

ttba
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**TOPSY TURVY
BLUE ABSURDITY**

Chairbeing's Address

Kate Stitt

"Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!"

So said Albus Dumbledore, and what a banquet we have before us, both in this keenly awaited edition of TTBA, and in the year of CUSFS events to come. A warm welcome to Cambridge and CUSFS to all our new members, and to our existing members, welcome back to what should be another great year.

This Michaelmas term heralds some exciting changes to our programme, with a broader focus on aspects of Science Fiction and Fantasy including film and television, and a new Thursday evening programme featuring screenings, readings and social events. Our focus in the early part of this term is on *Doctor Who*, surely one of the greatest Sci-Fi phenomena in the history of television.

Enjoy reading this TTBA, and I look forward to seeing many of you at this term's events, and those throughout the year.

Kate Stitt, Chairbeing 2002 - 2003.



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Editorial

Owen Dunn

Putting a TTBA together is a bit of an ordeal, really. Not just for the obvious reasons, either; while it can be difficult getting articles together, cajoling people to write reviews, and then printing and distributing the finished product, the real difficulty for me is computers. When I first tried to produce a TTBA some years ago I was confounded by a piece of software called Quark which ran on Windows 3.1 (remember that?). Part of the reason that issue never saw the light of day is that I spent all my time trying to get to grips with Quark rather than irritating the blazes out of all my friends by pestering them for articles. My experience this time has been slightly better, and if you're reading this it's also been successful.

In these enlightened days there are free word processors (ssh, not a word to anyone about the pirated copy of Quark), and I've been through three of them before finally finding something that doesn't crash, doesn't reformat the whole issue in 6 point Helvetica, and doesn't joyfully scroll around so that it's impossible to see what you're typing. Having found one that works and that I can understand - Microsoft Word is too user-friendly for me, I suspect -- I'll stick to it, but I can't help but feel that all this should be easier somehow.

Science Fiction and its often quirky views of the future have proposed all manner of futuristic gadgets for handling information, from *Star Trek's* data tablets to the ludicrous glove-manipulated user interface from the recent *Minority Report* film, but I think *Babylon 5* was closest to the mark when it comes to predicting what we'll be doing in the future. Even in the 23rd Century, in a space station in the middle of nowhere, mankind (and indeed most of the main alien races we see) still uses paper. Paper is easy to use, the user interface is superb, and if it all goes wrong you can fold it into an aeroplane and throw it across the room. Try doing that with a word processor.

With luck I'll be vacating the Editor's chair before the next issue to let the real Editor take up his post. TTBA is what you make it, so if you have any articles, reviews, stories, poetry, artwork, or anything else we might be interested in, send it to soc-cusfs-ttba@lists.cam.ac.uk. (Despite my liking for pen and paper, we can't accept handwritten contributions because the Editor clint rode the headwithers. Plain text or some other widely-spoken electronic format will be fine.)

The Committee

<soc-cusfs@lists.cam.ac.uk>

Chairbeing:	Kate Stitt
Secretary:	Tony Evans
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TTBA Editor:	Gaute Strokkenes
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Tied-in but Unbound

Doctor Who coming back? It never went away...

Steven Kitson

Everyone who's ever been to school has seen it in action. It's instinctive, wired-in to our hardware, a reminder that three meals' hunger will have us breaking spectacles and making conversation pieces with poles and pigs' heads.

The first law of the pack: know your place. Everyone needs a whipping-boy, and every sub-culture needs a sub-sub-culture to look down on. But in pigeonholing these series and (perhaps spurred on by memories of a couple of particularly unimaginative *Star Trek* novels) separating the patronisingly-named 'spinoffery' away from 'real' sci-fi, is fandom guilty of exactly the same prejudice with which mainstream reviewers treat the genre as a whole? And, more importantly, are we missing out on something worthwhile?

The good Doctor is no stranger to the literary medium. Way back in 1964 -barely a year after the TV series began -- David Whitaker, the first script editor, adapted Terry Nation's script into *Doctor Who in an Exciting Adventure with the Daleks*. Even at this stage there were stirrings of originality: as the Dalek story was actually the second one broadcast and no one was likely to novelise the first, a lacklustre romp with cavemen (over twenty years later, it would be one of the last to make it into print) Whitaker invented a completely new opening in order to introduce readers to the Doctor and his companions, one widely thought to be better than that on television.

In was some years later, in 1973, that the famous Target novelisations began by reprinting Whitaker's work as *Doctor Who and the Daleks*. Over the next two decades almost all the broadcast stories were transmuted into prose, mostly by the prolific-beyond-all-reason Terrance Dicks. Despite working under heavy restrictions (the books had all to be the same length, whether the original was a two-part or a ten-part story; they were targeted expressly at children) the results were, though by no stretch of the imagination great literature, fun and exciting (often improving on the TV stories which were their inspiration): the perfect fodder for a pre-teen with a big imagination and a thirst for words. They introduced many children to *Doctor Who* or to sci-fi in general; in a recent interview Dicks was asked 'how does it feel to have taught an entire generation to read?'

