

# matrix

The news magazine of the British Science Fiction Association

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## THE SF TOOLKIT

Paul McAuley and Stel Pavlou  
discuss tricks of the trade

## MUSICAL FUTURES

Martin Sketchley discusses music  
in SF with Ian MacLeod

## CHAIRS BOW OUT

Tom Hunter talks to  
Paul and Elizabeth Billinger

## The very strange afterlife of **PHILIP K DICK**

**VOTE for the greatest British SF of all time & WIN cash prizes**

# matrix

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**A**s William Blake noted long ago, the human imagination drives the world. At first it drove only the human world, which was once very small in comparison to the huge and powerful natural world around it. Now we're close to being in control of everything except earthquakes and the weather. But it is still the human imagination, in all its diversity, that directs what we do with our tools. Literature is an uttering, or outering, of the human imagination. It lets the shadowy forms of thought and feeling – heaven, hell, monsters, angels and all – out into the light, where we can take a good look at them and perhaps come to a better understanding of who we are and what we want, and what the limits to those wants may be. Understanding the imagination is no longer a pastime, but a necessity; because increasingly, if we can imagine it, we'll be able to do it."

**Margaret Atwood**

*The Guardian*  
June 17, 2005

## DEADLINES

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

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### Editor

# We can build you

Martin McGrath on plans to resurrect Philip K Dick – as a robot.

**O**ver the weekend of 24–26 June, Philip K Dick held court in San Francisco – and no one seemed to mind that Hollywood's favourite science fiction author had been dead since 1982.

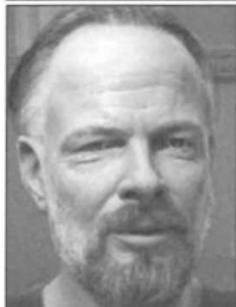
Surely, even in his wildest moments, the author of *The Man in the High Castle* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* could never have imagined that one day, twenty-three years after his death, FedEx would deliver him back into the world. However, a team of scientists, literary scholars, artists and engineers (including the FedEx Institute for Intelligent Systems (IIS), Hanson Robotics and the Automation and Robotics Research Institute) have combined their skills to "resurrect" the author at *Wired* magazine's celebration of future technologies, Nextfest.

The android Dick uses 36 servomotors to mimic facial expressions, and a polymer called Frubber that looks and moves like human skin. It uses motion-tracking vision to make eye contact with people in the room, and artificial intelligence and speech software to enable it to carry on complex conversations. It can also recognize people – friends, celebrities and family – in a crowd.

The artificial intelligence personality of the robot has been derived mathematically from Dick's life and works in a manner similar to that described by Dick himself in his book *We Can Build You*, claim its designers at the IIS.

"It invents new ideas using a mathematical model of Philip K Dick's mind extracted from his vast body of writing," says David Hanson, founder of Hanson Robotics. "More than imitating, we're trying to model it exactly. Human emulation robotics would offer robots that look and act pretty much like humans."

Hanson believes the Dick robot is just a first step and that robots that behave convincingly like humans may be just twenty years away. The technology in the Dick robot may see practical applications much sooner than that. "Rather than waiting until the 2030s, I think we can probably give



**"Philip K Dick held court in San Francisco – and no one seemed to mind that Hollywood's favourite SF author had been dead since 1982."**

robots faces a lot earlier," he said, predicting that this may be as little as two years away.

To heighten visitor's sense of interaction with a "real" Philip K Dick, the robot was placed in a set designed to look like a 1970s apartment. Sealed off, and soundproofed from the rest of the convention, the android sat on a sofa and attendees cued to chat

with "Dick". In addition, outside the apartment, another bust of Dick covered in frubber was available for convention-goers to touch (to feel the life-like nature of the skin) and a display showed the world from inside the robot's head – relaying the pictures from its camera "eyes".

*Matrix* couldn't make it to San Francisco to check out the

**Gather Yourselves Together** (top): FedEx-ed and ready to roll.

**The Simulacra** (bottom left): This model was available for visitors to touch.

**Puttering About In A Small Land** (bottom right):

The set was a mock-up of a 1970s apartment.

robot for ourselves, but the team behind it stress that the android was intended as a tribute and "powerful memorial" to the author. Paul Williams, a close friend and former literary executor for Dick, worked with the teams creating the robot. What the author himself would have made of it we can only speculate, but *Matrix* suspects it would have been a hell of a story.

# Scar marks victory

**"I** really couldn't be more delighted, or totally astonished," China Miéville told *Matrix* after winning this year's Arthur C Clarke award for his novel *Iron Council*. This is the second time that China has won the award, the first time being for his genre-redefining and equally excellent book *Perdido Street Station*, which makes him only the second person after Pat Cadigan to ever have won the award twice.

In his opening speech award administrator Paul Kincaid said that "China Miéville focuses sharply on political change, but note how many things feed into that change: wealth and suffering and sexuality and hope. This is the point at which the conflict between the moral and the political which has underpinned his previous books bursts into the open."



**Delighted and astonished:**  
China Miéville accepts his second  
Arthur C Clarke Award  
Photo: Tony Cullen

# Champagne, pigs and other peculiar prizes



**Big in Sweden**  
Philip Pullman receives his award — a specially created certificate — from HRH Crown Princess Victoria  
Photo: Lars-Erik Örthlund

## Aldiss honoured

Brain Aldiss has written more than forty novels, won Hugo, Nebula, BSFA and the John W Campbell awards, been honoured as an SFWA Grand Master and is now the recipient of the Order of the British Empire, presented in the Queen's Birthday Honours list, for his services to literature.

His updated website can be found at [www.brianaldiss.com](http://www.brianaldiss.com), his latest novel, *Jocasta*, is available from The Rose Press.

## Birmingham meets

The Birmingham SF Group has announced a programme of author events. Coming up are Jane Johnson (10 Sept), Peter F Hamilton (8 Oct) and Storm Constantine (12 Nov). All are scheduled for the Britannia Hotel, Birmingham from 7.30pm. Prices are £3 (members) and £4 (non-members). Check the website at [www.bsfg.freerverses.com](http://www.bsfg.freerverses.com) or email [bmbsfgroup@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:bmbsfgroup@yahoo.co.uk).

**Congratulations (or perhaps cheers?) to Terry Pratchett on making the shortlist for the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse prize for comic fiction.**

Now in its fifth year, the award is presented to the book that best encapsulates the tradition of PG Wodehouse, celebrating both satire and the comedy of manners. Terry was nominated for *Going Postal* but lost out to Marina Lewycka, whose book, *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*, won her large amounts of Bollinger champagne and the unusual privilege of having a locally-bred Gloucestershire Old Spot pig named after her novel (poor pig! — ed). Previous winners including DBC Pierre and Jasper Fforde.

Congratulations to Phillip Pullman on receiving the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award for children's and youth literature. The award, considered second only to the Nobel prize for literature, is worth £385,000. Phillip was cited as a "master storyteller in a number of genres, from historical novels and fantasy to social realism and highly amusing parodies..." He shares this year's award with Japanese illustrator Ryoji Ara.

Accepting the award, Pullman said that telling children's stories was the purest form of narration as they didn't fall for form or finely-tuned formulations. They just want to know what happens next.

And finally, Neal Asher's novel *The Skinner* won the Czech Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Academy Award for the best SF book published in the country in 2004.

# NEWSBITS

## *Third Alternative* fades to *Static*

Issue 42 of *The Third Alternative* will be the last to bear that name. Relaunching as *Black Static* in September, TTA Press editor Andy Cox reassured subscribers that the style and range of fiction would remain the same in the renamed magazine. *Black Static's* first issue will include a free book of nine stories by Dan Bennett. Cox also hoped to move the magazine from a quarterly to bi-monthly production schedule.

## Final Star Wars gross out

*Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith* grossed the highest single day box office takings ever earning a record-breaking \$50 million within 24 hours of opening in North America.

Benefiting from positive early reviews and high levels of audience anticipation eager to witness Darth Vader's birth, it already looks well on track to recoup its development costs of \$113 million.

## Free books

E-versions of Cory Doctorow's *Someone Comes To Town, Someone Leaves Town* and Charlie 'three Hugo' nominations' Stross's *Accelerando* are both available to fans entirely free thanks to their enthusiasm using the Creative Commons initiative. Visit <http://craphound.com/someone> and [www.accelerando.org](http://www.accelerando.org) for more details and start downloading now!

## Ian McDonald has a website, eee-eye oh never mind...

Ian McDonald, winner of this year's BSFA best novel award for *River of Gods*, can now be found online and on live journal at [www.livejournal.com/users/iamcdonald](http://www.livejournal.com/users/iamcdonald). Other author blogs and journals worthy of note include [vanderworld.blogspot.com](http://vanderworld.blogspot.com) and [kennacleod.blogspot.com](http://kennacleod.blogspot.com).

## Sussex ups

A new forum has been set up to bring together fans and writers in Brighton and Sussex, with a view towards organising groups, workshops and possibly replacing the *Interzone* pub-meets of yore. The forum is at [www.nostalgiaforinfinity.com/scifibrighton](http://www.nostalgiaforinfinity.com/scifibrighton).

# Singing simians

Roderick Gladish monkeys around

**A** new monkey species has been found in Africa for the first time in twenty years.

The highland mangabey, discovered in the Southern Highlands region of Tanzania, is one meter long with brown fur, an off-white chest and tail. Tufts of brown hair sprout from its head. The new monkey's small habitat is under threat from deforestation in all its flavours, so it may not be around for long. It was identified by its distinctive call.

On the other side of the Atlantic, in Bolivia, another new monkey species has turned up. The red-brown titi monkey (pictured) stands about one foot tall, weighs about two pounds and likes fruit. Each morning the monkeys gather in pairs and perform a "duet" call while hugging each other. An Internet charity auction for the right to name the new species raised \$650,000. The money will fund conservation of the monkey's habitat in Bolivia's Madidi National Park.

A new rodent was identified by biologist Robert Timmins of the Wildlife Conservation Society in the Khammouan region of Laos. He said: "It was for sale on a table next to some vegetables. And I knew immediately it was something I had never seen before."

The creature, related to guinea pigs, looks like a cross between a large dark rat and a squirrel. Locals roast them – always good eating on a rat. **Sources:** National Science Foundation & New Scientist

**A**lthough beaten to the Ansari X Prize by Burt Rutan's SpaceShipOne, Canadian Arrow continues in the race to carry fare-paying passengers into space.

Their capsule is nearly finished and engine tests are under way with the aim of commercial flights in 2007. Virgin Galactic, who intend to use craft based on the victorious SpaceShipOne, will not be ready to fly until one year later. Where SpaceShipOne lands aircraft-like on a runway, Canadian Arrow splashes down upon its return so take your wellies. **Source:** Canadian Arrow

**W**hile some are chasing profits others are tooling up for war. *The New York Times* reports that the US Air Force is seeking approval from the president for a new national security directive that will permit the deployment of weapons in space. The US has already spent billions of dollars developing space-based weapons, with \$8.8 billion budgeted for this year alone.

There are international rules against weaponising space – the UN's Outer Space Treaty was published in 1967 – but, hey, when has that stopped them?

Proposed weapons include "hypervelocity rod bundles" (scarily known as 'Rods From God') that are space launched inert metal projectiles



Bolivian monkeys:  
Get together for an early morning duet and a big hug

travelling at 7,200 mph and arriving with the energy of a small nuclear weapon and "global strike", a military space plane carrying precision-guided weapons, that could strike from halfway around the world in 45 minutes. And let's not forget the anti-ballistic missile systems the US Government has dreamt of for years, which may introduce "friendly fire" issues for users of Canadian Arrow and SpaceShipOne. **Source:** AFP

**S**tar Trek's transparent aluminium may still be some time off but bendy concrete is now science fact.

Using fibre-reinforcing, the University of Michigan has created a material that is 500 times more resistant to cracking and 40 percent lighter in weight. The embedded tiny fibres and other materials in the concrete to give it maximum flexibility. It is also lighter than standard concrete. **Source:** [www.physorg.com](http://www.physorg.com)

**C**osmos-I, carrying an experimental solar sail, is lost.

Launched from a submarine aboard a converted Soviet ICBM, some reports say Cosmos-I crashed shortly after take-off. Russian ground control claims to have received data from space but US Space Command have not sighted it in its expected orbit. **Source:** New Scientist

# Hail to the chief

**P**at McMurray will officially take over as Chair of the BSFA, replacing current joint-chairs Paul & Elizabeth Billinger (see interview on page 10&11), at Interaction, the 2005 Worldcon in Glasgow. He has already begun to take on some of the responsibilities of the job and is beginning to plan for the longer term. Talking about his vision for the BSFA, Pat said:

"The BSFA is like a box of chocolates, an octopus, a tsunami, six blind men and an elephant. It's huge, complicated and difficult to get your head around. It lives and dies by the quantity and quality of its' voluntary staff, so we're always looking for more people to get involved. But we don't need just people, we need people with ideas and imagination and organisational will.

Sounds chaotic, barely organised, always on the edge of collapse, surfing the immanent wave of the catastrophe? Good,

'cause that's how successful 21st Century organisations should behave. And we are going to be a successful 21st Century organisation!

I have ideas of my own as to what we should do – develop some we're doing already, do some brand new things, see what we can do about fundraising and grant applications, develop deeper more meaningful purposes. I want to talk more to more of you about this, after the oncoming Worldcon steamroller.

One key objective? That someone not yet born will be sitting somewhere giving their thoughts on becoming the first 22nd Century Chair of the BSFA. Maybe huddled around a campfire in a post-apocalyptic cave, or emailing a self-aware avatar to millions of members, or maybe by typing on a computer and getting it printed in *Matrix...*"

- **Mark Plummer's profile of Pat McMurray is on page 20.**

## The rest of the BSFA at Worldcon

**T**he BSFA will be making sure it has a strong presence at this year's convention, doing its best to promote UK SF to the world and happily enjoying the UK dominant line up in this year's Hugo Award nominations.

Central to this will be the launch of the BSFA's new Best of British awards (see pages 16&17) along with all the usual organisational activities that fans have come to expect.

BSFA merchandise, including rare con T-shirts and copies of Stephen Baxter's *Omegatropic*, will be on sale

and the ever-popular tombola will be making a welcome return, as well as other more social events including a party for members – look out for full details at the convention itself. Anyone who makes it out of the bar or dealers room and actually goes to some panels will also notice that many of the BSFA committee (including your trusty magazine editors) are scheduled to appear throughout the programme, so think of some interesting questions and join in.

## Competition Winner

**H**earty congratulations to Jim Steel from Glasgow (BSFA member no: 6365) who successfully spotted our slightly less than deliberate error in attributing a quote in our interview with author Tony Ballantyne to Dr. Mark Roberts instead (damn his eyes, no one told me people actually read this stuff – ed).

A copy of Tony's excellent featured novel *Recursion* as well as Dr. Mark's contribution to the decline of the medical profession, *The Thackery T Lambshead Pocket Guide To Eccentric & Discredited Diseases*, are both in the post.

All we can say is that's the last time Matrix trusts a man who claims to have received his medical qualifications in a dream...



Glasgow's SECC  
Armchair! Crunchy on the outside, soft in the middle.



New Broom

Pat McMurray is planning for the future.

## Not our fault

**I**t could have been cyber-gremlins, the first warning signs of the impending singularity or maybe just a random scrubbing of files caused by that mysterious black monolith we dug up in the garden the other day, but whatever the reason the result was still a scrambled version of what had been a fine layout file of issue 173.

Apologies to all the contributors who suffered and the readers who missed out on valuable linking sentences this time. Fully restored versions of all the afflicted articles are available online now at [www.matrix-magazine.co.uk](http://www.matrix-magazine.co.uk).

## New Non-Fiction Award

**A** new award for non-fiction will be added to the categories for next year's BSFA awards, the winners of which are traditionally announced at Eastercon. Full details from Awards Administrator Claire Brialey can be found in her regular Awards Update column (page 30).

