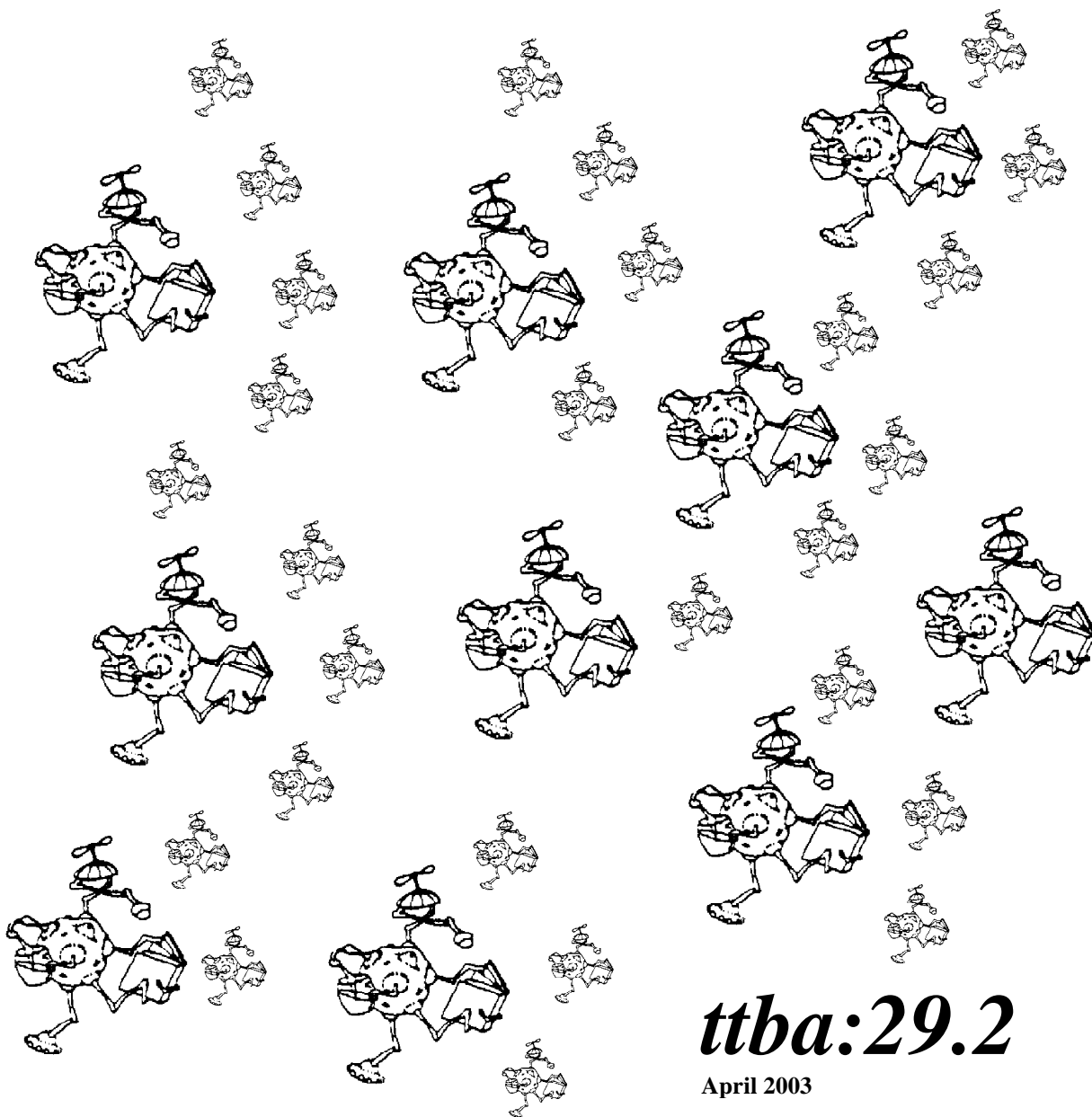


They Took Back Antares!

But would the Universe accept their New Galactic Order?



ttba:29.2

April 2003

Chairbeing's Address

Kate Stitt

The Chairbeing is currently of no fixed abode.

And with the compulsory bad pun out of the way, let's get on with a little review of CUSFS happenings over the last couple of terms.

In an exciting development, CUSFS and Kings' Films have been screening SF and Fantasy Film and TV including an *Alien / Aliens* double-bill, *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy*, *Dogma*, and *Bladerunner* during Michaelmas and Lent terms. There have also been a number of video screenings including *Dr Who* and *Babylon 5*, which were very well received. Discussions on a wide range of topics from media to hard SF have largely been well attended, and the move to an earlier slot with time for a beer before closing time seems to have been a success. The wider range of Thursday evening events replacing the weekly pub social also appears to be popular among both new and long-standing members.