As the series moved into what was to be its final phase, new script editor Andrew Cartmel had big ideas: for the first time a long-term view was taken, hints were dropped that the Doctor was perhaps more than he seemed. The novelisations reflected this, with such books as Ben Aaronovitch's treatment of his story *Remembrance of the Daleks* bringing in the first signs of a developed, rich mythology as strange and deep as anything in literary sci-fi. How well this would have translated to the screen is a mystery, as the rescheduled series lost its ratings battle against *Coronation Street* and production finished on the last season in 1989.

What seemed to be the end turned out, in true *Doctor Who* fashion, to be a new beginning. In 1991 Virgin books, which had acquired Target from WH Smith some years previously, launched a series of original novels picking up from where the TV series

left off. This new medium gave space to develop the new mythology and the character of the seventh Doctor himself: the rumpled mage, the clown who would use any means necessary, Time's Champion.

The New Adventures, as they were called, were unlike any other literary series. Quickly doubling their initial bi-monthly pace they had a momentum unmatched by any single author's series where books would appear after gaps of a year or more, but with over thirty different authors throughout the run there was no danger of the lack of ideas that eventually consumes most series. Successful financially as well as artistically, another range of books was launched featuring novels that slotted between TV stories to enable fans of other Doctors to see their favourite incarnation of the Time Lord in print.

Taken individually, the books scored more hits than misses. A combination of talented writers and a strong editor who refused to be satisfied with an unadventurous money-spinner that simply traded on past glories saw a range that could have been a lukewarm reread of the novelisations instead become as vibrant a source of new ideas as the mainstream sci-fi community during the period: Paul Cornell in *Love and War* played with the idea of virtual reality giving form to Jung's archetypes a full year before *Vurt*, and Aaronovitch took Iain M. Banks's conception of a technological paradise and asked the most important question, a question that Banks himself only touched on later: what do you do in the Culture if you love someone and they don't love you?

It was the name of *Doctor Who* which allowed this experimentation and originality to flourish. With steady sales practically guaranteed by the logo on the cover, the editors were able to take chances that more mainstream sci-fi publishers simply could not afford. Chances like developing new talent: many of the range's best writers had never been published before, and several have gone on to other things. Paul Cornell is becoming a presence in British TV drama, having written several episodes for the BBC's flagship series *Casualty*, and has recently published two original sci-fi books *Something More* and *British Summertime*; Mark Gatiss went on to co-create the Golden Rose of Montreux-winning *The League of Gentlemen*; and Lance Parkin was story editor on *Emmerdale* and wrote the acclaimed modern classic *Mandy's Secret Diary*.

As well as taking chances with new writers, the many of the books themselves were distinctly original, especially within the conservative genre of sf, a tradition that continues today. After the Doctor's short-lived return to television in 1996, the Doctor left Virgin (but not before the themes and mythology of the New Adventures had been brought to a satisfactory conclusion) and returned home to the BBC. There books like *The Scarlet Empress* and *The Blue Angel* (both by Paul Magrs) explore and explode narrative conventions, while Lawrence Miles's *The Adventuress of Henrietta Street* looks at symbolism and secret histories through the researches of a mysterious narrator who seems to know more than he is letting on.

The BBC have continued other traditions too, such as ensuring a mix of both new talent and those who bring their reputations to the range. Where Virgin had Russell T. Davies, writer of *Dark Season* who went on to find fame with *Queer as Folk*, and Steven Press Gang/*Coupling* Moffat, the BBC have Magrs, whose book *Modern Love* was hotly tipped for the Booker and who was listed among the *Times Literary Supplement's* Best Young British

Time and Space on a CD

Owen Dunn

The BBC currently publishes two ranges of *Doctor Who* books, and has recently reduced output from one book from each range a month to alternating them in order to allow the editorial team to spend more time on special projects to tie in with the upcoming fortieth anniversary of the TV series in November 2003. One range features the adventures of the first to seventh Doctors and their companions, while the other chronicles the continuing saga of the eighth Doctor (who appeared on TV once in 1996, played by Paul McGann). Both lines produce excellent books -- along with, it must be said, the occasional one that leaves you scratching your head as to why it was ever published -- but the latter is especially interesting as it carries the torch of the TV series in continuing the ongoing adventures of the Doctor.

As such, it is gratifying that these books do not remain static but do forge ahead into an uncertain future. Perhaps the biggest change of recent years was the destruction of the Doctor's home planet Gallifrey, an event which left the Doctor traumatised and the universe in an uncertain state. The books used this chance to refine and sharpen the Doctor's character: dropped without his memories at the end of the nineteenth century, he spent the next hundred years and six books slowly rediscovering his place in the universe and his own nature, connected to yet alien from the humans around him. The result was a Doctor who recaptures the distance, the danger which is such an important part of the character.

