

# matrix

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The news magazine of the British Science Fiction Association

Mar/Apr 2006 No. 178

Keith Brooke counts on  
success at *infinity plus*

Stephen Baxter on our  
pilots to the future

John Meaney on  
martial arts in sf

Robert Curley takes a  
*Freak Show* to market

Plus news, reviews  
and much more



## lost for words

It's the biggest sf  
hit for years, but is *Lost*  
actually any good?

# matrix

## Contents

<b>Guest Editorial</b>	3
Keith Brooke on writing sf and publishing infinity plus.	
<b>News</b>	4
Line-up for BSFA AGM announced, awards shortlist online, and are aliens amongst us?	
<b>Lost and found</b>	6
Claire Weaver and Tom Hunter consider the pros and cons of television sensation, <i>Last</i> .	
<b>Science news</b>	8
Roderick Gladwin on NASA's Pluto mission and the Vatican's support for Darwin.	
<b>Foundation Favourites: Amazing!</b>	9
Andy Sawyer looks back at the first issue of the magazine that changed sf forever.	
<b>Freaks going global</b>	10
James Bacon talks to Robert Curley on his indie comic book success with <i>Freak Show</i> .	
<b>Resonances: Pilots to the future</b>	12
Stephen Baxter looks at some of the British sf of the fifties that shaped the genre today.	
<b>Ironing Board: Kung Fu fighting</b>	14
Martin Skatchley interviews John Meany about his interest in martial arts.	
<b>Checkpoint: Remembering Ken Bulmer</b>	16
Ken Bulmer was a prolific author and long-time fan, Mark Plummer remembers.	
<b>Flicker</b>	17
Sci-Fi London 5 is coming. We look ahead to some of the attractions.	
<b>Reviews</b>	19
Previews, news and reviews. Including <i>MirrorMask</i> , <i>Evil Aliens</i> and <i>Underworld: Evolution</i> .	
<b>Goggle boxes</b>	24
Charles Christian rounds up the latest television news.	
<b>Seduction of the Innocent</b>	25
James Bacon on the latest comics, including <i>Identity Crisis</i> from DC.	
<b>Abort, retry, fail?</b>	26
Martin McGrath on <i>FEAR</i> and other emotions in the first person shooter.	
<b>Subscribe</b>	27
Don't miss an issue of <i>Matrix</i> , <i>Vector</i> or <i>Focus</i> .	
<b>Rage against: Infernal Wholesalers</b>	28
Liz Williams and the hell that is retail.	

## Words of wisdom

Choose your leaders  
with wisdom and forethought.

To be led by a coward  
is to be controlled  
by all that the coward fears.

To be led by a fool  
is to be led by the opportunists  
who control the fool.

To be led by a thief  
is to offer up  
your most precious treasures  
to be stolen.

To be led by a liar  
is to ask  
to be lied to.

To be led by a tyrant  
is to sell yourself  
and those you love  
into slavery.

Olivia E Butler (1947-2006)  
From *Parable of the Talents*

## DEADLINES

If you wish to contribute to future issues of *Matrix*, the deadlines are:

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## matrix

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# Two million words and counting

Keith Brooke is staying in and counting on the success of *infinity plus*

Milestones and targets matter. They give you a means of quantifying what you do and standards by which others can assess your efforts. For rather sad individuals like me they're one of the ways I keep motivated whenever energy flags (counting the words I've written, counting the minutes until lunch when I'm doing the day job...)

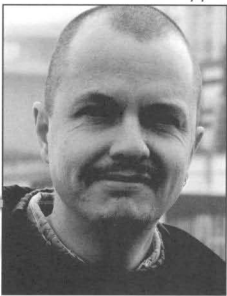
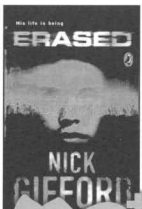
I know. I should get out more. (But I warn you: if I did, I'd almost certainly be wearing an anorak.)

Landmarks are more than just artificial targets, though: they're something to celebrate. *Interzone* recently passed 200 issues, which is a phenomenal achievement these days. Two hundred is just another number, of course, but seeing all those digits flip over is a big psychological boost and I think we can all pat ourselves on the back for playing our parts in sustaining a professional science fiction magazine for so long.

The website I run, *infinity plus* ([www.infinityplus.co.uk](http://www.infinityplus.co.uk)), primarily a showcase for professional genre fiction but also a thriving venue for reviews and interviews, started way back in 1997. That's back a geological era or two in internet years. Steadily, week by week, the site has expanded and our audience has expanded in step. I remember the excitement when we reached 1000 page requests a week; now we're getting 150,000 *distinct* visits a month. That's an audience most print editors would sell their grandmothers for. I'm just waiting for the month we hit 200,000.

Last late year I realised that a whole bunch of milestones for the site were arriving at around the same time: we had just passed 100 interviews, soon we will pass 1,000 book reviews and, as I write this in January 2006, we're very close to 2 million words of fiction, all available on the site for free.

It's not all about numbers, though, useful as they are as motivational tricks. Two of the most significant landmarks in the history of *infinity plus* were when



people mucked in to help. I ran the site singlehandedly to start with, but around 2000 I just about hit the wall. It's a feeling I'm sure most editors/indie publishers will recognise: you've been struggling away for years, putting all this time in, and you've just about had enough. Even the target of aiming for that 425,000th word of fiction didn't help, for some reason. That was when Nick Gevers joined in an editorial capacity, taking on a lot of the work of liaising with contributors and putting content together. A couple of years later, a similar wall loomed, and along came Paul Barnett, who has done a marvellous job of coordinating reviews and other content for the site. Without these two, you'd have been reading an obituary for *infinity plus* long before there was a chance of this guest editorial.

The most significant thing in the site's success, of course, has been the quality of content. We kicked off with contributions from Eric Brown, Stephen Baxter and Michael Cobley, and the quality and standing of our early contributors was significant in attracting more. I remember early on getting an e-mail out of the blue from Terry Bisson asking if he could join in

the fun. I thought long and hard and then sent him an instant "yes!" Currently available on the site we have Connie Willis's Hugo- and Nebula-winning "Fire Watch", Gene Wolfe's "The Arimasian Legacy", Ian Watson's "Ahead" and even stories by authors whose names don't begin with a "W". Much of our fiction is republished from elsewhere, but there are also some fine originals from Garry Kilworth, Anna Tambour, Zoran Zivkovic and others.

I'm particularly proud that the site has played an important part at critical stages in authors' careers. Jeff VanderMeer has commented that *infinity plus* was an important boost for him at a time when he was struggling to place his work (work that would later win him a World Fantasy Award, but the vagaries of genre markets deserve an editorial all to themselves). Also, we've featured stories by many rising stars.

One telling point about the site's on-going success is that, well, it is on-going: writers keep wanting to be involved, and we're never struggling for content.

Which brings us back to the fact that the thing keeps growing. If a typical issue of a print magazine might contain around 30,000 words

of fiction, an interview, a feature or two and some reviews, then we've published the equivalent of 60 or 70 "issues", giving *infinity plus* one of the highest issue tallies among British sf magazines. We're not doing the same thing as the real magazines, of course, but it's a nice game to play, another way of creating milestones.

We're not doing the same things as other websites, either, come to that. No discussion areas or blogs or chats, we're not a news site, we don't cover media sf. We just plug away as we always have, steadily adding high quality (mostly reprint) fiction and (mostly original) non-fiction, passing those milestones one by one. A thousand reviews, two million words of fiction, our hundredth "issue", ten years online...

I know. I should get out more.

Keith Brooke's latest adult SF novel, *Genetopia*, was published in February 2006 by Pyr. Writing as Nick Gifford, his teen SF thriller, *Erased*, was published by Puffin in January 2006. *Infinity plus* can be found at [www.infinityplus.co.uk](http://www.infinityplus.co.uk)

## We want your news

*Matrix* is actively seeking news from BSFA members. It could be about events in your area, information on new sf resources, local publishing opportunities or news that's actually about members themselves: maybe you've won a story competition or have an article appearing in a forthcoming magazine or are looking to set up an sf fan group in your area.

Whatever it is we want to know about it, and so do the rest of the BSFA. All BSFA related news should be sent to [matrix\\_editors@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:matrix_editors@yahoo.co.uk). We look forward to hearing from you.

## Competition winners

Andy Mills from Leeds won our Voyager tenth anniversary competition in *Matrix* 175. The kind folks at Voyager have also supplied us with additional prizes, which are being mailed out to runners up who also sent us the correct answer. Other winners were Mrs F Symes who won our Ray Bradbury competition (also in 175) and Peter Mabey who won the David Langford *The Sex Column* competition (176). Your prizes are on their way.

## All-star line-up for AGM



This year's BSFA Annual General Meeting will feature guest appearances from Bruce Sterling, Juliet McKenna and Stephen Baxter. The meeting, to take place on Saturday, 13 May, will once again take place at The Conway Hall in central London. Following the pattern of recent years, the meeting will be run jointly with the Science Fiction Foundation's AGM.

This year's meeting will feature interviews and panels as well as the essential review of the BSFA year (which all those members not

directly involved in the nitty-gritty of BSFA administration take as the opportunity to head for the nearest pub).

Previous AGM's have featured Guest Appearances from Alastair Reynolds, Karen Traviss and Liz Williams as well as a sneak screening of Neil Gaiman's *A Short Film About John Bolton*.

The BSFA AGM will be held from 10am – 5pm at Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1. The nearest tube is Holborn. [www.conwayhall.org.uk](http://www.conwayhall.org.uk).

# BSFA Awards shortlists announced

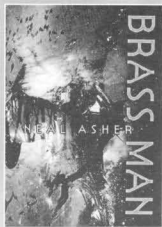
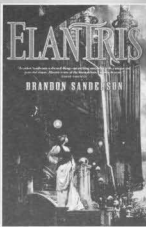
It's that time of the year again already. Nominations are in and by the time you read this it will almost be time to announce the BSFA Awards winners.

Regulars at the BSFA's monthly London meetings have had the chance to discuss the nominations in depth at a special event in March. For those who couldn't make it, a full list of the nominations can be found at [www.bsfa.co.uk](http://www.bsfa.co.uk).

This year's novel category includes previous winners Jon Courtenay Grimwood and Ken MacLeod alongside Clarke nominee Geoff Ryman and double Philip K Dick nominee Justina Robson. There's a strong showing for internet-based stories in the short fiction category while *Interzone* has two showings in the artwork category (all nominees pictured right).

The short fiction and artwork shortlists contain more than five works because of a tie in the number of nominations.

The BSFA Awards will be presented at Eastercon in Glasgow on Saturday 15 April 2006. The deadline for returning postal or email ballots is Tuesday 11 April.



Top row (left to right): Max Bartolini cover of *F&SF*, January; Kevin Brown cover of *Interzone* 196; Pawel Lewandowski cover of *Interzone* 200  
Bottom row (left to right): Stephen Martiniuk cover of *Elantris*; Frank Quitely (Justin Grant inked) 'Xan' from *Wu2*; Steve Rowlands cover of *Brass Man*

# Fermi flummoxed?

It may well be the most famous paradox in sf – Fermi's simple question: If there are aliens in the universe, why haven't we met them? It is the scourge of non-mundane sf writers everywhere. But what if Fermi was wrong. Are aliens here?

Post *X-Files* you only have to pop into the nearest Forbidden Planet to score a realistic-looking alien for your own Roswell-style fun but it was still a shock for Barney Broom to find his very own alien-in-a-bottle walked up in the attic of his cottage, wrapped in newspaper dated 1947. Screenwriter Broom reported his discovery to the Sci Fi Channel who called in professor and sf author Adam Roberts to investigate.

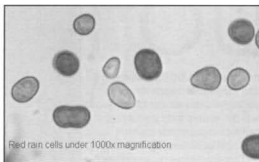
A "US serial number" on the foot of the 30cm model suggests a link between the cottage's previous owners and the nearby airbases at Lakenheath and Mildenhall. The model may turn out to be a film prop from the 1960s but the US airforce were quick (perhaps too quick) to deny involvement.

"It's a hoax," said a spokeswoman, not realising that nobody believes them these days.

Professor Roberts said: "That is the US airforce line. They deny these alien encounters. It is possible they concoct stories to cover up more nefarious activities."

Meanwhile, *New Scientist* (4 March) reports a more serious threat to Fermi. Red rain, which fell along the coast of India's Kerala region in 2001, contained particles that may be alien microbes. The finding could be massive boost to *panspermia*, Fred Hoyle's theory that life was "seeded" on Earth by material from space.

The particles are chemically similar to organic material. They are cup-shaped, have thick walls and resemble cells but have no visible nucleus and no DNA. Dr Godfrey



Red rain cells under 1000x magnification

Louis, the physicist investigating the material, even claims to have seen it replicate in unusual conditions.

Reaction from other scientists has varied from the rude to the curious. Whatever Louis has found, it has evaded easy classification. A rival to the alien theory is the vapourisation of bats by an air-bursting meteorite – the particles resemble mammalian blood cells. Or the particles may yet turn out to be spores or pollen.

Louis published early findings in *Astrophysics and Space Science*. See <http://education.vsnl.com/godfrey/>.

## More award news

Checking out the BSFA's own awards and UK's other main genre prize, the Arthur C Clarke awards, is usually a pretty good way of taking the pulse of recent genre activity, so anyone who hasn't checked out double nominees *Air* (2006 Tiptree Award winner), *Learning The World* or *Accelerando* should make the effort now. *Pushing Ice* by Alastair Reynolds, *Banner of Souls* by (Matrix favourite) Liz Williams and Kazuo Ishiguro's (is it genre?) *Never Let Me Go* complete this year's field.