## We want your news

**C**hange is good, says *Matrix*, which is handy given the amount of it knocking around in the BSFA at the moment. This page is dedicated to keeping members updated on all the latest goings within the committee and the regular BSFA events. However we also want to know what's happening with you, the members, so if you have an exciting piece of news about a new fan group or getting a short story published or bumping into the ghost of HG Wells in a Midlands pub we want to know about it. Send word to us at the regular address [matrixeditors@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:matrixeditors@yahoo.co.uk).

# No illusions

Andy Sawyer is waylaid by another classic from the SF Foundation Collection.

**I**t is something of a surprise to discover that *Way Station* came as late in Simak's career (comparatively: his first stories were published in 1931) as 1963, for I seem to have known the story as long as have been reading science fiction.

Even if I read it, as I must have, very soon after it was published, it would still have been in my early teens: at that significant age when you move on from material written primarily for children to stuff written primarily for adults, and either give up on SF or discover that it can appeal to an enquiring mind. *Way Station* was certainly one of those transitional novels, along with *The Space Merchants* and the People" stories of Zenna Henderson.

Enoch Wallace returns from the Civil War to run the family farm in remote, rural Wisconsin. Shortly afterwards, his father dies in an accident and Wallace is recruited to operate a Galactic staging post. Rendered almost immortal, for almost a hundred years Enoch has been operating one of the matter-transmission points by which individuals in a Galactic federation move around the known universe. Eventually, though, his presence becomes noticed by the American intelligence service. As they watch him, trying to make sense of his apparent youthfulness and the mysterious inscription on a grave in the family burial plot, Enoch is also wrestling with the problem of whether he should share the increasingly valuable knowledge which he gains. His use of an alien sociology forecasts a major war about to erupt on Earth. Has Enoch the right to keep secret his knowledge that there are beings, and modes of thought, out there in the universe which could help?

In *Way Station*, almost certainly his most inventive novel, Simak uses a number of ideas which were to become awfully familiar to SF fans in the next couple of decades. As well as matter transportation and a Galactic federation, he describes a kind of all-pervading spiritual force" which in some ways underpins the altruistic aims of the Federation and which is connected to by a Talisman



Grandmaster:

Clifford D Simak (left) won a Hugo for Way Station

that can only be operated by an individual with the right gifts. By using an alien science, Enoch has created a number of simulacra: Mary, a lover, and David, a "best friend". These simulacra are non-physical, but they are real enough to understand that they are, in fact, unreal, and one of Enoch's greatest mistakes is to create an individual who should hate him, but can only love him. None of these tropes are original with Simak, and several of them were later used more resonantly by others, but many readers have noted Simak's "pastoral" flavour, and this gives a clue to why this novel works as well as it does. By isolating his characters in a rural setting and allowing personal love and social responsibility to counterpoint and reinforce each other, Simak creates a story in which he is able to comment upon much wider issues than it at first seems that he actually does.

The theft, by the Government Intelligence watchers, of the corpse of the "Hazer" who dies at Enoch's Way Station becomes a political cause that may wreck the political plan of Galactic Centre to expand into our arm of the galaxy. Lucy Fisher, a deaf-mute girl (who may have uncanny powers) takes refuge with Enoch from her shiftless and brutal family. Meanwhile, we have learned that there are problems

with the Federation, which is not as all-powerful as all that: for many generations the custodian of the Talisman has been mediocre, the link with what we might as well call the Force tenuous. Through the transmitter in Enoch's Way Station comes a fugitive who has stolen the Talisman and hopes to hold it for ransom. As we might have guessed, when the object comes into contact with Lucy, it glows like never before. This obscure Way Station on a backwoods world becomes more important than it first seems.

Simak's story is one that is told many times in sf. An account of how Earth becomes part of the wider Galactic Federation is hardly new. Simak's romantic pastoralism might seem cloying to some readers. But what affected me when I first read it, and still appeals as I re-read, were two things. First, Simak's picture of his aliens such as Enoch's recruiter, "Ulysses", while folksy, has a ring of authenticity about it. There's a true sense of wonder as Enoch attempts to understand the sometimes baffling sociologies and technologies that run parallel with the alien biologies he encounters. The sense that overwhelming forces are threatening the "little people" of the Earth (1963, don't forget, was the year after the Cuban Missile Crisis when we seemed closer to Armageddon than

ever before: Simak and his readers knew very well that they didn't need an "alien sociology" to forecast the very real danger of war) is made almost trivial by the bigger picture. Yet Enoch, who knows that the real picture is vaster than anyone else on Earth knows, cares, and we know that he is right to care. Secondly, and rather running at odds with this, is the subplot involving the simulacra that are called into being by an alien technology. A trivial object – possibly a work of art, possibly a game – turns out to be the "fixing" tool that makes simulacra such as "Mary" physically real. But as both Enoch and Mary realise, even if an illusion should turn real, you still know that it is an illusion.

At the time I read *Way Station* I had yet to encounter the work of Philip K. Dick, who made this collision between illusion and reality his life's work. Dick is not usually a writer one compares with Simak, and Enoch's simulacra are not at the heart of his story. Yet this theme – almost a throwaway – is one which gives the novel its poignancy, and the last few pages of the story bring a lump to my throat in their picture of a lonely man getting on with the job. Perhaps it was simply the right novel at the right time, but *Way Station* will always be a particular favourite.

# The children of con-



**Children of war:**  
The blitz leaves these  
East End children homeless

**T**he current sixty-year memorials may be the last great anniversaries of the Second World War, as its heroism and horror start to slip beyond living memory and into history.

My mother (sixteen in 1945) has recently been writing down her memories for the benefit of her grandchildren, for instance this about the air raids on Liverpool: 'We'd been to a wedding ... We were on the bus when the air raid siren went and the bus immediately stopped and all the passengers had to get off. We started to walk ... Suddenly there was a terrific noise to the right of us. We all stopped and looked up and a terrific light lit up the night sky - red and yellow like a gigantic firework. It was a bomb and the noise was horrendous. I suppose it must have been miles away from us but we heard the terrible crash as it hit the ground ... Strangely I can't remember being particularly frightened. I always felt safe when my Dad was with us. We started off again, running.'

A generation of science fiction writers lived through the war. Surely it was a great dislocation in their lives and careers, as well as in the

development of a still-young field.

Arthur C Clarke (aged twenty-nine in 1945) rose to the rank of flight-lieutenant in the RAF. Much of his work concerned pioneering developments in radar, a time he documented interestingly in his semi-autobiographical non-genre novel *Glide Path* (1963). At one point the protagonist, whiz-kid radar engineer Alan Bishop, is called back from his work to his father's funeral in Exeter (Clarke was born in Minehead). But he finds he has outgrown his home: 'He could never escape from [his childhood's] influence, for it had shaped his character irrevocably ... But it would no longer dominate him' (chapter 21). Through the hyper-advanced technology of the war Bishop has encountered a new level of reality: 'He had become entangled in powers and instrumentalities that would surely shape the future' (chapter 30).

Clarke grew up as a farmer's son, and, born in 1917, lived through the great expansion of urbanisation and industrialisation which transformed much of Britain (and the US) in the decades 1890s-1930s – in many parts of Britain terminating an agricultural tradition that had

roots all the way back to the Iron Age. Perhaps his wartime-crisis experience of sudden personal growth and exposure to high technology influenced Clarke's many tales of transcendence through technology, from *Childhood's End* (1953) to 2001 (1968) and beyond: just as Bishop leaves his rural childhood behind for a technocratic future, so mankind must one day leave the green cradle of Earth.

Though Robert Heinlein (thirty-eight in 1945) is strongly associated with 'militarist' fiction such as *Starship Troopers* (1959), in fact his five-year service as a US naval officer was mostly in peacetime. His WWII service was at a Navy experimental station in Philadelphia, and he retired due to ill-health in 1942. L. Sprague de Camp (thirty-eight in 1945) served at the same station, as did Isaac Asimov (twenty-five in 1945), interrupting his education to do so.

War changes people. Before the war John Wyndham (forty-two in 1945) churned out unremarkable adventure stories and juveniles under a variety of pseudonyms. After the war, as Wyndham, he began to produce the grounded, realistic

disaster stories for which he became famous. Labelled 'cosy catastrophes' by Aldiss, these works examined the disruption of the lives of middle-class Britons by global cataclysms, echoes of the real disasters through which Wyndham's generation had lived. After the war John Christopher (twenty-three in 1945), who served, also produced memorable Britain-set disaster stories. Eric Frank Russell (forty in 1945) and Fritz Leiber (thirty-five in 1945) published anti-war stories in the pages of the American magazines.

Kurt Vonnegut (twenty-three in 1945) fought in Europe. Towards the end of the war he was a prisoner of war in Dresden, and lived through the saturation bombing of that city. *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969) is set during these ghastly events. The book with its jumbled timeline depicts a chaotic universe, casual in its cruelty. In a foreword Vonnegut describes a painful twenty-three-year saga of trying to write about the Dresden experience, two decades of self-administered therapy perhaps. A greater contrast with what Clarke, say, took away from the war is hard to imagine.

Brian Aldiss (twenty-one in

# Conflict

Stephen Baxter considers how their wartime experiences shaped the visions of SF's biggest names.

1945) served in the Royal Signals in Burma and Sumatra, an experience he memorably described in his autobiography *A Twinkling of an Eye* and made comedy of in his Horatio Stubbs saga (1971–1978). Perhaps the images of the ferocious, overwhelming jungle-Earth of *Hothouse* (1962) best reflect through science-fictional metaphors the experiences of a very young man thrown into the eastern war's green arena.

JG Ballard (fifteen in 1945) was too young to fight (he did serve in the RAF in the 1950s). But his experiences as a child interned in a Japanese prisoner of war camp clearly shaped his subsequent life. His novel *Empire of the Sun* (1984), based on that experience, full of prototypes of the images – drowned landscapes and empty swimming pools – that have recurred in his fiction since the 1950s. Perhaps Ballard's view of the world was forever of the baffled child caught up in huge events beyond his comprehension.

The consciousnesses of many significant writers were evidently shaped by the war, whether they served or not (there's probably a thesis or two in the topic). But the closer you were to the front line, and the younger you were, the more disturbed your subsequent visions.

My mother says of one night in 1945: 'It was midnight and very dark – there were no street lights. My dad was cycling home from the hospital where he worked. About one mile from home, in his dim bicycle lights he spotted a soldier struggling along with a big kit bag, gas mask and various other bags. He dismounted and called out, "Can I help you soldier?" The soldier turned round and to his amazement my Dad saw that it was his son Fred on his way home on leave from the Middle East. They hadn't seen each other for four years. We did not even know my brother was back in England!'

My grandfather had also served in a World War, the First. As a private in the 'Liverpool Pals', he survived Passchendaele. And then in 1945 he had a son of his own, serving in a new war. The experience of living through such cataclysmic upheavals – not just once in a lifetime but twice – can surely scarcely be imagined by those lucky enough to be born later, like me.

## Images of Liverpool at war (clockwise from top right):

Children evacuated from Lime Street Station; An unexploded mine on Score Lane, Childwall; Waterloo Dock Warehouse destroyed, and munition workers in Kirby promise victory



This image © Board of Trustees of National Museums & Galleries on Merseyside

**"The closer you were to the front line,  
and the younger you were, the more  
disturbed your subsequent vision."**

# The folding chair

**Tom:** I suppose we should start at the beginning so how did you first get involved with the BSFA?

**Elizabeth:** It's all the fault of Martin Potts, who is now the BSFA's treasurer. Martin and I used to work together (I trained him, taught him all I knew – it didn't take long) and became friends. He was a member and told us about the BSFA.

**Paul:** *The worrying thing was that Martin told us about the BSFA because of an article on Yes in Vector, not because of the sf.*

**E:** For a few years we read the magazines, made lists of books to look out for and marvelled at other people's knowledge and commitment. Then, in 1992, I think I read that the treasurer was retiring and a replacement was needed. 'I can do that' I thought, 'I'm an accountant, it will be easy and it won't take up much of my time'. Little did I know how once you volunteered the BSFA just sucks you in...

**P:** ...which is how I ended up as membership secretary – I went with Elizabeth to one committee meeting and got volunteered.

**E:** After that, the next big thing was going to Worldcon in Glasgow in 1995. Our first convention. We feared it would be boring and full of people in costume; we were wary. Instead it turned out that the BSFA desk in the dealers' room was a great place to hang out – we met lots of people, learned a lot and the rest is a matter of public record.

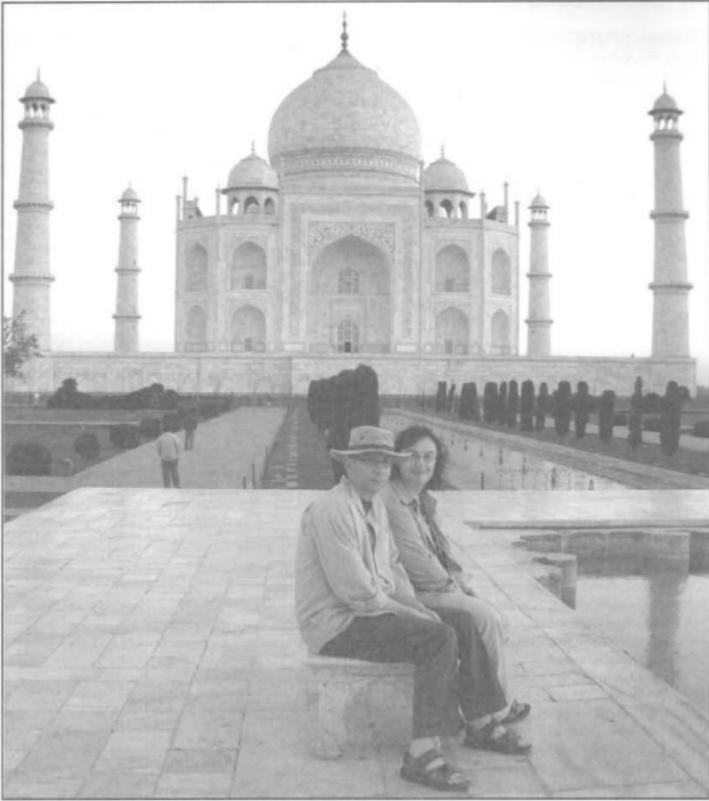
**P:** Which gives our retirement a pleasant feeling of symmetry. Pat will formally take over after this year's Worldcon, which is again in Glasgow. We'll have gone from Glasgow to Glasgow via Worldcons in Australia and America.

**TOM:** How long have you been joint Chair and how did it come about?

**E:** After Maureen Kincaid Speller retired, we had this idea that the BSFA could be run by committee (no-one wanted the job). This settled down into the two of us and Steve Jeffery making decisions, but it became clear that it was difficult for the outside world if there was no clear point of contact. And if there is no place that the buck stops, little things get overlooked. So, we bit the bullet and stood up to be counted.

**P:** And there were only two of us, so the counting wasn't all that difficult.

**TOM:** Do you have any personal favourite moments or amusing



#### anecdotes to embarrass people etc?

**E:** I'm saving the embarrassing anecdotes in case I ever need a second career as a blackmail.

**P:** I'm continually amazed by how many of the authors – novels, criticism, magazines – I've met.

#### TOM: Has the genre or fandom changed since you got involved?

**E:** For years people bemoaned the dearth of young people, now suddenly we've found lots of them to take over the BSFA...

**P:** The things that strikes me most are the technological changes. In the early 90s it wasn't normal to have email, let alone broadband and the amazing hardware and software that people now have at home and put to the service of the BSFA.

**E:** I remember when we volunteered for copy-typing duties on *Paperback Inferno*, the paperback reviews magazine. The reviews that were submitted were typed so we retyped them on our trusty Amstrad PCW before sending a disk to Andy Sawyer. The mags were sent to the printers as hard copy. Before we were really involved they were stuffed into envelopes and posted by volunteers.

Compare that with the zapping of emails around the world, electronic submission to the printers etc.

**P:** Things like email, newgroups and now LiveJournal, make the SF community seem larger and more connected.

**TOM:** Where would you like to see the BSFA going in the future?

**E:** I'm not sure, and I think that's a good reason for retiring now... I think that the changes I've mentioned lead to changes in what we can do and what is needed from us.