After escaping Earth, the Doctor's travels revealed that the universe was in a precarious state without the Time Lords to watch over it, leading up to the epic confrontation in the seventeenth century described in *The Adventuress of Henrietta Street*. Facing down the elemental forces of humanity's ignorance, the Doctor saved the day only after sacrificing an integral part of himself. This incident also introduced Sabbath, a human time-traveller with goals similar to the Doctor's but whose methods are utterly opposed, whose path has since crossed his several times.

Since then the books have embraced one of the series's concept's greatest strengths, the variety which is allowed by a narrative magic box that can take its occupants anywhere in time and space. The Doctor and his companions have faced anthropomorphic poodles who wanted to rewrite *The Lord of the Rings* and a comic-book supervillain at the end of time, visited the Spanish civil war and a planet of cartoons, while the books have explored the idea of historical truth emerging from disparate perspectives, the notion of Englishness in a post-World Trade Center world and the cruelty of free will.

Care has been taken to ensure that most books, while continuing the Doctor's story, are also 'stepping-on points' for those who want to give the series a try. If you are intrigued to find out about what's going on in this unfairly-neglected area of science fiction, I recommend picking up a copy of Lloyd Rose's *Camera Obscura* (it's got a rose on the cover) and settling back to enjoy a richly textured and wonderfully-written tale of carnival sideshows and temporal experiments in Victorian England.

If *Doctor Who*'s native medium is television, it is books that have always come second. It is only since the series' cancellation on television in 1989 that *Doctor Who* has really emerged in another medium: audio. Although the BBC themselves made some *Doctor Who* radio plays, they were always one-off specials.

Since 1996 Big Finish, a small British production company run largely by *Doctor Who* fans, had been producing audio dramas featuring Bernice Summerfield who had featured alongside the Doctor in Virgin's New Adventures *Doctor Who* novels. In 1999 the BBC offered them a licence to produce original *Doctor Who* audio plays for distribution on CD. It was a gamble: get the actors from the original television series to reprise their roles for audio plays, and hope that enough people buy the result. Luckily people did; Big Finish's first *Doctor Who* release, *The Sirens of Time* brought the Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Doctors together and sold over 30,000 copies. Although subsequent releases haven't been quite as successful as that, the company continues to be profitable and now releases a *Doctor Who* audio adventure on two CDs every month.

The thing which brought *Doctor Who* audios to my attention was the announcement in 2000 that Paul McGann would reprise his role as the Eighth Doctor in a season of four new plays. This was new *Who*, and once I'd enjoyed the first, *Storm Warning*, I was hooked. As I write, the second season of Eighth Doctor audios has just finished and a third seems a near certainty.

So, are they any good? The answer, as with the original television series, is that it varies. However, very few of the plays I've heard have fallen completely flat; even when they've not been wonderful they have largely still been great fun to listen to and that's largely the point of the whole thing. One of the most noticeable failings of some of the plays is their failure to make good use of the audio medium. Some releases are trying to be like television but without the pictures, making liberal use of special effects because sound is cheap and the listener can imagine the rest; unfortunately the result can be confused and hard to listen to. Other plays fall prey to the temptation to break the 'show, don't tell' rule, and compensate for the lack of visuals by stuffing the dialogue with exposition. Alan Barnes' two plays, *Storm Warning* and *Neverland* are particularly guilty of this, which is a particular shame in the case of *Storm Warning* because the pace of an otherwise enjoyable story is destroyed by the Doctor's lengthy soliloquising. On the other hand, there are stories which use the audio medium superbly. Jonathan Blum's *The Fearmonger* stands out, as does Robert Shearman's *The Chimes of Midnight* which creates a blend of tension and comedy in an Edwardian town house

Peter Davison, Colin Baker, Sylvester McCoy, and Paul McGann are all superb as the Doctor. Although it's been quite a while since any of them appeared in *Doctor Who* on television, they've picked up the role almost as if they've never been away. Davison, Baker, and McCoy all sound slightly older, certainly, and of the three it shows most in Davison's voice, but they manage to recapture the spirit of their time as the Doctor on television. Colin Baker is often singled out for praise for his performances in the Big Finish releases and rightly so. If his time as the Doctor on television was brief for political reasons, he's making up for lost

time now and playing the part the way one suspects he always wanted: more thoughtful and caring, and a good deal less loud. The innovation of an elderly companion in the form of a history lecturer called Evelyn helps as well. Played by Maggie Stables, Evelyn is a worthy match for Baker's Doctor, giving as good as she gets in their repartee.

Of the three television Doctors, Sylvester McCoy comes across least well on audio. Somehow he doesn't seem quite right, but it's hard to pin down quite why. I suspect that he was a much more visual Doctor on television, and it is the lack of these visual elements - the gait, the facial expressions - that I'm noticing. His successor, Paul McGann, is quite another matter. With only the character from the TV Movie to compare with there's no doubt that he's absolutely right as the life-loving Eighth Doctor. He bounds around his stories with obvious relish, at times reminding me of Patrick Troughton and at times of Tom Baker. Even the worst of the Big Finish Eighth Doctor stories (which I think has to be *Neverland*) is improved by McGann's presence.

