

# matrix

The news magazine of the British Science Fiction Association

September/October 2004 No. 169

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# TITANIC

Stephen Baxter on Huygens' visit to the Solar System's most enigmatic moon

## Jane Johnson

Claire Weaver interviews an author with many roles

## Paul Brazier

Martin Sketchley finds out about his plans for *Quercus*

## Gary Fry

Fusing Horizons editor on the ups and downs of small press publishing

## Jay Caselberg

Rages against science fiction's ingrained tropism

## Plus

News, reviews, Susanna Clarke on *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* and much more...



## The New Weird

Claire Weaver works out what it means while China Miéville defends it from its critics

# matrix

## DEADLINES

If you wish to contribute to future issues of Matrix, the deadlines are:  
matrix 170 (Nov/Dec 2004) copy deadline: 11 October 2004  
matrix 171 (Jan/Feb 2005) copy deadline: 29 November 2004

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## Welcome Write for Matrix

You may have noticed that along with the recent addition of a shiny cover and new regular features, this latest issue of Matrix is also more substantial, weighing in with four extra pages of SF news, reviews and opinion. The reason for this increase is simple: we think we can fill the space.

Matrix may have a regular team of contributors (both pros and fans), but that doesn't mean we aren't always looking for more. Those extra pages have been added specifically with new contributors in mind.

We're looking to commission features on themes that aren't already being covered in the magazine, or new spins on ideas that we've already touched on but are worth a return visit.

Alternatively if writing for Matrix appeals but you don't have a burning idea right now, we have a large stockpile of possible concepts and interesting-sounding titles that we're happy to share.

You can contact me at: [matrix\\_editors@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:matrix_editors@yahoo.co.uk)

Or to review for our media section, please contact Media

Editor Martin McGrath at: [martingrath@ntlworld.com](mailto:martingrath@ntlworld.com)

I look forward to reading you

**Tom Hunter**

## The news magazine of the British Science Fiction Association

### matrix

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**BSFA**

# Matrix goes all weird

Tom Hunter reckons there's something to this New Weird malarky.

**R**eturn of the New Weird: marketing ploy or literary Jabel? Critical folly, inspired synchronicity, a new genre movement on the loose or all the fault of that damned Miéville fella? Whatever the angle, mutant strains of the New Weird meme are still bubbling their way through genre and proving surprisingly resistant to even the toughest regime of critical revisionism.

For some the New Weird is little more than fantasy unpacking cyberpunk or sf rediscovering baroque, but even this oversimplification still admits that something is afoot in genre and the fact that no one has yet been able to pin (or perhaps, given its robustness, weld) it down and

classify it back into acceptable company may be the single strongest factor in ensuring its longevity.

News of the New Weird has been travelling fast. So much so that its come back full circle to the news pages of *Matrix* once more, not to report on its coinage this time but rather to explore the matter of its seemingly limitless appetite for controversy. Even within



Miéville: new weird

the relative safety of one of the BSFA's own monthly events you don't have to wait long before the big NW rears its misshapen head and bares its teeth for another confrontation.

The big question is are you in or are you out? The New Weird

needs you! And if you don't think you've signed up yet, it's only a matter of time before your bookshelf does it for you. Of course you don't want to choose the wrong side, do you now? But then again maybe you don't want to miss out on reading some of the finest UK fiction in many a year, whatever the genre?

It's a tough choice, and here at *Matrix* we know that when the going gets tough, the tough go to China, so that's exactly what we did. You can read Claire Weaver's exclusive interview with Mr Miéville starting on page 20 of this issue. Just remember that New Weird isn't just something that's happening to genre, it's the something you get when genre starts happening to us.

## BFS Award Nominees Announced

**T**he "long list" for the British Fantasy Award has been announced and by far the most interesting category to watch this year is clearly the Best Anthology list.

There are two books edited by Ellen Datlow: *The Dark: New Ghost Stories*, published by Tor, and *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror: Sixteenth Annual Collection* with co-editor Terri Windling. Datlow is renowned for producing high-quality collections that, more often than not, come out on top in awards.

There's also *The Thackery T. Lambshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric & Discredited Diseases*, a collection of fictional diseases penned by some of genre's best authors: Steve Aylett, Neil Gaiman, Jeffrey Ford and Alan Moore to name but a few (and there are sixty-five). Edited by Jeff VanderMeer and Mark Roberts, *The Guide* is also up for the World Fantasy and Hugo Awards.

Andy Cox of *The Third Alternative* and *Interzone* has been nominated with *Crimewave 7: The Last Sunset*; Stephen Jones has two books: *By Moonlight Only* and *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror: Volume Fourteen*. There's also Joel Lane with *Beneath the Ground*; L.H. Maynard & M.P.N. Sims with *Darkness Rising 7: Screaming in Colours*; Tina Rath with *Conventional Vampires*; Andy W. Robertson with *William Hope Hodgson's Night Lands, Volume I: Eternal Love* and Robert Silverberg's *Legends II*.

In the Best Novel list there are twenty-seven titles, including works from Liz Williams, Jude Fisher (interviewed on page 22 of this issue of *Matrix*), Christopher Fowler and Richard Morgan.

For information: [www.britishtantasyociety.org.uk](http://www.britishtantasyociety.org.uk) or [www.worldfantasy2004.org/wfaawards.html](http://www.worldfantasy2004.org/wfaawards.html)



## Comic artists get new protectors

**T**he Comic Book Legal Defense Fund elected new officers at its Board of Directors meeting at July's Comic-Con International.

CBLDF founder and President Denis Kitchen retired from the Board, replaced by Chris Staros, publisher of *Top Shelf Publications*. Kitchen's retirement marks the end of an era for the Fund, which he originally founded 18 years ago.

"The challenges facing comics are different from when I founded the Fund," he said. "In the eighties, comics were still fighting for respectability and it was perhaps easier for them to be stigmatised as kids stuff. Two decades later, comics have attained a certain respectability, but are facing a



new set of challenges. I think it's fitting that the generation facing those challenges, led by Chris Staros, a publisher after my own heart, should be the ones standing up to them."

Milton Gripp was elected as the organisations new Treasurer, succeeding Frank Mangiaracina. Peter David, John Davis, Neil Gaiman, Frank Mangiaracina, Greg Ketter and Louise Nemschoff were also re-elected to serve another term on the Board of Directors.

## NEWSBITS

## New Alternative

## Out of Orbit

Gillian Rooke, mistress of the BSFA's Orbiter postal SF writing workshops, is no longer contactable via email, after ongoing troubles. She can still be contacted via post (see page 2 for all BSFA contact details) and points out that any potential new members considering joining should not be discouraged by the lack of electronic communication as the ability to post a letter is vital to taking part.

## BBC launch comic site

Following the recent launch of their Cult Vampires site, the BBC have launched a new mini site featuring the best of 2000AD and British comics. The site features new strips, classic reprints, interviews, features and the chance to listen to some of Big Finish's *Judge Dredd* audio productions. Surf to [www.bbc.co.uk/cult/comics/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/cult/comics/) or feel the wrath of the judges.

## Simon's Brilliant

Focus editor Simon Morden celebrated the publication of his story collection *Brilliant Things* at the Greenbelt Arts Festival this August. The collection includes the Stoker-nominated and Year's Best Fantasy and Horror highly commended story "Hollow" and is published by Subway. [www.subway-writers.org.uk](http://www.subway-writers.org.uk)

## Nantes celebrates Verne's centenary

The 5th Utopiales International Science Fiction Festival of Nantes opens on 3 November 2004. SF authors including Walter Jon Williams, Paul di Filippo, Robert Holdstock, K.W. Jeter, Christopher Priest and Michael Moorcock will explore the theme of utopia and open the festivities related to the Jules Verne's 2005 centenary.

## And finally...

Matrix is delighted to recommend issue six of *Jupiter SF* and the story "Falling" by our own prolific reviewer and Production Editor, Martin McGrath. Perhaps the genre publishing event of the year so far...or not. For subscription details and online downloads go to [www.jupiterstf.co.uk](http://www.jupiterstf.co.uk)

Andy Cox started a heated debate about the future of *The Third Alternative* on the TTA Press message boards when he announced plans to change the focus of the magazine and, perhaps, its name sometime after the 40th issue, due later this year.

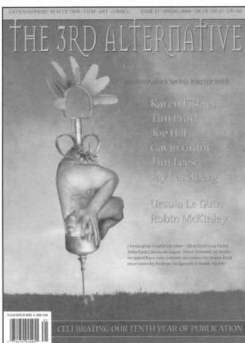
Citing the takeover of *Interzone* as a major factor Cox said that the future direction of TTA will be further way from its science fiction stablemate, though he promised "that the fiction will still be exactly of the type you started to read TTA for in the first place. I promise you - no compromise of principles or standards will take place."

It was the proposed name change that stirred up most controversy, with the majority of respondents (over 500 messages in the discussion and rising at the time of writing) arguing for the retention of the existing title.

However Cox has stuck to his guns, arguing that *The Third Alternative* has been difficult to market, falling between the cracks that divide the horror

and science fiction genres and leaving readers (and some *Best of...* editors) confused. "With the acquisition of *Interzone*", Cox added, "it seems logical to publish the SF material under that umbrella rather than have TTA competing with *Interzone* for stories and readers. This will mean TTA moving more to the Horror/Dark Fantasy end of the spectrum in what it publishes, though without abandoning the values that have made it so successful or becoming a clone of already established magazines like *Weird Tales*." The magazine's current name did not adequately reflect this new identity, Cox said.

Favourites amongst the new titles so far suggested include



*Black Static, Undertow and Shadow Aspect.*

To read the discussion and contribute (there may be a prize for the winning suggestion), at the TTA message boards [www.ttapress.com](http://www.ttapress.com).

## Epic existence



The name is Chadbourne, Mark Chadbourne

Author Mark Chadbourne's bio reads like James Bond's CV - he's fired bazookas in the Arctic, been threatened by gangsters and shot in the Californian desert. And now he's just signed a deal for a three-book sequence with publishers Victor Gollancz which will involve so much research the novels won't begin publication until late summer 2006. If his writing is even half as exciting as his life, the trilogy promises to be awesome.

A sword-and-sorcery style epic, the trilogy *The View Across Existence* will be "a breathtaking, surreal vision of twisting realities and altered perceptions, covering more than 2,000 years, five mythologies and multiple dimensions."

More information at [www.markchadbourne.com](http://www.markchadbourne.com)

## Colours raised on White Award

With less than a year to go before Interaction, the 2005 World Science Fiction Convention, the organisers of the James White Award are now taking entries.

Now in its fifth year, the James White Award is an international short story competition that commemorates one of Ireland's best-loved science fiction writers.

The competition is open to non-professional writers from around the world who may submit up to four original science fiction or fantasy short stories between 2000 and 4000 words each. The winning story will be selected by an international panel of judges and published in *Interzone* magazine. The author will also receive a trophy and a cash prize.

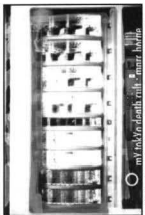
For full details visit: [www.jameswhiteaward.com](http://www.jameswhiteaward.com)



James White: remembered

© Peter Fleckner

# Free books more than a novelty?



Set somewhere between *Fight Club* and *Number 9 Dream* sits Marc Horne's novel *My Tokyo Death Cult*. But Horne's novel is different as it is part of a growing trend for authors: offering free downloads of their fiction or publishing direct on to the web or even via text message.

Jim Munroe is posting his new novel *An Opening Act of Unspeakable Evil*, as blog entries over the next 88 days. The book is being posted online at the faux blog [roommatefromhell.com](http://roommatefromhell.com) as the journal of a girl called Kate who discovers that her roommate is a demoness.

Meanwhile Chinese author Qian

Fuchang has made his latest book available by text message. *Outside The Fortress Besieged* has been cut down to 4,200 characters and will be distributed as 60 messages of 70 characters each.

Cory Doctorow, who has made his work available for free download, even when full-price printed versions are on sale, said: "More people will read more words off more screens and fewer words off fewer pages and when those two lines cross, ebooks are gonna have to be the way that writers earn their keep, not the way that they promote the dead-tree editions."

## Amazon huffs over puff

Online bookseller Amazon is clamping down on anonymous puff reviews posted on its websites by publishers, agents and even the authors themselves.

While publishing house backstabbing and the trade in positive blurbs is hardly new, a recent technical fault exposed the extent of the practise by revealing the identity of dozens of supposedly anonymous reviewers; many of whom turned out to be enthusiastic authors extending their gift for fiction to themselves.

The quality of online reviewing may stay as inconsistent, tongue-in-cheek and fannish as ever, but anyone with the urge to offer up their opinions to the online world will now have to provide credit card details as proof of identity before posting a comment. While the comments themselves can still appear under pen names, posters will no longer be able to simply describe themselves as 'A Reader.' Phillip Pullman is amongst the list of prominent authors who have already complained about the content of anonymously posted reviews which are prominently displayed on the site and considered a significant factor in securing sales.

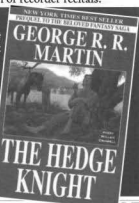
## Novels with graphic design

We've all seen countless novels adapted for the silver screen, but now US company Dabel Brothers Production are in the process of signing on top US authors and releasing graphic novel versions of their stories.

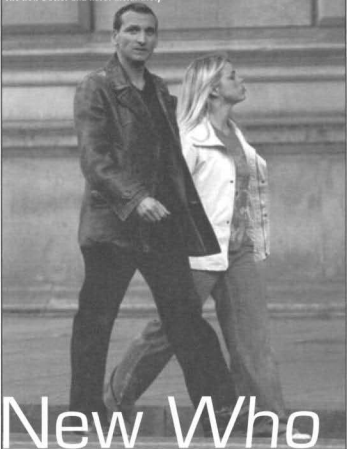
George RR Martin was the first author to get involved: *The Hedge Knight* graphic novel is a version of the novella that takes place before *A Song of Ice and Fire*, featuring artwork by Mike S Miller (*X-Man*, *Justice League*

*of America* and many more).

Dabel has plans to include UK authors eventually but there are no names signed yet. Their current line-up for 2004 is looking good, with Robert Silverberg's *The Seventh Shrine*, Tad Williams's *The Burning Man*, and Robert Jordan's *A New Spring*. Future Raymond E Feist adaptations are also planned.



The new Doctor and Rose: melancholy



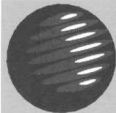
## New Who

The BBC has announced that the Daleks have been saved. The BBC has come to an agreement with the Terry Nation estate over the use of Daleks in the new *Doctor Who* series. The Daleks join Christopher Eccleston as Doctor Who and Billie Piper as Rose Tyler, the Doctor's companion for a new 13 part series which is currently filming in Cardiff and is due for screening in 2005. The announcement that the Daleks would not feature in the new series sparked a furious protest by fans which ended with this announcement. Antony Wainer of the Doctor Who Appreciation Society says that fans are delighted and added "Not having Daleks is like not

having strawberries and cream at Wimbledon. They're absolutely synonymous - you can't have one without the other."

Meanwhile the first pictures of the new Doctor and his companion Rose have leaked into the press. Eccleston's leather-jacketed Doctor is looking considerably tougher than ever before, reflecting the actor's desire to move away from the Doctor's "foppish side."

Eccleston told *Doctor Who Magazine* that he was most influenced by Patrick Troughton's Doctor, which was "compelling and a little bit frightening" and that he intended to concentrate more on the role's 'melancholy side.' Presumably without the return of recorder recitals.

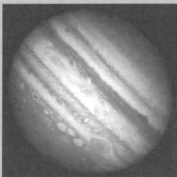


RODERICK GLADWISH'S WORLD OF  
**SCIENCE**

## Gas giants under pressure

Scientists at the Los Alamos National Laboratories, USA, have been improving the modelling of how the solar system's two largest gas giants formed. By using the results from experiments in which hydrogen was shocked to pressures a million times the pressure on Earth and close to those found inside the two planets they are trying to solve a fundamental mystery.

Jupiter and Saturn appear to have formed differently. In Saturn elements such as iron, silicon, carbon, nitrogen and oxygen are concentrated in its core. In Jupiter these elements are diffused throughout the planet. Why this is the case has yet to be discovered. However, these models will guide measurements to be taken by Cassini, now at Saturn, and future spacecraft to Jupiter. Source: Los Alamos National Laboratory



### Body popping

Microsoft has been granted a U.S. patent to transmit power and data using the human body. The company has no particular product in mind but their ideas are broad, covering wearable devices both on humans and animals. IBM demonstrated that data can be transmitted through the human body as far back as 1996, so how were Microsoft allowed to get the patent? Source: **The Guardian**

### Dirty clean-up

In answer to threats of a 'dirty' nuclear bomb the American Department of Homeland Security is funding a number of solutions to the aftermath. After dealing with the victims the contaminated region has to be cleaned. Brick and concrete are hard to clean because the radioactive particles get trapped in their porous structure. Current practice is to demolish the contaminated buildings, a victory for the terrorists.

The Argonne National Laboratory has developed an automatic system based on nanoparticles and super-absorbent gel. Spray washers apply a wetting agent to cause the radioactive particles to float in the pores. Then the gel draws

out the contamination and the engineered nanoparticles that sit in the gel fix it. Finally the gel is vacuumed and recycled, leaving only a small amount of radioactive waste.

Source: **Argonne National Laboratory**

### Sense of tumour

A new study at the Pacific Northwest Research Institute, Seattle, is suggesting that the propensity for cancer to propagate is down to the DNA structure of the pre-cancerous cells. It had been thought that any cancerous tumour can become metastatic, that is develop to a stage where cells break away from the primary site to create new tumours. Evidence from this research is showing a DNA characteristic in apparently normal cells proving a potential tool for early detection of fatal cancers, the key to beating the illness.

Source: **Pacific Northwest Research Institute**

### Leaky holes

You can't trust anything these days, even black holes. Stephen Hawking has admitted that he was wrong about black holes. He thought they kept everything they sucked in, but now it appears they leak, typically. Source: **Institute of Physics**



### Anthony

Nanson writes: I sympathise with Neal Asher's general irritation (*Matrix* 167) with

the misuse of scientific language in marketing. Not only language, but also the 'science' imagery deployed in ads for shampoo, detergent, and so on. However, the main target of his 'Rage against' is the labelling of 'organic' food – and implicitly the preference for eating such food. This is quite a different issue, though one might wonder what relevance it has to science fiction. In fact it has important relevance.

Neal's argument hinges upon the definitions of A-level chemistry: 'organic' refers to compounds based on carbon; other compounds are 'inorganic'. Ergo all food is organic. However, words develop new meanings.

When I was a kid a 'mobile' was a thing that hung from the dentist's ceiling. Today it's also a kind of phone; a convenient shortening of 'mobile phone'. The designation of some food as 'organic' originated as a shorthand way of distinguishing food grown using (organic) manure as fertiliser from food grown using manufactured nitrate fertiliser, an inorganic compound. As industrialized agriculture has widened its armoury of manufactured fertilisers and pesticides (many of which are, in the chemistry sense, 'organic' compounds), so the term 'organic', in its everyday sense, has come to refer to food grown without the use of such products of the chemical industry. The scientific and everyday meanings of 'organic' are different. When people choose organic food, they understand the word 'organic' in its modern everyday sense, not as scientific jargon.

Okay, maybe Neal is just kidding around, but it's hard not to detect a hostility towards the whole idea of organic food, not just the label. The more that I've learnt about the food industry, the more I feel inclined to go organic myself. The modern green movement started in the 1960s with Rachel

### Send letters and comments

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Carson's book *Silent Spring*, which spelt out the devastation that overuse of pesticides had inflicted upon wildlife in the

United States and the health risks, especially of cancer, arising from the contamination of food with these substances.

