

Three Thousand Books Arrive!

(Librarian Rumoured Still Alive)



ttba:30.1

September 2003

Chairbeing's Address

Kate Stitt

Welcome Back!

Here we are at the start of another year, and CUSFS seems to be going from strength to strength. Last year brought us lots of new members, exciting discussions, film screenings, and some extremely convivial socials, as well as events like Picocon and the launch of *Finding Helen*, the new book by Colin Greenland, one of CUSFS's favourite authors and all over nice chap. The library is back in hand thanks to some hard work by Clare Boothby. And of course we couldn't forget the Afmælisdagr, the Wake for the Old year (and a very good sunrise it was too), an extremely successful Veizla, and after a year's hiatus, the appearance of two excellent TTBA's; my thanks go to the editor, Owen Dunn, for his sterling work on those, and on the edition you're holding now.

This year promises to be equally exciting. Highlights coming up include trips to book launches and signings, an exciting selection of discussions and screenings, a library duplicate sale, and plenty of opportunities to meet and mingle with CUSFS members, old and new.

Thanks to the outgoing committee, for their dedicated work over the last year - you all did a grand job, and it wouldn't have happened without you - and to the incoming members, for volunteering and for their determination to make this year another great one. With their help, and yours, it should be packed with events to remember!

Kate Stitt, CUSFS Chairbeing 2002-2004.

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Editorial

Owen Dunn

The long hot Summer is gone and term is nearly upon us, and with it comes a new issue of TTBA. Published two or three times a year, TTBA has been the CUSFS magazine since 1974 when its title was *Title To Be Announced*, but that made things too easy for the University Library, so the title has changed every issue since 1975. With stories, reviews, articles, letters, and news about CUSFS and science fiction in general, TTBA is available free to all members of CUSFS.

There are a lot of reviews this issue, of books, authors, films and series both new and old. Now the CUSFS Library has moved out of the Union Society, it's an excellent opportunity to read for yourself some of the books on review here or up for discussion later in the term. (There's also an explanation by the Librarian of the current state of the Library and our plans for it elsewhere in this issue.)

Of course, the magazine wouldn't even exist without its contributors, so if you've read any science fiction or fantasy, seen any interesting SF films, felt a burning urge to rant about the misunderstood semiotics of space opera, or just been overcome by a desire to doodle spaceships, you can help! Send all your reviews, articles, artwork, comments, and letters to soc-cusfs-ttba@lists.cam.ac.uk; plain text is preferred, but any widely-spoken electronic format is fine.

This is my third issue of TTBA as Editor, with another one or two to come this year, but I'm very conscious of the fact that I don't get a lot of feedback beyond congratulations for managing to produce another issue. I'd really like to know what you, the readers, think of TTBA. Would you like to see more smaller issues, or just two or three medium-sized editions each year? What do you think of the mix of articles, fiction, and reviews? How about the layout? Let me know, and there's a chance I can make things (even) better.

One thing I'd like to see more of in TTBA is opinion articles. I want to see both sides of debates, authors sufficiently entrenched in their views that they'll defend anything to the death and beyond. I want blood in these pages, so if you feel a burning passion to defend Stephen Donaldson against allegations that he's an angsty hack with an overwhelming love for the word "clench", or you want to disparage *Babylon 5* as *Star Trek* without the production values, I'd really love to hear from you.

The other thing we need more of is art. We have our very own Captain CUSFS, but it'd be nice to have a few illustrations throughout the magazine. If you can draw, and especially if you can draw science fiction, do get in touch!

The Last Man in the World

Lucy McWilliam

I met Dora six months before it all began. She was devastating. I was a technician at one of the medical research institutes that clung to the edge of the city, while she'd just moved back from the States to head a new genetics lab at the university. We were thrown together at one of those numerous wine-and-no-cheese events which infest the run up to Christmas, when the safety officer from the hospital A&E department somehow failed to negotiate some low-flying fairy lights. You think he'd know better, but on this occasion I forgave him. After I'd retrieved several shop-bought mince pies from the tinsel-laden branches of the fake tree and fetched Dora another glass of inexpertly mixed punch, I decided it would only be polite to introduce myself. I told her my name, which is Adrian Newton, and added that my parents wanted to call me Isaac but the midwife thought the other kids would throw apples at me. Dora thought that was hilarious.

As the inhospitable chill of winter melted into the welcoming arms of spring, Dora and I grew blissfully happy. We were made for each other. I'd escort her home from work, especially when the GM activists were parading in force, and recount the anecdotes I'd stored up in my head to amuse her. I'd treasure the curl of hair she'd bestowed upon me and I'd keep it in a locket around my neck, close to my heart. I'd stay awake for hours just to watch her sleep. There must have been something in the air. Everywhere I looked people were smiling and laughing. We had no idea of the pain and misery that was to come.

In mid-February, Dora was due to attend a two-week conference in Hawaii. I was so jealous. Only astronomers and fruit fly geneticists get to go to Hawaii. I vowed to keep myself frantically occupied with work while she was gone. I made her cups of soothing herbal tea when she had a headache from alternating between microscope and computer screen all day. I listened to her practising her talks and joking about how all fruit flies did all day was eat, sleep and reproduce. When I said I'd like to be a fruit fly she told me I should have been a comedian.

As the dainty shades of March and April blossomed into the riotous carnival of summer, Doomsday approached. The undergraduates settled down to some last minute revision, while the steady trickle of tourists thundered into a torrent. Dora and I attended the DNA anniversary celebrations along with, according to the proclamations of the glossy brochure, aging and esteemed molecular biologists from all four corners of the globe. The high school geometry part of my brain protested that the Earth was spherical, not cuboid. Dora giggled like a girl.

