

# BRUM GROUP NEWS

June 1994

Issue 273

*The monthly newsletter of the Birmingham Science Fiction Group  
(Honorary Presidents: Brian W Aldiss & Harry Harrison)*

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DAVID HUNTER, NOVACON 24 CHAIRMAN - RICHARD STANDAGE, NOVACON 25 CHAIRMAN - TONY MORTON.

## "ANOTHER ROTTEN NIGHT IN PARADISE: MAUNA KEA, IT'S TELESCOPES AND IT'S ASTRONOMERS!"

a talk and presentation by

**AMANDA BAKER & DAVE CLEMENTS**

**Friday 17th June 1994, 7.45 for 8.00pm**

**Admittance: Members £2.50 Visitors £3.75**

Why do astronomers spend days travelling to the tropical paradise of Hawaii, and then spend all their time working nights on a desolate, wind-swept, (hopefully) extinct volcano? Because that volcano is Mauna Kea, one of the best observing sites in the world, and its summit hosts a plethora of telescopes. Front line astronomy from the radio to the optical is conducted here using some of the most sophisticated instruments in the world, including the 10 metre Keck telescope, the largest in the world.

Astronomers Dave Clements and Amanda Baker will present a tour of the Mauna Kea telescopes, and will discuss some of the latest work being done with them - including projects to understand the formation of stars, the power sources of quasars, and the origin of galaxies.



The BSFG meets at 7.45pm on the 3rd Friday of every month (unless otherwise notified) in the upstairs Function Room of the Australian Bar, corner of Hurst Street and Bromsgrove Street in Birmingham city centre. The annual subscription rates (which include twelve copies of this newsletter and reduced price entry to meetings) are £10.00 per person, or £13.50 for 2 members at the same address. Cheques etc. payable to "the Birmingham Science Fiction Group", via the treasurer Helena Bowles at meetings or by post c/o Bernie Evans (address below). Book reviews and review copies should be sent to the reviews editor Bernie Evans, 121 Cape Hill, Smethwick, Warley, West Midlands, B66 4SH (tel: 021 558 0997). All other contributions and enquiries regarding the Brum Group News to: Martin Tudor, 845 Alum Rock Road, Birmingham, B8 2AG (tel: 021 327 3023).

## COLOPHON

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Personal opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the committee or the membership of the Birmingham Science Fiction Group.

All text by Martin Tudor except where stated otherwise.

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Many thanks this issue to BERNIE EVANS for her con report and for typing the book reviews, STEVE GREEN, CRITICAL WAVE, MATRIX and WHAT'S ON for the news in the Jophan Report and Events listing and, of course, TONY BERRY for the use of his spare room.

## FORTHCOMING EVENTS

14 JUNE 1994: IAIN M BANKS & TOM HOLT will be reading and signing at Waterstones book shop, 24-26 High Street, Birmingham, B4 7SL, from 7pm. Tickets £1.50 (redeemable against purchase at the event), refreshments will be served. Call 633 4353 for further details.

MID-JUNE 1994: IAIN BANKS will be signing copies of his new novel *FEERSUM ENDJINN* at Andromeda book shop, 64 Suffolk St., Birmingham, call 021 643 1999 for details.

14 JUNE 1994: *BEDEVIL* will be showing from 9.30pm at the Arts Centre, University of Warwick, Coventry. Call box office on 0203 524524.

17 JUNE 1994: AMANDA BAKER & DAVE CLEMENTS will deliver a talk on astronomy, with the aid of a slide presentation and over head projector... at this month's BSFG meeting in the Australian Bar, Hurst Street, 7.45 for 8pm.

17 JUNE 1994: *DANGER DIABOLIK* outlandish comic-strip directed by Mario Bava, the hero "dallies with his beloved under a snowfall of banknotes, prowls about in black leotards armed with suction pads that turn him into a human fly and, encased in plumes of molten gold, is turned into a living statue by his arch-enemy". Screening at 11pm. The Electric Cinema, Station Street, Birmingham, call 021 643 7277 for further details.

18 JUNE 1994: *DARKMAN* Dr Westlake is on the verge of perfecting a synthetic skin which conceals disfigurements; the problem is that the skin dissolves in sunlight after 99 minutes. Directed by Sam Raimi. Showing 1am. The Electric Cinema, Station St., Birmingham, call 021 643 7277 for further details.

17-19 JUNE 1994: *KAFKA* Jeremy Irons, Theresa Russell in Steven Soderbergh's bizarre biopic. Triangle Cinema, Aston University, Birmingham. Call 021 359 3979/4192 for details.

17-22 JUNE 1994: *KAFKA* Steven Soderbergh's bizarre biography, shot in black and white and starring Jeremy Irons, Theresa Russell and Joel Grey. Showing at the Triangle Cinema, Holt Street, Aston University. Call 021 359 3979 for further details.

17 JUNE - 16 JULY 1994: *THE LAST SHOT, the untold story of the Three Musketeers*. "Athos feels she has been misrepresented; now is her chance to put the story straight... It is 1666. The Great Fire rages in London. Plague sweeps through the city and a plot is hatching to bring war to the whole of Europe. Only three people can help and they have retired. Can Porthos, Aramis and Athos be persuaded to ride again? This is the Three Musketeers' final, most secret and challenging adventure... only now can the truth be revealed, of a mission so secret it has been languishing in the vaults of a French castle for 300 years. From vicious man traps to giant spiders and evil magicians, the Three Musketeers must run, jump, juggle and bounce their way through the show, helped by any members of the audience who dare! This wonderfully original adventure for 7 year olds and over and their families has all the colour and humour of the circus; fire eating, juggling, stilt walking, pyrotechnics and crazy battles with swords and sea food!" The Mac Open Air Arena, tickets £4.95, call 021 440 3838 for further details.