Graham Harvey's 1997 book *The Killing of the Countryside* explains how the industrialisation of British agriculture since the 1940s has progressively destroyed the ecology of lowland Britain and given the British the most unhealthy diet in Western Europe. Hence two good reasons to eat organic food: to avoid feeding yourself carcinogenic poisons, and to stimulate demand for sustainable, organic farming methods that facilitate the coexistence of food production with wildlife.

Which is where science fiction comes in. Harvey is not talking about going back to the dark ages. He's talking about choosing between possible futures. The same thing that serious science fiction does.

For land use in Britain there's a dystopian pole of possible futures, in which industrialization progresses even further till every last acre is either built up or committed to soil-eroding monoculture, and a utopian pole, which sees a widespread return to organic mixed farming based on a recognition that humans are part of an ecosystem and so our food is better provided through a biological rather than an industrial process. In the latter case it might cease to be necessary to distinguish any food as 'organic'.

**Tom Hunter responds:** Thanks for your letter Anthony. You seem to have hit on a particular theme of this issue. Language and its relative uses will always be a source of inspiration or frustration to everyone in the SF genre, never more so than now, and not even our authors themselves are exempt from the power of words: whether you're Jay Caselberg railing against the same old genre tropes or China Miéville picking a tangled path between quality new writing

Continued on page 28

# Swinging times



Martin McGrath set high standards for *Spider-Man 2*, but Sam Raimi's sequel surpasses them all

**W**hen I was about four I inherited a box of comics from an older cousin. There were copies of *The Beano* and *Dandy* and others, soon discarded, but there was also a handful of issues of *Spider-Man Weekly*. Thirty years later I own perhaps twenty thousand comics and about a quarter feature Marvel's wallcrawler.

So, while I'm not an obsessive fan (no, really!) it is fair to say that I set higher standards for *Spider-Man 2* than for other summer blockbusters.

The first *Spider-Man* film, though it contains much that is excellent, was ultimately a disappointment. The Green Goblin was too outré a villain to take seriously on the big screen, the CGI special effects failed to convince and the story compressed too much into too little space.

Many of these faults have been addressed in *Spider-Man 2* and the result is the most successful, entertaining and serious comic book adaptation yet attempted.

There are still nits to pick, of course. The reality of the CGI special effects still falls apart at crucial moments, Mary Jane (Dunst) is still too simpering and Peter's "secret" identity is revealed too often, but these quibbles aside, *Spider-Man 2* is a triumph.

Most important for the success of the film is not the plot involving Spider-Man fighting Doctor Octopus (though Molina in superb and far more successful that most of Doc Ock's comic book incarnations) but the arc that Peter

Parker (Maguire) follows through the film. Director Raimi has a long history of torturing his heroes but even Ash from his *Evil Dead* films would beg for mercy if he had to suffer what Peter goes through here.

In the first hour Peter is on the verge of getting thrown out of university, he loses his job as a put-upon pizza delivery boy, he can't pay the rent for the slum in which he is forced to live and discovers that his sainted Aunt May (Harris) is facing losing her house because she cannot keep up the mortgage repayments. And then there's J. Jonah Jameson (Simmons – the buzz-cut editor incarnated) doing his best to humiliate him at every opportunity – both as Peter and as his masked alter-ego. As if all that wasn't enough, his best friend hates him and the woman he loves is marrying someone else.

What is the cause of all Peter's misery? *Spider-Man*, of course.

So, when his superpowers begin to fade, Peter is relieved to cast aside his masked identity and, just for a moment, it appears that he can live a normal life. A weight is lifted and Peter seems free, happy and content – all presented in a hilariously cheesy montage.

It can't last, of course. Peter Parker isn't a hero because of his powers. In *Spider-Man 2* Peter sets aside his guilt over the death of his Uncle Ben, confessing to his aunt and facing up to the old man in a dream sequence. He's not like Batman, driven by a desire for revenge against the sort of people who killed his family. He isn't Superman, some alien

god shepherding the human race despite their tendency for self-destruction. Nor is he motivated by patriotism, like Captain America, or an adventurous spirit, like *The Fantastic Four*. Yet, when he hears of a child trapped in a burning building, he rushes in to save it – powers or not.

So, as all good actors would ask: what is his motivation? This is the question that dominates this film.

Aunt May delivers a pep talk about how people need heroes to look up to, but the key seems to come when she says that she believes there is a hero inside everyone of us – something reinforced by Raimi when after *Spider-Man* risks his life to save a trainload of New Yorkers they, in turn, stand up against Doctor Octopus (albeit ineffectively) to protect their hero. They carry him on their shoulders. They recognise him as one of their own.

That is what was unique about Stan Lee's *Spider-Man*, what has endured for more than forty years and what lifts *Spider-Man 2* above the ordinary summer action movie. Peter Parker is a loser and knows first-hand what it is to be one of life's underdogs. In the Marvel universe he isn't the strongest or the wisest or the best at anything, he's just someone doing what he can to make the world a better place. That he is asked to sacrifice more than the ordinary man in the street, he knows, is because those who have been given the ability and power to do more have a responsibility to their fellow man. Before his transformation into

Doctor Octopus even Otto Octavius tells Parker "intelligence is not a privilege, it's a gift and we use it to help mankind".

Peter Parker knows it is the special duty of the strong to give a helping hand to the weak. Some commentators have tried to read into Raimi's film a critique of Bush's America in the aftermath of 9/11 and New York, but as Raimi would be the first to concede, *Spider-Man 2*'s moral message draws entirely from the well dug by Stan Lee forty years ago. Lee's liberal, working class heroes – Parker, Ben Grimm, Bruce Banner, Matt Murdock – embody a sense of decency and common courage that has its roots in the generation that fought the Second World War (during which Lee wrote army training films in a unit with the likes of Frank Capra, William Saroyan and Charles Addams amongst others).

If Lee's mantra that "with great power comes great responsibility" suddenly sounds like a sharply edged critique of the actions of Western governments perhaps it is only an indication of how far short we have fallen from the ideals set in those distant days.

## Spider-Man 2

Director: Sam Raimi  
Screenplay: Alvin Sargent  
Cinematographer: Bill Pope  
Starring: Tobey Maguire, Kirsten Dunst, James Franco, Alfred Molina, Rosemary Harris, JK Simmons, Donna Murphy, Daniel Gillies  
127 minutes

# Code-breaking



Creepy sex and no chemistry. **Martin McGrath** on *Code 46*.

British science fiction movies are rare and serious British sf is rarer still, so it seems churlish to be critical of *Code 46*. Director Winterbottom (*24 Hour Party People*) has made a noble stab at a film that creates a brave new world in the mould of, say, *Blade Runner* or *Gattaca* on a budget that probably wouldn't pay for a single television episode of a *Star Trek* franchise.

There are many positives in *Code 46*. The cityscapes and desert landscapes are beautifully filmed and the opening third of the movie, in which William (Robbins) – a sort of psychic-for-hire – is sent to find an employee who is faking insurance papers and selling them on the black market is convincing, interesting and smart. And, if nothing else, *Code 46* offers the entirely unexpected (but somewhat bewildering) opportunity to see Mick Jones belt out one of his classic Clash tracks.

I like the world that Winterbottom and writer Cottrell Boyce have sketched out, though at times it feels like they've cut up a copy of Naomi Klein's *No Logo* and chucked the passages together at random. Big

corporations rule the planet, the environment has been destroyed, everyone is genetically screened and everything you do requires insurance. Fail the genetic tests and you cannot get insured. Without insurance you can't travel, you can't get a job and you can't even enter the cities – condemning the unfortunate masses to exile in favelas in the desert.

As William wanders through this glass and steel future world we get a genuine sense of dislocation and, by allying the visuals with a series of trippy tunes, Winterbottom brings the audience into his desiccated, controlled world in a most effective way.

*Code 46* begins strongly, but things start to unravel with the arrival of Maria (Morton) as the employee selling faked insurance papers. The first problem is the incredible lack of chemistry between Robbins and Morton, one of the least convincing screen couplings in the history of cinema. Morton has been entirely miscast – she is too laid back and dopey to be convincing as some sort of rebel against the system and, though the plot goes to some lengths to explain William's overwhelming attraction for Maria, it never materialises on screen, cutting the heart from the

whole project – especially since they appear in almost every scene.

The two protagonists do, however, participate in a very creepy love scene. It is impossible to explain why without spoiling a key plot point, but suffice it to say that I squirmed through the scene in which William chains Maria to the bed.

The biggest problems with *Code 46* stem from the plot, which is stretched too thin over the film's (surprisingly brief) running time and which falls apart completely in the conclusion – leaving the audience feeling that everyone involved just got bored and walked away. It is one of the most infuriating endings I've ever seen.

Somewhat contrary to my expectation, *Code 46* manages to match bigger budgeted productions in terms of glossy visuals but fails to deliver a plot or performances to match the best of the films in whose footsteps it follows.

## Code 46

Director: Michael Winterbottom  
Writer: Frank Cottrell Boyce  
Cinematographer: Alwin Kuchler & Marcel Zyskind  
Starring: Tim Robbins, Samantha Morton,  
92 mins.

# Monstrous

In a curious way you have to admire director Paul W.S. Anderson. No matter what the critics say (and they've said some cruel things) he continues down his own path making a string of mildly popular films. If he were any good, one day he'd find himself hailed as an auteur. Sadly, from *Mortal Combat* and *Event Horizon* to *Resident Evil*, he has turned out an unbroken string of brainless and heartless action films.

But someone must like what he does, because Warner Bros have given him the reins of their two biggest (though badly bruised) sf franchises and let him loose with *Alien Vs Predator* (AVP). It is Anderson's biggest film to date and the history of both properties surely guarantee him his

biggest ever box office.

Insofar as it isn't a complete disaster, AVP is Anderson's best film to date – admittedly that isn't saying much and when considered against the best of both franchises, Anderson's shortcomings are pretty cruelly revealed, but AVP offers a degree of entertainment, one or two laughs and the occasional derivative thrill.

The problems, though, are obvious – with painfully unengaging one-dimensional characters and a complete reliance on cliché. So Anderson has the doomed but likeable character shoot off pictures of his children, a hero scrambles between rocks that are sliding together and later escapes to freedom sliding through a tunnel chased by the fireball



**Martin McGrath** watches *Alien Vs Predator*.

from a huge explosion. Everything has been done before and no matter how fast it is edited or how loud the music, AVP can't shake off the sense of déjà vu.

The cast do their best, the special effects are fine, but once again Anderson proves his best isn't good enough.

## Alien Vs Predator

Writer/Director: Paul W.S. Anderson  
Cinematographer: David Johnson  
Starring: Sanas Lathan, Raoul Bova, Lance Henriksen, Ewen Bremner, Colin Salmon  
97 mins.

# Not quite Camelot

Anthony Nanson reckons *King Arthur* is not exactly the "true story."

The 'real' Arthur – fifth-century Romano-British military commander – has been a routine figure of fiction since Mary Stewart set the trend in the 1970s. Now cinema has caught up. *King Arthur* is set on and around Hadrian's Wall circa 460AD, a time when indeed the Romanised British, led perhaps by 'Arthur', were resisting the Anglo-Saxon invasion. But in reality the Roman legions had already abandoned Britain in 410, whereas in the film Arthur (Owen) is still commanding Roman defence of the Wall and is shocked to hear that Rome has decided to pull out. A movie is not a history lesson, but the opening caption, stating that 'historians now agree' that the Arthur of medieval romance was inspired by an earlier historical figure, implicitly asserts that we should take the film's historical background as true.

Arthur's 'knights' are Sarmatian horsemen press-ganged in youth to defend the empire; an interesting use of speculations about the Romano-British strength in cavalry. The plot is driven by their desire to win their freedom and go home to their yurts. Another appealing though dubious ingredient are the uberprimal 'Woads', Britain's indigenous population,



Arthur (centre) and his scruffy knights

led by Merlin (Dillane), who sounds appropriately Welsh, and Guinevere (Knightley), whose undisguised home counties voice undermines committed physical acting. Though warrior chicks are becoming a cliché, in the case of a Celtic queen the cliché is justified. But not the battle bikini. She'd be more authentic naked except for woad and weaponry. The guys too, of course.

Their years in Britain have affected the Sarmatians in diverse ways. Bors (Winston) has clearly spent time in Essex. Lancelot (Gruffudd) has fraternised with the natives enough to acquire a Welsh accent. Tristan (Mikkelsen) is

a silent psychopath; Gawaine a deep-feeling ecowarrior, excellently played by Edgerton. A shame that he, like the rest, is given little to contribute to the story except to line up as battle fodder in Arthurian homage to *The Seven Samurai*. The traditional tale of Arthur, elaborated over centuries, is powerful and profound; *Excalibur* succeeded in part because it harnessed the power of that tradition. If you step far beyond its bounds, you need to work hard to generate fresh story, as Stewart and Marion Bradley have done in fiction. *King Arthur*'s fine cinematography, costumes and acting talent cannot hide

threadbare and predictable storytelling – particularly in the climactic battle.

The dialogue repeatedly spells out the theme of 'Freedom'. One promising aspect of this is Arthur's heretical Pelagian faith, unfortunately juxtaposed against gratuitous anti-Christian stereotyping. The Saxons, similarly, are stereotyped as Nazis. The wedding of Arthur and Guinevere – in Stonehenge, mysteriously translocated to the coast – is proclaimed 'the joining of two peoples', British and Romans. That the Woads are becoming Romanised is demonstrated by their facility with Roman artillery. But by now all the Romans except Arthur have departed. The triumphant aborigines are poised to build upon the legacy of Roman civilisation in a free Britain. Never mind the boatloads more Anglo-Saxons who are on their way.

## King Arthur

Director: Antoine Fuqua

Screenplay: David Franzoni

Cinematographer: Slawomir Idziak

Starring: Clive Owen, Keira Knightley, Ioan Gruffudd, Ray Winston, Mads Mikkelsen, Joel Edgerton, Stephen Dillane.

130 minutes

# Certainly not FAB

At least Lady Penelope is entertaining. **Martin McGrath** fast forwards through *Thunderbirds*.

At their very best the puppet adventures of Gerry Anderson's *Thunderbirds* contained as much drama, excitement and tension as any Hollywood blockbuster. So it is ironic that, as Hollywood at last delivers the long-gestating live-action version of the Tracys' adventures, the film can't live up to the epic quality of its Supermarionation roots.

Fundamentally this new version of *Thunderbirds* isn't as exciting as the best of the puppet adventures. Though it has a number of things going for it – fantastic realisations of Tracy Island and the Thunderbird craft plus the sublime Myles stealing the whole film as Lady Penelope – it doesn't match the scale or ambition of



Watch this bit, then fast forward

the originals, opting instead for sugar-coated teen angst and soppy sentimentality.

It's hard to believe anyone could look at the *Thunderbirds* track record and argue that the formula needed changing. And harder still to believe that they decided that

what the film needed most was to cut out the *Thunderbirds* and put in a load of whiny pubescents.

As a result of these changes and Frake's stodgy direction, this version of *Thunderbirds* is a formulaic teen adventure that suffers in comparison with Rodriguez's

recent *Spy Kids* trilogy. The whole film is imbued with the offensive drabness of Busted's dreadful tie-in track that kicks in as the credits roll. If you must see it, rent the DVD and fast forward through the many dull bits, slowing only when the *Thunderbirds* ships or Lady Penelope are on screen.

## Thunderbirds

Director: Jonathan Frakes

Screenplay: William Osborne & Michael McCullers

Cinematographer: Brendan Galvin

Starring: Brady Corbet, Soren Fulton, Vanessa Anne Hudgens, Sophie Myles, Anthony Edwards, Ben Kingsley, Bill Paxton, Ron Cook

94 minutes

# Girl power?



## Martin McGrath reviews *The Stepford Wives* and *Catwoman*

**F**irst there was feminism – in which some women sought to liberate themselves from an oppressive patriarchal society. Then there was post-feminism – in which some women decided that the only thing wrong with a patriarchal society was that they weren't the patriarchs and weren't about to quibble about genitalia so long as everyone just did what they were told.

Neither *The Stepford Wives* nor *Catwoman* belong to these relatively easy to comprehend categories. These appear to be post-post-feminist films. Both pay lip-service to the idea that women are the equals of (or are superior to) men, and both even seem to present strong women characters in their lead roles.

But scratch the surface, and the "girl power" patina quickly flakes away.

*Catwoman* is a poor film, but it has moments when you think it might say something interesting about women finding ways of empowering themselves or the essential stupidity of the beauty industry. Then its heroine appears in a frankly embarrassing S&M costume and the camera begins one of its many lingering shots of Catwoman's (Berry) backside or cleavage and every positive sentiment expressed elsewhere is immediately undermined.

*The Stepford Wives* is another poor movie – a half-baked remake of a far superior original – it takes a high-powered executive, Joanna (Kidman) who has lost her

job and places her in what is supposed to be a man's idea of paradise – a world of golf and dumb-blond housewives who live only to bake and satisfy their husband's every whim. Joanna decides to investigate but the filmmakers squander what scope there might have been for satire through incompetent plotting and downright cowardice.

In the end Joanna has to be saved by the "love" of her man (Broderick) – who, at the last minute has the magnanimity to change his mind about replacing her with a robot!

Both films share some interesting characteristics. In both the lead female characters, unable to cope with the stresses of the world, have what amounts to a nervous breakdown. It reminded me of those Victorian novels in which the heroine faints at the first sign of an interesting plot twist. Luckily both heroines have sympathetic ("new") men around to catch them as they fall and waft them with fans until they recover.

And in both (Warning! Spoiler!) it turns out that the injustices being done to women in these films (drug addiction and maiming in *Catwoman* and slavery in *The Stepford Wives*) are not the fault of men at all – but of women oppressing women. Both feature women who manipulate men as covers for their scheming. And in both instances these women are punished for their sins by being driven mad and having their dreams of power thwarted.

Anyone might think that the

boys involved in directing and writing these films were feeling a little threatened by women making decisions for themselves.

The truly sad thing is that even if one were able to discount the unpleasant anti-feminist/sextist subtext in both films – they're still rubbish. *The Stepford Wives* has a couple of good jokes at the expense of Microsoft and AOL but otherwise it is a grimly unfunny "comedy" while the action in "action adventure" *Catwoman* is hopelessly staged and persistently let down by some of the worst CGI effects seen this side of a Sinclair ZX81. The computer-generated Catwoman looks like she's been rendered on a PlayStation.

Avoid *Catwoman* at all costs and only watch *The Stepford Wives* for proof of how far the intelligence of mainstream Hollywood productions has declined since the 1970s.

### *The Stepford Wives*

Director: Frank Oz  
Screenplay: Paul Rudnick  
Cinematographer: Rob Hahn  
Starring: Nicole Kidman, Matthew Broderick, Bette Midler, Glenn Close, Christopher Walken  
93 minutes

### *Catwoman*

Director: Pitof  
Screenplay: John Brancato, Michael Ferris, John Rogers  
Cinematographer: Thierry Arbogast  
Starring: Halle Berry, Benjamin Bratt, Sharon Stone  
104 minutes

# Ridd

There isn't any point denying

**I**f I was a proper film reviewer what I'd be telling you about *The Chronicles of Riddick* would be that the script is a mess, much of the acting is wooden and that the plot is so ludicrously complicated that it requires not one but two character narrations to keep the audience up-to-date with what's going on. If I was a proper film reviewer I'd be telling you to avoid *The Chronicles of Riddick* like the plague.

But, if I was a proper film reviewer, I'd have left something crucial out of my review: **I love this film!**

It has all the flaws mentioned above and more, but at the same time (and maybe precisely because of those flaws – I'm a sucker for the underdog) I got such a thrill from watching it that I've been back to see it twice more.

