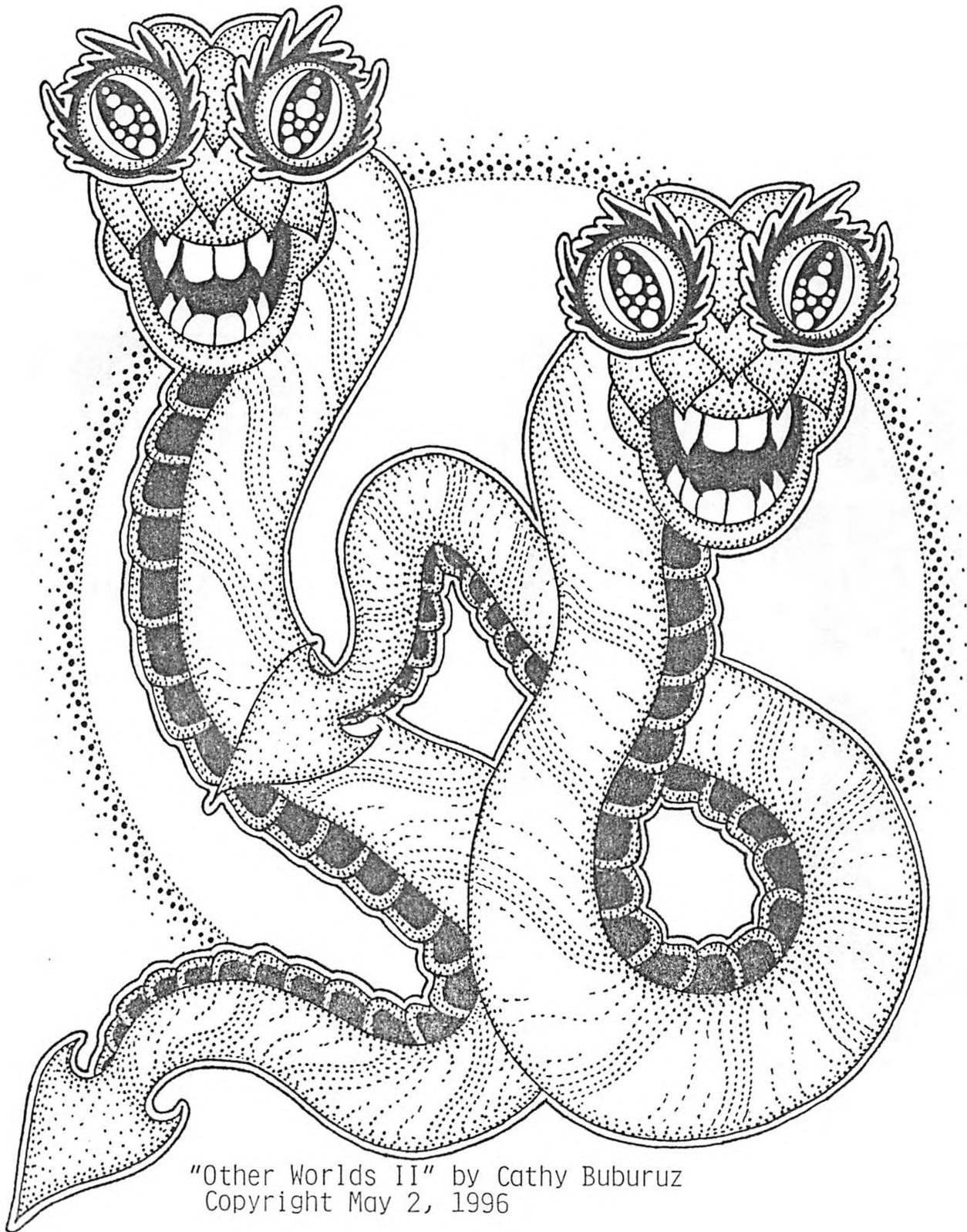


# First Contact

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"Other Worlds II" by Cathy Buburuz  
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# EDITORIAL HARANGUE

As I write, it is November 20<sup>th</sup> and despite promises from various members of the ISFA (though I wonder how many paid-up members there actually are), I have yet to receive a single submission to this august journal. Not a letter, not a book review, nothing. Considering this appalling display of apathy on the part of the members (whose newsletter this is) I thought about leaving the pages blank, or maybe leaving the editorial space blank. But why bother? You just wouldn't get it. Or if you did you wouldn't care.

And that's why the ISFA is staggering from meeting to meeting, never knowing whether there will be a programme, somewhere to meet or anyone in attendance. All the work is, as always, done by a few willing volunteers and at this stage the volunteers are just about knackered. They've put in their time and they need someone to take over the burden. And it is a burden, but one that it is worth bearing.

I had thought that there might be an upsurge of enthusiasm after Eurocon. Silly me. I had thought that there might have been an upsurge in interest prior to Eurocon as well. What a pillock. I now wonder if there is any way of breathing life into the shambling corpse that is the ISFA. And anyway, who cares?

Apathy has finally completely overtaken the society and in order to honour that particular state I am hereby tendering my resignation as temporary, stop-gap editor of First Contact. If anybody has any interest whatsoever in taking over from me they should talk to Robert Elliott who may or may not still be the Chairperson of the ISFA. Thank you (for nothing) and good night.

Yours with as much sincerity as I can muster,  
Bob The Editor (Retired).

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## INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRIC AUTHOR:

### A CONVERSATION WITH BRENT MONAHAN

by Beecher Smith

Brent J. Monahan is the author of several critically acclaimed novels, mostly in the horror-mystery-suspense genres, including **THE BOOK OF COMMON DREAD** and its sequel, **THE BLOOD OF THE COVENANT**, which was released in paperback in October of 1996. His latest novel, **THE BELL WITCH** (St. Martin's Press), regarding a celebrated, extensively documented poltergeist occurrence in Adams, Tennessee, early in the nineteenth century, was released March 1, 1997.

*Friday, February 21, 1997*

**DBS:** Brent, we've both seen some extremely successful authors like Larry Brown of Oxford, Mississippi, who aren't very erudite but manage to tell a wonderful story with a unique voice. This is largely attributed to his personal experiences as a fireman and how he relates them to his readers. How do you feel about that?

**BJM:** One of my major beliefs is that fiction writers should be basing most of their writing upon real life experience because most people aren't willing to invest the time to sit down and work hard at creating situations or characters. I think that's been proven, for example, by Mario Puzo. He authored **THE GODFATHER**, which is really just an amalgam of the New York City *famiglie* and, when he tried to do other things it just didn't have the breath of life in it and it didn't ring true. Same thing with **TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD** by Harper Lee. I'm now hearing some very disturbing stuff about it. That's my favorite novel and, in point of fact, not only was Truman Capote a cousin of Harper Lee, he may have done a lot of heavy duty editing on it. That may be why she never wrote another novel. We may be seeing a lot of Truman Capote in that novel. He is Dill in that novel. Isn't that amazing?

**DBS:** It is. I love books that take me to another world, one I haven't been to before, and one which fascinates me. The book may scare me, it may amuse me, but it must definitely entertain me. Having read two of your books, I found them definitely entertaining. What got you started on the vampiric theme?

**BJM:** I guess because it's one of the most durable in horror. It won't die for many reasons: Fear of death, fear of contagion, fear of sex, lots of other things. The thing that most made me approach vampirism was reality. I'd read it and read it and read it. Even with the ancient legends, I said, "Couldn't be! No one would purposely make a deal with the devil that would enable him to live a thousand years in exchange for an existence which required him not to expose himself to the light of the sun and to live in a coffin filled with dirt--Can you imagine how uncomfortable that must be--to rise at night only to suck on people's throats and maybe, maybe have a little sex. People only know they want to live--they fail to think ahead to realize how boring that might be.

**DBS:** Your vampires in **THE BOOK OF COMMON DREAD** and **THE BLOOD OF THE COVENANT** follow tenets much more closely aligned to the concepts of vampires originally reported in central and eastern Europe--the traits reported by Father Dom Augustine Calmet and others in the eighteenth century claiming the actual existence of vampires. They described members of the undead who still had human cravings, in particular for food and sex in addition to blood.

**BJM:** My concept is really more Faustian than vampiric because you have to make a deal. If not with the devil, then some otherworldly power that wants to remind you constantly that you are in its thrall by making you drink blood, which is the inverse of Christ. You drink His blood to save your life in the afterlife. But in this situation, this life, you are forced to drink human blood to serve the Antichrist.

**DBS:** Your two vampiric novels center around ancient scrolls which contain and reveal this secret, called the Ahriman Scrolls. They bear one of the oldest names for the Devil, "Ahriman." How did you come up with the idea for the Ahriman Scrolls?

**BJM:** I needed what Alfred Hitchcock used to call a "McGuffin." He couldn't remember from one film to the next what the thing was that people were chasing--whether it was a Maltese Falcon or a ridiculous thing called the Letters of Transit, which don't make any sense--but everybody always has to chase it. So, in this case, my McGuffin was these scrolls predicting imminent doom for the world, which the devil could not allow to be exposed.

**DBS:** Well, you certainly know how to keep you readers in suspense until the very end. Now, you live in Yardley, Pennsylvania?

**BJM:** Right.

**DBS:** .. And that's very close to Princeton, isn't it?

**BJM:** Yes, well, I used to live in Princeton, too. So, this once again goes back to what I had to say in the beginning. Some people would say, "Well, isn't that a ridiculous statement in talking about writing from experience? How can you write horror from experience--horror doesn't exist! It's speculative fiction. But my tenet is to surround my novel with as much truth as possible to suspend the audience's--the reader's--disbelief. So that they're constantly saying, "Yes, yes, yes, I understand. It's the same situation I've seen firsthand before: I've been in that town; I know where that cemetery is; I've eaten at that restaurant. People behave that way. Yes, yes, yes, yes." And then, into that frame of reference, to throw in the supernatural and really scare them.