I nearly fell asleep during the Chancellor's speech and tried not to cough too loudly as the Science Minister vaunted the achievements of British scientists. It felt almost like being a student again. We ate a picnic lunch amid a sea of dancing dandelion clocks and I watched them shedding their seeds into the flurry of the flirtatious breeze. As the conversation turned to the latest bacterial genome sequencing projects, I noted that Bordatella and Yersinia sounded like Mediterranean holiday destinations. Dora just rolled her eyes in a comical fashion.

The first days of June were filled with excitement. Dora and I did the usual round of the college balls, where I showed off my

juggling skills, and we spent Suicide Sunday ensconced in The Eagle, enjoying the extended happy hour. The next day, the unexpected sighting of a continent-crushing asteroid was plastered across the front pages of the national press. Quite frankly, I thought there was more chance of winning the National Lottery. The following Saturday, my numbers came up.

We were wandering round the midsummer fair, eating seafood and drinking beer. The air brewed with alcohol-fuelled conversation and the earthy smell of yeast. I watched with an affectionate smile as a small boy ambled past, blowing pretty bubbles in the air. They bob bob bobbed upwards and afar on a caress of the wind, exquisitely iridescent, kind of how I imagined souls might look. I like kids but I couldn't eat a whole one, I told Dora. You're so funny, she said.

Despite the sultry summer heat, I couldn't help shivering. The common had always been several degrees cooler than the rest of the city. Tourist guides and ghost walkers attributed this to the fourteenth century plague victims buried below. More sensible people believed it was due to the proximity of the river. Just after eight, my back pocket chirruped. I'd won the lottery! It's a shame it was only a tenner.

June ripened into July. The country was basking, some might say broiling, in the midst of a heatwave. There had already been two in-depth reports on the growing problem of global warming in the colour supplements to the Sunday papers. The organisers of the annual film festival feared a low turnout but Dora and I, like many people, took advantage of the arctic air conditioning and chilled drinks and stayed up to watch late night showings of classics such as *The Day The Earth Stood Still*, *The Terminator* and *Dr Strangelove*. Kinky sex, I suggested. Dora just threw popcorn at me. How ironic, we thought later.

To start with, people thought it was just another one of those bugs going round, an inevitable consequence of the influx of several thousand summer language students and the pre-end-of-term stress and post-end-of-term binge when most of the undergraduates buggered off home. It was the holiday season and the familiar faces in the common room changed from week to week. It was only when the ritual signing of 'get well soon' cards began to eat into the morning coffee break and the first deaths were officially acknowledged that people stopped gossiping and started to take serious notice.

Predictably, the first things to run out were bread, milk and bottled water. Mind you, that used to happen after a mere overnight snowstorm or the vaguest threat of a fuel shortage. No matter. Both Dora and I were wheat intolerant and hardened espresso drinkers. More than gradually, the schools closed one by one and the offices emptied as people began to find good excuses for working at home. The trip Dora and I had planned to the Shakespeare Festival was cancelled as the principal actors, the understudies, and the understudies of the understudies all succumbed. A plague on all our houses.

July yellowed into August. This is it, this is the big one. That's what the pessimists, scaremongers and vigilant were thinking. But - aside from obviously being some kind of rapidly evolving, highly transmissible virus - no one knew what *it* was. And without that knowledge there could be no vaccine and no cure.

One of the Australian tabloids reported - inaccurately, as it soon transpired - it to be a cousin-once-removed of a some virus that

inflicts blindness on marsupials. They christened it - rather appropriately, I thought - Kangaroo Flu and the name somehow stuck. Those out to make a quick buck stood on street corners peddling designer surgical masks, which had become all the rage, with tiny kangaroos on. This just happened to coincide with the release of a major Hollywood studio's big screen adaptation of the kids TV series, *Joey*. Before the authorities ordered the cessation of public gatherings, you could sit in a cinema and watch a walking talking CGI *Joey* while wearing a *Joey* mask and trying to eat promotional *Joey* popcorn. The conspiracy theorists had a field day with that one.

I usually avoided the news. It was depressing at the best of times. If something really important happened I'd expect one of the busybodies would make sure I was informed about it soon enough. One lunchtime I was lounging in the common room, idly resisting being drawn into small talk with the few remaining people working on our virus detection system. True to form, the Secretary-To-The-Research-Director - the capital letters were important, apparently - darted through the doorway and pressed the big red button on the dusty TV in the corner.

"...and if you've just joined us..."

It's strange how those were always the first words I heard whenever I happened to be near a television. It's like they *knew*. The sombre-faced, grey-haired BBC newsreader had been wearing a black tie since the death of the Queen, and it looked like he was still wearing the same suit.

"...in an announcement made a few minutes ago, the UK Government imposed martial law..."

A murmur shuddered through the building. It looked like there was going to be an apocalypse after all.

Next was a round-up of the world news. Apparently Canada's prime minister had vowed to jail "irresponsible" people who violated quarantine laws, the National Guard had gotten trigger happy in Birmingham, Alabama and, despite having the lowest reported infection rate, Singapore announced plans to install a thermal imaging camera at Chiangi International Airport.

Then followed a public information databurst, a veritable cornucopia of useful bullet points, meaningful statistics and whizzy graphics worthy of an election-night Peter Snow, bless his soul. From what I remember, the text went something like this:

```
***DATA***
OfficeOfNationalStatistics:
NewCases=1,517,666
Deaths=839,213
DepartmentofHealth:
Symptoms=fever,cough,headAche,soreThroat,
muscleAche.
Treatment=bedrest,fluids.
SeeCommunityPharmacistFor:
Paracetamol,analgesics,antipyretics,antibiotics,
linctus,oxygen.
Complications=pneumonia,bronchitis,heartAttack
SeekMedicalAttention. NationalHelpline=0800424242
***END***
```

I sighed, stood up and went back to work. It'd all be over soon, bar the screaming, and I'd rather not have to listen.