*The Chronicles of Riddick* is old-fashioned space opera (I was constantly reminded of Gordon R Dickson's Dorsai books) and most of the problems with the film come from over-ambition.

Director Twohy obviously has a

# Why,

Cast aside the expectation

**T**he problem with reviewing *I, Robot* is choosing the standard by which the film should be judged. On its own merits it is a smarter-than-average blockbuster, an efficient sci-fi thriller with a likable (but coasting) leading actor (Smith), beautiful design and cinematography and a plot with few enough holes in it to keep one engaged to the overblown ending.

For perhaps ninety-nine percent of the population, that will be all that matters.

For the rest of us, the one percent for whom Asimov's stories are a part of our mental furniture, the film is immensely irritating. It lobotomises these stories, at times appearing to deliberately introduce elements that it knows would have the old master spluttering (motorbike chases and shoot outs?) and shaking his head in bewilderment (crude and



# ick's return

ing the flaws in *The Chronicles of Riddick*, but **Martin McGrath** loved it anyway.



vast back plot in mind. Humanity has fractured into differently powered sub-species – Riddick (Diesel) discovers he is one of the last of the warrior race of Furyans, Aereon (Dench) is a computer-minded Elemental, while the Lord Marshal (Feore) leads the Necromongers, who are bent on destroying the rest of humanity. One

problem is that this background information is often dropped into the film in vast, indigestible lumps leaving the actors with undeliverable lines and plodding speeches.

The plot wanders too far from the straight route to be coherent. Against his will, Riddick is thrown into the battle, between humanity and the Necromongers. He gets

sidetracked to rescue Kyra (Davalos) – the young girl from *Pitch Black*, now grown up and in a (literally) hellish prison – and then returns to face the forces of the Necromongers. And I haven't even mentioned the bounty hunters. The film bounces around too much, though each sequence is competently delivered.

Diesel is never going to win an Oscar but he does well enough delivering action hero one-liners (though some of them are pretty poorly written). Dench is fine, if a little stiff and clearly feeling out of place in this production. But many of the supporting actors are much less successful. It seems cruel to single out anyone in particular, but Urban and Newton (Vaako and his wife) seemed particularly inept.

On the positive side, the special effects in what is a medium budget movie are sometimes superb, the planetary invasion early in the film is particularly effective.

And the ending of the film is a revelation. Looking back it is clear

that Twohy has been scrupulously fair and signposted what will happen, but he still springs a huge, cliffhanging, surprise.

*The Chronicles of Riddick* is deeply flawed, but then so is most space opera. Whether you enjoy it or not will, I think, depend on whether you can forgive it its stupidities and stiffness and just go with the ripping yarn it spins. I would not argue with those who think *The Chronicles of Riddick* is terrible, but I will be watching it again, buying the DVD and praying for a sequel – I have to know what happens next.

## The Chronicles of Riddick

Writer/Director: Alex Proyas

Cinematographer: Hugh Johnson

Starring: Vin Diesel, Colin Feore, Thandie Newton, Judi Dench, Karl Urban, Alexa Davalos, Linus Roach, Yorick van Wageningen, Nick Chinlund  
115 minutes

# , Robot?

is created by the name and *I, Robot* is a better-than-average action movie, says **Martin McGrath**.

invasive product placement).

There was no need for this. The script on which this film is based did not start life as an adaptation of Asimov's work. It began life titled *Hardware* and, in that form, screenwriter Vitnar

(*Final Fantasy*:

*Spirits Within*)

delivered a

perfectly

reasonable

of thriller.

The film as

it appears on

screen, now

re-branded

with added

Asimov, is

smarter than

the original – because it steals some interesting stuff from the author – but the three laws are, after all, ubiquitous and a simple nod in Asimov's direction would have been sufficient. The malign influence of late-comer Goldsmith (*Lost in Space*, *Batman and Robin*) on the script is noticeable in a slew of poorly crafted one-liners and gags, but there is nothing here that could not have been in a film called *Hardware*.

Why change the name?

The decision to re-brand

*Hardware* as *I, Robot* is as cynical as the cack-handed promotion of basketball boots and German cars throughout this movie. It opens up a franchise, it boosts marketing potential and it adds unwarranted weight to what is, when all is said and done, just another big-budget Hollywood blow-out.

And, as I've said, for the vast majority of the people watching, the Asimov name doesn't really matter. Only people who

admire the original stories and who understand why they are important, are going to care that this film takes a hammer to a stained-glass window.

Digest the film of the expectation that the Asimov "branding" brings with it for the "cognoscent" and it is far from a terrible film. It delivers regularly spaced thrills, without ever threatening to be really exciting, and in brief flashes it even makes a stab at addressing real issues about what it means to be human.

The film's "Turing test" is more affecting than I expected (though as a parent I find myself prone emotional responses to anything that places small girls in danger – it must be my hormones). Spooner's (Smith) "secret" is pretty obvious and unconvincing but at least the filmmakers bothered to justify the title within the story.

*I, Robot* is worth seeing for the special effects, which are frequently spectacular, and for the direction

and cinematography of Proyas and Duggan. There are a few moments in the film when they frame and then linger over shots that appear to be direct homages to the pulpy covers of old sf magazines and it is these moments and the images they have created, rather than anything in the plot or acting – that will linger after you leave the cinema.

The disappointment is that, in these memorable images, it becomes clear that Proyas could have delivered much more than he has achieved in this rather shallow exercise in corporate branding.

## I, Robot

Director: Alex Proyas

Screenplay: Jeff Vitnar & Akiva Goldsmith

Cinematographer: Simon Duggan

Starring: Will Smith, Bridget Moynahan, Alan Tudyk, James Cromwell, Bruce Greenwood, Adrian L Ricard, Chi McBride  
114 minutes



# Don't go into the woods

Martin McGrath likes *The Village*, but wants director Shyamalan to move on now.

**D**irector M Night Shyamalan is a victim of his own success. His huge box-office hit and breakthrough feature, *The Sixth Sense*, has locked him into a reliance on shock endings that is gradually throttling the life from the career of one of the best young American directors of his generation.

Though not particularly a fan of *The Sixth Sense* I believe that *Unbreakable* remains the best superhero film ever made (*Spider-Man 2* notwithstanding) and his alien invasion film, *Signs*, is a brilliantly suspenseful and very funny movie spoiled only by the ludicrous Achilles' heel he gives his alien invaders.

*The Village* is, like all Shyamalan's work, a beautifully made film – aided by superb cinematography by frequent Coen brothers' collaborator Roger Deakins. It is blessed to with fine acting from his leads Phoenix and Howard and a starry supporting cast including Brody, Weaver and Gleeson. Even Hurt, an actor whose mannered performances often have me grinding my teeth in frustration, is surprisingly effective.

The village of the title is Covington, a nineteenth century community in Pennsylvania. The citizens of Covington have withdrawn from the world partly through choice – they have all been touched in some way by the violence and iniquity of the world beyond their idyl – and partly because the forests that surround their homes are inhabited by mysterious monsters.

These creatures, drawn to the colour red, have reached an uneasy truce with the folk of Covington and, for the most part, they allow the townsfolk to live in peace but the woods are off limits and the town is always on its guard. The film opens with a funeral, at which the whole community comes together to commemorate their loss and, though it is a sad occasion, there is a distinct sense of contentment amongst the people of Covington.



Then bad things begin to happen. Animals are found slaughtered and skinned. The monsters appear to invade the borders of the village and tensions begin to build.

Against this background Ivy (Howard) and Lucius (Phoenix) fall in love. Ivy is blind, but the most capable young woman in the community. Lucius is clever and brave but strangely detached from the world.

As Lucius and Ivy announce their engagement the contented world of Covington begins to unravel and the elders are forced to allow one citizen of the village to attempt to reach the outside world to bring back medicines. This leads to a genuinely creepy and frightening journey through the forest and a showdown with the real monsters.

The 'twist' at the end of *The Village* is telegraphed long before it is revealed though, in any case, it will almost certainly be immediately obvious to anyone who

has ever read any genre material.

The problem with *The Village* is not necessarily with the final twist itself but with the way it has unbalanced expectation about the film. The first 95 minutes of *The Village* are as beautiful, atmospheric and interesting as any movie made this year and the plot itself contains plenty of surprises and excitement before the final revelation. But most members of the audience and reviewers seem to judge the film simply on whether they can accept the slightly ludicrous last twist.

It's a shame. Like *Signs* before it, the real pleasure of *The Village* is not the denouement but the journey to it. Shyamalan is an assured visual director creating films with a pure eye for detail and scene. He consistently does an excellent job of getting the best out of his cast and, as a writer, his ear for dialogue is always precise. Perhaps most importantly, however, he is one of Hollywood's most intelligent young directors, constantly seeking to pack more into his films than just big

explosions and brainless gunfights. As such, he should be cherished.

So, even with its flaws, *The Village* is a far superior film than most released this year. However, if Shyamalan is going to progress as a film-maker then he has to break out of *The Sixth Sense*-syndrome from which he is suffering. Perhaps he should take a few jobs directing other people's scripts – or letting other people direct his own – but he needs a change of direction. We need intelligent directors making beautiful films. It would be a shame if the career of one of the few who fit that bill was strangled by the legacy of his own success before it could properly flourish.

## The Village

Writer/Director: M Night Shyamalan

Cinematographer: Roger Deakins

Starring: Bryce Dallas Howard, Joaquin Phoenix, Adrien Brody, William Hurt, Sigourney Weaver, Brendan Gleeson

108 minutes

## Fountain spurts again

Darren Aaronofsky's epic story *The Fountain* seemed dead and buried when Brad Pitt walked out to star in *Troy* and the studio got cold feet last year. But the *Pi* director has stuck to his guns and production is back on track, according to *The Hollywood Reporter*, with Hugh Jackman (*X-Men*) in the Pitt role and Rachel Weisz (*Constantine*) as his co-star. The film, based on Aaronofsky's own script, is about love, death and immortality and is set in the present and both five hundred years in the past and future. Jackman is present in all eras.

## Superman saved

McG will not direct *Superman*. In an uncharacteristic flash of common sense Warner Bros have decided to steal the team behind the Marvel blockbusters *X-Men* and *X2* to update the big blue boyscout. Bryan Singer will direct a brand new script, probably by David Hayter. But where does that leave Marvel's third *X-Men* movie?

## X-Buffy

*Buffy*/Angel/*Firefly* creator Joss Whedon is being widely tipped to step up to take on the next *X-Men* film. Whedon, currently writing the *Astonishing X-Men* for Marvel, says he would love to do it but hasn't been asked. A stumbling block may be Whedon's poor relations with Fox. He fell out with the film division over

# FLICKER



The most successful director of the modern era was supposed to be making a film about the 1973 Munich Olympics massacre – but the script isn't ready. Meanwhile, Hollywood's biggest box-office draw, was supposed to be making *Mission: Impossible 3*, but preferred director (JJ Abrams) is busy with, so that's off until next year. So Spielberg and Cruise (*The Minority Report*) can come together again to remake HG Wells *The War of the Worlds* – or something vaguely like it. David Koepp (*Spider-Man*) will script this updated and relocated version.

the changes to his *Alien: Resurrection* script and the TV division unceremoniously dumped *Firefly*.

## Serene completion?

*Firefly* sequel *Serenity* has completed principal photography. Alan Tudyk (Wash) revealed during interviews for *I, Robot* that the cast and crew were signed up for a three movie deal, should the first prove successful. There may also be an animated prequel to fill the gaps

between the end of the series and the movie, a gimmick studio Universal have used for both *The Chronicles of Riddick* and *Van Helsing* (see Discover on page 14).

## Flash in the pan?

Stephen Sommers is making a career out of glossy but empty reworkings of genre classics. The latest hapless icon to fall under *The Mummy*/Van Helsing director's gaze is *Flash Gordon*. Already the subject

of one campy reworking, Sommers is on board to script and produce a new version but may, according to *Variety*, step into the director's chair if the writing process goes well. Flicker hopes not.

## The Dead have risen

Since zombies are the new black it was almost inevitable that someone would eventually let George Romero play with his old toys. His fourth zombie film, to be called *Land of the Dead*, will begin shooting in October according to *Variety*. It begins with the premise that the zombies now control the world while the few remaining living are trapped within one walled city. Beyond the walls undead are evolving. Hurrah!

## Moon good news

Matrix 160 reported that producer David Heyman (*Harry Potter*) was working on *The Moon* is a *Harsh Mistress*. Now Josh Whedon's right hand man, Tim Minear (*Angel*, *Firefly*, *Wonderfalls*), has signed up to write the script. Heyman now has two Heinlein properties in active development with David Reynolds (*A Bug's Life*) already writing *Have Spacesuit Will Travel* (*Matrix* 166).

## Looking dodgy

Warner Bros plans for a comedy *Green Lantern*... Terry Gilliam's *Brothers Grimm*, released delayed for a whole year... *Exorcist: The Beginning* just sucks...



Martin McGrath watches 1988's *The Seventh Sign*, a filming the tradition of *Rosemary's Baby* or *The Omen*, but, y'know, rubbish. No one who acted in this film has been heard of since 1995. Is it cursed?

## So, what's the film this time?

Are you saved?

What?

Have you found your way to the Word of the Lord?

Errr...

Do you know that all the signs are being fulfilled?

The end of the world is coming.

What signs?

Fire, ice, blood, plague and hail. Haven't you read *Revelations*? And, Demi Moore is pregnant.

You're talking about the film, aren't you?

Either that or I'm writing slash fiction again.

Demi Moore is pregnant, the seas are boiling, the deserts are freezing, the rivers are turning to blood. Jorgen Prochnow is Jesus (though this time he's come as a hard German called David), and Peter Friedman is The Wandering Jew, pretending to be a catholic priest to hurry along apocalypse. Ah, the priest is the bad guy, everything makes sense now.

Wait, there's more. Michael Biehn looks confused, but he might be acting. (Demi: "How was your day dear?" Michael: "Pff! The Supreme Court rejected my appeal. Again!") Michael is the lawyer for a very short person on death row for setting fire to his parents. This killer is *Revelations*! "Last martyr" whose death will trigger Armageddon.

Cue "geddon outta here" joke. Wait a minute, the killer is the martyr? Surely the victims...

Ah, but mummy and daddy were also brother and sister, and according to *Leviticus*, that means you can to char grill them to a crispy finish (18:6-30).

Does *Leviticus* have any other good advice?

God loves salt. He's very specific about it. Thou

shalt not forget to salt my meaty sacrifices! Do not forget the salt. Put plenty of salt on my meat (2:13). But hold the yeasty bread and honey (2:10).

And this is the book that's providing the justification for a guy to murder his parents? I didn't write this lousy script (or the Bible – I like yeasty bread and honey).

So then what happens?

God may be omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent and probably omnivorous...

Nope, we've established that, no honey or yeasty bread.

Oh, right. Well He may be those other omni-things, but His lawyer is rubbish, there's a get-out clause.

Light? World? Creatures? Mom? All Check!

Phone lawyer? Oops! So, what's the trick?

Stop the execution and you stop the Judgement.

So what cunning legal argument does Demi use to save the day? Do biblical scholars convince the boy that God really wants us to be nice to each other and that he should plead insanity?

Nope! She just rushes into the execution chamber and shouts: "Stop!"

That old one, his lawyer should have thought of that months ago. Then what?

The satanic priest shoots him anyway.

We're all doomed!

Luckily God changes His mind because Demi sacrifices herself.

But isn't suicide bad? (Cor 3:16-17)

Shhh! I fancy some beef, pass the salt.

Sorry, we've run out.

Jesus!

I think it was His dad.

# Heartbreak



Marlin McGrath blubs like a baby at *Grave of the Fireflies*

**R**egularly lauded as the best anime of all time, *Grave of the Fireflies* (*Hotaro no Haka*) now has a UK region "special edition" DVD release. US film critic Roger Ebert has said that this film belongs on any list of top war movies and others have compared its emotional impact to Spielberg's *Shindler's List*.

So can this film live up to the hype?

Absolutely.

One of the most heartbreaking movies ever, *Grave of the Fireflies* is unbearably sad – parts are almost too painful to watch.

Set in the dying days of World War Two, *Grave of the Fireflies* tells the story of a teenage boy, Seita, and his baby sister Setsuko. They live in Kobe and, as their story begins they are caught in the middle of an air raid. American bombers are dropping incendiary bombs on their home. The bombs flutter to earth with a strange beauty, but the damage they do is very real, and almost at once Seita and Setsuko are homeless and orphaned – their mother horribly burned by the bombing and their father, a sailor in the Imperial Japanese fleet, is lost at sea.

Seita struggles to look after his sister, while all the time refusing to do his "duty" and work for the war effort. They move in with their aunt, but she quickly sees them as nothing but a burden, and begins to cheat them of their food and forces

them out. They find a brief respite in a deserted bomb shelter, building a kind of idyll, but as the bombing gets worse and food gets harder to find, Setsuko becomes sick and Seita is forced to try and steal to provide for her.

We know Seita's fate from the beginning – the film is presented as a series of flashbacks introduced by the boy's ghost – though we hope, against hope, that he will find safety for Setsuko.

If you labour under the misapprehension that animated films are only for kids, *Grave of the Fireflies* will come as a shock. It is the most assuredly adult and lyrical anti-war statement ever committed to screen. Director Takahata makes plain the suffering of the children but it never descends into bitterness. In a strange way the bombings are beautiful – seen at a distance the falling firebombs echo the rising of the fireflies that surround Setsuko at every turn.

As a war film it is a curious creation, for the violence flashes past in moments but, as in real life, the repercussions are lasting. *Grave of the Fireflies* is relatively short but it moves slowly, lingering over images of nature even as the world is being destroyed.

The final scene, in which the ghosts of the children look out over modern Japan reduces me to blubbering sobs. *Grave of the Fireflies* is not a film to watch if you are trying to maintain a veneer of

thick-skinned manhood.

Based on a semi-autobiographical novel by Nosaka Akiyuki – who lived through these events and lost his sister to starvation – it hardly seems an obvious choice as the subject of an animated movie. Even stranger that it should come from Studio Ghibli – perhaps best known for Hayao Miyazaki's considerably lighter films (*Spirited Away* and *Princess Mononoke*).

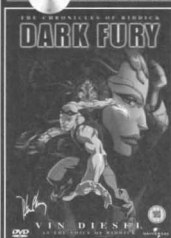
But, whatever the source, this is a powerful, moving, intelligent film. Not the sort of animated movie you'd want to sit down and watch with children, and probably totally bewildering for those who prefer their Japanese animation packed with giant robots, but still a truly great movie. Sadly the extras on this "special edition" aren't worth the space, but if you don't own this film or worse, if you haven't already seen it, buy it now.

*Grave of the Fireflies* not only survives the hype, it is a rare film that surpasses expectations. It isn't easy to watch, but it rewards every second. It is magnificent.

## Grave of the Fireflies

Writer/Director: Isao Takahata  
Art direction: Nizou Yamamoto  
Starring: Tsutomu Tatsumi, Ayano Shiraihi, Yoshiko Shinohara, Akemi Yamaguchi, J. Robert Spencer, Rhoda Choniste, Veronica Taylor, Amy Jones.  
93 minutes

DISCOVERY  
NEW ON DVD



**W**here *The Matrix* led it was inevitable that others would follow, albeit more cheaply and with a lot less originality. So it is that, in the spirit of *Animatrix*, Universal presage the launch of their two biggest summer blockbusters with animated prequels.

*Van Helsing: The London Assignment* is as cruddy as the film it leads into, with poorly drawn animation mixing with so-so computer generated stuff. Far more interesting is *The Chronicles of Riddick: Dark Fury*, which bridges the gap between *Pitch Black* and Riddick's latest adventure. Not only does this short film actually add something to our understanding of the characters in both films, it is also beautifully animated by Peter Chung ("Matriculated" in *Animatrix*).