25 JUNE 1994: *THE THING* men of a lonely antarctic research team are menaced by a

shape-changing alien from outer space. Directed by John Carpenter, screenings at 2.45 and 6.25. The Electric Cinema, Station Street, Birmingham, call 021 643 7277 for further details.

25 JUNE 1994: *THE CREATURE FROM THE BLACK LAGOON IN 3D* "who needs all the latest computer high-tech fx when you can have red and green glasses? This is atmospheric kitsch, a classic 3D B movie" - if you missed it at Novacon catch it now. Screenings at 1.10, 4.50, 8.30. The Electric Cinema, Station Street, Birmingham, call 021 643 7277 for further details.

29 JUNE 1994: *A CHINESE GHOST STORY* a Ming dynasty story of a wandering scholar who falls in love with a glamorous ghost, only to find the hordes of hell on his tail. Directed by Ching Siu-Tung. Screenings at 2.30 and 6.40. The Electric Cinema, Station Street, Birmingham, call 021 643 7277 for further details.

30 JUNE-2 JULY 1994: *FRANKENSTEIN'S MOTHERS* "returning to the University of Warwick Arts Centre after their hit show BLOODY MARY AND THE VIRGIN QUEEN, Foursight conjure up the ghosts of Mary Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft in this gothic fantasy exploring the rage of the outcast, the despair of the alienated, the ambivalence of creation and everyone's quest for love." University of Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry, call 0203 524524 for details (price £6.50 or £4.75).

15-16 JULY 1994: *THE WRONG TROUSERS, CREATURE COMFORTS, A GRAND DAY OUT* by Nick Park and Steve Box, plus the Oscar nominated *ADAM* directed by Peter Lord. The Mac cinema 6pm Friday, 2.30pm Saturday. Call 021 440 3838 for tickets.

29-31 JULY 1994: WINCON III sf convention at King Alfred's College, Winchester. Theme: "Science Fiction - Ideas in Focus". Guests of honour: Algis Budrys, James P Hogan and Norman Spinrad. Writers' Workshop with Colin Greenland. Attending £23.00, supporting £16.00. Day rates £5.00 (Friday), £15.00 (Saturday), £15.00 Sunday. Accommodation: £18.00/night B&B. Contact: Keith Cosslett, 12 Crowsbury Close, Emsworth, Hants., PO10 7TS.

SUMMER 1994: Beer & Skittles Evening call Helena Bowles on 021 558 7591 for details.

1-5 SEPTEMBER 1994: CONADIAN, 52nd world science fiction convention, at the Winnipeg

Convention Centre. Guests of Honour Anne McCaffrey, George Barr, Barry B Longyear, Fan Guest of Honour Robert Runte. Contact: Helen McCarthy, 147 Francis Road, London, E10 6NT.

26 SEPTEMBER - 1 OCTOBER 1994: *RETURN TO THE FORBIDDEN PLANET* at the Birmingham Hippodrome. Monday-Thursday 7.30pm, Friday 5pm, 8.30pm, Saturday 4pm, 8pm. Prices Monday-Thursday £17.50, £15, £12, £10, £8; Friday & Saturday evenings £19.50, £17, £15, £11, £9; Friday 5pm all seats £7.50; Saturday 4pm £14, £12, £10, £8, £7. Call 021-622-7486 for further booking information.

30 SEP - 2 OCT 1994: FANTASYCON 19. Annual British fantasy convention, Midland Hotel, New Street, Birmingham. Attending £30.00. GoH Brian Lumley, MoC Graham Joyce. Contact: 137 Priory Road, Hall Green, Birmingham, B28 0TG.

21-24 OCTOBER 1994: ALBACON '94. Central Hotel, Glasgow. Attending £25.00, supp. £15.00 until 31 April 1994. Contact: M. Drayton, 10 Atlas Road, Springburn, Glasgow, G21 4TE.

4-6 NOVEMBER 1994: NOVACON 24 the Brum Group's own sf convention at the Royal Angus Hotel. Guest of Honour Graham Joyce. Attending £25.00, supporting £8.00. Cheques payable to "Novacon 24" should be sent to: CAROL MORTON, 14 Park Street, Lye, Stourbridge, West Midlands, DY9 8SS.

11-13 NOVEMBER 1994: UNIFICATION '94 multi-media convention at the Grand Hotel, Birmingham. *QUANTUM LEAP, STAR TREK, DR WHO, ROBIN OF SHERWOOD, STAR WARS, V, TIME TRAX, DS9* and many more, plus guests, quizzes and games. For further information write to: Unification, Clifton House, 27 Clifton Place, Newton Bar, Wakefield, WF1 3JH.

11-14 NOVEMBER 1994: CULT TV "an appreciation weekend" at Seacroft Holiday Village, Hemsby, Norfolk, from £59.00 per adult. Guests include: Harlan Ellison, Sylvia Anderson, Annette Andre, Sophie Aldred, Victor Pemberton, Barry Letts, Deborah Watling. For further details call: 0772-622555, or send a SSAE to CULT TV, PO Box 1701, Peterborough, PE1 1EX.

28 NOVEMBER - 3 DECEMBER 1994: *THE ROCKY HORROR SHOW* 21st Birthday Party, Birmingham Hippodrome. Call 021 622 7486 for bookings.

14-17 APRIL 1995: CONFABULATION 46th UK National sf con at the Britannia International Hotel, London. GoHs Lois McMaster Bujold, Bob

Shaw and Roger Robinson. Attending £20.00, supporting £10.00 before 31 December 1994. Contact: Confabulation, 3 York Street, Altrincham, Cheshire, WA15 9QH.

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24-28 AUGUST 1995: INTERSECTION, 53rd world-con, Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre, Glasgow. Guests of honour Samuel R Delany, Gerry Anderson, Vinç Clarke. Attending £60.00 until 30 September 1994. Supporting and Junior (24.8.80) £15.00, Child (24.8.88) £5.00. Contact: Admail 336, Glasgow, G2 1BR, Scotland.

