, reliving some interesting sequences from the movies. In the video room there was an amazing array of interviews

shown, mainly from just after the release of the first movie, which really shows how sad people were at the time. Cool flares, and yet they produced something amazing. They also showed the episode of The Muppets with the Star Wars gang starring: vintage stuff.

There were twice as many dealers as last time, selling even more obscure and unbelievable products. But it was the main hall where all the action went on. From eleven to twelve people drifted about and some of the guests started signing autographs. Then, from 12:15 until 1:30 there was a great Q&A session; Peter Diamond proved very entertaining, showing a few physical tricks of the trade as well as listing off all the bit parts he played in the movies. That took ages and received a standing ovation.

From 1:30 until 2:00 there was another signing session. The Falcon Society had stills of all the guests selling at £2 each, and it cost £2 for each autograph, all funds going to charity.

At three there was an auction, and then lunch, and a chance to browse around the other entertainment on show. Then from nowhere appeared a storm trooper, armed with blaster, who accompanied Darth Vader. These two characters must have been wearing the real costumes, they looked straight out of the movie. They marched silently around the hall, and everyone wanted a photo with the two. The organisers really pulled out all the stops in order to entertain the fans.

There was a further signing session, a model competition with prize giving and more photo opportunities with the foulest of the foul.

By 6:00 most people decided to make the hazardous journey back home. News of the A1 crash had filtered through to most and I actually met two South Londoners who set out at 8am to make a two-hour journey, but didn't arrive until 3:30pm.

I understand that £2,000 was made for the various charities nominated by the guests.

I must admit I was really surprised to see so many out on such a disastrous day, but in retrospect I also travelled a few hundred miles just to get there, but then those who've experienced a 'Collectors' Day' run by the Falcon Society know that they're onto a good thing and it's always well worth the journey.

I have read that two more Star Wars days are in the pipeline for '96; one in Glasgow and one in London. Both are in more hospitable months, so I'll book early to avoid the inevitable rush.

# Letters

Swords,  
Co. Dublin

Dear ISFA,

Due to the lack of meetings, newsletters and Phases, I have decided it would be economically unsound to rejoin when my membership lapses. It possibly may also be impossible if there is no committee to take over after you lot.

I will miss much, as I remember when things were different, or miss sod all as things are now.

Due to the fact that I have yet to receive a number of FTLs and Phases over the past five years, I have calculated that you are £26 in debt to me.

Whether this is due to your negligence or not is irrelevant to me. I paid for what I didn't receive, I want what is due back.

Thank you for speeding up the inevitable, for nothing is everlasting; it's a pity you couldn't organise a piss-up in a brewery, though.

Please be advised that I will consider rejoining if a group of people who are honourable enough to do as they advertise take over, if another bunch of no-hopers take over I will walk away and reminisce, and feel £13 the better for it.

However, given that I'm the only one to say anything, I must assume that the rest of the members are happy with the committee, so maybe I'm being too harsh.

Don't worry too much, though; some courageous people did it before. I'm sure someone will revive it again.

Best of luck,  
James Bacon.

*Dear James,*

*I will not tackle your claim about monies owing you over the past five years as we can not verify them due the fact that we only joined the committee this year. However we do apologise for the lack of magazines to you and all members, the reasons for which are stated below. I also regret to inform you that it is not economically feasible for us to refund you or any member (including ourselves) as all of our budget is already accounted for.*

*The lack of magazines is due to financial reasons. Due to the fact that there have only been a few membership renewals, nearly all of our budget has been spent on the newsletters which cost £30*

*each month. Any other monies received on the door at meetings are spent on postage, the printing of flyers and posters and the purchase of drinks for guests at the meetings. This has left us with no money to produce the magazines. Realizing this we attempted to solicit money from sponsors in exchange for advertising, however despite our attempts, nobody was found who was willing to even part with anywhere near the amount of money required.*