August withered into autumn. Fall, the Americans called it. We'd fallen all right. Where there would have been smoking leaves and toasted marshmallows there were now smouldering bodies and scorched earth. So much for gunpowder, treason and plot. Before I knew it, I was sitting on my own, illuminated by a single candle, listening to the endless static on my wind-up radio.

They're all dead, I told him. He was a scrawny ball of mangled ginger fur with a blue collar and a silver bell that jangled incessantly as he snaked between my legs. I shuddered to think what he was surviving on. Maybe he was the ancestor of the next dominant species on the planet. It was a somewhat comforting thought. I hoisted the coil of rope over my shoulder and set off on the familiar route across the market square. I'd always had plans to build Dora a garden swing and now, when it was too late, I finally had the time.

The September sun sank behind the dreaming spires, drowning the city in blood and shadow. At ground level the air was dead, stagnant. From above, there was a flapping sound in the last puff of breeze. I looked up. Some agile young so-and-so had strung a banner across the ornate roof of the college chapel. THE END IS FUCKING NIGH. You can say that again, I thought.

I don't know how long I stood there, staring at the sky. I don't even know what I was thinking. All of a sudden, out of nowhere I heard the faintest of sounds. I spun around, to see nothing but the jaundiced grass and the weathered skeletons of bicycles. It grew louder, a metronomic squeaking, a high-pitched heartbeat, like an approaching army of mutant mice. A man on a bike wobbled around the corner. It was the safety officer from the hospital A&E department. We stared at each other, mouths agape.

"You're alive..."

I parked the bike against the railings outside Dora's house, under the council notice which explicitly forbade me from doing so. That was the good thing about Armageddon, no more silly rules. I smoothed my tousled hair, wincing as I grazed the rope burns on my hands, and plucked the lilies from the front basket.

My darling Dora lay on the bed, surrounded by sweet smelling flowers, strawberry blonde hair curling around her angelic face, slender arms folded across her milky chest, peaceful. I once told her she was like really good ice cream. Just being with her gave me a chill of satisfaction in the pit of my stomach. I wanted to consume her. In that room, in the half-twilight, with blood on my hands, I watched as she opened her eyes, eyes that pierced me straight to the heart.

"Why are you doing this?" she pleaded.

I absentmindedly fingered the locket around my neck, the locket that contained her hair, the hair that contained her DNA. I'd known before I'd sequenced it that we would be biochemically compatible. Like I said, we were made for each other. Oh, don't quibble with me about data protection ethics. Seq-U-like would be all the rage in the future. Or it might've been.

Why go to the trouble of trying to synthesise a plague from scratch when there are already plenty of dangerous pathogens available? You just get a close relative and use standard genetic

engineering, splicing in a get-out-of-jail-free card for yourself and your loved one of course. Isn't DNA wonderful? How tragic that the legacy of its discovery should be the smoking gun by which the golden bullet was delivered.

We, foolish mankind, have been predicting our own demise ever since we crawled out of the slime and tumbled down from the trees. Needless to say, we've come catastrophically close on more than a few occasions. People used to believe that Judgement Day would arrive with with a sudden flash of blinding white light and an unforgiving cloud of radioactive dust. Bad Hollywood science fiction lured us into a sense of false security. We would defeat the alien invaders. The asteroid would be deflected in the nick of time. A cure would be found. Science, courage and - most importantly, love - would triumph. The world would go on turning.

I thought back to that day, Valentine's Day, in the airport, her head tossing in contemptuous laughter, her hair tumbling like a waterfall into the whirlpool of her eyes.

"Not unless you were the last man in the world," she'd said.

And so, a good five million years before the warranty of the sun was due to run out, the world ended, not with a bang, but with a whimper, the death rattle of unrequited love.

This is Lucy McWilliam's first story for TTBA. When not occupied with stories or the many reviews she's contributed to this issue, she's doing a PhD with the Genetics department.

Summer Substance

*Lucy McWilliam, Simon Tatham,
Clare Boothby*

Before the Summer break, we asked three TTBA readers what they were looking forward to before Autumn. This was what they said...

Unless you've been hiding under a moon rock, it can't have escaped your notice that the fifth Harry Potter book, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, is due out on June 21st. Why on earth, you may be thinking, should a grown-up literary magazine like TTBA (!) be concerned with wizards, flying broomsticks and other fantastical things? When the fourth book, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, was released in the summer of 2000, I was finishing off a Masters degree in Leeds and, despite spending a large amount of my time procrastinating in Borders (I'm so glad they got round to opening one in Cambridge), was seemingly immune to the hype. It took eighteen months, a severe bout of insomnia and a perusal of my housemate's bookshelf to change my mind.

First of all, the adventures of Harry, Ron and Hermione are not just for kids. They're *fun*, dammit. Who hasn't drooled over the Halloween feast, wished they had their own house elf or yearned to race around the sky on a broomstick? Who hasn't dreamed (even if it was only a dream) of battling side by side with loyal and courageous friends (a la *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) and (in the words of Rick O'Connell from *The Mummy*) rescuing the damsel in distress (Hermione or Ginny Weasley), killing the bad guy (Professor Quirrell, at least) and saving the world (even temporarily)? Why should these experiences be restricted to

those under the legal drinking age? Even (some might say especially) adults need to escape the real world.