**DBS:** You get them settled into reality and then pull the rug out from under them. Your premise is to build a three dimensional world, a believable world, and then, to scare your reader, inject something horrific into that world where the reader is already snared. Then the reader can't get out until the writer, through the resolution of the tale, takes him out.

**BJM:** That's one of Stephen King's stronger points. In fact, he bludgeons it to death because he goes for an easy reference like a Coca Cola bottle. He uses lots of trade names and so forth. Every reader knows what a Coca Cola bottle is.

**DBS:** You have mixed feelings about Stephen King, don't you?

**BJM:** Yes. I originally liked Stephen King a great deal, even though I knew what he was--a master writer with a twelve-year-old boy's sensibilities. Most of the time he's saying, "Gee, look at this insect on the ground. I wonder what it would do if we ripped its wings off and threw it on a hot car hood." That's the kind of horror he creates. I liked him until he became editor-proof. In situations such as the second release of **THE STAND**, he now effectively says, "Look, I'm really angry that I was edited in the past. So now, I'm going to throw back many hundreds of pages of previously edited out material." That basically flies in the face of a process I think is very worthwhile, provided your editor is competent. I happen to think King's early editor was.

**DBS:** It seems the purpose of an editor is to help the writer make the manuscript more marketable, but large publishing houses have gotten away from that now. The writer no longer receives the support from editors he allegedly got twenty years ago.

**BJM:** Amen. Now a lot of times the editor's job seems to be only to hold your hand and to go out to lunch with you. I have twice had good editing. Early in my career I did not. In point of fact, with my first novel, which I co-authored, we got a great deal of money up front, but virtually no editing by the company, which was a very wealthy start-up company that had a lot of money but no expertise in their house. We hired, right in Princeton, Fletcher Knebel's wife Laura. He co-authored **SEVEN DAYS IN MAY**. She was a well known editor in New York City. We paid out of our pockets to get good editing. Even in that case, the editing wasn't particularly good because she really wasn't a fiction novel editor. But I recognized the need at the time and she filled it best under the circumstances. Excellent editing comes along rarely.

**DBS:** It's becoming a lost art, almost like good writing.

**BJM:** I would think so, at least from my experience.

**DBS:** Do you see a corollary between what's happening in the movies today, with this incredible emphasis on the box office gross receipts on opening week compared with the releases of books and what they're supposed to do within the first month after release?

**BJM:** Yes. The real horror story that's going on now is the consolidation of all enterprises for economic reasons. This certainly touches upon an author's ability to sell out of the gate because, now, computers keep track of how many books are sold. That's public record. If you only sell 40,000 paperbacks from your first book, you won't get a print run bigger than 40,000 for your second book, no matter how much better the theme, the writing, or the plot is. You get nailed in there. So, if you don't come out of the gate fast, it's almost an impossibility to climb. I don't know if it was happening back then, but I do know that Elmore Leonard was constantly in the mid-range of hard back. I guess that's about 7,500 copies. It was years and years before they took a chance on him. He'd even had a couple of movies made and was somewhere up near his twentieth novel before he really made it because of this system.

**DBS:** Talk about mid-life crisis! Mid-list crisis may be even worse.

**BJM:** Right.

**DBS:** There's the old story that, out of each ten books published, only two will be financially successful, but they all start out on the same footing--all equally appraised potential winners by the publisher.

**BJM:** I think to a certain extent it's luck. To a larger extent it's who you know, especially with the so-called literary novel where people from Princeton, Harvard, Wellesley, and Smith are writing these very self-absorbed novels but they know people in New York City. So these things are coffee table successes. I know a situation where a connected young Ivy League student worked as a doorman one summer in New York City and got an obscene amount of money for his memoirs, if you can believe it. Otherwise you can be condemned to the midlist forever. What unfortunately happens is that when a good agent will "auction" an

author, sort of sight unseen on the merits of the novel, what's known as a "feeding frenzy" happens in New York where virtually all the publishing goes on. And it will bid up this one book into the hundreds of thousands range, which means that every author in the midlist has to support it because, if the publisher bid several hundred thousand up front, he's then got to put considerable advertising money behind it. So that may even double the cost of that novel. Once that happens, if it doesn't pay out, then it will have to be carried on the backs of perhaps dozens of midlist people who will get not a cent for advertising.

**DBS:** And advertising is what moves books today, is it not?

**BJM:** Yes. It is so bad now that--

**DBS:** We want to think that good writing moves books, but it's advertising that does it.

**BJM:** Well, word of mouth will work with the extraordinary novel, but that doesn't happen very often. Sometimes people will push the novel themselves. They'll go around the country in their car and get it started, but advertising is generally what does it. It's reached such a place now, that the general public doesn't realize the houses are paying for the front ten to fifteen feet of a bookstore. They're paying an excise over the forty-five to fifty percent or greater discounts that they're giving the megastores. They're also paying for front shelf space. That's how important that is.

**DBS:** The premise that James Michener gave over ten years ago, that America is a great country--you can make a fortune as a writer you just can't make a living at it-- still holds true, doesn't it?

**BJM:** That's still true. Same with Hollywood. When I had a movie made through a Hollywood producer, he said exactly the same thing. He said, "You can get rich in this business, but it's very difficult to make a living."

**DBS:** What was the movie?

**BJM:** I won't say because the movie was a bigger horror than the subject of the book. Eventually it sold to a Canadian bank that had foreclosed on a motion picture company and bankers made the movie. I'll let you just imagine what happened after that.

**DBS:** It must be like lawyers trying to dictate culture--it just doesn't work well.

**BJM:** Yeah, that's right. It's like what Samuel Johnson said about women preachers, comparing them to a dog dancing on its hind legs--

**DBS:** --The amazement comes not that it does it badly, but that it does it at all--

**BJM:** Exactly.

**DBS:** I think it was Mencken who said no one ever went broke under-estimating the tastes of the American public.

**BJM:** Well, I hope that my public at least has pretty good taste. I don't write--and unfortunately my wife is very angry at me because I don't--for a front list audience. I write to please myself, since this is my avocation. She would like me to really pander and try to mimic the field, but then most wisdom says that mimicking the field doesn't guarantee anything either. Usually you're six months to two years behind the market demand.

**DBS:** That's like trying to hit a moving target, when people try to write like Dean Koontz or Stephen King.

**BJM:** Exactly. And there is only one Dean Koontz and one Stephen King. It's like the unfortunate guy who looks and sounds exactly like Elvis. He can't make a living even though he's talented.

**DBS:** So people who do that either end up getting out of the business or finding their own voice, or their own role, eventually.

**BJM:** They have to.

**DBS:** Dean Koontz has given some excellent advice to aspiring writers in the horror genre and in general. He's said to avoid being part of any school of writing, to be true to your own voice, avoid conventions, stay home and write, trust no agent to fully understand your vision. He says betrayal is routine, to expect resistance, indifference, callousness, bad advice, incompetence, deceit and corruption. He also admonishes to persevere, write for the sheer joy of writing, strictly for the love of it.

**BJM:** Mr. Koontz is a wise man, but he also holds the high ground of having made a lot of money.

**DBS:** Well, at least he never left his readers in the middle of a novel like Stephen King did in **THE WASTE LANDS**.

**BJM:** Not that I know of. Of course, I don't read that much horror myself. I don't find that reading horror informs my novels.

**DBS:** Do you consider yourself a writer in the horror genre?

**BJM:** No. There's an excellent essay on the nature of horror by Douglas Winter. You can still get it in the paperback called **PRIME EVIL**. His tenet is that very great writing--such as the works of Dostoyevsky and Hugo--contains elements of horror. It's not some easily labeled and pigeonholed second-rate genre. It's best to read the preface to that book, too, because I don't want to redefine what he is saying. I also

don't like the niche of horror because I was asked to be the keynote speaker at the Philadelphia Writers' Conference and the woman who invited me said that I was the darling of the selection committee, but that they had one request: when I did my keynote speech, that I not mention anything about horror because it was too declassé. People didn't want to admit its existence. Well, I had to mention horror. Turned out everybody was reading it and everybody loved it, so that didn't really work. But just the term "horror" has such negative connotations that not only don't I use it, but I tell myself what I'm writing is something different from that. I think its more apt to describe it as supernatural thrillers. I craft a lot of mystery in them, also a lot of adventure.

**DBS:** Mystery is the staple that has consistently sold, until recently when romance overtook it. Mystery has historically been the mainstream of publishers. Now romance is, of course, pushing it aside.

**BJM:** Mysteries are "the normal recreation of the noble mind."

**DBS:** But mystery requires cerebral exercise. At least good mystery does. I don't know about romance. Romance is much more of an emotional thing.

**BJM:** The mystery demands some participation by the reader. Another nice thing that a well-written mystery novel tries to do is educate the reader simultaneously about some aspects of the world. So I take them on travelogues or tell them how to find somebody who's impossible to find, throwing in at the same time tons of arcane but interesting minutiae.

**DBS:** For example, how close is the security system in the rare manuscripts section of the Princeton library you described in **THE BOOK OF COMMON DREAD** to the actual security system at the Princeton library? Is that an exact replication?

**BJM:** Not at all. But I was able to get my hands on the blueprints for that library, so every door is in the right place. However, the rare manuscripts room is not in the same place, so, anybody who wants to get their hands on a rare manuscript, don't use my novel for a roadmap.

**DBS:** What was your first book that was published?

**BJM:** My first book was called **DEATHBITE**. Actually, my first book in print was my doctoral dissertation, which is still in print, but I don't think my readers will care too much about that.