3-5 NOVEMBER 1995: NOVACON 25 the Brum Group's own sf convention at a new venue - the Chamberlain Hotel, Alcester Street, Birmingham. Guests of Honour: Brian W Aldiss, Harry Harrison and Bob Shaw, with Special Guest Iain Banks. Currently membership is only available to members of NOVACON 24, who should send £20.00 to CAROL MORTON, 14 Park Street, Lye, Stourbridge, West Midlands, DY9 8SS, cheques should be made payable to "Novacon 25". Memberships will rise to £23.00 at Novacon 24 and will be available to non-members of NOVACON 24 from 7 November 1994 for £25.00. Room rates are £20.00 per person per night in twin/double and £40.00 pppn in a single, prices include full English breakfast.

5-8 APRIL 1996: EVOLUTION 47th UK National Convention, Metropole Hotel, Brighton. Guests of honour: Colin Greenland, Bryan Talbot, Jack Cohen. Attending £20.00, supporting £12.00. Contact: 13 Lindfield Gardens, Hampstead, London, NW3 6PX.

27 DEC 1999 - 2 JAN 2000: MILLENNIUM. Venue to be announced, but definitely in Northern Europe (probably a BeNeLux country or UK), £3.00 (f10.00) per year, to be deducted from eventual membership fee (to be announced before 1997). Contact: Malcolm Reid, 2/R, 9 Airlie Street, Hyndland, Glasgow, G12 9RJ.

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*Although details are correct to the best of my knowledge, I advise readers to contact organizers prior to travelling.*

*Always enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope when writing to any of the above contact addresses. Please mention the BRUM GROUP NEWS when replying to listings or advertisements.*

*If you know of any events which you think may be of interest to members of the BSFG please send details to the Editor.*

Peter Luff, Conservative MP for Worcester, has written to John Patten, the Education Secretary, after receiving a complaint from a parent when Stephen King's *DOLORES CLAIRBORNE* was borrowed from a school library by a 12-year-old girl. The parent was concerned by the "graphic sexual descriptions and language it contained."

"I have suggested to him (Patten) that books like this should bear some kind of age suitability rating", Mr Luff told the Birmingham Evening Mail on 5 May.

A spokesman for Hereford and Worcester County Council said that while they would be reminding schools of their responsibilities over the type of literature they have on their shelves, in this instant the book had been donated to the school and had not been read by a member of staff.

Bryan Talbot is reportedly near-completion on his latest graphic novel, *THE TALE OF ONE BAD RAT*.

Entries for this year's UPC Science Fiction Award must be with the judges by 20 July, with a prize of one million pesetas (nearly £5000) for the winning novella of 25,000-40,000 words. In addition, the judges have two discretionary awards of 250,000 pesetas (nearly £1250), for a work worthy of "special mention" and for the best entry from a UPC member.

Manuscripts (two copies) should be forwarded to the Consell Social de la UPC (clearly marked "UPC Science Fiction Award 1994") at Edifici ETSAB, Av. Diagonal 649, 08028 Barcelona, Spain. Entries can be accepted in English, Spanish, Catalan and French.

Although it was SCHINDLER'S LIST which gained Steven Spielberg Academy Awards for best movie and director, JURASSIC PARK received three Oscars of its own.

The winning categories were for best visual effects (Dennis Muren, Stan Winston, Phil Tippett, Michael Lantieri), best sound (Gary Summers, Gary Rydstrom, Shawn Murphy, Ron Judkins) and best sound editing (Gary Rydstrom, Richard Hyman).

Meanwhile, Britain's Nick Parks made Oscar history when *THE WRONG TROUSERS* took the award for best animated short. All three of Parks' films have been nominated for Oscars, *A GRAND DAY OUT* (a surreal lunar

expedition featuring **WRONG TROUSERS** stars Wallace and Gromit) losing two years ago to his own **CREATURE COMFORTS**.

Tim Jones won the 1994 **FFANZ** ballot, which this year sends an Australian fan to New Zealand's national sf convention, **Silicon**. The event was held at Bentley's Hotel (formerly the **Alglen Hotel**) in Dunedin, over the weekend of 3-6 June.

Jones received 22 votes, against 11 for Murray MacLachlan and two (both Australian) for "hold over funds".

The **Writers Bureau**, the Manchester-based correspondence college for creative writing, is sponsoring a poetry and short story competition with first prizes of £200 in each format.

The judge for the prose category is Chris Kenworthy, founding editor of the small press imprint **Barrington Books**, whilst award-winning poet Alison Chisholm will judge poetry entries. The fee for each submission is £3.00, and the contest closes on 31 July; for further details, write to Department PC942, the **Writers Bureau Ltd**, **Sevendale House**, 7 Dale Street, Manchester, M1 1JB (tel. 061-228-2362).

Steve Ellis, whose thriller **CRYSIS** was among the shorts screened at last September's **Festival of Fantastic Films** in Manchester, plans to use the real-life 1960s "Bubblecar Murders" for his next project. For those who missed the earlier showing, Ellis will present **CRYSIS** in person in July, during **Wincon III's** film programme.

**UFO**, the deliberately non-PC sf spoof which marks stand-up comic Roy "Chubby" Brown's movie debut, was released on UK video rental by **Polygram** on 18 May.

A British video distributor and Japanese animé producer are reportedly interested in licensing David Britton's controversial novel **LORD HORROR** and its comic-strip spin-offs.

Although Tim Burton will forego the directorial reins on Michael Keaton's third outing as **Batman** (with, reportedly, Art Ventura playing the Riddler), he is set to helm the spin-off movie **CATWOMAN**, with Michelle Pfeiffer reprising her **BATMAN RETURNS** role as the acrobatic anti-heroine.

Burton's current project, **ED WOOD**, features Johnny Depp as the transvestite director of **PLAN NINE FROM OUTER SPACE** and **GLEN OR GLENDA**; Patricia Arquette co-stars.