So what of the future for Big Finish? Well, having just produced an adventure for webcasting on the BBC web site (*Real Time*) they're set to produce another, and they've already announced their plans for Doctor Who's 40th anniversary year in 2003. Read about *Zagreus* on their website and tell me it's not ambitious. I'll be very impressed if they manage to pull it off.

On the web:

<http://www.doctorwho.co.uk/>

Big Finish's *Doctor Who* releases

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/cult/doctorwho>

The official BBC site.

<http://www.gallifreyone.com/>

Fan site with news, reviews, and a comprehensive reference to all things *Who*

Reviews

Ash - A Secret History

Mary Gentle

Trade Paperback, £9.99

ISBN: 1-85798-744-6

Ash was a mercenary. Born 1457, died 1477. Raped at an early age, she learned to fight and became a leader of her own band. She's fought everywhere, from the furthest bounds of the Holy Roman Empire, to the English Civil Wars. The one thing she hasn't done is broken a condotta (her contract with her employer).

Pierce Ratcliff is a historian. Born in the 20th century he is writing a new biography of Ash at the beginning of the 21st, and uncovering new sources as he does so.

Ash faces problems from the major, like her ancestry, to the minor, how to feed 600 soldiers from day to day. Along the way she learns tolerance, hope, compassion and a lot more politics than she ever wanted to know.

Mary Gentle has done wonders with this book. To my mind Ash could have walked out of a real history book, although as history

the tale is somewhat too detailed to be from believable primary sources. It's impossible in most places to tell which bits of historical background she inserts are real, and which fiction. I suspect mostly the former.

The book has a lot of battles, but she manages to avoid them dominating the action. The inevitable journeys are successfully elided also, which is blissful. Some of the characterisation is a bit weak, but generally it's quite good. Read it.

Jonathan Amery

Ash is also available in the CUSFS Library.

British Summertime

Paul Cornell

Trade Paperback, £10.99

ISBN 0-575-07369-1

Paul Cornell came to talk to CUSFS earlier this year and apart from being a very entertaining guest, he read us some excerpts from his forthcoming novel *British Summertime*. These short fragments were quite light in tone, so the bleak and at times gruesome tone of the bulk of the novel when I came to read it were something of a surprise to me.

Alison Parmeter has a talent for reading things and people. She can look into a face and see a past and future, at a house and see that a dog lives there, at a street in a strange town and detect the gradient of 'chipshopness' that promises fast food ahead. When her friend Fran starts acting strangely and then disappears, Alison goes looking for her and encounters the Golden Men, angelic figures who have been around since Old Testament times, and then... Well, it gets complicated, as plots involving time travel are wont to do, and you need to add a Biggles-like pilot from the future, his disembodied head co-pilot, British Intelligence, and Judas Iscariot before you can start trying to imagine the whole of the story; the book is full of ideas. When I first read the book earlier this year I wasn't quite convinced that it all fit together, but on re-reading it for this review I found the intricate complexity breathtaking and convincing.

'Write about what you know' is often a tactic suggested to writers, and regardless of its merits in general one area where it does work well is in creating a sense of place, as here where *British Summertime* is set firmly in Cornell's home city of Bath, a city 'designed by the old and the drunk and the Luftwaffe, and their combined efforts resulted in a city of Autumn'. The novel is also very evocative of time: the national fuel protests and the *News of the World's* campaign to 'name and shame' paedophiles both make an appearance.

British Summertime is a very rich book, well worth reading and re-reading. I said it was bleak, but the bleakness is leavened throughout with wit, and there is a happy ending. Sort of.

Owen Dunn

The Straw Men
Michael Marshall (Smith)
Hardback, £10.00
ISBN: 0-00225-601-0

Michael Marshall Smith came to Borders in Cambridge recently to talk about his new novel, *The Straw Men*, published under the name Michael Marshall, and sold on the thriller shelves rather than the SF ones. "So why should we buy your book?" he was asked. MMS, grinning and unhesitant, replied, "because it's fabulous!"

So (slightly hesitant) I bought it, a little worried that one of my favourite authors was selling out. The plot goes like this: Ward Hopkins returns to his family home after his parents' funeral to find a note in his father's handwriting - "Ward, we're not dead". An abduction puts John Zandt, an ex-homicide detective, back on the trail of a serial killer who abducted his daughter two years ago. The two men follow their increasingly mysterious trails, crossing paths and eventually realising they're trying to solve the same problem, and ending in a dangerous attempt to rescue the latest abductee.

