

matrix

The news magazine of the British Science Fiction Association

Jun/Jul 2006 No. 179

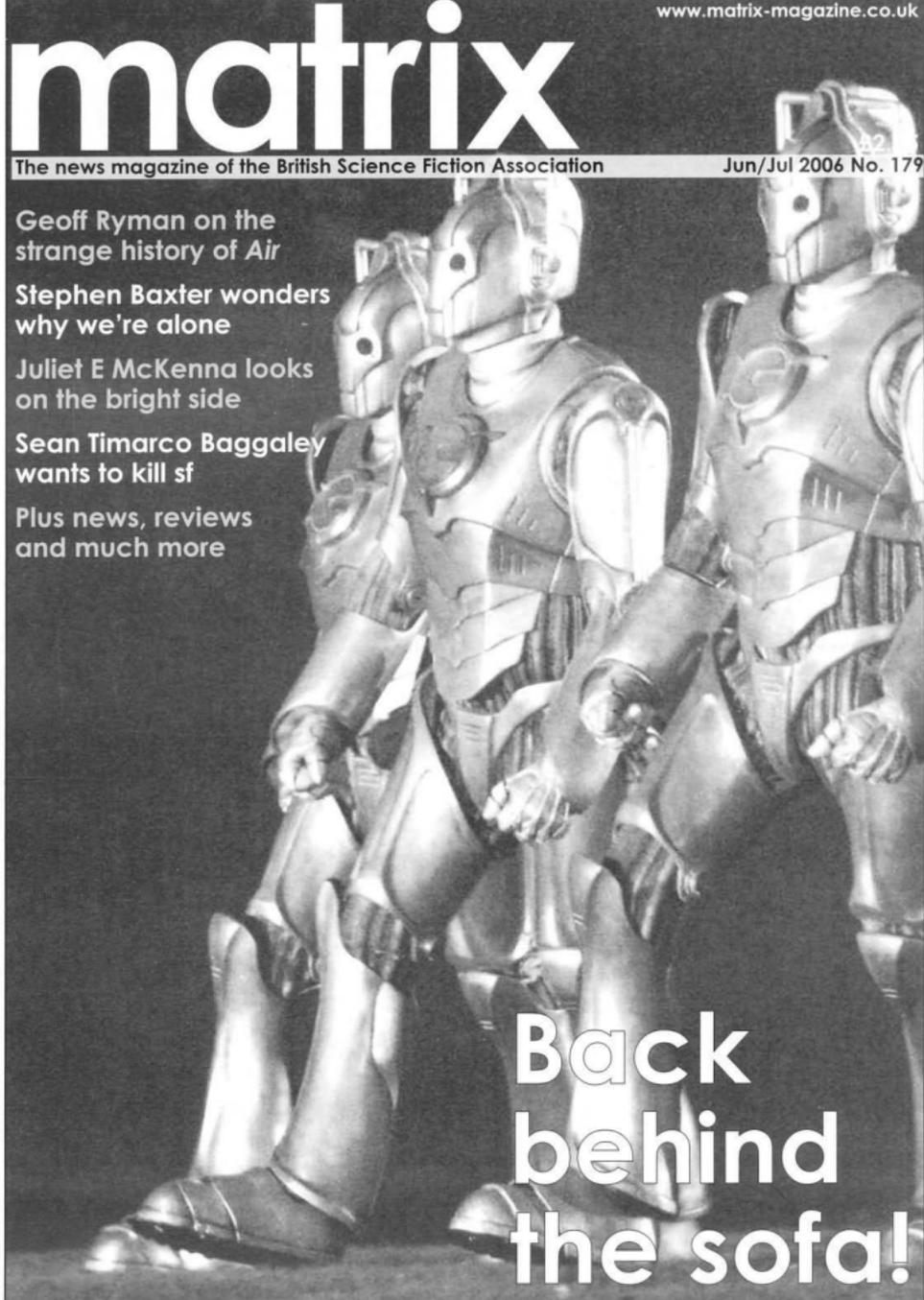
Geoff Ryman on the
strange history of *Air*

Stephen Baxter wonders
why we're alone

Juliet E McKenna looks
on the bright side

Sean Timarco Baggaley
wants to kill sf

Plus news, reviews
and much more



Back
behind
the sofa!

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BSFA

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Words of wisdom

"My idea of family entertainment is something that you could take a seven year old to and take a ten year old to and take a fifteen year old to and take a twenty-five year old to and take a fifty year old to and a seventy-five year old to and they would all get something different out of it. I like the idea that family entertainment is full of ideas, that its just things that you're going to see differently at different angles... At the end of the day, it's a show about family, but it's also a show about bravery, and it's a show about listening to kids. It's not one of those nice things that you can just reduce down to something nice and simple, nor does it actually end with everybody hugging."

Neil Gaiman on the stage production of *The Wolves in the Walls*. From an interview by Colin Clark

Reasons to be cheerful

Turn that frown upside down! Things might be tough in the publishing business, but the science fiction writer still has plenty to be thankful for, says **Juliet E McKenna**.

I'm frequently heard explaining how badly broken the current business model for bookselling is, from the author all the way to the bookshop till. What I don't often get to expand on is all that sf&f authors can put in the plus column, as we wait to see if glimmers in the present gloom are rays of hope or merely an oncoming train. So here goes.

Genre authors, whether writing crime, romance or sf&f, soon learn their advances rarely reach the dizzy heights that mainstream books can attract. What's less apparent is while we don't reach the heights, the range overall is narrower. The lowest mainstream advances make modest genre payments look wholly respectable. If we don't scale the peaks, we don't fall nearly so sharply into the crevasses.

When major publishers are reporting sales for all but their top 50 or so authors are falling sharply, it's easier to earn out a reasonable advance than some inflated, speculative amount. When a mainstream author only delivers average sales with an over-hyped second book, they'll be dumped far faster than a genre author, whose editor is still quietly building writing careers out of the spotlight.

As well as editors, genre fans are more loyal. They seek out what booksellers politely call 'destination departments'. They'll risk the escalator when the SF&F or crime section is shunted upstairs to clear space for *I'm a Celebrity*, *Let Me Shout at You!*. Once a genre reader discovers a new author, they're far more likely to seek out that writer's backlist. Genre books have a better record for simply staying in print.

So far, so good for all genres.

But we in sf&f have advantages that writers in other fields envy, trust me. We have well-established local fan groups and national fan organisations producing magazines and newsletters with international circulation. Given the overlap between sf&f readers and IT departments, we were streets ahead of the rest using the Internet to generate word-of-mouth enthusiasm for good books. That's what builds readerships. Most sf&f imprints had decent websites well before their mainstream stable-mates. Now we have webzines and forums, blogs and podcasts. The best reviewing sites are wholly professional in outlook, while retaining the valuable independence of the amateur. This increases their worth for the reader and keeps the astute writer alert. You don't settle for 'good enough,' when slush work will soon be rigorously dissected.

Then we have the convention circuit. Yes, it's great when someone comes up and says they enjoy your books but that's not nearly the whole story. Conventions give writers opportunities to find out what people are reading across the whole genre and beyond, hearing about recent disappointments and new enthusiasms. We can test ideas in friendly yet challenging debate that often sparks entirely new ideas. We meet other authors and swap helpful notes and cautionary tales about the business. We hone skills in public speaking and working as panels that don't half impress librarians, believe me.

I invariably come away from any convention with some new perspective that will improve my writing skills. Mainstream writers talk about literary parties where they stand with their



Juliet McKenna goes native at Dublin's P-Con 3, March 2006. Photograph courtesy of Alan Bellingham

backs to the wall so as not to get stabbed between the shoulder blades. The sf&f writers I've met, from highest to humblest, from my days as a complete rookie till now, have been friendly and accessible.

And not merely to fellow professionals. Only crime comes close as a genre where published writers are so generous with advice and support to aspiring writers. There's far more an attitude of 'we're all in this together' than any grudging fear of encouraging potential competition. Mostly because established writers vividly remember the help and encouragement they got back in the day. We still have a small press and magazine sector that refuses to quit.

All this can only be good for the health of the genre. Reasons to be cheerful!



Budding genre writers have one more reason to be cheerful thanks to Juliet, who is running a residential writers workshop later this year. Full details can be found on page four.

Western Shore is the third book in Juliet's Aldabreshin Compass sequence. Book four *Eastern Tide*, is published in October 2006.

NEWSBITS



SF author and convention stalwart Ian Watson needs you!

More precisely Watson and the Northampton Science Fiction Writers Group need you, especially if you live in the area and like writing science fiction.

The group meets on the third Wednesday of every month and is now actively seeking new members. At each meeting a short story or chapters of a work in progress are circulated in advance by two members in rotation for a detailed workshop analysis involving every member of the group.

Anyone wishing to join is welcome to send a sample short story or chapter (your choice of sf, fantasy or horror) for consideration to susans@albain.co.uk



Film rights for Serbian award-winning author Zoran Zivkovic's novel

Hidden Camera have been optioned to UK production company Chocolate Films by John Jarrold, Zivkovic's English-language agent.

Jarrold concluded the deal with Rachel Wang of Chocolate Films. "I think this is a great leap forward for Zoran," he said. "Rachel impressed me with the company's enthusiasm for this project, and I believe it will be the first of many film treatments of Zoran's outstanding work – other discussions are already underway."



Is the ebook about to have its iPod moment? Sony and Borders are teaming up to promote the new Sony Reader, a paperback-sized device with a high resolution screen and the capacity to hold hundreds of titles. The big storage capacity is bound to appeal to students tired of lugging around course books and sf readers hoping to reduce the space they devote to bookshelves by a room or three. But what will it mean for the publishing industry?

McKenna to lead writing course

Juliet E McKenna will be lead a residential creative writing course focusing on sf&f at the Castle of Park in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, from the 1-7 October 2006.

The week-long course will cover key elements of novel writing as well as practical approaches to the craft. Group work will focus on developing skills and exploring plot, character and world-building while individual sessions will enable participants to relate this work to their own writing.

The opportunity for one-on-one tutorials allows the discussion of work submitted prior to course.

In case you're thinking that the North-East of Scotland



Castle of Park, Aberdeenshire. Not so far away!

is a long way away, it's worth remembering that Aberdeen is an excellent communications hub, with an airport less than one hour away from the castle and the owners Bill and Lois Breckon

are happy to both collect people and drop them back to either there or the train station if they prefer.

More details can be found at www.castleofpark.net or www.julietemckenna.com

Paper robots defeat modern art

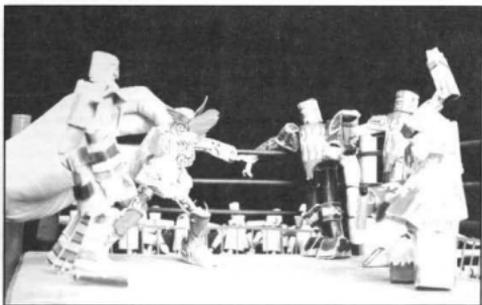
It's hard to call Kami-robo a craze when it's the work of one man, but Tomohiro Yasui's paper robot fighters have become precisely that.

Forget origami swans, these handmade robot fighters are constructed from paper, measure in at about 15 to 20 centimeters tall, and have jointed shoulders, hips, elbows, knees, wrists and ankles, which enable them to move freely and smoothly. In other words these robots are designed to fight.

Aged 10 and inspired by TV anime such as *Mobile Suit Gundam*, Tomohiro Yasui began constructing robots out of paper to give form to his dreams of wrestling robots.

Now a successful model toy designer, Yasui's private fantasy world of kami-robo wrestling came to light because of Katsunori Aoki. Aoki believed there was something compelling about kami-robo that would appeal to anyone and wanted to put together a project to take Yasui's world public.

Perhaps it's the handmade quality (and they are quality) or



Kami-robo kicked sand in the face of modern art at ICA

the fascination with one man's obsession, but Kami-robo has spread across the globe faster than, well, the last global craze based on robots. Plastic versions of the original paper fighters are now available, along with a host of merchandising. A recent exhibition at the ICA has provided credibility for those who need more

legitimacy before jumping onboard the next big craze – many visitors rated the show more highly than the modern art-yawn otherwise known as the Beck's Futures exhibition (see page seven) that was showing concurrently.

Paper robot fighters dominate the world! You couldn't make it up, but you can make them yourself.

Kincaid bows out of Clarke admin role

Paul Kincaid, the administrator of the Arthur C Clarke Award and chairman of the jury, has announced his resignation timed to coincide with the 2006 awards ceremony.

Paul has been involved with the award since its inception in the 1980s, serving as a judge for the first two years and taking over as administrator in 1995. His departure was marked by the presentation of a special Arthur C Clarke Award at this year's ceremony.

Paul said: "Eleven years was long enough to do this job, and this year offers an unmissable opportunity for me to leave on a high. It's the twentieth anniversary, with an all-British shortlist and all six authors being present at the ceremony... It seems like an excellent time to step down."

The Serendip Foundation, the management body, which runs the award, have decided to split the jobs of administrator and chairman of the jury. Paul Billinger will take over the jury role and Serendip hope to announce the new administrator soon (*Matrix* has a suspicion we know who it might be).

The BSFA nominated judges for 2006 award are Vector editor Niall Harrison and *Matrix* editor Claire Weaver.

Shameless plug!

Matrix editor Martin McGrath's conquest of the world of sf publishing continued its sedate progress with the publication of "Freedom" in *Jupiter* of no. 12, out now. It comes highly recommended, major British sf authors have called it both "disappointing" and "rubbish". He's also sold a story to *Schneizade*, due soon.