**TRANCERS 4: JACK OF SWORDS**, now available on video from **Columbia TriStar**, sees Tim Thomerson back in the role of zone trooper Jack Deth, this time hunting vampiric zombies across the fantasy landscape of **Orpheus**.

The same company released **TICKS** on 4 May, under the banner "They'll make your skin crawl!"; directed by Tony Randel (**HELLRAISER II**), the movie was exec-produced by Brian Yuzna (**SOCIETY, BRIDE OF RE-ANIMATOR**).

Keanu Reeves, Ice-T and Dolph Lundgren feature in **JOHNNY MNEMONIC**, adapted from a William Gibson short story. Filming began in Toronto in February.

**LIFEPOD**, the sf thriller recently released by **High Fliers**, has a longer history than most of its genre - it's adapted from the storyline **Alfred Hitchcock** and **Harry Sylvester** created for **Hitchcock's** 1944 drama **LIFEBOAT**.

Summer UK video releases include **SCANNER COP** (First Independent), yet another sequel to David Cronenberg's psi-thriller, **CYBORG COP 2** (**Columbia TriStar**), the long-awaited adaptation of **Stephen King's THE DARK HALF** (**Columbia TriStar**) with **Tim Hutton**, the similarly King-inspired **NEEDFUL THINGS** (**Polygram**) with **Ed Harris**, **MONOLITH** (First Independent), an sf chiller starring **Bill Paxton** (**ALIENS, PREDATOR 2**), and **Robert Townsend's** superhero spoof **METEOR MAN** (**Warner**).

**Reed Children's Books** launches a new series of horror paperbacks in June, aimed at young adults and all carrying a £2.99 price tag.

**Nicholas Pine's TERROR ACADEMY** introduces readers to **Central Academy**, an apparently normal New England school where suspense prowls the corridors and students quickly discover they have more to fear than missing their homework deadlines. The sequence continues with **LIGHTS OUT, STALKER, SIXTEEN CANDLES** and **SPRING BREAK**.

Veteran media fan **Bjo Trimble** is reportedly circulating a flyer warning **Trekkers** that **Joel Engel's GENE RODDENBERRY: THE MYTH & THE MAN BEHIND STAR TREK**, published in the US this month by **Hyperion**, is unauthorized and in the style of a "supermarket tabloid". **David Alexander**, she adds, is currently working on the official biography for **Penguin**.

*Thanks to CRITICAL WAVE and Steve Green for the above news. 1*

## BOOK REVIEWS

HARM'S WAY by Colin Greenland  
HarperCollins, 378 pp, £4.99, p/b

Reviewed by Rob Whitmore.

After being "bullied" by several fans, telling me to read this novel, I picked up this paperback copy from the review table. It is often difficult reviewing a novel that has been available for sometime. Many will have read the book, and the favourable reviews. Much of the usual review ground has already been covered. Excellent plot, great characters and bizarre aliens.

It was the "feel" of the novel, which gave me the greatest enjoyment. The story revolves around young Sophie as she escapes her oppressive Father, stowing away on board a space ship (ship being the operative word), in her search for information about her mother. The journey takes her to Earth, and a London that has a genuine feel of poverty and inequality. The quest takes her onto Mars - religion - prison - Angels..... (I'd better stop - before I give the plot away!)

This is an sf story, filled with invention and "sense of wonder", but flavoured with many other literary influences (at one point in London I half expected to meet Holmes and Watson). Its a sort of alternate history of the industrial revolution / British Empire.

Story telling at its best. If you have not read it please do, and if you have read it, then read it again.

THE DEUS MACHINE by Pierre Oulette  
Hodder & Stoughton, 446 pp, £16.99, h/b

Reviewed by Michael Jones.

It is 2005 and the USA is in the grip of a paralysing depression. A semi-subversive organisation sees genetic engineering as the way to a new prosperity and secretly diverts government money to fund the building of a new kind of super computer. So complex as to be beyond human comprehension, the DEUS machine is programmed to incessantly improve its own design, then to develop a "biocompiler" to work exclusively on genetic problems. Unfortunately, having also developed artificial intelligence, the DEUS machine runs out of control and produces a real-life biological system of seemingly unstoppable destructive power.

To be sure, none of this sounds excitingly new to the sf reader. However, the description of the computer hardware is more detailed than anything I have seen before in a novel and certainly sounds plausible, even if I cannot personally guarantee its authenticity. There is also a lot about viruses, genetics and DNA coding, and if the appendix giving details of research carried out by the author is anything to go by that part must be authentic. I did find it a little bit difficult to accept that a whole evolving biological system could spring from one small virus, but my sense of wonder soon overcame that problem!

Acceptance is helped by the fact of the book being so well written. There are four main characters (counting the computer) and half a dozen important minor ones, each being the focus of a subsidiary plot line of his or her own. All these come together to form essential parts of the unfolding sequence of events. After a while I even stopped noticing that it was written in the present tense, although I had thought that such pretension would get on my nerves.

This is a first novel. Pierre Oulette stands at a crossroads - will he become a genre sf writer or will he follow Michael Crichton and others who write mainstream fiction with a scientific or technological slant? Either way, he seems assured of success. By the criteria of either field, *THE DEUS MACHINE* is **excellent**.

STRATA by Terry Pratchett  
Doubleday, 236 pp, £14.99, h/b

Reviewed by Carol Morton.

STRATA concerns one Kin Arad who is a senior official in a company that lays down the past history of a planet in its rock strata, including such things as artifacts and animal and plant fossils. Her job is to oversee the planting of such items and to make sure that there are no mistakes like two workers who planted dinosaur fossils bearing placards with anti nuclear slogans. Kin is famous for actually writing a book once, (about her work and called "Continuous Creation"), because writing books, fact or fiction, just isn't done anymore. The machines that Kin uses to seed the rocks with history were built by a mythical race called the Spindles, who have been credited with many things, even to the creation of the universe. However, the Spindles seem to have died out, leaving only artifacts such as these machines behind. So when an alien approaches Kin with the story of having found what appears to be

a Spindle world, and a flat world at that, (shades of the Discworld here) she agrees to go with him to see this world and maybe contact the Spindles.