And, well, it is indeed fabulous. The change of setting to present-day has done nothing to cramp MMS's style. *The Straw Men* feels like a natural progression from his earlier works, with serial killers as disturbing as the farm in *Spare*, and detective writing that is every bit as sharp as in *One Of Us*. What surprised me most is that the air of magnificent strangeness that MMS's SF creates has also survived the move to a present-day story. The prose flows easily, carrying the reader easily along through the coilings and twistings of the plot. My only criticisms are that the plot gets a little *too* convoluted during the middle (where Hopkins and Zandt are still following independent trails) and that the characterisation is slightly patchy -- Ward Hopkins is superbly characterised, but Zandt and his partner seem a little wooden at times.

Overall, though, a really good read. Even if you're not fond of thrillers, give it a go (and MMS promises to return to the SF eventually...)

Clare Boothby

Signs
Written and directed by M. Night Shyamalan
Mel Gibson, Joaquin Phoenix, CGI aliens
Out Now

I'll come clean: I never saw *The Sixth Sense*. My first M. Night experience was 2001's paean to the four-colour superhero, *Unbreakable*. While, yes, it did have an impressive twist ending, I was left wondering what all the fuss was about.

Fortunately, Shyamalan's style fits his most recent work much better than his last. His portentous dialogue and a directorial style which had his actors delivering every line as if they were announcing the death of a major Royal still distance the viewer from the characters. While in the earlier film this greatly hindered the necessary empathy for its everyman hero, it is perfect for a film which is self-consciously a dramatised debate on Faith.

Gibson is mediocre as a priest who has turned his back on God and retired to a farm with his brother (Phoenix in another

excellent performance) and his two splendidly creepy children (Rory Culkin (yes, Macaulay's brother) and Abigail Breslin).

They awake one morning to a bizarre pattern of circles flattened into their crops. Is it the work of local hoaxers, or could the explanation lie farther from this world? Well, what do you think?

You don't need to worry about paying too much attention to this movie; you could happily doze off during some of the early sequences while you wait for the aliens to turn up. Anything that is vaguely important to the plot is signposted in flashing neon and repeated at least twice, just to make sure you don't miss it, and then in case you forgot during the last thirty minutes there are those annoying half-second flashbacks just before the payoff. Patronising? Oh yes.

The aliens' behaviour is suitably mysterious, though it does sometimes come across as a slightly forced eccentricity -- as if these are pretentious goth extraterrestrials, affecting bizarre symbols and mannerisms in order to be more inscrutable. Throughout most of the film they are seen only partly and in fleeting glimpses and these appearances, aided by the superbly manipulative soundtrack, are some of the most effective sudden-jolt thrills seen in cinemas this year. It's not the constant uneasiness of *The Others*, but it had me jumping in my seat, and I'm not usually a jumper.

The climax is disappointing: the aliens are reduced from terrifying force of nature to standard Hollywood CGI extraterrestrials, while the thematic conclusion is heavy-handed and trite. All things considered, *Signs* is a lightweight shock-fest with ideas well above its station, worth seeing if you have some time on your hands and you fancy raising your heart rate a little. Just don't expect to have to think, and at all costs ignore the last ten minutes.

I'm still wondering what all the fuss is about.

Steven Kitson

The Librarian Speaks

Clare Boothby

Possibly CUSFS' best-kept secret (after the one about the tame Venusian in the society trunk, anyway) is its Library. Situated in the heart of Cambridge, this majestic building dominates the Cambridge skyline, dwarfing the historically less interesting colleges -- or maybe not... In *this* universe, the Library is split between a set of rather dishevelled cupboards in the Union Society building and my attic. Its purpose is no less noble, though: to provide a source of reading matter for the impoverished student. With more than four thousand books, and free borrowing rights for all members, we hope to keep your bookshelves and your brains busy throughout your time in Cambridge (anyone who manages to read all 4000+ in three years may be eligible for a small prize). Our collection spans science-fiction, fantasy and friends with little regard for style, popularity or taste. We have everything from the rare (obscure Vinge, anyone?) to the common (Pratchett by the ton), from the sublime (Wolfe at his best) to the ridiculous (Heinlein's redheads) to the downright awful (I'm going to stop naming names here!) We've got high art and hack fantasy, the one you read when you were little and never thought you'd find again, and the one you always meant to get round to reading but never have. Simply

find what you want in the catalogue (available online at <http://www.chiark.greenend.org.uk/cusfs/>) and let me know, either in person at one of the discussion or social meetings or by email (soc-cusfs@lists.cam.ac.uk).

Alas, it is also my sad duty to inform you that due to problems with our tenure at the Union Society, the part of the Library that resides there is not currently available for borrowing. However, the remaining part is still very definitely open for business. The online catalogue lists the complete collection and the currently-borrowable bit separately, and you can expect to see both raffle books and advanced-reading books (for swotting up on meeting topics beforehand) at the discussion meetings. (And if anyone knows of anywhere we could keep 4000+ books indefinitely then the committee would be *very* interested to hear from you!)