Ryman completes UK awards double

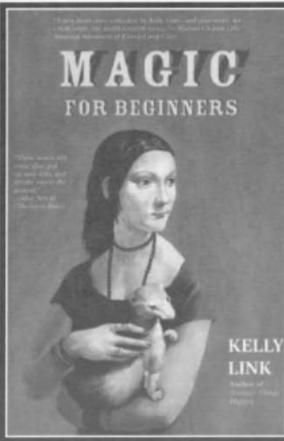


Geoff Ryman accepts this year's Clarke Award with out-going administrator Paul Kincaid and last year's victor China Miéville
Photograph courtesy of Chris Patmore

Anyone who has read *Air* by Geoff Ryman is unlikely to be surprised that it has won both the BSFA and Arthur C Clarke awards to become the undisputed best British sf novel of the year.

Details of how the author himself was more than a little surprised, and the long and winding road to publication and awards glory, can be found in the full interview with Geoff starting on page 10 of this issue. Speaking to *Matrix* after receiving the Clarke award, Geoff told us:

"*Air* is a literary SF novel and they are a byword for a difficult sell. I thought it was a good literary SF novel, with a lot of great conflict for the heroine in it, but I have to admit that its success surprised me. The Nebula nomination was almost weird as the book seems impossible to find in the States. In the UK, it was helped by the beautiful edition Gollancz produced for the price people are used to paying for DVDs. It was still very, very gratifying to get both British awards. It leaves you with the feeling: well, that one was worth all the work."



BSFA winners

The BSFA award for Best Short Fiction went to Kelly Link for "Magic For Beginners" from *F&SF*, September 2005, also now collected in *Magic For Beginners* (Small Beer Press).

The Best Artwork award was won by Pawel Lewandowski for the cover of *Interzone* 200.

The new Non-Fiction Award is awarded by a panel of judges rather than a vote, and this year was won by Gary K Wolfe for the collection *Soundings: Reviews 1992 - 1996* (Beacon Publications). The award was accepted by Roger Robinson of Beacon on Gary's behalf and presented by John Clute, who also read a statement from the judges.

More information on the non-fiction award, including the judges' recommended reading list for 2005, can be found online at www.bsfa.co.uk.

The dog's bollocks?

Boston Dynamics is developing the mechanical equivalent of the pack mule to haul loads where ordinary vehicles cannot go. The four-legged robot has been shown negotiating rough ground and recovering from a kick.

Called BigDog it is powered by a petrol engine and uses a complex array of actuators to maintain equilibrium. The designers claim it's "the most advanced quadruped robot on Earth", which is probably true. It's capable of carrying 40kg, about 30% its own mass and as the demonstration proves can react quickly if it loses its footing. BigDog can trot at 3.3 miles per hour and is smart enough to follow a simple route though it can be remotely controlled.

Designed to help soldiers carry their equipment it can't be long before either: a. weapons are strapped on, b. grunts start gambling on robo-mule races or, most likely, c. both.

Source: NewScientist.com



BigDog is slow, stupid, vastly expensive and it runs on petrol, not scraps. Only military intelligence could prefer a robot to Rover



Organic apples looking rosy

Stanford University has recently reported on a year-long study to measure the benefits of organic farming. They found that fertilizing apple trees with synthetic chemicals produced more adverse environmental effects than feeding them organic manure or alfalfa.

"The intensification of agricultural production over the past 60 years and the subsequent increase in global nitrogen inputs have resulted in substantial nitrogen pollution and ecological damage," the study noted. "The primary source of nitrogen pollution comes from nitrogen-based agricultural fertilizers, whose use is forecasted to double or almost triple by 2050."

The study involved taking four groups of apple trees and fertilizing them using conventional synthetic fertilizers in one group while the others were grown without any pesticides, herbicides or artificial fertilization, with a combination of organic and conventional techniques or with a fully organic regimen.

The conventional group had the best yield; but it also produced the most excess nitrogen.

Nitrogen leaching from the soil into the water supply is significant. High nitrate levels in drinking water threaten aquatic life and can cause illness in humans. Nearly 10% of domestic wells in the US sampled between 1993 and 2000 had nitrate concentrations in excess of recommended standards.

The research team also measured emissions of nitrous oxide a greenhouse gas 300 times worse than carbon dioxide. The results showed



that gas emissions were similar among the four treatments.

"We found that higher gas emissions from organic and integrated soils do not result in increased production of harmful nitrous oxide but rather enhanced emission of non-detrimental dinitrogen," they state.

Source: Stanford University



Google, Yahoo and others have bowed to Chinese demands for information controls so as to gain access to that huge market.

Now the Chinese may be taking fundamental steps to restrict access to the Internet.

Since March the Chinese government has been running an alternate Internet root system using Chinese characters for domain names. Use of their own language is not the issue. Roman characters (and English) have no right to dominate the Web.

What is of concern is that Chinese Internet users will no longer use ICANN, the US-backed domain name administrator. Whatever the system's faults, the US organisation's management of the Internet has led to the growth in free access and expression. Chinese information filtering is another matter.

Source: slashdot.org, Interfax



"Killer" bird flu strain H5N1 has caused 100 deaths world-wide. Meanwhile in the UK "ordinary" flu kills three to four thousand people a year (and it is believed the figures are under reported).

The last epidemic (1989/90) claimed about 30,000 UK lives and in 1918 50million were killed globally (over 200,000 in the UK).

The World Health Organisation estimates 100 million casualties if H5N1 becomes human to human transferable. At the moment, though, I know which 'flu I'm worrying about.

Source: UK National Statistics, WHO

Where do we go from here?

Edit a magazine for long enough and there are some things you'll come to learn. Once you get past the usual business of deadlines and the way gremlins infect even the best laid page plans, then one of the most important things you'll come away with is the way certain themes start to become apparent.

Sometimes you set out with a particular goal (like last year's *Star Wars* special) but there are times when you don't choose a theme, it chooses you.

Matrix 179 is one of those issues and our theme is the way the concerns of the sf genre have increasingly become concerns over the sf genre. Look close enough and there's a distinct thread running through the various interviews and articles that arrived on my desktop this time round.

In many ways what we're really talking about here is sf as a published genre (DVD and Xbox sales seem to be doing just fine). It ranges from Geoff Ryman's observation that Golden Ages aren't just about great writers at the top of their game but boring stuff like the logistics of getting books in front of potential readers (marketing may be a dirty word to many genre fans, but not as much, I bet, as science fiction is to many who read exclusively outside the genre) through to Juliet McKenna's ambitions to look to the positive. Then there's the ups and downs experienced by David Murphy and Alan Cash in trying to get their books noticed and on bookshelves while Sean Timarco Baggaley is busy arguing that we tear down those same bookshelves and start over.

Whichever way you cut it, we seem fated to read in interesting times.

However, having identified this potential theme, I want to push it further. I think we know these arguments and the debates, and what I'd like to consider instead is an idea that has been running parallel

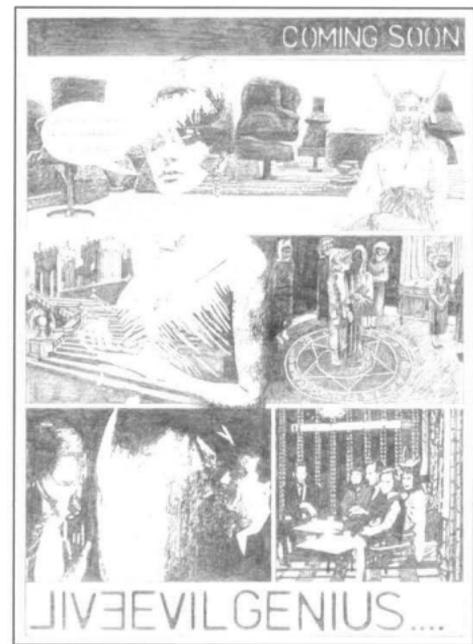
Tom Hunter considers the future of sf and what modern art can teach us. Are we as isolated as is often claimed or does work like 2006 Beck's Future nominee Olivia Plender's *The Masterpiece* (art as a comic book) demonstrate the blurring of boundaries?



to all this in my mind as this issue has assembled itself.

I was recently invited to visit the Beck's Futures contemporary art exhibition at the ICA (perhaps people thought the use of the word 'future' would allow me to comfortably crossover into a different discipline) and was intrigued to see what was representing the cutting-edge in the art world, what condition was it in, and were there parallels I might divine for the future state of sf?

It's striking how many similarities there are between our sf community and that of contemporary art. Both are vital ingredients in the popular cultural mix and yet both are ghettoised by the culture they invigorate. Perhaps this is due in part to the fact that both have a well-



established historical dialogue with their own origins, and a codified set of references that make it difficult for people to access more arcane levels of appreciation without serious commitment. Equally both suffer from easy stereotypes foisted on them as journalistic shortcuts to a quick joke.

Both forms are also concerned with the act of 'making it new,' although this will hardly be news to anyone involved in an artistic discipline. Rather my point here is that perhaps sf is not as alone as it often appears.

You could, for instance, look at the way the BSFA's own award for Best artwork is deliberately open to images from outside what we might immediately consider genre to be. Should there be another award for best art installation,

best website or best theatrical performance? I'm not sure, but it's amazing how much stuff there is out there that might fill the categories if there were. Literature, film and television have produced sf masterworks but can we claim a theatrical production or art exhibition as our own, as being *really* genre just yet?

I don't have answers to the questions I've raised, but I am beginning to suspect that when future fans sit down to work out a masterworks list of sf for the 21st Century, they're going to have a very broad set of categories to fill.

It may not be a new Golden Age, but the blurring of sf's borders with other forms and practices may not only offer a way forward for the genre, but also a whole new way of enjoying it.

Where *Eagle* Dares

It is time to make a confession: I never liked *Eagle*.

There was a lot to admire about *Eagle*. It was a comic which treated its readers intelligently, which opened up the world to them. It offered variety in its contents and was exceedingly well, often brilliantly, drawn. But in my pre-teens I tended to go for the story-papers like *Rover*, *Adventure*, and *Wizard* (and their various combinations as sales dropped). Pulpish adventures ranging from sporting triumphs to derring-do in far-flung countries and (if we were lucky) even a spot of rather fumbling science fiction were what I craved in my pre-teen years. Story-papers were kind of OK in parental terms because they were one step up from the *Beano* and its like – they were text rather than picture-stories after all, but paradoxically the highly-illustrated *Eagle* was approved because it was good for you. It was certainly more literate than the D.C. Thomson story-papers, but it was suffused with a muscular-Christian morality that aimed to compete with horror-comic degeneracy.

I came to *Eagle* some time after its mid-50s height and although at that time I knew nothing about the comic's founding in 1950 by chaplain Marcus Morris, there was a whiff of worthiness about it which I and my friends found irritating. But, of course, there was one exception and it was what kept the comic going all those years. This first issue contains a number of old favourites: PC 49, Seth and Shorty... which raise a collective chorus of "Who?". But on the front page was the first adventure of the man who comes into the mind of any sf fan when the name "Eagle" is spoken.

Dan Dare, pilot of the future. We meet Dan breakfasting on vitamin blocks instead of bacon and eggs. He is moaning to batman Digby about not being selected for the launch of the "Kingfisher" to Venus. Suddenly he is summoned to HQ. Has the Kingfisher landed. Or perhaps, like the previous two

FOUNDATION
favours
by Andy Sawyer
NUMBER TWENTY: *Eagle* No. 1

attempts, it has vanished...?

And from there a whole generation was hooked. Although Arthur C. Clarke was writing by then (and casting his eye over the scripts until, so it is reported, he decided that there were no technical improvements he could suggest), and John Wyndham was writing *The Day of the Triffids* it is possible that, were it not for Frank Hampson and Dan Dare, British science fiction would have taken a less exciting and more mundane path. Would there have been *Journey into Space* for instance (my own true gateway into sf)? One can look at the tone of these adventures and see the old-fashioned aspects, but my own feeling is that Dan Dare represented the more progressive elements of a whole lot of debates which were being aired (in typically British coded style) at the time. Britain played a major role in the Space Fleet, but there was no suggestion that Britain owned the Fleet: this was a multinational enterprise. There was even a woman Professor Jocelyn Peabody).

The rest of *Eagle* no. 1 is interesting but confirms my childhood impression. Much of the strip-art is solid but lacks excitement. "The Adventures of PC 49", "Captain Pugwash", the cowboy story "Seth and Shorty", and "Rob Conway" don't engage the reader. Two text stories, "Plot Against the World" and "Lash Lonnergan's Quest" are exciting but also confirm to parents that this isn't just a horrid American comic.

"Professor Brittain" tells us all about radar in the start of a long tradition of educative material, but a highlight is the meticulous colour centre-page exploded diagram of "the new gas turbine-electric locomotive". This



Frank Hampson's impressive artwork takes centre stage in this advert for the first issue of *Eagle*

is the start of *Eagle*'s celebration of science and technology. The comic's Christian origins are more overtly emphasised in the back-cover colour strip, another well-researched Hampson production, "The Great Adventurer": a life of Saint Paul. *Eagle*'s biblical epics were always exciting, and this compares well with Dan Dare.

It would be interesting to compare *Eagle* with the great-inventor fetishism of Hugo Gernsback's early propaganda for scientification. Behind *Eagle*'s apparent attempt to enlist the nation's youth into a shinier Boy Scout movement (there's a strong Scouting ethos in the first editorial) are echoes of the kind of thing which the transformation of the British Empire into the

Commonwealth was trying to achieve: manage the process of change. This wasn't a new nation: it was an old one trying to adapt and survive. There was an optimism about the enterprise which may very well have been naive: but this was a time when the world's future looked at least as ominous as it does today and such optimism should not be sneered at.