The Award will be presented in a ceremony at the Apollo Cinema, Lower Regents Street, London, on Wednesday April 26 in conjunction with the Sci-Fi London Film Festival.

## And yet more award news

More good news for the Brit contingent abroad as Neal Asher (Cowl) and Justina Robson (*Natural History* and *Silver Screen*) headline the nominations for the 2005 Philip K Dick Award for distinguished science fiction published in paperback form alongside MM Buckner, Karin Lowachee and Will McCarthy. Full prize and special citations will be announced on Friday April 14 at Norwescon 29. See [www.philipkdickaward.org](http://www.philipkdickaward.org) for more information.

## Rolling in galleons

Harry Potter publisher Bloomsbury are in race to find a suitable way to spend their vast wizard-related wealth before being forced to pay out the majority of the cash to their own shareholders. Now actively seeking what the industry term an 'acquisition target' the company's house broker said a takeover of a US publishing rival was the best option for spending its cash bonanza.

Meanwhile, the latest Potter film (*Goblet of Fire*) has passed the \$600 million mark in international box office – placing it in the top five most successful movies of all time, just behind *Star Wars*. The *Philosopher's Stone* and *Chamber of Secrets*, which it may yet surpass. The *Prisoner of Azkaban* ranks only ninth in the all time list (topped by *Titanic*'s awesome \$1.2 billion box office) with a "mere" \$545 million take.

JK Rowling had announced that she has started writing the seventh and final instalment of the mildly popular wizard's tale, suggesting the possibility that it will be published sometime in 2007.

## Howling good time

*The Wolves in the Walls: A Musical Pandemonium* is the story of Lucy, who is convinced that there are wolves in the walls of her house. Her family don't believe her, but they are wrong as they will all soon find out...

A crack creative team, including Improbable Theatre's Julian Crouch, co-creator of the smash hit *Shockedhead Peter*, Steven Hoggett of Frantic Assembly and an unruly pack of actors, musicians and crazy puppets, bring Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean's cult story to life. *The Wolves in the Walls* is at the Hammersmith Lyric Theatre, London from 12-29 April 2006 ([www.lyric.co.uk](http://www.lyric.co.uk)). Look out for extra tour dates in Autumn 2006.

# NEWSBITS



Ever wondered where Buzz Lightyear and Woody really came from, or how a whole

family with superhero powers was imagined? Pixar have been making innovative movies such as *Toy Story* and *The Incredibles* for twenty years and have never let anyone see how they work. Now you can be among the first in the UK to see hundreds of artworks, models and digital paintings from their studios, plus two amazing audiovisual experiences unique to this exhibition. From rough sketches to finished films, *Pixar: 20 Years of Animation* takes you behind the scenes to discover the science and magic that created some of the most popular films ever made. At the Science Museum, London, 1 April – 10 June 2006. [www.sciencemuseum.org.uk](http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk)



The Split Infinities: the Fantasy & Sci-Fi artwork of Les Edwards/Edward Miller

exhibition is a unique chance to see the artwork of Les Edwards (also known as 'Edward Miller'). Les, who lives in Ilford, is best known for his book jacket illustrations in the fantasy, science fiction and horror genres. He has worked on movie posters, fantasy games and graphic novels and has won the British Fantasy Award for Best Artist.

See it from 20 March to 29 April, Redbridge Museum, 1st Floor Exhibition Area, Central Library, Clements Road, Ilford IG1 1EA, 020 8708 2317



The Association of Illustrators is organising a Sci-Fi/Fantasy Art conference at the Royal College of Arts.

Invited speakers include Dick Jude, author of *Fantasy Art* and *Fantasy Art Masters* (HarperCollins), Alan Lee (interviewed by Brian Sibley), Dave McKean (TBC), Chris Moore, Jim Burns and Fred Gambino (TBC). At the Royal College of Art, London, Saturday 20 May. [www.rca.ac.uk](http://www.rca.ac.uk)



Alt-Fiction will bring together some of the biggest names in sf, fantasy and horror writing. With

workshops, discussions and readings from authors like Ramsey Campbell, Simon Clark, Simon R. Green, Richard Morgan, Mark Chadbourne and others. Saturday 6 May, 12.30pm – 8.30pm, Darwin Suite, Assembly Rooms Derby. Contact Alex Davis on 01332 715434 email [alex.davis@derby.gov.uk](mailto:alex.davis@derby.gov.uk)

# Lost

At last, *Lost* is over – well, season one anyway – and what a load of rubbish it was. Stupidly random in its approach to plotting, I can't believe that it's been taken as seriously as it has, by viewers and the production company who put together such a fantastic marketing effort (maybe they knew from the start that it would need it). It was described on an IMDb review as "restoring what little faith I [the reviewer] have in TV" – an opinion I'm sure wouldn't exist without the extremely high levels of promotion the series has been given.

My problem with *Lost* was that it asked so many questions and never supplied any semblance of an answer. And no, I wasn't expecting to know everything by the end of season one. I am simply asking that we, the viewers, be given a sense of getting *anywhere*, rather than perpetually treading water.

Throughout the season I've felt as lost as the people on the island – as hopeless and abandoned – and although some may argue that is suitably fitting (helping us empathise with the characters and understand their plight, or some such Psych 101 crap), it does not, I repeat *does not*, make good television. This is a TV series, after all. There are rules: you have plot arcs. You have subplots and stand-alone stories that are solved on a one- or two-episode timeline.

*You cannot provide this in flashbacks alone.*

Yes, you can leave the big stuff for later – season two, or perhaps three. I wasn't expecting to find out who *The Others* are, where the island is or what the big machine/monster in the jungle is – but give us something to help suspend our disbelief for a while.

And some the "big stuff" was just stupid. Polar bears? Magic numbers? Give me a break! Not only are these things absolutely ridiculous, but the writers didn't even attempt to build on them – except to add more pointless questions. I'd have been happy to wait to find out why there were polar bears if I was given even a tiny clue as to how it was possible that they could survive. But no,

the characters simply shrug and don't mention it again for half a series (you can almost tangibly feel the writers hiding off set behind reams of blank paper, hoping that no one will notice).

The only answer I can possibly think of is that it's all some magical sort of bad dream – a terrifyingly stupid answer which seems all the more dismayingly inevitable since the appearance of a giant angry polar bear in a jungle in Hurley's comic book. I have a sneaking suspicion that the writers haven't entirely ruled out this option yet.

My anger is probably fuelled (and the situation made more problematic) when you take into account the fact that the writers don't even know where they're going with it. You'd think that writers on such a big project would have experience in this sort of thing and could develop plot arcs with their eyes shut – but obviously not. Instead they are floundering around blind in a nightmare world built on the foundations of their own desire to create shocking twists, without thinking for a moment how they could give any answers. If it was an experiment in some new and exciting approach to television writing, then fair enough – but it isn't and we all know it.

The characters were brilliantly plotted, and their back-stories provided some really nice, unexpected twists, but they are only a fraction of a whole – they are just characters, their main scenes just flashbacks. They are not plot. They are not pacing. They are not development. They are not the sole thing into which the writers should put all their effort.

*Lost* was a successful failure from the start. Its marketing efforts were as massive and as vague as the plot (was I the only one who thought the original advert was for a Calvin Klein fragrance?), and as such it is doomed to success. It will be popular and will span at least seven series – some people might argue that's a good thing – and it will sap hours and hours from our lives. But we will never get the answers we want, nor the satisfaction we deserve.

**Claire Weaver**



*Lost asks lots of questions.*

What is it with those numbers? Why is a polar bear on a tropical island? What is the deadly thing in the jungle? What really is inside that mysterious bunker? How come Hurley hasn't lost any weight yet?

But the real question is, is it really classic television or over-hyped cobbles?

*Matrix* can't decide. Claire thinks it stinks. Tom thinks it is fabulous. Nobody asked Martin. (For the record, he thinks it is "alright" – which really doesn't help at all).



# Found

**L**ost is classic TV. I know this to be true, but what I'm having trouble explaining is exactly why I think this is the case. Perhaps it's because the show itself has something of an aversion towards explaining anything?

I think perhaps this might be a good place to start: I like not knowing everything. I even like the idea that maybe the writers don't know everything. It is a show about mystery after all, so why shouldn't its creators have a little fun too?

For me *Lost* has all the compulsive watchability of what I imagine "proper" soap opera should be about while still maintaining some kind of loyalty to both its overall direction and original premise. You only have to watch an episode of *Eastenders* after a year-long break to see the kind of convoluted depths scriptwriters will plunge their characters into in order to keep churning out tabloid fodder storylines. *Lost* may deliberately strive to keep us in the dark, but at least it doesn't ask us to suspend our disbelief to the point of imbecility like much other mainstream TV. Sure it wants to keep you wrong-footed and guessing all the way, but this must be better than the slack-jawed pap most channels are serving. Make no mistake, *Lost* is a genre show, even if it is genre by stealth, and its creators are a genre-savvy bunch.

I'm also reminded of the episodic nature of the comics industry and back to when I was younger and my parents would buy me boxes of random comics at equally random points in the year. Of course they'd never find issue one so inevitably the stories were in full swing and Spidey would be making some back-story reference to Doc Octopus or whoever, and you'd be greeted with a "See Issue 169 - Ed" message in a neat little caption box. To me, with no chance of going back to the issue in question, this was a far more cryptic message than a mysterious French SOS transmission or a series of supposedly portentous numbers and so, like you do, I was forced to fit my own imagination into the gaps and take part in the

narrative rather than simply let it wash over me.

I think it's these early reading experiences that have given me a taste for the more complicated narrative structures at play today (hats off to writers like Chris Priest, Jeff VanderMeer, Hal Duncan etc) and it's a similar experience I've enjoyed while watching *Lost*.

I like the fact that the writers are clearly making stuff up. To sort of quote Neil Gaiman (another master of episodic narrative) a writer is someone who makes stuff up then writes it down, and there's a joy in watching writers shape whole plot arcs out of what we all secretly know was once just a throwaway piece of dialogue or a cool-looking image first and a rational explanation way down the line, or maybe never.

And while we're on the subject of cool images, why is it that everyone picks on the poor polar bears as an example of the plot being unbelievable and not making any sense while being happy to accept the ongoing parade of psychic children, invisible monsters and visions of dead parents wandering around the beach as though these things happen all the time, and not just on mysterious uncharted islands, and are therefore somehow acceptable examples of weirdness?

*Lost* is by no means the best genre show on TV right now (if you ask me that's the new *Battlestar Galactica*) but it is the one that best crosses over that all important genre boundary, and in part I think it is successful precisely because its plot arc works as both an Ouroboros cycle and also as a headlong motion forwards (towards something, maybe, I hope). Perhaps not a show that has you wanting to watch it over and over as a box set, but a proper old school TV experience that keeps you tuned in, same time same channel, every week because in the end while our own genre-saturated imaginations could likely create a better ending than this particular show will probably be allowed to get away with, in the meantime it's the mystery that keeps us coming back.

**Tom Hunter**



# Nasa's Express delivery



**New Horizons:**  
Artist's impression of  
mission passing a Kuiper  
Belt object. Image:  
JHUAPL/SwRI

**N**ew Horizons, NASA's Pluto mission, is on its way. It has a ten year, three billion mile journey ahead of it and by then the celestial body may stop being a planet (officially), but will still be an exciting target.

Pluto has always been an astronomical puzzle. Found because of deviations in the orbit of Neptune suggested another planet was out there, it turned out to be too small to cause the deviation. In 1978 a moon, Charon, was discovered. At 600km it is over half Pluto's diameter. Theories about whether Charon and Pluto were formed together or Pluto captured its moon may be answered by New Horizons. Last year two more moons were found. Between 45km to 160km in diameter they lie in the same orbital plane as Charon adding weight to the idea that Pluto and its neighbours were a proto-planet that failed to complete aggregation.

Other bodies have been found at a similar distance from the sun and of a similar size fuelling the 'is it isn't it a planet' debate. These form the Kuiper belt a ring of 'left overs' from the Solar System's formation.

New Horizons hasn't the fuel to stop and will pass Pluto in a matter of hours. Mission planners have been developing strategies to optimise their brief opportunity. Beyond Pluto new discoveries should abound in the Kuiper belt.

**Source:** NASA, ESA, *New Scientist* and Society for Popular Astronomy.

# God backs Darwin Saucery

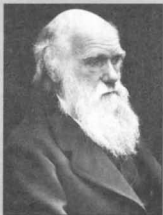
**I**n the US Bible Belt the battle rages between Evolution and Intelligent Design; however, Darwin has a surprise ally in the Catholic Church.

*L'Osservatore*, the official Vatican newspaper, agrees with the US court decision that ID is not science.

"If the model proposed by Darwin is not considered sufficient, one should search for another," Fiorenzo Facchini, professor of evolutionary biology at the University of Bologna, wrote. "But it is not correct from a methodological point of view to stray from the field of science while pretending to do science. It only creates confusion between the scientific plane and those that are philosophical or religious."

Not all articles in *L'Osservatore* represent church policy, though they are unlikely to be fundamentally contrary to official thinking. The Catholic Church has had a cautiously positive approach to some forms of evolutionary theory since an encyclical published by Pope Pius XII in 1950.

**Source:** United Press International and [www.terradaaily.com](http://www.terradaaily.com)



**Charles Darwin:**  
Evolution has friends in  
high places.



**I**f flying saucers didn't exist we'd have to invent them, repeatedly. The latest inventor is Geoff Hatton of GFS Projects, Peterborough, (GFS stands for Geoff's Flying Saucers). According to *The Sun* he has spent five years developing one in his garage.

It utilises the Coandă effect, the tendency of an air stream to stay attached to a convex surface. Blow air over its top and up it floats. Able to hover without rotors or skirts and with little downwash it could be used for crossing minefields or examining delicate structures.