This year's AGM took place in the Lent Term, and elected what I hope will be a strong committee to carry forward the work that has been done this year. I was re-elected as Chairbeing for a second term, and fresh blood comes in the form of a new Treasurer and Secretary, neither of whom have previously been CUSFS committee members. We hope next year to repeat our success at recruiting so many active new members while hopefully finding something to interest everyone involved in the society.

So - a big thank-you to all of this year's committee for their good work, and for next year's for the enthusiasm and commitment which is already so apparent. Thanks also to all of those non-committee members of CUSFS who help out by hosting events and lending a hand when they can - we couldn't do it without you. Keep up the good work!

The Committee

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Chairbeing:	Kate Stitt
Secretary:	Tony Evans
Membership Secretary:	Ian Jackson
Treasurer:	Peter Corbett
TTBA Editor:	Owen Dunn
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Reeve:	Jonathan Amery
Geldjarl:	Peter Corbett
Bard:	Matthew Vernon
Meadkeeper:	Dan Sheppard
Runecaster:	Clare Boothby

Editorial

Owen Dunn

When I wrote the Editorial for the last issue of *ttba*, I was living in a different house, and thoughts of moving were the last thing on my mind. Now I'm happily ensconced in my new lodgings, I should apologise for the lateness of this second issue of the magazine. You know how it is when your computer's in a box under a pile of other boxes and you can't do anything with it right now because you've still got to assemble the flat-pack desk to put it on. Still, it's not good enough, and future issues will be a bit more on time. Promise.

Where last issue had a lot of media SF content, with articles on *Doctor Who* and film reviews, this issue has a slightly more literary bias, with two stories and a pile of book reviews. It just goes to show that *ttba* is what you, the CUSFS members, make it, so if you don't like what you see here, help us make *ttba* the way you want it, by submitting reviews, articles, stories, or even just suggestions for things you'd like to see. As ever, the address to email submissions to is soc-cusfs-ttba@lists.cam.ac.uk and plain text is preferred. Other formats can probably be coped with; ask us if you have any particular queries.



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A Tale for Advent-Eve

*Matthew Vernon, Jon Amery, Sarah Amery,
Clare Boothby, Pete Corbett, Tom Garnett,
Kate Stitt, Matthew Woodcraft*

Lindisfarne Abbey, in a world not so different from our own, but many years ago.

The Abbey stands on a small island three miles long, a couple of miles from the coast of England; accessible twice a day along the three-mile track demarcated by wooden posts sunk into the sand, assuming the weather is good. The Abbey itself is a substantial stone building with Gothic arches and long corridors. It is winter, and during the long nights wooden torches are the only source of light. The Shrine of Saint Cuthbert is a place of pilgrimage, although at this time of year the weather means that the Benedictines who live here have few pilgrims to interrupt them from their prayers.

All is not well, however, as the Franciscan Brother John struggles across the causeway to pay homage to the shrine of St. Cuthbert, a few days before the start of Advent...

* * *

John wrapped his cloak around himself more tightly as he walked the last half mile across the causeway. The wind and rain combined to try and hurl him into the sea, and he was once again glad that he bore his forty winters lightly. Nevertheless, this was a foul night, and the villagers of Beal had looked askance at him when he announced that he was going to cross this evening, rather than waiting until the morning. Something was compelling him to make haste.

Ahead of him, he could see the Abbey standing proud and immovable against the weather, perched atop the small isle of Lindisfarne. A single torch ahead of him illuminated the unfortunate novice who had been sent to greet anyone attempting the crossing. John increased his pace a little, and raised a hand in greeting. The novice looked up, and John thought he looked relieved.

"Brother John, from Canterbury?"

"I am he. You were expecting me?"

"Yes, yes, we were. I'm Aidan. I'm rather glad you're here, actually."

Something in the lad's tone surprised John. "Why, is something the matter?"

"Well, now you come to mention it..."

They walked in silence towards the Abbey for a while as Aidan collected his thoughts. "I fear you'll think me mad, but I give my word that I tell the truth"

"Go on..."

"Two of the Brothers have been found struck down in the cloisters this evening, and we expect them both to have departed to the Lord's Rest ere the morning. And Brother Brendan was found by St Cuthbert's shrine gibbering insanelly about a fiend coming from under the shrine to devour him."

They were approaching the Abbey gates, and John paused.

"You're not going to abandon us, are you?" There was an edge of panic in Aidan's voice.

"No. I was collecting my thoughts. It seems the Almighty has sent me to you this night. He moves in mysterious ways."