*A few of the newsletters have been quite late and for this we apologise but this is mainly due to the fact that the both the committee and the editor have other commitments and have at times failed to meet our deadlines. However there has not been as you claim a lack of newsletters as all have been produced, although sometimes in the form of a double issue with double the pages.*

*There have been three meetings which have failed to occur. The first one was due to an oversight on our part as we failed to remind our speaker, with whom we had made an initial agreement, close enough to the meeting and when we did, they had gone away for a few days. As for the other two meetings we are wholly without blame as the Pub double booked at a late date, a fact over which we had no control. We have since changed venue to Brogan's Pub in an attempt to prevent the same from happening again.*

*I feel it is incumbent upon me to address one of your last points despite my feelings that it was a merely a feeble example of childish name-calling not worthy of mine nor anybody's attention. I am of course referring to the label of 'no hoppers' which you used to describe the committee. While at first glance this statement may appear valid with regard to our apparent organisational abilities, I feel it is completely unjust as an apt title for us.*

*We originally volunteered for the committee because we enjoyed the ISFA and did not wish to see it disband as it nearly did last year. None of us had prior experience, and although this is not an excuse, it does explain why we were not able to anticipate certain problems which arose over the course of the year. We tried our best and put in a lot of time into our duties despite the fact that most of us are heavily engaged with other commitments. It for these reasons that I see your remark as a grave personal insult against myself and the other members of the committee, and while I have no doubt it is of any concern to you, my estimation of you has changed from that of an amiable character who was*

*always willing to advise and lend a hand to that of a hurtful, inconsiderate crank who spares absolutely no thought for the time and effort put in by others. While others have also spoken to us harshly they have given us advice and ideas on how to remedy problems, rather than stare at us disapprovingly and make snide remarks for most of the meetings like yourself.*

*To address the last point of your confidence that some courageous people will take up the reins of the ISFA, I must voice my confidence that I know it will never be you James, for your only courageousness lies in your ability to seize upon the failings of others and destructively criticise them for no end except to satisfy your own smugness.*

*Walk in Peace.*

*Vincent Canning, Secretary*

*On behalf of the Committee*

Loughlinstown

Co. Dublin

Dear Robert,

For the first time in quite a while I read the latest (October/November) issue from cover to cover. Okay, it was double-sized, and late, and... no, it's not that sort of letter. I thoroughly enjoyed it and look forward eagerly to the next. Despite (or maybe because of) the fact that it was written mostly by you (the editor, the man of destiny) [*capitals, please! - RDE*] it had a feel of variety and because of (or maybe despite) the aforementioned fact it also had a warmth and personality that is often missing from newsletter-type-things – if I may borrow your laser-sharp descriptive style.

The quality of the contents, despite (or etc) the lack of visual inserts (intrusions?) has inspired me to fire up the old word processor and actually write my first ever letter to this august (or should that be January) journal. And surprisingly I come to praise the editor not, as most would expect, to bury him. My only complaint is that, given the entertainment value of recent issues, First Contact does not appear regularly enough. Or just plain regularly.

**(This bit is for the members)**

On the front page of the last issue of First Contact there is a plea for help for the ISFA from its membership, without whom the

society cannot survive. At the moment about the only sure sign that the ISFA is still alive is the continued appearance of First Contact. The newsletter cannot survive without stimulus and input from the membership. Without it the association would have no voice. You get out of a group like the ISFA exactly as much as you are prepared to invest. At the moment nobody's putting much in at all. If it wasn't for Robert Elliott, there would be no newsletter. If we don't get off our bums there will be no ISFA at all.

At the moment the cart is being put before the horse. The most able organisers in the association are pouring their energies into running Octocon. I have always felt that without the support structure of the ISFA, a national convention would not be possible. Certainly it grew out of the ISFA originally. But last year we were in the absurd situation that at the AGM a committee could not be found to run the association. With due respect to those who gave their time to bail the ISFA out of its administrative vacuum, this year we need a *real* committee, one which can put the association back on track.