**P:** When the BSFA was formed there was a strong element of introducing fans to each other, people who had a lot in common but were isolated. There are still people out there who don't volunteer or go to conventions, but if they have internet access, they are unlikely to be isolated in the way fans were in the 1950s.

**E:** I wish we had funds to do more publishing, to take on projects that don't seem safe or profitable enough for commercial publishers.

**TOM:** So, the one you knew we were going to ask – why are you

S

Tom Hunter talks to Elizabeth and Paul Bilfinger as they end their term as BSFA Chairs.



**"I want to see someone with new ideas and fresh enthusiasm take things over and do things I never thought of."**

#### stepping down?

E: I've been treasuring or chairing since 1992, and I think it would take a very special person to maintain enthusiasm for much longer than that. Jobs like that are not things that you can ignore for more than a couple of days – there are always little things cropping up, let alone larger crises like printers being flooded, editors having hard drive failures, etc etc. It takes a lot of energy to keep picking up the pieces and trying to encourage the other members of the team. And when you run out of energy I think you're more of a liability than an asset.

P: I want to see someone with new ideas and fresh enthusiasm take things over and do things I never thought of.

**TOM: With that in mind what does the role of Chair involve?**  
E: Generally all the bits that don't fit into anyone else's job description. That and be the place where the buck stops, the one that takes responsibility for decisions and disasters. And the vision thang.

**TOM: Changing the subject for a moment, have either of you ever tried writing SF yourselves?**  
E: Not yet.  
P: No, nor me.

**TOM: Well in that case I guess you'd better tell me about your favourite authors, books, shows, movies, artists etc instead.**  
E: I suppose you really mean sf... Well this week there's *River of Gods*,



#### What's that building with the Bilingers (left)?

**Paul and Elizabeth in India.**  
**Guns, lots of guns (above):**  
Both refuse to comment on rumours that they are deporting the BSFA to concentrate on their plot to make a half-decent sequel to *The Matrix*

include *River of Gods* as my personal favourite of the moment. I've never been a big fan of hard SF – although reading *Revelation Space* when it first came out was exhilarating – much preferring authors who take our world and twist it, which would fit with Grimwood and McDonald, and would include people like Tim Powers and Kim Newman. And at the moment any book that has anything to do with India becomes a favourite!

**TOM: You're both involved with the Serendip Foundation, what's that all about?**

E: We are both on the board of directors, part of a team that is managing the Arthur C Clarke Award now that Rocket Publishing is unable to provide funding beyond the actual prize money. It's a tough one and we're all on a steep learning curve – event management, grant applications, publicity, the vision thang again.

P: We are looking for a suitable sponsor for the Award – not a global arms company or cigarette maker – but it does need to have some ready cash available. If anyone reading this fits this profile then please get in touch.

**TOM: One for Paul now. You're the reviews editor for Vector, what does it involve and what's it like getting sent all those review copies?**

P: Which is a role I'm carrying on with (you can never quite escape...).  
[E: Just when I thought I was out... they pull me back in...]

P: The role of the reviews editor starts with publishers sending me books for review – which unfortunately I then have to send out to others to review (well, not all, I do review some myself). The reviewers then send me back a review (hopefully promptly) which I then edit into the reviews column. I also write most of the Particles section – which gives me the chance to be rather sarcastic about some of the comic fantasy we get to review. The other main part of the role is compiling the annual best books of the year piece for Vector, which takes a fair amount of editing but gives a great summary of the highlights of the year (and *River of Gods* coming top of the poll in 2004 shows that our reviewers do have taste). I'm always interested in getting new reviewers so if anyone wants to give it a try then just get in touch.

**TOM: And finally, any last official message to BSFA members?**

P: Volunteer, volunteer, volunteer!  
E: Come on in, the water's fine.

# Tooled up and ready

**Paul:** I first heard about the writer's toolkit specifically, the science fiction writer's toolkit from William Gibson. The basic idea is that SF writers have a common set of tools and tricks they can use to convey information, strangeness, and so on neatly and efficiently. Descriptions of some of these tools can be found in Samuel R Delany's essay 'About 5,750 Words', which argues that SF has developed a distinctive grammar to deal with ideas and convey weird situations. The classic example is Heinlein's phrase 'the door dilated', which in three words immediately transports us to another world where doors don't swing sideways on hinges but work like the iris of a camera.

SF writers tend to arise from within the field, before they were writers they were readers, consuming forests' worth of novels and stories, and in that way absorbing the essential kit for crafting sf. This means, of course, that writers who approach SF and science fictional subjects from the outside are often decimated by those within SF for reinventing the wheel. But reinventing the wheel, or alternatives to the wheel, isn't necessarily a bad thing, so while the toolkit is very useful, it can also be limiting. After all, if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

*Gene* explores the very science fictional idea of a genetic basis for reincarnation, and appears to incorporate a small library's worth of research. It's also a fast-paced thriller that literally hits the ground running. Stel, how did you strike a balance between packing in the necessary information, and driving the plot forward?

**Stel:** The key to the science in *Gene* was really to treat it as an integral character in the book. It has a history, the same as the Cyclades and Athanatos, and it's because of science that these two characters are experiencing and maintaining their reincarnated shot at immortality. Therefore I chose to make the scientific reveals play out like I would the reveals of the background to a character. Give just enough for the reader to understand and digest which would therefore allow them to make the same journey that the characters are taking, but not labour

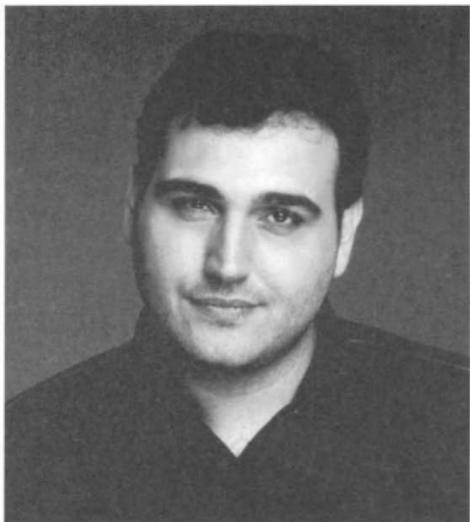
any of the points. The key difference here is that the thriller audience likes science but might not necessarily be as up on it as much as a hardcore SF audience might be. Therefore the aim was to make the science both exciting and informative and well spaced out enough throughout the plot that it doesn't get bogged down.

Thriller writing is a little like music, there's an intentional rhythm to it. Right down to the cadence of word choices and sentence structures. Being a bastard child of SF, that type of blasphemer I call a speculative thriller writer, who writes not quite SF and not quite classic thriller, the balancing act also comes from the skeleton that I decide to hang the story on, which is its theme. Every time I hit a bump in a chapter, or a character is heading off in a direction that doesn't help drive the story forward, I always come back to the theme and think, okay what am I trying to say here and how does this fit in?

If it doesn't fit, it gets cut. That way I was able to keep a check on the science so that I could move forward with plot and character at each turn.

*White Devils* is the heart of darkness for the 21st Century. It explores a world that has been ravaged by disease and is struggling to come to terms with the aftermath of a genetically engineered environment. It is absolutely crammed with so many ideas that it puts many authors to shame. Simple little throw away details like inventing new words such as 'genengineered' and cellulose '9' are rooted firmly in a writing style that I found very akin to a documentary style. While the psyche of an American right wing religious eco warrior is very plausible indeed if current trends continue of environmentalists teaming up with the religious right. Much of SF by its very nature explores what ifs. Paul, do you see *White Devils* as forecasting the inevitable, or more of a cautionary tale that serves as warning?

**Paul:** I agree that it isn't always easy to maintain the rhythm of the story while slipping in necessary bits of scientific exposition, even with full deployment of the good old SF tool kit, and especially when you're



**"Thriller writing is a little like music, there's an intentional rhythm to it. Right down to the cadence of word choices and sentence structure."** — Stel Pavlou

writing for two somewhat different audiences. As far as thriller readers are concerned, I'm probably guilty of a few too many information dumps. And I'm envious of your trick of using revelations about the science behind the story to do double duty by also revealing more about the nature of the two main characters.

I suppose that *White Devils* is more a cautionary tale about the misuses of science than an attempt to predict the future of biotechnology. I used to work as research scientist at about the time that utilitarian science was beginning to drive out pure, blue skies, idea driven research. Just before I quit, boxes in which applicants had to outline the economic potential of their work started appearing on research grant forms. Of course, pursuing research regardless of its social or ethical consequences is just as bad as only pursuing research that will make a profit for someone, and *White Devils* pits the two kinds of bad science against each other.

As for predicting the future, I'm happy to leave that to the futurologists. As far as I'm concerned, anyone writing fiction about the near future is really writing about the present, and contemporary concerns and fears. So *White Devils* is really no more than an attempt at a satirical heightening of what's already happening around us the present turned all the way up to eleven. Of course, in these days of Bushism, Blairism and the Great American Adventure, writers really have to go flat out to keep ahead of stuff that falls into the category of You Just Could Not Make It Up (like the proposal to replace the Statue of Liberty's torch with a sword), but it's still just about possible. Especially when, like you and me, they tap

# dy to write

Paul McAuley and Stel Pavlou discuss the toolkit of modern SF.



**"As far as I'm concerned, anyone writing about the near future is really writing about the present and contemporary concerns and fears."** — Paul McAuley

into that rich source of unease, biotechnology.

In *Gene*, you neatly dramatise contentious theories about DNA and identity, and the modern fear that we may be no more than the sum of our genes. I don't know if you can say where you stand on this without giving away the plot, so maybe I should also ask if the story and characters developed from this idea of DNA driven predestination, or if they (and the Trojan War) came first? (I guess I'm trying to find a new way of asking the old chestnut about where writers get their crazy ideas.)

**Stel:** I know exactly what you mean about 'You Just Could Not Make It Up.' The problem that SF currently faces is an acute identity crisis. As our ordinary 'real world' progresses deeper and deeper into an SF world, the lines are becoming

blurred between the plausible and the fantastic. But what struck me about your writing, and I learned a lot from it and I sincerely thank you for that, was the clean, efficient and focussed way in which the world you constructed was made utterly plausible because the detail was all there. An example was a throwaway mention of solar panel paint. I've no idea if that exists, but it sounds like it should. Bucky balls in the smashed cell phone. None of it was laboured. It all had that the door-dilated quality to it and what's more, it felt like an obvious progression for today's technology. Ultimately, as an ordinary reader, I was left with the notion why didn't I think of that. That's an impressive trick to pull off.

Much of *Gene* by contrast is set very much in the now. But because of the elements of flashback, each flashback also had to adhere to its

own 'now'. My wrestling match was in taking fantasy elements of Gods and elixirs, and slowly trying to get them to mesh with technology and DNA. Again I come back to the notion of theme and parallels. Really what I was attempting was to have the science/mythology parallel the nature versus nurture aspect of identity that's at the heart of the characters and the story. What makes us us.

As you know, the debate has become polarized, but I find it to be a disingenuous argument at best. My personal take on it is that we are defined both by our genetics and by society, since both forces are at work from day one. It's not an either/or proposition. A question I asked myself when I set out to write *Gene* was: what's the point in existing, genetically speaking?

If you stick to the rigid Dawkins mechanistic approach of the "selfish gene", I concluded that the idea of a higher organism made no sense. Why build a body if it isn't going to provide information to the genes that would enhance its survival?

The Lamarckian approach has long been dismissed, but as I was writing some new studies were coming out of Sweden that bolstered the emerging science of epigenetics, which to be blunt, though it isn't Lamarck, is perhaps a distant cousin. The effects of things that we eat for example affect not only our children, but our grandchildren. As my research progressed I also read some studies about cows that were familiar with cattle grids which were then taken away to breed. The calves by contrast had never seen a cattle grid in their lives, yet when one was painted on the road they wouldn't cross it. There was also a study on slugs that had been trained to react to electro shock, Pavlov style. When they then chopped the slug in half, not only did the half with the brain still remember its learned behaviour, but when the tail end grew a new brain, it too still remembered its learned behaviour. Obviously that shouldn't happen if memories reside only in the brain. So taking those ideas together as a whole, it led me to reassess what instinct, memory and thus identity really meant.

*Gene* begins with the idea that one character believes identity is

shaped by experience, while the other is concerned with lineage. As you know it gets a little more complex than that but any more would give the plot away. However, the goal really was to challenge their preconceptions of identity forcing each of them to continually take into account the effects of the other.

I'm from a mixed background. My father was Greek Cypriot, my mother English. Since an early age I've had to wrestle with this notion of identity and with external forces trying to fit me into a box. English people treating me as Greek. Greek people treating me as English. I even wound up volunteering for Greek National Service at one point, but I soon discovered I had limited innate 'Greekness', since I couldn't speak a word of the language when I turned up. Yet I would look in the mirror and see my father's bottom set of teeth and my mother's top set and wonder where I fit in.

In *White Devils* you tackle the idea if identity, and fitting in, in another way. There was an element of travel writing to it. It felt as though you genuinely and deeply knew Africa. I was struck by the tremendous sense of place that you managed to evoke. The redness of the river. The earth. The dust. The sense of a hot, dry climate. How well do you really know Africa?

It feels very real. In many respects you very cleverly use it as a scarred and subverted place, shaped by outside forces, and which mirrors the dual nature of Nick Hyde. I too don't want to give the plot away, but there is a very real sense that the *White Devils* after which the book is named applies to more than just the obvious element of the storyline. Does that strike you as accurate?

And to what extent do you think layers are important not only to *White Devils* but to storytelling as a craft?

**Paul:** Woah. Lots of good stuff to deal with. The technique of dropping into the text hints about bits of every-day future technology such as solar panel paint and buckyballs is one of the techniques from the SF tool kit I use a lot. I'm very keen on texture that is, giving the idea that there's a lot more going on than is presented at the surface level, and if

I can manage to do that I don't think it matters too much if every reader gets 'em right. That's only part of the layering that you mention of course, but it's a very important part of it as far as I am concerned; to me, getting across the inherent weirdness of the happening world is at least as important as characterization.

Did I go to Africa to research White Devils?

Actually, no. For all kinds of reasons, including the fact that the part of Africa I wanted to write about is a war zone, and the feeling that a couple of weeks of tourism wouldn't have made that much difference to what I'd gleaned about Africa from an enormous amount of research, but chiefly because the Africa of *White Devils* isn't exactly our Africa. It's a radically altered and heightened post plague version that deliberately mirrors the kind of colonial fantasies of a depopulated continent ripe for exploitation.

I wasn't trying to write from an African viewpoint, and don't think I could, or should, but from various skewed European viewpoints (and every European in it is wrong at some level). If it's convincing, it's because I did a lot of research and a lot of thinking about the research, and I also applied some experience I've had in other tropical countries, but most of all I tried to make sure that it was internally consistent. And if I managed that, it was because I was deploying all kinds tools and tricks I learned from reading far too much SF (pretty much to the exclusion of everything else) when I was much, much younger.

As for why it's set in Africa, rather than anywhere else, well, the scene in the second chapter contains an altered version of the genesis of the novel, which was a flash vision of a hot, dusty road through what was definitely an African landscape, where soldiers and scientists were examining the remains of a massacre carried out by some kind of monster. I can't explain why it was Africa, but everything flowed very quickly and naturally from that.

I don't know about you, but I'm not a big believer in only writing about what you know. I think it confuses imagination with journalism. Of course, imagination can only take you so far, but on the other hand, too much undigested research can seriously wreck a story.

The trick is, perhaps, to convince the reader that you know more than you do (and to leave out a lot of what you do know). In the end, I think, every novel, from whatever genre, has to contain its own internal truth. Once you get that down, once you've convinced the reader of the reality of the novel's world, everything else follows, even if it's pretty weird. In that respect, I think you did a fine job of introducing the character of police detective James North and the

texture of his world at the beginning of *Gene* I know New York fairly well, and can't fault the verisimilitude of it. I guess that you had a lot of fun researching it. And I'd venture that it's important to the novel that you kicked off with a grittily realistic setting, and what

indeed science fiction, if it's going to survive as a genre, and not disappear up its own fundament can most profitably inhabit?