With Dan Dare, some of the old world stayed on to rather excruciating effect – for public-school Dan there was a comic batman, Digby, born in Wigan and as Northern as whippets, flat caps, and keeping your coal in the bath. But Dan Dare told us that the world was going to alter, it was going to alter it, and we were going to alter it. I can still admire the *Eagle*.

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

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

Science fiction must die!

Sean Timarco Baggaley reckons that the idea of science fiction obscures more than it explains. SF is not a genre, it's a setting and pretending otherwise causes confusion. Time to move on.

Science fiction has a strange relationship with the rest of the world. It is usually frowned upon, treated like the bespectacled schoolboy resigned to finding a "Kick Me" sign stuck in his jacket every lunch break. Like a cheap actor, we raise our fists to the skies in impotent fury every time we see the tired old clichés of *Star Trek* conventioners paraded across TV screens as if this were representative of the "science fiction" genre.

Why has this been our lot for so long?

Why this constant, consistent ill-treatment?

"We get to ask the Big Questions!" we shout. "We write about the future! We're not navel-gazers, but bold pioneers!"

Oh yes, they will rue the day! Come the launch of the missions to Mars, they'll have to talk to us again. "Science fiction" will become fleetingly fashionable once more. But we know, deep down, that interest will soon fade. "Science fiction" will return to the ill-lit corner of Waterstones, cast out to the less reputable shelves of the store with its companion pariah, "fantasy".

Why?

The answer is staring us in the face: "Science fiction" is a setting, not a genre!

Look at all those other shelves. We see labels like "mystery", "action", "thriller", "horror" and "romance".

All of these other, more acceptable, genres describe what the book is about. What they are not is descriptions of settings. Ellis Peters' "Brother Cadfael" stories are mysteries set in the medieval period.

However, you won't find these novels stacked on shelves labelled "medieval fiction". They're mysteries – logic puzzles – first and foremost.

Do we see Stephen King's horror stories filed under "small-town America"? No. Again, it is the story that the "horror" genre describes, not its setting.

This highlights the fundamental, untenable problem with "science fiction" and even "fantasy".

Why in blazes should Isaac Asimov's *Caves Of Steel* mystery novels be filed on the same shelf as Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonsriders Of Pern* romance novels? They're chalk and cheese! I've read *Star Trek* tie-ins that were out-and-out thrillers – roller-coaster rides – while others have been farces and yet more have been mysteries. All filed under "science fiction (Tie-in)". Readers who like humorous novels might easily be put off by hard, militaristic books in the same series.

Tastes vary, but "science fiction" offers no assistance to our audience. It tells them nothing of value.

No wonder the mainstream media has so much trouble 'getting' sf: we've made it a royal pain to work out what any particular novel is about and, dear reader, that is what people want to know.

It matters not one iota whether *The Ship Who Sang* is set in space and has spaceships in it. It is far, far more relevant to the reader that this is a collection of romance stories. Anne McCaffrey herself has freely admitted that she writes love stories.

Neither HG Wells nor Jules Verne wrote "science fiction".



Nothing in common? Anne McCaffrey (left) and a reclining Isaac Asimov at Boskone VI in 1969

The term didn't exist back then. This did not stop either of them from making a living writing stories that involved speculations about science and technology.

"But what about 'fantasy'?" I hear you cry. "Surely that's just as vague?"

Indeed it is. And I don't think it's a coincidence that "science fiction & fantasy" are so often lumped together.

Why else do we find fat trilogies of heroic epics involving loincloth-wearing barbarians sharing shelf-space with the likes of Terry Pratchett's satirical *Thud!*? Worse still, many bookstores don't really try very hard to separate them. I've seen Iain M. Banks' 'Culture' novels alongside Robert Rankin's novels involving talking sprouts. Both are fine writers, but to suggest that they write within the same genre is clearly wrong.

The very existence of the labels "science fiction" and "fantasy" is the root cause of a great many problems. I don't want to think of myself as a

"science fiction" mystery. I want to write comic wryer stories. That their setting happens to be a carefully researched extrapolation into the middle-distant future isn't really the point: it's the characters and their actions that matter.

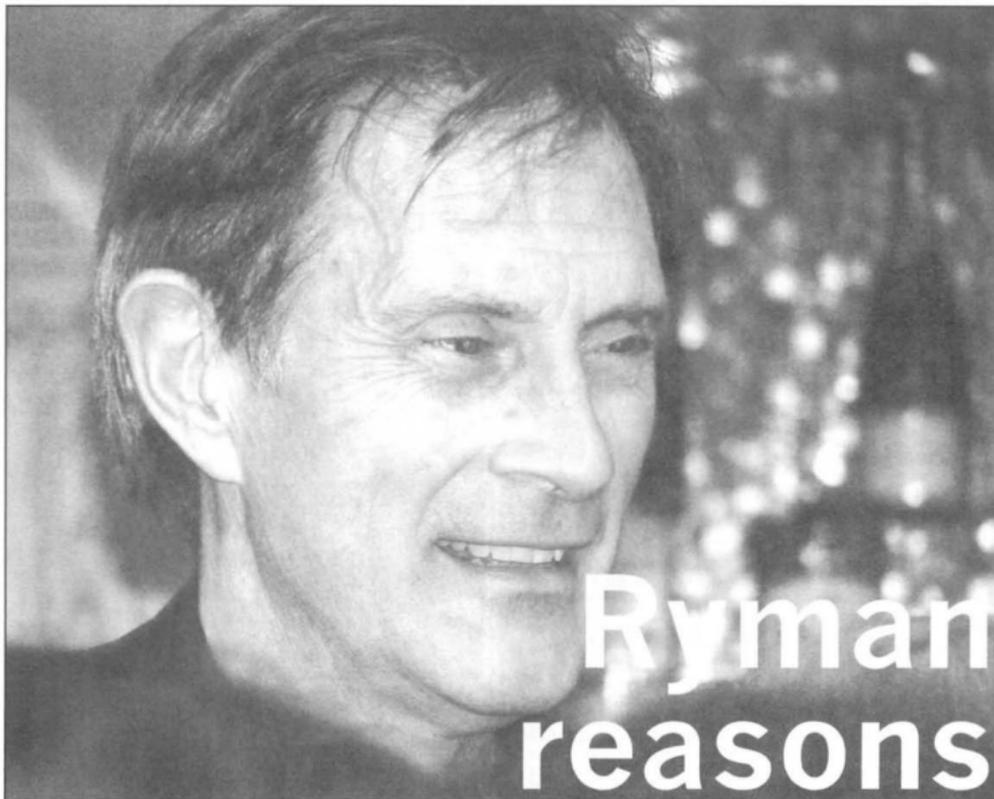
The setting provides flavour, some motivation and makes the logic-puzzle core of the mystery more interesting.

The TARDIS in *Doctor Who* merely plays the role of an enabler, of a moving mono-mythical threshold. It bookends each story, but it rarely takes part in the core action, aside from standing there like a cheap BBC prop. It is not, and never has been, the core of the stories. It simply provides the initial push to get the story rolling.

Quit treating science as special. End this ghettoisation!

Science fiction is hereby considered harmful and I demand that it be sentenced to death!

M'lud, the case for the prosecution rests.



Ryman reasons

Tom Hunter: Is this time, right now, (say this decade) rather than some previous time in the past, the real Golden Age of science fiction? It's an open question that we've been knocking around, not with any real commitment either way, that I guess you could sum up as 'have we ever had things any better in genre?' What do you think?

Geoff Ryman: We have a lot of great writers now, but then we always have done. Golden Ages are the result of things like distribution and reach. It's sure **not** a golden age for short story *sf* mags. The big US magazines are down to 13 or 15K sales. They aren't in supermarkets any more... or even in specialist magazine kiosks. I just don't see where the next generation of *sf* readers is gonna get hooked. Probably *Strange Horizons* and the online mags, but finding a viable commercial model for those is touch and go. But reading has such a lot of competition now, particularly *sf*.

Short stories and novellas seem to me to be a more successful

length for *sf*. It's just too darn easy to lapse into copying your own past experience into the future when you have a novel to do it in.

No, I don't think this is a golden age at all. Movies have taken our USP which was vast unreproducible vistas of Otherness. You wanna see a lost city, a giant ape, dinosaurs, space craft...you can go to the movies. Conglomerate publishing is not welcoming to midlist writers which is where most *sf* authors sit, so even some of the greats find their novels are not being published, except through the lovely cuddly creative small presses.

Nor are we a popular or successful genre in commercial terms. Of the hot 100 festsellers for the last couple of years only Terry Pratchett is an *sf* author who regularly appears except of course for JK Rowling and for a couple of years Philip Pullman. But. Those books are often fantasy and have a great deal of crossover with children's books. The fabulous *sf* and fantasy Masterworks series helps keep the canon going. New British writers still have *Interzone*

and *TTA* to publish in. It's not awful, it's just not Golden.

We do have good modern *sf* writers. McLeod, Robson, Stephenson, Clarke, Baxter, Bear... the list goes on and on. There have always been great writers, the question is, what the industry does to them and with them.

Tom: One opinion we had on this was the Golden Age of *sf* happened to be either (a) when you started reading it or, (b), being more discriminating, when you started buying it. What would your own Golden Age of *sf* be using these criteria?

Geoff: Probably 70s when WH Smith racks were a mix of the canon and good new *sf* books, though at the time we all thought that the very best was still difficult to find.

Tom: We've also heard you talk before about the new genre writing now happening in places like India. Could you tell us more about that, from how you first started discovering these writers, to the themes used and

how they might differ to, I guess, Western concepts of *sf* literature, and also what would recommend to an interested British fan?

Geoff: What I can see happening is that (a) people whose parents who come from those regions but live in the USA or Europe or (b) live in those regions but are middle class, or rich, or both, are beginning to produce good post-colonial *sf*. This is happening probably later than in mainstream literature, but *sf* has often been behind the times. So there is a post colonialist group, writers like Anil Merton, emerging. But it will take longer than I thought partly because the markets in those countries are not mature.

Tom: About *Air* now, and I wanted to get a sense of how it began for you. I understand that it was a short story first, and then that it took a long time from starting out to the finished novel, so what was it that made this idea the one to work on?

Geoff: Oh dear. Well it grew out of the impact of the internet on the civil service and the battle that



Geoff Ryman's novel *Air* has recently won the Tiptree, Sunburst, BSFA and the Arthur C Clarke awards for best novel. **Tom Hunter** talks to him about his work, the state of sf publishing and the future of writing. Photographs courtesy of **Tony Cullen**

the States and it then promptly had a succession of editors, which did it no good at all really. Odd things just kept happening to the editing etc with missing chapters etc...

Suddenly sometime around 2004 people who read *Air* really started liking it. I have no idea why. Suddenly it sold to a UK publisher. It's now up for a Nebula, the Clarke, the BSFA, has won the Tiptree, the Canadian Award the Sunburst... It's the same book as in 1998. So I feel confused.

Tom: *Air* is one of those books that can properly be accused of literature, yet it has a very definitive genre sensibility. Could you identify those moments in the text where you knew what you were writing was sf?

Geoff: From the moment in chapter one when they announce a new free wireless Internet-plus in everybody's head for free, it's in the future. They have to cope with change. I thought it was sf in its bones from the beginning. It was just an sf novel that was about people leading ordinary lives. Guess what. In the future people will lead ordinary lives.

Tom: Conversely was there ever a time when *The King's Last Song* started to slide into sf/fantasy?

Geoff: No, not for a moment. The skills you use in releasing information about a world, and the interest you develop in what things are made of and how they get there serve you well in writing mainstream historical fiction.

You also think in sf about what language people are talking in and how you can get across the level of formality or informality of the dialogue, though it's from a different culture. That helps.

You get used to writing spectacle, which a lot of mainstream writing doesn't let you do. So those basic writing experiences feed into a book like *King's Last Song*. The *BSFA* people I know are all read widely, and may well enjoy the descriptions of Angkor in its heyday. But there's not a trace of magic about it. There are spirit beliefs of the Cambodian people, but nothing magic happens at all, nor did I ever envisage it would.

That's not the case with the two novellas that came out of the last Cambodia trip. *The Last Ten Years of the Hero Kai* is an out and out Cambodian kung fu with lashings of magic. *Pol Pot's Beautiful Daughter* to come from *BSFA* mag sometime this year is 12,000 words about Pol Pot's daughter being haunted by ghosts, and it's very firmly fantasy.

Tom: I'd like to know about how you created your version of Jayavarman (the king of *The King's Last Song*). The "king" is so

integral a part of modern fantasy, I was very interested in the way your take on this character undercut a lot of those tropes. **Geoff:** Basing him on a real king undercuts tropes. Cambodia did not really have primogeniture. So it's debatable who Jayavarman was and where he came from, though we do have his father and mother's name. We have some very specific dates, but also long silent periods, and some real mysteries about his career. I had to make up what some of the battles were, and against what kinds of forces. I had to think about the re-taking of Angkor from the Chams and why there are Chams in the bas reliefs fighting alongside the Khmers. Why did he wait until 50 before going for the kingship? What happened to all of his sons? Why did he make a Cham his heir? Why didn't that heir actually inherit? The awkward realities and the questions they posed meant I continually had to make up solutions that taxed both invention and logistics.

There were also the fantastic portrait busts of him and his wife to refer to and be inspired by, and the revolutions in art that briefly flowered during his reign (everyday life honoured on temple walls, the photo-realistic if propagandistic portraiture of him and his wife, etc). Making a king a religious revolutionary also calls up echoes of Ankhnatn and Nefertiti.