**DBS:** In which discipline was that?

**BJM:** In music.

**DBS:** You have a doctorate in music from where?

**BJM:** Indiana University at Bloomington.

**DBS:** Was that in instrumental or vocal?

**BJM:** Vocal.

**DBS:** Do you still sing?

**BJM:** I do on occasion. I made my living for a while doing that, but it's a precarious living.

**DBS:** I could imagine.

**BJM:** Maybe even more precarious than being a horror writer.

**DBS:** Your day job is with Peterson's.

**BJM:** Right. Peterson's is the premier provider, both in print and on the Web, of information for making life-long educational and career decisions.

**DBS:** You're a fairly high official, aren't you?

**BJM:** Oh, I suppose. I'm in charge of the higher education division.

**DBS:** Does that require you to travel a lot?

**BJM:** I guess I go out on the road about a half dozen times a year, maybe twenty days or so.

**DBS:** But you don't have to call on customers as a routine?

**BJM:** I go to the conferences and conventions and I represent the publishing house.

**DBS:** You've had quite an interesting career going from singing to a white collar executive's position.

**BJM:** That's true. I came to Peterson's on a lark, part time because I was a child of the Sixties--from Rutgers University, which they used to call the "Berkley of the East." Bombing Englehardt Industries was our favorite activity. And all business was Evil. I got into this because I was writing for ABC daytime serial television, which everybody thinks of as the "soaps." You're not allowed to say that there, of course. I was a dialogue writer, so it allowed me quite a lot of free time. Because nobody could "come out and play with me in the daytime," I was getting a little bored, so I took a part time job.

**DBS:** At Peterson's?

**BJM:** Right. And I found that a company which deals with business and academia and helps people find the right educational and career slot for themselves was actually quite rewarding. Talking to academicians is great for a writer because I gained so many links all around the country. Now, if I need some forensic information, I can pick up the phone and call a friend and get the state of the art answer.

**DBS:** Did you ever have a time when you weren't into writing and went back to it? Or did you write constantly?

**BJM:** I wrote constantly. What I did was make the same mistake as another "soap opera writer" named Victor Miller, who has his degree from an Ivy League school. I don't know how much I should say about this because Victor might get mad at me, but Victor was trying to do the same thing as I was, trying to write the great American novel, you know--very heavy duty Fitzgerald type of work for a prolonged time. On a lark he wrote one of those classic horror movies that became--and I won't say the name, but it went from "I" through "XIII"--and Victor still steadfastly refuses to acknowledge that he did that. But high flown prose was what I was trying to do for about five or six years. I'd write serious stuff and everybody would say, "This is unpublishable. The public isn't interested in this kind of thing. The words are too big."

**DBS:** Sort of like the dilemma Sir Arthur Sullivan found himself in--he and Gilbert could write the most wonderful operettas which would be wildly commercially successful, but nobody would consider Sullivan as a "serious" composer.

**BJM:** Probably for the same reasons that they didn't publish my serious novels--because Sir Arthur Sullivan was a second-rate serious composer. W. S. Gilbert is one of my *bon mot* heroes for saying, "Actors paint, but seldom draw."

**DBS:** His lyrics are timeless.

**BJM:** I agree that they transcend time. They're not Shakespeare, but they're the next best thing, at least as far as musical comedy. It's hard to imagine that things can be as germane as they still are after 125 years.

**DBS:** Don't you think that Gilbert and Shakespeare were both successful because they were writing words that were intended to be spoken to people with very short attention spans?

**BJM:** Probably. Shakespeare certainly knew how to pander to an audience. Meanwhile, they were getting the highest quality stuff you could think of.

**DBS:** Even Shakespeare had his critics.

**BJM:** Mel Brooks said, when asked about critics, "They make nice noise when they rub their hind legs together."

**DBS:** Tell me, you didn't start out with the vampiric, but moved into it. **THE BOOK OF COMMON DREAD** was like your second or third published novel.

**BJM:** It was my fourth published novel. After about seven years of writing really high-falutin' stuff, on a lark, in about six weeks, strictly part time, I wrote a novel about a very frustrated classical singer who--this is truly Faustian--would do anything to improve his life. His mentor, who is a very strange coloratura soprano, dies in a plane crash at sea, but keeps coming back to him at night as a sort of succubus. Every time she comes back, she gives him a pointer that improves his voice. But the dream sex becomes more and more sadistic, and horrific things are happening around him. The whole point of the novel is: just how far are you willing to sell out for fame and fortune? It ended quite well.

**DBS:** What was the name of that novel?

**BJM:** It's called **SATAN'S SERENADE**.

**DBS:** Was that the predecessor of **THE BOOK OF COMMON DREAD**?

**BJM:** No. The direct predecessor was my favorite child, called **THE UPRISING**. That one's based on a visit I took to see relatives in Ireland, where I immersed myself in Irish legend and fairy tales. Basically the point of this novel, although I have loaded it up so much it's sometimes hard to see the point, is the intolerance of religion and how religion has probably caused more division in human existence than help, at least organized religion has.

**DBS:** Now, you've got a new one coming out very soon, don't you?

**BJM:** Right. It's coming out in March and called **THE BELL WITCH**. This one deals with the most celebrated poltergeist haunting in the United States and the only one which ostensibly involves the death of a person.

**DBS:** And it's in my home state.

**BJM:** It's in Tennessee. In Adams, Tennessee. It occurred between 1817 and 1821. What I have done is "unearth" yet another journal. This one is penned by the teacher who lived in that town, which goes well beyond the [two existing] diaries used for source materials and explains exactly the horrific naissance of this poltergeist's being and why it haunted someone literally to death.

**DBS:** Is this historical fiction, nonfiction, or a novel?

**BJM:** Let's call it "faction." The ultimate roman-a-clef, I would say. It's virtually 95% as recorded in several books--two diaries and a book by a woman who uses her initials (M. V. Ingram). In the Nineteenth Century women didn't want to be recognized, so they used their initials. Ms. Ingram collected all the accounts of the neighbors who had witnessed this as well. These events are extremely well documented.

**DBS:** There are certain techniques people use to make poltergeists interesting. In the original movie **POLTERGEIST** they drew upon the idea that poltergeists are more than just kinetic energy, that they represent some force of intelligent, evil, undead spirits.

**BJM:** That's a bit much. In most cases a poltergeist is as it's defined in German, a "rackety ghost." But there is no ghost. Usually during the change from girlhood to womanhood, at the beginning of menses, there is in some women the phenomenal outputting of tremendous psychic energy, which evidently can telekinetically affect things in some very strange cases like this one. It goes well beyond noises. In this case, I think it was a combination of **THE THREE FACES OF EVE** and the abnormal poltergeist thing--she was able to superimpose upon it a multiple set of supposedly ghostly characters, each with its own voice, an amazing thing. This was very much like the Epworth Ghost that haunted the Wesley family, the founders of Methodism. The daughter was jealous of the reputation of the father and the son, and subconsciously created this so-called ghost. I think that's what this young lady in Tennessee, this Betsy Bell, did. She subconsciously created a spirit to literally hound her father to death.

**DBS:** Is the format of your book a novel?

**BJM:** For all intents, if you picked up this book you would not think it was a novel. You would think it was an account from 1842.

**DBS:** It's amazing, when you talk about building a three-dimensional world, it does seem sometimes that the things which happen in the real world are stranger than anything anybody could dream up. The Holocaust, for example--who would dream that Germany, the country which produced Beethoven and Kant, would also produce Hitler?

**BJM:** He was an Austrian. But Mozart was too. It is amazing what the human mind, what ranges of behavior human kind is capable of. I mention at the end of this novel how Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart as a young man was able to attend the Sistine Chapel Mass. The Pope Marcellus Mass was taught to their choir voice by voice, then destroyed so it could not be performed anywhere else. He heard it once, then went back to his room and wrote the whole thing down from memory. We have no knowledge, really, of the extent of the powers of the human mind. I think that this young woman plumbed the depths of certain horrific powers.

**DBS:** I wonder how far writers can take their readers and keep their credibility. Look at Stephen King's **THE STAND**, how he gets his readers to accept a post-apocalypse world. It's a tremendous challenge. When a writer succeeds in achieving the willing suspension of disbelief on a prolonged basis from the readers, then a successful novel has been accomplished.

**BJM:** I agree. Toward this end, I visited the Bell Witch locale. I immersed myself in the writing from that period. I stole phrases and sentences, and St. Martin's Press was even kind enough even to print it in the look and print style of the Nineteenth Century.

**DBS:** You mean with the "f's" for "s's" and things like that? Because if it does, the readers will really get lost.

**BJM:** No, not that bad. That's more like Eighteenth Century, you "filly fot."

**DBS:** It's interesting that those who write in the horror genre range from a few who actually believe in the supernatural to many who are basically cynical and use it to earn their bread and butter. Where does Brent Monahan stand in that spectrum?

**BJM:** I generally disbelieve everything. I know where these things come from, like the myths of the centaur and the werewolf. I know about xeroderma pigmentosum, X-P, connected with the vampire myth. There are origins to all these things. One of the origins of the vampire was from the premature burial.

**DBS:** And porphyria.

**BJM:** Yes. So, I don't believe in much to do with the supernatural. Being a disbeliever, I don't place much credence in reincarnation. However, when I was over in Ireland and stood on a site that had a village about 11,000 years before Christ, I had the most overwhelming sensation that I had stood there before. I guess my mind is open enough at least to speculate upon these things--without believing most of them.

**DBS:** You're a good rationalist. You would have fared well in the Age of Reason.

**BJM:** I think that's what makes my writing compelling. Most people read a horror book for the same reason they get on a roller coaster. They want a good scary ride. They also are like my daughter, who is afraid to climb to the top of the jungle gym bars because she might get hurt, but she'll get on the steepest roller coaster in the world. When I ask her why, she'll reply, "Look, Dad, they wouldn't build them if people would get hurt." So she puts herself in the hands of the roller coaster builder and feels perfectly safe--"

**DBS:** But won't trust herself on the jungle gym bars.

**BJM:** Exactly. People know that the world is horrific. They may step outside their front door and take a bullet in the head from a drive-by shooting. But reading horror is a very safe, vicarious way to get your thrills. I want to do the very best I can to help them along. As a rationalist, I am constantly saying, "This is real; this is real; this is real. And then I just push them over the edge and let them free fall for a while.