**Stel:** Ah, you see I completely bought that you knew Africa. Great job! New York was a lot of fun to research. I flew over a few times and walked the routes my characters took, taking a digital camera with me and snapping at intervals along the way. I like to try and visit the locations I want to use as much as possible where possible, but as you rightly say, sometimes it really isn't. I never did visit Antarctica for my last novel for example. But this 'write what you know' mantra often makes me want to tear my hair out, and I agree with your take on it. The whole process of research is surely to enable a writer to be able to write from a position of familiarity with the subject, yet it sometimes feels like there are a select group of people out there aghast at the thought of someone having the impertinence to even try: forgetting that the grandfather of SF, Jules Verne, wrote mostly in a library using journals and travel books as his guides.

With *Gene* wrestling with the philosophical and moral issues that science throws up was really the area that most interested me. The problem is that can be very dry for a lot of people, so I see my task as trying to make it interesting and lively for people who wouldn't normally ask themselves these sorts of questions. Speculative thrillers seem well suited for that. I think now that the futuristic dream SF and thriller writers have been espousing is finally around the corner in many respects, it's time for our type of fiction to take a good long look and offer people glimpses of consequence, something I think you achieved with *White Devils*. Not political consequence, you may as well play the lottery with the chances of getting that right, I mean psychological. How we cope with what awaits us as a species is going to be just as telling as what it is we're destined to cope with. For my money taking a classic noir story, hanging technology on it and calling it, I don't

know, 'cyberpunk' doesn't cut it for me anymore.

The basis for this notion is a very simple one: people want answers. The beginning of the 21st Century is proving unsettling for people. If you think back over the last five years. We've had airliners ploughed into buildings, a Tsunami killing 300,000 odd people, a war fought on lies, with the genuine Orwellian slogan coming out of the US President's mouth 'War is Peace'. SF has always had the outrageous at its heart, but how do you compete with that?

And as people struggle to deal with all that change, their only framework is social and religious memes. So perhaps the next step is to wrestle with the big questions, and highlight the possible consequences of the different paths ahead. You did a similar thing in *White Devils* as I did in *Gene* by very neatly having the protagonist, Nick Hyde, confront the question of who he was and

## "I'm not a big believer in 'only write what you know'. I think it confuses imagination with journalism."

— Paul McAuley

seems like a standard thriller chase which quickly turns into something else. We aren't sure that what we think is going on is really what's going on, and that sucks us right in.

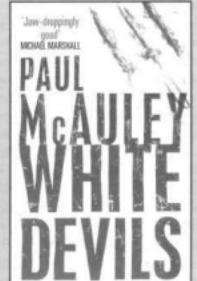
Nature/nurture... *Gene* plunges right into two of the most important and vital scientific debates of the late twentieth/early twenty first centuries: the debate about genetic determinism versus individuality and free will; and the really big question about the physical nature of memory. I agree that if you take the ideas of *The Selfish Gene* at face value that is, we're here simply as carriers and replicators of our genes you end up with a very bleak, deterministic vision of human nature. But Dawkins concluded his book by insisting that we can only rebel against the tyranny of our selfish replicators' even the champion of the power of the gene accepts that there's what Stephen Rose calls 'the rich inconsistency' between the professional beliefs of scientists and their lived lives. This is, I think, the gap illustrated by the dualism that informs the plot of *Gene*. You point up your very personal and deep experience of this. I wonder whether you're more interested in wrestling with the philosophical and moral issues that science throws up than actual linear extrapolation. Is that the kind of space the science thriller or

"It's time for our type of fiction to take a good long look and offer people glimpses of consequences" — Stel Pavlou

what his place was in the world. Maybe the surrogate philosophy will prove pretentious in the long run, who knows, but unless you try you'll never find out. But I also think it's an exciting time whenever a genre is forced to reinvent itself. It usually gives birth to something completely unexpected and I think it's time for speculative thrillers and perhaps even hard SF to rise to the challenge, and it's my hope that *Gene* takes a step towards doing that. I think if we can broach the subjects of science, religion, morality and change without succumbing to preaching and moralizing, or losing sight of our business, which is in the final analysis, to entertain, perhaps this type of fiction can remain strong.

Stel Pavlou's *Gene* is published by Simon and Schuster, £12.99.

Paul McAuley's *White Devils* is published by Simon and Schuster, £6.99, and his new collection of short stories, *Little Machines*, is available from PS Publishing (<http://www.pspublicising.co.uk>)



# Pretty as a picture

SFX is ten years old, Roderick Gladish takes a look.

**S**FX celebrated its tenth anniversary in June with issue 131. A glossy, newsagent-available magazine it is the most successful SF dedicated publication in the UK.

Film and TV are more significant to SFX than literature. Reviews of forthcoming TV programmes are in the sealed 'Spoiler Zone', although I've always thought of it as a film magazine being fuelled by big cinema events such as *Star Wars Episode III*. It has produced a *Star Wars* special issue and number 130 came with a choice of Jedi collector's covers. Dr Who's resurrection is a Godsend with lots of Mr Eccleston and Ms Piper in both issues reviewed here. Billie Piper gets to be on a poster in one issue and on several postcards given away in the next. Although her nose is likely to be blue-tacked to the wall because Tricia Helfer (a persuasive argument for betraying humanity in the new *Battlestar Galactica*) is backlit in a clingy translucent red dress is on the poster's other side.

Rarely is an article longer than a couple of pages and if it does stretch further there is a peppering of info-boxes to break it up. This is writing for the skimmer. Open it at any page and you can read a thirty-second titbit or go for the slightly longer pieces of text. It is comprehensive; covering books, films, comic books, anime, manga and audio productions, but lacks depth. The blip-vert style is distracting and the print tending to micro-dot in places is tough on the eyes. I kept hoping to get through the snippets to find something more in-depth, for it is a large magazine, but reached the end with no joy.

While reading issues 130 and 131 I started to wonder if I was a SF fan, usually an avid reader of all things SF I skipped bits. Then I started to wonder if the SFX team were SF fans. It has a 'lads mag' feel to it with micky-taking, throwaway put downs, comments on how women look and enough f-words to put me off suggesting it to a younger fan. The jokes made me smile; however, after so many it led to questioning whether they take SF seriously.

What I liked was the letters section and wherever fans managed to get their voices heard. On the death of *Star Trek: Enterprise* to the debate on Eccleston deciding he should move on and do something different (please can someone get



him to talk to George Lucas – a TV series, for goodness sake stop it!) it came across as people who genuinely care rather than being clever. Only a real fan can suggest Pingu vs Predator over *Alien vs Predator*.

'Couch Potato', which should have been entitled 'Shooting Fish in a Barrel', searched for the worst *Star Trek* episode ever (Issue 130) and went after the Ewoks and droids spin-offs in the following issue.

In all the data dump and info-burst contents, there are hidden surprises for the obsessive reader. Under the publisher details are the locations of the Future Network (check out the last one, it changes with each issue) and yet another joke.

That sums up SFX, good for a laugh with nice pictures. It's survived for a decade and that formula will continue to work, but for serious reviews stick with *Vector* and *Matrix*.

A smaller, but more significant anniversary is that Jupiter SF has started its third year. One year's subscription is slightly more than a single issue of SFX; skip an issue and get some grass-roots fiction in your head. Fiction being what SFX lacks.

*Futurismic* is a high concept website. It has a fiction section that is an extrapolation from reports of scientific advances and news from its other two sections (the blog and essays), or at least that's what it claims. It has been going about a year and is very thin because it publishes

one short story a month. Updated more regularly is the blog, a daily digest of science news snippets; one of these may be extended into an 'essay' which appeared more like an opinion piece than a view of where technology would take us.

Picking the last three fiction entries showed two that met the publisher's intended remit and the remainder that didn't in spades.

'Better Sweats to Prove Than Sleep' by Lisa Manchev was a day-in-the-life story. No plot as such instead showing how a highflying businesswoman lives in the future where sleep for some has been removed thanks to an onboard operating system. Sleep becomes a rapid fantasy for mental filing, recycle bin included.

'Push Patterns' from Jay Campbell looks at free, limitless power and how it would change the world if the powers that be let it. The inventor of this wonder is imprisoned, achieves mental rebirth and is liberated to find the world minus the USA heading for utopia.

Then there's 'Strike A Pose' by Donnárd Richardson Sturgis. It has a warning about sex, violence and 'naughty words'. What it doesn't warn you is that it is a Cinderella fantasy set in a land entirely populated by drag queens. They fight and kill in gangs (houses) to obtain modelling contracts. There's holographic gold lame, male rape, voodoo, a

combat style that appeared to be based on Madonna's arm waving Vogue thing, oh, and 'death pumps' (shoes of death). I would like to say it's bonkers. I can't. It's odd and confusing, but fully consistent to the concept; however, it is not an extrapolation of current trends or I'm living on a different planet. Planet check: footballers are paid more than doctors here aren't they?

Like many webzines it's looking for donations and is up-front about its expenditure, the founders took out a \$3,000 loan to set up the site and pay contributors. It is said that it won't be around for long if it doesn't get support. But being so slim on content, survival seems unlikely.

Webzine *Dark Planet* went into stasis four years ago and exists as an archive. Editor, Lucy Snyder, has regularly said she is open to any who wants to resurrect the site because she hasn't the resources to do so herself. That said she's started a blog (<http://lucysnyder.blogspot.com>) with a new piece every weekday evening. Expect an odd mix of essays, reviews, fiction, and poetry, she writes. Then people started asking if she'll consider taking submissions so now she's reserving Mondays for guest features. She'll accept science, science fiction, novel extracts and artwork. As yet Lucy Snyder has not said she can give up publishing anytime she wants, but it won't be long.

the BSFA's greatest

# BRITISH

science fiction ever

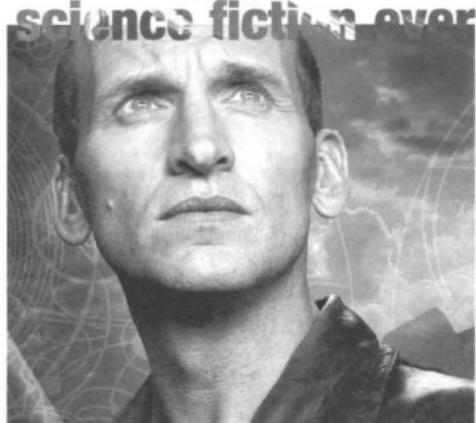
In August, Worldcon, the world's biggest science fiction convention is returning to Britain for the first time in a decade. To celebrate, the BSFA are launching a vote to discover what fans think is the very best British science fiction of all time.

We want your opinion. What is the best British novel ever? The best newcomer? Best television show? Best film? And who belongs with Mary Shelley, HG Wells, George Orwell and Arthur C. Clarke in the Order of Merit, as one of the all time greats?

We've made some suggestions, but **you can vote for anyone you want**. And to thank you for helping us decide who should win, we're offering a top prize of £50 in cash and £25 to two runners up pulled from the hat.

Who will you vote for?

- The best British SF novel ever;
- A great British SF author to join the BSFA's new Order of Merit;
- The most exciting new British SF author (who has published their first novel in the year 2000 or later);
- The best British SF film ever;
- And the best British SF on TV.



## BSFA Order of Merit

At this year's Worldcon in Glasgow the BSFA will launch the Order of Merit to mark the brilliant careers of the best British SF writers. The BSFA committee have **already selected** four undeniably great SF writers for the first year:

- Mary Shelley
- HG Wells
- George Orwell
- Arthur C Clarke

An additional, fifth candidate will be chosen by popular vote. So, who else do you think deserves to be on this list?



**Mary Shelley**

Frankenstein is far more than a monster story, it is the founding myth of the age of science.



**H.G. Wells**

Socialist and utopian, Wells combines insight and adventure as one of the founders of modern SF.



**George Orwell**

Intelligent, moving and fierce, Orwell's *1984* remains the high-water mark of SF as social criticism.



**Arthur C. Clarke**

One of SF's great visionaries, Clarke's novels practically define "sense of wonder" for generations of readers.

# Vote and win

By simply taking the time to vote and return this ballot paper, you could be in with a chance of winning up to £50 – don't delay. Vote today.

**Ballot papers must be received by:**

**Monday 1 August, 2005**

Complete the ballot paper (you can use this page, a photocopy of it or just write down your favourites in each category and send it to:

Great British SF,  
48 Spooners Drive,  
Park Street, St Albans  
Herts, AL2 2HL

or email your choices to:  
[greatbritishsf@ntlworld.com](mailto:greatbritishsf@ntlworld.com)

Remember to include your name and address so we can contact you if you win a prize. The winners will be announced at Worldcon and we'll have a full report in the next issue of Matrix.

**Name:**

in full, please print

**Address:**

**Postcode:**

**E-mail:**

## Best novel

1984 – Orwell	
Frankenstein – Shelley	
Greybeard – Aldiss	
Hitchiker's Guide... – Adams	
Pashazade – Grimwood	
Stand on Zanzibar – Brunner	
The Centauri Device – Harrison	
The Chrysalids – Wyndham	
The City and the Stars – Clarke	
The Drowned World – Ballard	
The Separation – Priest	
The Time Ships – Baxter	
Use of Weapons – Banks	
War of the Worlds – Wells	
Other:	

## Best film

1984 (1984 version)	
28 Days Later	
A Clockwork Orange	
Brazil	
Code 46	
Doppelganger	
Dr Who and the Daleks	
Island of Terror	
Quatermass and the Pit	
The Curse of Frankenstein	
The Day the Earth Caught Fire	
The Man in the White Suit	
The Man Who Fell to Earth	
Things to Come	
Other:	

## Best newcomer

Neal Asher	
Tony Ballantyne	
Jon George	
Gary Gibson	
Ben Jeapes	
David Mitchell	
Richard Morgan	
Adam Roberts	
Alastair Reynolds	
Martin Sketchley	
Charles Stross	
Steph Swainston	
Karen Traviss	
Liz Williams	
Other:	

## Best television

Blake's 7	
Doomwatch	
Dr Who	
Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy	
Quatermass	
Red Dwarf	
Sapphire and Steel	
Space 1999	
The Avengers	
The Clangers	
The Day of the Triffids	
The Prisoner	
Thunderbirds	
Ultraviolet	
Other:	

My nominee for a place on the BSFA Order of Merit is:

# A Little *Light Music*



**M**usic in SF movies and TV programmes has always been somewhat difficult to do well. Several examples spring immediately to mind: the band in the cantina at Mos Eisley, the bizarre, blippy music of the Krell in *Forbidden Planet* – the “electronic tonalities” of Louis and Bebe Baron – and those naff bands that sometimes used to pop up in TV series such as *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* or *Battlestar Galactica*.

The makers of these TV programmes and movies seemed to feel compelled to make any music that featured in their productions

particularly “alien” or “futuristic”, generally by making the music as discordant and arrhythmic as possible in the case of the former, or by using electronic instruments in the latter instance. Sometimes a strange combination of the two is employed. Occasionally there are also exotic-looking instruments and musicians as in the case of the Mos Eisley cantina band, whose music had a slightly unusual sound, but was nonetheless very “Earth-like” in style. The overall result is almost invariably unsatisfying, often unconvincing, and occasionally shifts the emphasis briefly towards the ludicrous.



## Martin Sketchley talks to Ian MacLeod about music in science fiction.

Knowing that he has a particular interest in music I thought I'd ask Ian MacLeod his opinions on this issue. I started by asking him what music in SF particularly stands out in his mind, whether good or bad? "What comes instantly to mind in film," says MacLeod, "is Kubrick's two SF movies. He always made clever choices. The music of Walter/ Wendy Carlos, who had already produced the ground-breaking *Switched On Bach*, was perfect for *A Clockwork Orange*. This was early synthesizer music, Carlos being a devotee of the Moog, and it still sounds just right. Even the slightly cheesy, feel adds to the film's sense of cool menace."