It's not long since there were twelve interesting and well-attended meetings per year. It is not long ago that the newsletter was expected every month, and appeared. Neither is it that long since the ISFA was taken seriously by the media, the publishers and worldwide fandom. This is not the case today. We are the forgotten island. Without a vibrant and vocal national association to speak for us, our voice will not be heard.

Maybe this is not important to most of you – it appears that way to me – but I would prefer to be part of an association with meaningful aims and some credibility, nationally and internationally. Only we, the membership, can make it so. It doesn't have to be hard work. In fact, it shouldn't be. We are all in the ISFA to enjoy ourselves. I don't think a credible association and a good time for all concerned are mutually exclusive. If anyone is bothered, I'm always happy to discuss just about anything with just about anybody and I'm usually along to the monthly meetings. Maybe I'll see you there. If you care about the future (we are after all SF fans) perhaps you might even talk to me.

Yours hopefully,

Bob Neilson

## Cinema Review

# City of Lost Children

Imagine a heavy, deep fog, resting on the surface of a calm sea, through the gloom the absurd spiked spheres of mines bob, and up ahead looms a dark and evil tower containing an evilly intelligent sorcerer and his menagerie of freaks.

Towards this rows our implacable hero and his beautiful young heroine. Unknowingly aided by the sorcerer's amnesiac, arch-nemesis they have beaten evil hordes and a twice-powerful witch to get this far on their unswerving mission to save the children kidnapped by, you've guessed it, the evil sorcerer. All the ingredients necessary, I'm sure you'll agree, for a fine fairy tale.

Jeunet & Caro made their directorial debut over a year ago with the delightful *Delicatessen*. A beautifully-shot work, fast pace and lightning script notwithstanding, this work introduced us to a world in the throes of economic apocalypse. Haunted by butchering landlords, cannibalistic tenants and a (literally) underground vegetarian movement named the Troglodytes, this world merged private technology far in excess of today's with public poverty, grime and disintegration.

The *City of Lost Children* continues to explore said world, but this time from the freakish carnival side of mutants and monsters, all the while bundled up in a light dressing of comedy and absurdity.

Our hero is dumb in words and mind. The actor perfectly portrays both the power and impotence of brawn wi'out brains, and yet he endures.

The astonishingly beautiful heroine is but twelve years old. Forever beyond the hero's grasp and yet deceptively devious all the while and in complete control.

Their nemesis is a failed genetic genius and his six sidekicks (cultured clones) all have the sleeping-sickness (as you may have noticed, the film also allows for overdone alliteration).

With a failed carnival owner who's enamoured of both hashish and his pet fleas, a Siamese twin witch who runs the local orphanage like Dickens' Fagan, an over-zealous, Paisley-ish religious leader and a migraine-ridden brain in an aquarium to fill our cast you are beset with reason to sink in your seat and question, 'Why, why?'

Of course this never happens. The photography is more stunning than ever, rivalling Greenaway's *The Cook...* and like that film, the music is so well-crafted around the visual extravaganza (with costumes by Gaultier) that it's harder to remember the tunes afterwards compared to the feelings they evoked. Even the subtitles rendered in their playschool-like font add to the enjoyment of quick appreciation of a foreign rendering of a stunning script.

If all this sounds like whole-hearted praise don't worry, it's meant to be. There's not enough good I can say about this film. From one of its most understated yet empowering attributes – the use of stunning special effects and animation – to its ludicrous, Jennet & Caro trademark, linkage of extremely unlikely events to produce a good story result, this story will hold your attention through many a watching.

By the time this has winged its wondrous way into your hands the film will have finished its surprisingly long run in College Green's Screen cinema. And it may be a while before video gets around to it, but this critic would well advise you to continually hassle Laser, Forbidden Planet, etc. and buy a copy when it's eventually released. You'll laugh, you'll cry, and while you may not hurl, you'll definitely enjoy it, over and over and out.