All does not go according to plan as on the journey in what appears to be a Spindle ship the alien dies, leaving the pre-programmed ship and its passengers journeying to this possible Spindle world with no idea of how to fly or land the ship, and thus no way home. More disaster follows when they arrive at the planet and it seems to be deserted.

This is the first hardback release of a novel originally published in 1981, and only released in hardback because of Pratchett's immense popularity. At least that must be the reason, I can't think why else it would be reprinted. It is certainly not one of his best, and the cover artwork is not Josh Kirby's best either. I am not a particular fan of Pratchett's books but I did enjoy *MORT*, *THE COLOUR OF MAGIC* and *THE LIGHT FANTASTIC*, if only for that cute luggage. But this yarn has none of the humour or plot twists or, well, anything associated with the Pratchett his fans have come to know and admire. Admittedly this book was first published 13 years ago, and Pratchett has undoubtedly improved as a writer, but I would say that you should only read it if you are a confirmed Pratchett fan.

X-MEN: THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE by John Mosby  
Boxtree, 96 pp, £9.99, large format trade p/b  
Reviewed by Martin Tudor.

It would be difficult to think of a more inaccurate or inappropriate title for this book - essential it isn't, eminently dispensable perhaps...

It is comprised of 30 plus short "bios" of X-Men past and present, interspersed with a couple of hundred words about each decade of the comic and a number of "technicals" - maps and plans of the Mansion and its surroundings. Finally we are presented with a brief synopsis of each episode of the two seasons of the animated series.

Although the information is accurate (as far as I can tell - but I haven't read the comic for around five years) it is written and presented in a pedestrian manner (fortunately) alien to the comic itself. This is one for only the most "fanboyish" of completists.

TEK VENGEANCE by William Shatner  
Pan, 224 pp, £4.99, p/b  
Reviewed by Bernie Evans.

Sixties drug culture meets cyberpunk's microchip implants meets James Bond meets whichever incompetent writer first springs to mind. And that's a shame, because there are some good ideas in here, and they're buried amongst the "pace and style" mentioned in the cover blurb.

"Pace" presumably refers to the break-neck speed at which it all happens, leaving no time at all for character development or plot development or anything else which may have turned these ideas into a readable novel. With chapters three to five pages in length and a change of scene for each one, the term "cardboard cutout" is over-complimentary!

"Style" presumably refers to the fact that, whichever page you choose at random, at least half (often all) of it is dialogue. As a device for explaining bits to the reader, used sparingly, this isn't a bad thing. The way it's used here, you could have a script for an action movie if a few stage directions were thrown in. One gets the feeling that Shatner learnt how to write from reading *STAR TREK* and *T J HOOKER* scripts rather than from reading novels.

The "Tek" of the title is what 21st century hop-heads "do" instead of drugs, and refers to microchips which slot into the brain. How this happens, and what then transpires, isn't explained. A Tek Lord (drug baron) formulates a devious plot to eliminate Jake Cardigan's girlfriend before she can testify against him in his forthcoming trial. 63 pages on we've gone through 15 chapters, and she's dead. The rest of the novel is all about the vengeance of the title.

An extra 50 pages, a lot more care and a different writing style would make this an inventive and pacey novel. As it stands only a Shatner groupie could enjoy it.

DEATH DREAMS by Ben Bova  
NEL, 646 pp, £5.99, p/b  
Reviewed by Michael Jones.

The story opens dramatically with the death of a fighter pilot during a combat experience in a virtual reality flight simulator. After that the action slows down as we follow Dan Santorini, who has worked on the simulator, to a new job with a firm which is developing virtual reality games. Soon, however, it becomes apparent that all is not well in the virtual world. Extra input is coming from somewhere, somebody is using the system for his own ends, and games involving combat are becoming dangerous. There is also industrial espionage going on, and when the government

gets involved a whole new dimension of danger and subversion is added. Santorini becomes the focus of all of it and manages to save the day, even if only just.

I found this an enjoyable and readable book and its great length was no handicap at all - it seemed to come to an end as quickly as one half the size. I felt however that I was reading a mainstream thriller novel - apart from the advanced technology there is only one very well hidden hint that it is set (slightly) in the future, and the usual subliminal clues by which one is often able to identify genre sf were conspicuously absent. I had to reassure myself by searching for the words Science Fiction writ small on the back cover, and even when I had found them I still wondered if they were there by mistake.

None of which really matters to whether or not this is a good book in its own right. Up to a point the answer is yes. It is very typical of Ben Bova - the writing is sound and craftsmanlike, the science is impeccable (well, almost) and the plot is flawlessly constructed. It is just that it fails to inspire. Yes, it is a good book and well worth reading, but it will never be the kind of great book to which one will return again and again.

THE WEIRD COLONIAL BOY by Paul Voermans  
Gollancz, 302 pp, £4.99, p/b

Reviewed by Tony Morton.

Nigel, a bored, dull inept youth of Melbourne Australia, discovers a way to travel to an alternate Earth. There, the other Australia proves both backward and barbaric. In this parallel world the British Empire reigns supreme, still having rule over Australia, America, India and so on, and using such places to keep control. Transportation of criminals to Australia has continued to the present day (the novel is set in 1978), the buildings and the spread of the population we know of in our world did not happen. A largely underdeveloped, even unexplored Oz, with few inhabitants but large prison camps, is what Nigel discovers. He encounters several more oddities before being wrongly convicted of highway robbery, the real criminal being both Nigel's double and his equivalent in this other world.