Planet of War

Sebastian Bleasdale

"Gentlemen," Planning said, and seated himself, completing the Mars Colony Leadership Committee. "I assume the six of you have read the briefing. So, Mining - can it be stopped?"

"An ordinary meteor, no problem," Mining said. "But this one, it's got a small moon's mass and there must be half earth's antimatter pushing it. No chance."

"We sent a probe. It got shot down," Exploration said. "Our ships have no better armour. What I want to know is why they're doing this. They must know they can't get away with it. When the WPO hears..."

Defence had been looking pale. "The Sayles project," he said.

"You went ahead with it? Even though..."

"A month until the ship's launch," Defence confirmed. "But everyone's loyal... they can't have found out."

"We can launch it before?" Planning said.

"A fortnight at best. And we've only got days before ... but this is insane. It's overkill. The meteor doesn't just destroy the ship or even nuke the base. It'll shift Mars out of its bloody orbit."

"But completely legally," Mining said, glaring at Defence, "Thanks to your ship and you ignoring every..."

Planning cut him off. "Recriminations later. We've got an evacuation to organise."

As it happened, the president of UMRA hadn't known about the ship. However, as with everything else, his unborn son was going to get the best star sign that money could buy.

On the web:

As well as drawing our *Captain CUSFS* comic, Sebi wrote and drew a year's worth of web comic...

<http://pcpcomic.ucam.org/>

Pete the Carnivorous Plant

Taking the Biscuit

Owen Dunn

'This is where we signed the treaty that ended the War, in the same place Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan made their first steps towards the end of the Cold War fifty years ago. Reykjavik. A place half the world hadn't heard of back then but now the place the whole world knows as the place Mankind was saved.'

Serge paused and looked past the small group of tourists and the white-painted building and the city lights beyond. They knew now what bargain had been struck on their behalf, what sacrifice had been made, to secure their safety. His train of thought was interrupted by a glider roaring across the harbour. Cameras clicked, flashes went off, and the tourists gasped appreciatively as, in the distance beyond the glider's path, the Northern Lights began their nightly show.

Thousands of miles away the President of the United States (and Mankind's Official Representative to the League of Friends) took a gulp of coffee and grimaced.

'So, what do they want from the first shipment?'

His National Security Advisor looked up from the strange pad device they'd been given by their conquerors. It was rather like a laptop computer, but the casing was malleable like plasticine and could morph into any shape at the machine's command. Their scientists hadn't been able to work it out, and whenever they tried to examine the device a small warning popped up and the device would shut down for a while in an electronic sulk.

'It's rather strange, Mr President,' she said.

The President laughed. 'What isn't with these guys?' Some of the others in the room laughed nervously.

'Well, they want... Look, I'll show you.' She hit a button on the side of the device and turned it round. They read:

A GRANDE AMERICANO WITH ROOM FOR MILK

The machine recoiled in distaste as the President spluttered a mouthful of coffee over it. His Secretary of State slapped him on the back until he stopped coughing.

'Is that all?' he croaked.

'Well,' said his National Security Advisor cautiously, 'there's a slight matter of scale.'

* * *

Serge smiled as he sat in the little coffee bar enjoying a cappuccino and reading a copy of the London Times from a couple of days ago. He had left the tourists bewildered as their real tour guide had arrived and come here. This holiday was turning out well, just the relaxing break he needed after all the chaos that the Friends' attack had caused. An odd name, but that was what they called themselves. The Quakers had been outraged.

His pocket beeped and he ignored it; he was on holiday, after all. His pocket gave him a small electric shock, and he pulled the bleeper out to find it pulsing an angry red. 'Sorry about holiday. Help required urgent. Washington.'

'Ah hell,' he muttered. 'What do *they* want?'

* * *

'A cup of coffee.'

Serge blinked. 'Why call me? You could just go down the road to Starbucks.'

'You know what these people are like, Serge. We're talking about aliens for whom Earth is approximately equivalent to a small coffee shop. A grande americano is going to be something like...'

'About five thousand trillion litres,' supplied the National Security Advisor.

'Jeez. That's a *lot* of coffee, A hell of a lot of coffee.' Serge paused and frowned. 'Even supposing we can make that much coffee, where do we get a cup large enough to serve it in?'

'Actually,' said the President, 'I don't think that'll be a problem. They just want it beamed to their ship.'

'Ri-ight. So all we need is a jumbo espresso the size of New York and a whole load of hot water...'

* * *

A week later the Grande Americano Project was up and running under the supervision of the Government's Chief Scientific Officer Serge Cossett. It wasn't going very well, though. They'd assembled on the shores of Lake Michigan -- Serge guessed they'd have to go to Lake Victoria if the Friends had wanted a Venti -- and had set about acquiring all the material for the largest cup of coffee America, or indeed the world, had ever seen.

The espresso machine was relatively easy: a quick modification to one of their obsolete gas-burning power stations, and they had something which would use power to convert water to steam and force that steam through an enormous quantity of ground coffee. The difficult part was the hot water for the rest of the Americano.