Mr Hatton told *The Sun* he is talking with US defence chiefs. "The Americans hadn't seen anything like it and were extremely impressed. As far as we know this is the only saucer of its kind in the world."

US Department of Defence has a short memory. During the late 50s they funded a disc-shaped vehicle, the Avrocar, using the same principle. Before that the Germans worked on similar vehicles with their engineers and scientists ending up on both sides of the iron curtain after the war.

Keep watching the skies for GFS's 'unique' craft or JetFan Technologies' vehicle. This Australian company also has a prototype saucer flying.

**Sources:** *The Sun*, [en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org), [www.gfsprojects.co.uk](http://www.gfsprojects.co.uk), [www.peterboroughtoday.co.uk](http://www.peterboroughtoday.co.uk)

# Plan ahead or die

**W**hat happened to the Neanderthals? Theories change with the times. In our Imperial days modern humans out fought them in a battle for resources and achieved dominion over the world. In our Darwin days the heavy browed fellows were out-hunted by our hi-tech ancestors. A new study argues that this is not true either.

Using data from a 60,000-20,000 year old rock shelter in the Georgian Republic, researchers from the Harvard University, the Universities of Connecticut and Haifa and the Hebrew University now say both human types had the hunting skills and technology to survive.

These anthropologists think the Neanderthals lacked forward planning and division of labour skills. Meaning that although they could hunt with the best of them, they were unable to prepare for those eventualities that lead to extinction.

Living for today kills off your species.

**Source:** United Press International and [www.terradaaily.com](http://www.terradaaily.com)



# Amazing futures

Andy Sawyer on the magazine that changed sf forever

Given the importance of this science fiction in the history of thought odd that it hasn't featured here before. But that's because we didn't have a copy until recently. Copies of the first *Amazing* don't come cheap. And it's only thanks to all those folks who donate money to the Science Fiction Foundation and the generosity of a major dealer in sf mags that we now have a copy of the first ever English-language magazine devoted to science fiction.

By the way, Gentle Readers, that is a hint.

But to the topic at hand. Gernsback, of course, needs little introduction. Born in Luxembourg in 1884, he emigrated to the USA in 1904 to become an entrepreneur in the exciting new radio industry – equivalent to the home-computer industry of the 1980s. Tapping into the hobbyist market, he launched *Modern Electrics* in 1908. In it, a few years later, he serialised *Ralph 124C 41+*, a novel variously described as “the first conscious attempt by an author to write science fiction” (Gary Westfahl) and a “tawdry, illiterate tale” (Brian Aldiss). Not necessarily contradictions...

Spurred by the popularity of fiction in his essentially non-fiction magazine, and inspired by the growing niche market in fiction magazines (*Detective Story Monthly* had started in 1915, *Weird Tales*, in 1923), Gernsback decided to devote a magazine to this new genre he called “scientifiction”.

The story behind all this has been well charted in two excellent books by Mike Ashley, *The Time Machines* (Liverpool University Press, 2000) and *The Gernsback Days* (Wildside Press, 2004) so let's look at this magazine which – if some of Gernsback's more enthusiastic supporters are to be believed – changed the world.

The cover (by Frank R. Paul), which appears to show a party of fur-clad skaters against twin mounds of ice topped by sailing-ships, over which ringed Saturn looms, illustrates Verne's “Off on a Comet” (Hector Servadac). An engraving of “Verne's tombstone at Amiens portraying his immortality” heads the contents page. “Extravagant



Fiction today... Cold Fact Tomorrow” is the masthead of the editorial promising a “new sort of magazine”: a magazine that will entertain, instruct and, well, amaze. “By ‘scientifiction’” (Gernsback explains) “I mean the Jules Verne, H.G. Wells and Edgar Allan Poe type of story – a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision... Not only do these amazing tales make tremendously interesting reading – they are always instructive. They supply knowledge... in a very palatable form.”

Science fiction, folks, is good for you.

The names of Verne, Poe, and Wells were prominent inside and outside. Verne's story is one of his comparatively few space stories although, as Mike Ashley says, it is also one of his “least scientifically plausible novels”. Don't revise for your physics exams here! Wells' “The New Accelerator” is not one of my favourite Wells stories but it is an entertaining version of a story told many times since: a drug speeds up the protagonist's perceptions. *Amazing* spent the next couple of years reprinting Wells, and although

he was well-known already the result was that he was – and still is – central to the sf field. In contrast, Poe's story is one of his best. “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” fuses sf and horror as the narrator describes an experiment to see if hypnotism can carry consciousness beyond the point of death.

None of the other three stories are well-known, although two at least are worth remembering. Austin Hall's “The Man Who Saved the Earth” is an interesting take on the “Martian Invasion” theme but its verbose and rather pompous style means that you have to work hard at discerning the (perhaps unintentional) coldness at its heart. G. Peyton Wertenbaker's “The Man From the Atom” (written, apparently, when the author was 16) deserves notice for its Wellsian impact. Clearly influenced by *The Time Machine* it tells of an invention that shrinks or grows the subject so that he is travelling through the macrocosm – solar systems on our scale are atoms on a vaster one. Returning, the traveller finds that time on our scale has shot by and he is stranded in the future. George

Allan England's “The Thing From Outside” is a horror tale about a mysterious being in the Canadian wilderness which references Charles Fort to good effect.

The most interesting thing about *Amazing* no 1 is the fact that there are no original stories in it. True, Gernsback is making a point in featuring the three “giants” so prominently, but the other three stories are all reprints, two from Gernsback's own *Science and Invention* and the third from *All-Story*. Imagine launching a new magazine today consisting entirely of fairly recent reprints! Gernsback was trying to break a new market, and to many of his readers most of these stories will be new. Nevertheless it's this as much as his rather earnest justification for charming romance, scientific fact and prophetic vision all stirred together which strikes you when you read the magazine. Gernsback was saying, it seems, “Look, here's what I'm talking about. It's a new form taking shape. Let's have some more!”

We are living in the results of that exhortation.

**FOUNDATION**  
*for the*  
**sciences**

NUMBER NINETEEN: *Amazing Stories* No. 1, ed. Hugo Gernsback



**Be Amazed:**  
Gernsback's legacy, *Amazing* no. 1, the original Hugo and his “prophetic” novel *Ralph 124C 41+*



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, contact Andy Sawyer at The Sydney Jones Library, University Of Liverpool, P.O. Box 123, Liverpool L69 3DA ([osawyer@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:osawyer@liverpool.ac.uk)). Science Fiction Foundation Collection: [www.sffoundation.org](http://www.sffoundation.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.

# Freaks going g

Robert Curley started with a back issue stall in a Dublin indoor market. Eleven years later, he now owns two comic shops called Sub-City, one in Dublin and one in Galway. In the last year, he has achieved the extraordinary by taking a self-published comic, something that would normally be ghettoised and brought it to a worldwide market, selling over 15,000 issues to date. **James Bacon** talks to him about his experiences in the comic industry.

## First off can you introduce *Freak Show*, your self-published comic to our readers?

On the surface *Freak Show* is a story about a bunch of misfits who find themselves in increasingly strange situations with each story. There are five main characters: Jack who was recently fired from the LAPD after his true sexual identity was revealed, Susan, an out of work ex-Hollywood starlet who, after being the focus of Jack's last case, joins forces with him to set up a detective agency, Myles, a rich kid wannabe beatnik who is on the run from a past he would rather forget. And Elizabeth, a Russian emigrant who came to the States with her mother fleeing the grip of Nazi Germany and who has come to love everything American. The last character to come on board is James, a black ghost who happens to inhabit their base of operations. Each story introduces a new villain who in some way reflects the mood of the time [*Freak Show* is set in 1950s New York] whether it is anti-Communism or the hangover of the depression of the 1930s. Basically I'm trying to bring together my love of comics, sci-fi, horror and politics and present an original story.

## Can you tell me about the two artists involved?

They are Stephen Mooney and Stephen Thompson, although I think I should mention that it's just Mooney and I now working on the book. Mooney worked in animation before coming on board full time and Thompson has done some other comic work for Dark Horse Comics as well as some other small press publishers.

## Why did you go the self publishing route?

It was not a conscious decision

in the sense that I sat down and worked out the pros and cons of it. It never entered my head to approach any of the large companies with a proposal. I have always been a great believer in doing things yourself, that way you get to make all the decisions and don't have to worry about anybody changing your original idea. Although I will admit as time goes on, the idea of somebody else looking after the marketing etc sounds pretty good.

## You are on the collaborative team, as a writer, editor and also you are the publisher. How does that affect the working relationship with the other creators?

I guess it's fair to say that our relationship is a bit different to most collaborators in the sense that I pay the bills and have the last say on how something should look. But for the most part Stephen does a great job even if it's not what I originally had in mind. We both have different ideas about the book and although at the start I had a more Gothic feel in mind Stephens noir style has helped broaden the story and give it a more realistic feel. As far as the creative process goes all the character ideas from their look to their personality come from my own imagination so it's more a case of Stephen interpreting those ideas. At this point the two of us have been working together for just over a year and have gotten into a flow as far as understanding each other's method of work. We've just finished a short story for an Amnesty International graphic novel, which was great as it was a very different type of storytelling for both of us.

## Are you more a project manager than just a creator?

I would like to think that I am a

creator first off. Everything else is like a necessary evil there is not much point in putting a book out if nobody going to read it. There are parts of it I enjoy doing like interviews and conventions. As far as marketing your ideas through advertising and trying to persuade shops to stock your product it can be both costly and timely but at the end of the day it's all for your own benefit so I would not complain about it; not too much anyway!

## How did you market the comic?

At the start I was happy to sell a few hundred issues through my comic shops. Then when I did my first convention in Bristol, I secured a distribution deal with Diamond that opened a lot of doors. I began to see the potential for selling *Freak Show* on a larger scale. I did some advertising last year as well and that has helped to some degree. Some of the Irish newspapers have interviewed me on the subject of comics in general and *Freak Show* in particular and this has been great as it at least makes people who would be otherwise unaware of your work realise that there is a home industry and there is more to comics than super heroes and breasts.

**"...it at least makes people who would be otherwise unaware of your work realise that there is a home industry and there is more to comics than superheroes and breasts"**

## Did you find attending comic conventions worthwhile?

Absolutely. You get to meet people and make them aware of your work. You also realise just how many people out there are interested in self-published books and are looking for something different. The main problem for me as far as conventions go is the fact that I don't live in England or the States so the expenses involved with doing major conventions can be large.

## What sort of print run did you start with for issue one and how has it grown?

For the first issue we did a print run of two thousand issues. Initial sales

were around eleven hundred. After that the print run is fifteen hundred per issue. It has been a year since the release of issue one and it's still selling. Each issue has sold more or less the same amount. To date there have been twelve issues of *Freak Show* released and two graphic novels that were both released in the last two months. To date we have sold around fifteen thousand copies of the comic in all.

## The graphic novel of the comic is an interesting step, is this something solely for the market abroad?

The idea of doing a graphic novel only came in to play after we released a few of the individual issues but right now I see them as being the main ingredients in the long term success of *Freak Show*. It's not necessarily just for the foreign market, but that is part of its appeal. Comics by their nature are fleeting. Graphic novels on the other hand have a much longer shelf life and if they sell out shops will continue to reorder them. As well as that they are more accessible through bookstores and some music stores so more people get the chance to read them. I was talking

to Neil Gaiman recently and he described comics as being seen as down and out living in the gutter while the graphic novel enjoyed a life in high society living it up with the genre.

## How did you manage to get listed in Diamond and how important is that listing?

Obviously I have had a working relationship with Diamond through the shop but it was at the Bristol comic convention when I met up with Pat Sullivan from their English branch and he introduced me to some people over from the States who dealt with submissions for distribution. I gave them some

# obal

samples and a couple of weeks later I received an email saying they would solicit *Freak Show* in their catalogue. I would say it is hugely important as it is the main avenue for getting through to every comic shop in the USA and Europe it also gives the work some form of credibility even if it's only a perceived one. There are other avenues and I hope to explore them all during the coming year.

## How does the distribution system work for you?

With Diamond it's very straightforward. You send them the details of each issue along with a jpeg of the cover; they then place your listing in their catalogue that is sent out on a monthly basis to all of their customers (comic shops) who then fill out their orders for each item they wish to buy. You are notified within a couple of weeks of your own orders and you then simply ship the title out within the required time. As for self-distributing, it's a little bit more time-consuming and obviously the orders are smaller and more time consuming to organise but on the other hand you get a larger portion of the profits. For me personally distribution means anything from walking around to the local comic shops and dropping the comics off to sending Diamond their monthly order. Basically whatever it takes.

## Special Offer

Many thanks to Robert, as an example of his guerrilla marketing tactics we have a special offer for readers of *Matrix*.

Robert has a special offer for us. The *Freak Show* graphic novels retail for £10.95. But readers of *Matrix* can get Vol. 1 for £6 or both Vol's 1 and 2 for £11, inclusive of postage and packaging.

Postal order/bank draft (UK cheques can't be accepted) to Sub-City Comics, 2 Exchequer Street, Dublin 2, Ireland.



# Pilots of our future

Some of the great British franchises of the sixties, notably *Doctor Who* and the Gerry Anderson shows such as *Captain Scarlet*, are still imaginatively alive in a new century. But those creations were influenced by what went before them. I was born in the Fifties, and the media icons of that grey-tinged decade, like *Dan Dare* and *Quatermass*, have been names in the background all my life. Now, thanks to some helpful reissues and repackaging, we have access to these monuments of a vanished age.