**DBS:** Despite parts of **DRACULA** which are simply atrocious writing from a stylistic perspective, people who critique it generally agree that what carries the day for the novel is Bram Stoker's credible presentation of an otherwise incredible subject. He spent seven years researching and writing the book. Although he didn't go to Transylvania, he got every resource available to familiarize himself with his subject.

**BJM:** Another Irishman who did his homework.

**DBS:** We hope Brent Monahan will be in print at least as long as Bran Stoker.

**BJM:** Thank you.

**DBS:** What is your advice to writers who are just coming into the field and are serious about getting published?

**BJM:** Pay your dues. Read a great deal, but if you want to be a horror writer, don't just read horror. Read good writing. Read for dialogue and characterization, and for plot advancement. Gather your tools by writing every day, whether you want to or not. If you don't have anything on the paper in front of you, you can't say, "That's bad because ...." Make it a habit to write. Know a lot about the world, and mostly people. Because, no matter what that novel is, I don't care if it's **THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS**, it may ostensibly be about rodents, but it's really about people. The only thing we're interested in is ourselves, ultimately. You have to be a student of human nature. Know how the world works, especially how the people in it work.

**DBS:** What advice do you have about coping with rejection? Every writer must face it. How do you deal with it?

**BJM:** Just persevere. Get smart though. Most of the time it happens because you're not in the right place at the right time. Try to get the best agent you can. Throwing un-agented manuscripts over the transom doesn't work. Hone your skills. Constantly strive to improve yourself. Take criticism only from those you deem qualified--fellow writers with more experience. Don't ask your mother.

**DBS:** If somebody has had six novels published, then writers should listen to what he has to say about their work?

**BJM:** Yes, but don't anybody send those novels to me, please.

**DBS:** No. No. Thank you so much for your for your time.

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## LYNNE - "THE VOID"

"The Void" is the 5th album by solo artist Bjorn LYNNE. Lynne is originally from Norway, but in 1995 his music brought him to England, where he has now settled down in the Yorkshire countryside. For as long as Bjorn can remember, he has been interested in SF and Fantasy literature (he practically grew up on Tolkien and Star Trek), and this is reflected in his music.

After two self-published CDs ("Hobbits & Spaceships" (1992) and "Montage" (1994)), he signed with Centaur Discs in 1995, released "Dreamstate", and started to build up a small but enthusiastic following of his music; this strange and fresh blend of symphonic rock music, mixed with more electronic, progressive and psychedelic styles, all with

strong atmospheres and a deeply melodic core. His "back to nature" album "Witchwood" was released in 1996 on Mellow Records, before he once again turned to space in 1997 with new found support from the UK premier progressive rock label Cyclops and the release of "The Void". LYNNE's music may not appeal to the masses, but he is enjoying a constantly growing base of loyal and enthusiastic followers. LYNNE has been told that his music may be too electronic for the rock fans, too punchy for the electronic music fans, and too melodic for the psychedelic music fans, but he feels he has found his style, his own formula, and he refuses to budge. When asked what style of music he writes, Bjorn usually just says "well, can we just call it adventure music?"

LYNNE is currently talking to fantasy author Allan Cole about writing the music for his fantasy novel "Wizard of the Winds" (titled "When the Gods Slept" in UK) - and although some details still need to be sorted out, this will probably be the next LYNNE project.

Official LYNNE internet page: <http://www.lynnemusic.com> - Bjorn LYNNE personal email: [bjorn@team17.com](mailto:bjorn@team17.com)

"The Void" can be purchased online on the internet from <http://www.lynnemusic.com> for the price of £12.99. It is also available in well stocked branches of HMV and many specialist mail order outlets, including: GFT LTD, 33 A Tolworth Park Rd., Tolworth, Surrey KT6 7RL, Phone 0181 339 9965, Fax 0181 399 0070

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## Short Story

### Clara

By Guy Moulton

I had no memory of meeting Clara. I woke late one summer's afternoon with the sun coming through the grill in the ceiling, lighting up the dust-motes as they danced among the pipes that hung like vines from the roof. She was next to me, dark-haired and naked on the concrete floor. When I rested my hand on the soft skin of her shoulders, she woke and kissed me, and I knew that we had made love again and again the night before.

I remember little of the days before she came. Just bitter, stinging loneliness that consumed me. I drifted from town to town. Sometimes following the river, sometimes blown by the cold wind that raced along the empty streets. Sometimes following something else: a dark germ that stirred beneath the surface of my memory.

By day I slept in cellars, barns, disused railway tunnels: anywhere that was dark, silent, and empty. At night I would wake, and emerge like a moth, drawn to the bright neon lights and the pulse of music. I would wander through bars, amongst the smoke and vapours, seeking human company. Trying to touch, to taste, and to smell. To be what I was not - to be more than just shadow and memory.

Sometimes I would meet a woman who was too drunk to notice what I am, and for a few precious hours I would forget myself. When the sun rose, I would leave her to wake alone, shivering, in the cellar of an abandoned house, or on the cold marble slabs of a broken mausoleum.

Then one cold dawn at the start of spring, I tumbled through a broken iron grill, and found myself in the basement of an old apartment block, amid the disused junk of a generation.

I lay there, listening to the faint vibrations of humanity above me: tiny voices filtering down through the layers of stone and concrete, along the maze of pipes. I listened as people came and left, argued, cried, and made love. I was lulled to sleep by the symphony that played unendingly in the rooms and flats above me.

Then Clara came, and I had no need of the living. Day after day I drown myself in her. We woke each night when the sun lay dying in bloody pools on the floor, and made love until dawn. We didn't leave the cellar, except occasionally, on moonless nights when the stars were hidden by a blanket of clouds. Then we would creep out into the deserted streets, down to where the Thames turns a bend and there are steps right to the water's edge. We would sit by the river and let the dark sluggish water flow over our feet, washing out all traces of pain.

But in the day while I slept - a cold wraith, vanished by the morning sun - the voices from above still entered my mind. They came trickling down the walls, filling my dreams with garbled voices and snatches of dramas played out in the honeycomb world above me.

One voice in particular clamoured for my attention, awakening memories that invaded my dreams day after day, until a faint uneasiness penetrated my waking mind.

One night when the summer was gone, we emerged from our cellar grave, and found the city covered with a white pelt of frost. We stood for a moment, basking in the sharp, clean air. A door slammed somewhere close by. Footsteps sounded on the wooden stairs. I stopped, feeling the memories and dreams stir inside me. Clara crouched beside me, her back arched, cat like. Then the front door opened, and a man stepped out into the light of the street lamps. We waited, motionless, as he walked down the street, and was finally lost from view. I was torn between the urge to follow him and the fear of the memories that rose in my mind. That night we walked for hours. Only when the dawn broke, and the pale ghosts fled from my thoughts, did we return to the basement.

I lay awake that day in the cellar, the cold sunlight filtering down from the street. Now my conscious mind was alert to the voices, and in the days that followed I would listen for one in particular, a certain whisper, a laugh, or a creaking of the wooden stairs that ran up from the hall. Sometimes I heard it, more often I didn't. But each time the memories grew more vivid, the fear more intense.

At last we followed him. He walked for miles in the dark streets, and we slunk behind, twin wisps in the sodium glow of the streetlights. Away from the Thames, until he came to a single story house. He knocked and waited, and as he entered I saw a flash of blond hair in the lighted doorway. Deep in my chest my heart wrenched.

I looked in through a parted curtain, and saw three figures eating by candle light. At one side sat the man, on his left a young child, sipping orange through a straw. In the centre sat a woman, her back to me. Softly spoken, familiar. Tears welled up in my eyes, but I didn't know why.

When I was with Clara that night beneath the stars, and I felt her move under me, I thought of the woman in the house, smelt the apple blossom smell of her hair, and tasted the salty perfume of her skin as I kissed her chest. Clara moaned. Her eyes were wide open, drinking the starlight, and I knew that she too was somewhere far away.

It became a ritual. Whenever we heard the creaking of his door, or his step in the hallway above, we would rise, silently, and follow him. Two extra shadows. Some nights he would go to a bar and sit drinking alone. Then we would leave him. But more often we followed him to the house. We would watch through the windows until the last light was extinguished, and in the darkness we would hear the whispered breath of lovers. Then we would skulk back to the cellar, or to our haunts along the Thames, to lose ourselves in dreams and fantasy.

One night we had followed him to a bar. Clara stood watching him, her dark eyes fixed on his. I turned to leave, but she stopped me.

"How can I not be with him?" she said. "We are the same."

Suddenly I remembered a dark night in Spring, when the moon was gone and the whispers of lovers were all around me. On that night, alone in the darkness of the cellar, I took my loneliness, my sorrow, my memories, and wrapped them up like a glistening pearl, and made them into a heart. And for lungs I took cobwebs from the walls, and the skin I made from dust, and the sinews I wove from darkness, and the blood I made from my tears. I kissed life into its mouth, and in the darkness the creature of my loneliness stirred and looked up at me. And I knew that he and she were the same: my loneliness, my sorrow, my tears.

I watched her cross the bar towards him. He looked up, suddenly aware of her presence. She smiled at him. He reached out hands as smooth as silken rope, and touched her arm. I remembered those hands as I had felt them before, twisted around my neck, bursting my throat, and suddenly I knew why I had landed in that basement flat on that cold spring dawn.