Both are too short (30 minutes) to really justify the expense and the other extras are just promotional puff but *Dark Fury* would make a welcome addition to *The Chronicles of Riddick* DVD.

Elsewhere, the *Donnie Darko* Director's Cut puts back stuff that was probably better left out, but the film seems to improve with age.

*Shaolin Soccer* is finally released by Miramax in the US – so if you haven't seen the greatest football/kung fu/musical crossover of all time, you could get the Region 1 disc – but search out the Asian region free release, featuring hilarious subtitled scenes. A full review next issue.

# Don't fear the reaper

Martin McGrath crosses over to the other side with *Dead Like Me*.

**D**ead Like Me has three great strengths. The first is the opening credits, which feature scenes of "Grim Reapers" doing everyday things – travelling to work, playing basketball, hanging out at the water cooler – its cute, funny and beautifully shot. It is an excellent introduction to the show and the best looking part of what is quite often a rather plainly produced comedy-drama.

The second thing *Dead Like Me* has going for it is its situation. George (Muth) is a typically miserable and directionless 18-year-old when, taking a break from her dead-end temping job, she finds herself at "ground zero" for a re-entering Mir toilet seat. But obliteration isn't the end for George, she immediately meets Rube (Patinin), foreman to a team of reapers. Physically transformed (though we still see the "real" George) she discovers that the afterlife is no walk in the park – there's no pay for being a reaper but no escape from her duty either, so she has to hold down a job, squat in dead people's apartments and fret about the reaping jobs handed to her by Rube.

This could have been a recipe for horribly sentimental, *Touched by an Angel* style schmaltz, but it isn't. The writers (mostly) maintain a nicely cynical distance from the subject of death and the rooting of Rube, George and the other reapers work in grotty reality keeps everything just this side of ugly. *Dead Like Me* does have its sentimental moments but, for the most part, it sticks to a gently black humour.

The third and best thing about *Dead Like Me*, however, is the cast. Mandy Patinkin will, in my mind, forever be Inigo Montoya from Rob Reiner's *The Princess Bride* ("Hello, my name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father: prepare to die!") but he's rarely



found a role better suited to his talents than the knowing reaper foreman Rube. He does a nice line in tender, but he's at his absolute best (and very slightly scary) when explaining the tough realities of the afterlife to a reluctant George. He is also surrounded by an excellent supporting cast: roguish Mason (Blue), tough-as-nails Roxy (Guy), sweet Betty (Gayheart) and former starlet Daisy (Stevenson).

Ellen Muth does a good job in the tricky role of cynical, bored and sometimes unlikely self-obsessed George. Her character mellows out somewhat as the series progresses and she settles, however uncertainly, amongst the team of reapers and with the equally entertaining cast of characters in her life as a cubicle jockey at "Happy Time." Especially rewarding is the relationship between George and Dolores Herbig (Willes), the perpetually positive, scrapbook building, recovering coke-addict who is her manager. Dolores has the best line of the whole first season: "The homeless are passionate lovers, but they will rob you blind!"

*Dead Like Me* creator Bryan Fuller was responsible for some of the best episodes of *Star Trek*:

*Voyager* and was the co-creator on one of 2004's most unfortunate shows, the quite excellent *Wonderfalls*, cancelled (like *Firefly*) by Fox after just 4 episodes. There are similarities between the two shows – both featuring alienated, intelligent young women for whom some undefined mystical power – fate or god, we're never told – intervenes to give their life direction, despite they're own best efforts to resist.

*Dead Like Me* is quite smart, not too cute and funny in a sometimes quite grim way. Personally, a show that features a pair of animal rights protestors getting mauled by the bear they're trying to set free is irresistible. This isn't a classic piece of television by any means, but it can be surprisingly engaging.

The first season (14 episodes) are available now as a Region 1 DVD boxset, while the second season begins on Sky One in the UK in August.

## Dead Like Me (Season one)

Creator: Bryan Fuller

Writer/Director: Various

Cinematographer: Danny Nowak & Tony Westman

Starring: Ellen Muth, Mandy Patinkin, Jasmine Guy, Callum Blue, Cynthia Stevenson, Rebecca Gayheart, Laura Harris

14 episodes (including pilot)

## of the BEST

### Reaping Havoc



The main story, involving George and Betty bonding and one of them making a momentous choice, is good but a side-plot in which Mason has to spend time waiting with an old woman whose body won't let go is both funny and surprisingly touching.

### A Cook



One of the episodes that gives most space to Rube, and therefore one of my favourites – as he breaks his own rules about getting involved in the lives of his targets and ends up becoming a cook at *Der Waffle Haus*. Plus, we get to go home with Dolores.

### The Bicycle Thief



Daisy is stalked by an artist whose painting she steals after "reaping" him, Mason gets another sweet moment (and a swish apartment) reaping the souls of a gay couple who cannot bear to be separated and the wacky folk of Happy Time throw a leaving party for George, who has found a better paying job.



# Tru-ly tedious



When Eliza Dushku walked away from the chance to lead a Buffy spin-off based on her character Faith, choosing instead to set up shop in *Tru Calling*, quite a few fans were deeply disgruntled. And when *Tru Calling* finally aired, in all its tedious blandness, that sense of disgruntlement turned to disbelief.

What had the girl done? Why would anyone swap Joss Whedon's endlessly inventive world for this rather drab, and unusually predictable dress?

Then, while superior contemporary genre shows like *Firefly*, *Wonderfalls* and *Jake 2.0* fell around it like flies, *Tru Calling* survived the cull and was around for a second series. Based on critical response or audience numbers, the show's survival seemed quite inexplicable. What was going on?

The idea of the show is pretty banal. Tru Davies (Dushku) is "smart and sexy" but hard done by – heading for a high-powered medical internship she gets dumped on and ends up working in the morgue. Then she begins to hear voices – the dead start to ask for her help and she finds herself thrown back twelve hours and charged with changing their fate. Fox claims the show is a cross between *Run Lola Run* and 24, but *Tru Calling* consistently lacks the excitement or unpredictability of either of those two shows and ends up playing out like *Groundhog Day* (without the jokes) crossed with *Quantum Leap*. Nor is the idea of a time travel device leading to a race against the clock to change the future (present?) particularly new, having formed the basis for both *Early Edition* (1996-2000) and *7 Days* (1998-2001). Perhaps significantly, neither show was a particular success.

So does *Tru Calling* have anything going for it? Well Dushku remains a considerable screen presence, even if the show often gives her little to do but run around and look worried. The investment in the show, however, is obvious. The overwhelming atmosphere may be of drabness but *Tru Calling* does have a certain zippy style in the way it is put together.

What *Tru Calling* really lacks, however, is conflict and the show quickly became quite repetitive. In an attempt to address this problem the producers have thrown in a new twist. The final two shows of season one reveal the existence of a "counter-Tru" amongst her friends. In what must rank as one of the most bizarre misuses of the laws of Newtonian physics Davis (Zach Galianakis) explains to Tru that every force has an equal and opposite force, so if she is saving lives, there was bound to be someone who is taking them.

It is too early to say how the producers will exploit this shift in the show's dynamic and whether or not it will make the second season (starting in November in the US) more interesting than the first.

Someone at Fox appears to have decided that Elisha Dushku is a star in the making (no argument there) and they are going to throw money at making this prediction come true. It is just a shame they've chosen a vehicle as bland and predictable as *Tru Calling*, the girl deserves better.

- Season one repeats of *Tru Calling* are currently showing on Sky One and they will also show season two.

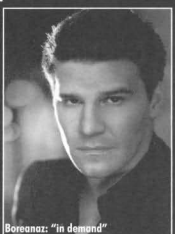
Dushku: "smart and sexy"



# Regrets, they have a few

Warner Bros may be regretting dropping *Angel* so suddenly last year. The collapse of the *Dark Shadows* remake that WB had lined up to replace *Angel* has left them with a hole in their schedule and WB are chasing Joss Whedon and David Boreanaz for a series of *Angel* television movies. Unfortunately for WB it appears that Boreanaz is in demand in Hollywood and won't hurry back to his vampire roots, on television at least. He has told interviewers that he might be interested in a movie made for cinema. WB Network Chairman Garth Ancier recently told The Hollywood Reporter that he believed they had made a premature decision cancelling the show, blaming pressure from *Angel*'s broadcaster Fox Network.

Whedon, meanwhile, has suggested that the Buffyverse could continue on television without either Michelle Gellar or Boreanaz. "I think there's about ten other characters I could name who would be totally worthy of movies," he told *Sci-Fi Wire*. Google boxes always preferred Spike anyway.



Boreanaz: "in demand"

## Clangers return

Yes the Daleks are coming back. And so is *Farscape*, but even bigger news is the return of *The Clangers* – sadly no new shows but repeats of the classic cute creatures from The Moon can be seen on weekday mornings from 6 September on Five.

## Frequency flyer

Principal photography for the television version of the Warren Ellis sci-fi spy thriller *Global Frequency* has begun. Judging from Ellis' blog ([www.diepunyhunans.com](http://www.diepunyhunans.com)) he's pretty happy with the way shooting on the pilot is going in Vancouver. The cast includes Josh Hopkins (*North Shore*) as Sean Ronin, Michelle Forbes (24) as Zero and Australian Jenni Baird in the lead role of Katrina Finch. Internet rumours suggest that Ellis may script at least one of the first thirteen episodes while *Tick* and *Angel* veteran Ben Edlund has joined the show as a writer/producer. The Warner Bros Network has scheduled *Global Frequency* for a March 2005 debut in America.

## V-anished

Way back in *Matrix* 162 we reported on plans at NBC for a sequel to the eighties series *V*. Work on the new show has ground to a halt, with NBC claiming that the most recent draft of *V* creator Kenneth Johnson's script wasn't as innovative as the original.

## Cut-price Federation

The price of the new series of *Star Trek: Enterprise* has been more than halved. Broadcaster UPN only renewed the series from Paramount on the understanding that the cost dropped from \$1.7 million per episode to "just" \$800,000. It is not known how much of that price reduction will be fed through to the show's budgets. It is possible that Paramount may see continued production of the series as a loss leader for the estimated \$20 million a year they make from merchandising. Perhaps they can borrow some of *Dr Who*'s old gear if cash gets tight later in the season.

## Earthsea closer

The Sci-Fi Channel in America has announced further details of their adaptation of Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea*. The two-part, four hour mini-series will air in December. Images, interviews and more can be found at [www.sfi.com/earthsea/](http://www.sfi.com/earthsea/)

## Carnivale - at last!

When we reviewed *Carnivale* (*Matrix* 165) Channel 4 were close to agreeing a deal for the US depression-era set fantasy. Then they decided to pull out – leaving room for more repeats of *Friends*. It will finally get a UK airing on satellite channel FX289 beginning in September. It is still highly recommended. [www.carnivale.fx.uk.tv](http://www.carnivale.fx.uk.tv)

# Far sighted

matrix 169  
**Foundation  
 favourites**  
 Number nine: *The Pleasures of a  
 Futuroscope* by Lord Dunsany

Andy Sawyer returns to the Science Fiction Foundation archives with one of their most recent purchases, a "lost" novel by one of fantasy's most unique voices.

When I started this series the idea was to look at some offbeat or personal favourites of the Science Fiction Foundation Collection and the related sf archives at the University of Liverpool Library, with the implication that they would have been around long enough to become favourites.

This current item, though, was published in 2003, acquired in 2004, and at time of writing hasn't even been catalogued yet. Still, it counts – because a new novel by one of my favourite fantasy writers is memorable enough in its own terms, and because "new" is perhaps not the right word. *The Pleasures of a Futuroscope* was written in 1955, two years before Dunsany's death, and is now available for the first time in an attractive edition from Hippocampus Press.

The Anglo-Irish peer Lord Dunsany is one of our most remarkable writers of fantasy, best known for his short stories beginning with *The Gods of Pegana* in 1905, and novels like *The King of Elfland's Daughter*. His long and varied writing career – he was a popular playwright and an accomplished poet – included several volumes featuring the tall tales of Joseph Jorkens, many of which verge on science fiction, and which were, in part, the inspiration for Arthur C Clarke's *Tales of the White Hart*.

The "futuroscope" of this novel also appeared in a story in the final "Jorkens" collection, published in 1954. In it Jorkens attributes its invention to one Methery, who in this novel has loaned it to the narrator, who identifies himself only as a retired journalist. A device through which the user can see through time is one which appears on numerous occasions in science fiction, for instance

in Arthur C Clarke's "The Parasite" and *Childhood's End* (both 1953), which each feature ways of observing the past. It's possible that one or both of these might have been a source for the "futuroscope", but the idea of such a device is common enough and the debt may even be reversed. Dunsany himself, as early

as *The Chronicles of Rodriguez* (1922) introduces a castle with magic windows through which the hero, in the Golden Age of Spain, views first the wars that were and then the more ruinous wars to come, aided by Man's new ally, the machine. And Dunsany's treatment of the idea is very much his own.

One of the pervasive elements in Dunsany's writing is a kind of elegiac melancholy, a lament for passing time. Whether this was a personality trait, or related to Dunsany's position as an Anglo-Irish peer seeing his state of privilege removed from him, is not something we have space to go into, but it is certainly here. The narrator is playing with the futuroscope, observing the hills and woods around his home (very much like



flash almost blinds him and for some time he is unable to use the futuroscope. His doctor notes that the water running from his eyes is slightly radioactive. When he returns to the futuroscope, tuned to slightly after this time, he notices that it is snowing, even though it is June.

What he has seen is the atomic explosion that destroyed

the whole of London.

As the narrator explores the resulting future he comes to observe a single family some five hundred years hence. Humanity has reverted to an apparently idyllic existence in family groups, living off nature's bounty and terrified of the rusting remnants of our technologies. Understanding their language (English has changed little in five hundred years), but unable to interact with them, the narrator becomes emotionally involved with "his" family; the narrow escape of the two sons from a pack of wolves, the romance between the eldest son and the daughter of a neighbour, and the mysterious "Wild Man" who seems to have designs on Liza, the family's daughter. When Bert's girlfriend is kidnapped by the raggletaggle gypsies-O, complete with caravan, crystal ball, exotic music and iron knives, things get, frankly, a little silly, but it's made up for by the ingenious way in which the narrator manages to engineer her rescue. And as with all true pastoral comedies it ends with a wedding and flowers. Lots of them. Although all too cosy to be either believable or, frankly, morally acceptable, in my book, Dunsany's writing is never less than attractive, his love

for the natural world clear and unfeigned, and a refreshing strain of humour runs through it.

The "let's blow up the world and then we can have Utopia" vein is never attractive no matter from which side of the political spectrum it comes. But Dunsany's anxiety about the possibility of nuclear holocaust is no less valid for being rooted in feudal conservatism. His sense that the marvels of our civilization are only temporary is one that we as sf readers must accept as very real. And the narrator's rather pedantic domestic obsessions are delightful (he rapidly becomes addicted to this new entertainment, but keeps on reminding us that he has to break off his futuroscope sessions to do his domestic chores), as is the irony that he is learning all about the nature surrounding him by sitting with his eyes fixed to a trans-temporal viewer. The scene towards the end of the book where his narrative is broken off while he deals with a demand for his television license fee (for the futuroscope needs something like a TV aerial, and this has been spotted by an officious bureaucrat) is pure Dunsany in its comic exasperation, but offers a further clue to why this is not just an exercise in nostalgia, but a contemporary book.

For above all, in an era of Reality TV, *The Pleasures of a Futuroscope* seems to be a novel whose time has come. The narrator uses the futuroscope "for my personal amusement, very much as people buy television sets." Like much sf, this says more now than when it was written. It is a novel of 1950s nuclear anxiety and it is a satire of the rapidly-arriving television culture, but it's also a rather neatly-imagined and sardonic prevision of how we are now using this culture to intrude into other people's lives. And the narrator's (apparent) cosy insulation from the threatening aspects of a post-holocaust world is closer to reality than even Dunsany might have dreamed.



Lord Dunsany: "remarkable"

the area around Dunsany's home in Dunstall Priory). He notices the country giving way to the spread of the city; choking industry rising where nature falls. The victory of commerce and machinery over art seems assured.

Then a dazzling

The Science Fiction Foundation Collection is the largest collection of English-language science fiction and material about sf in Europe. Administered by the University of Liverpool, it is a resource for anyone with a research interest in sf. It has been developed thanks to the generosity of publishers, writers, and fans who have donated books, magazines, and money to buy them. For new purchases, and for the preservation and conservation of the existing collection, it depends entirely on such generosity. If you would like to support the collection in any way, please contact Andy Sawyer at The Sydney Jones Library, University Of Liverpool, P.O. Box 123, Liverpool L69 3DA (asawyer@liverpool.ac.uk). Science Fiction Foundation Collection: [www.sff-foundation.org](http://www.sff-foundation.org)

We are grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Board for funding the "Science Fiction Hub" project, which will develop and enhance our catalogue.

# Clash on Titan

Stephen Baxter looks forward to Huygens' encounter with Saturn's enigmatic moon, Titan.

**T**itan, Saturn's largest moon, is an enigmatic world in its own right.

I surveyed Titan in science fiction in *Omegatropic* (BSFA, 2001), and in my novel *Titan* (HarperCollins, 1997) I did my best to portray Titan as we know it now. But we may soon learn a great deal more. On 1 July 2004 NASA's *Cassini* spacecraft sailed through the rings of Saturn. In its very first week in orbit *Cassini* passed within a third of a million kilometres of Titan, and its sensors spotted a huge impact crater, methane clouds at the south pole, and what may be a vast methane sea.

And on December 25<sup>th</sup> *Cassini* will release a European probe called *Huygens* which, on 14<sup>th</sup> January 2005, should drop into the thick atmosphere of Titan itself.

Titan was discovered by the Dutch astronomer Christiaan Huygens in 1655. It was just a dot of light, glowing dull orange – but in 1944 Gerard Kuiper, another Dutch astronomer, discovered methane gas there. Titan is able to hold onto a fat layer of air because of its extreme cold. This was the basis of such stories Arthur C. Clarke's 'Saturn Rising' (*F&SF*, March 1961), in which a hotel is established on Titan by a visionary entrepreneur, for the sake of the view.

Our first close-up views of Titan came in 1980 and 1981, when *Voyagers* 1 and 2 flew past Saturn. But Titan was just a ball of smog: if you were to stand on Titan there would be no green methane sky, no glimpse of Saturn's rings. This cold, murky Titan was visited in Michael Swanwick's 'Slow Life' (*Analogue* December 2002) – 'Titan had more kinds of rain than anywhere else in the Solar System'. Swanwick's Titanic life form, a giant communal entity living off thermal vents, is eminently plausible. Titan also cameos in Richard Lupoff's *Sun's End* (1984), impressively but unscientifically, with methane seas and icebergs of solid nitrogen!

But now *Huygens* is on the way. *Cassini*, about the size of a school bus, was too heavy to launch direct, so its flight path, extending across seven years, took it on swings past Venus, Earth and Jupiter. A fat pie-dish shape, three metres across,

An artist impression of *Huygens* as it drops into the uppermost layers of Titan's atmosphere (Source: ESA)



clings to the side of the *Cassini* stack. This is the *Huygens* probe. Dormant for most of the interplanetary cruise, the lander will be released on Christmas Day, and on 14<sup>th</sup> January will plunge into the centre of Titan's sunlit face.

The first three minutes of the entry will be the worst. The spacecraft is protected by a heat shield, with a coating of heat-resistant Space Shuttle-like tiles. The deceleration will peak at sixteen gravities; every joint and structure will be stressed to its limits. Earth, light-hours away, will be too remote to be able to assist. In 1996, researching my novel, I went to visit the Logica team in London responsible for *Huygens*' command software. This was developed with then-new object-oriented programming techniques, using the Ada language: hundreds of labour hours were invested. *Huygens* will

be on its own; this mid-1990s state of the art software will have to do its job...