Titan Books have recently begun to publish a very welcome series of compilations of *Dan Dare* strips, complete with historical essays and interviews. The career of the 'Pilot of the Future' was launched with the *Eagle* comic on 14th April 1950, less than five years after the end of the Second World War. Marcus Morris, a parson based in Southampton, was concerned about the impact of American 'horror comics' on British kids. He hired artist Frank Hampson, who had drawn illustrations for a parish magazine, to put together the *Eagle*, a children's comic full of clean, exciting adventures. Rarely can such worthy motives have had such a spectacular outcome.

Dan's first adventure, 'Voyage to Venus', lasted an epic 77 weeks. In Dan's future, bright multi-finned spaceships have already reached Mars. Dan leads an expedition to Venus, where it is hoped that the lush, moist landscape under the opaque clouds can be farmed to feed a teeming humanity. However Venus is inhabited by the Treens, logic-driven 'scientific automatons', and the nobler Therons. Consultant Arthur C. Clarke's touch shows in details such as the Treens' use of 'comsats'.

The myth of Dan Dare derives heavily from the British experience of the recent war. Dan is clearly modelled on Battle-of-Britain pilots, complete with standard-issue laconic humour. The moral dilemmas posed by the war are confronted too. Dan goads the Therons into fighting by appealing to their consciences: 'Have you nothing more than pity for Earth's pain? A good man grieves but he acts as well' (issue 34). Later he appeals for peace through disarmament (vol. 2 issue 25).

The glorious and detailed strip was a splash of colour for children

growing up in a bleak, rationed, post-war fifties Britain. And as for its influence, Dan Dare's universe is a clear precursor to the loosely connected worlds of Gerry Anderson's 'supermarionation' puppet shows of the Sixties, from *Fireball XLS* to *Captain Scarlet*. In both universes Earth basks in a technocratic utopia under a world government. Both universes are set at a specific point in the future – 1995 for Dan (established in *Eagle* no. 4), and the 2060s for Anderson, always precisely 100 years ahead of the shows' broadcast dates. In the comics and annuals of both franchises key characters were given carefully developed biographies, there were cutaways of the imagined technologies, and so on. Perhaps most striking, the famous newspaper-style cover design of the Anderson comic *TV Century 21* (see my article in *Vector* 224) was foreshadowed in *Eagle* no. 25 (see opposite).

A recent tribute to Dan Dare is the Warren Ellis/Chris Weston comic *Ministry of Space* (Titan Books, 2005), an alternate history in which, thanks to an aggressive British post-war space programme, the Moon and Mars have been absorbed into the British Empire. As in my own alternate-Britspire pieces ('Prospero One' and 'First on the Moon!'), both with Simon Bradshaw, in *Hunters of Pangaea*, 2004) there is a worm of corruption within the shining apple of the space missions. But the images are everything, including the cover drawing of a Spitfire parked alongside a stubby spaceplane.

The BBC's *Quatermass* television serials of the 1950s were altogether darker than *Dan Dare*. The first serial, *The Quatermass Experiment*, was broadcast before I was born, and I had not seen it until its recent reissue on BBC DVD. But four episodes of six had been wiped to save tape – as many *Dr Who* episodes were trashed a decade later – an astounding act of self-inflicted cultural vandalism by the BBC. (A restaging of *Experiment* in 2005 featured soon-to-be-*Who* David Tennant.)

A British spaceship crashes in Wimbledon, bearing an astronaut who wears a space helmet like a huge gas mask. It turns out that the astronaut has been infected by spores



Stephen Baxter on the men who shaped our imagined futures

from space. The plot is driven by future shock and contemporary fears of the unknowns of space, but the story, like all the *Quatermass* serials, is essentially an update of the much older idea of demonic possession. And everything is in the shadow of the war. One bewildered old dear, rescued from the rubble of her home, asks, 'Are they starting up again?' It's as if everybody was mildly shell-shocked.

*Quatermass II* (1955) aliens invade the Earth again, this time inside hollow meteorites. The fifty-year-old sequence in which Quatermass flies a nuclear rocket on a kamikaze mission against an asteroid was reminiscent of the scenes returned by NASA's Deep Impact space probe, which struck Comet Tempel-1 on 4th July 2005, coincidentally the day I first watched this episode. In the third serial *Quatermass and the Pit* (1958-9) Quatermass finds 'ape-man' bones

in Knightsbridge with, beneath them, the hull of a spaceship. The insectile crew came to 'uplift' the pre-humans, a foreshadowing of the were-the-gods-alien theme that emerged a decade later in von Daniken's *Chariots of the Gods?* and Clarke's *2001* (both 1968). The fourth and final serial was *Quatermass, or The Quatermass Conclusion*, with John Mills as the elderly hero. This wasn't broadcast (by ITV) until 1979, by when its depiction of 1960s flower children led astray by another example of alien possession was somewhat out of time.

Of course the show itself has dated, such as in its attitude to women, who seem to be permanently on the edge of hysteria. And there is a rather elitist feel. *Quatermass* is an interesting character, a mad scientist with a conscience. But the scientific and military are always in control; ordinary people, blundering about in



**Dan Daring-do:**

**Far left:** Newspaper-style cover of Eagle issue 25

**Middle left:** Cover of TV Comic 21 inspired by Eagle

**Left:** Titan Books collect Dan's early adventures

**Above:** Dan Dare stirs the Therons to fight

Cockney oafishness, are mere fodder for the snail forces that prey upon them. There's a striking contrast with, say, the new *Who*; Rose, glorying in her ordinariness, saves the world.

Despite its limitations and repetitions *Quatermass*, effective and popular, found a way to map an sf story into mundane settings, and all on a BBC budget. A decade after the first serial, *Quatermass* was undoubtedly in the minds of the first producers of *Doctor Who*. There are echoes of *Quatermass's* adventures in the various alien incursions into British settings from as early as 'The Dalek Invasion of Earth' (1964).

The Pertwee-era *Earthbound* stories carry the strongest parallels to *Quatermass*. According to co-producer Derrick Sherwin at the time (interviewed in *Doctor Who: The Sixties*, David Howe, Mark Stammers, Stephen James Walker): 'I went to the BBC archives and managed to dig out some episodes of the *Quatermass*

*Experiment* ... What the producers had been trying to do ... was to get some reality into it ... What we had got to do with *Doctor Who* was to forget wobbly jellies in outer space and create some reason for bringing the stories down to Earth.'

The third Doctor's first adventure, 'Spearhead from Space', featured a shower of hollow 'meteorites' bearing an alien threat to Earth, just like *Quatermass II*. Presumably *Quatermass* creator Nigel Kneale had no objection as he was Sherwin's neighbour at the time! The recycling of old ideas into the latest (2005) incarnation of *Who* has ensured that the germ plasm of *Quatermass* lives on even today. (For more on this see Kim Newman's forthcoming TV Classics: *Doctor Who*.)

As it happens there are also traces of *Dan Dare* in *Who*. Clearly the Daleks' radiation-blasted origins reflected 1960s Cold War fears, and Terry Nation's creations drew heavily

on the ur-trope of the period, the Second World War, dramatising retrospective fears of Nazi conquest. But the Daleks' home world Skaro isn't so dissimilar to Dan's Venus, with its Thal-like Therons and Dalek-like Treens. And in the first Dalek annual, *The Dalek Book* (Souvenir Press and Panther Books, June 1964), written by Nation himself, the Daleks rampage across a space-opic war system in which Dan would have been at home.

Like all sf, *Quatermass* and *Dan Dare* are expressions of the tensions of their age: *Quatermass* is a fearful response to the Cold War, while *Dan Dare* nostalgically reworks past glories. The generation of fans who revelled in these adventures, glimpsed in gaudy comic strips or in flickering monochrome on thick-glassed TV sets, is growing old. But through their influence on those who followed, *Dan Dare* and *Quatermass* have shaped our culture ever since.



# Everybody is kung fu

Acclaimed SF author John Meaney has entertained many conventions with his martial arts knowledge and skills, demonstrating how to kill people with your little finger, doing the splits, etc. I asked Meaney what lies behind his interest in martial arts, and just what it all means to him. In response, he tells me all about shotokan, wu shu kwan (which I always thought was a rap group), ishin ryu, and many other difficult-to-pronounce things...

I started by asking what martial arts qualifications Meaney has – what level/s has he reached, and in what? “I started training in martial arts in 1972,” he replies. “For the first half of the 90s I trained in the famous Marshall Street dojo of the late Enoeda Sensei, ninth dan and European Chief Instructor of the Japan Karate Association. That was pure, and hardcore.

“That’s my lineage, and the source of my greatest pride and obligation. It has nothing to do with grades: framed certificates are irrelevant. After gaining shodan (first degree black belt), I trained for a quarter of a century without grading again. It was only last year, having settled down in a new karate association, that I got around to taking (and passing) my nidán (second dan) grading.

“Given my decades in karate, I consider nidán a low grade. During the grading, the chief examiner knew that I’d trained under Enoeda Sensei. I felt under pressure to excel not for myself, but for the reputation of the vastly superior martial artist who trained me.”

So how and when did Meaney first become interested in martial arts? “My first martial art was judo. Once you entered the fifth form in my old grammar school (that’s tenth grade to the US contingent of the BSFA!), you could go to the local college on Wednesdays. Remember games afternoons? I spent one year training under a 70-year old instructor called Alf. He taught me how to fall without hurting myself!

“Next year we had a new instructor, Jack, who was a 50-ish weightlifting ex-Commando. He was a gorilla who laughed a lot. Along with a handful of lads who were a year younger than me, I underwent Jack’s special after-

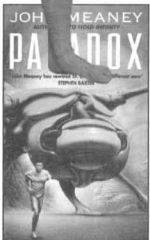
hours training, when the ordinary judo students had gone home. We lifted weights, practiced striking techniques (for Jack also trained in wu shu kwan), and fought blindfolded, one-against-three, and against plastic knives. Soon I was training in the wu shu kwan club as well.

“At university, the karate club taught shotokan, and so I switched. That was September 1975, and shotokan has remained my primary art ever since. I’ve taken opportunities to train in other styles of karate – I once sparred with Ticky Donovan, head of ishin ryu and the all-styles England team manager, and he must have hit me two hundred times – and in kickboxing (with world champ Bill Wallace) and jeet kune do (with Bruce Lee’s protégé, Dan Inosanto). All martial artists eventually create a personal, unique style of their own. That’s why, in *Resolution* (Meaney’s most recent novel) you’ll see Ro McNamara authentically blending techniques from every art imaginable, even catch-as-catch-can wrestling, to lethal effect.”

I wondered what Meaney gets out of this sport? Or, I propose, am I missing the point completely, and it is more than a mere ‘sport’? And why did he start in the first place. “Why did I start? Because of James Bond novels and the like. And I was truly awful: I was the fat, asthmatic, unathletic kid who did no sports before the age of fifteen. If you want to know how I felt about my early training, check out the part of *Paradox* where Tom has his first lesson in the fictitious art of phi2dao. Why do I continue? Because I can’t imagine life without that kind of relentless self-discipline.

“There are so many misconceptions. Some people think that martial arts are only soft disciplines featuring muscular and breath control. Others think that the arts are only violent. Take out the word ‘only’ from the preceding two sentences, and you’re getting closer.

“When I was first talking with the American writer Lori Ann White, I realized that she and her husband were from a very different (Chinese) martial arts lineage, so we had no way of recognizing the



validity of our respective instructors' names. Then Lori asked, 'Have you ever been injured?'

"I laughed, because I knew what she meant. If you've never lost consciousness or suffered broken bones (and caused the same phenomena on others!) then you've not trained in a true martial art. Yet only a thug could train in an environment where blood is spilled all the time. It's not a sport. Oh, but it's not self-defence, either. Martial arts need to be adapted for street situations, and then they're effective. I know of exactly one style that's based on realism from the

beginning, and that's the Israeli art of *krav magá*. Those guys are good."

I asked Meaney whether there are any SF books or films in which martial arts featured, and which he thought were particularly well executed? "You know I'm fond of a good paradox..." he says. "I liked the wirework antics of *The Matrix*, because they're supposed to be inside VR, and it works like a video game. Otherwise, I detest wirework movies.

"There have been flashes of authentic martial arts in some SF books. Um, *Hardwired* and *Angel Station* by Walter Jon Williams,

# u fighting!



## JOHN MEANEY To Hold Infinity

Dark, complex and glimmers with brilliant imagination... John Meaney has reinvented it. Everything is different now.  
—TIMOTHY BACKE



### Can I kick it?

**Above left:** John Meaney, black belt second dan and sf author

**Above:** Bruce Lee, in *Enter the Dragon*, "for nostalgia's sake"

**Left:** Meaney, the collected works



who's a kempo fourth dan, and Tricia Sullivan's *Someone To Watch Over Me*. And there's the occasional microsecond of fighting in Jon Courtenay Grimwood's novels.

Those moments work because he is the most stylish writer in the world. "When I met Tricia Sullivan at a Clarke Award ceremony (the year after she won the thing), I looked over to the edge of the gathering and said: 'Er... Isn't that Steve Morris standing over there?' The thing is, her partner is probably the best (and most vicious) martial artist, and no-holds-barred fighter that Britain has ever produced. And only someone

who's trained since the 70s would recognize him. Everyone else at the ceremony was oblivious to the most renowned person present."

Conversely, I wondered if there are any books or films in which he feels martial arts were particularly poorly executed? "Yeah... Pretty much all the rest that have attempted to, I'm afraid. And books need to engage all the senses, not just the visual, if they're going to get it right. That comment extends beyond fight scenes. Take a look at *Collateral* and its superb predecessor *Heat*: fights that last for a second. They're ultra-realistic, with

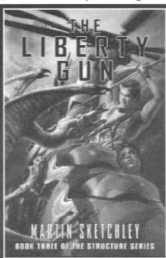
Okay, not everyone. Just John Meaney. And it is karate, not kung fu. But you know what we mean. Martin Sketchley investigates.

field-stripped techniques. More melodramatically, the first Rambo movie, *First Blood*... honest! Think of the bit where Sly escapes from jail.