I watched for a while as they stepped out onto the dance floor. Two heavenly bodies locked in a spinning orbit, a planet and its dark, eclipsing moon.

I lay awake in the cellar that night, alone again with cold, lonely memories. Towards morning I heard footsteps outside - two sets, close together. And Clara's voice, clear in the cold air: "*We will be together always. Forever.*"

He laughed and said, "Forever is a long time, sweet one."

They went inside. I heard twin footsteps cross the hall, and followed the whispers in the darkness, up the staircase.

Later, in a room far above me I heard a bed creak, and I imagined her, a creature of darkness, distilled from my pain and sorrow, coiled above him. And down through the concrete pillars, and along the water pipes drifted her faint whisper - "*No, my lover, forever.*"

A few moments later the screaming started. Desperate, bellowing screams, like the screaming of a trapped animal. No longer fearing death, only the pain that will come before it. It came in waves, rattling down through the water pipes, shaking the wooden boards of the ceiling, and making the concrete tremble. I tried to cover my ears, to block out the sound, but I felt it through my body, my bones, and my flesh. I hoped that it would stop, in merciful silence. But I knew that even when the sound had gone, when his throat was no longer living flesh, the screams would continue. At last, when I could stand it no longer, I fled from the cellar and into the night.

I wandered from crypt to basement, seeking nothing but absolute darkness. I moved blindly, night by night, never content to rest in the same place. I hardly noticed where I was or where I was going. Until one night, when I stepped out through a shattered door, and walked in the shadows between the streetlights. I knew the road, and at the end, the house.

The back door was swinging open, as if to invite ghosts and thieves to enter. I stepped soundlessly across the kitchen, into the dining room.

She sat as on the night I had seen her before, with her back to the window, now facing me as I stood at the kitchen door. A single candle burned on the table. She held the child on her knee. I stepped forward into the room, and she looked up at me. Perhaps she saw me; perhaps she just felt a breath of wind. I looked into her eyes, and I felt that I could have been looking into my own: there was nothing inside but pain and loneliness. I stood for a while, watching the tears run down her face. Then I left, and joined the cold autumn wind outside.

## A Question of Taste

Which two characters from your reading and viewing of science fiction would you invite to your house for dinner, and why?

First, Richard Strauss. Second, diva Plava Laguna from Fifth Element. These two because I'm really far more obsessed with opera than I am with SF, or even (for those who know me!) Trek. I have been known to endure temperatures of minus 20 Celsius for it! And no, the first one is not cheating: Richard Strauss is the composer of "Also Sprach Zarathustra" aka the theme from 2001 - THAT Richard Strauss. He appeared, or rather a reconstruction of him appeared in a short story by Fred Pohl (I think). Then, I also want Plava Laguna from Fifth Element - since no one has managed to write Kiri Te Kanawa or Jessye Norman into a SF story (to my patchy knowledge any way). Both guests would be expected to "sing for their suppers". Richard, who so loved the soprano voice would adore Plava, and I'd love to hear her wrap her tonsils around the Four Last Songs, The Moonlight Scene from Capriccio or with the aid of multitracking, the closing duet and trio from Rosenkavalier - all accompanied by the composer himself...only SF could make this particular dream come true...! Truly cosmic, and an aesthetic experience! -- **Margaret Moran**

I'd like Jim Pooley and John O'mally, both Robert Rankin characters from the Brentford Book. They're so fun! Great stories to tell. -- **Mike Carroll**

I'd invite Mr. Alfred Bester -- the *Babylon 5* namesake, not the real author, and also any well-adjusted Old One from Zenna Henderson's *The People, No Different Flesh*. (This will rule out William Shatner, because he played one of The People from the repressed community of Bendo, and Bester knows *way* too much about repression already!!) I suppose I want the Old One to give Bester a dressing down, for being a sorry excuse for a human being, despite all his wonderful psi gifts. The only problem is, it's likely I won't remember the evening myself, and end up with a headache in the bargain. -- **Lynne Ann Morse**

I'd take Mr. Spock, and H.G. Wells, who wrote *The Time Machine*. I'd used Wells' time machine so I could have the 7 year cycle of *pon farr* repeat continuously, and permanently. (You did say *just* dinner....) -- **Jean Keegan**

*(Jean wasn't the only one having trouble distinguishing between characters and real life people....)*

I'd go for Marina Syrtis, so I could check out (maybe after the Mississippi Mud Pie) if those shoulder blades are for real. And then I'd also invite Philip K. Dick, to ask him where all those crazy stories in "Handful of Darkness" came from. Not to mention the other collections which we might get to around coffee-time. And, of course, the novels. -- **Syd Venner**

We'd invite Delenn (so we could keep *Grant* awake 24 hours with all those rituals for preparing meals). And we'd invite Garibaldi because he's cute and to lighten up the tendency to be tedious. Anyone watching Warner Brothers cartoons is welcome. -- **Terri and Grant**

Just Garibaldi, in cartoon watching mode. We'd watch cartoons *during* dinner. I don't know for the other one... I prefer the actors to the characters. -- **Vincent Smith**

*(It seems like a lot of B5 fans are out here, but there were some X-Files fans, too... except none of them wanted to invite Scully or Mulder to dinner. Is this a conspiracy? Or would their attitude have put you off your food?)*

Jerry Cornelius, so he could introduce me to his sister. And Sir Richard Francis Burton, because he could do just about anything. -- **John Kenny**

The first Doctor Who, because he's the only person in SF who looks older than me, and of course Spock... because it's only logical. -- **Brendan Ryder (Allegedly)**

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# ALBEDO

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**Small Press**

Albedo 1 #14, £2.50, A4, 44pp

Albedo 1 #14 is distinguishable from #13 by the fact that it's possible to look at the cover without squinting; a gentle cyan replaces the garish yellow. Martina Pilcerova's cover artwork would perhaps have looked slightly better with a higher level of reproduction, but nonetheless is a worthy introduction to the magazine. Inside, Sevarian continues his/her diatribe against the vagaries of publishers, a subject also broached by Rod Slatter in the letters page. The fact that the letters page warrants a mention is something notable in itself; although the fiction and articles in the magazine are usually of a high standard, the letters page is usually devoid of anything approaching interesting material. But with two quality letters in the one issue, perhaps we're seeing the start of something different. I hope so.

Let's quickly mention the extraneous material - sorry if I've just dismissed your life's work, by the way - so we can get on to the fiction. There's an interview with Jeff Noon that vaguely disappointed mainly, I suspect, because I'm a great admirer (anything to avoid the word 'fan') of Noon, and the questions asked were not the ones I would have posed.

However, it was an interesting interview, and one that I suspect would have encouraged me to read his books had I not done so already. The book and small press reviews are of the inevitable high standard, although I would suggest to Underview that Albedo One is not the place for reviews of unauthorised X-Files books. While there are doubtless readers (I'm one of them) who watch the X-Files, there are plenty of other magazines out there that cover the subject, and there's no need for Albedo to join in, particularly if the review is a negative one.

Right. On with the fiction. This issue boasts six stories, including ones from Brian Stableford and Ian McDonald. While there is much to celebrate in attracting such names, the celebration should be for good stories, rather famous writers. Of course, it's very easy for me to take the high ground like this; I'm not publishing the magazine, and it's entirely possible that the editors liked Stableford's second story in the magazine. Suffice to say that I didn't, and I'm glad it was only two pages long.

Even shorter is "Tugging the Heartstrings" by DF Lewis. Lewis is a prolific, albeit erratic, short story writer; his stories range from top-notch to distinctly ropy. His latest offering is just over a page long, and leans toward the lower end of that scale. Well-written but pointless is, I think, the best way of describing it.

Next, we have "Anatomy of Resistentalist Induced Matricide" by Sean Mac Roibin. Mac Roibin was the writer of Albedo's third showcase, an excellent, mainstream(ish) story that was indeed worthy of separate publication. I was thus looking forward to this story, despite the wanky title. Unfortunately, it didn't even approach my expectations. Written in a style that's obviously supposed to be funny, the half-witticisms are sufficiently frequent to interrupt any flow the story might otherwise have had. Granted, those epigrams seem to be the story's entire *raison d'être*, but the fact that they aren't all that amusing means that the whole story falls flat. Like "Something Occurred" (his Showcase story), this story isn't SF; unlike that story, this sucks.

By now I was beginning to despair. Half the stories read, and not a good one among them. Thank the gods for David Gullen, who gave us the issue's longest story, "After Henderson." A satirical look at a fragmented Britain where market forces hold sway in a farcical parallel with mediaeval times, "After Henderson" has about it a subtle wit that manages to last the entire story. Gullen doesn't make the mistake of dumping the entire background on us at once; rather, the story serves to let us know gradually what the world around our protagonists is like. That's not to say that the characters aren't important; indeed, the narrator of the story is well thought out, and the supplementary characters are well-written as well. Gullen's bio mentions that he's written a novel and is seeking a publisher; if this story is indicative of his writing, that's one novel that I'd love to read.

Next, "Java" by Nigel Quinlan. This is Quinlan's second story in *Albedo*, and it has a lot in common with its predecessor. It's very short, it's driven by dialogue and you spend ninety per cent of the story wondering what the hell it's doing in an SF magazine. Quinlan's stories give the impression that he'd rather be working for television or radio; his style is not unlike Roddy Doyle's, albeit with better punctuation. The story isn't great, but it's got fine dialogue and promises a lot from Quinlan in the future.