Secondly, JK Rowling's books, despite their increasing length (*Order of the Phoenix* will consist of 225,000 words in 786 pages and 38 chapters), prove much easier on the brain than, for example, Shelley's *Frankenstein* or Hamilton's *Night's Dawn* trilogy. This may explain why I whizzed through the former within a weekend, while the latter remain languishing in my to-read pile.

Having said that, just as *Babylon 5* is not just another *Star Trek*, the Harry Potter story is more than just a Famous Five for the Gameboy generation. The plot of this intricate world is as thick as the spines of the books in which it is written. Harry's ability to speak Parseltongue, first revealed in chapter two of the first book, *The Philosopher's Stone*, is instrumental in the second book, *Chamber of Secrets*. Sirius Black, wrongly accused villain of the third book, *Prisoner of Azkaban*, is first mentioned a mere sixteen pages into *The Philosopher's Stone*. The polyjuice episode in *Chamber of Secrets* will later return to haunt Harry in *Goblet of Fire*. Rowling has revealed that she had pre-emptively plotted out seven books, one for each of Harry's years at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and that she has already written the final chapter of the final book. Is Rowling the new J. Michael Straczynski?

So I, like the rest of the world (the first four books have sold 200 million copies in 55 languages), will be counting down the days of June because *I want to see what happens next*. What will happen now that You-Know-Who has returned? Who will be the new Gryffindor Quidditch Captain? Will Ron and Hermione ever get together? Last but not least, how will the three friends cope with their Ordinary Wizarding Level exams (OWLs)? I guess we shall find out soon enough.

Lucy McWilliam

I haven't got the money (or the time!) to keep up with Interzone or Spectrum or any of the other SF magazines, or with the dozens of shiny new SF books that appear every year. That's why I spend every summer bouncing with anticipation for the new Hartwell Year's Best anthologies. They let me in on the mysterious world of the SF magazines, they give me a taste of authors whose books I might otherwise ignore, and most importantly, they're damned good! Hartwell has been an SF editor (of both books and magazines) for over 30 years, and his eye for a good story is unerring. I can hand over my money secure in the knowledge that every one of the twenty-odd stories per volume will be worth reading, be it by an old favourite or a familiar but untried name or a complete newcomer.

Clare Boothby

I'm planning to re-watch *Babylon 5* season 2 over the coming few months, because it's just come out on DVD. Shiny spaceships, humour, dark forebodings, Vorlons, all in glorious widescreen. What's not to like?

I'm terribly bad at picking out stuff to read, so I barely have a list at all. I'd quite like to read Tad Williams' *Otherland* series at some point, since *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn* was quite fun in a well-trodden-path sort of fashion and this sounds interestingly different.

Simon Tatham

Reviews

The Last Resort
Paul Leonard
BBC Books, £5.99

One of the great strengths of the BBC's series of *Doctor Who* novels involving the Eighth Doctor has been the ongoing story, an overarching plot that links the tales together. It has given the series a sense of direction, and (possibly more importantly from the point of view of the BBC) kept readers hooked so that they'll read the next month's installment. Except it's not a month any more. About a year ago the output was halved, with the Eighth Doctor novels going bi-monthly and alternating with stories about the previous seven Doctors, and that's in part why the current story arc just isn't working.

For the past five books, we've been in what people have started to call the 'alternative universe cycle', and I've not really enjoyed any of the books that much. Perhaps this wouldn't matter, but these five books have been spread over ten or more months, so we've been slogging through alternative universes for *ages* now. I'm getting bored, and *The Last Resort* is one of the least interesting *Doctor Who* books I've read. It's also one of the most terribly confusing.

So let's see: following the demise of Gallifrey and most of the Time Lords, Time is falling apart, leading to lots of alternative universes, which are gradually beginning to impinge on each other. At this rate, the Universe will go foom, we're told, and the Doctor has to fix it. In *The Last Resort*, we encounter a reality where time travel has become commoditised and Good Times Inc. are selling package holidays to various times and places in Earth's history. Beyond that, I'm afraid I lost the plot a bit. The multiple different versions of several chapters and several characters make it hard to work out what the hell is going on, and the plot doesn't so much have a conclusion as a frayed end.

Oh, and the characters! Written well, the Eighth Doctor's companions, Fitz and Anji, can be interesting human beings, playing well off each other and the Doctor, but here they are at best cardboard cutouts of themselves, and Anji swerves wildly out of character. Good Times is used for a little authorial anti-capitalist polemic, which is fine - readers don't have to agree with authors - but when Anji (who was a futures trader before she joined the Doctor) has moments of socialist revelation ('Oh how evil I was, how greedy we all were' and other such tosh), I begin to get a little grumpy.

The original characters for this novel, Jack and Iyeye, are little better, and the Doctor doesn't even make an appearance until 150 pages in. Most of the characters die several times, some quite gruesomely, but for all the blood and gore it's meaningless because there's always another version of the character who's alive and well. We're supposed to believe that the Universe is at stake, and presumably to care that the Doctor sorts it out, but based on *The Last Resort* I neither believe nor care. Paul Leonard can do better (*The Turing Test*), and so can the *Doctor Who* range. How did we get from superb books like *History 101* and *Camera Obscura* to this?

Owen Dunn

Light
M. John Harrison
Gollancz, £10.99

In 2400 Seria Mau Genlicher is a pilot - and an integral part of - a K-ship. Becoming such is a choice not easily taken, even harder to reverse, and one she now deeply regrets. In our present Michael Kearney is close to understanding something fundamental about information that will open our way to the galaxy but is perpetually haunted by a strange entity he calls the Shrande, and murders people in an desperate attempt to keep it at bay. Meanwhile back in 2400 Ed Chianese has experience all the thrills there are and would just like to see his sister again. All three are both drawn to and terrified by the Kefahuchi Tract, a radiating ocean of energy in space that has attracted and baffled beings far greater than them.