Tom: The publication of *253* on the internet was a step forward in our understanding of e-publishing. How has its initial creation and subsequent publishing in book form informed your view of writing on the internet since?

Geoff: First, hypertext is not interactive enough. We have interactive literature and it's the games. Hypertext links between similarity. That's tough if you want to write about difference. You shouldn't offer links in the text, it confronts the reader with a decision while they want to read. The future of entertainment and art online does not lie with simple hypertext fictions like *253*. The internet will distribute written literature for free or for (less) profit. Art objects partly made of words, gaming, automatically generated texts all of these are different from HTML.

The best piece of online mostly written literature I read was the support site for *AI* the movie. It consisted of a series of recreated websites of the future to visit. You then ended up joining a virtual underground trying to solve a murder. Fictional characters sent you emails and engaged in correspondence with you. JPEGs showed up with clues embedded in

the programming code. You joined together with other fans helping to solve the puzzle, sharing clues. That was pretty darn good. But it takes teams to produce that. One person off by themselves generating a game or an environment? Only small limited ones.

To do it really well you need to work with databases not raw html and that is more expensive in terms of manhours. There is an expectation of things online being free. *253* was, but that didn't satisfy people because it was only the hypertexted html pages. They really didn't want to sit at a screen and click, they wanted a free download of the text in Word. They really did. So where's the artistic point of using the internet just as a distribution mechanism for another medium. Also the reality of economics intrudes. Do I want to give away all this work for nothing really? The answer is no, usually.

Tom: What do you think the reason is for so many novels being so long these days?

Geoff: Word processing. Used to be about draft three you'd go to completely retype and you'd get bored. You would suddenly realise if it was your baby and you were bored typing it, other people would get bored reading it. So you'd jump to an interesting part. These days the last step of writing a novel should be going back and cutting out about 30000 words. It's just too darn easy to add individual scenes or add to existing ones. Everything just keeps growing.

Tom: Did you ever imagine any of the kinds of art works that might be generated by people using the *Air* format as part of building the world of the novel?

Geoff: If *Air* happened, nothing would be like anything else ever again. We wouldn't have novels or written stuff at all. I think you'd get a kind of multisensual poetry in which you felt yourself move and smelled things, tasted things, as well as saw and heard them. Basically art will go all the way to communicated dreams. You'd also get the kind of merging of individual contributions, so I guess you'd get the Collab mixes described in *Air*, where peoples minds mix shared music memories, images, biography and imaginings.

It could also move us away from the current domination of the original arts by the interpretive arts. I think we would go back to artistic origination as a principle arena for the arts. Less huge teams dominated by visionaries with business skills, more the perfect and uncompromised new thing from a fresh mind then being picked up and transformed by the audience as a whole.



Confessions of a self-distributor

You've written your book. It's great, and you think the hard part is over. Wrong! Now you have a book but no one else wants to publish it. So you publish it yourself. It's great, and you think the hard part is over. Wrong! Because now you've got to sell it, and to sell it, you've got to get it in front of the reader. **David Murphy**, veteran self-distributor offers advice.

Face it: book distribution companies have no interest in your self-published or self-imported book. They see you as having no marketing behind you and no PR worth mentioning. You cannot compete with gold-embossed titles and big names. You are non-commercial. Your only option is to be a one-man (or woman) publicist, distributor, agent, stockist, marketer and Jack-of-all-trades. You will have to interface with the increasingly hostile retail trade.

Time was when you could walk in off the street to any bookshop, big or small, talk nicely to the booksellers and they would make room for you on their shelves. Even the big chains made space for the self-distributed. Things have changed. Disappointment may be in store, if you'll pardon the

pun. Your salesman's patter may succeed in smaller shops and some of the mediums. As for the chains and bigger stores, genuine book-loving people who work in these palaces of neon-lit, gaudy-covered, best-selling covers no longer have the authority to make decisions about what to put on the shelves. It's all homogenised, stultifying, hive-minded, moneyed titles coming down on high from faceless men and women in suits, marketers and accountants.

Big bookshops have become like commercial radio-stations with ever-constricting and predictable play-lists. It's all about turnover and product. In a big store nowadays you talk to someone who needs to check with someone else who walks up to you and says, "We only take stock from the

main distributors," or "No new accounts are being set up." Don't take such remarks at face value. Do not turn around and walk out. Stand your ground. Argue your case. If the manager says they only take stock from major publishers, ask how then does one become a major publisher? Watch them wriggle out of that one. If it's clearly a lost cause remain friendly because it's not unheard of to return a month later to find that they will take your tome after all. Persistence does pay. Remember, you're trying to sell a book. Here are a few hints that may help.

Try not to look scruffy and don't walk in carrying books in a supermarket bag. Invest in a proper briefcase, which you'll need anyway for bits and pieces such as business cards (a must), delivery

dockets, calculator, invoices, pens, elastic bands and a few spare covers (make sure to get loose covers off your printer or publisher - they're handy for identification/location purposes when you return to the shop and you can also use them for publicity). Have invoices prepared with ISBN, invoice number, book title, your address and contact number already written on them. All you need fill in is the quantity and date. That saves time. It makes you look and feel professional about what you're doing. Have plenty of books with you or in the car boot. You'll kick yourself if the bookseller asks for twelve but you only brought ten.

Experience will teach you that it can be very hard to predict when you'll make a sale. You will make firm sales (cash for books when you



amount of booksellers who hand over immediate payment because it saves paperwork and avoids clogging up their system. Don't be happy just to take the money. Ask if they want more. They will hardly refuse because they, and you, are on a winner. If there are no sales, accept that it's the wrong location and move them to another shop. If there are both sales and returns under the same roof, and the bookseller says they've been long enough on the shelves, offer to leave a copy on a no-return, shop-keeps-the-money basis. It's a friendly gesture that the bookseller will appreciate. Tell them to put whatever price they like on it. The advantage is that your book remains 'on the market' in that locality. But there is another hidden advantage you can exploit using the following ploy: make sure that the freebies you hand out in this manner are slightly shop-soiled or imperfect copies from the printer's initial shipment (there may be some). Use the copies you wouldn't otherwise hand out as complimentary or direct sales. There's nothing underhand in this method of weeding out imperfect books because you're giving them away for free and have already told the seller to lower the price. Think of it like this: the successful distribution of hundreds of books is like shuffling a very large pack of gigantic cards. When you get two hands of cards back from the dealers, re-shuffle them, weeding out the undesirable shop-soiled returns to create one new, perfect, hand that you can place elsewhere.

Small presses, self-distributors and minority-interest books (such as academic presses) rely more and more these days on direct sales rather than the increasingly narrow retail sector. Target conventions, organise signings and readings, nuzzle in on literary festivals, get yourself onto writers' directories, be interviewed in local newspapers, use the web. Get as many direct sales as possible because these are the gravy - you get one hundred per cent on the cover price so they're worth more.

One very lucrative area (in Ireland) is the public library system. Each county and city

has its library HQ where individual librarians have the power to decide what to buy (unlike Northern Ireland where such decisions are made by dreaded committee). Most of these book buyers are not averse even to cold-calling. Sell yourself well and each HQ (there are about three dozen here) may buy anything from one to twenty copies, depending on the type of book and the number of local branches under their wing. They pay full price, though a few may ask for a small discount. I'll repeat that in case you missed it: the vast majority of libraries pay the full cover price. Do your sums and you may be able to break even on library sales alone.

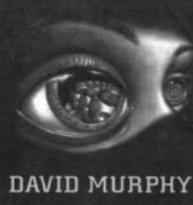
Budget for plenty of complimentary copies. Reviews may help if you can get good ones, but fulfil all your legal-deposit copy requirements, which in Ireland amounts to about ten (you will receive legal-deposit requests from archive libraries - these places are entitled to demand, free of charge, a copy of every book produced in their jurisdiction). Allow also for archive copies to go to writers' and literature centres. Remember, it's all about getting into the right hands. A well-placed complimentary may lead to an invitation to read; the fee for which may well equal the profit on fifty sales.

In the end you can sell pallets of books and make thousands of euro in profit, far more than you'd make if you had to pay fifty or sixty per cent to a professional distributor. But it's very hard work. Keep track of your expenses: petrol, other transport costs, postage, phone charges, launch costs (if there is one), etc. If you don't count these you're only fooling yourself. It helps if, for other reasons, you travel about the country a lot. That way you can deliver when you happen to be passing. That saves you money. There's no rush. Your book does not, like some, have a shelf life of only a few weeks. You're the boss. Take your time. Play it like a game and you'll find yourself enjoying it.

After hopefully less than a year, it will be time to put that book on the back burner and move on to the next project. What to do with the remaining shop-soiled

returns? Amazing how a rub of an eraser removes all but the most stubborn dust stains from the leading edges of your pages. Discard or replace aged price tags. Remove unsightly gum residue from old tags and stickers. Wipe the cover with a damp cloth and many of your books will again be presentable. What to do with goods damaged beyond reasonable repair? One option is the second-hand trade. It may be anathema to see your books re-cycled in this way, but there are long established and well-known shops that will buy several copies each from you. They'll give you a pittance but if your book is already in profit what have you to lose? It's extra icing on the cake because it disposes of unwanted leftovers, exposing you to additional readers. It's better than other ways of recycling and is something to consider as your book reaches the end of its natural life. Remember you don't want to be left with more than, say, a few dozen copies after the first year has elapsed. That should leave you with enough future freebies for new friends and acquaintances, greedy relatives, etc. It may even be enough for a lifetime's supply. However, if you intend remaining active in the book world, if you're occasionally invited to read at bookshops and conventions, you may need considerably more than a few dozen to keep you going!

LONGEVITY CITY



David Murphy is a short story writer and sf novelist. Happily, his latest novel *Longevity City* fell into the hands of a professional publisher, so his footwear has been spared the travails of self-distribution on this occasion.

To find out more about David's latest, along with all his other small press work, visit the author's website at <http://gofree.indigo.ie/~dmbc/davidmur.htm>

deliver!) in the most unlikely shops in the most obscure towns. Other places, which you think of as potential goldmines, will be a waste of time. Then, when you're in, you can never tell how sales will go. So much depends on placement. On a bottom shelf with only spines showing, they're dead. Face out at eye-level and they'll sell, even if it's a light romantic novel in a Marxist bookshop. Placement is everything, or almost everything. Go with the lowest cover price possible. The lower the price, the more sales.

When you re-appear months later you will hopefully experience the delight of a frequent sell-out. Produce an invoice and ask for payment there and then. If they say it'll take months to process, ask for thirty-day credit. You will be agreeably surprised by the

Where is everybody? The Galaxy is so old that if extraterrestrial aliens ever existed they should have spread everywhere by now. So how come we don't see them? Are we alone? – but it's hard to believe that in this vast universe only Earth hosts intelligent life. Are they hiding? – what, all of them, even the Ferengi?

This problem, clearly articulated in 1950 by the physicist Enrico Fermi (over a long lunch, as it happens) is a genuine paradox, because two apparently plausible lines of thought – that we aren't unique, and that the universe is old enough for extraterrestrial life to have made its mark – come bumping up against each other. Our vision of the universe has expanded greatly since 1950, of course,

but we've still turned up no incontrovertible evidence of life away from Earth.

In the past I've been somewhat transfixed by this question, enough to write a whole series of novels about it (my *Manifold* books, 1999-2001). In Book 1, *Time*, we are alone. In Book 2, *Space*, we are not alone – but the universe is a lethal place. And in Book 3, *Origin*, there is a much spookier resolution.

Of course the paradox has been extensively explored elsewhere in sf. Maybe they have transcended into a form we can't recognise, as in Clarke's *Childhood's End*. In David Brin's *Uplift* sequence, and indeed under *Star Trek's* Prime Directive, we don't see them because we aren't yet ready to be raised up into the galactic civilisation. Perhaps for many races the starry sky is simply invisible and

therefore aliens unimaginable, as in Asimov's 'Nightfall'. We may just not know what we are looking at: biologist and sf author Jack Cohen (*Whealers*) is scathing about our lack of imagination regarding possible modes of life.

Another solution is malevolence. Fred Saberhagen's *Berserkers*, the machine entities of Gregory Benford's *Oceans of Night* sequence, the invaders of Greg Bear's *The Forge of God*, and many other hostile alien forces simply wipe out young life before it can spread. (In my novel *Transcendent* (2005) humanity are the star-killers; we cause the paradox ...)

Fermi thinkers recently paused for breath when author Stephen Webb (*Where is Everybody?*, 2002) classified fifty 'explanations' of the paradox. Grouped in broad categories – they're here

but we can't see them, they exist but they aren't here, they don't exist at all – these solutions range from variants of the Roswell mythos, to a 'Prime Directive' interdict, to notions of how intelligent life really is so unlikely that we're simply alone. I'm in here too; I set out a 'planetarium hypothesis', trying to put some numbers on the idea that they're running a giant holodeck with us inside (an idea dramatised in my *Asimov's* story 'Touching Centauri').

But even with all this past work new explorations of the paradox continue to emerge. A possibility recently explored by Karl Schroeder (*Permanence*, 2003) is that of communication horizons. Perhaps among creatures that are simply too divergent, no symbolic communication is possible. Even if we recognise



Are we really alone?

If common assumptions about life and the universe are right, then we should have alien civilisations on every street corner. So, where are they? **Stephen Baxter** considers some of the more and less plausible explanations for the Fermi paradox.

each other as alive, perhaps we can only 'communicate' in more direct fashion - such as by eating each other.