After three minutes *Huygens*' speed will be down to under fourteen hundred kilometres an hour, not much faster than a passenger airliner. The main parachute will open, and the probe's cover will break apart. Portals will open, and booms unfold: more than a billion kilometres from the nearest human engineer, instruments will peer out at Titan.

Air samples, no more than a millionth of a gram, will be tested by a mass spectrometer and a gas chromatograph. There are instruments to register radio pulses from lightning strokes, and even a microphone to listen for thunderclaps. Cameras will scan steadily. The sun will be plainly visible as a brilliant point source of light, surrounded by a yellow-brown

halo of smog.

Winds, gusting at two hundred kilometres per hour, will batter at the parachutes. But the winds will ease as the lander falls deeper, until the thick air is as still as deep ocean water. Fifteen minutes after its unpacking, the main chute will be cut away, and a smaller stabiliser chute opened. Now the probe will sink faster. The temperature will drop steadily.

Some fifty kilometres above the surface, the Titan's surface will slowly become visible. The lower atmosphere is convective, like Earth's, and some of the clouds are probably bulky cumuli, like storm clouds. So this first tantalising glimpse might look like a high-altitude view of Earth, though rendered in sombre reds and browns.

The landing in the methane slush will be slow, at less than twenty kilometres per hour. *Huygens* carries a small surface science package, developed in the UK, seven simple measurement experiments: a penetrometer to gauge the hardness of the slush, and a tiltmeter, like a spirit level.

But nobody knows for sure if *Huygens* will make it all the way down. In fact *Huygens* may even come down in an ocean or a lake – not of water, for water-ice is Titan's bedrock, but of hydrocarbons like ethane. So *Huygens* has also been designed to float. No spacecraft has

“The main parachute will open, and the probe's cover will break apart. Portals will open, and booms unfold: more than a billion kilometres from the nearest human engineer, instruments will peer out at Titan.”

Stephen Baxter



splashed down since Apollo, and to build *Huygens* the designers were forced to reference dusty studies dating back to the 1960s. There will be science to be done as *Huygens* bobs on the slow waves: a tiltmeter will detect sea waves, an acoustic sounder will probe the ocean's depth, and a sapphire prism will shine light through it.

What kind of world will *Huygens* find?

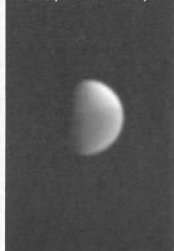
There is methane in the air, but the bulk of the atmosphere is nitrogen. The air is thick: Titan has the most massive atmosphere of any rocky world after Venus. Over a rocky core, Titan is clad by a layer of water ice a thousand kilometres thick. Perhaps there is a liquid mantle of ammonia and water: there could be water volcanoes. And there may be craters flooded with liquid ethane, crossed by waves hundreds of metres tall.

And, out of those layers of clouds, complex organic molecules – the stuff of life itself – continually drift down to the unknown surface below. The deep cold inhibits chemical reactions. So, on Titan, there may be organic molecules four billion years old.

*Huygens* will surely change everything we believe about this important world. But *Huygens*'s mission will last mere hours. 153 minutes after power-up, no more than minutes after landing, the probe's internal batteries will be exhausted, and the chatter of telemetry will fall silent.

It will take two more hours for news of the adventure to crawl at lightspeed to Earth, but by then *Huygens*' story will already be over. On the surface of Titan, melted slush will frost over the buried portals of the stranded lander, and a thin rain of tholins will begin to settle on its upper casing.

Cassini's first picture of Titan (Source: NASA/JPL/Space Science Institute)



# We knew it'd be back

Roderick Gladwish gets a good feeling about the return of *Premotions*.

**P**remotions magazine is a comeback story. Having run between 1992 and 1994 in its first grasp at life, the biannual print magazine re-emerged from the Pigasus Press stable full of energy. It feels like the decade between issues has caused a backlog of literature with stories and poems building until there's no wasted space between its covers. Even the illustrations often serve a double purpose. After the contents list it is straight into the first story. Where slack space threatens a poem is wedged in. No interviews or reviews – Pigasus Press leave that to their print or web magazines of which there are many. It

does take a breath just before the last few pages to slip in a piece from editor, Tony Lee, confessing he's resurrected the magazine because it's fun. You're really getting two magazines for the price of one because a poetry anthology *Great Mutant Brains* that failed to get into print is where most of the poetry comes from. Much of that comes from the dizzily prolific Steve Sneyd.

Claiming some precious space is a series of dark cartoons entitled *Pa and Ma Macabre* by Robert Halstead – grimly low key though not as shocking or humorous as they could be.

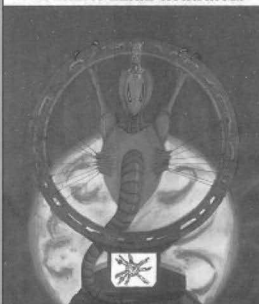
Stories stretch the *Premotions* tag line of 'Different Eerie Warnings'. There were warnings and some were eerie, however, to me the stories that least fitted the description were the best.

The first story 'Restless' by K Bannerman was a better religious one than any in the self-declared Christian SF magazine *Gateway SF* (reviewed in *Matrix* 168). It was a satisfying take on the 'wandering Jew' myth. In 'Ayumi-Chan in Wireless Heaven' John Paul Cotton examines simulated spouses in techno-saturated Japan, once read it's not surprising he lives in Tokyo. Stepan Champman based 'The Stiff and Stile' on a folk tale shifting it to a mutated post-apocalyptic world and the 'stiff' is not quite dead yet.

Back to Japan for 'Rise of the Ancestors' by Tim Clare with violent men finding peace in death by a rising spirit cloud.

Middle American generational spaceships with nano tech and (lack of) gun control came from Hugh Cook in 'Shotgun Al's Last Picnic' a definite warning, which will be tragically ignored.

SF & HORROR FICTION, POETRY, ART CA.52  
**Premotions**  
DIFFERENT EERIE WARNINGS



Mars in the far future and a city that commits suicide to avoid a greater horror is presented in 'The Doom that came to Xanthus' by Andrew Darlington. Phil Emery goes for peculiar punctuation in an experimental piece on identity 'ID'.

More like poetry were 'A Brush of Mammoth Wings' by Wade Robertson and 'Station to Station' by David Hudson. The first covers a child collecting bugs being collected. The second mixes snippets of description and 'radio chatter' with the travelling between stars turning into a humdrum and brutal business. I reckon if someone else read it they would get a different meaning. Then there is the talented Anthony

Mann with 'Sex and the Single Xanthocrite', my story of the review, just pipping 'Restless'. Previous Mann stories I've found harrowing, this was equally clever, but full of humour.

'Two Heads Are' from Mark Mellon describes a drowned New York full of technological wonders used as toys by the super rich. Using people as toys always comes with a price.

The FBI are searching for aliens as well as Reds in post-war America in 'Are You Now...?' by Debbie Moon. Everyone's corrupt or corruptible, even when humanity may be at stake.

'The Third Instar' was a building tension tale about zombies from David Rawson.

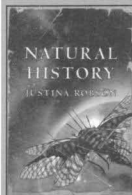
Poems really do cover an anthology with a theme of psychic and ESP powers, if I listed all the contributors and poems it would fill the column. Poetry still doesn't grab me and my search for positive and uplifting SF poetry continues. J P V Stewart is very close with 'The Sapient Gas Beings of Sirlolbelthar Four'. The majesty of our Universe and an alien life-cycle is captured in a handful of verses.

The gap to the next issue should be about six months. Lee had fun compiling it and I had fun reading it, but what do you expect from the team who also bring you [www.rotaryaction.com](http://www.rotaryaction.com), a guide to helicopters in cinema and television and [www.girls-with-guns.co.uk](http://www.girls-with-guns.co.uk), a guide to female action movie stars.

*Premotions*: £4.50 per issue from: Pigasus Press, 13 Hazely Combe, Arreton, Isle of Wight, PO30 3AJ  
[www.pigasuspress.co.uk](http://www.pigasuspress.co.uk)

# Now that's weird...

Suggested New Weird and Proto-NW titles for your bookshelf



*Natural History*  
by Justina Robson

New Weird in Space: In the far future, humanity has engineered itself into new purpose-built forms capable of space flight, terra-forming planets and the exploration of the deepest oceans (a futuristic echo of New Cronuzon's ReMade's perhaps?). However,

the discovery of a new world and the mystery of its vanished former occupants sparks a story that will bring us into contact with a force more weird than anything humanity could ever imagine.

Is this New Space Opera or is it New Weird – or can it be both?



*Perdido Street Station*  
by China Miéville

At over 800 pages of bristling invention, *Perdido Street Station* is the definitive baroque Über-daddy of the New Weird world and the vanguard novel of a resurgent fantasy genre.

It's urban, gritty and undeniably weird



*The Year of Our War*  
by Steph Swainston

On first glance there's nothing unusual in Steph Swainston's approach to fantastical world-building. You've got the 1000 years of history and complicated genealogies, the legion of mighty heroes, dark forces massing on the border, and even a map

of the Fourlands at the front of the book. In other words, all the trappings of door-stop length high fantasy. And yet, having done all that meticulous research, Steph's original conceit is to slice it all straight out of the novel again. Presenting a stripped down, austere account of a single critical confrontation (the titular year of our war) from the first person perspective of a drugged-up and reluctant hero, where the reader knows his author has a plan but still has the joy of figuring it out on their own.

# The truth a

**China Miéville**, the man who named the New Weird, talks to Claire Weaver about what it is and why some people have got so upset about it. It's not about limiting what people can write, he says, but about building understanding.

**B**roadly speaking, New Weird is about a confidence, and an energised joyful pillaging of the fantastic and the grotesque across the generic categories.

You can unpick it: lack of respect for generic categories, an interest in the more grotesque tradition of the fantastic than a moralistic tradition, that kind of thing. I think the question of confidence is key – the confidence to do what you want to do. A post-pulp mentality, in that it's an unapologetic reveling in the literalised fantastic, that there's no sense of the narrowly metaphorical or the allegorical literature, but at the same time that doesn't mean it doesn't have metaphorical or allegorical elements. It's literature that knows that it's always going to have those elements and you should also be allowed to enjoy the weird for its own sake. These aren't hard and fast divisions, they're what seem to me to be specific about New Weird. But that's just one person's opinion.

"What's always distinguished the genres of the fantastic (for me) from a kind of moralistic literature or an allegorical literature, or a narrowly utopian literature, is that it's unabashed about the fantastic itself, and it does all those other jobs but it also just enjoys itself. When mainstream writers dip their toe in the fantastic, they're very keen to make sure that it's not 'about' monsters or 'about' spaceships – it's actually 'about' gender inequality, or genetic manipulation, or whatever. What genre writing has always understood is that it's about both: that it's not that we're about monsters and therefore not about gender inequality, for

example, it's that we have the ability to be about both, and to enjoy the fantastic for its own sake as well as making whatever other points we want to make. New Weird seems to be able to do that with great gusto and pleasure; it relaxes into the fantastic and respects it for its own end and therefore – it seems to me – to be something close to the heart of what the genre at best has always done.

"The reason I got involved was because at an analytical level it was quite interesting and at an artistic level it was quite exhilarating, and it was good that these things are discussed.

"A lot of the comments we received said, 'Any time you pigeonhole writers you're doing them a disservice. You can't pigeonhole writers because that's limiting what they can do.' But that means you can't talk historically about fiction, you can't look at Joyce and Beckett and Virginia Woolf and see that here's a group of things that are shared but can be distinguished from other writers like, say, Martin Amis. I don't intend to limit anyone – what I'm doing is looking at what they're writing and saying maybe it's helpful if we look at it in this way.

"You can say that the grouping together of books can give you insight into a certain cultural moment and set of concerns. And as soon as you say that, the problem doesn't become that you can't categorise, it becomes 'Is there anything useful or perspicacious of New Weird as a category?' There are people, for example Nick Mamatas, whose argument on New Weird is that 'This category is not a helpful category.' That's great – that's an argument. Michael Cisco has just written a

## Its a weird world...

...and its getting weirder all the time. Claire Weaver on her search for the New Weird.

**W**e argue about all sorts of things – politics, money, parking spaces – but isn't it a bit weird to be getting all worked up over a literary classification?

There's a lot of heated debate on whether New Weird is a good, bad, or entirely irrelevant thing. But why do I get the feeling that a lot of opinions about New Weird stem from misunderstanding – a lack of the full facts or, maybe, just a desire to bitch about something that's not within the usual sphere?

I'm never one to force my opinions on people, but I hate to see a misunderstanding go uncorrected. So I schlepped it up to Kilburn to pay a visit to China Miéville and find out what the real story is with New Weird – does it exist? Who started it? Is it of any use?

I found China to be a genuinely nice

guy (and quite cute too...), and most of all he's extremely intelligent and articulate. He says he didn't write about New Weird to rile people. It's not even 'his' – just something he saw happening, and named.

You may agree with what he has to say. You may not. Maybe you couldn't care less about New Weird. Perhaps you're sitting there saying, "New What?"

You're not about to read the definitive guide; this article doesn't pretend to set out any sort of rules for New Weird. It's here as a debate, a view, a thought, maybe a starting place for opinions.

By all means, hate New Weird because you don't agree with classification; argue over the uselessness of sub-genre; debate the list of titles. But it ain't cool to go on a rant without the full facts – at least, that's my humble opinion.

# bout weird



really interesting piece on it for a website [the modern word] in which he takes really interesting directions. But the whole thing about 'pigeonholing is bad' is that's not an argument, it's a refusal to analyse historically and I've got no time for it.

"Some of the responses to New Weird were astoundingly vitriolic and vicious, and others were wildly enthusiastic. Part of the vitriol was about that people thought I was trying to corral literature and whip it into a shape I'd decided, and take control. There is nothing in what I've written that suggests that, although I know how these debates and arguments go and I can't say I'm hugely surprised that people are interpreting it that way.

"There's something too trite in the statement that the fact that everyone got so worked up about New Weird means there's something there. That seems like too much of a neat rhetorical trick. So I'm not saying that, but at the same time there's something in me that leans in that direction. If I had simply plucked three writers such as Anita Brookner, Ruth Rendell and Tricia Sullivan, and said these are a new movement, they're the Neo-Thalassophiles – there wouldn't have been a whole hullabaloo, because they're so disparate. People would have just ignored it because it doesn't chime at any point. The vehemence of the reaction by Pros and Antis suggests to me that at the very least we are at a particular point in fiction in which certain arguments can be made, and this comes back to the argument about categorisation and why I get so frustrated with the "no pigeonholing" type sense, because that seems to me to be ultimately about the denial of analysis, the denial of theory, masquerading as open-mindedness.

"What I don't want to do, what would be a very craven attitude would be to now say, 'No no no, we never meant anything.' We'll stick to our guns. The reason we started talking about this was because we felt that it pointed out that something was going on. The question was, 'Is something really happening? If there is something happening, what is it, how can we best talk about it?' I absolutely defend the notion of New Weird, insofar as it was a looking at the state of the field and saying there are certain things going on that unite otherwise very disparate writers. That doesn't mean they're the only interesting writers – there are many writers whose work I think is fantastic but is not New Weird.

"New Weird not only will become cliché, it already has started to become cliché. Without turning my back on it, this is partly why I'm not going to talk about New Weird any more (as I explain in the forthcoming Nebula Anthology). You can already see books which are second generation riffs on some of the stuff that's been coming out over the last five years. And it doesn't mean they're all bad – standing on the shoulders of what's gone before is part of what we all do. But the point at which it becomes a mannerism, and we're like 'Oh god, another fantasy-sf-hybrid-with-dark-gothic-grotesque-lovecraftian-monsters, yawn,' fine – then, time to write something else: history's moved on. And then thirty years later we'll come back to it (maybe). I just don't see a problem with that."

- China Miéville's latest novel is *The Iron Council*, from Macmillan. Whether it is, or is not, New Weird, is open for debate.

## ...or is it?

Matrix asked some of those authors linked to the New Weird what they thought about it. Below Steve Cockayne, Justina Robson and Jon Courtenay Grimwood have their say.



"When I wrote the 'Legends of the Land' sequence, I had no idea that it was going to be hailed as part of a new movement in fiction. I didn't even set out to write in any particular style or genre, and my influences included detective fiction,

Hollywood horror, books I had read as a child, and the characters and stories from my family's marionette theatre. Having collected a mixed bag of ideas that seemed worth putting on paper, I then let the content dictate the format and came out with a narrative structure that more or less did the job. When critics and academics started praising my work as ground-breaking, innovative, etc, I couldn't have been more astonished! I'm delighted and flattered to have produced something that people are finding so interesting, but all I have really done has been to write the books that I wanted to write." (Steve Cockayne)



"New Weird is a marketing phenomenon whereby a group of writers who have similar sensibilities and a very contemporary and literary edge are all writing their own thing, but with that slant going on: using the best and most fun tools out of all the possible writing

boxes, not limited to any particular genre. The fact that, as a label, New Weird is so ambiguous has made it really successful in terms of creating a stir." (Justina Robson)



"I'm not sure anyone actually knows what New Weird means but I figure it's a particular sensibility and a way of both looking at things and constructing fiction. The defining characteristic seems to be a willingness to use tropes from other genres

and mix them, and I certainly didn't mind discovering myself on *Locus's* New Weird list because bricolage is what I do and what I've always done." (Jon Courtenay Grimwood)

# Multiple personalities in order

Jane Johnson has many lives. She is Jude Fisher, putting the sex back in fantasy with the *Fool's Gold* trilogy, and (with M John Harrison) she's Gabriel King. Plus, when she's not being two (one and a half?) other people, she's also editor at HarperCollins. Claire Weaver finds out how she copes.

Jane Johnson has worked in the publishing industry for twenty years, and has been writing professionally for ten of those years. She has a degree in English Literature and a Masters in Old Icelandic ("I've never liked to tread the mainstream line," she says). She got into publishing through remarkable synchronicity, starting out at George Allen & Unwin Publishers, who handled Tolkien – one of Jane's favourite authors.

"I've always adored fantasy and mythology: the wellspring of all human stories. At its best the genre is limitless, challenging, exciting, stirring, disturbing in a way more realistic fiction cannot aspire to.

"I've been writing since I was about 6 – animals stories, ghost stories, gruesome horror stories; the first novel (ritually burned) when I was 23, and then, professionally, since 1995.

"People have very set ideas of what fantasy is, and to some extent I am working within those perceived ideas: it's a made up world, it's quasi-medieval, it has magic in it. It has monsters in it; gods and goddesses and a whole order of cosmology. But I wanted to be a little bit more subversive with the genre. The disappointment with the genre is that you don't always feel the people are as real as they should be; that they are stereotypes or archetypes walking around in a landscape. The most important thing about any story is the people; how are you supposed to identify with what you are reading unless you can feel that those people are as real as people you'd meet down the pub. So one of the components of people being real is sex, I find it extraordinary that it is missing so much from



Jane Johnson: All of Jude Fisher and half of Gabriel King

fantasy. It's as if everybody has had their bits cut off. I also think sex is an incredibly powerful motivator. It wasn't a completely conscious decision to revise Tolkien by putting sex into fantasy."

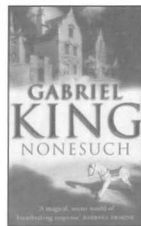
The *Fool's Gold* novels are written under the name Jude Fisher, and in the late nineties Jane collaborated with M John Harrison to produce four novels with the pseudonym Gabriel King (the names come from her

favourite author, Thomas Hardy (Gabriel came from a character in *Far From the Madding Crowd*; Jude from *Jude the Obscure*), plus the Fisher King, that seminal character in Arthurian legend).