Light is not an easy book, it won't do quite what you expect. Its plot strands spiral inwards towards each other, not to meet but to slip by and head out once more on their own unexpected paths. It forces you to look at the roles society expects from us, how we are bound by them and how we can escape. It skews reality under your feet so that a dinner party becomes a cold vicious skirmish, while the murder that follows is full of loving warmth. Like the tract at its heart it won't give up its secrets easily.

Persevere however because it is one of the best books you will read this year in any genre.

Duncan MacGregor

The Moon and the Sun
Vonda McIntyre

This delightful book introduces the court of Louis XIV to an interesting race of SFnal sea monsters. As is usual for McIntyre, there are ideas from feminism, SF and a certain amount of left-wing politics. But, unlike many of her other works, here the plot is tightly drawn and gripping. The characters grow and change even as they scheme, so that the reader can see interest at a personal, as well as global or racial level. This book is idiosyncratic in subject matter, but it is well-executed, great fun, and well worth reading.

Ian Jackson

Untied Kingdom
James Lovegrove
Gollancz, £10.99

If you saw the cover blurb and expected that this book would be an insight into actions taken by states in the name of the International Community, you'd be disappointed, but with the international politics cast firmly in the background, we are left with a superb quest novel in a future England.

Following some disastrous political decisions, referred to only as the "Unlucky Gamble", the United Kingdom has fallen apart. Its government is in exile somewhere in the Caribbean, and its infrastructure has been ruined by random bombing raids by the faceless International Community. What government there is local, with towns organising themselves to get by. One of these towns is Downbourne, ruled by a mayor who has styled himself as one of England's mythical figures, the Green Man. When this town is attacked by a London gang, though, the idyll is shattered and many of the town's women are taken away to serve in the British Bulldogs' "Recreation Zones". One of these

women, Moira, is the wife of our protagonist, local schoolteacher Fen Morris.

Their marriage hasn't been happy, but Fen nevertheless sets off for faraway London to rescue her and the rest of Downbourne's women. Fen's journey to London, then, forms the bulk of the book, with distinct episodes along the way. There is Wrickmanasinghe, a Hindu travelling the largely deserted railways in a commandeered old piece of rolling stock he calls the *Jagannatha*; there is Netherholm College where a mediocre author is worshipped by his adoring fans; there is Fairfield Hall where a community lives together in and around the manor house there. Finally there is Lewisham and the home of the British Bulldogs who kidnapped Fen's wife.

While most of the story is told from Fen's perspective, his journey is interspersed with Moira's first person narrative of her experiences with the British Bulldogs. Her gradual acceptance into the trust of their leader, Craig (known to the others as "King Cunt"), puts the goal of Fen's rescue mission in doubt; does this particular damsel in distress even want to be rescued?

Untied Kingdom is a novel about communities, how they form and how they are held together by individuals. From the towns of rural England to the city compounds of the gangs that control London, from the communities Fen encounters on the way to the faceless International Community that rains down its bombs, one of the book's strongest messages is that it is only by banding together that humans can survive and thrive; that leaders are the necessary cement that help hold communities together. Individuals on their own like Wrickmanasinghe, travelling aimlessly and alone, stand little chance.

Owen Dunn

Altered Carbon
Richard Morgan

Altered Carbon should be a great book. It has all the right ingredients -- strong characters, and a tight, exciting plot played out against a fascinating world. The problem is that Morgan hasn't yet got the knack of fitting all the pieces together, so that the book as a whole is somewhat less good than the sum of its parts.

Our hero, Takeshi Kovacs, wakes up on an unfamiliar planet to find he's been hired by a local bigshot (Bancroft) to investigate a rather fishy murder. So far, so good--but in Morgan's universe the commonplace copying of minds and their resleeving into bodies makes everything a little more complicated. The body which Kovacs wakes up in isn't his own, but one which was confiscated from a local hood; the murder was of Bancroft himself, but his two-day-old backup is missing some vital memories.

Alas, none of the rest of the book quite lives up to this promising set-up. The main let-down is Kovacs, a very strong, determined character, but unfortunately one who tends to dash off manically without thinking. Because he's also the viewpoint character, the narrative does the same, and we're left trying to piece together a plot out of his senseless actions. The other big disappointment is that the setting raises a multitude of interesting moral and social questions which never interact with the plot. As well as the questions surrounding copying and cloning, there are others like 'what if you're so poor you have to rent your body out?' and 'how do you work with someone who's wearing your boyfriend's body?' Morgan doesn't ignore the issues, but each one is reduced

to two paragraphs of angst in Kovacs' train of thought before he dashes off to do something pointless, and meanwhile the standard detective-story plot chugs on regardless, oblivious to any of the interesting problems in the world around it. The book would really have benefited from being written in the third person rather than the first, so that the characters might have had the chance to at least talk through their problems instead. It's a great shame to see such a promising background wasted!

In short, I wouldn't blame you for wanting to skip this debut novel, but Morgan's definitely one to look out for in the future. Once he's learned how to write characters that interact with his worlds rather than treating them as pretty backdrops he'll be dynamite!