"Guilty. I'll confess to my old favourites among yer actual martial arts movies: *Perfect Weapon*, starring Jeff Speakman, *Lone Wolf McQuade* with Chuck Norris (also his *Code of Silence* and *The Hero and The Terror*) and the incomparable *Enter The Dragon*, for nostalgia's sake. Also check out a riveting documentary called *Choke*. Oh, and there's the fight scene in *Grosse Pointe Blank*, featuring John Cusack (and his stunt double) against the legendary Benny Urquidez. And *Batman Begins* is kick-ass excellent. The movie star I'd least like to fight all-out is Dolph Lundgren.

"In books... I've one major candidate here, and that's the superb novels of Barry Eisler. Read him, if you haven't already. His half-Japanese assassin-hero operating in modern Tokyo (and elsewhere) is ultra-cool, with leading-edge covert tech. Eisler depicts Japan better than anyone. Otherwise, the early Robert B Parker novels convey the visceral feel of what it is to be an ex-boxer, ex-cop private eye (remember what I said about engaging all the senses?). And James Lee Burke's ex-alcoholic detective uses running and weightlifting (though not martial arts) to fight off the devils in his mind. Then there are the tense classic Quiller books by the late Adam Hall (real name Elleston Trevor), which taught me how to write physical action.

"And as for the bad stuff... I'd like to pretend that no one has ever made a movie in which martial artists can levitate into trees. Say it ain't so, Joe."



Unfortunately this is the last ironing board [sniff]. Due to time pressures on my part and the fact that *Matrix* is being slimmed down to 28 pages, this seems an appropriate time to hand in my notice without leaving anyone in the lurch. I hope you've found at least some of the ironing interesting, and would like to thank the BSFA for giving me the opportunity to make some kind of contribution. So, that's it, pop kids. Keep to the beat.

The paperback edition of Martin Sketchley's second novel - *The Destiny Mask* - is published in April 2006 by Simon & Schuster in the UK, and by Pyr in the US. Autumn will see the publication of *The Liberty Gun* - the third in the Structure series.

If you have any specifically web-related news that might be of interest to Matrix readers, or ideas for future articles, please keep them to yourself.

Martin Sketchley  
www.martinsketchley.co.uk/  
martin@martinsketchley.co.uk

Titles currently available by John Meaney in the UK are *To Hold Infinity*, *Paradox*, *Context* and *Resolution* is just out in paperback, which is, according to the author "far better than my previous books!". In the US, *Paradox* and *Context* are published by Pyr - *Paradox* was chosen as number two in Barnes and Noble's Books of 2005 (and compared with *Dune*). *Resolution* will be available in the US in March, and *To Hold Infinity* will follow.



# Remembering a "right guy"

Ken Bulmer was a prolific author and a fan with links back to fandom's birth. Mark Plummer remembers.

On 16 December the ether vibrated with the news that Ken Bulmer had died. It wasn't exactly a surprise – the man was 84 and he'd been in poor health since suffering a stroke in the late nineties – but his passing creates another break with the formative years of British sf and fandom.

Ken was a writer, of course, and an astonishingly prolific one with some 160 books and over 200 stories to his name. I've read relatively few of them and thus I'm not really in a position to make much comment about this literary output – and, anyway, this column probably isn't the place. But Ken was also a fan, if not quite of the first wave then certainly from the early days of British fandom.

His first fannish contact was through Mike Rosenblum's *Futurist War Digest*, and he published his own *Star Parade* as a rider alongside 'Fido' in 1941 until he joined the forces at the end of that year. I have a copy of Vol 1 No. 2 from May 1941: four pages of faded foolscap, crammed with science articles, stories, a poem, and a fan quiz. But his peak period of fannish activity was probably from 1949 to 1952 when he shared a flat with Vin\$ Clarke that became known as 'The Epicentre'. Irish fan Walt Willis visited them there in 1951 before The Festivention convention:

"I had never really believed that fandom could be a way of life until I saw this place. It is a fan's paradise and a housewife's nightmare. Books, prozines, fanzines, letters, typewriters, mimeographs, stencils, artwork are heaped about in mountain ranges. Behind them are presumably walls, but rumours that a floor has been seen once or twice must be discounted. Archaeological expeditions have definitely established that the Epicentre is built on a solid foundation of old fanzines, stretching from strata to

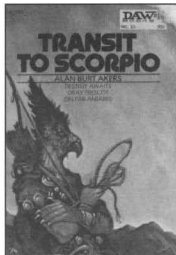


**CHECK  
POINT**  
News on fans and fandom

strata down to the eternal fires of Vom." "The Harp in England", *Quandry* #11, June 1951

Despite all this, the duo actually produced a couple of co-written sf novels while living there, *Space Treason* and *Cybernetic Controller*, and it seems that this set them off on their different paths. An author in search of a counterfactual plot might like to explore what might have happened next had Vin\$ decided to pursue a career as a professional writer while Ken eschewed filthy prodom to devote himself to fandom. It's probably a little specialised but I'm sure there's a few of us who'd buy a copy.

Those first co-written books set Ken off on a hectic publishing life – seven solo novels followed in 1953 alone – but he didn't turn his back on fandom by any means. He was a regular contributor



(and one-time president) in the early days of the first British APA, OMPA, and his OMPAZine *Steam* appeared throughout the 1950s. Indeed, steam was something of a common Bulmer theme: observing a boiling kettle "a strange force that seemed to reside in the vapour of the boiling water, and speculated on the possibility of harnessing the energy for transportation and other socially useful ends" (Dick Enye, *Fancypedia II*). This gave rise to a long-running dispute with American fan Lee Hoffman about who held the patent to this remarkable power source.

In 1955 he won TAFF, beating such luminaries as Eric Bently, Terry Jeeves, Stuart Mackenzie, Ken Slater and Ted Tubbs. His old flat-mate Vin\$ had been the first winner, but he'd been unable to make the trip so Ken was the first

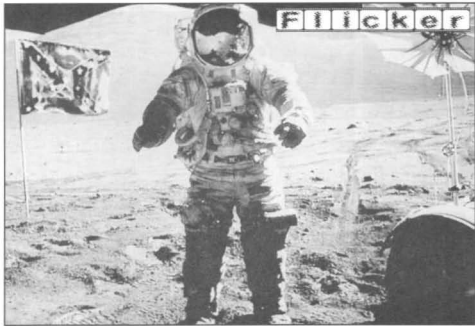
delegate to cross the Atlantic at TAFF's expense.

A report appeared by instalments between 1955 and 1961 (available online at [www.taff.org.uk/reports/hkb1.html](http://www.taff.org.uk/reports/hkb1.html)) and the trip even warranted a brief mention in the Bulmer obituary that appeared in *The Guardian* ([www.guardian.co.uk/obituaries/story/0,3604,1672178,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/obituaries/story/0,3604,1672178,00.html)).

I can't offer much by way of personal experience of Ken; I saw him at conventions maybe once or twice but we never actually met. I'll give the closing remarks, then, to Greg Pickersgill, writing on the one of the elists, who said of Ken that he "...was definitely a Right Guy, both as a fan and as a writer who produced some work of genuine charm that was actually memorable, which is a damned sight more than can be said of very many other authors."



# London calling...



## SCI-FI-LONDON<sup>5</sup>

THE 5TH LONDON INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASTIC FILM

We don't mind if it makes us sound a bit pathetic, but Sci-Fi-London (The London International Festival of Science Fiction and Fantastic Film) has become one of Flickers' most anticipated weekends of the year – up there with Christmas and the two days we get off from reviewing films in July.

This year sees the fifth festival shift venue to the new, and very plush, Apollo West End cinema and the date shift back to 26-30 April, so we've had to wait longer than usual, but that's just succeeded in boosting our levels of anticipation.

Here's our look ahead to some of things we're most looking forward to at this year's Sci-Fi-London.

### **Puzzlehead** (USA 2005)

A story about love, identity and what it will mean to be a human (or a robot) in the near future. *Puzzlehead* is a modern riff on Frankenstein's tale but one with an awareness of some of the layers of complexity that artificial intelligence promises to add to our near future.

### **Survive Style 5** (Japan 2003)

Sunny Chiba. Violence. Vinnie Jones. More violence. Five different

stories cut through each other at frenetic speed. A cooler than ice soundtrack. A would-be killer with a wife who just won't die. Assassins. And a man doomed to cluck like a chicken for the rest of his life when a stage hypnotist drops dead. Expect to see me in the front row.

### **CSA: The Confederate States of America** (USA 2005) and **First on the Moon** (*Perviyje na lune*) (Russia 2005)

Two alternate history stories, one on an America that never existed and another on Soviet heroes that never were.

In *CSA* a British documentary team explore modern America in a world where the South won the Civil War. Satirical and thought-provoking, *CSA* mixes fake adverts, talking head "historians" and clips from fictional television programmes to ram home the director's point about the racism inherent in his fictional Confederate States. And no one should miss the implications for those who still fly the confederate flag in the USA.

*First on the Moon* begins in Spring 1938 and mixes fact and fantasy (genuine vintage footage and fake material) to tell the story of a secret Soviet space programme

developed before World War II, twenty-three years before Gagarin's first flight. More than just a fantasy, though, *First on the Moon* explores the random cruelty and oppression of the Stalin era.

### **Places Promised in Our Early Years** (Japan 2005)

From the director of *Voices of a Distant Star* this anime promises more of his first outings beautiful visuals but a longer and more complex plot (*Voices...* ran just 25 minutes, this is 91 minutes long). *Places...* is a story of children growing up in an alternate Japan where America rules the south and "The Union" the north.

### **Die You Zombie Bastards** (USA 2004)

With a tagline that claims it is "the world's first EVER serial killer superhero rock'n'roll zombie road movie romance" this'll do exactly what it says on the tin. Expect unsubtle fun for fans of *Troma*.

### **FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions** (Spain 2005)

FAQ is set in a near-future Paris surrounded by desert and controlled by "The Sisterhood" – a religious/fascist tyranny preaching sexual abstinence (who votes for these

people?). Angelina and Nono embark on a journey that will lead them to question the foundation of their society in a film that blends surrealism and satire. Could be great, could be a pretentious mess...

### **White Skin (La Peau Blanche)** (Canada 2005)

First time writer/director Roby's *White Skin* is a vampire story that plays out more like a thriller. Short on hack and slash but more chilling for it, *White Skin* could be a smarter take on an often brainless genre.

Other stuff to look forward to includes a screening of the original *Logan's Run* (soon to be remade by *Usual Suspects*/X-Men/Superman director Bryan Singer), anime, vampire and *Mystery Science Theatre 3000* all-nighters, a chance to experience the brilliance/nonsense (I still can't decide) of *American Astronaut* on the big screen and the usual (or should that be unusual) eclectic programme of short features and fan films (always one of my festival highlights).

By the time you read this, tickets may already be on sale, so Flickers recommends you go immediately to [www.sci-fi-london.com](http://www.sci-fi-london.com) for all the latest details.

Sci-Fi-London is back

Left: Journeying to the moon for "all mankind" in *CSA*

Above (top): Lost Soviet heroes rediscovered in *First on the Moon*

Above: Puzzlehead begs questions

# Broken mirror



By all rights, *Mirrormask* should be a triumph. It has behind it a host of formidable talent, from the pen of Neil Gaiman through the visual élan of Dave McKean to the technical capabilities of Jim Henson Productions (who really do excel themselves). On top of that there is an engaging cast – particularly Leonidas, McKie, Brydon and Barry in the four key roles – giving solid performances. There was even sufficient cash to succeed in transferring the very strange visions of Dave McKean's artwork into sprawling life.

Nothing, it seems, could go wrong. Amongst a certain type of film and comic book geek no film has been more keenly anticipated than *Mirrormask*.

Which makes it all the more painful to report that *Mirrormask* is in no way equal to the sum of its creative parts.

No one could fairly accuse the film of lack of ambition and technically it is a revelation. Director McKean's artwork will be familiar to readers of books such as *Black Orchid*, *Sandman Presents*, *The Wolves in the Walls* and *Vanjak Poo*. His singular approach to the construction of images places him,

for me and many others, amongst the finest illustrators currently at work. And, for the most part, *Mirrormask* succeeds in bringing McKean's peculiar visual style spectacularly to life.

This film's failings are primarily to do with its storytelling. Neil Gaiman's script is fine, so far as it goes, with nicely crafted dialogue. As one might expect from a writer who has made a career from dissecting the stories we tell ourselves, this is an intelligent and knowing reworking of some standard fairytale tropes (primarily *Alice in Wonderland*). But the pacing is all wrong, there are long, languorous passages when really very little happens. The characters, particularly within the dream world, are too distant and too abstruse to engage the viewer and their motivations are too obscure.

The story is familiar enough. A young girl, Helena (Leonidas) growing up in the circus run by her parents (McKie and Brydon), wants to run away and join the "real" world until her mother falls ill. On the night of her mother's operation (why the NHS is doing a non-emergency operation in the middle of the night no one ever bothers to explain) Helena falls asleep and

wakes up in a fantasy land that is in crisis. A princess from the dark lands has stolen the mirrormask, the queen of the light kingdom cannot be woken from her sleep without it. Darkness is spreading across the land. Helena embarks on a quest with Valentine (Barry) to recover the mask and set things right.