Here's another possibility: what if they have been and gone? We have recently learned that interstellar visits may have been more likely in ancient times than now. The Galaxy's peak star formation rate appears to have been some five billion years ago, that is just before the birth of the sun. So as we look out across the Galaxy we see most stars and planetary systems older than our own. They may have gone long ago, their worlds exhausted.

And suppose they did come to the solar system, billions of years ago. Perhaps they wouldn't have visited Earth - but Mars. In its 'warm and wet' period prior to about 3.5 billion years ago, Mars may have been a more attractive

target for interstellar visitors than a roiling young Earth, because it was more hospitable to life at that time.

What traces can we expect to find of such long-ago visits? The northern plains of Mars may have been resurfaced since the warm and wet days, but the southern terrain has not, and structures on the surface or major earthworks may have survived. Perhaps a polar ice core will tell us if Mars was ever washed by a starship's wake.

Meanwhile, looking beyond the solar system, we may soon know a great deal more about the distribution of possible habitats for life in the Galaxy. We're already discovering planets beyond the solar system, and over the next few years a new generation of techniques should enable us to study even Earth-like worlds orbiting other stars.

French astronomer Luc Arnold (see *New Scientist*, 9 April 2005) has pointed out that a planet-finder telescope capable of detecting an extrasolar world by its eclipsing of its parent sun could also detect Big Dumb Objects in orbit around the star - Ringworlds, perhaps, vast solar sails, incomplete Dyson spheres, or even world-sheltering parasols (see *Sunstorm*, my recent collaboration with Sir Arthur C Clarke). You could even send signals by arranging your orbiting BDOs in clumps to send shadows in prime-number sequences.

In parallel, the searches for radio signals, now decades old, continue. Seth Shostak, the senior astronomer at the Search for Extraterrestrial Life Institute in California (see *New Scientist*, 24 July 2004), has recently claimed that if our computer power continues to expand at the present rate, and if his estimates about the likely number of radio-transmitting civilisations in the Galaxy are correct (between ten thousand and one million - granted that second 'if' is a big one) then we should detect one of them 'within twenty years'. More pessimistically, if we don't find a radio-transmitting ET within twenty years, then absence of evidence begins, subtly, to morph into evidence of absence: perhaps we can rule out ET civilisations, at least of our radio-transmitting type, anywhere in the Galaxy.

I'm willing to bet that with this flood of new information, Fermi will be resolved one way or the other before the end of the century. But what will that resolution be?

It is perhaps comforting that this isn't the first time scientists have chased their tails in search of answers to profound mysteries. Palaeontologist Michael Benton (*When Life Nearly Died*, 2003) says that between 1920 and 1990 at least one hundred theories were put forward to explain the demise of the dinosaurs, from volcanism to that old favourite racial senility. What's comforting is that among these 100+ dinosaur explanations was one, the impact of an asteroid, that

turned out to be the right one. So maybe we already have the answer to Fermi somewhere among Webb's 50 solutions. The hard part is knowing which one ...

The Fermi Paradox has confused and entertained for decades, and continues to do so. But why do we care about it so much?

Of course our longing to break the cosmic silence predates Fermi's formulation of the paradox. Back in the nineteenth century there were proposals to communicate with purported inhabitants of the worlds of our solar system, involving building great mirrors to flash light at the Moon or Mars, or cutting vast Pythagorean triangles into the Siberian forests.

There are even deeper philosophical roots. The Fermi Paradox has parallels with the much more ancient conundrum of *silentium dei*, the Silence of God. Bertrand Russell was once asked how he would respond to God if he were called to account for his atheism: Russell said he would ask God why He should have made the evidence for His own existence so poor. (There are even theological resolutions of the Fermi Paradox. What if among all the universe's peoples it is only humans who are 'fallen', tainted by the primordial sin of Adam? In that case, so CS Lewis suggested, maybe God made interstellar distances so challenging to quarantine us from the rest of the universe.)

Maybe it's simply that we are not used to being alone.

It is a mere thousand human generations, or even less, since the Neandertals and perhaps some relict populations of *Homo erectus* and others, succumbed to our over-competition and went extinct. We evolved in a world full of other kinds of people, other kinds of mind. And so at a deep level we expect that when we walk over the hill we will come across strangers, intelligences other than our own - and we are disappointed when it doesn't happen.

Perhaps that is why we fill the sky with angels and Martians. We can't stand the echoing silence we have created on Earth.

Southward bound

Richard Kelly has set himself a tough act to follow. His first film, *Donnie Darko* is one of the most talked about films of the decade, a massive critical hit that announced him as the hottest young director in Hollywood.

If he hoped that the five year gap since *Donnie Darko*'s release might have dampened expectations for his follow-up, *Southland Tales*, he will be disappointed. Kelly's new project has been the subject of enormous – almost obsessional – interest by fans around the world.

We'll find out whether it can possibly live up to the hype in mid-September, but with a premiere screening at Cannes now complete, details are starting to leak out. Set a few years in the future in a Los Angeles that is on the brink of environmental disaster and social break down, this multi-threaded story follows a

movie star with amnesia, a porn star trying to launch her own reality TV show and a police officer who has the key to a conspiracy that could blow the top off the city. The cast includes *The Rock* (*Doom*), Sara Michele Gellar (*Buffy*) and Kevin Smith (*Clerks*).

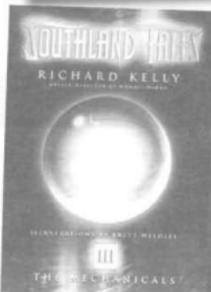
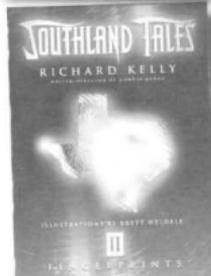
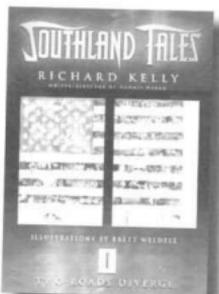
But *Southland Tales* won't stop, or even start, at the cinema screen. Kelly has written three 100 page graphic novels, prequels to the film, which will be released monthly between May and July. Each book is a chapter of the story dealing with a single day in the week leading up to the events of the film, which itself contains three chapters (each one day) and climaxes amongst the Independence Day celebrations on 4 July 2008.

There is also a sprawling website, only parts of which are currently

accessible, which (depending on your point of view) is either infuriatingly enigmatic or just plain infuriating. There's a warning that "you are now entering a domain of chaos", an image of a strange airship and a jigsaw puzzle that becomes a short film of blurry, distant events on a beach. Other pieces include a strange story-boarded advert for an off-road vehicle that sprouts legs, some old pictures and a set of co-ordinates. Kelly insists that everything on the site is linked to the film.

Early reviews of the film from

Cannes have been scathing, but then so were the early reviews for *Donnie Darko*. *Southland Tales* is released in the UK on 15 September.



Carter scuppered

The troubled production of *John Carter of Mars* is officially on hold at Paramount. Director Jon Favreau has moved on to another project – an adaptation of Marvel Comic's *Iron Man* – and Paramount are focusing their efforts on an eleventh *Star Trek* film, to be directed by *Alias/Lost* mastermind JJ Abrams.

Verne sets sail

Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* is to be readapted for the big screen. Craig Tittle (*Scooby Doo*) will write and Sam Raimi produce.

Tittle responded angrily to Internet rumours that his plan was to update the story: "Wrong, wrong, wrong. It will be period, set in the exact year (1867) of Verne's novel. The idea is to go where previous film versions could not go due to lack of technology and to finally put some of the novel's classic scenes onto the big screen for the first time."

Forced to pay

After saying never, George Lucas has finally relented to allow the release of the unadulterated original *Star Wars* trilogy so we can finally

see Han shoot first in crystal clear DVD-quality before going out and buying the trilogy again in ultra-crystal clear high definition DVD (probably in both Blu Ray and the other format, just to be sure).

Eli in The Box

Horror director Eli Roth is to direct an adaptation of Richard Matheson's short story *The Box*. Roth will work with Richard Kelly (*Southland Tales* – see above) on the project after Roth finishes the sequel to his last film, *Hostel*. Roth says the project will be a chance to do something other

than his trademark splatter films. He promises it will be "much more of a psychological film. We want to try and make it more in the Hitchcock-Polanski kind of realm."

Looking dodgy...

Ghost Rider movie pushed back from this summer to February 2007, not a good sign... Joss Whedon is having trouble writing the script for *Wonder Woman*... Adam Sandler gets given a universal remote that lets him fast forward and replay parts of his life in *Click!* – does it have an off switch? (MMCg)



Ultraviolet is so bewildering in the scale of its ineptness that there seems no way for a poor reviewer to convey the full scope of its failures. It is a film of total and unrelenting stupidity, featuring performances of immeasurable shallowness and a plot and script that would be banal if they were not so utterly confused. Fatally it is unable to even deliver on the basic promise of exciting action sequences.

The most obvious of *Ultraviolet*'s list of inadequacies – but by no means the most serious – rest with the cast. Jovovich, as Violet, is an undeniably impressive physical specimen but she fails here even to match the ineffably low standards she has set herself in the dismal *Resident Evil* films. Her performance looks as though it has been based entirely around striking odd poses at the end of action sequences. I half expected Madonna to sing "Vogue." This would be the low point of most productions but Jovovich is saved by the incapability of everyone around her. The trio of male actors (Chinlund, Andrieu and Fichtner) might easily have been replaced by constructs of MDF and two-by-four to no obvious impact on the

quality of their performances – and the evidence on screen suggests that this is precisely what happened. The boy playing Six (Bright) would normally escape censure on the grounds that he was at the mercy of his elders, who should have known better, but his wide-eyed gurning is unbearably irritating from start to finish.

But for all the inadequacies of the cast, it is the failures of writer/director Wimmer that do the most to sink this production.

Ultraviolet is set in a dystopia. Some feeble plot device (sorry, that should read "mysterious virus") has infected a proportion of the population and turned them into vampire-like super-soldiers. Some people might worry that the idea of a virus that gave people fangs and superpowers was a stupid idea, but I say hold on. A virus that can do dental work? Think of all the problems that might solve – no one need queue for an NHS dentist ever again! Apart from the fangs (and the ability to prunk like a Thompson's gazelle on speed) it isn't entirely clear what damage the virus does or why anyone would be worried about catching it, nevertheless the current world order has collapsed, to be replaced by a fascist government bent

on destroying the vampires and keeping the population in line.

Wimmer here repeats the same trick he tried with *Equilibrium*, hoping to disguise the crassness of his film with a veneer of political parable. In *Equilibrium* his confusion over the concepts he raised led him to create a protagonist every bit as violent and fascistic as the government he's supposed to be fighting. In *Ultraviolet* the plot is so thin and confused that it is never entirely clear what anyone is fighting for. We are given no reason to care what happens to anyone and are left only with the director's facile assurances that Violet is a good guy and that Daxus (Chinlund) is the baddy.

Violet is part of a vampire freedom-fighter/terrorist group. She is sent to steal a package from a high-security compound. She succeeds, but discovers that the package contains a boy, Six, who both chief-terrorist Nerva (Andrieu) and Daxus wants dead. Unable to let that happen, Violet goes on the run, leading to a variety of shamelessly derivative and unconvincing fights and chases until the all-too-predictable conclusion, which manages to be both unpleasantly cloying and frustratingly unsatisfying.

Technically the film is a mess. The special effects are unacceptably poor. The fight sequences are incompetently and repetitively staged. And efforts to disguise the failings of the director through intrusive editing only draw attention to Wimmer's lack of talent as a storyteller.

The best part of *Ultraviolet* is the opening credits, a series of still comic book images and some nice artwork, but even this is fake – *Ultraviolet* isn't based on a comic – and is obviously ripped-off from the opening of Ang Lee's *Hulk*.

If you thought *Aeon Flux* (*Matrix* 177) or *Undenworld Evolution* (last issue) were as bad as bad-girl sci-fi movies could get this year, *Ultraviolet* will surprise you. With just two genre films under his belt, Kurt Wimmer is rapidly earning himself a place alongside Uwe Boll and Paul WS Anderson as the greatest plague on modern science fiction cinema. (MMcG)

Ultraviolet

Writer/Director: Kurt Wimmer
Cinematographer: Arthur Wong & Jimmy Wong
Cast: Milla Jovovich, Cameron Bright, Nick Chinlund, Sebastien Andrieu, Ida Martin, William Fichtner, David Collier
88 mins

Creepy crawlies

Slither is a throwback. In an era when what passes for an American horror movie is either vapid over-produced mush or repetitive slasher movies, *Slither* harks back to the

low budget monster movies of previous eras. It has plenty of knowing nods in the direction of B-movies from earlier decades.

Slither has a likeable cast and a smart and an often laugh-out-loud

funny script. The special effects sometimes creak but that can actually work in the film's favour, reminding audiences of its B-movie roots and eliciting sympathy not derision. In any case, *Slither* makes up for any rough edges with energy, humour and pacy storytelling.

The big surprise about *Slither* is that it comes from writer/director Gunn. His track record includes cynical, plastic movies like *Scooby Doo* and the lamentable remake of *Dawn of the Dead*. *Slither*, is a world away from those films. It bubbles over with a love for the genre and an unrestrained joy to be playing so freely with its tropes.

The plot follows familiar lines, with small-town America under threat from an alien menace. This time the town is Wheely, where the mayor (Henry) screams foul-mouthed abuse in the street and the biggest social event of the year is the opening of hunting season. The alien threat takes the form of a fleshy, shape-shifting blob that begins as a standard monster in the dark but then releases a vast swarm of fleshy penis-shaped slugs that enter humans through the mouth and take control of them.