**Molly**

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*And now, the moment I've all been waiting for...*

## Book Reviews

*Doctor Who Poster Book,*  
Boxtree, £9.99, 30 posters

*Doctor Who Postcard  
Collection, Boxtree, £5.99, 21  
postcards*

These are strictly for fans of Doctor Who. As an occasional viewer of the series, and not at all since Peter Davidson's day, it is difficult for me to comment on the desirability of the photographs.

Being full-colour presentations, there is nothing in either the poster book or the postcards from the first, black-and-white, series and, although both publications feature a brief overview of the series, neither purports to be anything but a collection of images from the much-loved programmes.

The poster book is flashed on the cover with the words



contains previously  
unpublished photographs.

There is no indication which photos these are but possibly that claim may be related to my single criticism. A number of the photos in the poster book are fuzzy. Surely in a presentation of this type the shots should be pin-sharp. Perhaps in an effort to give the public something new, the editor of the poster book sacrificed a modicum of quality control. Whatever the reason, even one poorly-reproduced image is one too many in a poster book, where presentation is everything. Who wants to cover their walls with blurred, poorly-focused or badly-printed posters?

**Robert Neilson**

*Love in Vein*, ed. Poppy Z. Brite, Voyager, pb, £4.99, pp433

Anthologies are always difficult to review. There's never enough room for a plot synopsis and a comment on each story in the collection, and even if there was, that would be about as inspiring to the reader as watching repeats of the Eurovision Song Contest. But *Love in Vein* is an exception to the rule. It's easy. All the stories (with a single exception) are of consistent worth, the themes fall within

the parameters stated in the cover blurb – a collection of vampire erotica – and, as a package, the anthology can be summed up in two words: simply brilliant. Or for those of you who want the shorter version of my critique: brilliant.

If an editor has any effect on the finished product, as I believe, then Poppy Z. Brite should be encouraged to bring her editorial eye to bear on future short story collections. What is it about *Love in Vein* that makes it stand so far above the crowd of merely functional horror anthologies? Could it be the authors from who she chose to invite submissions? Or the selection process used on those stories received? Or did the subject somehow trigger a rich vein (pun intended) of creativity in the horror world?

Usually what you get in one of these collections, is a bunch of the editor's friends who have dashed off something that roughly conforms to the theme in order to be included in their mate's book. Somehow, it seems to me, the authors included in this collection have consistently given their best. In that I include the single exception to the wonderfully consistent fare – the execrable "In the Greenhouse" by Kathe Koja and Barry N. Malzberg –

mainly because the story is on a par with any of the non-linear rubbish I have ever read by Mr. Malzberg. To Kathe Koja (whose work is unfamiliar to me) I offer my apologies for including her in this attenuated stream of vitriol, but she should have known better than to associate her name with such drivel.

As for the rest of the stories in the anthology, each of them is vampiric (though the definition of vampire is used in the broadest sense), the majority of them are also erotic (though some are, admittedly, merely gruesomely, sexually explicit) and they are mostly horrific. Whatever you feel you might require from a collection of vampire erotica, you will find it in *Love in Vein*. In fact, I would be surprised if you fail to discover more than you expected, more than you could have imagined. Not for those with delicate sensibilities. Thank goodness.

**Robert Neilson**

*The Ultimate Avengers*, Dave Rogers, Boxtree, pb, £16.99, pp350

Normally this sort of book is recommended for fans of the series only. And certainly if you liked *The Avengers* in any of their various guises then this is an invaluable reference

work. But anyone who has an interest in television, particularly the behind-the-scenes working of the medium, will find this fascinating. Sure, there's the inevitable, exhaustive and exhausting listing of every episode, all the credits and a brief plot synopsis, but you don't have to read that if you don't want to. And ignoring this aspect of the book (which is for anoraks only) does not render the publication bad value.

Each series is considered critically and the background to its production is discussed from several different viewpoints. Virtually everyone who made a meaningful contribution to the series has been interviewed and each series considered in the context of what general television was doing at the time.