Perhaps because of Valentine's Irish accent or perhaps because of all those long, empty moments, there were times when *Mirrormask* reminded me of a Samuel Beckett play. And while I'm a big admirer of the work of Ireland's greatest playwright and Nobel laureate, in this case that is not a compliment. I'm not convinced anyone in this production was aiming for quite that tone of dislocation and bewildering emptiness. Nor do I believe that McKean and Gaiman intended us to stare at the screen wishing their characters would just bloody get on with something, anything.

Matters aren't improved by the inevitable disjunction between characters and actors that occurs when filming action set in computer generated worlds. While the heavy processing of the film necessary to achieve McKean's distinctive look does something

to disguise the fact, there are still moments when the actors are clearly not "attached" to their surroundings. There are times when everyone looks like they are in the middle of 80s' kid show *Knightmare*.

And yet, I cannot bring myself to be too critical of *Mirrormask*, for all its faults. The films that really annoy are those that fail through lack of ambition or stupidity and *Mirrormask* is guilty of neither of those sins. Even at its lowest ebbs there are interesting things just around the corner and *Mirrormask* doesn't fail for lack of imagination or a desire to engage the viewer in an intelligent conversation. I certainly hope to see more films from both Gaiman and McKean and (with this experiment behind them) believe they both have better work to come.

*Mirrormask* is a visual treat rather than a successful film. (MMcG)

## Mirrormask

Director: Dave McKean

Writer: Neil Gaiman

Cinematographer: Tony Shearn  
Cast: Stephanie Leonidas, Gina McKee, Rob Brydon, Jason Barry, Dora Bryan, Robert Llewellyn, Andy Hamilton, Stephen Fry  
101 mins

# Not evil, just bad



**H**ow funny do you find portrayals of rural Welsh farmers as inbred madmen? Would it make you laugh if they spat, loudly and in unison, every time someone said the word "English"?

If you giggle at the idea then there might be something in *Evil Aliens* for you. If not, move along, there's nothing to see.

*Evil Aliens* is a splatter movie with an sf theme. Unlike horror movies, which are supposed to try to scare you, splatter movies are only really interested in disgusting you. To that end the viewer can more or less toss aside expectations of tension, intelligence or drama. You do, however, get a lot of splatter for your money.

The story centres on a crew of reporters from a cheesy cable television show, "World of Weird", sent to investigate reports of alien abductions on a Welsh island. Soon they find themselves in the middle of an invasion by anal-probing, baby-implanting, cow-ripping aliens and killing or dying in a variety of inventive and overwhelmingly bloody ways.

Now there are going to be those who find all this hilarious and enjoy it immensely. When I was thirteen

I loved films like Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead*. It has that same mix of ultraviolence, low humour and a touch of smut that appealed to me as a teenager. I am sure, years from now, there will be those amongst the current crop of thirteen-year-olds who will look back on *Evil Aliens* with the fondness that I have for its antecedents.

However I don't think it is just nostalgia that forces me to say that *Evil Aliens* isn't a patch on those earlier films. First, the splatter movies of the late 1970s and early 80s were doing something new, pushing the boundaries of what was acceptable in films in a way that had never been done before. By contrast, *Evil Aliens* has some unpleasant scenes but, separating the images from the gross humour, there's nothing on the screen that you wouldn't find done just as explicitly in a more mainstream Hollywood horror movie like *Hostel* (see review on page 20).

Second, it has to be said that the director West is no Sam Raimi. At best he handles the camera competently but there is nothing to suggest that he is capable of surprising the viewer. Indeed all the best moments in the film, such as the nice, if too long, pastiche

of spaghetti western stand-offs, are contained in "references" (or ripped-off sequences) to other films.

I'm as keen on post-modern cinema as the next French philosopher, but there has to be some core to make watching a film full of "references" worthwhile. The problem with *Evil Aliens* is that there is nothing here we haven't seen done more funnily, more explicitly or more frighteningly in the films it is busy ripping off.

*Evil Aliens* does have positive points, but none are to do with plot, character or performance. It's a low-budget British sf-themed film that got made, which is no mean achievement on its own. Technically the film has some shining moments and the people responsible for the special effects, both practical and CGI, have done a professional job on a shoestring budget.

And the very least you can say about the film is that it is honest. There is no pretence at profundity or emotional content. *Evil Aliens* has no more depth than its name suggests and the pantomime performances of the cast are suitably broad and shallow.

*Evil Aliens* is hardly "politically correct" – part of its "shock" tactics is to indulge in childish smuttiness,

which, for the most part, succeeds only in highlighting writer/director West's inability to craft a halfway decent joke. But the treatment of a gay character is unpleasant. The stream of unfunny queer jokes seem to have been pinched from a (bad) 70s' sitcom, but the character's final fate (skewered from anus to throat by a cross) suggests something nastier. Amongst all the cartoon violence and silliness this is moment leaves a real sense of unease about the film-maker's intent.

As I've said, I don't doubt *Evil Aliens* will find an audience who adores it. That happy group won't include me. Really great horror films can fill you with such dread that you wish you were somewhere else. Bad horror films make you wish you were anywhere else. *Evil Aliens* definitely falls into the latter category. (MMcG)

## Evil Aliens

Writer/Director: Jake West  
Cinematographer: Jim Solan  
Cast: Chris Adamson, Emily Booth, Sam Butler, Jennifer Evans, Mark Richard Hayes, Jamie Honeybourne, Norman Lovett, Peter O'Connor, Jodie Shaw, Nick Smithers, Chris Thomas, Mildred Von Heidegard  
93 mins

# In America, only th

Do you know what's wrong with the horror movies produced in America today?

Everything!

But what is particularly wrong is that they've forgotten that their job is to scare people.

It might be fun to make the audience leap from their collective seat because you've pulled a cheap "he's behind you" moment or worse, "the sudden loud bang", a technique even a three-year-old can master, but that alone does not make a great, or even a good, horror movie. That kind of cheap scare works for a minute, but really good horror films disturb people long after their heart rate has settled back down again.

Nor is it enough to make them turn away from the screen in disgust as you splash buckets of gore or splatter pints of blood all over the set. For a start that's already been done so often that most filmgoers are immune to your shenanigans but it is also lazy. Anyone can do it.

All the special effects and buckets of fake blood in the world won't disguise the fact that the vast majority of modern American, and by that I mean Hollywood, horror films are so utterly bereft of truly scary ideas that they are not worth your time and effort.

There is a whole industry out there churning out insipid, glossy teen nonsense and stupid, gory slashfests which share a single common flaw: they're not scary. A generation of scriptwriters and directors seem to have no concept of what it takes to create tension and excitement in a plot. Certainly none of them has any idea of what it takes to create a film that deserves the epithet "horror".

It has not always been that way. Remember America once produced films like *Psycho*, *The Exorcist*, *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Shining* and *Dawn of the Dead*. Even in the 1980s the likes of *The Thing*, *Evil Dead II* and *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* could emerge – admittedly from the fringes of Hollywood – and be truly shocking.

Now, however, American filmmakers appear entirely incapable of producing films that

achieve more than cheap frights based on "boo!" moments, and some can't even manage that. Which brings me to the three pitiful examples before us today.

*The Fog* (1980) was not one of director John Carpenter's better efforts but it came amongst that rush of films released in just eight years that included *Assault on Precinct 13*, *Halloween*, *The Thing* and *Christine* which secured his status as one of the best "B" movie directors ever to point a camera. So, even though the original *The Fog* belongs in the second rank of his films, there are moments of real tension. The fog itself is beautiful and the final struggle as the isolated DJ (Barbeau) fights for her life in her lighthouse remains memorable.

The remake, *The Fog* (2005), has no such moments and not the slightest hint of tension. The cast appear utterly bemused by what is going on around them and display not the slightest hint of being capable of expressing a single believable emotion. Chief amongst the culprits are Tom Welling (*Smallville*) and Maggie

Grace (*Lost*) who are so wooden that you suspect the reason the plot has them running around so much is that the producers feared that if they stood still, they'd plant roots. There is so little chemistry between the two that when they meet (we're expected to believe that they are lovers who have been separated for months) something close to the opposite of sparks fill the air. The screen seems to visibly chill. It is as if energy is being leached out of the surrounding atmosphere.

The plot of *The Fog* never really mattered – the ghosts of murdered sailors return in the form of fog to punish those who betrayed them – but the remake even manages to balls that up. At first it seems that the fog is killing everyone, then it appears that the sailors are only after the descendants of those who betrayed them. But in the climactic (and I use that word only loosely) moment the film contradicts all that has gone before, revealing that the ultimate aim of the ghosts is the marriage of their leader to the transformed great-granddaughter of one of their murderers. It

is a supremely stupid moment that comes without warning or explanation.

Worse, even after the soul-sucking idiocy of the previous one hundred minutes, and just when I had become convinced that neither the art of cinema nor I could sink any lower, it is delivered in such a banal fashion that only expletives sufficed to express my own and my fellow viewers displeasure. *The Fog* (2005) is not the worst film I have ever seen (sadly) but it is a strong contender for the bottom ten.

Judged against *The Fog*, *Final Destination 3* is a towering work of cinematic genius – which is to say that by any normal standard it is slightly below average multiplex fodder designed to attract teenagers more interested in texting each other than watching the film. In that spirit I rather liked the first *Final Destination* film which was directed by James Wong (*Space: Above and Beyond*, *X-Files* – including "Squeeze" and "Tooms"). The *Final Destination* films share the same central conceit: a teenager experiences a vision of impending



# e president is scary



## Don't panic

**Far left:** Am I wrong? Surely everyone has wished they could treat tourists like they do in *Hostel*?

**Above:** *Final Destination 3* - proving death is a rollercoaster.

**Left:** Sadly the fog is never thick enough to disguise the cast's inadequacy.

disaster and save the lives of a group of people. However Fate or Death will not be denied and bizarre accidents start claiming the survivors in the order in which they should have died.

What fun there is to be found in *Final Destination* movies is in the construction of complex and inescapable traps for the victims. There is macabre fun from watching all the elements fall into place and trying to work out just how the filmmakers will actually off their target. This third outing sees Wong return (he was missing from the second) and there are moments of gruesome fun but the core idea has started to wear a bit thin and, recognising this, the filmmakers have reacted by upping the splatter factor and using more effects. There is, however, a nice sequence in a DIY store that manages to wrongfoot all your expectations and deliver a nasty coup de grâce that matches anything in the earlier films for gruesome amusement. And the opening roller-coaster disaster is a well choreographed ride. *Final*

*Destination 3* is not as good as the franchise's earlier outings, but it isn't offensively bad either.

That *Hostel* isn't offensive certainly isn't for the want of trying. Director Eli Roth (with his so-called "horror porn" style and a knack for self promotion) has earned a reputation as a rising star amongst horror directors. I found his first film, *Cabin Fever* (*Matrix* 164), simultaneously tedious and bewildering and though *Hostel* is better, it does nothing to justify the high regard the director has achieved in some circles.

*Hostel* is the story of three unlikeable young men – two Americans and a Finn – aiming to shag their way across Europe. They are directed to a youth hostel in Slovakia with the promise of wild times. After what seems to be an age the men become involved in a mysterious plot and people start to disappear. As things take a turn for the dark, Roth piles on the gore and works hard with flashy but over-obvious camera movement and editing, but to little real effect. The problem is the plot.

For most of the film events seem to happen at random so that by the time the cause of all this carnage is revealed – a rich man's club selling murderous experiences – any interest has been dissipated. The denouement, based on a run of ever more improbable coincidences, wholly fails to convince.

Films like *Hostel* and *The Fog* clearly find an audience, otherwise they wouldn't get made, and *Final Destination* has been popular enough to spawn two sequels, so perhaps the film-going public are getting the kind of horror films they deserve. Even so, one can't help feeling a certain despair as another insipid teen horror movie rolls across the screen. With rare exceptions (*Saw*, *The Others*, the films of M Night Shyamalan) American cinema has lost the knack of producing interesting horror films that deliver more than cheap thrill and dumb laughs.

Keep your teen franchises and your "horror porn" – I want scary movies that make me fret and worry and think. I want films that are better than this. (MMCG)

## The Fog

Director: Rupert Wainwright  
Writer: Cooper Layne  
Cinematographers: Nathan Hope & Ian Seabrook  
Cast: Tom Welling, Maggie Grace, Selma Blair, DeRay Davis, Kenneth Welsh, Adrian Hough, Sara Botsford, Cole Heppell, Mary Black, Jonathon Young  
100 mins

## Final Destination 3

Director: James Wong  
Writers: Glen Morgan & James Wong  
Cinematographer: Robert McLachlan  
Cast: Mary Elizabeth Winstead, Ryan Merriman, Kris Lemche, Alexz Johnson, Sam Easton, Jesse Moss, Gina Holden, Texas Battle  
93 mins

## Hostel

Writer/Director: Eli Roth  
Cinematographer: Milan Chadima & Shane Daly  
Cast: Jay Hernandez, Derek Richardson, Eythor Gudjonsson, Barbara Nedeljkova, Jan Vlasák, Jana Kaderabkova, Jennifer Lim, Lubomir Bukovy  
95 mins

# Darwin was wrong!

# Ring's fur



I am a peaceful man. I have never owned or fired a gun and I hope I will never have to kill a man. But I want everyone reading this review to listen very carefully: If I hear that any of you paid money to enter a cinema to watch or bought a DVD of *Underworld Evolution*, I will hunt you down. I will cause you pain.

Why? Because having suffered through the original *Underworld* (Matrix 164), a truly awful movie, I have now had to sit through the sequel. All because there are enough dimwits out there willing to put money in the pockets of people who make this sort of trash.

Now when I say that *Underworld Evolution* is better than the first film I don't want you to take that as a recommendation. Shit on a stick made more interesting viewing than *Underworld*, which makes its sequel roughly equivalent to watching just the stick.