Clare Boothby

Rings of the Master series

Book 1: Lords of the Middle Dark

Book 2: Pirates of the Thunder

Book 3: Warriors of the Storm

Jack Chalker

The setting is promising (if a little clichéd): all-powerful computer created millennia ago to prevent war has become stifling and oppressive, and a few brave humans go against it

However, Jack Chalker simply has too little knowledge of the things he's writing about and makes too many mistakes. As he used most of the powerful ideas early, the plot, and the technology, rapidly become absurd - leaving Chalker's already limited abilities unable to carry the suspension of disbelief. The worst example is Chalker's introduction of a universal scanner/constructor/replicator, an item of technology so powerful it will necessarily destroy most plots.

As the story became ever more ridiculous, and Chalker's errors became more annoying, my interest waned. At the end of book two I decided to skimread book three in the hope of seeing if the endgame was any more worth reading. However, book three opened the plot up even wider and at by the end of it the series seemed likely to last for at least another three volumes, so I gave up.

Those who need their books to have character development and/or other interesting literary merit will have probably wisely avoided this series in any case and should spare it no more thought. Those who were looking for good space opera, or an exciting rebellion, or interesting technology, should also give this series a miss.

I shan't be reading any more Jack Chalker.

Ian Jackson

Tiamat / Hegemony Series

(The Snow Queen, World's End, The Summer Queen)

Joan Vinge

The setting Joan Vinge has constructed is a Hegemony consisting of a handful of worlds left connected by FTL travel, following the collapse of a near-omnipotent pan-galactic society. Amongst these worlds is Tiamat, where a key tension is between the Hegemony's high-tech imperialist despoilers and low-tech native defenders of Tiamat's unique biological heritage.

These are very ambitious works. The characters do battle, and play, on a grand stage, and with galaxy-shattering consequences. The leftover old technology is so powerful as to be nearly godlike. The characters themselves change radically over the course of their lives, as the themes of personal and societal fall and redemption run throughout all three books.

By and large I think Vinge has succeeded. There are two key weaknesses:

Firstly, *World's End* is almost unrelentingly bleak and depressing; the main character is at a nadir of depression and angst, and manages most of the time to exacerbate already-dire situations. You should not read *World's End* on its own, without expecting to go on to *The Summer Queen*; if you do, you may find yourself cast into a pit of despair. Luckily, you can avoid *World's End* completely if you must, and if you're reasonably good at picking up dropped threads: there are a couple of passages in *The Summer Queen* which are specifically there to clue in readers who have come straight from *The Snow Queen*, and *The Summer Queen* is billed as the direct sequel to *The Snow Queen*.

The other failing is not particularly surprising: some of the events near the end, required to tie up the loose ends and provide good closure, are a little stretched. Surprisingly perhaps, the main weakness here is not in the treatment of the technology, but in the characterisation.

Some readers who demand complete technological faithfulness (particularly faithfulness to existing scientific knowledge) may be a little disappointed, but I found the use of the fictional technology and science fitted well with the plot and didn't jar.

Likewise, few of the characters are subtly described: most are very boldly drawn indeed, sometimes approaching caricature. In these works, though, I found this a strength: anything less than the prominently described character traits would be swamped under the hugely powerful settings and plots.

Overall, I found the series exciting, enjoyable and memorable.

Ian Jackson

Available from the CUSFS Library:

Paul Leonard, *Dreamstone Moon*

M John Harrison, *Light*

Vonda McIntyre, *Aurora: Beyond Equality*

Vonda McIntyre, *Dreamsnake*

Vonda McIntyre, *Fire Flood and Other Stories*

James Lovegrove, *The Foreigners*

James Lovegrove, *The Hope*

Richard Morgan, *Altered Carbon*

Jack Chalker, *Lords of the Middle Dark*

Jack Chalker, *Pirates of the Thunder*

Jack Chalker, *Warriors of the Storm (and many others)*

Joan Vinge, *The Snow Queen*

On the web:

<http://www.chiark.greenend.org.uk/cusfs/cat.html>

The full Library Catalogue.

Firefly **CUSFS Video Showings, Wednesdays from 12th November**

Firefly comes from the creator of *Buffy*, *The Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*, Joss Whedon, but it's nothing like the former's bright teenage demonology or the latter's brooding meanderings. At its heart it's a Western in space, and the crew have the old-fashioned guns to prove it.

The first thing you notice about *Firefly* is how dirty everything is. The planets are dusty and dry, our protagonists fly around in a slightly cantankerous old ship, oh, and they're on the run from a government with a taste for officials in shiny peaked caps. A lot of *Firefly* has the feel of the original *Star Wars* films. The second thing you notice about *Firefly* is how similar the setup is to that old CUSFS favourite, *Blake's 7*.

In the 26th Century, Earth's resources have been used up, and other planets have been terraformed to cope with the expansion. The central planets formed the Alliance, and waged war to bring all mankind under their rule. *Firefly* follows some of the losers from that war. With a ship (*Serenity*, Firefly class), captain Malcolm Reynolds (Nathan Fillion) and his crew make a living by taking cargo and people from place to place.

The crew of *Serenity* are a mixed bunch, and it's some of their interactions, relationships, and secrets that add to the series' interest. Mal Reynolds is the captain of the ship, but this is no military operation and he doesn't always have the total loyalty of his crew: a second-in-command, his pilot, a "Companion", an engineer, a mercenary, a priest, a doctor and his fugitive psychic sister, River.

While *Firefly* doesn't ooze long running plot arcs, it does have its mysteries. In a time when prostitution is perfectly legal and very respectable on most worlds, why does the Companion Inara choose to tag along with this bunch of reprobates? What happened to River to make her the scared and sometimes insane girl we see in the earlier episodes? Why is Shepherd Book along for the ride, and why does he seem to have special influence with the Alliance?