"The collaboration with Mike Harrison came about because we'd lived together for many years and always talked about writing something together: then we split up and promptly did so! We have very complementary skills and interests, so it was a terrific way to work and I learned a huge amount about writing. The way it worked was we created a basic plotline and fragmented it through three or four characters and narrative threads, which we then wrote separately and wove together. Writing solo is a very different process for me: it's much less planned, more organic, more chaotic! And rather more lonely, too. There might be more from 'Gabriel King' in the future, if the right idea comes along."

Jane sees her fiction as approachable, realistic, and fun: it's not high fantasy, it's not clichéd or stale.

"Writing is a very unconscious process; I've had so many epiphanies and shocks, things that I had no intention whatsoever of doing. I can hear the voices of my own characters in my head as I write, and they're just not like anyone else's, having a more contemporary sound and being based on people I know. They have their own rhythms and dialogue tics, and I have a conversational style of writing which is very much less stylised than many of the writers I work with. I don't want to use archaisms: using made up and stilted language distances the reader from the characters. I understand it sometimes when



"I find it extraordinary that it is missing from so much fantasy. It's as if everybody has had their bits cut off."

Jane Johnson

you want a high style, and some books do seem to require a high style because they're very noble books – but I don't write noble fiction. It's very ignoble in many ways; my characters don't behave well a lot of the time. I just wanted to make a transparency between the reader and the people that they were experiencing in the book.

"I was absolutely determined to bring this massive narrative to a satisfying shape in a proper trilogy: three is a special, strong number: it felt important to me to develop and complete the entire saga in the space of the three books offered. The third volume – *Rose Of The World* – is pretty long, though!"

*Sorcery Rising* was originally published by Earthlight, the imprint of Simon & Schuster which met its demise in 2003.

"I lost two editors within a year: John Jarrold, my original editor, whose passion and commitment had won the books at auction; and then Darren Nash, who had been the marketing manager for Earthlight and was persuaded to move sideways to take on the editorial responsibility. It was pretty hard and upsetting, both personally and professionally, and left me feeling disillusioned and adrift. That's not to denigrate the commitment of the rest of Simon & Schuster's team: the sales force have been amazing throughout. I've never met so many publishing people who actually read and love the books.

"Editing is quite a creative process – I like to prompt my authors to produce the best book they possibly can by asking difficult questions and by making suggestions. One of the things that has happened as a result of my writing is that I understand that process a lot better – I understand the difficulties a lot better. It's a completely mysterious and uncontrollable process and I'm a lot more sympathetic towards authors now when they're having a hard time.

"I am a very honest editor, much to the chagrin of some of my authors: but then I don't think you're doing your job properly unless you're being completely honest with people. I don't praise where it's not due: it's not my way.



"What makes me say yes to a novel?

It's the voice: if it grabs me. Vitality is the most important thing – it's a quite rare skill to be able to produce something that gives off energy. You really have to grab the reader's attention and make them want to read on. There are no formulas for that, but having interesting characters, good dialogue and obviously a very good plot is what you have to do, but really it's the individual voice of the author that's the most important thing – making it capture people's attention. The thing about this area – our community of editors – is that we're all different. If it doesn't find a home with one it may well find a home with another. It really has to strike a personal chord: just be yourself and let your voice come through. Don't strive to please other people – if you please yourself and are proud of what you've done then you're much more likely to get published.

"You have to be quite arrogant to be a writer – you have to feel that it's worthwhile and that other people's criticism is not worth a damn. Writers' groups are great

for moral support

but they can be phenomenally destructive. It's such a subjective process; it can destroy you. You have to be very confident, you have to know what you want to achieve and feel that you're doing it right.

"It's not a pleasant process when you're facing a problem in a book, but I do believe that things are going on in the back of your head that you don't know about and you have to give them a chance to come out. Every writer is different – everyone writes in a completely different way to everyone else. What I can say is just keep at it, because it will come. I don't believe in writers' block. Just keep hammering at it and it will give way."

Writing and editing are both full-time jobs that few others would attempt to combine.

"The two careers don't mix at all, really, since they're each so all-consuming. I work three days in the office, and one day at home; but in that time management to fit in the same full-time job I've been doing for the past ten years. That leaves three days for writing.

An average writing day consists of me finding umpteen small tasks around the house to put off writing until self-disgust reaches such a pitch (around noon) that I can't put it off any longer. Then I work till I'm exhausted (around 6 or 7, with many small breaks for stretching, coffee, talking to the cat). Then I put on the loudest music I can find and pogo around the house (I once knocked myself unconscious to EMF's *Unbelievable* in my cottage in Buckinghamshire, which had unfortunately low beams...) to get rid of pent-up energy. Then I read through, self-edit, add new bits and pieces and always leave it in the middle of a scene for the next day.

"Conventions are weird for me as an author and editor I'm perfectly happy for people to network with me, that's exactly what these things are for as far as I'm concerned – and it's nice to feel professional and wanted! As an author it's quite weird because I've seen it for so long from the other side of the fence. I always find it quite strange that people want to talk to me as an author. I find publicity can sometimes be a trial – it's not what authors are about, but in the modern age it seems that this is increasingly what we want. I do think that the work should speak for itself."

Looking ahead, what should we expect to see next from Jane?

"I'm currently writing my second children's book: the first one, *The Secret Country*, comes out in the spring next year, and *Rose Of The World*, the final volume of *Fool's Gold*, is due out around the same time. And there's a *Complete Visual Companion* for *Lord of the Rings*, including all the things we weren't allowed to show or talk about, coming in October this year.

"At Harper Collins I'm putting the final touches to the edit of *Cold Granite*, a superb debut thriller by young Scottish writer Stuart MacBride; am reading the manuscript for *In The Night Room* by Peter Straub, which has to go into production swiftly for publication this autumn. And any day Clive Barker is due to send in his short story collection, which includes the death of Pinhead. I can't wait to read it – we've been talking about it for years!"



You have to be quite arrogant to be a writer – you have to feel that it's worthwhile and that other people's criticism is not worth a damn.

Jane Johnson

# Magical mystery

**Susanna Clarke** writes stories in tiny pieces that she rearranges until they makes sense. Tom Hunter talks to her about her first novel, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, and wonders whether it would have been easier if she'd done it with magic.

**Q** *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* is a big book in every sense. How long were you writing it for?

**A** I began writing the novel in January 1993 and finished around October 2003. Except for the last three months I was working full time. I also wrote and published seven short stories, most of which took about four months to do. Apart from the time spent on short stories I was writing the novel continually, at various levels of concentration. Three or four years in, I realised I had some wonderful pieces of writing, but they didn't really resemble a novel. So I had to go back to the beginning and start again – that was quite painful. I had to learn a new way of writing – it took a very long time to write the first five or six chapters. I'm sure I became more focussed once I'd acquired an agent and b) got a contract for publication – but both of those things happened quite late on.

**Q** At what point did you realise that all the pieces you were writing were a novel?

**A** It was always clear that this was a story on a fairly large canvas, i.e. a novel. Also I had no interest in writing short stories and never actually tried until forced to do so by the tutors of a writing course I went on. (Their names were Colin Greenland and Geoff Ryman.) Once I'd written that first story, Neil Gaiman asked me to do one for the Sandman prose anthology – *Book of Dreams*.

**Q** The idea of building up your novel in pieces is fascinating but hard to imagine. How does it work for you?

**A** A scene will come to me in little scraps of dialogue or phrases and I write those down. Then, after a while, I have some more ideas, so I write those down. Then I try to thread them into sentences and make a coherent passage. I go over and over the piece and I move everything around until it works. I wouldn't recommend this way of writing to anyone. It's just

the only way I know how to do it.

**Q** You mentioned Neil Gaiman already, and you're also a fan of Alan Moore. Have you ever been tempted to follow his lead and use magic, English or otherwise, to aid the writing process?

**A** Once upon a time I'm sure I would have preferred to have the working method of someone who begins at the first sentence of a book and goes on to the last sentence and then stops. But now I'm superstitiously attached to my own method. Even if I could write another way, I'd be scared to try in case the result wasn't any good.

Alan Moore's magical method sounds most intriguing – at one point he seemed to be writing a quite impossible number of monthly comics. However I've never tried using magic to write. I don't actually believe in magic – not really. Occasionally I'll look at a favourite pack of tarot cards to generate some ideas, but that's more to do with the fact that I find the images inspiring or evocative, rather than anything to do with the "tarotness".



© Spiral Enterte



**Q** OK, that's one end of the creative spectrum, how about the practicalities of research?

**A** I do two sorts of research. There's the very straightforward sort. (What sort of guns did Napoleonic soldiers carry? Where exactly was Wellington on the morning of 13<sup>th</sup> July 1812?)

And then there's the vague sort. For example I might read about myths to do with beekeeping, not because I'm going to write about beekeeping or myths. In fact I don't really know why it's a good idea to read about beekeeping myths at all, but I just have a feeling it's the right thing to do. And maybe what I learn there may crop up in quite unexpected ways in my writing. And maybe it won't.

**Q** And finally, Strange and Norrell may appear the foremost magicians of their time, but it's the character of the Raven King that really personifies English magic. What does this term mean to you and were there any precedents for this character?

**A** I wanted to have a magician with no name, because I

thought it was a cool thing to have and because Tolkien and Le Guin both have one. Nobody believes me about Tolkien but it is actually true. Unfortunately I hadn't realised that it was a bad idea to have a main character with no name – as a consequence he acquired more names than most people. He's the Raven King, the Black King, the King of the North and John Uskglass. Plus he has a fairy name that's been forgotten.

In the first part of *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* magic is very much a matter of scholarship and books. Strange and Norrell are reviving an old branch of learning that's fallen into decay. Like other arts and disciplines, it's difficult to learn and it's full of peculiar technical terms. But as the book progresses the two magicians learn more about the true nature of English magic. They realise it is part of England itself, imbedded in the English landscape. This was a very obvious connection for me to make. For me England is a pretty magical place. Sometimes a feature of a landscape – a line of trees in a field; a perfectly ordinary house on a hill – can have the eeriest effect upon you that you can't quite explain.

“Three or four years in, I realised I had some wonderful pieces of writing, but they didn't really resemble a novel. So I had to go back to the beginning and start again...”

Susanna Clarke

JONATHAN  
STRANGE



MR NORRELL



by  
Susanna Clarke

*Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* is published by Bloomsbury USA on 8th September 2004 and by Bloomsbury UK on 30th September 2004.

# Wild EnFusiasm

Gary Fry, editor of *Fusing Horizons*, talks about the pitfalls and problems of setting up your own small press magazine when you've no experience of publishing.

Folk have suggested that I was brave starting a mag', but for me it had always been an ambition. There's an element of self-indulgence, I guess, in pronouncing oneself an editor. However, as birds fly and fish swim, I've been driven to creativity as long as I can remember (increasingly less as I move inexorably into my thirties!).

When I was thirteen years old, I was addicted to computer games, and also to reading every monthly review mag' released. I even decided to start one of my own, which never got off the ground, on account of limited ability. Still, the intention was there, and ostensibly it was never truly suppressed.

My reading developed and I picked up novels and short stories. I started writing, principally episodes of the TV show *Blackadder*, which I shudder to contemplate in hindsight. However, all was in place for a preoccupation with literary matters, and after studying for a degree - somewhat tangentially - in psychology, I started writing in the free time my present PhD affords. It was then that I decided to start up a mag'!

*Fusing Horizons* came about because I wished to contribute something to the sadly depressed current market in dark fiction. I stole my title from a phrase of the philosopher Hans Gadamer, who regards the reading process as a subtle intertwining of authorial intention and reader expectations. I believe imaginative fiction illustrates this issue most pertinently. I was keen to develop an ethos of sound storytelling with stylish prose and ambitious thematic concerns.

My first task was to find a hook. For many years I'd been a fan of the great Ramsey Campbell, and after having some contact with him more recently (he bought my first short

## Highlights so far:

Interviews with Michael Marshall Smith, Jonathan Carroll, and Stephen Gallagher.

Reprint of rare Ramsey Campbell tale 'The Invocation', unavailable in the UK since 1990.

'Diversion End' by Sam Hayes (issue one) receives an honourable mention from Ellen Datlow in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* (2004).

story for his anthology *Gathering the Bones*), I decided to approach him for a reprint, to which he gladly assented. The next thing was to contact other fine scribes in the field - Joel Lane, Andrew Hook, Joolz Denby, et al - and ask them if they had anything to offer. Most did, and issue one, with so many other sterling efforts by newer writers, is generally regarded as a corker!

I confess that my earliest attempts to publish this were naive. I'd planned to put it out on my inkjet printer, maybe photocopying other sections - the quality of the

production was less important than the star content, I reckoned... Nooope. Not even practicable. After my first few hundred or so sheets, my cartridge ran out and there were thousands left! Fool. Nevertheless, all was not lost; ever resourceful and optimistic, I contacted the printing department of my employers (The University of Huddersfield) who quoted very reasonable prices. But

even then my problems weren't over.

Inexperienced in such matters, I didn't know how to devise a file that was printer-friendly. Fortunately I'd got to know a few other people who'd gone through the same process, and following advice and help on pdf (from Marie O'Regan of *Elastic Press*) I was able to get a usable file to the printers. However, my illustrations

looked feeble - what to do about them? Well, I took a cautious route and had only the text produced, in order that I might add the drawings from my home PC, extracting each relevant page and then rearranging, before folding to staple.

If these sound to you like the actions of a plonker, you'd be right. What did I know about any of this? I was all burning enthusiasm and little know-how. Since then,

I've learned several more things about printing, the most important of which is 'let them do all the work!' Somehow, even if it costs a little more, you must have the pros manage the finished product. Presently, on the fringes of issue three, I've finally reached a stage where the mag' is ready to post as soon as I collect it. If you want to publish right way - that is, by preserving your sanity - there's no other method. Speak to those who've been there before first. Ask away: everyone in the small press is most forthcoming and friendly.

Didto all the marketing folk.

I have three distributors in the US, and I tackle matters at home pretty much by myself. Target major message boards, get yourself well-known; have writers believe in you by expressing thoughtful opinion about existing work. The aim is to be trustworthy, both as a handler of people's cherished work, and perhaps more importantly, of their money! Pretty soon

you'll have a stack of cash coming in; it's important to honour the faithful individuals have shown in you.

My intention is to keep to quarterly deadlines, improve every issue of *Fusing Horizons*. Issue one had 88 pages, issue two 96, and now the third boasts 100! There are fourteen stories and fifteen *Fusing Atoms* (mini-tales of around 150 words) in this. I hope to go from strength to strength.

Most crucially, I think, I aim to keep the price reasonable: £2.65 a copy, £9.99 per annual subscription.

## Fusing Horizons:

£2.65 per issue, Four issue subscription: £9.99

Cheques payable "Gary Fry" to: 19, Ruffield Side, Delph Hill, Wyke, Bradford, West Yorkshire, BD12 8DP, United Kingdom.

[www.fusinghorizons.com](http://www.fusinghorizons.com)



If these sound to you like the actions of a plonker, you'd be right. What did I know about any of this? I was all burning enthusiasm and little know-how.

Gary Fry

# Quercus maximus

With *Interzone* under new management, its long-term production manager and sometime guest editor, Paul Brazier, has gone it alone again, this time with e-zine and book-length collection *Quercus*. **Martin Sketchley** asks how, when and why?

There's a new online fiction magazine – *Quercus* – from longstanding *Interzone* stalwart, Paul Brazier. Brazier launched his own science fiction magazine – *SF Nexus* – in 1990. This proved very difficult to get into circulation, and limped along for four years until Brazier and then *Interzone* editor David Pringle agreed to merge the magazines, with Brazier taking on the role of Production Editor, and acting as guest editor on several issues.

Of *Quercus*, Brazier says: "It was plain to me that *Interzone* was failing as a print magazine for the past couple of years, so I was quietly developing this electronic alternative with the hope that we might be able to migrate the magazine to the internet and turn it back into a paying proposition. David's announcement that he was ending his involvement with the magazine came as a bolt from the blue. I took the opportunity to demerge myself, and the quiet development I'd been conducting suddenly accelerated, and became very public. As I had to set up all the back office services from scratch, it's been a bit of a scramble, but I hope it's been worth the wait.

On the *Quercus* website, Brazier says: "We're not doing po-faced literature here, this is meant to be fun, and the quirkiest the better." I wondered what kind of "quirkiness" he was looking for, exactly. "Quirky as in individual and perhaps a little off-beam," says Brazier. "Why do some people make us laugh when we talk to them? It's because they know how to venture just far enough outside the known to achieve disjunction from reality, and then allow us to snap back with their commentary. They surprise us into seeing the world differently. This is what I mean by quirky: It'll become much clearer when the site goes live. I've already accepted several stories, each of which is quirky in its own way. Steve Aylett has come up with a wonderfully bizarre piece of space opera for *Quercus*. There's also a story from new author Jeff Spock that I fished out of the *Interzone* slushpile last year: a first encounter story with an alien that smells of zucchini..."



Brazier's known for his relationship with *Interzone*, and people are likely to see *Quercus* as being a spin off of that. I wondered if that would be a fair assessment, or whether Brazier's got a different take on things? "If I didn't have a different take on things I wouldn't have tried to set up *SF Nexus*. But you have to be pragmatic. David Pringle kept *Interzone* going long past anyone's expectations, and you can only admire him for that. I like to think I helped a little, and the opportunity to do the occasional guest editorial was a welcome outlet for my occasional frustrations with the kind of stories he did publish.

So, yes, my taste is somewhat different from the mainstream of *Interzone's* output, but I was glad it was there, so I could occasionally give my ideas expression."

What has Brazier learned from his experience with *Interzone*, I asked, and how will this affect the way he runs *Quercus*. "Probably the most important thing I've learned is not to try to run the thing on a shoestring. David Pringle spent the past 10 years just about getting by. If readers really don't want to pay a going rate for fiction, then they won't get it. There is only so far that goodwill will stretch. If *Quercus* doesn't at least break even then I'll

knock it on the head, and a darned sight sooner than David did with *Interzone*."

So how much will a *Quercus* subscription cost? "I haven't set a definite rate yet, but it's likely to be around £60 per annum. For this, subscribers will be able to read all the fiction published on the website over the year as it is accepted, and will also receive two collectable hardback books featuring that fiction. These books will not be available to buy in any other way – they will only be available to subscribers, and I intend to limit the print run to approximately the number of members at the time of going to press. I hope there will be a mass market paperback edition, but the subscribers' edition will be a genuine, high quality first edition with, hopefully, several new stories from high profile authors alongside the newer writers."

So how many stories will there be in each issue? "There won't be a story count," says Brazier, "but there should be around 250,000 words in each book. For comparison, *Interzone* had around 35,000 words in each issue, which amounts to 210,000 words a year. I also intend for there to be a feedback process, rather like Analog's Analytical Laboratory, where the most popular story in each issue wins a bonus for its author. This is one of the technical problems that is holding up the launch, but I'm adamant that this must work. There should also be an email discussion forum where readers can discuss stories as they appear, which is another reason to have a new story published on the site every week. I want the site to be fully interactive. There will also be other features – reviews, interviews, news – but these will be site-only, and added when the fiction side is up and running properly."

Brazier says that each issue of *Quercus* will have a theme. I asked him whether he'll inform potential contributors of the theme when commissioning work, or whether a theme will be decided upon if there seem to be several stories covering a similar subject. "Each issue of *Interzone* that I guest edited had a theme, however loose. I did a Christmas issue, an Australian



Probably the most important thing I've learned [from *Interzone*] is not to try and run things on a shoestring. David Pringle spent the past ten years just about getting by.