"As for 2001, his use of Strauss' *Also Sprach Zarathustra* was inspired. The extraordinary thing is that Strauss always intended the piece to be about the quest for progress in humankind, so it matches the theme of the film exactly. I love the entire tone poem, and it's one of those very rare instances of music being used in a visual context which doesn't spoil it when you listen to it later. Then there's *Blue Danube* and the Khatzaturian piece and the soundscapes of Ligeti. All so, so brilliantly apt that I think it rather spoilt the field for future directors."

To my mind music in SF is always a well, cringe-making, and never quite works. I asked MacLeod why SF films and TV programmes don't usually seem get it right. "Orchestral music often feels wrong because we're aware that orchestras won't be the same in the future, whilst music which attempts to be modern becomes dated very quickly. It can, eventually, acquire a sort of period charm, such as the *Doctor Who* theme, but very often doesn't. Having said that, there's an argument for saying that the best film and TV music shouldn't always be noticeable on a conscious level. That's especially true in SF because of the extra problems of sustaining credibility. I seem to remember, for example, that the soundtrack of *Solaris* was effective, without being especially memorable. Ditto for *Gattaca*. When composers start pulling out the stops, as John Williams likes to do in the *Star Wars* movies, I'm much less convinced."

Music touches humans on several different levels: a strong rhythm presumably connects with some physical rhythm that exists within

us, while other pieces – opera or classical music, for example – stir emotional responses. Presumably the form any alien music might take will be linked to their physiology and/or the way they function at a mental/intellectual level. I asked MacLeod to speculate as to the possible nature of alien music. "There's a nice use of this theme in Mary Doria Russell's excellent novel *The Sparrow*. When the first transmissions are received from earth from an alien civilisation, it turns out to be a form of song. In fact, Russell deals with the whole syntax of a song-based alien language pretty convincingly. What makes the song we first hear in the book all the more sad and creepy is that (and I don't think I'm spoiling

that there are now so many other alternatives. Multi-sensory and multi-media is an obvious avenue, but, with us humans being such visual animals, music often tends to fall into the role of providing an atmospheric background when it has to compete with other senses, as it does in films and computer games. Music really surged ahead in the last century because of the advent of recorded media, and that's not going to happen again. Maybe the hot acts of a century from now will be working on texture and smell instead."

"In the novel I'm currently writing – *In Another Place* – I have to deal with music in the future pretty much head on, as the main

### "Music really surged ahead in the last century because of the advent of recorded media, and that's not going to happen again."

anything here, because, as I recall, she lets most of this out early on) the singer we first hear ends up being responsible for raping the Jesuit priest who travels to this planet. Maybe why Russell succeeds, and where a lot of alien music falls down, is that it's often merely put in for local colour, rather than having any real significance in the story."

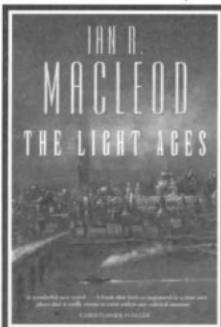
"More broadly, though, I don't think that music as we know it would transfer very readily to an alien culture. Sure, there could well be sound, but, even if you consider birds and whales, not to mention bats and so forth, the uses to which different species put sound vary greatly. Having said that, there is a contrary argument to the effect that music is essentially a mathematical construct based on regular sound vibrations, and might thus transmit more effectively than, say, the graphic arts. From the viewpoint of a writer, I guess you can play it either way. But alien is alien. And music, as you say, is very heavily rooted in the nature of our being human."

Given the changes we've seen in our own music over the last millennium, I wondered if MacLeod thinks we'll see the same level of development over the next, or have we explored every avenue? "The problem with the old arts is

character's a musician who lives through this current century. What I imagine will come about is that musical scores will become intelligent and evolving rather than static. The same piece played twice would thus be different. I also expect that people will have greater control over the music they're hearing – devices such as the iPod probably point the way ahead. As far as *In Another Place* is concerned, I keep the main emphasis on classical music, which, as it's old and dated already, isn't likely to become more so, and may even grow more fashionable. But the book and the main character both have to end up concluding that music as we know and love it's not going to remain as big as it is now. And if you have pieces of music which can evolve, maybe they will evolve out of being music, and become something else..."

Moving away from SF specifically, I wondered what music MacLeod likes to listen to himself. "I've drifted more and more towards classical music in recent years. I have a particular liking for the late romantics such as Elgar and Richard Strauss (whom I first discovered many years ago thanks to Kubrick). But I'd like to think my tastes are pretty broad. In modern music I've always been interested in the ambient and experimental. That

goes back to the stuff that Fripp and Eno produced in the 70s to more recent work such Boards of Canada, Squarepusher and Björk. Air are an intriguing group in this area, and in the context of SF. Moon Safari in particular uses a lot of consciously dated effects (old synthesizers, the vocoder) to produce some timelessly beautiful but very spacey and witty music. I guess the lesson there is that if you want to sound modern, aim to sound out of date! In terms of songwriters, I'd mention Richard Thompson, Joni Mitchell and Steely Dan, whose lyrics have provided all sorts of inspiration for me. I also like jazz, and enjoy investigating dance and world music. Sad to say, but I guess rather predictably for someone in middle age, the more mainstream rock acts don't really do it for me nowadays. I guess I look back to the time when King Crimson were able to produce chunks of brilliant free-form jazz on what were supposedly rock albums, along with songs about Rembrandt, sonic references to Vaughan Williams, Stravinsky and minimalism, quotes from Dylan Thomas, and Chinese drumming. I don't really feel there's been much of a leap forward since. I guess we can only try to keep listening with open ears and minds, and live in hope!"



Ian MacLeod's novels *The House of Storms* and *The Light Ages* are available now. His website can be found at [www.ianmacleod.freescrve.co.uk](http://www.ianmacleod.freescrve.co.uk)

Photograph opposite © Emily MacLeod

If you have a suggestion for future ironing, contact me. Please note that this no longer has to be internet-related.

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# The eternal fan

Mark Plummer on the surprisingly long career of Pat McMurray

**H**e is the Eternal Fan. He was there at the beginning, one of the *eo-fans*, the first generation of enthusiasts who looked on when science fiction was being created by Hugo Gernsback in *Amazing Stories*. And he wrote long, eloquent letters to those early pulps, although modesty meant that he always asked that they not be printed.

He was there when Fred Pohl, Don Wollheim and the other New York fans drove down to Philadelphia in 1936 for what may have been the first SF convention, although he is missing from the photos because he was parking the car at the time.

He was also there in Leeds in 1937, at the other first convention, and you can see him standing next to Arthur Clarke and Ted Carnell in the grainy photos of that event. Well, no, you can't – he was refilling his pipe when they were taken – but he was there.

And while the histories all note that Forrest J Ackerman won the 1953 Hugo for 'Number One Fan Personality' – which he subsequently turned over to Britain's Ken Slater – they don't mention that there had been an even earlier winner of that first ever Hugo, a fan who had already declined the award in favour of Forry...

For the Eternal Fan is also a self-effacing fan, a moving and shaking presence eschewing the limelight. As a result, you'll see no mention of him in Harry Warner Jr's seminal histories of fandom in the 1940s and 1950s (whole chapters were written but excised at the subject's request), and for many years he declined award nominations and guest-of-honourships, and any form of recognition for his achievements.

In fact, if you rely on the established fan histories you'll see that there is no evidence at all of Pat McMurray's presence before the 1993 Eastercon on Jersey. That is, at least officially, when Pat first encountered fandom – or perhaps when fandom encountered Pat. But some of us suspect the truth.

I first met Pat at Sou'wester, the 1994 Easter convention and, looking back on it, I think that I almost immediately began to suspect that he was The Eternal Fan. Here was a man who ostensibly



He who has always been with us!

Pat McMurray, is this the face of the secret force behind fandom's greatest moments?

was only attending his second Eastercon yet who possessed the confident assurance of somebody who'd been around for a lot longer than a year. We could only conclude that the rest of us had somehow failed to notice him earlier although it wasn't entirely clear how that could have happened; Pat was obviously the sort of bloke who'd be Doing Something. Were we really that unobservant?

Nothing about his behaviour then implied a rank newcomer. He was a hive of activity: part of the bidding committee for the 1996 Eastercon, and a division head for the 1995 Worldcon. If he really was the newcomer that he seemed to be, we did rather wonder how wed ever got by without him.

The old-time Scottish fan Ethel Lindsay once said of the 1960s New Wave leading light Charles Platt that he never quite forgave fandom for starting without him.

his own earlier activities. Does this perhaps explain why there is no primary documentary source for the 1957 Eastercon? And just what did happen there?

Pat's devotion to SF convention has taken him far and wide, making him what old-time fans – those who remember the days before the invention of the letter 'G' – call a Travelling Jant. He sees nothing odd in jetting half-way around the world for a long weekend at a convention, even if it's only for a convention which is discussing the running of conventions. Last year he stood for (and won) the Going-Under Fan Fund (GUFF) which took him to a convention in Australia, and in the wake of this he has, in his usual way, altogether exceeded a fan fund delegate's responsibilities when it comes to developing intercontinental fannish relationships.

And in his spare time he is a Content Provider, one of that noble band of selfless individuals who devote themselves to doing noteworthy and interesting things so that people like me can write about them. I am suitably grateful.

However, in documenting all of this, I find myself wondering a couple of things. Firstly, if he is indeed the Eternal Fan, why – after decades of anonymity – did he decide to go public in 1993? Personally, I suspect that before that date the Eternal Fan had only been an idea, yet at the 1993 Eastercon the idea was made flesh. Pat McMurray came into being, the mental projection of many cosmic fannish minds after several days of drinking Arthur Cruttenden's punch and wearing those strange pointy Romanian hats we all had that year. We made him: Pat is all of us, and we are all Pat.

I also wonder just how come it's taken until 2005 for Pat to assume the mantle of head of the BSFA? Of course, I'm overlooking the possibility that – as the Eternal Fan – he's done his job before. In fact, he was probably there when the BSFA was founded in 1958. He was probably taking the minutes of the meeting, subtly steering the anarchistically-minded fans towards the idea of creating a national fan organisation, although in characteristic self-effacing manner his notes do not record the role that he played. Or even that he was there at all.

# mediations

**W**hat's the worst film you've ever seen? I'm a something of a collector of bad films. I recently picked up long sought after "favourite" – the woeful *Mac and Me* an ET rip-off that is sponsored by MacDonalds. You can guess what the little alien's favourite food is. And where key scenes take place. And where a character works.

There are people out there who will tell you that the worst film they've ever seen is *Attack of the Clones* or *AI* or some big budget extravaganza that didn't quite take off. I tell you these people simply aren't trying hard enough. There is a whole universe of no budget movies that these people haven't even begun to explore. Movies that prove that just because independent filmmaker has no money and a pocket full of dreams, doesn't mean that he has any talent.

An awful film can sometimes be rewarding in its own way, unintentionally funny perhaps, or an insight into the stranger parts of humanity's soul. The films of directors like Ed Wood or "B" movie 'maestro' Samuel Z Arkoff possess a certain charm because the people involved see the world or movie making in unusual ways. The films might be bad, mad even, but they are interesting. Weird, daft, inept, but interesting.

Even *Mac and Me*, appalling though it is, is so blatant, so concentratedly evil, that you can't help but be impressed.

But sometimes a stinker is just a stinker. Sometimes a film not only lacks any technical merit, it is also without a spark of imagination (however warped) or inspiration (however desperate) or vitality (however misdirected).

Sadly, this month, we review one such film. It is so bad that even I may never watch it again. A genuine contender for the worst film I've ever seen.

Step forward Timothy Hines, take a bow Pendragon Productions, your *The War of the Worlds* is totally without merit. I hope you're proud.



## Spielberg not good enough for Card's Game



Is Orson watching?

Ender's game author Orson Scott

Card attacked fans' choice Spielberg

Photo courtesy of Wikipedia

(www.wikipedia.org)

**O**rson Scott Card has responded angrily to fan complaints about the selection of Wolfgang Petersen (*Troy*) to direct the adaptation of his novel *Ender's Game*. Defending Petersen as a director who makes stylish films that make money, Card lambasted some fans' preferred choice, Stephen Spielberg.

"Take a look at *Hook*, for instance," Card said, "or the false and dishonest over-the-top ending of *Schindler's List*... you want a director who can't bear a tough ending? A director who has no understanding of character?"

Far be it from Flicker to intrude in a private argument, but perhaps Card should watch *Enemy Mine*, Petersen's adaptation of the Barry Longyear story (and the only SF movie he has directed). Petersen also produced the even more dreadful *Bicentennial Man* – murdering classic Asimov. Both films feature sickly sentimentality, appalling characterisation and the mauling of admired and award-winning pieces of science fiction. Just a thought.

## Sun cast shines

**F**lickers wants to be positive about Danny Boyle's new movie *Sunshine*, if only because genuine British science fiction films are so rare.

So, even if the plotline sounds ridiculous – astronauts sent to restart the sun with nuclear bombs – we're encouraged that Cillian Murphy, Chris Evans (the American actor, not the ginger celeb) and Michelle Yeoh have signed up.

## Zooming to court

**F**ox is suing Sony over a film that hasn't even started production yet. Fox and Marvel Comics are trying to block Sony and Revolution Studios' *Zoom*.

The film features a team of teenage mutant superheroes living in an underground base. Fox claim that the film, set to star Tim Allen (Roseanne), steals ideas from the X-Men franchise but are particularly incensed by the release date (May 12, 2006) only a fortnight before the release of X-Men 3.

## Looking dodgy

You can hear the pitch now: "It's *Alien Versus Predator* meets *The Thirteenth Warrior*".

**F**lickers has read the Wachowski brothers' script for *V for Vendetta* and it is a travesty. The character's creator, Alan Moore, has read the script and demanded that his name be removed from the production – which is why this poster reads "from the creators of *The Matrix trilogy*". So why is Flickers giving space to this movie? Well, that is one incredibly cool image and sometimes we're just that shallow.

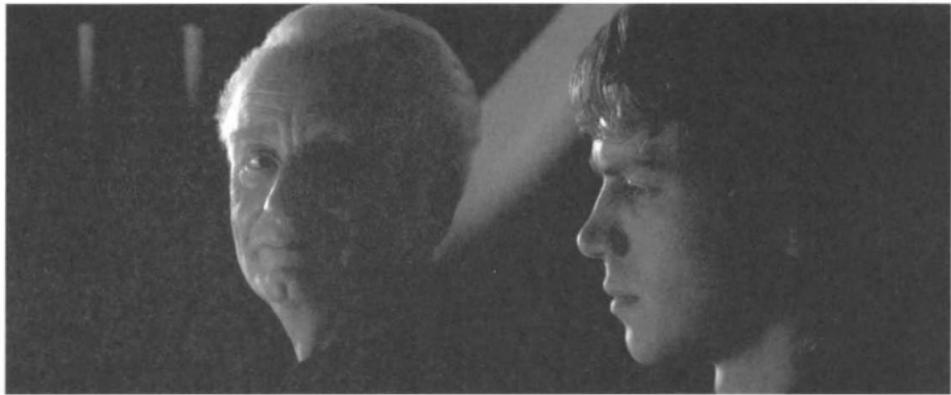
PEOPLE SHOULD NOT BE AFRAID OF THEIR GOVERNMENTS.  
GOVERNMENTS SHOULD BE AFRAID OF THEIR PEOPLE.



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# The decline and fall



**T**he greatest irony in *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith* is that the oldest generation of *Star Wars* fans have forced George Lucas to make a film that many of them would have been unable to watch when they first fell in love with his universe.

*Revenge of the Sith* is rated 12a (13 in America) – a rating that, if it had been enforced for the earlier films would have excluded many of those who have gone on to be the franchise's most devoted fans. This nastier, darker movie has been born out of the constant whinging of older fans who found the new films disappointing.

*Star Wars*, of course, wasn't made for thirty-something fanboys but for children. It is precisely because these films are childish that they carry so much importance for so many people. *Star Wars* is the most potent fairytale for a whole generation and, as such, it has become imbued with all the signifiers of childhood – innocence, simplicity and freedom.

With that baggage, the sensible assessment of the original trilogy is almost impossible and a convenient amnesia prevents fans recalling its flaws. Those who felt "betrayed" by the silliness of Jar Jar Binks conveniently forget the irritating Ewoks. Those who whined about the lengthy discussions of politics in *Attack of the Clones*, forgive the inane cod-philosophical burblings of Yoda in *The Empire Strikes Back*.