As a mere occasional viewer I always thought of *The Avengers* as a particularly English adventure series of the spy/secret agent variety. What *The Ultimate Avengers* highlights is just how close to the cutting edge of television science fiction the early series were in their day. "The White Dwarf," transmitted first on 16<sup>th</sup> February 1963, concerns the threat of a star which will collide with the Earth. The plot synopsis to "Build a Better Mousetrap" (Feb '64) begins

'Mrs. Gale becomes a biker to investigate what mysterious signal is jamming all the mechanical devices in the neighbourhood.' "The Hour That Never Was" (Nov '65) has the Avengers frozen in time and then there's "The Cybernauts" (Oct '65) which features robot assassins.

With the introduction of the second Avengers girl, Diana Rigg as Mrs. Emma Peel, it seems that SF came to dominate the themes used in the series and by the time of *The New Avengers* in the seventies, the chances of finding a straightforward plot were akin to looking out the window to be confronted by a giant finger (UK readers only).

So, is *The Ultimate Avengers* worth buying? For fans of *The Avengers* it's a must. For fans of British television in general, it definitely warrants close consideration. Being neither, I still enjoyed the few days I spent in the company of Dave Rogers' interesting, informative and reader-friendly work.

**Robert Neilson**

*Caliban's Hour, Tad Williams, Legend, pb, £4.99, pp180*

Tad Williams is the best-selling author of the *Memory*,

*Sorrow and Thorn* trilogy which began with the phenomenal *The Dragonbone Chair*. That first volume demands the description phenomenal more because of the stir it caused in British publishing on the heels of the advance paid for the rights, than for any literary qualities it may or may not have possessed. Personally, I was sucked in by the hype and secured myself a copy. To my disgust I could not progress further than the first five hundred pages of what seemed to me a funereally slow and turgid bore. This was the baggage I brought with me as I embarked on my journey through Tad Williams' latest paperback.

I'm sure Williams' editor, and Williams himself, thought it was a phenomenally (that word again) clever literary idea, to take the central characters from Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* and take a look at them some years later. How could the events of *The Tempest* have affected them? How could the results be viewed from Caliban's viewpoint?

Perhaps a deeper knowledge of the play, and possibly the Bard's other works, is needed to fully appreciate the delicate nuances of *Caliban's Hour*, but to the

average SF or fantasy reader, at whom this book will inevitably be marketed, the story must stand on its own merits. While the characterisations in this short novel are expansions and variations on those of the original play, they do not delve deep enough in their own right. And when the character study aspect is dispensed with, there is little or no plot left to carry the reader forward.

It is a criticism I have levelled at publishers and editors on many occasions in the past, but once again I feel it is valid in this case. Had this slender novel been submitted to them without the weight of a best-selling author behind it, I doubt it would have reached the bookshelves of your local shop in anything close to this form. Yes, the central idea behind it is interesting and worthy of exploration, but it deserves more meat on its bones. Once again, this has the feel of work that has been submitted to the public's view at least one stage too early in the editing process.

As many an English teacher would scrawl across the bottom of a manuscript such as this, "Good idea, but needs more thought and application. Can do a lot better. C minus."

**Robert Neilson**

**Psychoville,** Christopher Fowler, Warner, pb, £7.99, pp417

The other day I was speaking to Dublin author, Michael Carroll, and in the course of our conversation *somehow* the subject, as usual, turned to books. Immediately Michael recommended that I read anything by Christopher Fowler, which was the sort of coincidence I'm sure he would never dare use in his fiction; at the time I was in the middle of reading Fowler's latest. The title is *Psychoville*, and if it is anything to go by, then I must echo Michael's sentiments.

Previously, the only fiction by Fowler which I had read was contained in his short story collection, *The Bureau of Lost Souls*. Unfortunately, for me it would appear, I found the stories in the collection to be rather strained and unexciting. The net result of this exposure being that I avoided Mr. Fowler's work for the past half-decade or so. But I'm still young (by some standards) so there's time to put my error to rights. I'm reliably informed that *Spanky* is a cracker.