In prison he develops both physically and mentally, accepting his lot to some extent. But events overtake him and through a stroke of good fortune he escapes to set up a gang. His idea being to free thought, thereby questioning the order of things, and

through this to inevitably gain freedom(?) It is during his ranting that Nigel discovers a way home, which he eventually takes. He sees and confronts this world's equivalent of the girl he fell for there, telling her the whole story, but will she believe it? Who *would* believe such a story on our world?

The story is well told, with the brutality of the alternate world - all its floggings, public executions and so on - enhancing the plot. It fell flat at the end, and the somewhat lame ending countered, for me, the richness found earlier in such items as the slapstick routine and the inventiveness of the Serbs in their roles. An unusual and very off the wall story that, probably because of its very strangeness, leaves this reader unsure of its merits.

IMPERIAL LIGHT by Mary Corran  
Millennium, 358 pp, £16.99 h/b, £8.99 "c" format  
Reviewed by Phil Noyes.

This fantasy saga (not a trilogy - at least not yet!) is set on a world where survival is becoming increasingly marginal for the bulk of the population, who are held in line by the priesthood of the Lords of Light. The story is told from two viewpoints: Kyria, a half-caste woman who shows uncanny links with the powers of lightstones and may be the prophesied Lightbearer, and Hilarion, the heir apparent to the imperial throne.

As it unfolds we learn a little more about the world: the Sea People, the multiple court intrigues and treachery by which the priesthood seeks to consolidate its power over the blind figurehead Emperor, and the Lightstones themselves, which may be a link to serpent gods, or perhaps aliens.

Though I don't usually read much fantasy, I did become interested in the fate of the protagonists, and found the straightforward style readable. On the down side, I was frustrated by the author's tendency to throw in interesting parts of the world and then do nothing more with them. I guess at the back of my mind this started to ring "potential trilogy" warning bells - still, an OK read.

BARRAYAR by Lois McMaster Bujold  
Pan, 396 pp, £4.99, p/b

Reviewed by Mick Evans.

Cordelia Naismith has not been long wed to Aral Vorkosigan, (whom she had beaten in battle when she was the "legendary" commander of a Betan battleship), when he had to take up

the regency on Barrayar upon the death of the planet's Emperor. Peace doesn't last long, and a civil war begins with an assassination attempt on Aral, which also threatens the life of Cordelia's unborn son. What follows is all rather tame and ordinary.

A rather pedestrian plot summary of a rather pedestrian book, in which I found nothing very stimulating to the imagination. To me it reads like a soap opera set in the far future. It's not badly written, but neither is there any originality or any individuality of style.

Reading this book was a chore rather than a pleasure, and one I would have given up on after 100 pages were it not for the fact of its being a review copy placing me under an obligation to read it. You are under no such obligation, so don't bother.

THE BORIS VALLEJO PORTFOLIO Introduction by Nigel Suckling  
Paper Tiger, 28 plates, £12.95, limpback artbook  
Reviewed by Dave Hardy.

What can one say about Boris Vallejo? You either love his work or hate it; but he seems to have thousands of fans out there. If you are one of them, and already have *THE FANTASTIC ART OF BORIS VALLEJO* or *MIRAGE* (both from Ballantine Books) you will already have much of the work in this "portfolio". They are reproduced larger here - though not as large as the size of the book suggests, since there is a wide border around some of the illustrations.

Boris is probably unsurpassed in the field of herioc fantasy art, and his paintings are sensual, erotic; and often quite sexy (he certainly knows his anatomy!), but obviously staged or posed, and often quite static despite the apparent movement within the scene. This is probably because they are based on photographs. One of my favourites is plate 16: "Discus Thrower", which depicts a gleaming metallic robot similar in feel to the Japanese artist Hajime Sorayama, but without the obvious airbrush texture.

The four pages of introductory text by Nigel Suckling are the usual summary of the artist's work.

SEAQUEST DSV: THE NOVEL by Diane Duane + Peter Morwood  
Millennium, 200 pp, £9.99, h/b

Reviewed by Carol Morton.

This is the novelisation of the pilot episode of *SEAQUEST DSV*, which was Spielberg's homage to the cult TV show *VOYAGE TO THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA*. If you've seen the show,

the novel is almost word for word the same, if not, then the plot follows.

The story takes place some 25 years in the future when man has tamed Earth's final frontier, the sea bed, and is living in and farming the deeps. It is set just after a brief and bloody power struggle to control said deeps. All is now nominally at peace and the UEO, United Earth/Oceans Organisation, polices the oceans' floors. The flagship of the UEO fleet is the *Seaquest*, an advanced type of submarine, which is in need of a Captain after its original Captain was dismissed from the fleet for using unnecessary force against some raiders.

The man who designed and built the *Seaquest*, Nathan Bridger, had left the then navy after the death of his son and promised his (now dead) wife never to return to armed service. But Bridger is lured back on to *Seaquest* by his friend, and is conned back into harness by the *Seaquest* being sent, while he is still aboard, to the urgent rescue of some farmers under attack. It turns out they are being attacked by the former Captain of the *Seaquest*, who has vowed to destroy both the submarine and her former teacher, Bridger.

There are one or two points that will not really make sense if you haven't seen the TV programme, such as just how Bridger's dolphin friend, Darwin, talks. But on the whole it is a fairly competent novelisation, as you would expect from such authors, but I feel it could have done with being longer and explaining a few more points.

WARPATH by Tony Daniel  
Millennium, 295 pp, £4.99, p/b

Reviewed by Phil Noyes.

The novel premise of this yarn is that, through mental power, 12th century Mississippi Indians made it to the stars in canoes (!), millennia before the rest of humanity, and only grudgingly share worlds with later settlers. This gives an interesting chance to re-run the settler/Indian conflict.