The first generation of fans have

"But this film belongs to McDiarmid as the wonderfully pernicious, subtle and (yes) insidious Emperor Palpatine."



spent twenty years justifying their continued devotion to these childish films, wrapping them in tightly-woven layers of mythology, weighing them down with undue significance. They have forgotten that they first fell in love with simple emotions, thrills and, yes, corny dialogue.

Not that *Revenge of the Sith* is a bad film. It's got piles of action, fabulous special effects and some effective, character-driven drama. There are problems – it takes a while

to really get going. Count Dooku is despatched too quickly and General Grievous isn't half as menacing a villain as the animated series, *The Clone Wars*, made him appear.

But most of the last hour, from the fall of the Jedi to the showdown between Anakin (Christensen) and Obi-Wan (McGregor) is magnificently realised. There is an operatic quality to this section and the cast suddenly spring to life.

McGregor sparkles as, at last,

he is allowed to act and express emotion. Jackson's Mace Windu goes down in a blaze of glory. Even the wooden Christensen becomes animated. But this film belongs to McDiarmid as the wonderfully pernicious, subtle and (yes) insidious Chancellor/Emperor Palpatine. Crucially for the credibility of all six films, McDiarmid is so utterly persuasive that we not only understand Anakin's choices, we almost sympathise with them.

If you don't understand why a sequence of children's films grips so many people, *Revenge of the Sith* will not enlighten you.

If you are a six or seven-year-old, for whom your *Star Wars* will always really be about Gungans and pod-racing, *Revenge of the Sith* may be a little bewildering, when you are old enough to be allowed to watch it.

If, however, you are a first generation fan, sit down and relax. This is the film you are looking for. It might not feel as good as the first time (these days, what does?) but stop whining now. You won.

## Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith

Director: George Lucas  
Writer: George Lucas  
Cinematographer: Ewan McGregor, Natalie Portman, Hayden Christensen, Ian McDiarmid, Samuel L Jackson, Jimmy Smits, Frank Oz, Anthony Daniels, Christopher Lee  
140 mins

# II of a Republic

Martin McGrath reviews *Revenge of the Sith*, and looks at love and politics in the *Star Wars* prequels.

If anything in the *Star Wars* prequels has been less popular than Jar Jar Binks it is the emphasis Lucas placed on the political manoeuvring that leads to the decline of the Republic. Trade wars and tax disputes were not the stuff *Star Wars* fans wanted.

Politics doesn't feature much in science fiction. There's plenty of ideology and plenty of SF is willing to promote (or attack) "big ideas". But when it comes to the processes by which decisions are taken in a working society – the day-to-day reality of politics – SF yawns. Politicians of the liberal democratic sort tend to be dismissed as corrupt, inept or bureaucratically hidebound.

Not only does Lucas take politics seriously, but he has made the defence of democracy the key message of his films. His case for the importance of liberal politics is as central to the new trilogy as myth-making was in the original.

The prequel trilogy can be seen as retelling American history. It proceeds from a war of independence instigated by a row over trade through the corruption of idealism by increasingly powerful military/industrial interests to the final betrayal by a politician bent on attaining supreme power through the manipulation of a military crisis. Lucas makes three crucial points.

First, politics, despite its flaws, can be a force for good. Padmé is central to this point, in *Episode II* she says: "The more I studied history,



In defence of politics:

Lucas uses Padmé to express his opinions on democracy.

the more I realised how much good politicians could do". That is a sentiment that is vanishingly rare in SF! Alongside Palpatine and the mass of corrupt senators Padmé (with Bail Organa) displays a selfless concern for the wider public good.

Second, Lucas highlights the dangers of unrestrained populism and jingoistic militarism. The militarisation of the Republic, the centralisation of power in the face of a manufactured crisis and the spread of fear create the conditions for a coup. Meanwhile, the Sith become protectors of "homeland security". Palpatine defends the abolition of the rights of the old Republic as necessary for a "safe and secure

society". The only price is freedom.

Finally, Lucas stresses that politics is, in Bismarck's phrase, "the art of the possible". When, in *Episode II*, Anakin says that what we need is "a system where the politicians sit down and discuss the problems, agree what's in the best interests of all the people and then do it," Padmé is quick to challenge him. The competing interests of citizens are not so easily dismissed, she tells him. Anakin's response is that dissenters should be forced into consent which, as Padmé points out, is not democracy but dictatorship.

The Republic is, of course, doomed and it falls to Padmé to put the final nail in the coffin when she

confesses to Anakin that even she no longer believes in the cause for which they are fighting. "What if the democracy we thought we were serving no longer exists," she tells him, "and the Republic has become the very evil we have been fighting to destroy?" This conversation heralds the beginning of the darkest hour in any *Star Wars* movie as the Jedi and the Republic sink beneath an ocean of slaughter. But, it would be a mistake to imagine that Lucas has surrendered to pessimism. Even as Palpatine (literally) tears the senate apart in his attempt to destroy the last of the Jedi, we know he will fail. After all, a rebellion is just around the corner.

## Love and the dark side

The weakest element of the *Star Wars* prequels has been the love story between Anakin (Christensen) and Padmé (Portman). It may be thirty years since *American Graffiti* but it seems incredible that the director who sublimely captured the awkwardness of teenage love then should have failed so completely now.

Casting was a weakness – Christensen is no Richard Dreyfuss and Portman never seemed to cope with the demands of effects-led movie-making.

It was not just the actors' fault. Lucas has always had limitations as a writer of dialogue and he was often out of his depth, dropping the ball most obviously in *Attack of the Clones*.

One of the most pleasing things about *Revenge of the Sith* is the way in which the love story pays off, providing a human reason for Anakin's switch to the dark side.

Portman and Christensen never develop real chemistry, but Anakin's torment, and his conviction that his actions are not just right but necessary, provides the core of *Revenge of the Sith* with a more subtle and convincingly human motivation than might have been expected.

Ultimately, Anakin does not succumb to the Dark Side because he wants power for his own sake. Nor does he ever simply choose evil over righteousness. There may still be good in him, but love has convincingly lead Anakin to fear – and every fan knows where fear leads.

**True love ways:**  
The stilted love story finally pays off in *Revenge of the Sith*.



# Passion for pixels

**T**ime was, in the days before TiVo and videoplus, setting the video meant kowtowing to a faux wood-panelled toploader, and praying to the deity of TV schedules that your attempt to tape this week's late night showing of *The Prisoner* actually worked this time.

Time was, five out of ten attempts something went wrong, instead of old Paddy McGoohan shaking his fist and not being a number, you would instead be treated to the unsettling pleasures of some Czech stop motion film, all oblique and allegorical, or maybe something a little left field and hippyish from the Canadian Film Foundation.

Whilst these short films were little recompense for missing your program, it was often almost worth it to stumble across the kind of imaginative and innovative animation that definitely was not Disney.

Role the clock forward to the present and our video recorders are more accurate, and TV schedulers are less sneaky, more safe, with what they do with their avant-garde offerings. In the age of digitally stranded TV getting the timings wrong on your video is more likely to reap you a half-hour of reality show live feed than anything by Jan Svankmeir. It is getting harder and harder to lay your eyeballs on truly synapse snapping animation.

But not to fear, like a some sort of new media aid agency setting up camp in your local art house cinema there comes *onedotzero*.

Specifically centred on the kind of animation that is digitised and pixelated, *onedotzero* is now in its ninth year and showcases bleeding edge innovators in this quickly evolving medium.

The lone Czech animator in his Prague basement painstakingly moving his precious clay puppets millimetre by millimetre is gone. He has been replaced by an intensely focused Japanese software wrangler in his poky Osaka apartment, double-clicking his creation into life.

This year as well as *onedotzero*'s updated perennial attractions there were: wavelength, a mix of cutting edge music videos created by fresh and established new media talent and featuring the videos of Björk, The Prodigy, Beck (a video by Shynola, the outfit that, amongst

Simon Gilmartin reports from the *onedotzero* festival at the ICA.



**Anime (top):**

Things get a bit

mystic in Elysium.

**Wavelength (right):**

Björk animated in

"Dennim".



other things, were responsible for the Guide animations in this year's movie adaptation of *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy*; lens flare – a – pattern showcasing all that's best in current gaming animation, featuring cut scenes from *Resident Evil 4*, *LEGO Star Wars: The Video Game* and *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory*. Also on a repeat visit was j-star, a package of all the latest that Japan has to offer, with exclusive footage of anime, music video and motion graphics not previously seen outside of Japan.

Alongside these regulars there were panels and programs of shorts featuring new media from Europe and the East. This year there was a fresh focus on Korea.

The two features from Korea

were *Elysium* and *Sky Blue*. *Elysium* is a computer animation, a kids film of manned battle bots towering over cityscapes knocking seven shades of pixel out of each other with techno-gothic ironmongery. It wasn't subtle but interesting for its subtext – different from the usual Japanese, Hiroshima-fuelled ambivalence to technology, the military and empire. Instead it had bad aliens that are actually good aliens except for the war-mongering and really bad aliens that the North (*Elysium*) and South Koreans (*Earth*) can unite against and overthrow.

The second feature coming from Korea was *Sky Blue*, on general release in July, and reportedly one of Korea's most expensive animations

ever. This anime-like epic seems to take its influences from wide range genre texts, including *Metropolis*, *Logan's Run* and *Akira*. Like the latter it jettisons coherence at the end for a sense of the transcendent.

On tour now and with DVD's showcasing some of the best material from its festival, *onedotzero* is a definite must for those who actually yearn for video tape that doesn't quite record what you thought you want, but delivers something unexpected and inspirational.

\* The *onedotzero* festival was at London's ICA from 27 May to 5 June, but it sponsors screenings around the world. For more information: [www.onedotzero.com](http://www.onedotzero.com)

# Bourgeois heroics

*Batman Begins* is an entertaining film, says Martin McGrath, pity about the billionaire hero.

**P**rincesses, god-like alien boy scouts and billionaires.

When I was a child DC superheroes never appealed, and I think the reason lay with their remoteness from the real world. Sure they would occasionally sweep down from their secret bases onto the mean streets of Gotham or Metropolis (even the cities were made up) to beat up some working-class henchmen, but they got their moral authority (such as it was) from being above such things. In Wayne Manor, the Fortress of Solitude and wherever Wonder Woman lived (*Paradise Island*) they didn't have to mix with ordinary people.

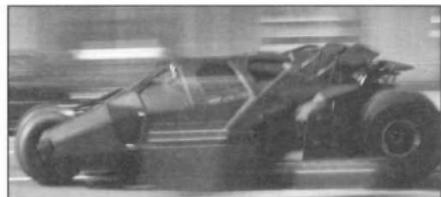
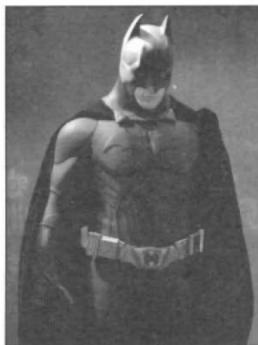
Marvel heroes, by contrast, are from realistic communities – suburbs, rough inner cities, Yancy Street. Even when their heroes were gods they behaved like teenagers, fighting with their brothers and defying their dad. The Black Panther was royalty, but he was cool, black, African royalty. And when they did have a millionaire hero (Tony Stark), the arms-dealer's origin involves him having his heart ripped out to teach him the error of his ways.

While watching Christopher Nolan's mostly excellent *Batman Begins*, I was reminded very forcefully of why I have always found DC heroes so distant.

There is a scene, shown in flashback, of the Wayne family's fateful journey to the theatre. They are travelling on a train and, as a depression-hit Gotham trundles past, daddy-Wayne explains to his son how his money built the train, the skyscraper that dominates the skyline and the station that entrenches Wayne Enterprises at the city's heart. And he's done it all, daddy says, to help the poor. But, that's not all! He's also given up running the family multi-national so that he can devote his time to saving the poor as a hospital doctor.

At the end of this condescending paean to patrician smugness, Joe Chill could get in line. I was ready to shoot the bugger myself.

Bruce, doesn't ask the obvious question: "If you're so magnanimous, why not pay a few of the city's unemployed to cover up the huge hole in the garden I just fell down and, while they're there, could they clear out the billions of bats that



scare the bejesus out of me?" He is too awed by daddy's munificence.

None of which has anything to do with the obvious qualities of Nolan's exciting and surprisingly witty film. A strong performance from Bale (Bruce/Batman) is only slightly marred by the actor's perpetual coldness. He has support from three of cinema's finest (Caine, Neeson and Freeman) and the others (Wilkinson, Oldman and Murphy) are hardly less impressive. Caine (faithful butler Alfred) and Murphy (Crane/Scarecrow) stand out in particular. Only Holmes, as the love interest, fails to convince.

Nolan does an excellent job, taking the source material seriously

enough so that the plot matters while also displaying a surprisingly light touch. There is a nice sense of fun in the way he plays with the potentially daft Bat-paraphernalia. The scenes between Bruce and Lucius Fox (Freeman) are funny and nicely balance the film's potentially overwhelming grittiness.

The fight scenes are brutally realistic. They are not pretty or as spectacular as recent wire-fu extravaganzas, but they fit the film's mood. Gotham is beautifully realised, a real, rundown city not the wild gothic creation of Burton or the plastic fantasy of Schumacher.

*Batman Begins* is an excellent summer movie, balancing action

**Scaredy-crow (top):**  
Batman gets to grips with Dr Crane.

**Belt up (left):**

This utility belt comes equipped with complementary billionaire.

**Also available in khaki (above):**  
The Batmobile, 2005 style.

and character development, wit and violence, style and substance.

Shame, though, that I still can't warm to a hero who seems to represent the wealthy's primal fear of the poor, and who returns at dawn to his mansion, servants and billion-dollar business.

## Batman Begins

**Director:** Christopher Nolan  
**Writers:** Christopher Nolan & David S Goyer  
**Cinematographer:** Wally Pfister  
**Starring:** Christian Bale, Michael Caine, Liam Neeson, Katie Holmes, Gary Oldman, Cillian Murphy, Tom Wilkinson, Morgan Freeman, Rutger Hauer  
**141 mins**

# Three Worlds are

**T**ypical, isn't it? You wait nearly fifty years for another movie adaptation of *The War of the Worlds*, and then three turn up at once. This year has seen the release of two straight-to-DVD versions of the story, *The War of the Worlds* (Pendragon Productions/Timothy Hines) and HG Wells' *War of the Worlds* (The Asylum/David Michael Latt). And, of course, there is also Stephen Spielberg's mammoth *War of the Worlds*, (a Dreamworks/Paramount co-production).

Despite springing from a common source, these are three quite different films. The Pendragon/Hines version claims to be the most authentic, setting itself in the late nineteenth century and following the book very closely. The Asylum/Latt production is set in modern America, but it too follows the book's plot very closely, though it excises the subplot featuring the narrator's brother. Finally, the Spielberg film plays most freely with the novel's structure — though many key elements remain — and departs most significantly from Wells' novel.

So how should we judge the relative merits of these films? As pieces of entertainment each film stands or falls by the qualities of their production, the competence of the direction and the ability of the actors, and those will be considered in a moment. But as adaptations of a classic work of science fiction, they must also be judged on how they interpret Wells' novel.

To judge this we must ask what is it that makes Wells' story significant, almost one hundred and twenty years after its first publication. In my opinion there are four key factors.

First, this is an adventure story. Wells wrote a page-turner that remains enormous fun to read. His innate intelligence means that this book has more to it than bangs and flashes, but the fireworks should not be dismissed.

Second, this is not the story of a hero. The narrator is unnamed because he is insignificant in the relation to the events he relates. His concerns are primarily domestic. He has no part to play in defeating the Martians, indeed by the end he has despaired utterly of everything he held dear and wishes only to die.

Third, this is not a story of mankind's victory. The Martians fail, but not before they destroy every human conceit. The science, military prowess, religion and civilization of humanity's most powerful nation crumbles before their onslaught.