At this point the film moves from alien monster territory to zombie flick and the pace, already swift, accelerates towards the final showdown. Gunn handles the action competently but the real strength of his approach is in the time he devotes to his characters, who remain engaging even as chaos erupts around them.

Sherriff Pardy (Fillion) and

his childhood sweetheart Starla (Banks) work well together with a nice chemistry and Fillion in particular benefits from some neatly ironic one-liners. Saulnier, is also good but Henry, playing the unrepentantly vile Republican mayor Jack MacReady, comes close to stealing the entire film.

I enjoyed *Slither* much more than I expected. It is hardly likely to win anyone an award and it isn't going to make anyone's list of greatest movies ever made, but it is a strong contender for the B-movie hall of fame and I predict it will win a cherished place in the DVD collections of many geeks. I know I already have a space set aside for it.

If I have a reservation about *Slither* it is that it comes close to the line in its treatment of women. While accepting that the horror genre has a long history of putting women in peril, there is a "rape" sequence here that I felt got close to the edge of what I want to watch as entertainment. The naked girl in peril in the bathroom scene is, I think, slightly overplayed and the treatment of Brenda (Gutierrez) is pretty unpleasant. Still, by the final reel the surviving women are kicking ass and *Slither's* humour just about saves it. (MM:G)

Slither

Writer/Director: James Gunn
Cinematographer: Greg Middleton
Cast: Nathan Fillion, Elizabeth Banks, Gregg Henry, Michael Rooker, Toni Thompson, Xantha Radley, Dana Saulnier
95 mins

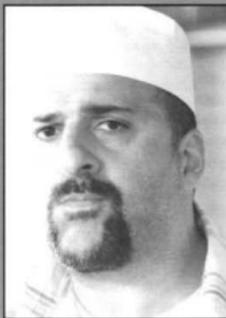


Stiff and cold

Try and approach every film with an open mind, but as I dragged myself to the cinema for *Alien Autopsy* I can't deny that my hopes weren't high. The prospect of turning around for an evening at home watching repeats of *The Good Life* on Bravo Gold 3 +1 (or any other of the digital channels that exist only to show repeats of Penelope Keith sitcoms) became more appealing with each step.

And, for the most part *Alien Autopsy* was every bit as inane, humourless and drab as I'd expected.

The film takes a geological age to get started and most of the first third



is painfully unengaging and the final third descends into an increasingly confused mush with, apparently, no one able to decide what sort of film they were trying to make.

But the middle third does have its moments. The actual alien autopsy, filmed in the living room of a cramped and slightly grotty flat is genuinely funny with Djailili stealing the entire show as the increasingly fraught kebab-selling director. It's the kind of sketch that Morcombe and Wise would have been proud of, but the film has nothing else to match it and quickly trails away into tedium.

McPartlin and Donnelly are

likeable enough in their own cheesy way, but they are entirely incapable of sustaining an entirely funny and confused script. The presence of actors such as Stanton and Pullman is bewildering, especially as they are comprehensively underused. (MM:G)

Alien Autopsy

Director: Jonny Campbell
Writer: William Davies
Cinematographer: Simon Chadoir
Cast: Declan Donnelly, Ant McPartlin, Bill Pullman, Harry Dean Stanton, Omid Djailili, Jimmy Carr, Morwenna Banks
95 mins

Joke free zone

Any hope that *Scary Movie 4* might improve upon its predecessors is squashed in the pre-credit sequence as an attempt to parody *Saw* falls apart embarrassingly.

I spent the most of the film staring at the screen in slack-jawed disbelief that anyone could have thought that filming this script was a smart idea. That the director and one writer (Zanuck and Abrahams) were once responsible for the brilliant *Airplane* films made this all the more disappointing.

Scary Movie 4 goes on



to attempt to spoof *War of the Worlds*, *The Grudge*, *Cinderella Man* and *The Village* but misses all of them by miles. Only twice – during a *Brokeback Mountain* skit and when *Airplane* veteran Leslie Nielsen appears as a Bush-like American president who hears of a national disaster but refuses to leave a children's classroom until he's heard the end of the story about the duck – does the film even manage to wing its targets and elicit a smile if not laughter.

The *Scary Movie* franchise has always been

unrewarding and this film is simply appalling. Its only achievement is to make it abundantly clear that this is a franchise long past its mediocre best. (MMcG)

Scary Movie 4

Director: David Zucker
Writer: Craig Mazin, Jim Abrahams, Pat Proft
Cinematographer: Thomas E Ackerman

Cast: Anna Faris, Regina Hall, Craig Bierko, Leslie Nielsen, Carmen Electra, Shaquille O'Neal, Dr Phil C McGraw, Bill Pullman, Chris Elliot, Michael Madsen, Chingy, Lil' John, Charlie Sheen
83 mins

Dumb hummock



A critic for the Hollywood Reporter labelled *Silent Hill*, the latest computer game to be adapted for the silver screen, as "witless, soulless and joyless" – and to be honest, I have to agree.

As a big fan of the games, that's difficult to admit – the games are tight, original and endlessly enthralling. While the movie stuck almost completely to the plot of the first game and nicked a character or two from the second, it somehow managed to lose everything good about *Silent Hill* along the way.

If you haven't played the games you will inevitably find the movie flat, confusing or downright stupid. Or more likely, all three. The iconic trademarks of the games – annoyingly foggy streets; painfully slow suspense; a warbling air-raid siren you quickly learn to fear because it means your world is about to be plunged into the depths of hell – just don't transpose well into a two-hour movie, especially when the majority of your audience bores easily, frightens with difficulty and never approves of anything anyway unless it's bland rom-com tat.

Take, for example, the hellish nurses in the decrepit hospital, all broken and bloodied and freakishly creepy. Armed with iron pipes and rusty scalpels, they're pants-wetting scary – until the movie comes along to whisk the magic away, showing them for what they really are: faceless actresses squeezed into shamefully revealing outfits juddering around set like something out of a Marilyn Manson video. Anything *but* scary, if you ask me.

The reason why the film is such a failure is obvious. In the games, it's you that's about to get your

head chopped off by an eight-foot tall nightmare butcher with a metal head and a sword longer than your soon-to-be-dead body. But watching the movie, there's no immediate danger – everything's one step removed. It's not you that's locked in the room with the mutilated body and crying ghosts, it's someone else – and you're free to leave them there while you go get more cola if you want. You know the protagonist isn't going to die because, well, she's the main character – and besides, she successfully ran away from all the other hell-fiends and demon-beasts while simultaneously reapplying her lipstick, so you know this time will be no different.

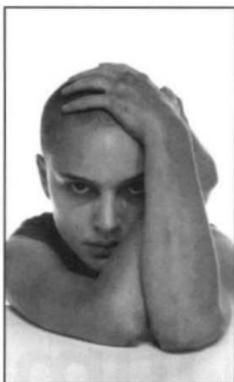
With appalling acting, unsuccessful scary bits and pacing slower than a zombie's shuffle, I don't blame the audience for coming out of the cinema laughing their heads off instead of cowering behind their popcorn and being too afraid to go to the toilet for fear of what they might find. It was only my love for the games that stopped me joining them in their ridicule – and, as you can see, that didn't last long...

Claire Weaver

Silent Hill

Director: Christophe Gans
Writer: Roger Avary
Cinematographer: Dan Luastsen
Cast: Radha Mitchell, Sean Bean, Laurie Holden, Deborah Kara Unger, Kim Coates, Tanya Allen, Alice Krige
127 mins

New order



There is no doubting the desire of the makers of *V for Vendetta* to stay faithful to Alan Moore's original graphic novel. Their investment in the look and feel of the film reveals that in every frame. The problems with this movie lie not with the film-makers intentions but with the shallowness of their understanding.

On a number of levels *V for Vendetta* is a triumph. It looks beautiful and is far less reliant on action than the connection with the Wachowski brothers might suggest. It has some excellent performances. Fry, Hurt, Pigott-Smith, Graves and Cusack do fine jobs in supporting roles and Rea, an often unsung but reliably excellent actor, makes Inspector Finch both vulnerable and formidable despite the character being poorly served by the changes in this adaptation.

The most extraordinary performance, however, is that of Weaving. Whether or not he's under the mask – the part was recast in mid-shoot, so it could be anyone under there – Weaving's mellifluous voice gives life to V's fixed mask in every scene.

Portman's Evey, however, is the weakest link. Despite doing all they can to make her look downtrodden, Portman is just too much of a film star (and too beautiful) to be really convincing in the role. Her English accent (proper and posh) doesn't help but the way the character has been rewritten, presumably to allow for Portman's star presence, seriously unbalances the whole

story. Evey appears every bit as well read as V and she's already politically conscious when he meets her – which makes her moments of stupidity such as her faith in the bishop (necessary to move the plot along) all the more bewildering.

The most serious problems with *V for Vendetta*, however, stem from its confusion about politics and a failure to accept the implications of the material being adapted.

Moore's novel was written in the darkest hours of the Thatcherite Eighties. The country was convulsed by strikes, there were race riots in cities across the country, unemployment was skyrocketing and the then government seemed determined to pick a fight with anyone (at home or abroad) who was not unwaveringly "one of us". The Cold War was at a peak and nuclear conflict seemed more than possible. In those stark circumstances, Moore's contention that liberal states could not hold was widely shared.

Moore's *V for Vendetta* offered a stark choice between anarchy (created, inevitably, through violence) or totalitarian oppression. While I've always believed Moore was wrong to present the world so monochromatically, it is possible to make the case for the intellectual integrity of this argument.

However, this adaptation can't bring itself to follow Moore's argument to its logical conclusion.

The film turns V's struggle to destroy government into a fight for a better government – which is by no means the same thing. The film

has V concede that his violence excludes him from life in the new state and he presses Evey to deliver a new democracy.

The finale sees massed ranks of people in V costumes walk through lines of impotent soldiers to celebrate the destruction the Houses of Parliament. This makes no sense. Parliament isn't established as important to the regime or even mentioned earlier in the film. The novel destroys "the head" – Downing Street – in its finale, a less visually impressive target but, as the site of executive power, more apt. The film preaches democracy but glorifies the destruction of its most potent symbol.

A weirder irony, however, is the destruction of a regime dedicated to the imposition of conformity by a mass of people in identical uniforms. If the producers ever spot the strangeness of this conjunction of images, they don't let on.

They might argue that because the crowd, at the last moment, take off their masks to reveal their true faces this proves that the "V-alikes" aren't just another bunch of leader-worshipping drones but free individuals, "just like us". That, of course, misses the point. Evey massed Ku Klux Klan rally ends in people removing their masks to reveal that underneath, they're also "just like us". The baying crowds at Nuremberg were, afterwards, "just like us" too. And so are those who have supported totalitarian regimes on every continent. People "just like us" have proven themselves capable of being complicit in

horrendous crimes then swearing their innocence and passing the blame on to governments.

This film's cult of V – who is, remember, a murderous, cruel (look what he does to Evey), sociopath who acts through terror – hardly seems to offer the foundations for the democratic future that the film demands. Films, particularly American films, can rarely resist make their protagonists the "good guy". So it is here, as they turn V's relationship with Evey into a love story and try to humanise him at every turn (V cooking breakfast in a pinafore!) – but V is not a good guy and he is certainly no hero, he is a monster, whose only saving grace is that the regime he fights is worse far worse. V turns "all to rubble", what grows afterwards he can't know and hardly cares.

V for Vendetta is a better than average action movie, but, given its source, it is impossible not to expect more from it. In its misunderstanding of V's nature and the misrepresentation of its meaning the film is revealed to be juvenile in its politics and unaware of (or unwilling to accept) the full implications of the issues it raises. (M:CG)

V for Vendetta

Director: James McTeigue
 Writer: The Wachowski Brothers
 Cinematographer: Adrian Biddle
 Cast: Natalie Portman, Hugo Weaving, Stephen Rea, Stephen Fry, John Hurt, Tim Piggot-Smith, Rupert Graves, Roger Allam, Ben Miles, Sinead Cusack
 132 mins

Out of tunes

There are, no doubt, Wagnerians who howled in pain at this adaptation of *Tristan + Isolde*. I can hear them now: No magic potions? A skinny girl playing Isolde? No screeching? How could they!

But the spear and magic helmet brigade should take note: this film isn't *Tristan and Isolde*; it isn't even *Tristan & Isolde*; this is *Tristan + Isolde*. That plus sign is important. It means this isn't some dry historical epic for cultural fogies that listen to Wagner, this is a film for "da kids". That plus sign deliberately attempts to evoke Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* and position this film as a street-smart updating of a legend.

Except that, of course, *Tristan + Isolde* is no such thing. Plus sign or no plus sign and this is a rather plain historical romance lacking any of the artistic flourish of Luhrmann's vastly superior movie. It tells a rather old-fashioned love story in an old-fashioned way.

Tristan + Isolde is not a satisfying experience. I found the casting of the leads bewildering. Myles and Franco are a handsome enough pair but there is no spark between them and neither offers enough star-power to justify their selection on economic grounds. Surely, then, this film could have been made just as successfully with actors from Ireland and Britain in their appropriate leading roles? We



would then have been spared the futile struggle to pin down Myles's accent, which wanders across the whole northern hemisphere. Franco, to be fair, has no such problem, clearly content to be the only native Californian in seventh century Britain, he doesn't bother with acting. The supporting cast, however, are very good – particularly O'Hara and Sewell

Tristan + Isolde is full of anachronisms – the most discussed is the presence of a seventeenth century poem by John Donne in a drama set a thousand years earlier. Others include a Norman-style,

castle in Britain four hundred years before Hastings and an equally out of place chivalric tournament that, presumably unintentionally, evokes comedy moments in *Shrek* and *A Knight's Tale*.