One of the saddest things about *Firefly* is that we never find out most of these things because the show was cancelled after only thirteen episodes. Reasons all too familiar to anyone who followed the failure of JMS's *Crusade* -- studio interference, bizarre scheduling, near-zero promotion -- stopped the series as it was just getting into its stride. Two more episodes were made but not aired in the US, and there are scripts for one or two more than that, but barring Joss Whedon's hopes for a film that's pretty much it for *Serenity*. It's a crying shame.

Owen Dunn

The Animatrix **Warner DVD, £15.99**

What do a cat lover, a high school kid, a private detective, a female Samurai, a pair of robot ambassadors and the crew of a hovercraft have in common? They each feature in one of nine short animated films that make up *The Animatrix*. The two-part *Second Renaissance* recounts - in scenes reminiscent of the WWI artists, HR Giger and the Terminator films - the history of the conflict between man and machine. *Matriculated* sees the human resistance attempting to reprogram the robot enemy through the use of trippy visuals. In the washed-out, noir-inspired world of *Detective Story*, a private investigator

takes on a job which proves more than he can handle. *Beyond* elegantly explores a glitch in The Matrix as seen through a child's eyes. The photorealistic animation (spot the gratuitous CGI buttock) of *The Final Flight Of The Osiris*, which acts as a prelude to *The Matrix: Reloaded*, more than holds up to the scrutiny of the big screen. *Kid's Story* tells the tale of an atypical teenager, the fuzzy rendering matching the blurring of reality. Some of these animations work and some of them don't, but as a whole they provide an intriguing glimpse into the complex world of *The Matrix*.

Lucy McWilliam

Hulk **Dir. Ang Lee** **Universal Pictures DVD £19.99 (out November)**

A military scientist trying to genetically engineer the ultimate super-soldier starts experimenting upon himself. Thirty years later his son, also a scientist, has an accident in the laboratory and starts experiencing violent mood swings which turn him into a not-so-jolly green giant. This sets off a chain of events which sees 'Angry Man' demolishing his place of work (like we all haven't wanted to do that), battling a mutant French Poodle (a scene for the canine-harrassed postmen in the audience), being pursued by a cavalcade of police, army and SWAT teams worthy of *The Blues Brothers*, and generally having a smashing time. Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? But translated to the big screen it all makes (almost) perfect sense.

Ultimately, it's all in the eyes. Bruce Banner (Eric Bana) gazes into the bathroom mirror, contemplating his existence and dreading any glint of green which might surface in those sensitive puppy dog eyes. His colleague and ex-lover, Betty Ross (Jennifer Connelly), watches on helplessly, her baby blues - framed by those famous eyebrows - filled with compassion. Her Marine father (Sam Elliott) - all bristling moustache, leathery skin and military grey/blue glare - monitors the imprisoned Banner by CCTV and the fugitive Hulk by radar. David Banner (Nick Nolte) searches for his son, his grizzled brow quivering with emotion. And finally, the intelligently computer-generated face of the Hulk himself reflecting the astonishment and fear of those who see him as a monster.

Director Ang Lee's vision leads the audience - by means of zoom outs, wipes and split screen trickery - through this surprisingly sumptuous action story, touching on mythic tragedy, scientific ethics and family angst. In the spate of recent comic book adaptations, in my view, this makes *Hulk* one of the best.

Lucy McWilliam

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon **Dir. Ang Lee** **Columbia Tristar DVD, £19.99**

I have a theory that *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is the perfect date movie. For the guys there are those breath-taking, gravity-defying fight scenes and Chow Yun Fat's portrayal as the fierce but sensitive and intelligent warrior, Li Mu Bai. For the girls there are the strong female characters - Jen Yu (Zhang Zhi Li), a nobleman's daughter who hides a secret talent, and Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh), the swordswoman who befriends her - and the two love stories - between Li Mu Bai and Shu Lien, and Jen Yu and a desert bandit - which lie at the heart of the tale. Both sexes can glean some kind of useful relationship advice from the plot, i.e. take a chance on love and don't leave things until too

late. The choice of this film shows excellent taste (after all, it won four Oscars) on the part of both dater (for asking) and datee (for accepting). Finally, it inspires plenty to talk about in what might otherwise be one of those awkward post-date silences. Unmissable, with or without a date.

Lucy McWilliam

The Librarian Wibbles (Again)

Clare Boothby

The cover of this issue might give you some idea what our big news this time is. On the 20th August, a gang of intrepid volunteers, armed only with cardboard boxes, braved the dusty halls of the Union to rescue some 3000 of our books, finally reuniting the two halves of the library into one joyous, papery whole. They said it couldn't be done (in fact the Union stood in our way several times, shouting "You shall not pass!") but we donned our best dragon-fighting gear and readied our shiniest chariots and in the end we moved all 3000 books in an hour and a half! Along the way we uncovered a variety of delights, including several boxes of magazines (and the catalogue to go with them), exciting historical documents (and Jómssmissives from the year dot), a seam of mould hiding behind Frederick Pohl (ew!), and the Mysterious Secret of Cupboard 13. All in all, a successful evening. Many thanks to everyone who helped out; it would have been impossible without you!

What this means in practical terms is that very soon the whole library (all 7000 books of it) will be available for borrowing. At the time of writing I am about two-thirds of the way through the recataloguing, and I expect it to be finished by the start of term. For those who don't know the drill, if you want to borrow some

books then first find the on-line catalogue at <http://www.chiark.greenend.org.uk/cusfs/cat.html> and pick what you want to borrow. Then email me at soc-cusfs-library@lists.cam.ac.uk with your list (it helps if you send me the catalogue numbers too, if the books have them) and I'll arrange a convenient time for collection or delivery. Borrowing is free to all CUSFS members.