Finally, it features a colonial power suffering the ignominy of an invasion by a vastly better armed enemy. Wells puts England's imperialists in the position of those they have defeated and exploited.

These core ideas are not fixed to any one place or era — which is precisely why Wells' book remains relevant and readable today and is not just a dusty museum piece. It seems legitimate, therefore, for a modern adaptation to update the location. America is now, after all, the world's pre-eminent power in a way that even Victorian England could only envy.

Which brings us to the Pendragon/Hines production, *The War of the Worlds*, and its claim to be authentic. Though set in Victorian England the film was shot in America and, because of its low budget, most of the action takes place in non-descript fields and countryside. This gives the whole thing an odd pastoral feel — there isn't a paved road in the whole of Victorian Olde Englandsire — and immediately the sense of England as a powerful nation, confident in its military and industrial might, is lost.

But this is the least of the film's worries. Hines' direction is inept, the film moves at the sort of pace that would bore a sloth and its interminable three hours are filled with padding shots of people walking, running and riding to no particular effect. Worse the director seems fixated with reaction shots — nothing happens without a cutaway to a close up of someone's face looking surprised. The film is no better served by the acting.

Leading man Piana (*The Writer*) is woeful, the English accents vary from Dick Van Dyke in *Mary Poppins* to the truly ludicrous and some of the supporting cast are profoundly incapable. And all this is compounded by laughable CGI effects and some dodgy costuming — British soldiers appear to be wearing cowboy hats?

Worse though is that Hines (who

**Six legs good (top left):**  
David Michael Latt gives his Martian killing machines three extra legs — as if they need them.

**Death in the country (bottom left):**  
In Hines' version the aliens die in a field, somewhere.  
**Family values (right):**  
Robbie (Chatwin), Ray (Cruse) and Rachel (Fanning) huddle together in the face of destruction.



also wrote the script) clearly has no idea what his film is supposed to be about. Tiny details are given undue prominence while the bigger picture is entirely lost. Hines is not just incapable of seeing the wood for the trees, he is incapable of seeing the whole of the tree for the leaves.

The only way I would watch this nonsense again was with a *Mystery Science Theatre* commentary track — but I fear even they couldn't make this turkey funny.

The Asylum/Latt offering is less offensive, but it never rises above the level of a poor made-for-television offering. HG Wells' *War of the World* at least has a passably competent actor in its lead (Howell) and setting itself in the modern era means its budget is spread less thinly. Within the limitations of a small budget, its effects are acceptable, though there appears no sound reason for replacing the famous tripod with six-legged alien fighting machines.

Latt does nothing dreadfully wrong as director, though he's no maestro behind the camera. The

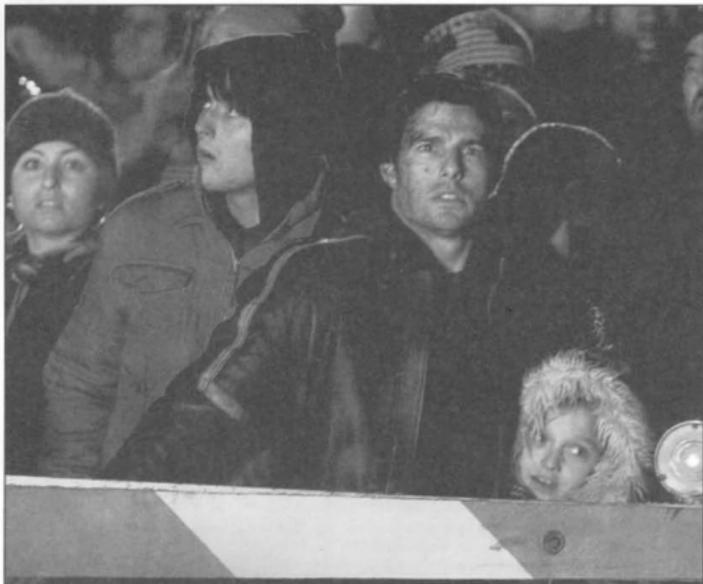
acting tends towards the overly melodramatic, Howell, Busey (as the soldier) and, in particular, Giles (as Pastor Victor) fail to convince in their various moments of madness.

The film has two major flaws as an adaptation. It cannot resist making its protagonist the hero. Trapped in a veterinary surgery after the arrival of another alien pod, when an alien comes searching for the Pastor, the protagonist injects it with rabies, saving humanity. Secondly, it makes no attempt to update or recognise the anti-colonial elements of Wells' story. Latt never acknowledges the possibility that there might be a sense in which this fictional America is suffering what has inflicted on others, elsewhere.

To my surprise that theme is practically the only thing that survives untouched in the Dreamworks/Spielberg *War of the Worlds*. Right from the moment of the aliens' "shock and awe" arrival — cutting off power and communications — through speculation about the attackers being

# going to war

Martin McGrath endures three new adaptations of HG Wells' classic *The War of the Worlds*.



terrorists to Ogilvy's (Robbins' mad survivalist) comments that 'occupations never work', this film is absolutely aware that it is being made in the aftermath of 9-11 and the invasion of Iraq. And, for those 'sins' the script by Keopp and Friedman puts modern America (car-obsession and all) through the ringer in the most brutal fashion.

However, in pursuing this theme, the director and writers abandon almost everything else that makes *The War of the Worlds* distinct. Cruise is far too much of a star presence to play the part of an everyman, his acting is too affected and his star presence demands that, far from being broken down by the terror of his experience, his character (Ray) emerges as a hero having learnt valuable lessons about being a better father. The decision to lumber the hero with his children provides for some effective moments of peril, and it allows the film to contrast Ray's determination not to get involved with his son Robbie's (Charwin) desire to get revenge,

but it remains a mistake. Rachel (Fanning) is used too frequently as a helpless cipher to ramp up the tension until her presence becomes an irritation. The conflict between Ray and Robbie is clichéd and the reconciliation blandly predictable.

Crucial to Wells' story is the breaking down of humanity's conceits. The idea that we are masters of the universe and our confidence in ourselves as both a species and as individuals, is stripped away. In his most serious mistake, Spielberg chooses instead to use the story as an attempt to affirm the importance of individual human life. Ray, his family and, we must suppose, the other survivors, emerge from the ordeal whole, intact and infuriatingly confirmed in a new and wholesome domestic American idyll.

However, as a pure adventure story, Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* works reasonably well. The aliens' arrival is dramatic, their opening wave of destruction is awesomely realised and there are moments – though too infrequent – of sweaty-

paled tension. The sequence on the ferry and the battle Robbie joins in his desire to strike back against the invaders are memorably intense. Nor has Spielberg lost his touch for creating striking images: a burning train flashes across the screen in a surreal moment of destruction; empty clothing, torn from the dead, rains to the ground; and aliens snap up humans with frightening speed.

None of these adaptations entirely satisfy. The Asylum/Latt version is unrewarding and the Pendragon/Hines version should be avoided by all but the most committed masochists. The Spielberg production is plainly the superior film – and not just because it has vastly higher production values. His *War of the Worlds* retains enough of Wells' novel to pay proper homage to the source material and it is the only film to demonstrate even a sliver of the original's intelligence and dramatic power. However, its flaws as an adaptation and as entertainment in its own right, prevent an unambiguous recommendation.

## **The War of the Worlds**

**Director:** Timothy Hines  
**Writers:** Timothy Hines & Susan Gosforth  
**Cinematographer:** Timothy Hines  
**Starring:** Anthony Piana, Jack Clay, James Laffrop, Darlene Sellers, John Kauermann, Jamie Lyn Sease, Susan Gosforth  
**180 mins**

## **HG Wells War of the Worlds**

**Director:** David Michael Latt  
**Writers:** Carlos De Los Rios & David Michael Latt  
**Cinematographer:** Luis Diaz Sas  
**Starring:** C Thomas Howell, Rhett Giles, Jake Busey, Peter Greene, Andrew Lauer 90 mins

## **War of the Worlds**

**Director:** Stephen Spielberg  
**Writers:** David Koepf & Josh Friedman  
**Cinematographer:** Janusz Kaminski  
**Starring:** Tom Cruise, Dakota Fanning, Justin Charwin, Tim Robbins, Miranda Otto, Morgan Freeman (voice)  
**116 mins**

# Romero rises

*Land of the Dead* entertains and provokes Martin McGrath.



Blue-collar zombies:

The workers have risen, from the dead.

**Z**ack Snyder's MTVish 2004 remake of *Dawn of the Dead* was, in my view (*Matrix* 167) a vacuous waste of time and effort, but it did do one magnificent thing: it ensured that George Romero (director of the original) could get the budget to make his fourth zombie movie.

Unlike the Snyder remake, Romero proves with *Land of the Dead* that you can make a modern horror movie that is fast moving, scary and that maintains a basic intellectual integrity by employing a grown-up and thoughtful subplot.

In the sequel to *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead* and *Day of the Dead*, the human race has lost America, the zombies control the countryside with the living confined to a fortified Manhattan from which raiders roam, killing zombies (called "stenchers") and taking supplies. When they raid Union Town, however, they discover something strange. The zombies are acting out the things they did when they were alive, and they are starting to learn, communicate and cooperate. The raid goes disastrously wrong and though most of the protagonists escape, they sow the seeds of destruction as the zombies slowly and methodically set out for revenge.

Meanwhile, Manhattan is controlled by Kaufman (Hopper). He is a ruthless businessman who

keeps the wealthy living in luxury in Fiddler's Green, the ultimate gated community, while he distracts the poor with games and vices. Caught in the middle is Riley (Baker), who leads the raiding teams but who really just wants to get away to somewhere quiet and safe.

*Land of the Dead* works on two quite distinct levels. On the surface it is a straightforward zombie movie, the only twist being that the zombies have started to learn. As far as that goes, it is entertaining enough. The dialogue is a little choppy in places but the special effects are mostly excellent and there are some nice twists and turns, some solid scares and a satisfying conclusion.

Beneath that superficiality, however, *Land* is a much more interesting movie. The zombies might be scary but they are not the villains of this piece – they are just getting on happily with their domestic lives when the raiders sent by American business come storming in to destroy everything. The zombie's revenge on Manhattan's wealthy may be terrible but, as Riley understands, they had it coming. This is clearly Romero's take on America's current overseas adventures.

Beyond that, the class divisions in America, given form in the film by the contrast between those who dwell on the streets and those who

live in affluence in Fiddler's Green are a mirror of the division between the living and the zombies. In the initial attack on the aptly-named Union Town, the blue-collar zombies are distracted by displays of fireworks and cannot concentrate on anything else – much to the fury of one that has become aware of what is happening. By the end of the movie, the zombies have overcome their fascination for the meaningless bright lights – at the same time as the ordinary people of Manhattan cease to be distracted by the games and vices provided by Kaufman and take control of what is left of the city.

I went in to this film expecting to be disappointed. It is twenty years since Romero has made a really good film. I came out delighted. Perhaps this isn't the mould-breaking shock of his earlier films, but *Land of the Dead* manages to entertain and provoke thought, proving again that no one makes zombie movies quite like George Romero.

## Land of the Dead

Director: George A Romero

Writers: George A Romero

Cinematographer: Miroslaw Baszak

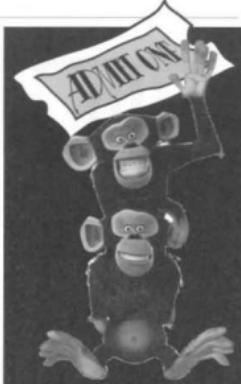
Starring: Simon Baker, John Leguizamo,

Dennis Hopper, Asia Argento, Robert

Joy, Eutene Clark, Joanne Bolan, Tony

Nappo

93 mins



**M**adagascar is another in Dreamworks Studio's long line of imperfect animated films. Funny in places, especially if you're an adult who can catch all the film references – *Planet of the Apes*, *Born Free*, *The Great Escape* and even *The Matrix* all get substantial nods. But it is inconsistent and lacking in any genuine charm, and so ultimately disappoints.

It is probably worth watching for some "performances" by the supporting cast – most notably the psychotic penguins and the lunatic lemurs – providing a pleasant distraction from the formulaic and sentimental main story of New York zoo animals trapped in the wild.

Sadly, there was little in *The Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy* to distract the audience from the train-wreck that was unfolding in front of them. A mixture of cack-handed direction, dreadful miscasting and a complete insensitivity to the rhythm of the source material achieved the impossible, I didn't laugh once. The only positive note is that some of the special effects, especially those representing passages from the book, were competently done. A terrible wasted opportunity.

*Sky Blue* (reviewed as *Wonderful Days in Matrix* 172) is a beautiful but shallow animated film from Korea. The rather trite plot, a standard anime mixture of high tech, corrupt government officials and ecological disaster follows its usual course, including the obligatory transcendental moment of cleansing. *Sky Blue's* visuals deserved more than this stodgy story.

# Bring harmony to the force

Alex Morris lives with the soundtrack to *Revenge of the Sith*.

**S**ince R2's inbuilt box of gadgets increases with every movie it is probably safe to assume that he has a CD drive plugged in someplace (we won't speculate where) in which case, he should be able to rip and burn music as an accessory to his prime roles of servicing spaceships and annoying C3PO.

The next question is obviously going to be what sort of music do the Jedi have on their iPods?

Presumably not as much as the Sith, since illegal downloads are certainly going to be on the 'thou shalt not' list of the Force-user's manual – if Lucas's clone army of lawyers have anything to do with it.

So does Anakin search his feelings' with Padme while chilling out to Dido? Did Obi-Wan develop a taste for contemporary jazz the minute he first grew a beard? Does Yoda have a secret stash of Limp Bizkit B-sides for days when the younglings get just too much?

I ask these questions as a person who's spent the last few days with the *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith* theme as the soundtrack of my life. Call it an experiment in *Stars Wars* social conditioning if you like, but mostly it's because I got forwarded a review copy and told to hand in copy ASAP or be frozen in carbonite and hung on the wall of the *Matrix* editorial office. With this in mind, and since there are

'proper' reviews out there for those who can't form an opinion without having it backed up by a star rating, it seemed a good idea to take the soundtrack out and road test it against everyday life. Could John Williams's iconic bombast lift me out of the run of the mill and fly me to a galaxy far, far away.

Monday morning, start of a new chapter (um, I mean week). It takes approximately seven minutes to reach my bus stop. In this situation it has to be track one, the opening titles. I check my hair, grab my keys, hit play and we're off...

(Interactive readers, feel free to hum the theme to yourselves at this point – you know how it goes.)

My transport moves into view on cue but a problem is looming and I may need to switch tracks. I've arrived at the same time as a raiding party of jawas (in school uniform) who threaten to scavenge all the spare seats. Time for a change of sides I feel, so I skip to track ten, 'Anakin's Dark Deeds,' and do what I must to secure my seat, trying not to think about the path I have fallen on to so early in my week.

No turning back now so I stick with the theme and decide that 'Enter Lord



Vader' is an appropriate way to climb the long flight of stairs to my office and start on conquering the coffee machine.

Coffee sorted and I'm ready to read email, so it's on with the appropriately sombre 'Anakin's Dream' while I sort, reply and delete the lightsaber extension span that swarms like a flock of gundarks in my inbox. I'm still hacking away when it's time for the weekly team meeting, so it's on with 'Grievous Speaks to Lord Sidious' as I pretend that our list of team objectives includes ridding the galaxy of the Jedi, dissolving the senate and bringing a new rule of force to the galaxy. As I currently work in sales this suspension of reality isn't hard to achieve and I switch over to 'Palpatine's Teachings' as

the briefing session comes to a close.

The rest of the day is a thankless slog, rescuing a reluctant invoice from the finance department and surviving a thousand years being slowly digested in the stomach of the Sarlaac (more meetings). I need a rousing theme to keep my force up and 'Battle of the Heroes' followed by Anakin Vs. Obi-Wan does the trick nicely.

The end of the day, at last, and my colleagues propose a trip to the cantina for a few spiced ales. I go along but I know that 'just a quick one' can turn into 'just one more' too easily, so to the strains of 'The Immolation Scene' I explain that I'm feeling tired and don't want to end up completely legless.