As for *Psychoville*, it charts the life and downtrodden times of the March family, particularly their son, Billy. Forced to move from the safe haven of

London's inner city through the vagaries of the soulless planning authority, the family is deposited in one of those horrendous 'new-town' suburbs built on a green-field site miles from nowhere. To compound matters, the residents are middle (striving to be upper) class and consider the Marches all together too blue collar for the area.

In many subtly callous ways the neighbours make it obvious to the Marches that they are not wanted. Then begins a series of unlucky incidents which being to force the Marches out of their new home. But is it merely bad luck? Billy march asks himself. His father is wrongly accused of theft and loses his job. His mother slips on spilled oil in the supermarket where she works but is denied compensation as a *helpful* neighbour cleaned up the mess and then denied its very existence.

Abandoned to the national health service, Billy's mother is left to wait months for a hospital bed. Her health and spirits deteriorate until she takes her own life. Finally Billy and his father are forced to abandon their suburban house and move back to the city. The snide, hostile, snobby and loathsome neighbours have won.

But this is a horror novel. The Marches will be avenged. Horribly. Inevitably. In part two. Welcome to Psychoville, the suburb in which anything an uninhibited maniac is capable of imagining for revenge can, and does happen.

What makes this such a powerful piece of horror is that for the most part it is so reasonable, so much a catalogue of everyday suburban bitchiness. And then Christopher Fowler allows his imagination off the leash and all we can do is sit back and watch, initially with pleasure, as Billy's vengeance unfolds. But as his eventual aim becomes clear so we see his mind unravel – or notice that it has been raveled already. For the most part this is not a novel of gut-wrenching horror, but when the mayhem hits its stride I would strongly recommend an empty stomach to readers. I would also recommend this book. Strongly.

**Robert Neilson**

*The Dictionary of World Folklore, Harraps, £9.99*

In the immortal words of Joe Cabot to his Reservoir Dogs, "Let's go to work," because that's what first sprang to mind when asked to review the Dictionary of World

Folklore." Not everyone's first choice for a good book to curl up with by the fake fireside in a warm pub on a Winter's eve to enjoy a ripping yarn of adventure, suspense and romance. Add to this the gloomy image of flicking through pages of "ADONIS (Gr) God, Greek mythology...", "Hallowe'en (USA), holiday in Western hemis., 31<sup>st</sup> October, based on Ghosts and Ghouls," etc. When I discovered the publishers were Harrapps, more noted in *this* critic's mind for their admittedly sterling works in the fields of language, my hopes of an unputdownable book understandably flagged.

So surprise was my predominant reaction on first perusings. Such delights as the Black Dog, image of many a ghost story, was listed with reference to its possible Celtic origins, its inherent prophesy of impending doom and some of its names. This nestles right beside the immortal pirate Blackbeard and worlds away from the Mahabharata (a Sanskrit epic of India's Bharata dynasty {circa 400AD} and central to Hinduism) and the "magic object – a common folkloric motif."

However, further readings brought, to myself at least, less joy. This is more of an

encyclopaedia than a dictionary, with references ranging from a few paragraphs to a few pages, but (a) it's too small to be a good encyclopaedia, and (b) it lacks a coherent and user-friendly cross-reference. True, there are fairly useful links inserted into certain references, but the lack of an index means I ended up looking unsuccessfully for an unremembered Greek demi-goddess, and half an hour's fruitless searching later remembered that Calliope was her name, and found no reference to her, although they *do* have, neatly tucked away, references to Icarus and the little-known Kairos, the world's first wine-maker, pupil of Dionysus and killed by a group of peasants who killed him believing him to be a poisoner when they experienced the world's first hangover (true, I swear; he'll be my favourite toast from now on).