'We've tried everything, but we just can't heat the whole of Lake Michigan to the sort of temperature we need!'

The President frowned at Serge. 'Not even close? No, I suppose not, and we can hardly serve them cold coffee. We've got to do something, otherwise this planet's toast!'

'Yes! That's it!'

'You *want* the planet to...'

'Gimme the communication device, the one you use to talk to the Friends.'

The President pulled the little walkie-talkie out of his pocket and looked at it. Serge snatched it from his hand and began to dictate his message to Earth's conquerors:

'You scum, you think you can just come here and demand a coffee the size of Lake Michigan? Who do you think you are? I can't speak for the President but for me the Treaty's off. Do you hear? No more coffee, no custom disco acts, no planet-wide karaoke. Off.'

The President was staring at him, mouth wide open and eyes bulging. 'You just told the Friends to...'

'Not yet. In about two minutes.' He took a couple of steps towards the water and threw the communicator into a speedboat at the side of the lake. 'On my mark, dump the espresso into the water.'

'You're mad!' spluttered the President. He was on the point of having Serge arrested, but couldn't quite see the point of firing the only man crazy enough to pull this thing off.

'No more mad than the idea of making a giant cup of americano, Mr President.'

They waited, staring at the water, while the engineers on the espresso machine readied the giant hoses that would deliver a concentrated burst of caffeinated goodness into Lake Michigan. Then, suddenly, Serge ran to the side of the lake where the speedboat was waiting, started the motor, and jumped out as the boat chugged out towards the deeper water.

The President looked at Serge. 'Got to make sure the heat gets delivered to the heart of the drink. And stir it a bit...'

There was a terrible deathly silence and then a loud whining noise as a beam of red heat lanced from the sky into the lake. The Friends weren't happy.

'Now!'

The espresso workers started the machine and the syrupy sluggish substance gushed like oil into the water, which had begun to steam and bubble at the touch of the Friends' heat ray.

'Oh my God,' said the President.

'Oh my God,' said the National Security Advisor.

'Now they just need to, well, wake up and smell the coffee,' said Serge.

At that moment, two things happened. The heat ray stopped, there was a pause, and then the lake was surrounded by an eerie blue glow. The ground shook and the rumble of rock being torn from rock was briefly audible before it was overtaken by a horrible wheezing sound. The lake, and much of the land around it, vanished from sight, leaving in its place a perfectly round crater.

Applause broke out among the party at the lake's edge as it started to rain. The President hugged Serge, the National Security Advisor hugged a surprised espresso engineer. They had done it!

'What about the milk and sugar?' asked the President.

'I imagine they've got other planets for that. I don't envy them; they'll need one hell of a lot of cows.'

'There's a medal for you for this, Serge.' The President was

grinning.

'Don't count your chickens,' muttered Serge. He pointed up at the sky where several huge metallic discs were falling through the atmosphere, glowing red with the friction of re-entry.

'What the *hell* is that?'

'I think, Mr President, that it's our tip...'

CUSFS Vice-Presidents

Owen Dunn

Did you know that Stephen Hawking is Honorary President of CUSFS, and that we managed to persuade him to agree to don this mantle only on the condition that we never talk to him again? If not, you probably didn't know that CUSFS elects six vice-presidents every year either. Here are the results of recent years' elections.

2000

In 2000, vice-presidents were chosen by mediocrity voting (whereby the most and least popular choices are discarded) and they were:

- Sam, the New Hall College cat
- The Name of the Rose
- The spirit of English cricket
- The view from the lounge at 12A Clare Colony
- Thomas Womack's disk space
- Ian Jackson's bed

2001

In 2001, the CUSFS vice-presidents were elected in a succession of games of top trumps, where nominees' talents were pitted against each other for no particularly good reason. Those selected were:

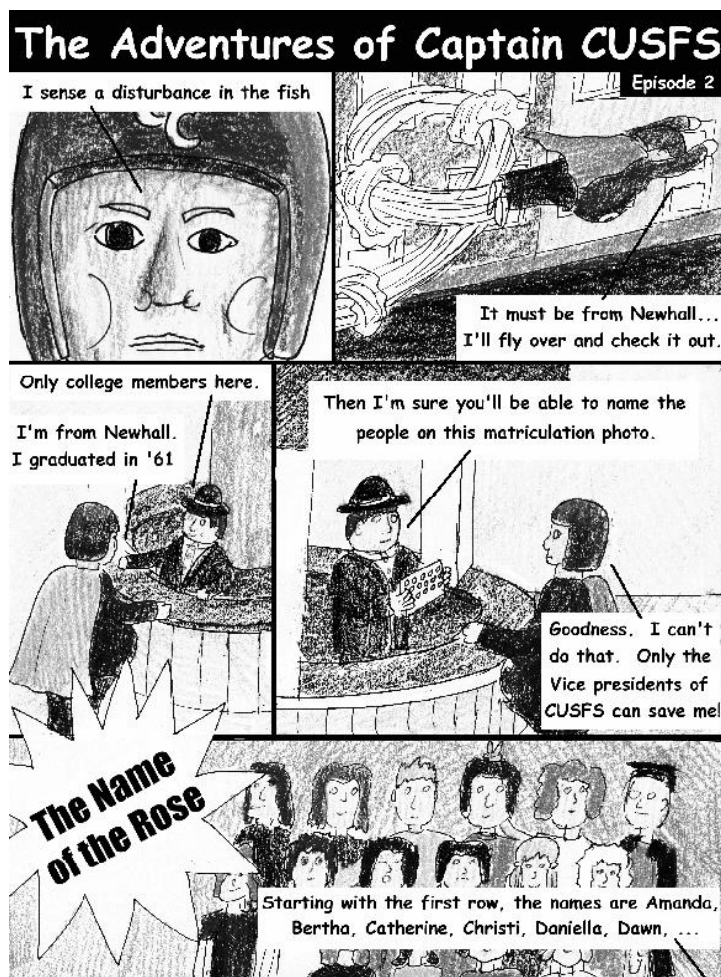
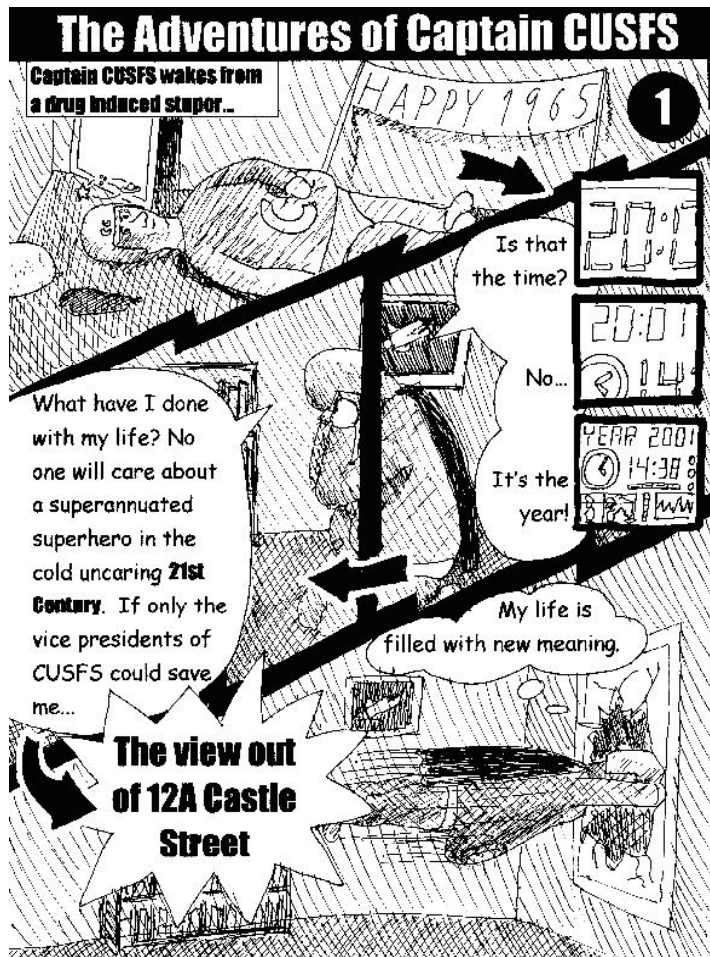
- John Prescott's fist
- The *Instituto do Vinho do Porto* (Port Wine Institute)
- The Women's Press
- Tom the barman at Girton
- Shiny Things

(No, I don't know why there are only five either. -Ed.)

2002

In the year 2002, vice-presidential nominations were submitted to trial by combat, as one Summer evening CUSFS members gathered in Trinity New Court to fire rubber bands at one another, much to the bemusement of passing college porters. The result of this bloody battle was that the following miscreants were elected:

- The Glorious Planet Gallifrey (may she rest in peace)
- Kate Stitt
- The Picture of Dorian Gray
- Cambridge University Veterinary School
- Anubis
- Pern



Termcard - Michaelmas 2002

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Week 1 7th-13th October							Squash Bowett Room, Queens' 7:30pm
Week 2 14th-20th October				<i>Doctor Who</i> Video Showing			Discussion: <i>Doctor Who</i>
Week 3 21st-27th October							Discussion: Favourite Author
Week 4 28th Oct - 3rd Nov				Dinner			Discussion: Mars
Week 5 4th-10th November							Games Evening
Week 6 11th-17th November				Storytelling			Discussion: Douglas Adams
Week 7 18th-24th November							Discussion: <i>Star Wars</i>
Week 8 25th Nov - 1st Dec				Reading			Discussion: Marion Zimmer-Bradley

(Where not listed here venues will be announced by e-mail. To receive information about the society, mail soc-cusfs@lists.cam.ac.uk)