In the end a sneaky toilet break buys me time to select 'Anakin's Betrayal' and, using a combination of mind tricks and Sith law, I'm already making the jump home when my companions realise it's my round.

We all regret our actions from time to time, and I daily with 'Padme's Ruminations' on the way back, but the mood passes as I reach home, find my keys, re-check my hair and fall into bed.

It's the end of a long, strange, *Star Wars* kind of day and with my eyelids closing like the setting of Tatooine's twin suns, I barely have time to set the 'End Credits' rolling before I become one with the force for another night.

keyboard mangling that would reduce Mavis Beacon to tears.

So while the civil service takes a month to type up a report, what does the alien do? Tall, dark and asthmatic is abducting the female readers of *Bikini Girl*, which might be a soft porn magazine – or might not.

And what do we learn about the alien? That he has an eye for a nice car. After arriving from Ganymede in a glowing egg, he pinches an E-Type Jag and bombs down the motorway like a neophyte Kray.

How does he kidnap the girls? They are dragged through mysterious 3D photographs to distant Ganymede.

How does it end? The alien kills lots of people then delivers a standard Cold War alien address to mankind (Version 2.1) – about mankind's need to learn to live peacefully with others (which coming from a homicidal maniac, seems a bit cheeky) – then he reveals that he is half handsome, half cheap special effect and disappears in a ball of flame.

Typical. And the moral? 'Lets hope they find a cure, and tell us.'

And the real moral? Girls shouldn't read porn mags and shouldn't believe wheezy blokes who promise not to hurt them. Unless they want to go to Ganymede.

How does that song go again? 'The niiight callerrrrr Casts a hypnotising spell, Fools who try to fight it, never live to tell. Never live to te-eeeeeeeeeee!!!'

**TALES FROM THE CRYPT**

SPACE CREATURES SNATCH GIRLS TO MYSTERIOUS PLANET

Produced by ASSOCIATE, INC. Directed by ROBERT LEE STONE

**NIGHT CALLER FROM OUTER SPACE**

starring JOHN SAXON MAURICE DENHAM and PATRICIA HAINES

The *Night Caller From Outer Space* (1965) AKA *Blood Beast From Outer Space* proves that not just American girls are threatened by the lustful advances of alien beasts. Martin McGrath leaves humming the theme tune, over and over and over...

What is that terrible noise?  
The niiight callerrrrr  
Is a mystifying maze  
Or a dangerous, intoxicating game...  
Stop! Stop! My ears are bleeding!  
The niiight callerrrrr  
Must be played with many skills.  
As the stakes are met for Britain's secret group...

What are you doing?  
Leave me alone, I'm crooning!

I thought you were throttling a moose.  
Philistine, you can't appreciate a great theme song when you hear one.

So is this film is about a maze?  
No.

A dangerous, intoxicating game?  
None.

Umm... is there a secret British group?  
Hmmm, let me think... Not that I recall.

Do you think whoever wrote the song –  
Albert Hague.

Right. Do you think he actually saw the film,  
or read the script?  
It would appear not.

No maze! No game! What is it all about?  
An egg falls to Earth, scientists pick it up, an alien appears, woman sees alien, woman faints, the alien hides, no one believes the woman, men see alien, everyone believes men.

Do we learn anything about British scientists  
in the 1950s?

They weren't employing pretty secretaries for  
their typing. There is a display of two-fingered

# Non-fiction award restored

Claire Bridley with big news from the BSFA Awards.

**R**ejoice, rejoice! The BSFA awards are really beginning to come alive for this year, and it's suddenly possible to believe that there will be life in science fiction, fandom and even our household after Worldcon.

Big news first: I'm delighted to announce that the BSFA is restoring an award for non-fiction, or more specifically for writing about SF or fantasy. We've found an approach that should address the difficulties of comparing the rather different forms such writing can take but which retains a crucial role for BSFA members.

So this is the plan: the award will be decided by a panel of judges. The judges will consider any pieces of writing about SF or fantasy which any of them want to propose to the others, and also any relevant pieces of writing nominated by BSFA members. In other words, any BSFA member can nominate any number of specific works that they believe that the judges should read.

As BSFA awards administrator I won't usually play a part in making the decision, but I will manage the process of organising nominations and enabling the judges to choose a winner. All correspondence about this award category should continue to come to me, please.

Now it's over to you. If you've read something about SF or fantasy which deserves to be considered for the BSFA non-fiction award, let me know. It could be a book, an essay from a collection or

anthology, published in a magazine or journal or fanzine or APAzine, posted on a website or a blog or a newsgroup, or anything else you think I'm being very shortsighted to miss! It would be very helpful if you could provide as many details as possible of where the work was published (or a copy, if that's permissible). Experience with the previous version of this award suggests that not all good writing about SF or fantasy is easily accessible.

The deadline for nominations will be 21 January 2006, which is also the deadline for nominations for the other categories. The judges will then determine a shortlist and ultimately a winner, which will be announced alongside the other BSFA awards at the Eastercon. I'll keep the 'longlist' of nominations updated on the website as it grows, and we'll publish a full list of what the judges read when the award has been announced.

In this first year there will be three judges from within the BSFA – so that we can try out this new approach and make sure we get it running smoothly before other eminent figures get involved. As we go to press I'm awaiting confirmation from all of the potential judges that they're willing to be involved; so watch for an announcement next time!

I've also got more good news about the other categories for the awards. Those who remember my wailing and gnashing of teeth over the past couple of years about the slow start to nominations for the

short fiction and artwork award may be as surprised and pleased as I am at the numbers of nominations already received in both categories, especially short fiction. As promised, the list of nominations in those two categories (received by 10 June) is below; the list on the BSFA website will be more up-to-date by the time you read this. This year the novel category is taking a bit longer to get started; a list of novels promised is also on the website.

So, keep up the good work; tell me what you've been enjoying in science fiction and fantasy this year (by 21 January) and recommend what fellow BSFA members should be reading.

Finally, anyone interested in science fiction awards should remember to look out for the results of the Hugo awards at the Worldcon in Glasgow. They'll be presented on Sunday 7 August and the results should be available on the website ([www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk](http://www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk)) shortly afterwards. The fiction categories in particular cover the same period as the 2004 BSFA awards did, and that's just one of the reasons I'm really interested to see the results! In particular, the Best Novel Hugo award sees *River of Gods* by Ian McDonald (winner of the BSFA's Best Novel award) up against *Iron Council* by China Miéville (winner of the Arthur C Clarke Award) and novels by Iain Banks, Charles Stross, and BSFA award nominees Susanna Clarke: the first time there's ever been an all-British shortlist for this award.

## Eligibility criteria

Works published by the BSFA itself (whether in book form, on the website, or in one of the magazines) are not eligible for any of the awards. Works by BSFA members (including Council and committee members) which have not been published by the BSFA are eligible, subject to the conditions below.

The novel award is open to any novel-length work of science fiction or fantasy published in the UK for the first time in 2005. (Serialised novels are eligible, provided that the publication date of the concluding part is in 2005.) If a novel has been previously published elsewhere, but it hasn't been published in the UK until 2005, it is eligible.

The short fiction award is open to any shorter work of science fiction or fantasy, up to and including novellas, first published in 2005 (in a magazine, book, or online). This includes material published outside the UK.

The artwork award is open to any single science fictional or fantastic image that first appeared in 2005. Again, provided the artwork hasn't been published before 2005 it doesn't matter where it appears.

The non-fiction award is open to any written work about science fiction and/or fantasy which appeared in its current form in 2005. Other decisions about eligibility will be for the judges in each year.

## Short fiction and art nominations

'A World of His Own' – Christopher East (*Interzone* 197)  
 'Dee-Dee and the Dumpy Dancer' – Ian Watson & Mike Allen (*Interzone* 197)  
 'Ducks in Winter' – Neal Blaikie (*Interzone* 196)  
 'Going the Jerusalem Mile' – Chaz Brenchley (*TTA* 41)  
 'Heads Down, Thumbs Up' – Gavin Grant (*SF* Fiction, 27 April)  
 'I Robot' – Cory Doctorow (*Infinite Matrix*, 15 February)  
 'Keyboard Practice, Consisting of an Aria with Diverse Variations of the Harpsichord with Two Manuals' – John G. McDavid (*F&SF*, January)  
 'Kivani' – Dave Hoenig (*Interzone* 197)

Olympia. ET Danieland City  
 (Leeding Edge 49, cover) by Eugeny V Marinin

'Magic in a Certain Slant of Light' – Deborah Coates (*Strange Horizons*, 21 March)  
 'Planet of the Amazon Women' – David Moles (*Strange Horizons*, 16–23 May)  
 'Smile Time, The Comic' – Astrid (Livejournal community ATIS... ENDOFDAYS)  
 'SS' – Nathan Ballingrud (*TTA* 41)  
 'The Emperor of Gondwanaland' – Paul Di Filippo (*Interzone* 196)  
 'The Face of America' – David Ira Cleary (*Interzone* 196)  
 'The Kansas Jayhawk vs. the Midwestern Monster Squad' – Jeremiah Tolbert (*Interzone* 197)  
 'The Tetrahedron' – Vandana Singh

Weapon Shop (*Interzone* 198, cover)  
 by Kenny Brown

(*Interzone* 1, April)  
 'The Western Front' – Patrick Samphire (*TTA* 41)  
 'This Is Where the Tide Goes' – Scott Edelman (*The Journal of Pulse-Pounding Narratives*, volume 2)  
 'Threshold of Perception' – Scott Mackay (*Interzone* 197)  
 'Totems' – Wil McIntosh (*Interzone* 196)  
 'Two Dreams on Trains' – Elizabeth Bear (*Strange Horizons*, 3 January)  
 'Winning Mars' – Jason Stoddard (*Interzone* 196)  
 'Written in the Stars' – Ian McDonald (*Constellations*)

Winning Mars (*Interzone* 196, cover)  
 by Jason Stoddard



*Squid Girl* (*Interzone* 197, cover)  
 by Kenny Brown



*Megara* (*F&SF*, January cover)  
 by Max Bertolini



Olympia. ET Danieland City  
 (Leeding Edge 49, cover) by Eugeny V Marinin



Weapon Shop (*Interzone* 198, cover)  
 by Kenny Brown

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annual rate

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I enclose a cheque / money order for £\_\_\_\_\_

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ (parent/guardian signature if under 18)

# Rage against... SF conventions /

From the desk of one known only by their convention badge name: Jango Fête

**L**ike many diatribes past, present and no doubt future, the seeds of this Rage began in a pub.

To be more precise it was a bar, and to be absolutely definitive yet at the same time slightly disingenuous (if such a thing is possible) it was a hotel bar at an SF convention not such a long time ago and in a galaxy not terribly far, far away.

We weren't drinking real ale at the time.

This was nominally because it had run out before we even arrived although, as one of my fellow Rager's pointed out, if it had been available we wouldn't have been drinking it anyway, just for different reasons. These mostly to do with the confused notion that consuming any beer called something like Mashed Goblin that has the texture of warm silt and arrives 'flatter than the chest of a Taiwanese ladyboy' is in some way a fun thing to do.

It doesn't take long to realise that real ale and SF conventions go together like Spock ears and those 'other' conventions, the ones that real fans of real ale would never grace with their presence for fear

of darkened reputations and unwittingly confirming a media stereotype.

Inside this Rage is another secret Rage waiting to get out. It probably makes lots of cogent points about exactly why a community allegedly enamoured with a literature of the future would opt for a drink last popular in the Middle Ages (and then only because there wasn't much else on offer) as their whistle-wetter of choice.

This, however, is a Rage against conventions, or 'Cons' as they are better known: This shortening presumably on the advice of a past convention committee member who had both a sense of humour and access to a crafty lawyer with a knack for inverting the spirit of the trade descriptions act.

It seems evident that the modern convention is suffering from a severe case of good-old-days syndrome – A phenomena typified by phrases such as 'well, that's the way we've always done it' and 'because it's tradition, that's why.'

A case in point would be the continued obsession with progress reports, those costly mementos



## RAGE against the...

Angry? Don't keep it in, let us know. Let rip with your own 'Rage against' whatever you loathe in SF in 650 words and send it to:

[matrix\\_editors@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:matrix_editors@yahoo.co.uk)

that do little more than update members on the publishing of more progress reports, while all the while membership numbers are steadily dwindling and the whole convention format is looking decidedly stale.

A lot is said about the greying of fandom being a major contributory factor to the drop-off in attendance, but this seems unlikely given the ongoing youthing of professional sf&f writers. If we take the media stereotype at face value for a moment then the traditional readership of 'the genre' is still teenagers, and if a portion of these readers are capable of going on to be pros, you have to wonder why they aren't also going on to be fans, and thus conventions

members?

Again the malign influence of the progress report may hold a clue. Essentially this is a document that reiterates information already freely available on convention websites but that costs a substantial amount more to produce and distribute 'because that's the way we've always done it'. Money that could perhaps have been spent more wisely on attracting the interest of a new generation of fans, many of who currently have no idea that conventions still exist – again because what little publicity there is tends towards placing ads in the progress reports of other conventions.

If conventions as we know them are going to survive then I believe that a new commitment to innovate is required. One that actively encourages new members and does away with the perceived fanish clique of keeping it all in the ghetto.

Meanwhile life, and fandom, goes on, and I'll hopefully see you all in the bar this Wordcon. If we're lucky it'll be packed full with strangers and if the real ale has sold out again maybe for once this will be seen as a good thing.

# The War of the Worlds

Win the soundtrack to the new Stephen Spielberg film and a volume of criticism on HG Wells classic novel.

**T**his BenBella Books publication includes the full text of HG Wells' novel plus 12 new essays by SF authors and critics, including Stephen Baxter, Ian Watson and Corinne Willis and an introduction by Robert Silverberg. Plus we've got John Williams' soundtrack to the new Spielberg film adaptation. The crossword contains the unclued titles of four HG Wells' novels (in the shaded squares). To win, complete the crossword and email titles, with your name and postal address, to: [matrix.competition@ntwdt.com](mailto:matrix.competition@ntwdt.com) by 16 September, 2005.

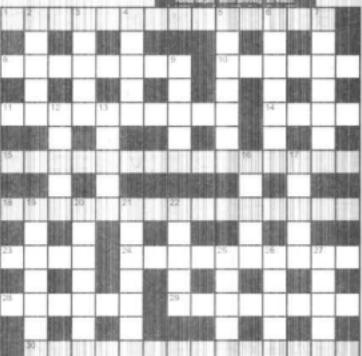
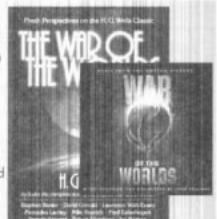
### Across

- 1 Unclued
- 8 Woodwind instrument (8)
- 10 Bounder, smells a bit off? (6)
- 11 You'll only need to keep one ear on this recording (10)
- 14 Mad, collected by squirrels (4)
- 15 Unclued
- 18 Unclued
- 23 Close, over or bleeding, perhaps (4)
- 24 Every author's dream (10)
- 28 Plan of action (6)
- 29 Person-to-person (3-2-3)
- 30 Unclued

### Down

- 2 Greetings (5)
- 3 This body can't go out on a limb (5)

- 4 Lunar, calendar or time of the... (5)
- 5 The plants have ears but cannot hear (4-3)
- 6 Extreme (7)
- 7 Daughter of Agamemnon (7)
- 9 Colours – perhaps in hair (5)
- 12 My brother's daughter (5)
- 13 Spotted horse, won't hold a quarto? (5)
- 16 The \_\_\_\_ of Heaven by LeGuin (5)
- 17 Ethical, a lesson, honourable (5)
- 19 Water spout – beloved of dogs and firemen (7)
- 20 Struggle with a large man or conscience (7)
- 21 Mother of Jacob and Esau (7)
- 22 Type of music, dancing and dance hall (5)
- 25 Sniffed, trout-like fish, extract metals (5)
- 26 Set free (5)
- 27 Feeling bored of doing the crossword, again? (5)



The winner of the competition in Matrix 172 was Zaneta Au who correctly identified Saturn and 15 of her moons. She wins a copy of the BBC Space Odyssey DVD and book.