The biggest stumbling block in *Tristan + Isolde*, for me, was Isolde's inexplicable fascination with Tristan. Franco may be handsome, but his Tristan is wet and whiny.

The predictably tragic ending (this is based on an opera, after all) takes too long so that it is finally a relief to see Tristan and Isolde disappear. You can't help feeling, as the coda suggests, that Marke was

better off without either of them.

Not frenetic enough for teenagers or complex enough for adults, *Tristan + Isolde* is too long and bland to please anyone. (MMcG)

Tristan + Isolde

Director: Kevin Reynolds
 Writer: Dean Georgaris
 Cinematographers: Artur Reinhart
 Cast: James Franco, Sophia Myles, Rufus Sewell, David O'Hara, Mark Strong, Henry Cavill, Bronagh Gallagher, Ronan Vibert, Dexter Fletcher
 125 mins

Based on Cornelia Funke's novel, *The Thief Lord* is a children's film set in Venice. It is the story of Prosper and Bo (Johnson and Harris), brothers split up by their unpleasant guardians after their parents' death.

They flee to Venice where they are taken under the wing of Scipio, the Thief Lord (Weeks), and his gang who live in a deserted cinema.

Scipio provides for his gang, by stealing from the rich. Through his association with the criminal Barbarossa (Sayle) they become involved in a scheme to reconstruct a magical merry-go-round that can manipulate time.

Venice provides a magical setting for the film and helps us forget that in the real world this lot would be a load of happy-slopping ASBOs wearing electronic tags and



performing old ladies. Likeable performances from all the kids help too and the adults, particularly Carter, are good.

The film-makers try too hard to remain faithful to the book – the action feels a little too compressed and there are times when budget limitations show. Despite this, *The Thief Lord* is a slight but pleasant film but it is perhaps better suited for a Sunday afternoon on the sofa than a cinema trip. (MMcG)

The Thief Lord

Director: Richard Claus
 Writers: Ricard Claus & Daniel Musgrave
 Cinematographer: David Slama
 Cast: Aaron Johnson, Jasper Harris, Rollo Weeks, Alice Connor, George McKay, Lithaniel Dyer, Jim Carter, Caroline Goodall, Alexei Sayle
 98 mins



Where wolves?

What is wrong with scaring impressionable young children? If we follow the lead of Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean, apparently nothing. Their cult children's book *The Wolves in the Walls*, in which a young girl called Lucy attempts to prevent wolves taking over her family home, has been adapted for the stage by Improbable Theatre, the company that brought us the delightfully macabre *Shockheaded Peter*.

Featuring light-hearted songs about playing the tuba and making jam, and truly laugh-out-loud air-guitar moments, *The Wolves in the*

Walls is enjoyable and chaotically fun. Gaiman's rhythmic language transposes perfectly into song and McKean's wildly imaginative illustrations are wonderfully brought to three-dimensional life.

But *The Wolves in the Walls* has a darker, scary side – with a set design not unfamiliar to fans of *Silent Hill* and a sinister, building tension in which the wolves stalk Lucy and her toy pig puppet, you could easily assume this was no play for children. Indeed, a lot of the audience was made up of childless adults (myself included), and with a show time of seven thirty it is well past a lot of bedtimes.

Improbable Theatre does a

wonderful job getting the balance right between scary and safe. The ragged, feral wolves are softened by the visibility of the puppeteers, so although they look like dangerously demented Fraggles, we know where we are and we're just the right amount of scared.

Lucy represents the hero every child wants to be – brave, wilful, strong and intelligent, the rescuer of her pig puppet and protector of her family – and as adults we willingly follow her story. Lucy isn't precocious, demanding, spoiled or stupid. We know there are wolves in the walls, and we're glad that it's Lucy – not her parents or brother – that knows it too. Quick-witted,

she is the voice of wisdom and reason; she has the answers and isn't afraid to act. And as for the pig puppet, he really pulls at the heartstrings when left behind in the rush to escape. Who wouldn't risk life and limb to save him?

For those familiar with the theatre, *The Wolves in the Walls* is a re-imagining of what is possible on stage; and for those in the audience unfamiliar with its trickery and magic, there really is no better place to start. Because everybody knows, when the wolves come out of the walls, it makes for super theatre.

Claire Weaver

● *Wolves in the Walls* will tour the UK again in Autumn 2006

You wait decades for the BBC to revisit its past and create the perfect time travel show, and then a cop show almost trumps it for entertainment value.

Featuring great work by leads John Simm and Philip Glenister *Life on Mars* is both a brilliant reworking of shows like *The Sweeney* and *The Professionals* and a proper sf show. It screams quality from the opening credits and mixes humour, proper police procedural (or, given the decade, lack of procedural) and strong characters. A classic in the making, the first season on DVD might help hold you over until the new series (Released: 15 May).

Man Thing is an unusual Marvel character. An early example of environmentalism in comics, it is also a rare, genuinely ambivalent comic character – the creature is almost mindless, reacting to human emotions



and "heroic" only by coincidence. Not here, however, this low-budget, no-brain, direct to video *Man Thing* turns the swamp creature into a bog-standard movie monster. Director Leonard is a hack, the cast dire and the script crap. Drunken baboons would be embarrassed to produce a film this

amateurish (22 May).

Seven Swords is a lushly-filmed, epic Chinese adventure movie featuring a band of seven heroes who come together to defend a village from a rampaging general. Directed by Tsui Hark (responsible for classics of Hong Kong cinema such as *The Swordsman*), *Seven Swords* isn't his finest work but it has some beautiful moments and a couple of thrilling fight sequences. The film's fantasy element comes from the strange powers of the eponymous swords. I enjoyed most of it, but there is no denying that it is much too long (29 May).

Also out: the best avoided *Aeon Flux* (15 May) and *Underworld Evolution* (19 June); more promisingly, *Mirrormask* (5 June) is also available as part of a reasonably priced box set with *Labyrinth* and *Dark Crystal*, worth looking out for if you don't have either of those films. (MMCG)

Aliens groove machine

If the combination of sf and music only brings to mind Hawkwind, Jeff Wayne and prog rock, then you need to get with the cool cats daddio. A new wave of bands like The Flaming Lips, Air and Gorillaz are drawing on media and literary sf sources in their songs.

In the Flaming Lips mold are The Aliens (all ex-Beta Band) whose new EP, *Alienoid Starmonica*, uses images of alien abduction, robots and space travel. After an opening that sounds like a trip through a Jack Kirby spacecape, "Hey Leanne" briefly surfaces as the country and western lament of a boy for his alien-abducted girl before dipping back into strangeness. The other songs are more straightforward – "Robot Man" is hugely infectious and "lonas (look for space)" comes close to capturing the woozy, uplifting best of the Beta's.

This is pulse-racing stuff, as eclectic as the Beta Band but (barring "Hey Leanne") wrapped in funky, hummable tunes. *Alienoid Starmonica* manages to incorporate influences like The Beatles and Pink Floyd and yet still sound like it's from five minutes into the future. The only problem? Just four tracks! I want more, and soon. (MMCG)



The point of *Galactic Civilizations II: Dread Lord* (GCII), if you haven't guessed from the title, is to build a galaxy spanning empire. Like most strategy games you expand across the map, taking control of regions (in this case solar systems) which provide resources that allow you to conduct research and construct units which, in turn, allow you to spread yourself further across the galaxy.

There is plenty to like here. The presentation is nice, with the galaxy's various solar systems spinning prettily around their stars and the spaceships nicely rendered. Especially clever is the function that allows you to design your own spaceships – so unlike most games you aren't limited to a narrow number of units but can design your own depending on the task you wish them to complete. Importantly, the different units are clearly distinguished so you can tell at a glance what each ship is built to do.

In addition, unlike most previous strategy games, it really is possible to play and win at GCII by pursuing a peaceful strategy and never fighting a battle. While, if you want, you can build mighty armies and smash your way across the universe, you can also pursue strategies based on achieving the most advanced technologies, cultural assimilation or diplomatic domination.

The game is also notable for



an excellent AI system – at higher levels the computer players are capable of remarkable levels of duplicity and complex strategy but it never feels as though the computer is cheating. Indeed the game's makers promise that the computer characters are playing by exactly the same rules as the humans, which is very unusual. This game has a tough learning curve and the computer players aren't easy to beat, so beginners are going to have a tough time but it is important that GCII's computer players are good because there is no way to play the game online against anyone else – which seems a curious omission from a modern strategy game.

Despite its technical excellence, the positives in GCII are comprehensively outweighed by the negatives. The game is slow to start and nothing much can seem to happen for an age as you plod about the galaxy building colonies. The range of options available in the opening turns is so limited and the likelihood of doing anything interesting so small that GCII fails to deliver that opening hook that is needed to drag players deeper into the game.

Once you do get established,

however, the game remains frustrating with persistent niggles spoiling the game experience. Scrolling around the map is irritatingly slow. The technology tree (a core part in games like this, as researching technology opens up new opportunities, new colony improvements and new units) is poorly described and frustratingly badly presented on screen. The management of colonies also feels frustratingly shallow – it's a case of building a limited number of upgrades rather than being able to exercise more in-depth controls.

Most annoying, however, is the poor and non-intuitive interface design. Basic tasks, such as building a new unit, should be straightforward in a game like this – you should be able to make things happen quickly and with the minimum of key presses. GCII never achieves that, it's interface is messy and poorly thought out and it is rarely clear what you need to do while navigating one of the many different management screens to achieve the goal you want. To compound matters the game's manual is only provided as a PDF file, which is absolutely useless when you want to find out what to do while playing the game, and there are no tutorial levels.

There might be a good game beyond the tedious opening and bewildering interface but I'm afraid most players won't want to play *Galactic Civilizations II* enough to get beyond the unappealing first impressions. (MMcG)

RETRY



Hammered

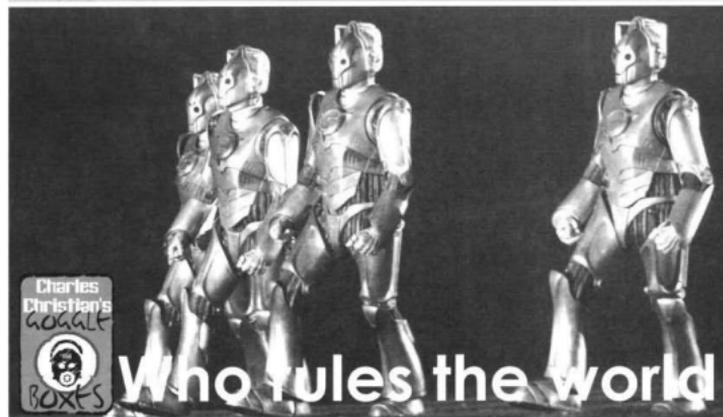
The fundamentals of the real time strategy (RTS) games were set down when Westwood Studios effectively invented the genre with *Dune 2* in the early 1990s. Players start with a small number of units, build a base, harvest a resource (in *Dune 2*'s case, Spice) which then allows them to expand their base, construct more units, research new technological advances and expand their territory.

Perhaps the most notable modern RTS with an sf setting is *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War*. This takes a relatively small-scale and squad based approach to RTS gaming as you command the 'Blood Raven' chapter of space marines from Games Workshop's popular tabletop wargame, *Warhammer 40,000*.

Dawn of War has limitations – the game mechanics force the player forward, making defensive strategies difficult to implement, the camera is prone to zoom away dramatically in the height of battles and the single-player game is relatively short, but it is beautifully presented and a particularly visceral wargame. The plot of the single-player campaign is reasonably diverting and the online community remains vibrant.

Even as someone unfamiliar with Games Workshop's Warhammer universe, I found *Dawn of War* immediately engaging but it lacked variation and was much too short. It can now be bought bundled with the expansion pack, *Winter Assault*. The extra campaign and newly playable Imperial Guard make this a more challenging and satisfying game.

A second expansion pack, *Dark Crusade*, is expected later this year with two more playable races, new technology and a dramatic change to the gameplay. (MMcG)



Who rules the world

Doctor Who returned to our screens this Easter and promptly cleaned up in the holiday ratings war, with the new Doctor – David Tennant – revealing he really is as good as the hype would have us believe.

The first episode's script was subtly witty – having the character of Lady Cassandra (Zoe Wanamaker) concerned that she looked like a chav, after she had managed to occupy someone else's body for the first time in five billion years was a classic moment. Having Rose closer in age to the Doctor undoubtedly adds a genuine sexual chemistry to the relationship. The series runs for 13 weeks (BBC1, Saturdays at 7:15pm) which takes it through until July. Watch it.

Still on the subject of the good Doctor, what is interesting about its revival is the way the BBC has woken up and started leveraging the maximum benefit from the brand. Along with the main series and the forthcoming spin-off *Torchwood*, we've also got *Doctor Who Confidential* (BBC3, Saturdays at 8:00pm), the new *Totally Doctor Who* for kids (BBC1, Thursdays at 5:00pm) and a new BBC magazine (*Doctor Who Adventures*) and a series of one-minute long *Tardisodes* that can be viewed on video/net enabled mobile phones (text TARDIS to 81010) or via the web (www.bbc.co.uk/doctorwho/tardisodes). It is the same tactic Channel 4 have used with their *Big Brother* franchise and ITV for *The X Factor* and should help the series on its way towards world domination.