Its not as if there isn't potential here. The idea of a film in which vampires and werewolves fight each other should be a surefire winner with geeks everywhere. Add the opportunity for those geeks to lust over the attractive form of Kate Beckinsale in leather gear that wouldn't look out of

place in certain type of Soho shop and the reason for the first film's modest success appears obvious.

Yet, for all her undoubted charms, Ms Beckinsale's name in the titles hardly bodes well for the casual viewer. Her ability to choose a script might, charitably, be described as questionable. As well as *Underworld*, she has lent her talents to the dire *Pearl Harbour* and the appalling *Van Helsing*.

But the principal faults of *Underworld Evolution* don't have a great deal to do with Beckinsale's qualities as an actor. Far more important is the incapability of her husband, Wiseman, to point or move his camera in a coherent and interesting way. *Underworld* was his first film as director and this sequel is his second. At his current rate of improvement he should be making a halfway decent film sometime near the start of the fourth millennium. Worse, however, is the writing with luridly clichéd dialogue, a plot that has more holes than a golf course and characters that lack credible motivation. Like the first film the central "love story" is mind-numbingly predictable in its course made worse by the central actors lack of any onscreen spark resulting the most cringe-inducing



On its cinema release *The Descent* garnered rave reviews across the board, even from those not known for their sympathy towards genre movies. Finally watching it on DVD, it's easy to see why it appealed to so many reviewers. Smartly directed, it uses its modest budget to good effect with spectacular cave sets and cinematography working miracles with what little light allowed in the darkness underground.

Unlike most horror films *The Descent* invests time in creating characters with history and relationships that appear recognisably human. This effort is slightly undermined in the latter stages when, caked with mud, wearing helmets and in the dark, it becomes tricky telling one cast member from another, but pays off handsomely in the end. And, like most good ideas the film's premise, a group of women coming across something

sex scenes ever performed.

Where *Underworld Evolution* scores more highly than its predecessor is in its superior action sequences. There's an impressive opening battle and a chase sequence involving a large truck that works exceptionally well. The special effects have also taken a significant step forward. The film takes advantage of this, dropping the *Matrix*-style gunplay that marred the first film in favour of more werewolf on vampire scrapping. The presence of Jacobi and the fleeting return of Nighy add a weight to this film that it hardly deserves, but it is a pleasure to watch both of them on screen.

None of this adds up to making *Underworld Evolution* a film that can be recommended – and I certainly don't want any of you doing anything to encourage them to make another one. (MMcG)

## Underworld Evolution

Director: Len Wiseman  
Writer: Danny McBride  
Cinematographer: Simon Duggan  
Cast: Kate Beckinsale, Scott Speedman, Tony Curran, Derek Jacobi, Bill Nighy, Steven Mackintosh, Shane Brolly  
106 mins



# Ultimate

# ry tales

Amidst the 2005 Christmas TV scheduler's dross & repeats, Channel 4 is to be congratulated for broadcasting over three hours of great dragon-slayer saga based on Nordic/Germanic mythology.

*The Sword of Xanten* (Ring of the Nibelungs in the US) directed by Uli Edel, was the love story of Siegfried (Furmann) and Brunhild (Loken). The film, in muted tones, told of a quest for identity (Eric the blacksmith was really Siegfried), of Kriemhild's (Witt) unrequited love and King Gunter's (West) betrayal. Early on a meteorite strike allowed 'Eric' to use the ore to forge a mighty sword using the secret technique of twisting two bars of 'star' metal together. This plot device was later 'borrowed' by Hollywood for Jim Bowie's blade.

There was a CGI dragon 'Fafnir' and his treasure hoard, ghostly Nibelungs and bathing in the dragon's

blood imparted invulnerability upon Siegfried (a lot messier than a dip in the River Styx). Amongst the treasure was a cursed ring, the properties or advantages of which were not explained. A disgraced Nibelung was the owner of the magic 'Tarn helm', a helmet which conveyed 'shape shifting' abilities, which Siegfried took and used for adulterous purposes whilst under the influence of a love potion. There were a couple of great fight scenes, especially one with double blade axes on an ice floe.

I didn't recognise the lead actors Furman and Loken (she's the female terminator in T3 -ed.), but the supporting cast were known from UK television and there was an excellent performance from Max Von Sydow.

Maybe more 'Sword & Furs' than sword and sorcery, or sword and sandals, *Sword of Xanten* was redolent of many themes plundered by JRR

Tolkien, cinema directors and a host of modern fantasy writers.

Perhaps Peter Jackson should add tales of the Norse Gods to his list of 'must do' films, as modern TV and cinema seems to have 'played out' Greek and Roman tales? I know I am still happy to watch the occasional repeat of *The Vikings*, but perhaps BBC/HBO might now do these stories justice? (Mike Brain)

• *The Sword of Xanten* is out now on DVD.

## The Sword of Xanten

Director: Uli Edel  
Writers: Diane Duane, Peter Morwood and Uli Edel  
Cinematographer: Elemér Ragályi  
Cast: Benno Fürmann, Kristanna Loken, Alicia Witt, Julian Sands, Samuel West, Max von Sydow  
132 mins(UK cinema), 184 mins (DVD)

nasty down a cave, appears straightforward but allows plenty of room for manoeuvre.

Still, *The Descent* is by no means flawless. While the set-up and the final half an hour are excellent I found the second act – an extended sequence of potholing – dragged somewhat. There were just too many sequences of people crawling through narrow tunnels for my taste.

The main problem with *The Descent*, however, is the ending. This is one of those horror films that seems to end one way and then switches back to confound you. The problem is that the first ending is both touching and satisfying, while the coda has little resonance.

Yet I'm willing to forgive *The Descent* almost everything for the thrills and excitement of the third act. There are no scream queens amongst the women in *The Descent* and when they are pressed into a corner they come out fighting

(the monsters and each other) in the most satisfying way. Even more impressive, however, is the twist by which Sarah (MacDonald) and Juno (Mendoza) resolve their personal conflict. I can honestly say that I didn't see that coming.

Marshall's second feature is a significant step forward from the fun but plodded *Dog Soldiers*. He appears to be developing into a significant force in UK cinema – a genre director who can get films made and with real potential as both a writer and behind the camera. His next project is an sf/horror film, *Doomsday*. (MMcG)

## The Descent

Writer/Director: Neil Marshall  
Cinematographer: Sam McCurdy  
Cast: Shauna Macdonald, Natalie Mendoza, Alex Reid, Saskia Mulder, MyAnna Buring, Nora-Jane Noone  
99 mins



# Underground movement

One of the reasons for the success of Marvel's Ultimate line of comics (which take classic characters and kick them into the grittier, tougher twenty-first century) is that, for the most part, they have built the line around the best writers and artists. The *Ultimates*, a reworking of the classic Marvel team The Avengers, is a perfect example. The opening volume pinched writer Mark Millar and artist Brian Hitch from DC when they got cold feet about continuing to publish their overtly political *The Authority* in the run up to the US election. The Distinguished Competition's loss was Marvel's gain as the subsequent *The Ultimates* book proved a commercial and critical hit.

Sadly, in Marvel's first in-house produced movie, *Ultimate Avengers* (a direct to DVD animation) the House of Ideas hasn't stuck to its policy of focusing on talented creators. The result is a movie that looks as though it has been produced for a cheap

Saturday morning kids show. Half the comics' appeal was Brian Hitch's 'widescreen' artwork, so the fact that the animation here is so childish is profoundly disappointing. The contrast between the books and the film is rubbed more deeply into fan's faces when the final credits are accompanied by examples of Hitch's artwork from the comic book. Its the artistic equivalent of Jim Bowen's 'and here's what you could've won' moment.

Such shortcomings might have been forgiven if Millar's story hadn't been so thoroughly bowdlerized. Stripped of its satirical, political and adult content the resulting mish-mash doesn't even make a good adventure story. A film for children could simply have retold the traditional Avengers origin. As an adult adventure, an *Ultimates* adaptation required more courage. As it is, onscreen violence earned *Ultimate Avengers* a PG13 in the US, making it unsuitable for kids but what remains is still so watered-down that it is hard to

imagine it appealing to adults.

The Japanese can produce complex and adult-themed animated sf adventures and sell them to the West by the bucketload. Surely, if they had sufficient confidence in their source material there was an opportunity for Marvel and Lions Gate Films to tap that market. Instead they have failed to invest the resources necessary to produce a quality adaptation of this material. The result is a film that seems unlikely to satisfy anyone – I count myself something of a Marvel apologist and even I can't forgive this. (MMcG)

## Ultimate Avengers

Directors: Curt Geda & Stephen E Gordon  
Writer: Greg Johnson  
Cast: Justin Gross, David Boat, Olivia d'Abo, Grey DeLisle, Michael Massee, Nan McNamara, Nolan North, Fred Tatasciore, Andre Ware, Marc Worden  
72 mins



# y futile

# Television Invasion



Like the old joke about London buses – there is never one around when you want one, then three come along at once – so it is with sf on TV. In the last issue I was moaning there was nothing to watch during the autumn but now there is so much on the box that since Christmas my VCR has been overheating just trying to keep up. (OK, I admit I've also been following *Celebrity Big Brother* which this year featured one alien and at least five other people who didn't appear to be regular occupants of Planet Earth.)

A key viewing highlight – not least because it was just about the only thing worth watching on Christmas Day (it even kept my mother entertained) was the proper debut of David Tennant as the latest *Dr Who* in "The Christmas Invasion" (BBC1). It had an excellent plot, including a couple of surprise twists at the end (which also hinted that the upcoming *Torchwood* series is going to involve some kind of Area 51 facility exploiting alien technology) plus further developments in the character development of Rose's character – is she the best Doctor's sidekick ever?

What I found particularly satisfying is the way Tennant has already marked out his turf as the heir to Tom Baker's Doctor – an apparent flippant attitude masking a far more serious intent – witness his decidedly Machiavellian touch in starting a whispering campaign to destabilise the prime minister Harriet Jones (Penelope Wilton) for using *Torchwood* to gain down the retreating *Sycorax* spaceship.

Bearing in mind *Dr Who* is the series the BBC once tried to bury, a few factoids worth noting include *The Christmas Invasion* achieving

the second highest viewing figures for Christmas Day, with 9.4 million viewers, – beating *The Queen*, *The Two Ronnies* and the movies *Shrek* and *Toy Story 2* and only beaten by *EastEnders*, which has been the number one Yule-view for many years. And, David Tennant's 'geek chic' outfits – tweed suits with scruffy trainers – being touted as one of the fashion trends – no really – for 2006.

The BBC also notched up another success with *Life on Mars* (BBC1, Mondays) which involves modern-day, politically correct policeman Sam Tyler (John Simm) having a road accident and waking up in 1973, at a station populated by flairs-wearing rejects from *The Sweeney*. Has Tyler really travelled back in time or is it's all just a dream while he lies in a coma at a hospital? It's too early to tell. In the meantime just sit back and enjoy what is probably the best SF/fantasy series on BBC since, er, the return of *Dr Who*.

Those too young to remember the early 1970s need only know one thing – it really was as bad as it is portrayed in this series. Everything was coloured beige or brown, Italian food meant Heinz Spaghetti Hoops, the clothes were that awful, and the police (and I'm speaking here in a purely professional capacity you understand) were that thuggish, chauvinistic, totally lacking in anything even remotely resembling the forensic technologies you see on *CSI*. Must see TV indeed.

So two out of two for BBC1 but BBC2 ran out of luck with *Hypervise* (Wednesdays) which is pub TV at its worst. 'Pub TV' here being defined as a programme you watch when you come back from the pub having had too much to drink and find hilarious – it's the

entertainment equivalent of beer goggles. The pre-publicity was keen to stress that 'this was not going to be another *Red Dwarf*'. Too right, *Red Dwarf*, even the not-so-good first series, was funny. *Hypervise* is just lame and suffers from all the worst elements of British sitcom – jokes you can see coming light years away and comedy acting that consists primarily of people doing silly walks and gurning. Think of *On the Buses* set in the 22nd Century. Nick Frost deserves better than this.

If you want good comedy sf then *Johnny and the Bomb* (BBC1, Sundays in January) had it all. Adapted from the Terry Pratchett novel, it also had a cast of good child actors and, like *Life on Mars* some red-hot period detail to remind us that many of the things and concepts we take for granted today were completely alien 30 or 60 years ago.

So what else was there? *Eleventh Hour* (ITV1, Thursdays), a four part "scientific thriller", starred Patrick Stewart as Professor Hood (yes, him from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*) as one of those crabby idiosyncratic academics even senior politicians are in awe of (in the real world they'd just stop his grant) and was unmitigated twaddle with leaden plots and a science fiction element verging on mumbo jumbo. An earlier Goggle Boxes ad *Eleventh Hour* sounded like the old 1970s TV series *Doomwatch*. That contained a major shock for the more innocent audiences of those days when one of the show's stars Toby Wren (Robert Powell) was blown up at the end of season one. Only dynamiting every second *Eleventh Hour* video tape could live up this series. And even then I might not watch. Definitely missable TV



Once (*Threshold*, Sky One reviewed last issue) might be an accident. Twice

(*Invasion*, Channel 4, Sunday) might be coincidence. But three times (*Surface*, ITV2, Mondays) must be enemy action. Perhaps aliens are behind these American imports that all feature plot lines about something falling into the sea and either taking over people or causing new forms of marine life to emerge. And if you still think that is a coincidence, both *Invasion* and *Surface* feature a protagonist who has recently been divorced and is involved in a custody battle for their kids. *Invasion* is going for the *Lost* approach – mysterious and stylish – while *Surface* has more special effects, but about the only difference is that the 'things' beneath the sea emit an eerie golden light in *Invasion* and an eerie turquoise light in *Surface*. Verdict: something to watch on a wet Sunday if you think *Songs of Praise* may be too exciting.