Admittedly, I'm too used to virtual reference works on CD-ROM, where any topic is a quick Search away, but nonetheless this book is a good attempt at cataloging a world of what is essentially a vague, misty dimension of imagination and localisation. A tokohoshi may sound like the latest liquorice sweetie to your good self but to the South

African Bantu it names the darkest of beasts from under the bed (no, it ain't listed, but bogey is given, both as the monster and the golf score).

In places it's too bookish – Cinderella doesn't really merit two pages – and overanalytical; the merits of "The Recognition Token [as] a widely-used plot device" is not nearly as poetic as a "glass slipper".

But overall it's a lovely coffee table book, not quite as useful as it could be. Here's to the next edition, with an appended index to enable avoidance of the dross in search of the gems. In conclusion, I'd advise you to enjoy the trivia and delights, but use it for reference at your peril.

**Stephen Malone**

*HEADCRASH, Bruce Blethke, Warner, \$5.99*

Minimum system requirements before reading this book are Windows 3.1, DOS, Netware of your choice and a small smattering of UNIX.

At least that what I thought with more than a little smugness while getting the in-jokes in the first few chapters of this book. It appears to concern itself, interestingly for me, with this poor unfortunate, Jack "Pyle" Burroughs, the

Junior Assistant Software Engineer-in-Training, working in the IT department of your local multinational. Pyle's working life is a hilarious mixture of terrifying office politics, stupefying user practices - fridge magnets keeping floppies safe, (too good not to be true), psychotic co-workers, and a VR LAN game called Slaughter, inspired by you-know-what. Tell me about it.

Snatches of dialogue as they attempt to bring the network on-line, (Scottish accents abounding) gives something of the flavour:

"... an anomalous flutter in the flowgate collectimizer"

"Confirmed. We are experiencing a degradation in the heuristic flowgate stabilizer, adjusting delta-V to compensate"

"Not responding....she's breaking up...Abort! Abort!...Blowout in the synchronic gillyoolystat!..Five seconds to cache failure... she's gonna blow!...WE'RE ALL GONNA DIE!...", etc.

Otherwise, when no-one from management is watching, one of them simply types "START". A gas ticket, and hugely enjoyable.

At home in the evenings however, the obligatorily nerdy Pyle logs in to his Virtual night club by speeding down a

graphically described (yawn) information highway on his virtual Harley (yawn) and becomes superdude MAX\_KOOL (yawn). Unfortunately for us, Pyle gets fired from his day job and so you have to wade through several chapters of this nonsense before with a sinking heart you realise that he is not going to get his job back and that the remainder of the book will be spent in this modern-day Noddyland, where all the main virtual characters turn out one by one to be -surprise! - all the people he knew in his job. You know what I mean - all the saps you ever knew turning up as characters like Gunnar with the virtual HumVee and virtual weaponry, Don Vermicelli the virtual Mafia don, Diana von Babe who in real life would almost certainly be more or less male, and, guess what, the huge Arnie type turns out to be the bloke in the wheelchair! The various pieces of required VR hardware such as the data-bra and the ProctoProd™ also leaves a bit too much of his Freudian slip showing in this pitiful slop of wish-fulfillment. Spare me.

This novel therefore reduces the entire phenomena of the Internet, virtual reality, et al, to no more than a plot device akin to something as

hokey as whatever Thomas Covenant types do to get in to their personal Noddylands. Pity really.

That said, I have to grudgingly admit that it does have its moments, and I loved the opening chapters, and the 'info nuggets' in their little boxes scattered throughout are a much better idea than footnotes. And just remember, all you hard-core SF kiddies out there who will sneer with me at the premises herein, the hard truth for all us is that any sort of interstellar travel, for instance, is an Abracadabra to get us to Noddyland in a way that is no less preposterous than Pyles virtual world, or anybody else's.

**Gerry Doyle**

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*Bugger. I hate it when I've got this tiny section left to fill so the magazine doesn't look too untidy. Ah, well. See you next month. RDE*

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