Finally, the other big name of the issue. Ian McDonald's "Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet" continues the fine *Albedo* tradition of poney story titles, but unlike Stableford's offering you don't get the feeling that this story is here because he couldn't get money for it anywhere else. The fantastic element in it is minimal; in fact you'd probably need a scanning tunneling microscope to find it. However the story itself is excellent, and it's hard to bitch about a story this good so we'll pretend it's set on a different planet. Or something. Anyway, it's a story about a bunch of people singing. Not, you might think, the most captivating premise for a story, especially when I mention that they're singing a hymn, and that the story is about people joining in and singing along. However, it's a damn fine offering, and the sort of uplifting tale that's in severe danger of being included in one of those awful "Chicken Soup for the Soul" books. It deserves better. So there you have it. At three shite stories out of six I can't say that this is the best issue to date, but there are few magazines that can boast two truly great stories in an issue. Picking the best story in a magazine isn't normally a difficult thing, but this issue would have proved a lot more problematic had McDonald's story turned out to be SF. As it isn't, Gullen gets my vote this issue. Sorry Ian.

*Albedo 1* costs £2.50, and you can pick up your copy at the occasional bookshop, or write to *Albedo 1*, 2 Post Road, Lusk, Co. Dublin. Alternatively you can e-mail [blhry@iol.ie](mailto:blhry@iol.ie) or check out [www.iol.ie/~bobn](http://www.iol.ie/~bobn)

## Books

*An Exchange of Hostages*, Susan R. Matthews, AvoNova, \$5.99, pb, 0-380-78913-2

When was the last time you read a really good book about someone who tortured people to death for a living? And speak to me not of that sissy Severian; Gene Wolfe eschewed for the most part the gorier details, a decision not shared by Matthews.

Andrej Koscuisko is a very talented surgeon, one who can look forward to a great career in the business of healing. However, he finds himself instead training as a Ship's Inquisitor. As such he is a man who, like Ximinez and his bunch of wacky Spaniards, extracts information from unwilling subjects. There are ways other than torture - drugs, for example - but as a future Ship's Inquisitor he's expected to be proficient at them all. And he finds himself more than proficient; he consistently proves himself to be one of the best to have ever wielded a whip or syringe. During the course of his training, his talent reveals some nasty truths about his subjects, his teachers and his Bond-Involuntaries - convicted criminals whose behaviour is controlled by a limiter in their brain. These Bond-Involuntaries serve as batmen and general dogsbodies for the staff and the trainees, and are entirely subject to the whims of their masters. Matthews is a sufficiently competent writer that even in a training centre where people are tortured to death for practice, the revelations come across as reprehensible.

As the novel progresses, Andrej gets more and more efficient at his job, and in the process finds himself resorting more and more to alcohol to get through the days. His talent means that he's well-looked after by the staff, and Curran, his Bond-Involuntary, finds himself becoming more and more dedicated to his master. It's a bizarre, happy-family situation where the only abnormality is the training courses on how to keep a man alive and screaming for days on end. Matthews' world is a far from pleasant one, where the police can torture to death anyone who is even suspected of a crime. Andrej has been brought up in this system, and though he sees its cruelty he does his job. Matthews has done a wonderful job of showing how within such a system a man can show great kindness even while living the life of a professional torturer.

As first novels go, I've rarely read one better than this. Highly recommended.  
Robert Elliott

*The Sparrow*, Mary Doria Russell, Black Swan, £6.99, tpb

*The Sparrow* is a novel that is five hundred pages long. I spent 490 of those pages wondering why I was reading a novel called *The Sparrow*. Well, okay; not all of those pages; for most of the time I was too gripped by the story to bother with such trivialities, but whenever I picked up the book, that nagging question was there. All became clear at the end, and with palpable relief I realised I wouldn't have to spend the rest of my life wondering.

But that's not the only strange thing about this book (I'll get on to the story real soon, I promise). There are three pages of wonderful quotes about this book, all of which I read after I finished the book. Call me paranoid, but I couldn't escape the feeling that this was a book that the publishers didn't know what to do with; it seems aimed simultaneously at people who read proper books (not science fiction) and at science fiction fans who are. God bless them, simple folk at heart who want nothing more than a few explosions and perhaps the odd Stormtrooper. According to the Seattle Times, "rarely is there a science fiction novel I can recommend whole-heartedly to my literate, SF-challenged friends." Bollocks. The poor lad obviously doesn't get out much; there are easily twenty SF novels published every year that are unquestionably literature of the highest magnitude. My favourite quote, though, is from Booklist, who tells us that "the dense prose in this complex book may at first seem off-putting." Again, I say bollocks. First of all, the prose is neither dense nor complex, and I confess to bemusement as to why the quote was there. Perhaps in the future I can look forward to having a quote on the back of Orson Scott Card's *Hope* ("a great book after the first fifty pages, which are shite" - Robert Elliott) should Black Swan ever decide to publish it here.

But I digress. I've wasted far too much space cavilling about publishers, and have ignored totally the novel itself, with which I can find no fault.

It's a first contact novel, and concerns a trip by a bunch of Jesuits sent to explore a new planet. The story starts off with one of the members of the team back on Earth, horribly injured and the only survivor of what was a disastrous mission. Thence the story jumps backwards and forwards, interviews with our unfortunate survivor interspersed with the story of the trip.

I really don't want to go into the story as even a slight synopsis would fail to do it justice. The aliens, which I first feared to be Star Trek aliens, proved to be nothing of the sort. The explorers, three Jesuits and two of their friends, are excellently handled; not even the most cynical about religion could fail to appreciate what faith can do for someone. This is a gift Russell shares with few writers, particularly in the science fiction/fantasy field; only Orson Scott Card manages to do it consistently, with Katherine Kurtz deserving an honourable mention.

The Sparrow is unquestionably the literature sought by the Seattle Times, and a novel worthy of every prize you can think of from the Booker to the Hugo. Of course, she's got no chance at winning respectable awards, but if she isn't at least nominated for the Campbell there is no justice in the world.

The Sparrow isn't just a great book; it's essential reading. Buy it now.

Robert Elliott

## Television

The Burning Zone, RTE, Tuesdays at about 11:30

Before you ask, yes. It's an X-Files clone. Not in the "We're being invaded by aliens" sort of way, but the behind-the-scenes sort of conspiracy from people who really run the planet.

After the concept became popular in The X-Files, we were blessed with the same sort of thing in such shows as *Nowhere Man*, that thing with Kim in it and now this. There were signs of it even earlier; *Earth 2* managed to get the odd hint in, and *VR5* was on the verge of exploring the idea when it was cancelled. Ironically, that aspect could have saved *VR5*; it sucked right up to the last episode, when it really began to get interesting. Even Chris Carter is emulating his own formula; a conspiracy of serial killers (no more ridiculous than most, I suppose) is after Frank Black now in *Millennium*.

The smallest of glances at the internet or at any one of an increasing number of magazines reveal that most people believe they're being lied to about something; be it aliens, illegal experiments or how Jacobs get the figs into the fig rolls. Whatever the crime, there are hundreds of people willing to believe some illegal cartel -- usually involving the government -- is responsible. Just look at the number of people who are supposed to have killed Princess Diana. I've yet to see anyone suggest that the CIA killed Mother Theresa, but I've no doubt that the theory has been put forward by someone.

Given this level of interest, it's inevitable that television jump on the bandwagon. Science fiction is the natural genre for exploring this theme, as the conspiracy is usually backed up by strange and mysterious powers. Unfortunately, the conspiracy aspect can be brought in simply to appeal to the X-Files audience. When done properly -- *Earth 2*, for example -- it isn't the focus of the episodes but is always in the background. However, it's possible to mishandle the subject by treating it in a similar fashion; pretending it isn't there most of the time, and occasionally devote a whole episode to it. While this is doubtless a more realistic approach, it serves only to annoy casual viewers (such as I). This is the approach taken by the producers of *The Burning Zone*, and it serves as an irritating distraction in what would otherwise be a damn fine series.

The premise is simple enough; a bunch of guys and gals (okay, one gal) work for Atlanta's Center for Disease Control, and they run around America trying to cure people. In these days of rampant genetic experimentation and the knowledge that more and more bacteria are becoming immune to treatment, it's a theme that should have little problem in attracting viewers. If you add the fact that a lot of mad scientists and their gun-laden henchmen could frequently be a bountiful source of arse-kicking, you've got a premise for a series that could prove very promising.

Alas, we learn all too soon the limits of this approach. The programme is still finding its feet, but so far is showing little of its promise. Part of the problem may lie in the fact that the programme's creator, Coleman Luck, is not executive producing; that honour goes to James D. McAdams. Since JMS started being so vocal about his overseeing every aspect of Babylon 5, I've noticed a difference between programmes that have a shared creative aspect and those where the creator takes charge. Nowhere Man is an example of the latter: say what you will about its faults (and they were many), by the end of its only season the viewer was aware of the extent of the scheme, and aware also of how little was known about it. Here, however, we've got a programme created by a guy who had a good idea, and who passed this torch on to an executive producer with ideas of his own. Unfortunately, the two don't work well enough together to be able to produce original ideas; all we've had so far is the loony and/or disease of the weak.

The aspects of the programme that deal with the disease detection and cures are very well handled, and are of a higher standard that we've come to expect from American television. The actors play their parts well, although all the characters are caricatures to some extent. There's the boss who knows more than he lets on, but is willing to go to the wall for his team. Jeffrey Dean Morgan plays the manly man of the piece, and the womanly woman is Tamlyn Tomita, whom we all remember from the B5 pilot. James Black, a big, strong, bald black guy who's handy with his fists or his guns, provides the action.

So far, I don't seem to have said many nice things about the programme, which may give the impression that I don't like it. In truth, I'm not sure that I do, but I still find myself more and more frequently in front of the box on a Tuesday night. The programme has promise, and it's a rare programme that shows its promise immediately. Had American Gothic or Earth 2 been given a second season, I'm sure both programmes would have developed beyond their first seasons, and we'd have been blessed with quality television and the network execs would have had programmes that people would watch. Unfortunately, I don't think we're going to see another year of The Burning Zone; so far it shows no signs of improving, and we're left hoping that the writers have more up their sleeves than they're quite ready to reveal.