The second season of *Battlestar Galactica* kicked off on satellite (Sky One, Tuesdays)

with an episode that suggests the new series is going to be even better than the first. This is classic space opera – complete with battles between starfighters, sleeky blonde femme fatales and killer robots – and one of the few programmes of any genre that can build up the same kind of adrenaline rush that the first couple of series of 24 produced. Unmissable, not least because along with the action, the second series is also addressing some of those thorny political issues rarely touched upon in sf TV – including martial law versus democracy and religious fundamentalism versus scientific pragmatism.



Finally, it's a fantasy but the new series *Supernatural* (ITV2, Sundays, ITV1, Mondays)

could be the next best thing to *Buffy*. It has a likeable cast, a semi-scientific approach to the evil spirits they hunt down but it is also touched with humour, loud music, an armoury of unfeasible weapons (just like *Buffy*) and some scary moments that had me behind the couch. By comparison *Sea of Souls* (BBC1, Saturdays), which has a team of university parapsychologists investigating things that go bump in the night, is s-l-o-w, predictable and not the least bit scary.



# SEDUCTION of the Innocent

COMIC REVIEWS BY JAMES BACON ESQ.



With *Hellblazer* 16 Glaswegian crime writer Denise Miller starts her run on John Constantine's ongoing title. This book is one of DC's longest running mature titles, and Mina starts with a pretty impressive story. She can write horror, and does so with the right mix of supernatural

magic that is the mainstay of the comic. The is a perfect time and place for new readers to pick up what is a real diamond in DC's stable. Set in London, *Hellblazer* is dark, gritty and quite enjoyable. If anyone of you wonder what the fuss is about, try this and see how it goes.



Some comics to watch for are *Fury: Peacemaker* by Garth Ennis & Darick Robertson, from Marvel Comics. Part One: "Kassirine Shield" has Nick Fury of 'Howling Commandos' and 'SHIELD' fighting in Tunisia, with the US army. Expect a gritty war story as this falls under the Marvel Knights banner which is rather dark.

Also a hot title to watch from Marvel Knights is *Squadron Supreme*, which will have its own ongoing title following the hugely popular mini series. Written by J. Michael Straczynski with art by Gary Frank. Straczynski has made a seamless transition from brilliant TV writer to comic writer, and this comic hopefully will continue the trend.



Since it has come to the attention of my local comic book shop that I am reviewing for the BSFA they have afforded me a discount. Which is brilliant as they are great value anyhow. So this article was brought to you with the help of A Place in Space.

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# Christ another Crisis

The cross over is endemic in the comics industry, a tried and tested method for boosting sales of flagging titles by involving popular characters from the best selling titles in a publishers stable. A scam to some, to others an opportunity for their favourite characters to do battle on a larger canvas.

The latest 'world changing' cross over from DC comics is *Infinite Crisis*. The story is complex, but not half as complex as trying to track down all the individual comics containing important parts of this large tale. Fortunately, for those interested, DC is moving quickly to collect this massive cross over into easier to find collections.

I try to veer clear of this type of thing, but if you loved Wolfman and Perez's ground-breaking *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985), it might be time to buy the half dozen graphic novels that are already available, and this event isn't over yet.



**Identity Crisis** written by Brad Meltzer, art by Rags Morales and Michael Blair  
DC Comics, HB 288 pages, £16.99

I came to *Identity Crisis* with some scepticism, but was rewarded quite quickly by a really good story that is only tentatively linked to the overall drama. *Identity Crisis* stars the Justice League, who on this occasion comprise stalwarts like Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, The Flash, Green Lantern and lesser characters such as Hawkman, The Green Arrow, Zatanna, Atom, Black Canary, and Elongated Man.

This is a horrible, beautifully told story. Mainstream superhero stories aren't normally so troubling and nasty while having a genuinely beautiful story laced with intrigue and permeated with deceit. In this collection of seven comics there is a scene near the end of the first chapter that is terribly sad.

The physical and mental violence perpetrated and portrayed vividly mixed with clever plotting really makes this story work. The premise is simple. What would happen if the identity of superheroes became known? They would be under threat, nothing new there, they can take it. But if a villain wanted revenge then attacking Superman is not sensible. But his family? His friends? It just gets nasty after that.

Morales artwork complements the excellent story. There is clarity to his line that is very impressive. It might be unfair to compare him to other artists, but he is in the same class as Brian Bolland. His heroes have a real world look about them that is very pleasing and he draws female characters that look pretty without recourse to 34DD assets.

One can read this story, utterly enjoy it, and not be aware of the connection to the other stories that make up *Infinite Crisis*.

**The Omac Project - Countdown to Infinite Crisis**  
written by Greg Rucka, art by Jesus Saiz and Cliff Richards  
DC Comics, PB 256 pages, Titan Books, £9.99

After *Identity Crisis*, I hoped that maybe there would be cohesive writing across the whole *Infinite Crisis* event.

How wrong could I be? Having got my hopes up, The Omac Project was all the more disappointing. It's a mediocre story that suffers terribly from every possible drawback that a cross over series could have.

Initially the story seemed to have potential. Rucka cleverly allows the reader to sympathise with the protagonist, Blue Beetle, nicely portraying the life of a second string hero. This first chapter is great. Beetle discovers that Maxwell Lord once a financial backer of The Justice League is head of Checkmate, an organisation with information on how to kill the most powerful of superheroes.

He discovers a plot against all of The Justice League involving robots controlled by Lord, but in doing so puts himself in jeopardy, and subsequently the League after at first showing contempt for Beetle, go into action. Unfortunately Omac appears disappointed, it is too short with not enough detail and too simple, relying on the demise of a character to keep the reader interested rather than providing an entertaining and intelligent story.

There are too many unnecessary references to other comics. For example, as an introduction there is a whole page explaining who Max Lord is and what Checkmate is, and then in the middle of the story there is a synopsis for three other comics not included in the collection (parts one to three of *Sacrifice*) and then we continue with the fourth issue of that series in full. I have no idea why DC did this. If I just wanted to read synopses of these stories I would have gone online and not bought a comic. The disjointed feel mixes with the disappointment. The artwork is brilliant, the story has potential and is wasted, just like my £9.99.



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# FEAR, not loathing



FEAR

You will be scared  
by a little girl.

Atmosphere, emotion and complex storylines are not something one normally associates with first person shooters (fps). Indeed apart from one or two notable exceptions (see box opposite) there was a period when the 3D shooter seemed destined to an online future of shallow blasting to the accompaniment of the homophobic rantings of teenage American boys.

Done well there's nothing particularly wrong with the adrenaline packed shooter – as anyone who has rampaged through *Serious Sam*, *Black* or the *Quake* games can attest – but they don't offer the kind of long term pleasure of more involving games. Even in the trigger happy world of the fps I find myself valuing games that can offer an interesting narrative and even engaging characters.

Happily, *FEAR* is a rare example of just such a game, offering fantastic game play alongside a complex plot and a cast of characters who are actually important to the feel of the game. At first the game hardly appears to break new ground – the central character is a silent, super-tough special forces operative spearheading an investigation into strange goings on at a secret military operation. Your character is new to his unit, First Encounter Assault Recon (FEAR), and somewhat mysterious. As the plot unfolds we discover that some very unpleasant experiments



involving genetic manipulation, cloning and telepathy have been taking place. Plus, there's something in the water. And, somehow, the player's character is intimately involved.

From that foundation, however, *FEAR* does two very special things. First it introduces a complex plot, – a surprisingly multi-layered web of intrigue, betrayal and conspiracy that drags the player into the story. As much as you are running through the corridors and industrial complexes familiar from a thousand and one other fps games, in *FEAR* you are always aware that you are also chasing answers and a target that mysteriously and infuriatingly always seems out of reach.

But the second, and most impressive, achievement of *FEAR* is to construct a truly chilling atmosphere. Your character is plagued with visions, there is an unravelling, and apparently supernatural, story that literally haunts your every move and a hint of *Chinatown* in the political machinations you uncover. Moody lighting, excellent sound design and smart direction (drawing heavily on Japanese horror films) take *FEAR*

to a level involvement I've rarely experienced in a video game.

Creeping through empty office buildings lit only by computer screens while being tracked by the terrifying "ghost" of a young girl wearing a coat the colour of the blood pooling next to a mutilated body by the photocopier is one of those gaming moments that will stay with you. Sadly a monster computer is required to see the beautiful graphics at their best, but it does scale down quite well for slower computers.

The enemy AI is excellent, they'll try and find cover if you start firing at them and sneak up behind you if they can. And when things look hopeless they'll run away and try and ambush you. The supporting cast are good too, with the stories of the terrifying little girl and the monstrous Paxton Fettel really pushing the whole game along.

*FEAR* gripped me in a way no video game has in a very long time and I felt compelled to play it through to the end just so I could find out what was going on. It isn't perfect – it is perhaps a little too obviously linear, the gamer really has only one way to go in most circumstances, but that's probably a price you have to pay for having a game that contains this much story. If you have any regard for storytelling in video games, then *FEAR* is a must play game packed with atmosphere and style. Highly recommended. (MMCG)

## RETRY

FEAR is one of a select band of fps games with interesting plots, here are some of the best.

### Half Life and Half Life 2

The greatest of all first person shooters (fps) *Half Life*, its add-on packs and its more recent sequel, *Half Life 2*, remain well worth the considerable investment of time they require. *Half Life* offers a complex, cinematic, story that succeeds in making the gamer feel as if they really are just one part of a much bigger drama that is unfolding about them.



For my money the original and "expansion pack" *Blue Shift* remain the benchmark against which all other fps games are judged. They may have been technically surpassed but no other fps game matches them for the integration of plot and character. *Half Life 2* is a technical masterpiece but perhaps not as engaging a story.

The only drawback with *Half Life* is it infects your computer with Valve's infuriating Steam downloading system.

### Halo

Still the best thing to emerge from Microsoft's X-Box, *Halo* is a widescreen sci-fi movie shovelled onto a computer. The central hero, the Master Chief, is a more instantly recognisable hero than *Half Life*'s physicist Gordon Freeman, and *Halo* is significantly less involving, but this is still an excellent game on a well-realised and beautifully designed world.

### Far Cry

The least complex story of the games discussed here but a beautiful game nonetheless, *Far Cry* is notable for swapping the grimy corridors typical of fps games for tropical rainforests and sandy beaches. A tremendously fun game to play, *Far Cry* features some excellent AI for the enemy mercenaries who prove capable of complex and surprising manoeuvres.



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What I can't stand are customers from hell. As well as being a SF writer, I co-own a witchcraft supply shop, in Glastonbury, and I'm telling you, some of our customers are the devil incarnate. I've just had yet another email – 666@hotmail.com (no kidding) – and it's blank. And I know it's some little devil kidding around. What really gets my goat is that we know there's a market there. They produce enough of the stuff in the first place: after we signed the contract for a load of cheap cauldrons from the Chinese, what did we find? They'd outsourced the factory work to Hades, along with a bunch of American soft-drink companies and sports shoe manufacturers. And it's real sweatshop labour, too (it is hot, I suppose). The labour laws are non-existent and as for human rights – well, you're not human anymore, so it doesn't really apply.

Trying to get any information out of these people is a fucking nightmare. Go to the main website, [www.lakesoffire.com](http://www.lakesoffire.com), and yeah, sure, it looks pretty enough. Lots of time share deals, but they've traditionally dealt in property so you expect that. Check out the manufacturing pages and they promise you the earth (something about the mineral rights). There's also a lot about selling souls – which used to be a small cottage industry, confined to a few Yorkshire villages, small-town stuff to do with building churches in a single night or moving lakes, benefiting both individuals and the local economy, but now, oh

no, it's a big-contract thing for a handful of fat cats in the WTO. Blair's got a personal one, apparently. No surprises there: he can afford to stuff everyone else's pension now, can't he? And you thought him being mates with Berlusconi was bad.

The infernal thing is that we're supposed to have specific trade agreements with these people. What does Islam call the US? The Great Satan. Well, *exactly*. It's not just a nickname, you know. But so much for the special relationship. That's the trouble with this government: they don't give a toss about British industry. You can buy bumper stickers which read 'I KNOW THERE'S A HELL. I WORK IN RETAIL.' Well, you wouldn't bloody think so!

We've been trying to branch out a bit and run guided tours – everybody wants to see Hell, they just don't want to move there – so I have contacted an Italian gentleman who claims to have expert knowledge. Very nice guy, says it depends where you go, really; the central part's a bit of an inferno in the summer but it's all right during the rest of the year. And there can be rather a lot of flies, but you expect that, what with the Lord of them and all. It does smell a bit, but so do lots of places. And if you go abroad you might end up in an earthquake or a tsunami so hey, why not just cut out the middleman? We're going to have to tell tourists that it's all local colour and if you must visit the Third World (Heaven and Earth being First and Second), you have to expect to rough it a bit. Getting hold of a brochure has been tricky, since they have a tendency to burst into flames as soon as Parcel Force shove them through the door.

Still, at least their internet connection is reliable. I had to contact them today, and I will say that they might have moved all their call centres downwards from India but their staff are well-trained and pleasant. It's still hell getting through – they put you on hold for an eternity and you end up going round in circles – but you might do worse than try Demonym yourselves, in fact.



When she's not busy trying to flog cauldrons and railing against Hell and all its works, Liz Williams writes successful books. Her recently released novels include *Darkland* and *Banner of Souls* (both in paperback from Tor) and *Snake Agent* (Night Shade Books). *Demon in the City* (also from Night Shade Books) will be published in August.

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