Will James, the viewpoint character, is a newspaperman with friends in both communities, and is also a man with a past - unlike other settlers he arrived by experimental matter transmission, which his lover only partly survived. This makes his a misfit in time, coming from 500 years previously. What appears to be the familiar colony world setting turns out to be nothing of the kind. Indians use a loose clay, which can carry complex algorithms and enables them to link with Chocolas, alien entities outside normal perceptions but

something like Indian spirit creatures. The theft of clay containing a Chococaca duplicate sparks off dispute and threatens outright war, and only Will James is in a position to deflect this.

This is a very impressive first novel, with many ideas which seem unconnected welded together into a consistent and believable (if unlikely) world, and with well thought out characters, all upholstered with a high standard of writing. I will certainly watch for his next book.

LOVEDEATH by Dan Simmons  
Headline, 468 pp, £5.99, p/b

Reviewed by Mick Evans.

This is a collection of five novellas dealing with love and death. The subject matter, and the fine writing expected from Dan Simmons, is all they have in common with each other. Every story is different, and fascinating.

The first, "Entropy's Bed at Midnight", deals with accidents - some of them tragic, a couple hilarious - through the eyes of an insurance salesman, and slowly revealing his own personal tragedy. Tightly written and very good.

"Dying in Bangkok" is Simmons' comments on AIDS, from the viewpoint of an American soldier, who had been in Bangkok on R & R during his service in Vietnam and returns in 1992. This is provocative, probably pornographic, and absolutely un-put-downable.

"Sleeping With Teeth Women" is a moving homage to American Indians, and a savage indictment of the travesties inflicted on them (with particular reference to the film *DANCES WITH WOLVES*). A seventeen year old Sioux Indian, Hoka Ushte, finds himself with the responsibility of saving his people from the progress of the white man.

The nearest this collection comes to sf is in "Flashback". The title refers to a drug used to experience chosen segments of ones past. The story shows an America falling apart at the seams and under Japanese control.

The final (and longest) tale, "The Great Lover", is the journal of James Edwin Rooke, a poet and an army officer during the First World War. It deals with events leading up to, and during, the Battle of the Somme, and is the horror story to end all horror stories, because it happened.

There are at least a couple of classics here in "Dying in Bangkok" and "The Great Lover", with "Sleeping with Teeth Women" not far behind. Almost everything Simmons does

seems to win some sort of award in a variety of fields. Enjoying this book it is easy to see why.

SEAQUEST DSV: FIRE BELOW by Matthew J Costello  
Millennium, 264 pp, £14.99, h/b

Reviewed by Carol Morton.

Not only the hard-working and the adventurous have moved out onto the sea beds in the near future, but also the criminal element. In this second Seaquest adventure terrorists hold up an exclusive undersea resort, threatening to blow it open unless a huge ransom is paid. Seaquest and her crew are assigned to the rescue attempt and needless to say win through, but only after using the dolphin, Darwin, to remove the explosive.

After the hostages have been released Seaquest gets urgent orders to take one of them, a Doctor Richard Ernst, to an undersea research station, where creatures have been discovered that seem to have existed since pre dinosaur times. But there is some mystery as Bridger is told to keep the security of Seaquest paramount, some of the researchers have been killed and some are missing. What Bridger finds brings the film Alien to mind.

The first half of this novel is a fairly decent thriller with credible plotline and is entertaining but the second half has a risible 50's B movie plotline and one can almost visualise the bad acting that would round off the whole. So, a book of contrasts, possibly only for those who have seen the TV shows.

THE GOLDEN by Lucius Shepard  
Millennium, 116 pp, £5.99, "B" format

Reviewed by Phil Noyes.

Bloody brilliant! (sorry). This is a vampire novel whose themes and trappings will often be familiar to Anne Rice readers, but make no mistake, Lucius Shepard is very much his own man, and adds as much to the vampire tradition as he takes out - notably the mythic death by sunlight becoming the agonising illumination in which a vampire burns for hours at the same time as being given visions of the future.

Shepard introduces us to the immense Castle Banat, an architectural nightmare in which vampires congregate to taste the blood of the Golden - the Chateau Lafite of victims carefully bred over generations for a unique experience. Hours before the "decanting" the Golden is discovered drained and dead, and in

the amoral and intrigue ridden vampire court Michel Beheim, an only recently undead police detective, is given the task of finding the perpetrator. Beheim is an excellent vehicle for Shepard to explore the world of Benat and the vampires, and also the dilemmas of a man between the worlds of the living and the undead, torn between two different value systems.

The book is a triumph, whether you read horror or not. It is marvellously written, and the search for the identity of the murderer, though the main narrative drive of the book, is none more important than the examination of vampire society. Read it or regret it.

PERMUTATION CITY by Greg Egan  
Millennium, 310 pp, £8.99, "C" format

Reviewed by Phil Noyes.

Greg Egan is an Australian writer of immense promise, whose short fiction has made him a regular feature in "Best of Year" collections. This is his second novel, and deals with a theme he has used many times, though always differently, human consciousness and identity.

Egan takes us to a future which, though not distant, is certainly very strange. The rich can take themselves past the threshold of death by downloading into virtual environments in which any experience can be duplicated for use by "copies" (and quite a few which cannot be experienced by corporeal humans). Paul Durham, a man with an apparent history of mental disorder, attempts to sell these wealthy copies a future in which they cannot be interfered with, shut off or restricted. His story is so strange that several throw him out, but those who hear him through buy in.

The true genius of his plan, and the strangeness of the theory behind it, makes for fascinating reading, told through several character viewpoints including an intriguing glimpse of Durham's own first moments as a copy. Credibility builds as fruition approaches. Then, when wish fulfilment seems inevitable, an unforeseen danger strikes.

The strengths of the novel lie in the writing skill and the brilliant science Egan uses. However I found, as with his previous novel, a less than convincing end section - a little disappointing. Egan will do better, and this is nonetheless a good book, and I give it "ye trump citation".

AZTEC CENTURY by Chris Evans  
Gollancz, 352 pp, £4.99, p/b

Reviewed by Mick Evans.