The second big piece of news is that in order to save on storage space we will soon be selling off a large number of duplicate books from the library. The sale will take place some time after the start of term, and details will be announced in the Missive as they become available, as well as on the sale page at: <http://www.chiark.greenend.org.uk/cusfs/sale.html>

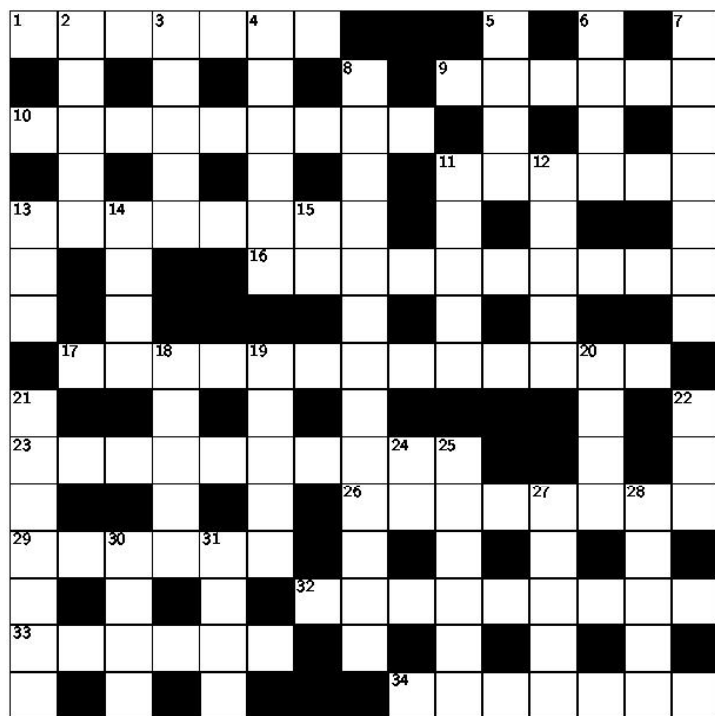
CUSFS Vice-Presidents

Owen Dunn

Every year, for reasons of which our President Stephen Hawking prefers to remain ignorant, CUSFS elects six vice-presidents. This year election was by "Pin the tail on the CUSFS Vice-President". Nominations were written on a large piece of paper, in many cases with accompanying illustrations, and then volunteers were blindfolded, given a tail, and pointed in the direction of the paper in the traditional manner. The results were:

- The Republic of Gilead
- Friendly the Fox
- Cecil Nyarlathotep
- Mary Gentle's pigs
- Cruithne
- Siegfried von Shrink

ttba:crossword:30.1



Across:

1. Case notes. (7)
9. He sleeps with the fish. (6)
10. Could be a super tom. (9)
11. Turn out succour, turn out saffron, it turns out. (6)
13. A girl in ... in another! (8)
16. A gathering of nuns could be a plus. (10)
17. The fool received the award - one about the state of the stars. (13)
23. See 22.
26. How to flock from Devon air. (2,1,5)
29. About to greet, but gave quarter, alas. (6)
32. Half man, half biscuit. All cop. (9)
- 33,27,19 Warning the ignorant, comedy or otherwise. (6,5,2,3)
34. Act up as Cymbeline's Jupiter. (4,3)

Down:

2. The scent and sound of a wanderer. (5)
3. Relish in August or September. (5)
4. Got an itch perhaps, but no tan. How uncouth! (6)

by Swirly and Steph

5. See, hear - the sea's here. (4)
6. Great number in the community. (4)
7. Quietly forwarded parcel. (7)
8. (13))
11. Boarded revolutionary steamship. (5)
12. "Stop tickling me!" He has such nerve. (5)
13. The fellow to use in case of a waterfall. (3)
14. See 20.
- 15,24. Either way, it's high time. (4)
18. It counts from term one. (5)
19. See 33.
- 20,14. One left a partnership and nearly rose up within the followers. (4,4)
21. Pull a cartwheel in the race. (7)
- 22,23. Eb ll'eh. (3,10)
24. See 15.
25. Thus spoke God, laid back. (6)
27. See 33.
28. I see vain doer of oddness. (5)
30. Talk of foul play. (4)
31. Up the stake, explosively. (4)

Answers next issue, or from the CUSFS website in November.

Termcard - Michaelmas 2003

| | Sunday | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday |
|------------------------------|---|--------|---------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Week 1 12th-18th October | Squash | | | | Video Showing TBA | | |
| Week 2 19th-25th October | Discussion: Robin Hobb (aka Megan Lindholm) | | | | Kevin Crossley- Holland at Heffers | | Robin Hobb Signing, London |
| Week 3 26th Oct - 1st Nov | Discussion: Peter F. Hamilton | | | | Meal | | |
| Week 4 2nd-8th November | Discussion: Favourite Author | | | Fireworks, Midsummer Common | | | |
| Week 5 9th-15th November | Games Evening | | | Firefly Video Showing | | Neil Gaiman, Foyles, London | |
| Week 6 16th-22nd November | Discussion: Ursula Le Guin | | | Firefly Video Showing | Reading Evening | | |
| Week 7 23rd-29th November | Discussion: SF and Technology | | | Firefly Video Showing | Film Trip TBA | | |
| Week 8 30th Nov - 7th Dec | Discussion: Fairy Stories (with fairy cakes!) | | | Firefly Video Showing | | | |

(Where not listed here venues will be announced by e-mail. For more information about the society, or to join the mailing list, ask <soc-cusfs@lists.cam.ac.uk>)