Talking of ITV, the channel reckons it will have an answer to *Doctor Who* in the shape of

Primaeva, a CGI-intensive series that uses the services of the same company who produced *Walking with Dinosaurs*. The basic plot is a wormhole in time opens up allowing dinosaurs to start slipping into the modern world and the *Primaeva* team – headed by Professor Nick Cutter (Douglas Henshall) and zoologist Abby Lister (Hannah Spearritt, previously with, er, *S Club 7*) – are brought in by the government to deal with these rips in time.

Sounds good except... Except I just wasted 3 hours of my life watching ITV's most recent foray into fantasy TV, the tedious *Ghostboat* starring David Jason. Think Stephen King's *Christine* only with a boat and starring 'Del Boy' Trotter with a beard. Glossing over the holes in the plot you were left with the sneaky suspicion that having got a big star, some fancy special effects and a Maltese location, the channel's executives felt they had to spin out the story over two evenings whereas the whole thing would have been much more taut if the programme compressed into one episode. Memo to ITV: don't make the same mistake with *Primaeva*.

Ironically the exact opposite problem hit the recent BBC4 remake of *A for Andromeda*. True it is 35 years since the original series aired, so much of the impact has been lost – back in 1961 computers still had a mystique, the concept of DNA technology was so novel that the ink was still wet – and it did star Julie Christie, one of the faces of the soon-to-start swinging sixties, as the android Andromeda. However whereas the original ran for seven 45 minute episodes, with a further six part sequel, the remake

compressed the whole story into 90 minutes with the result that *Andromeda* (played exquisitely by Kelly Reilly) had to have a very sudden change of heart to go from alien nemesis to suicidal. One other grouse: if BBC4 is going to make programmes like this, could someone please give them a bigger budget – you could get away with it in 1961 but today nobody believes Jane Asher and a couple of chums could grow an android in what appears to be a supermarket freezer cabinet. That said, could I suggest *The Stone Tape* (written by Nigel Kneale and starring Jane Asher in the 1972 original) is another suitable candidate for a remake?

Elsewhere on the Goggle Box... the second series of *Battlestar Galactica* (Sky One, Tuesdays at 9:00pm) goes from strength to strength (alright, the black market episode was weak and had some implausible character developments) with the current run scheduled to end in mid-May with a flashback/flash forward double episode that jumps the plot forward twelve months... *Buffylite* series *Charmed* (Living TV, Saturdays at 9:00pm) is to end at the completion of its current (8th) series – but no doubt it will live on (and on) as satellite... *Life on Mars*, the BBC hit series from earlier this year, will be back for a second series next year with an extended writing team, including Chris Chibnall who is currently working on *Torchwood*. And, the *Star Wars* spin-off TV series (set somewhere in time between films III and IV – does this mean lots of farming stories on Tatooine?) will begin transmission in late 2008 and run for 100 episodes.



Stargate SG1 has been written off more times than dodgy Vauxhall Astra but it is still going after ten seasons. MGM have announced that they are planning a movie based on the series that will launch a third regular TV show. A massively multi-player role-playing game is also due.



Christopher Eccleston looks set to return to genre TV by taking the lead role in Sky One's remake of *The Prisoner*. Relocated to an "exotic foreign location" the six part "thrilling reinvention" is being produced by Granada from a script by Bill Gallagher (*Clocking Off*).



Battlestar Galactica is to get a spin-off. *Caprica* is set fifty years before the current series and deals with the creation of humanity's nemesis, the Cylons, through the lives of the Graystone and Adama families. *BSG* creator Ronald Moore promises "corporate intrigue, techno-action and sexual politics".



Obligatory *Torchwood* news! Burn Gorman – Guppy in the recent *Bleak House* adaptation – will play the organisation's medic while Naoki Mori will feature as Toshiko Sato, the technical expert introduced in "Aliens of London", the first episode of the new *Doctor Who*. Filming is underway and *Torchwood* has been pencilled in for transmission in October.



The UK Sci-Fi Channel has announced its first ever original drama series. *Ice Planet* will have 22 forty-five minute episodes and star Michael Ironside (*Starship Troopers*) leading a crew of scientists aboard the spaceship *Magellan* after Earth has been attacked by aliens. The series will cost \$29 million.



The US Sci Fi network have announced a slate of new programming including AI conspiracy thriller *Snap*, *Persons Unknown* about a group of strangers who wake up in a deserted town they cannot leave and *Chariots of Fire*, a six-hour adaptation of Erich von Danikens odd-ball theories.

SEDUCTION of the Innocent

COMIC REVIEWS BY JAMES BACON ESQ.



Marvel has announced a new six issue mini series by Neil Gaiman and popular artist John Romita Jr. The series, *The Eternals*, will revamp the characters created by the legendary Jack Kirby.

Belfast-born writer Garth Ennis has signed up to an ongoing series for DC's Wildstorm imprint. With art by Derick Robertson, *The Boys* features a group of government operatives who monitor superhero activities and, when ordered, take them down, CIA style. The sixty issue series starts later this year and, since his last project on this scale was the ground breaking *Preacher*, this is definitely one to watch.

Legendary Golden Age comic artist Jerry Robinson is appearing at The London Film and Comic Convention in Earls Court, London (1-2 July). Jerry created both The Joker and Robin characters and has a long history in the comics industry. He's an unusual yet welcome guest at this large media event, which has appearances from cast members of *Lord of the Rings*, *Lost*, *Star Trek* and other television and film franchises. (www.londonfilmandcomiccon.com).



It's been a bit of an Alan Moore month, with the release of *V for Vendetta* and interviews by BBC's *The Culture Show*, *The New York Times*, and even MTV. *Vendetta* co-creator David Lloyd gave a talk in *The Guardian's* Newsroom Gallery where there was an exhibition of original artwork. Moore gave a talk about Blake and Fuseli at the Tate Britain's "Gothic Nightmares" exhibition.

Mustard, an excellent and very funny UK zine, also got in on the Alan Moore act this month. Issue six has an amazing interview, with a fresh perspective on his work – possibly because it wasn't so comic focused, and maybe because he seems to have been in a great mood. *Mustard* is highly recommended (get more info at www.mustardweb.org).

NEW U.S. COMIC IMPORTS
March 22, Image Publications
GRAPHIC NOVELS AND TRADE PAPERBACKS
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Ultimate Iron Man

Writer: Orson Scott Card; Artist: Andy Kubert

Publisher: Marvel, 2006, £12.99, 136pp

Orson Scott Card launched himself as a comic writer with this *Ultimate Iron Man* story and grabbed a huge following after just one five issue mini-series. That series is collected here along with promises of further tales to sat fans desire for more.

Scott Card rewrites the origin of Tony Stark from the very earliest moments – beginning while he's still in his mother's womb. An accident kills his mother and creates a child with great intelligence but a weakness that is potentially fatal. The story then examines Stark's formative years – his father's difficulties coping with work and a son and Tony's time at a school for the gifted. It is here he meets his future nemesis, Zebadih Stane, who Tony comes to hate by the end of the first series – but for quite unexpected reasons.

There are a number of comparisons to be drawn with *Ender's Game*, but this is definitely not a rehash. The similarities have more to do with Scott Card's talent for writing convincing child characters than any revisiting of previous glories.

Kubert's art is clean and neat, and helps the story to flow.

If I have two quibbles they are first that the series could have been longer, and the ending, in true Scott Card style, is unsatisfying and leaves one waiting for the next series for the wrong reasons. Secondly there were a variety of delays with the original run that should have been avoided, readers deserves better.

The second series is promised shortly, so keep an eye open for it.



Bad Company: Goodbye Krol Word

Writer: Peter Milligan; Artists: Brett Evans, Jim

McCarthy and Steve Dillon

Publisher: Rebellion, 2005, £13.99, Paperback 256pp

This volume reprints forty-one episodes of *Bad Company* which began in issue 500 of *2000AD* in 1986. Many people consider *2000AD* to have been at its peak in the mid-eighties and simple, powerful sf stories like *Bad Company* are the reason.

Bad Company is the story of Danny Franks, a young recruit fighting on the planet Arrat. Bad Company rescue him from being killed by the alien Krol and, with two buddies, he gets assimilated into this unit of misfits and freaks commanded by Kano. Bad Company fight without compassion or respect for authority. They understand the pointlessness of what is really going on – the war is already lost – yet continue to fight.

Bad Company was hugely popular at the time, dirtier and more gruesome than *Rogue Trooper*, Danny Franks obviously struck a chord with the youth of 1986.

Peter Milligan pens a great tale, despite the requirement for every six pages to have some sort of conclusion and that each episode be able to stand on its own. The artwork by Evans and McCarthy has just the right feel, it's scratchy, yet the facial expressions tell much of the story and their portrayal of the jungle planet, the Krol and Bad Company themselves are excellent.

Bad Company represents a special part of the *2000AD* library and is a joy to read.

Tozzer and the Invisible Lap Dancers

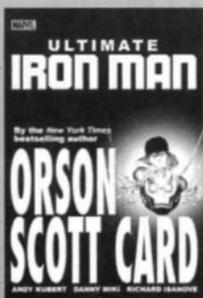
Writer: Rob Dunlop; Artist Peter Lumby

Publisher: Ablaze Media, 2002, £5.99 Paperback 80pp

Tozzer is a UK produced comic that has to be one of the most irreverent parodies that I have ever read – it's a messed up car crash between *Monty Python* and *South Park* that takes the total piss out of many Hollywood icons and actors, while being full of hilarious puns and skid mark toilet humour.

I laughed quite a bit while reading this. The 80 pages are rammed with so many amazing ideas it's sickening. The full colour artwork looks like Kevin O'Neil crossed with the art from Samurai Jack, it's easy to follow and the representations are spot on. The creators do the convention circuit with an amazing stand and also have an extensive website at: www.tozzer.com

Worth every penny of £5.99, a second book is available now with plans for more.





On a dark and wet September evening my wife handed me an article in the Saturday edition of one of the "heavier" daily papers. Someone eminent in the parent company of a well-known chain of bookstores had gone on record that the range of books carried wouldn't be narrowed if the bid for another chain of bookstores succeeded. He went further, he "absolutely guaranteed" that the chain would "give local authors a break." I thought it was probably part of a cosying up exercise to make us feel warm and fuzzy about this behemoth during the bid process, but nevertheless I sent a letter to the aforementioned eminent person, advising him that three of my books would set

the firm back all of £13.55 and take up very few inches of shelf space. Did I get a reply? From anyone at all? Well, blessed be he who expecteth nothing - for he will never be disappointed. It made me feel better for, maybe, a nanosecond. I went into the local branch. Had they changed their policy about stocking books from small presses and local authors? Had they buffalo.

It seems to me that trying to break into these bastions (unless you are (a) a celebrity, (b) a celebrity, (c) work in publishing or (d) exceptionally lucky - as a friend of mine was in meeting of the chief buyer of a huge chain doing an incognito recce in a rival's shop) is like trying to wake up the giant Cronos by tickling his feet. Everything

favours overcentralization and remoteness. Decisions are made in some colossal, gleaming, streamlined, tower block in a distant business park, somewhere. If only you could meet a real person and convince them that it wouldn't be so terrible if they took a chance on a half-decent novel. As Jon Grimwood railed against computer driven telephone systems, which cut us off from real people (*Matrix* 175), so does the remoteness of the decision-makers in the book-buying business.

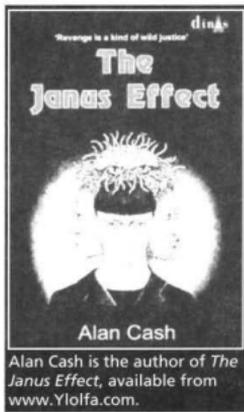
How can we struggling authors impress others with our human warmth if we can never get to meet another human being?

I once tried handing in my book to someone who said they would hand it onto the SF buyer at a well-known chain. It sank without trace. When I enquired about it, the manager said it had been unsolicited (untrue) and she had no intention of standing in a queue at the post office to send it back. Bearing in mind this was another large chain, I wonder if they had never heard of the invention of the franking machine, for starters. She ended by putting the phone down on me.

I have just read that the behemoth's new manager is pledged to give power back to local managers. We shall see. In the meantime, on the advice of a friend of mine, I

have spoken to the buyer of my genre. He sounded nice. I have sent him my book. It is on a pile on his desk. Time will tell if they will consider stocking it. Watch this space

To end on an optimistic note, a chain that bears the name of a character in the Tintin books has been very generous. So I suppose there is hope yet, unless they get taken over. A City columnist at The Times considers that "Readers, authors and publishers may well be refreshed by free-market winds." No doubt - when the chill wind of the bookshop's choice, rather than the reader's, howls through the halls of the one and only Mega bookshop from Lands End to John O'Groats.



SNICK!

The summer blockbuster season arrives, and *Matrix* 180 will have reviews of all the big movies (and maybe a few you haven't heard of yet). Look out for: *X-Men 3*, *Click*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Omen*, *Cars*, *District B13*, *The Lake House*, *Angel-A* and whatever other stuff we can trick the people into letting us see early.

Matrix, the most masterful and magnificent magazine yet manufactured by man (and woman) its modestly modulates to make monstrously merry with as many manipulators of the pen (for 'tis mighty) as may muster to minister in any of the myriad of missions that are 'important in the momentous making of our missive.

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Congratulations

Matrix would like to offer its congratulations to all the winners of the 2005 BSFA Awards.

Novel: Geoff Ryman, *Air*

Short story: Kelly Link, "Magic for Beginners"

Non-fiction: Gary K Wolfe, *Soundings: Reviews 1992-1995*

Artwork: Pavel Lewandowski, cover of *Interzone 200*

Thank you to everyone who voted and special thanks Pavel Lewandowski for allowing us to reproduce his winning artwork.