John strode purposefully towards the Abbey's great gate, pushed it open, stopped and looked around. In the entranceway a number of Brothers were scurrying around. The two unfortunates were lying down and being attended to by the Brother physick. The Abbot came over to John and greeted him.

"Ah, the Abbot... Michael?"

"Yes, and I am being remiss in my hospitality. These are Brothers Luke and Gavin, and this is David our physick. I wish I could tell you what happened to the Brothers, but they were just found in different parts of the cloister - just an hour ago - struck down, and neither of them has said a word since. What with this and the strange behaviour of Brendan it is most concerning. I understand you have some knowledge of physic yourself, maybe you could offer some assistance."

John wandered over and greeted David. David turned from looking down at one of the prone figures and said, "well, Brother, I don't know if you can really. In all my years here I've never seen anything like it."

He opened the habit of the Brother before him so that only John could see and indicated a couple of vertical slashes on his chest, rather furtively.

"Brother John, would you mind walking with me for a while?"

The pair of them walked east, David continuing: "Those marks, what surprises me is that there is no rent or tear in the fabric, but something has apparently clawed these monks."

John thought for a bit, then said, "Come show me this shrine of St. Cuthbert, which is what I came to see."

David led him out of the gateway, along a covered walkway and in to the chapel. It was a fairly modest affair, given the size of the Abbey. In the North transept was the shrine of St Cuthbert.

David turned to John, saying, "Well, as I'm sure you're aware, St Cuthbert the Martyr was a monk here, indeed the Abbot, many years ago. This shrine, here, is a great site of pilgrimage, indeed it keeps us in revenue during the summer season."

The shrine was enclosed by a three foot high iron fence, with a catafalque showing St Cuthbert lying reposed, with a model of the Abbey in his hands. "Here lies St Cuthbert" was inscribed in Latin.

David continued, "The catafalque is not, as it may appear, solid. There is a staircase leading down to a little chapel containing the actual remains of the Saint; but it takes four men to move it so we don't go down there very often." He paused. "You are in fact now standing where we found poor Brendan."

"This is very disturbing, and I have much to think about."

As the bell began to ring for Compline and the monks began to gather in the chapel David excused himself to look after his charges. As the familiar ceremonies unfolded in front of him John pondered the things that had been presented to him, and a small smile formed itself upon his face.

After the service the Abbot, somewhat less flustered, came back over to greet John. "I hope you won't mind if we have to house

you in the outbuildings tonight, as we have not had time to prepare anything for you. There is some space in with the animals which should be quite comfortable."

John agreed, noticing that the Abbot seemed rather nervous and drawn.

"I'll get Aidan to show you to the appropriate place."

Although, of course, he was far too well brought up to mention such a matter, this seemed quite unnecessary to John, although he had slept in much worse conditions, and at least he would have a roof over his head.

Aidan seemed rather scared, not unsurprisingly.

"So, tell me young boy, how long have you been here?"

"All my life. I was found as an orphan and brought here. One of the Lay Brothers brought me up but he's dead now and the Abbot is my only father."

"So do you have any idea who your parents were?"

"No, and no one has been able to offer any suggestions, although sometimes I fancy...." he trailed off...

"...Here will be your lodging. I will bring light and a fire for you. These outhouses, sometimes when peddlers and traders come we have them stay here when we don't want them inside the walls..." he trailed off again, realising he might have said too much. "I hope all goes well with you this night, Brother," with which he returned into the warmth and relative comfort of the Abbey walls.

John looked around the stable he had been placed in, eventually settling on the hayloft as it contained the hay with the least vermin. Since it was night most of the animals were already asleep, so he picked his way past cold forms and lay down. Sleep came quickly, but it was not a restful night. He tossed and turned with images of a darkness spilling out from under the catafalque and washing in waves over the Abbey, and then again, suddenly, a dinner where as the Abbot opened his mouth to say grace a blackness spilled forth to overwhelm those present. And again a mass of black furry bodies washing over the animals and rising up towards him. And then finally an image of a sea of blackness and, floating in the middle, a large stone block showing a monk lying reposed, the face that of a mischievous young boy called Aidan.

At the bell for Lauds he woke as usual, although not well slept. With a strange sense of forboding he walked back across the damp grass towards the Abbey, pushed the door open and thought it was quite quiet given that the Lauds bell had just rung. It was a very tired David who turned to him from his charges, who were now three in number. He walked over to John, and said, quietly so that none should hear even if any others were present: "I'm sorry about the Abbot's strange treatment of you last night. I'm afraid Gavin has not made it through the night, and that Brother Aidan now lies stricken. I'm worried, John; something is afoot within this abbey, and I'm greatly concerned. Perhaps Brendan is not as mad as the rest of us would like to think. Perhaps he did see something at the shrine of St Cuthbert. But come, the Lauds bell has rung and we must go and pray for the rest of Gavin's soul."