Paul Brazier

issue, a John Christopher issue, a false anniversary issue... The idea of the *Quercus* website is to stimulate writers to produce something, so the hope is that they will find the site, read the spec and go away and write me a story. I want to be able to put a new story up on the site every week, as the idea is that the site will be a focus for readers and writers. I should also add here that I will pay on acceptance, which means practically I will pay when the story appears on the site, not when it appears in the book. And no, I won't be informing potential writers of the theme – this will be announced on the site. The theme for the first issue is The West Pier Gazette.

"Brighton, where I live, has always been famous for having two piers: the Palace Pier and the West Pier. The Palace Pier was rescued from dilapidation by the Noble Organisation, people who run slot machine arcades all over England. Recently, they changed the name to Brighton Pier, but everyone still calls it The Palace Pier. In its day the West Pier was where retired gentry went to relax and promenade, but it was closed in the early 70s and slated for demolition. A Save Our Pier campaign started, and various financial schemes have started in an effort to get the West Pier refurbished.

"In the intervening 30 years the pier has gradually fallen to pieces: a barge under tow broke loose in a storm and crashed into it, then arsonists set fire to the two major segments, and various bits have been demolished to make the structure 'safe'. This resulted in the concert hall partially collapsing, then recently falling into the sea. The West Pier's days are numbered, but right now it represents a romantic focus for a story – after all, they filmed part of *Oh What A Lovely War* on it. The stories I've already received show just what can be done, and I hope they will stimulate more writers to try. I've already got a couple of stories from *Interzone* stalwarts. Daniel Kaysen has done me a super West Pier ghost story called *The Twilight Sort*, and Nigel Brown has imagined what novel use the West Pier might be put to in future.

"The theme for the issue after The West Pier Gazette is already decided: The Spike. When the West Pier Gazette goes to press I will announce the theme for the issue after The Spike. This means that at any one time there will be two collections in preparation, so writers have plenty of time to come



up with new stories."

I asked Brazier what he meant by "The Spike." I tend to think of themes as a bit like the stick that you put into a candy-floss machine. There is all this creative talent whirling around out there. All it needs is a focal point, something to write about. If I make the theme too concrete, it will limit writers too much. If I make it too vague or don't explain it enough then they won't get any stimulation from it. I think "The Spike" is a wonderfully evocative theme because it can mean so much. To give several examples from my own perception: outside London Bridge station a piece of modern sculpture was erected six or seven years ago. It resembles the gnomon or virgule of a sundial in that it is a spike of masonry that leans about twenty degrees away from the vertical. There's no plaque to explain what its meant to be and as soon as it was finished and the construction debris and barriers cleared away it became scarred up to about four feet above the ground as skateboarders began to ride along it. I just wonder what the architect and the skateboarder might have to say to one another.

"Samuel R Delany wrote a wonderful novel called *Triton*. One character is called The Spike. She runs a street theatre company in a space colony. Central character

The site will stand or fall by my reputation and the quality of the fiction. People just have to take a look at my achievements... to see what you can expect from the future with *Quercus*.

Paul Brazier

Bron, a pre-feminist man, falls for her. In order to try to attract her, he has a gender-change operation. She's perplexed because it's not his gender but his character that she didn't find attractive, and that hasn't changed. Dan Simmons' stunning science fiction novel *Hyperion* features a creature called a Shrike, which is a bird of prey that catches food then impales it on the thorns of a bush until it is ready to eat.

"Finally, in *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, Buffy's second vampire lover is Spike. Spike transmigrates over to Angel where he becomes even more of what he was in Buffy, the person who describes the scene as it is without side as he has no interest in any outcome. Spike is the voice of unvarnished truth. I would like to see more stories of unvarnished truth. It's bloody difficult."

Brazier's keen to highlight just what he doesn't want. "I'm not interested in crop-sharing stories. They are the antithesis of what I want. If you can't make up your own scenario, describe it and resolve it in a short story, then you can't write what I want. I don't want you to redescribe what I think The Spike is. I want to be surprised by your take on the idea."

So when can we expect *Quercus* to be live? "The schedule is beginning to shape up like this: end-August 2004, site launched; end-February 2005 *Quercus* 1 – The

West Pier Gazette published and theme for *Quercus* 3 announced; end-August 2005, *Quercus* 2 – The Spike published.

There should then be a new book every six months. If it takes off and makes lots of money (which I doubt) it might appear more often, but it's more likely that I'll try different parallel projects.

So who is Brazier hoping to receive submissions from? "It's often been said that if everyone who sent a story to *Interzone* subscribed to the magazine it would never have had any financial problems. With this in mind, all subscribers to *Quercus* may submit as many stories as they like, and they'll be given reading priority over all other submissions. Various professional authors will be asked to provide stories, and many have already promised work. I'm afraid that if you're not a known author, either professional or semi-professional, then it's unlikely that your work will be of a high enough standard to be considered for *Quercus*. However, all writers have potential, and they are welcome to submit their stories to the *Quercus* online workshop – [sendmeastory.co.uk](http://sendmeastory.co.uk). There's a £5 reading fee (waived for subscribers) for this workshop, but for this you're guaranteed a professional opinion. Also, for those writers who are happy to take part, their story will appear on the site with the editor's opinion appended. I hope this will generate lively debate in the *Quercus* email forum.

"The site will stand or fall by my reputation and the quality of the fiction," says Brazier. "People just have to take a look at my achievements as guest editor of *Interzone* and editor of *SF Nexus* to see what you can expect from the future with *Quercus*."

## URLs of relevance to this issue

For information on *Quercus* - including online subscriptions - go to:  
[www.quercus-sf.com](http://www.quercus-sf.com) &  
[www.sendmeastory.co.uk](http://www.sendmeastory.co.uk)

If you have any specifically web-related news that might be of interest to *Matrix* readers, or ideas for future articles, please send me an e-mail at the address below with the relevant URLs.

Martin Sketchley

[www.msketchley.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:www.msketchley.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk)  
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WELCOME to a new concept in internet fiction

The *Quercus* publishing project is transparent and interactive. Click anywhere to see what we mean

*Quercus* will publish two collections of short stories a year as collectable hard back books only available to members

As stories are accepted for the collection, they will appear here but they will only be available to members

Anyone may submit stories. However, our standards are high. See the submissions guidelines for more details

See the sidebar/page for the full list of membership benefits, subscription rates and a very special offer

**Quercus**  
SCIENCE FICTION



**Letters (continued from page 6)**  
and avoiding the excesses of blank marketing-speak, the challenges of communicating about our changing world (and its fictional counterparts) now seem as vital to SF as charting the impact of those changing technologies used to in the territory that SF has always made its own.

**M.G. Sherlock Writes:** Further to Ross Lewis's letter (*Matrix* July/August 2004): in a 1979 article *Hollywood and I*, Isaac Asimov announced that *I Robot* was to be filmed with a script by Harlan Ellison of which Asimov approved.

But the project seems to have gone into the black hole of planned but unproduced Hollywood movies, as no more was heard of it.

Ross was right, however, about the new version directed by Alex Proyas being good. He shouldn't worry too much about Asimov's ideas being misrepresented, as the movie's credits claim only that it is 'suggested by' (not even 'based on') the master's works.

The SFX are excellent but don't overwhelm the theme, which is the crucial question – debated since the nineteenth century and will no doubt continue to be discussed in the first and far beyond – of whether machines could become sufficiently complex to develop minds of their own (here, their motives turn out altruistic – they're trying to save flawed humanity from itself).

Will Smith and Bridget Moynahan are a likeable leading couple, and the robots themselves, with their Wilfred Hyde-White features and polite English-manservant demeanor even when they're getting rebellious, join Gord, Robbie, R2D2 and the small graduating robots from *Silent Running* in the historic gallery of memorable androids.

Go see!

**Marin McGrath responds:** You can read the *Matrix* review of *I, Robot* starting on page ten of this issue.

On purely aesthetic basis *I wasn't* so keen on the "I Mac" style robots – not that they weren't fabulous technical achievements but just because I thought the film did a great job with the older, more mechanical looking machines.

Any one can list great robots but what are the worst? My votes goes to that rubbish bomb-disposal thing with the irritating voice from Short Circuit and Robin Williams's effort in another Asimov 'adaptation' *Bicentennial Man* – at least Woody Allen was trying to be funny in *The Sleeper*.

# Of fans and dreaming spires

There was a fly in the room. In fact, later it became apparent that there was a fly in every room, and we had to consider the possibility that there was a whole gang of them, operating as a team, but Claire was quite convinced there was only the one but that it was working to a plan. It would flit around the post-industrial ductwork in the ceiling, and then descend to buzz a random – or, who knows, perhaps carefully-selected – audience member, before bashing itself against the window for a few seconds.

It was, I thought, almost certainly a metaphor for some aspect of Veronica Hollinger's paper on 'Post-genre Science Fiction: Gibson and Atwood' but I'm sure I'm not clever enough to work out what it might be. And I kept being side-tracked by the absence of any consistent view on the pronunciation of Istvan Csicsery-Ronasy.

We were at the Science Fiction Foundation's 'Commonwealth of Science Fiction' conference in Liverpool's Foresight Centre, (5-8 August), with an assortment of academics, a smattering of writers and even the odd fan or two. The term 'conference' is important here; this wasn't a 'convention', for all the occasional similarities and even some familiar faces. In this world the programme features papers on 'Monstrous Makers and their Progeny: Exploring Gendered Subjectivity through the Figure of the Replicant as Doll'. Can a fan be at home here whose only credentials are a not-very-good 'A' level in English and a Preliminary One swimming certificate? Are we deep into the territory of – using the parlance of post-colonial interstitial discourse – 'academic wank'?

Actually, I'd say that there are many fans who could get a good deal out of events such as this, and indeed that fan-run conventions could pick up a few tips from its operation. Firstly, the Commonwealth of Science Fiction had the benefit of sponsorship from Middlesex University and the University



of Liverpool, which enabled it to assemble a truly impressive international guest roster in Damien Broderick (occasionally-Texas-resident Australian), Jon Courtenay Grimwood (Maltese-born world-traveling Brit), Peter Halasz (Canadian, and probably the first 'fan' guest of such a conference) and Nalo Hopkinson (Caribbean-born Canadian). Seriously, you're not likely to see such a line-up outside of a Worldcon, and here it was augmented by attendees such as Australian writers K J Bishop, Stephen Dedman, and Sean McMullen; critic and encyclopaedist John Clute; and Locust reviewer Gary K Wolfe.

The programme itself consisted of paper sessions (typically two or three 20-minute presentations followed by questions), panel discussions, and individual guest items. Whilst it's not unknown for participants to rewrite their papers on the hoof – several had changed their titles from that stated in the printed programme – it's rather refreshing to see people who have given some thought to the subject in question days, weeks, and even months in advance of the event. How unlike the home life... etc.

The more chaotic convention experience is partially down to organisers who don't always bother to contact programme participants in advance, but there does seem to be an over-reliance on simply winging it on the day. We were also spared the kind of fanish free-spirited attitude that says we're all equal here, all our points are valid, and we should therefore feel at liberty to make them whenever we wish without bothering with such niceties as waiting for question sessions or the chair

to recognise us. There are times when this is actually the right way to do things, but there are times when it isn't; and I fear the difference isn't always recognised. Sadly, I suspect this one will never catch on.

You can tell I'm not a proper academic, mind. In the evenings – back at our billets in the Adelphi Hotel of not-so-blessed fanish memory – my thoughts turned not so much to 'Fluid (Ex)Changes: Embodiment, Myth and Queer Maternity in The Kappa Child and Green Grass, Running Water' but rather to the extent to which it's possible or indeed desirable to increase fan attendance at events of this kind. The problem is, there isn't really an answer which doesn't involve some degree of elitism. This conference, and indeed its predecessor in 2001, derives something from the balance of academics, writers, and fans, and a significant increase in the weighting of any one group would change the dynamic. At the same time, I'm sure there are plenty of fans who would get something out of this, and indeed make a meaningful contribution, but who are put off by the 'conference' label and the sense that this is not for them. I have no answers, but if you're interested in the serious discussion of SF I suggest that you keep an eye out for future events of this kind.

Speaking of which: membership of Interaction (2005 Worldcon in Glasgow) is £95 until the end of November 2004 which sounds pretty horrendous, I know, but it's not going to get any cheaper. You might also like to note that membership of the Worldcon brings nominating and voting rights for the 2005 Hugo Awards. You have to have joined the convention before 31 January 2005 to nominate. If you've been in any way inspired by my comments on the Commonwealth of Science Fiction conference, you may wish to note that there will be an academic track running within the convention, themed on 'The Matters of Britain'. And all less than a year away now...

# Is small still beautiful?

## Eligibility criteria

### Best Novel

The **Best Novel** award is open to any novel-length work of sf or fantasy first published in the UK in 2004. (Serialised novels are eligible provided the publication date of the concluding part is in 2004.) If a novel has been previously published elsewhere, but it hasn't been published in the UK until 2004, it will be eligible.

### Best Short Fiction

The **Best Short Fiction** award is open to any shorter work of sf or fantasy, up to and including novellas, first published in 2004 (in a magazine, book, or online) including books and magazines published outside the UK.

### Best Artwork

The **Best Artwork** award is open to any single image of sf or fantasy artwork that first appeared in 2004. Whether or not an image is science fictional or fantastic is perhaps the most subjective judgement call within these awards (but the more information you can give me about it, the better). Provided the artwork hasn't been published before 2004 it doesn't matter where it appears.

Anything published by the BSFA itself, whether in the magazines, in book form or on the website, is not eligible. But the awards are open to works by BSFA members (including Council and committee members) provided they have been published elsewhere.

**Claire Briley** has been reading some short fiction and has opinions on it. What have you lazy lot been doing?

**T**hese past few weeks I have mostly been reading short fiction. This is not a thing that I usually do.

And that's just wrong. Here I am, a science fiction fan for 25 years, and yet I don't usually read sf short stories. I know that they're the pure form of the genre. I know that many of authors and readers alike prefer short fiction. I know that many 'classic' but oddly disappointing science fiction novels are really expansions of far superior short stories or novellas. I know all this. And yet the fact remains that I've tended to choose novels. Not necessarily long novels, but long enough, at least, for there to be scene-setting and characterisation and plot development: a beginning, middle and end, rather than just a neat idea and a twist.

That was my general opinion about short fiction when I embarked on a programme of reading – not for the purpose of improving my mind and raising my snafu consciousness, but because I had a vote. Yes, we're going to the Worldcon. I could tell you my own preferences, but by the time you read this the results will be known and this year's round of outrage about the actual winners will probably have died down so there'd be little additional pleasure from seeing how badly I got it wrong.

Still, I've read some good short fiction, with all those ingredients I think are necessary in a story; and I've read a few that were good despite not pretending to be a miniature version of a novel; and I read some that were less good. If asked to generalise wildly in a few dozen words I would say that I think the best of the short fiction

categories nominated from 2003 are better than those nominated for the retro Hugos for 1953, but that overall the standard from 1953 seems much higher. There are good reasons why this should be the case. We've had 50 years to think about what was good in 1953, to judge it by our own standards as well as considering contemporary readings, and to assess how it's stood the test of subsequent developments. So people nominating in these categories should have been able to pick some good stuff. And yet I believe that sf has developed, and is still developing, as a genre, so the quality of the 'best' should keep rising. What I think stops each and every shortlist from being better now than the equivalent of 50 years ago is the way that people nominate for the Hugo awards.

What I think stops even those works that do seem to deserve to be on the list from winning is the way that people vote for the Hugo awards. Lacking the critical skill of looking confident while bluffing, I try to read all the nominees for awards about which I want to have opinions. And I'm a particular old fart about voting: if I haven't read all the nominees in a category I usually don't vote. My suspicion is that many Hugo voters don't have such tender consciences, and this is of course Bad and Wrong. Those of you who suspect a related agenda for the BSFA awards may not be wrong. Let's just say that my goal here is to increase informed participation.

But can I really claim to be informed myself? OK, I've recently read 30 works of short fiction and I can rank them in order. I can tell you how many of them I thought were really good (four out of fifteen

from 2003, seven or eight from the same total in 1953). I can tell you how surprised and disappointed I was at the overall standard of the 2003 shortlisted short fiction. I can tell you that notwithstanding this I think that anyone who hasn't already should rush off and read Jeffrey Ford's 'The Empire of Ice Cream' (in Sci Fiction on sci-fi.com, from February last year) right after this column. But I can't have an opinion about whether the 2003 selection really was a reasonable proposition for the best of the year in the way I can, and do, about any contemporary shortlist of sf novels.

But are any of you any better?

I ask because so far this year – nearly two-thirds of the way through the year – I've received one nomination for the 2004 BSFA award for short fiction. And in the past two months, since I wrote my previous column, I've received none at all.

None at all, perhaps not entirely coincidentally, the number of works of short fiction published in 2004 that I've read as well. Reading what's apparently the best short fiction from last year and from 50 years ago hasn't converted me to wanting to read lots more. And this despite the fact I would give myself the opportunity to nominate for the Hugos as well as the BSFA award, thereby making the world a better place for science fiction fans at least.

So are you reading anything good these days? Or is it time for the last fan out of the magazine racks to please turn off the lights and lock the door for good? If not, cogent rebuttals, heartfelt polemics, invitations to step outside and nominations for the BSFA awards should be sent to the usual address...

## Nominations received

### Best Novel:

- \*Cloud Atlas – David Mitchell (Sceptre)
- Forty Signs of Rain – Kim Stanley Robinson (HarperCollins)
- Newton's Wake – Ken MacLeod (Orbit)
- \*Recursion – Tony Ballantyne (Tor)
- \*River of Gods – Ian McDonald (Simon & Schuster)
- \*The Etched City – K J Bishop (Tor)
- The Year of Our War – Steph Swainston (Gollancz SF)
- White Devils – Paul McAuley (Simon & Schuster)

### Best Artwork:

- Cover of Newton's Wake (US edition) Stephan Martinière
- Cover of Newton's Wake (UK edition) artist uncredited
- \*Cover of Recursion (shown right) Dominic Harman
- Cover of The Year of Our War Edward Miller



### Best Short Fiction:

- 'Deletion' – Steven Bratman (Analog, Jan/Feb)

\* = New since last listing

# incoming

## Events

### Octocon 2004 (Oct 16-17)

Tanith Lee, Storm Constantine, Harry Harrison, Kim Newman and many more are the guests at this year's Octocon at the Glenroyal Hotel in Maynooth, Co. Kildare, Ireland. The two-day con promises to be packed with panels, interviews, workshops, discussions and parties. Membership €40. [www.octocon.com](http://www.octocon.com) for more details



2-6 September – **Noreascon** (Worldcon), Boston

3 September – **British Fantasy Society open night**, Princess Louise pub, Holborn, London.

14 September – **SF reading at Borders**, Oxford Street, London – guest tba

22 September – **BSFA meeting**, Cory Doctorow interviewed by Simon Blisson, the Star Tavern, London ([www.bsfa.co.uk](http://www.bsfa.co.uk))

24-26 September – **Fantasycon 04**, Quality Hotel, Walsail

16-17 October – **Octocon 04** (see above)

27 October – **BSFA Meeting**, NM Brown interviewed by Maureen Kinkaid Speller, the Star Tavern, London ([www.bsfa.co.uk](http://www.bsfa.co.uk))

### Future Dates for Your Diary

5-7 November 2004: **Novacon**, Walsail ([www.novacon.org](http://www.novacon.org))

25-28 March 2005: **Paragon2** (Eastercon), Hinckley ([www.paragon2.org.uk](http://www.paragon2.org.uk))

4-8 August 2005: **Interaction** (Worldcon), Glasgow ([www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk](http://www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk))

14-17 Apr 2006: **Concussion** (Eastercon), Glasgow ([www.eastercon2006.org](http://www.eastercon2006.org))

## Movies

### Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow (Oct 1)

Jude Law, Gwyneth Paltrow and Angelina Jolie star in this intriguing retro-style adventure with everything except the actors generated by computers.