If you're stuck in on a Tuesday or you remember to set the video, then by all means give The Burning Zone a chance. If you ignore the two-dimensional nature of the characters, you'll find that some of the science in the programme is well worth watching, and some of the individual episodes are very good. You may find, in spite of yourself, that you're hoping that it will be renewed. I hope so, too; but I don't think it'll happen.

Robert Elliott

## Card Games

Magic the Gathering : Tempest, Wizards of the Coast, £5.95 for 60-card starter, £2.00 for 15-card booster

I must confess; after I saw Phasing introduced in the Mirage expansion set, I thought WotC had lost it. "This is it," thought I, "The end is nigh." It was a stupid idea, irritating to use and seemed to be there only to make play a little more complex. Considering also the vast number of errata and clarifications issued by Wizard Central every couple of months, it looked as if Magic was becoming too top heavy; the constant need to issue new expansions and new rules was finally unbalancing the game.

With Tempest, however, Wizards have gone a long way to redeeming themselves. The set itself - a standalone, so starters are available as well as boosters - draws its base cards from the traditional set, and the new cards are quite nifty. For the most part, anyway.

The new rules are interesting, too. I confess to having my doubts about the viability of "Shadow" cards, but time will tell. A creature with Shadow can only block or be blocked by Shadow creatures, so battle now consists of essentially two separate fights. There are of course cards that give or remove Shadow to creatures to add that extra bit of spice, and until the novelty wears off Shadow creatures are fun to play. Unfortunately, I can't really see it lasting; it'll be popular among people who like having the game over by turn four; as the game wears on, though, I suspect Shadow will prove too volatile to be relied upon.

Another interesting idea is the creature known as the Sliver. There are a whole bunch of these, and each of them endows all other slivers with one ability. The Barbed Sliver (R2), for example, is a 2/2 creature that gives each sliver in play "2: This creature gets +1/+0 until end of turn." The Muscle Sliver (G1) is a 1/1 that gives all slivers +1/+1. With

other abilities such as flying, first strike and extra toughness, Sliver decks could well be a force to be reckoned with. These decks will of course be vulnerable to that damn Fallen Empires card - ruins of something, you know which one I mean - so I suspect no decent Sliver deck will be without a couple of Disenchants.

Licids - creatures that can become creature enchantments, are a nifty idea in theory, but as I don't own any I'll say only that theoretically, they're nifty.

The other notable feature about is its use of a storyline (the story takes up most of the rulebook). This is an attempt by Wizards to give more background to their game, making it a more rounded, fulfilling experience. I've no problem with this - indeed, I enjoyed the story in the rulebook - but I suspect that they're wasting their time, and also forgetting why it is that people play Magic in the first place. I like to be able to whip out my sixty cards, sit down, play for a few minutes and finish. I've never had any interest whatsoever in Urza, Mishra, Serra or any of the others, and I'm unlikely to care much about the crew of the Weatherlight either. Adding this background does no harm - indeed, I'm sure a lot of people will enjoy it - but I worry that it shows WotC may be trying to encroach on the RPG players, a change in focus for the game that will surely spell its death knell.

Overall, Tempest is a fine set, well worth playing either as a neophyte or a cardlord. The box says that it's recommended for experienced users, but I reckon that that's just so they can sell more of Portal; trust me, if you haven't played Magic before, you won't have any more problems learning Tempest than you would any other expansion. The game still has way too many errata and clarifications of which most players aren't aware, but this is being fixed (albeit slowly). They've forestalled the problem with the new cards by explaining what happens when, for example, you're buying back a card and it's countered (buyback, by the way, is a boring feature I'll not mention further). Nor is it a problem for new players, who are unlikely to attack with a Hypnotic Spectre and an Abyssal Spectre, anyway. Which effect does happen first? I never could figure it out.

One final mention for a card I worry about; Endless Scream (BX) is a creature enchantment with the same cost and effect as a Howl from Beyond, but that effect is permanent. Granted, as soon as it's played the creature will become the target for, oh, everything, but I confess to wondering occasionally whether the WotC playtesters haven't slipped up on this one. But one petty cavil shouldn't put you off what is otherwise a well-balanced set (to my humble and untrained eye, anyway).

If you're interested in playing or in starting to play Magic, then Tempest is the set to get. If you're not, then you probably haven't got this far in the review.

Robert Elliott

## Cinema

Contact, directed by Robert Zimeckis, starring Jody Foster

We're in a bit of a watershed of notable films at the moment; we've got Contact, Face/Off and Alien Resurrection all happening around now, and Starship Troopers around the corner. Starship Troopers is also based on a novel but there, I suspect, the similarity with Contact will end.

That's because Contact is a nice film, you see. Granted, the film has its fair share of assholes (so does life, I suppose), but in general it's got an ET kind of feel about it, except that the nice cuddly alien isn't actually present, and we're not even sure if it's nice or cuddly.

Contact is the story of humanity's first contact with an extraterrestrial species; this contact comes in the form of a signal beamed to Earth, a signal which is revealed to contain coverage of the 1936 Olympics, with Adolf Hitler in all his black-and-white glory. This is not, the scientists, tell everyone, something to worry about; after all, the aliens beamed back the first signal from Earth that was powerful enough to reach them. It does, however, give one bunch of loonies an excuse to come out of hiding.

Also contained in the signal are detailed instructions on how to build a device that will allow humanity to travel to our extrasolar chums. But who will enter this device?

Given that we've all seen the ads or read the book, I guess it's no surprise as to who gets the gig. Jody Foster is the focus of the entire film; a long-time worker for SETI before the US government dropped the axe, she nonetheless kept up her work through private funding, and spent many a happy hour at the New Mexico VLA.

Having faced indifference and hostility before her success, she now finds herself in the background as others horn in on her discovery, and as news spreads, more and more loonies come out of the woodwork.

The actual voyage and contact towards the end of the film are handled in a predictable way, but not one that's as facile as I'd feared. However, despite its name, the film isn't about contact itself, rather the trouble humanity faces -- on an individual level and as a species -- in the knowledge that life is indeed out there.

Although the book on which the film is based is inevitably more complex, Zimeckis does an admirable job of keeping the whole tone of the movie faithful to Sagan's original. Vast areas of the book were left out, others trimmed down considerably; only one voyager made the inaugural trip, for example. The commission's notion that the voyager should be a religious person was included, and was handled in a way that won't really offend anyone. I was glad to see this in the film; whereas, for example, Stephen Hawking carefully didn't discount the possibility of a god in his *Brief History of Time*, Sagan had no such compunctions about cheerfully decrying religion as superstition in his ultra-wonderful series, *Cosmos*. This attitude was never going to be reflected in the film, but the problem was at least raised.

Of the casting, there can be little fault. The scientists are just nerdish enough to be convincing, with Foster putting in the fine performance we've come to expect from her. Tom Skeritt manages quite capably to play her slimy boss but the film is all about Foster and she's rarely off-screen.

Overall, I have little to say against the film. As the years have gone by, I've become more and more disenchanted with Zimeckis as a director. This film has gone a long way to restoring my faith, and I urge you all to watch it; not just as a good movie, but as an important one.

*Face/Off*, directed by John Woo, starring John Travolta and Nicholas Cage

Yet another film I've been waiting for for ages. Of course, I've been looking forward to every John Woo movie since *Hard Boiled*, but the anticipation of this film had an extra frisson about it; this, after all, is the movie made the way John Woo wants it made. Studios eager to see his films sanitised for domestic audiences, which may have encouraged a few more people to watch it in the first place but did nothing to encourage repeat viewing, have hamstringed his previous three American efforts. *Face/Off* is a John Woo movie, made in the John Woo style.

Plotwise, it differs from traditional John Woo fare in many respects, but contains enough of his signatures that it's readily recognisable as a Woo film. The bad guy of the piece, Nicholas Cage, is more of an out-and-out evil-doer than we normally see in his films, and John Travolta is likewise a Real Hero. Woo has directed his fair share of nasty characters in the past, but rarely are the truly evil given such a central role.

Travolta is an anti-terrorist fed, and Cage a guy who planted a shitload of nerve gas somewhere in Chicago. In order to find out where it is, Sean Archer (Travolta) must undergo surgery to look like Castor Troy (Cage), and get the information out of his brother, Pollux. Unfortunately, Castor isn't as coma-ridden as the feds thought, and when he forces the surgeons to make him look like Archer, fun and mayhem ensue.

Of course, the science is absolute bollocks. However, Woo was eager to downplay the science fiction element of the film and so attempted a more (if you'll excuse the phrase) down-to-Earth approach, and this was inevitably going to prove somewhat dubious, scientifically. Having said that, this isn't going to worry anyone except people who dislike John Woo movies because the guns never need reloading; it's a petty matter that has no real solution, so we'll live with what we can get.

Broadly speaking, the movie can be divided into two sections; gunfights and everything else. What sets Woo out from other action directors (in the West, anyway) is that the "everything else" bit is never there merely as filler; rather the spectacular action scenes are there to support the movie. If more writers and directors caught on to this little trick, the film-going world would be a much happier place.

This film's "everything else" concerns itself with Archer, the hero; both through his own eyes (as played by Cage) and through the eyes of his family (where Troy, played by Travolta, is making inroads on the wife and kiddy). Both sides are very well handled, although no-one really believes that Mrs. Archer wouldn't notice that she was shagging the wrong guy. While Archer finds himself becoming involved with Troy's family and friends, Troy himself is busy being nice to Archer's daughter. Both make mistakes, but overall both do a fine job of bullshitting the opposition. Of course, now that Troy is the head of a government agency, he can get oodles of his cop buddies in on the search for Archer (or Troy. Whatever). This allows liberal scope for ultraviolence, of which more later.