An intriguing alternate history in which Duran's disease, an infectious illness as deadly to Europeans as the Black Death, has decimated populations from Ireland to Siberia in the 16th and 17th centuries, and thus has stilled European exploration of the New World for over a hundred years.

As the story opens we learn that the Aztecs have risen in status to be a world power, with the whole of Europe, including most of the British Isles, under their rule. In London, pyramids are scattered amongst what remains of the old architecture, England has a puppet government, and the Royal family, scattered and in hiding, exists in name only, and the King is about to die.

The story is narrated by one of his two daughters - Princess Catherine who, together with her sister Princess Victoria and her brother Prince (soon to be King) Richard, has been brought forcibly to live in the Royal Palace - and deals with her relationship with one particular Aztec. Extepan is heir to the Aztec Empire, and has his own problems....

This is an excellent novel, full of intrigue, and Chris Evans makes the unlikely scenario totally believable. He builds well on the contrasts between the two cultures, adding yet more tension with the hints that there is a hidden, more ancient, Aztec culture beneath the modern face shown by the principal characters, a culture based on sacrificial religion rather than science.

I raced, completely hooked, through the final section of the book to a beguiling and quite unexpected ending. Magic, well worth reading, so treat yourself and do so.

## CONVENTION REPORT

MEXICON 6: THE PARTY  
20-22 May 1994,  
Hertford Park Hotel,  
Stevenage,  
Report by Bernie Evans.

This was the Con that wasn't a Con, but a celebration of Mexicon, a 10th anniversary party for the first ever Mexicon, and, as it turned out, a wake for Mexicons no more. That last requires some explanation, so I'll come back to it later.

Programming was deliberately sparse, to allow plenty of time for items to run over

time, and for discussion to continue in the bar afterwards, without needing to miss the next item. It was designed to incorporate many of the features of the early Mexicons, and that started as soon as members walked in, with Eve Harvey pouncing on them to answer three questions, which were the first round eliminators for the Ultra-quiz. Round two, the first programme item on Saturday morning, was an exercise in logistics (build the Eiffel Tower with plastic drinking straws and paperclips!), and round three on Saturday night was University Challenge. On Friday night the censorship debate from the first Mexican was reprised, by Iain Banks and Roz Kaveney, with Paul Barnett, moderating. The lively discussion failed to reach a definite conclusion, and was continued in the bar late into the night.

After the Ultra Quiz on Saturday morning Colin Greenland, Maureen Speller and Iain Sinclair asked if SF itself has lost its way in the search for establishment credibility. Perhaps it should get back in the gutter?

Saturday night saw Gollancz launching Gwyneth Jones' new book, *NORTH WIND*, with free booze from them, followed by round three of the Ultra Quiz. Chris Priest, ably assisted by Dave Langford, then entertained us royally with *Live Deadloss Visions*, a verbal presentation of Chris's fanzine of the same name (newly updated and re-published at £4.00), this being a factual history of the still un-published *LAST DANGEROUS VISIONS*, and some of the controversy surrounding that black hole for short stories. Charles Platt, over from the USA, added some (unexpected - by me) wit and charm to the proceedings, and to those of us familiar with the legend but not with the details, this was extremely interesting, and, judging by audience response, equally interesting to those who ARE familiar with the details.

A People's Disco rounded off the night, with Brian Ameringen's magnificent punch,

Sunday morning began with a discussion on E-Mail versus the paper fanzine. Although very lively, the main area of discussion tended to be the problem of E-Mail accessibility for the less-well-off fan, despite Abi Frost's attempts to get back to the advertised topic. Greg Pickersgill and Lilian Edwards were the participants here, Greg being anti E-Mail and Lilian for.

This was followed by a fan-fund auction, John Jarrod ranting on video, and the closing ceremony, all of which I had to miss, the latter two because I had to leave due to our car breaking down so our party had to leave early, and the former because I had no money

to spend, and no way to get the stuff home even if I did have the money!

But what of Saturday afternoon? I've deliberately left that 'til last. First there was a quick slide show put together by John and Eve Harvey, with a wonderful commentary delivered by John, on previous Mexicons, shown as the lead-in to the Mexican Debate. Greg Pickersgill and Colin Harris were the contenders, Eve Harvey refereed, and battle commenced.

And the Wake mentioned above? It was mooted at Misdemeanour by Greg Pickersgill that Mexican had run its course, had started to lose its way, and should be killed off and given a decent burial. Many of the attendees there agreed with this, so it was decided to give the idea a wider forum. With only 145 members the forum wasn't perhaps as wide as it could have been, but given that those 145 members were, on the whole, Mexican diehards, it was the correct forum. About two thirds of the membership were in the room so, although a small sample of fandom at large, there were enough of the "right" people for any decision reached to be a fair and representative one.

The decision reached was that Greg was right, the freshness of the early Mexicons had been lost, people were turning up to meet their friends, not to attend the programme (yes, many conventions are like that, but that was never the intention for Mexicons. Audience participation for items about written SF, with new faces and fresh approaches, was always Mexican's *raison d'être*), recent Mexicons had guests that could have been found at other conventions. It was agreed unanimously that, whilst a Mexican style convention was still needed, Mexican itself should indeed be killed off and given a decent burial. I'm not sure about the burial, I'm sure that in the future a group of fresh enthusiastic people will re-invent (as it were) Mexican, but as a Wake for Mexican in this incarnation, it definitely succeeded.

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## GOOD FOOD GUIDE

MARTIN JUDOR is trying to put together a GOOD FOOD GUIDE to the restaurants, pubs and cafés in and around Birmingham city centre. The idea being to update and reproduce it each year for use by Novacon attendees and Bruu Group members. Reviews should be about 50-150 words in length, and should include the name (and telephone number if possible), details of location, price range, acceptable methods of payment and comments on quality of the food, standard of service, etc. Please send your reviews to him at 845 Alum Rock Road, Ward End, Birmingham, B8 2AG.