- 3 September – *Hellboy*
- 10 September – *Open Water*
- 17 September – *Colateral*
- *Code 46*

- 24 September – *The Punisher*
- 1 October – *Dead Man's Shoes*
- *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* (see above)

- 8 October – *Bubba Ho-Tep*
- *Resident Evil: Apocalypse*

- 15 October – *A Sound of Thunder*
- *Creep*

- 22 October – *Alien vs. Predator*

- 29 October – *Exorcist: The Beginning*
- *The Grudge*

## Comics

### Black Widow #1 (Sept 22)

Acclaimed SF author Richard Morgan (*Altered Carbon*, *Market Forces*) brings you old ghosts and new revelations about the original Black Widow in this six-part Marvel mini-series



- 1 September – *Bulseye* #1 (Marvel)
- *SMAX* (Wildstorm)
- 8 September – *Batman: War Drums* (DC)
- 15 September – *Hellblazer: Setting Sun* (Vertigo)
- *Madrox* #1 (Marvel)
- *Strange* (by J Michael Straczynski) #1 (Marvel)
- 22 September – *Black Widow* #1 (Marvel) (see above)
- 6 October – *Conan and the Daughters of Midora*
- 13 October – *Superman: True Brit* (by John Cleese) (DC)
- *Astro City: A Visitor's Guide* (DC Wildstorm)
- 20 October – *Arkham Asylum Anniversary Edition* (DC)
- *Toe Taps* (featuring George Romero) #1 (DC)
- 27 October – *Green Lantern: Rebirth* #1 (DC)

## In Print

### Crossing the Line Karen Traviss (Oct 26)

Sequel to the critically acclaimed debut *City of Pearl*, one of the best first contact novels of recent times and written by a BSFA member to watch.



### September

*Quicksilver Zenith* – Stan Nicholls. Final part of the Quicksilver Fantasy trilogy (*Voyager*)

*Banner of Souls* – Liz Williams (Spectra)

*Saints and Sinners* – Tom Holt (Orbit)

*The Bottle of Corrin* (Legends of Dune) – Brian Herbert, Kevin J. Anderson (Hodder & Stoughton)

*The Dark Tower VII: The Dark Tower* – Stephen King (Hodder & Stoughton)

*Murder of Angels* – Caitlin R. Kiernan (Roc)

### October

*Quicksilver* – Neal Stephenson. This year's Clarke Award winner now in paperback. (William Morrow Harper Collins)

*The Algebrat* – Iain M. Banks (Orbit)

*Going Postal* – Terry Pratchett (Doubleday)

*The Boy Who Would Live Forever* – Frederick Pohl (Tor)

*Black Projects*, *White Knights* – Kage Baker (Golden Gryphon)

*The Ruins of the Earth: The Last Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* – Stephen Donaldson (Gollancz)

*Crossing the Line* – Karen Traviss (HarperCollins Eos) (see above)

*Gifts* – Ursula K. Le Guin (Orion Children's)

*The John Varley Reader* – John Varley (Ace)

If you have any forthcoming events, publications or other material you think should be included in *Incoming*, then please contact Claire Weaver at [matrix\\_editors@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:matrix_editors@yahoo.co.uk).

# Timewasters

## Competition 169

This wordscape contains the names of over 20 authors reviewed in Vector 235 – all the letters are used, some more than once. Surnames only; read them in any direction.



Answers within three weeks of receipt of mailing to: John Ollis, 13 Bernesha Close, Corby NN8 8EJ.

## Competition 165 result

Several entries at last, all from Nick Dale, and the book I would most like to read is *Take Back Sirius* by Olaf Stapledon and Colin Greenland.

## Competition 167 result

Nick is the only other member who's ever read an sf book he didn't like. We agree on *That Hideous Strength* by CS Lewis, which is anti science, but far worse is anything by Sydney J Bounds.

## Crossword 167 result

The answers we wanted were:  
*Time and Relative* (Kim Newman)  
*Blood And Hope* (Iain McLaughlin)  
*Rip Tide* (Louise Cooper)  
*Shell Shock* (Simon A Forward)  
*Companion Piece* (Mike Tucker and Robert Perry)  
*Citadel of Dreams* (Dave Stoker)  
Congratulations to Kevin Smith from Oxford.

## Solution:

**Across:** 1 Time and relative, 7 Blood, 9 Nightcaps, 11 Ellison, 12 Riptide, 13 Shell, 15 Companion, 18 Filmstrip, 19 Shock, 21 And hope, 24 Educate, 26 Tradename, 27 Piece, 28 Citadel of dreams.

**Down:** 1 Tablets, 2 Andes, 3 Dining-car, 4 Edgar, 5 Iraqi, 6 Eastern, 8 Oil-well, 10 Top-hats, 14 Lissome, 16 Maple-leaf, 17 Isolate, 18 Frantic, 20 Keepers, 22 Draft, 23 E-mail, 25 Uppier.

# Contributors

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**News:** Claire Weaver, Denis Jackman, Martin McGrath and Tom Hunter

**Flicker, Goggle Boxes and Crossword:** Martin McGrath

**Incoming:** Claire Weaver and Tom Hunter

# ENCOUNTERS

## Basingstoke

*Genesis SF Club*

Meets every four weeks on Thursday, starting 7:30pm. The Hop Leaf, Church Street, Basingstoke RG21 7QQ  
Contact: Mark Sinclair [genesis@theshop-demon.co.uk](mailto:genesis@theshop-demon.co.uk)  
Web: [www.genesis-1.org.uk](http://www.genesis-1.org.uk)

## Belfast

*Belfast Science Fiction Group*

Meets alternate Thursdays, starting at 8:00pm. The Monica Bars, Lombard Street, Belfast BT1 1BB  
Contact: Eugene Dolohy [timen@webidirect.co.uk](mailto:timen@webidirect.co.uk)  
Web: [members.belfastcity.org.uk/timen/monica.htm](mailto:members.belfastcity.org.uk/timen/monica.htm)

## Birmingham

*Birmingham Science Fiction Group*

Meets 2nd Friday, starting at 7:45pm.  
Britannia Hotel, New Street, Birmingham  
Contact: Vernon Brown [bhamsgroup@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:bhamsgroup@yahoo.co.uk)  
Web: <http://bham.sfnetworks.com>

## Birmingham

*The Black Lodge*

Meets 2nd Tuesday, 8:30pm. The Hogshead, Newhall Street, Birmingham B3 3PU  
Contact: Steve Green [ghashwos@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:ghashwos@yahoo.co.uk)

## Cambridge

*Cambridge SF Group*

Meets 2nd Monday, starting at 7:00pm. The Cambridge Blue, Gwydd Street, Cambridge CB1 3LG  
Contact: Austin Benson [austin@xcm.org](mailto:austin@xcm.org)

## Colchester

*Colchester SF/Horror Group*

Meets 3rd Saturday, starting at 12:30pm. The Playhouse pub, St. John's Street, Colchester CO2 7AA  
Contact: Des Lewis (01255 812119)

## Croydon

*Croydon SF Group*

Meets 2nd Tuesday, at 8:00pm.  
The Dog and Bull, Surrey Street, Croydon CR0 1RG  
Contact: Robert Newman (020 8686 6800)

## Didcot

Meets 2nd Tuesday, starting at 7:30pm.

The Ladygrove, Cow Lane, Didcot OX11 7SZ  
Contact: Nigel and Sabine Furlong [bfurlong2@aol.com](mailto:bfurlong2@aol.com)

## Dublin

*Dublin Sci-Fi Club*

Meets 1st Tuesday, starting at 8:00pm.  
Upstairs bar in Boves Pub, Fleet Street, Dublin 2  
Contact: Frank Darcy [frankd@tastepark.com](mailto:frankd@tastepark.com)  
Web: [www.tastepark.com/dubai/](http://www.tastepark.com/dubai/)

## Edinburgh

*Edinburgh*

Meets every Tuesday, at 9:00pm.  
The Doric Tavern, Market Street, Edinburgh EH1 1DE  
Contact: Jim Darroch [ed\\_04@hotmail.net](mailto:ed_04@hotmail.net)

## Edinburgh

*Meeting in A Jackson's*

Meets every Thursday, starting at 8:00pm. K Jackson's pub, Lady Lawson Street, Edinburgh EH3 9DW  
Contact: Charlie Strous [charlie@outpost.org](mailto:charlie@outpost.org)

## Hull

*Hull SF Group*

Meets 2nd and 4th Tuesday, 8:00pm.  
The New Clarence, Charles Street, Hull HU2 8DE  
Contact: Mike Cross [mike@theshop-demon.co.uk](mailto:mike@theshop-demon.co.uk)  
Web: [www.mikeshop-demon.co.uk/hullsf.htm](http://www.mikeshop-demon.co.uk/hullsf.htm)

## Leicester

*The Leicester Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Group*

Meets 1st Friday, starting at 8:00pm.  
The Globe, Silver Street, Leicester LE1 5EU  
Contact: Mark E. Cotterill [leicoutfanders@hotmail.com](mailto:leicoutfanders@hotmail.com)  
Web: [www.outfanders.fsnet.co.uk](http://www.outfanders.fsnet.co.uk)

## London

*London BSFA meeting*

Meets 4th Wednesday, starting at 6:30pm.  
The Star Tavern, Belgrave Mews West, London, SW1X 8JH  
Forthcoming guests: Justina Robson (July).  
Contact: Farah Mendelsohn [farah@fn3.demon.co.uk](mailto:farah@fn3.demon.co.uk)  
Web: [www.bsfu.co.uk](http://www.bsfu.co.uk)

## London

*East London fans*

Meets Tuesday after the first Thursday, starting at 7:00pm. The Walnut Tree, Leytonstone High Road, Leytonstone, London E11 1HH  
Contact: Alex McLintock [alexmc@yahoo.com](mailto:alexmc@yahoo.com)

## London

*The City Illiterates*

Meets every Friday, starting at 6:30pm.  
The Windmill, Mill St, off Conduit St, Mayfair, W1S 2AT  
Contact: <http://london.pm.org/meeting/locations/windmill.html>

## London

*The Tim*

Meets 1st Thursday, starting at 7:00pm.  
The Florence Nightingale, 199 Westminster Bridge Road, London, SE1 7UT  
Web: [www.ds.gla.ac.uk/SF-Archives/Ankable/london.html](http://www.ds.gla.ac.uk/SF-Archives/Ankable/london.html)

## Manchester

*FONT*

Meets 2nd and 4th Thursday at 8:30pm.  
The Crown and Anchor, Hilton St, Manchester, M1 2EE  
Contact: Arthur Chappell [arthurchappell@dsds.net](mailto:arthurchappell@dsds.net)  
Web: [www.arthurchappell.dsds.net/font.htm](http://www.arthurchappell.dsds.net/font.htm)  
[www.gowall.demon.co.uk/fontzoo/font.html](http://www.gowall.demon.co.uk/fontzoo/font.html)

## Northampton

*Northampton SF Writers' Group*

Meets once a month with SF author Ian Watson to workshop members' fiction.  
Contact: [suzenn@vblion.co.uk](mailto:suzenn@vblion.co.uk)

## Norwich

*Norwich Science Fiction Group*

Meets every second Wednesday, starting at 9:00pm.  
people gather from 8:00pm. The Cellar Bar, Ribs of Beef, Eye Bridge, Norwich, NR3 1HY  
Contact: Andrew Stitt [astitt@icwm.net](mailto:astitt@icwm.net)  
Web: [www.homespage.norfolknet.org/realty/optional](http://www.homespage.norfolknet.org/realty/optional)

## Oxford

*North Oxford*

Meets first Wednesday of the month, from 7:00pm. The Plough, Wolvercote, Oxford OX2 8BD  
Contact: Steve Jeffery [pavek@psd.com](mailto:pavek@psd.com)

## Peterborough

*Peterborough Science Fiction Club*

Meets 1st Wednesday, starting at 8:00pm.  
The Blue Bell Inn, St. Paul's Road, Peterborough PE1 3EZ  
Meets 2nd Wednesday, starting at 8:00pm.  
Goodmans Yard, St. John's Street, Peterborough PE1 5DD  
Contact: Pete [psfclub@btinternet.com](mailto:psfclub@btinternet.com)  
Web: [www.psfclub.btinternet.co.uk/psf.htm](http://www.psfclub.btinternet.co.uk/psf.htm)

## Portsmouth

*South Hants Science Fiction Group*

Meets first Tuesday, starting at 7:00pm.  
The Magpie, Fratton Road, Portsmouth PO1 5BX  
Contact: Mike Cheater [mike.cheater@ntworld.com](mailto:mike.cheater@ntworld.com)  
Web: [www.pampy.demon.co.uk/shsf.htm](http://www.pampy.demon.co.uk/shsf.htm)

## Preston

*Preston SF Group*

Meets every Tuesday, starting at 8:30pm.  
The Grey Friar, Friargate, Preston PR1 2EE  
Contact: Dave Young [psf@hairy1.demon.co.uk](mailto:psf@hairy1.demon.co.uk)  
Web: [www.hairy1.demon.co.uk/psf/](http://www.hairy1.demon.co.uk/psf/)

## Reading

*Reading SF Group*

Meets every Monday, starting at 9:00pm except third Monday, when they meet Tuesday, starting at 7:30pm.  
The Corn Stores, Forbury Road, Reading RG1 1AX  
Contact: Mark Young [enquiry@rnf.org.uk](mailto:enquiry@rnf.org.uk)  
Web: [www.rnf.org.uk](http://www.rnf.org.uk)

## Sheffield

Meets every Wednesday, starting at 9:00pm.

The Red Lion, Charles Street, Sheffield S1 2ND  
Contact: Fran Dowd [fran@dwad.demon.co.uk](mailto:fran@dwad.demon.co.uk)

## St. Albans

*Polaris: The St. Albans SF Group*

Meets 1st Tuesday, 8:00pm. The Plough, Tittenhang Green, St. Albans AL4 0RW  
Contact: Martin Stewart [polaris@pobox.com](mailto:polaris@pobox.com)  
Web: [www.polaris.org](http://www.polaris.org)

# RAGE against tropism!

Genre readers and writers are trapped by the endless regurgitation of over-used tropes, argues **Jay Caselberg**, but it's time to stop limiting ourselves to the comfortably familiar.

The involuntary movement of an organism activated by an external stimulus wherein the organism is either attracted to or repelled from the outside stimulating influence. That is a definition of tropism. I'd rather extend its meaning to talk about Genre, The Genre, and the capitalisation is deliberate. We, the genre community, and genre writers in general suffer this affliction and its manifestation with tedious regularity, driving to what amounts to little more than derivative unoriginal fiction where we plunder the resources of those writers that have come before us, snatching their tropes and peppering our stories and novels with the familiar. I actually don't believe that it's anything more than tropism in its true form, reaching for those things that make the readership and the booksellers and marketing departments comfortable. If you think about the work, about the body of recent work, there's a consistent recurrence of particular established tropes: downloadable personae, sentient ships; intelligent guns, nanotech in various forms...the list goes on. People, these things have been around for over twenty years, and there's nothing particularly innovative or inspiring about their use. We are simply invoking (and re-using) the avatar of those writers that have come before. The problem is that the writers who established these tropes in the first place, people like Banks and Gibson are still working today.

The readership is as much to blame as the writers themselves. An inability to explore outside the boundaries of what makes up "acceptable" science fiction or fantasy, seeking that comfort level that is at home in the familiar. I like to think that our readers are intelligent and thinking but clutching to the safe does not fill me with confidence. These readers help promote the behaviour that characterises the writing—innovative, adventurous and original writers who stifle their potential by going after that which is a given. Science Fiction is not the only subset that is

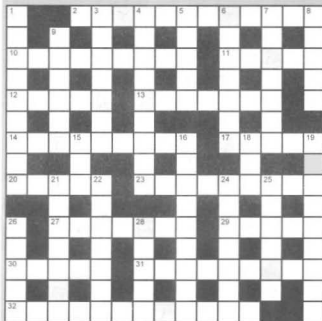


guilty of this. The latest trend seems to be industrial fantasy. Having completely plundered the wasteland of talking swords and angry reluctant heroes with eventually-to-be-revealed powers, the next step is to populate your fantasy landscape with machines and tools. Of course this too was started by particular writers, and again still, writers who are still working today.

Self-limitation isn't the mark of a field that should be exploring the wonders of what might be. Hence I want to take this one step further and question why we impose this boundary of "The Genre" or "Genre" upon ourselves. Partially dictated by market forces, partially the quest for what sells (always a little too late—if it's been done, it's been done) it too is a form of tropism. What genre? There's more than one type of genre fiction out there and SF&F ain't the only one worth reading. We, however, seem to be the only literary subset that spends half its life struggling with self-definition and identity. Romance seems to have no trouble defining itself, nor does it seem particularly worried about that definition. Are we Space Opera or Chickpunk or New Weird or what? Damn it people, it's fiction. It may have things to say, and in the broader categories of Science Fiction and Fantasy, we hope it might say something new, interesting and challenging. Why is it that Welles and Verne didn't have these issues? Partially the marketplace, partially the readership not putting limitations and expectations on the writers, there was a greater freedom and capacity to tell a good story whatever form it took. It's time readers started to demand something new in the literature of ideas. Sure, there's a place for the cosy and the comfortable, but I would hope that in our field, there's the place for exploration as well. I cannot believe that there's nothing new to write about or perhaps we've all simply run out of ideas.

**Jay Caselberg** is the author of *Wyrmling and Metal Sky* (Sept 04). You can find him at [www.sff.net/people/jaycaselberg](http://www.sff.net/people/jaycaselberg)

## Alien Vs Predator



The *Alien Vs Predator* film isn't great, but here's the chance to see how it should be done. We've got a variety of *Alien Vs Predator* graphic novels and novelisations for the winner of this issues competition. Complete the crossword and rearrange the letters in the shaded boxes to identify a female British sf writer.

Send the answer with your name and address to: [matrix.compellion@ntlworld.com](mailto:matrix.compellion@ntlworld.com), by 29 November.

### Across

- 2 Wrote *Castles Made of Sand* (7,5)
- 10 Shaky sounding (9)
- 11 From that time (5)
- 12 Loathed (5)
- 13 Climbing aid, made Lev Bronstein's ears burn! (3-4)
- 14 Workers' test the heat (9)
- 17 Mountains, end of 15 down! (5)
- 20 and 1 down Wrote *Memoirs of a Spaceman* (5,9)
- 23 Restaurant (9)
- 27 Fabric, region of Poland (7)
- 29 Killed by Sparrow, with his bow and arrow (5)
- 30 — the Jubilee by Ward Moore (5)
- 31 Mary Gentle, Liz Williams, Stephen Baxter — for example (3,3,3)
- 32 Wrote *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (6,6)

### Down

- 1 See 20 across
- 3 The men who — talk, Isaac Asimov short story (7)
- 4 New era is ancient history (9)
- 5 Style, flavour, brief experience (5)
- 6 and 25 Wrote *Mappa Mundi* (7,6)
- 7 Won't slip, brave person's pants! (3-4)
- 8 and 19 Wrote *The Year of Our War* (5,9)
- 9 Mary — wrote *Ash* (4)
- 15 Limb (3)
- 16 Snake, danger is inflated (4,5)
- 18 Indicating maiden name (3)
- 19 See 8
- 21 Dumping (7)
- 22 Against the law (7)
- 24 Flat open area (7)
- 25 See 4
- 26 Leg bone (5)
- 28 Zeno's followers are impressive (5)