The two main actors do a damn fine job of swapping personalities for a chunk of the film. At no time is there any confusion as to who's inhabiting which face, and the audience (i.e. me) had no problems following the plot. The Cute Kid (there were two, but don't worry; one dies at the beginning) is left with little to say, and the supporting characters do a capable job of revolving around our two main protagonists. The bad guys are perhaps a little campier than one would expect, but this is hardly a major crime and adds to the sense of dislocation felt by Archer, the fed in a strange land.

Then, of course, there are the guns. Truly, John Woo has no equal in the genre of Heroic Bloodshed. Anyone who's seen *The Killer*, *A Better Tomorrow* or *Hard Boiled* will know what to expect, and in this film Woo isn't holding back. Unfortunately, the same can't really be said for his stunt crew, which makes a noble effort but sadly isn't up to the task. While the guns are blazing and people are dying there is little to complain about, but the familiar hand-to-hand kung fu shit-kicking is absent. One or two stuntmen couldn't even die convincingly. Whereas it would be unfair to expect

someone of the calibre of Chow Yun Fat or Ti Lung to appear in the film, I had hoped that there would be some American fighters showcased. Sadly, this was not to be.

Of course, none of this matters if you haven't watched his Hong Kong films. If you're looking for a comparison to *Hard Target*, *Violent Tradition* or *Broken Arrow*, then there's no question that this film is superior in almost every respect. To look at it beside Cage's last two actioners, *The Rock* and *Conair*, is to see a film that is at least as interesting as, and much more action-filled, than *The Rock*. An enema would, I suspect, prove more interesting than watching *Conair*, so further comparison is unnecessary.

I would like to know, though, what kind of mother would name her sons Castor and Pollux.

If you want to watch a really cool action film with lots of gunfights, interesting characters and liberal amounts of plot exposition that is actually worth watching, then *Face/Off* is the film for you. As I said, I was a little disappointed by some aspects of the film, but even the most hardened John-Woo-should-have-stayed-in-Hong-Kong fanatic would have to concede that *Face/Off* is eminently watchable, and highly recommended.

*Alien Resurrection*, written by Joss Whedon, directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet, starring Ripley and Wynona Ryder

I've got to confess, I was worried about this film on the way into the Savoy. It was in good creative hands to be sure, but after the appalling third installment, I couldn't help but feel a little trepidant. I sat down, and watched a rather nifty title sequence that gives a major hint as to the nature of the film.

First of all, Ripley's alive. Actually, she's a clone, which was one of the main reasons for my pre-viewing unease. Clones are a staple of science fiction movies, and are invariably mishandled. Could the writers come up with a plausible reason for having an adult Ripley with memories intact? Well, sort of. But they did make the effort, which is the main thing.

Second of all, seeing as she's a clone and she had an alien queen in her head when the DNA sample was taken, she's a hybrid. You know, super strong, acid for blood...

But who are the cloners in question, I hear you ask. I suppose you were expecting Weyland-Yutani, and so was I. But no, apparently Ripley worked for a completely different Company, and anyway this time it's the United Something Army, performing nasty hybrid experiments two hundred years after her death.

And then -- sorry to have to spoil this for you -- the aliens get loose and start killing people. And as the army abandoned their big ol' ship to the cold and friendless night, it's up to the rag-tag crew of a transport vessel who are left behind to kick arse.

First of all, let me get my cavils out of the way. They are few in number, and I'll be a happier person for having got them off my chest. Overall, the film adhered to the laws of physics pretty well; as I said I was impressed with their attempted 'clone' explanation. But truly, we don't need two *Alien* movies that climax with a really shitty and wholly implausible explosive decompression. The whole army abandonment thing was mishandled, too; two minutes after our drooling chums are loose, the brave army are all in the lifepods. Then the ship's computer realises there's an emergency, and heads back to Earth. While this leaves our heroes with a limited and tension-filled amount of time in which to resolve the crisis, it's rather grating when you realise the sloppiness with which the scene has been set. Fortunately, our guys all have their weapons, despite being searched when they first entered the army ship.

But let us forget these trifles. Okay, not trifles, but the movie was sufficiently cool that they're forgivable. It's easy to forgive when you've been treated to a movie that looks as good as this. Jeunet's style will be familiar to those who've seen his French movies; indeed, his preference for darker scenes will now be familiar to many that haven't. He's far more capable of using sparse lighting than many who aspire (let's pick a name totally at random; er, David Fincher). As well as the look, Jeunet does a good job of keeping the film tight; the pre-alien-breaking-out bit isn't at all tedious, and the film fairly whizzes along, yet still manages to give enough screen time to each of the players their own character. Only one character -- the inevitable Carter Burke clone (for want of a better word) -- comes across as being there solely because the film needs someone like him. Jeunet also kept the "Jones jumping out of the locker" scenes to a minimum; two, I think.

Of course, not all the credit for this film can go to the director. Joss Whedon did a damn fine job. The script has all the humour that was missing from the third movie, as well as... actually, it improved on *Alien3* in every respect. Granted, that's hardly a difficult job, but given the absolutely ridiculous material on which they had to follow up, they did excellent work; you find yourself leaving the cinema almost grateful to *Alien3* for providing the background for this film.

Ooh, I nearly forgot the actors. Wynona and her pals (including a couple of Jeunet & Caro regulars) are bad-ass freighter crew, always ready to rumble yet not all entirely in love with one another. When left alone with a horde of aliens and only their wits and weapons to save them they're efficient, but are quite willing to leave behind anyone who gets into trouble. Heartless bastards to a man. Except one crew member, of course; I'll leave it as an exercise to the

reader to guess which one, and why. All of the characters are believable, with Ron Perlman in particular acting with gusto but without excess. Oh, and Brad Dourif played a nutter. He performed as well as you'd expect from someone who's had as much practice as he's had.

But I neglected to mention Ripley. No longer the waking-up-with-nightmares, fights-when-she-has-to sissy of previous films, this is a woman who's damn-near invincible, and who doesn't give a fuck. This woman is astonishing. Sporting a pitch-black sense of humour and the coolest of moves... words fail me. She's amazing, and I'm in love.

To sum up, then. Thematically, the film is a continuation of the James Cameron film rather than the original, and the story goes more into the nastiness of The Company and humans in general than was done in previous movies. This ground has been well-trodden in Dark Horse's comic spin-offs, but is deserving of treatment on the big screen.

Comparing it with the first film is as ridiculous as were comparisons between Alien and Aliens, and there was hardly a film made that doesn't come off well when compared to Alien3. Our only valid comparison, therefore, is with what looks like being James Cameron's swan song; unfortunate, really, because Aliens is unlikely to ever have peers. This film comes close, and there's been no actioner this year that beats it.

Robert Elliott

## Comics

Since Alex Ross first illustrated Marvels, he's been very much in demand for high-quality stories that transcend traditional superhero fare. His latest project is US, written by Steve Darnall and concerning an old man who may or may not be Uncle Sam. He appears to be a beggar, and all around him he sees the destruction of his country. He is also subjected to periodic flashbacks to moments in American history, to some of the more shameful events that shaped the country. Is he or isn't he? We'll have to wait for the second and final issue to find out.

Alex Ross' artwork is of course superlative, and a pleasure to behold. Of Steve Darnall I know nothing, but based on this offering I'd say we'll hear from him again. The pacing of the story is somewhat off, though; and overall we get the feeling that he's just here to give us a litany of American atrocities throughout its two-hundred year history. The framing story, though well told, appears incidental.

Because the American government purports to worship the freedom of the press, American misdeeds are well-documented outside the mainstream media, both in America and internationally. Nonetheless, this is the first example I can think of of a mainstream company - especially one fronting a corporation like Time/Warner - publishing a comic like this. We're all sick of being told that 'comics are growing up at last,' and this is a sign that that is indeed the case. It's a flawed comic, but one that's definitely worthy of consideration.

Also from Vertigo is Winter's Edge, a 96-page prestige format (that's comics talk for 'expensive') book that contains small tales from most of the Vertigo creative staff. There's a framing sequence that's excellently produced by Seagle and Kristainsen based in their House of Secrets, and all of the stories prove entertaining. A pleasant surprise was the inclusion of Steve Gerber, consistently one of the finest - and most underused - writers in comics for the last fifteen years. I hope that his Nevada heralds a new series. The other new addition is The Minx, from Pete Milligan and Sean Philips. This was my least favourite of the stories, and I don't think I'll be rushing out to buy the comic when it appears next year. All the others impressed me greatly, though; even The Invisibles which I normally dislike intensely.

The highlights of the collection are the aforementioned Nevada and an Endless tale featuring desire. John Bolton's artwork is truly wonderful, and when combined with Gaiman's writing we're given a truly superlative story.

If you haven't picked up many of the Vertigo titles, then you could do far worse than to pick up this collection. As an introduction it's great, and you may find yourself looking at one or two titles you'd previously ignored. For my part, I'll definitely be giving Sandman Mystery Theatre a look.

This is the ubiquitous 'something for everyone' collection, but this one actually delivers. At £6.95 it's not cheap, but it's definitely worth the pennies.

Finally, an honorary mention goes to Shit the Dog, the latest offering from Grant, Wagner and Bisley. Our eponymous hero is well named, for he is a merry dumper, capable of giving us what's described on the front cover as "faecal fun for mature readers." As if we needed the warning. A typical issue (and we've had two so far) consists of a number of strips (seventeen in issue one) which are not unlike Fred Basset, albeit with more colour, humour and poo. These strips take up one side of a humungous poster, the reverse of which is, well a poster. And not a pleasant one either.

So should you spend £1.95 on this piece of Shit? I don't see why not. No-one really finds stuff like this offensive unless they can get on television, and while it'll definitely appeal more to those of us whose sense of humour has a certain scatological bent, I'd say most people will manage a guffaw or two.