The monks, indeed, all seemed somewhat subdued at Lauds, which was somewhat longer than usual given that it included the service for the dead. John noticed that the Abbot had the look of a man who had not slept at all, and seemed even more on edge than he had the previous night.

The service of Lauds proceeded, and John participated, although his mind was elsewhere. Evidently something was indeed afoot. And had he been brought here to do something about it? Though many things had the look of the strange and supernatural about them, John wondered if there might be a more natural explanation. Maybe someone in the Abbey wished to murder someone? He wasn't convinced, but was he to believe that in this most holy of place someone had been tempted by forces less than holy and made some alliance with the devil? Neither could be, but one had to be. As the service continued John was disturbed by the implications of all of this.

At the end of the service, John once again sought out David, and they spoke of his night and the discovery of Aidan, in a corridor this time, leading from the chapel. John asked to see Aidan and was taken to him, and indeed he was in the same state as the Brother he had seen the night before. The Brothers were very subdued. Brother John was still disturbed by his thoughts in the chapel and asked to see Brother Brendan. David and John walked through long, dark, corridors, where very little light penetrated this early on a Winter's morning, away from the chapel and towards the Brothers' dormitories, past the sleeping areas and to a small room where a novice sat outside. With a nod from David the novice unlocked the door with a big key and they entered.

In the corner of the small stone room the figure of a Brother sat cross-legged against the wall, seeming quiet and exhausted from his ravings of the day and night before. He seemed unaware of them and John walked up to him and crouched down at ground level.

"Brother Brendan", he said. There was no response. He touched the man on the arm and Brendan flinched. Brendan looked up, but seemed to not quite see the man in front of him. "Brother Brendan", John said again, "can you tell me what you saw?"

"Black!" he said. "Black it was, to be sure. From the pit, oh yes, from the pit. I know, oh yes I know, what you do not tell, what the Abbot does not tell, what has gone these years, but what should I tell you."

"Come Brother," John said, "but tell me what you saw."

"Black! Three of them, three below as there are three above. Three from Cuthbert's pit! Oh, yes, Cuthbert, he knew too. It was there in his day as it is in this. The things that man does unto man, they're the true hell. The Abbot, you speak to the Abbot. He knows, but he is afraid. Bread. Bring me bread and salt. For he hasn't eaten these two days, but I am so very tired."

Brendan's head slumped on his chest, and John could see he would get no more out of him.

"Well," he said, "that is most interesting."

He turned to David who had been standing, his mouth half open, avidly listening to every word.

"So it seems," he said, "though I wonder why he talks to you when for all my entreaties he said nothing to me."

And with that he turned on his heel and stalked away.

John turned and followed after David, calling after him. David stopped, and turned and John caught up. "Tell me," said John, "what do you know of Brother Brendan?"

David paused, thinking. "Brother Brendan joined us, it must have been, eight, ten years ago. He came from a distance, not from these parts. Old for a novice, but keen, very keen. Some suspected he might have been running from his past, but he was a good student and a quick one, and very dedicated. He has served the Abbey well this time."

John thanked him. David excused himself and went on his way.

John stood a while in the remote cell with the novice and the nowsleeping Brendan. He turned to the novice and said, "take good care of Brother Brendan. I shall find some food for when he next stirs".

John turned and left, heading for where he expected the refectory to be. Indeed it was not long before the smell of food wafted into his nose. Even here, which was a hive of activity, it remained somewhat subdued. He took a loaf and a little cheese and a mug of weak ale for Brendan. Bearing these he returned to the little cell where Brendan was still asleep, leaving them on a little stool by the door. He again admonished the novice to take good care of Brendan and strode off in search of the Abbot.

He wandered for a little while until he saw one of the Brothers walking towards him. He stopped him and asked, "where might I find the Abbot at this hour?"

"I'd expect to find him in his office, I will show you the way."

He led John along the corridors and up some stairs into an area a bit grander than the monks dormitories although not as grand as the chapel itself. He showed John to a large door and John knocked on it. From within the Abbot's voice bade him enter.

John pushed the doors open, and went in. The Abbot was indeed at his desk. He looked not exactly over the moon to see Brother John standing there, and John thought that with his influence he should have concealed that a bit better.

"Brother Michael, what can you tell me of the shrine of St Cuthbert?" John asked in a level voice. He wasn't sure, but Michael seemed to start slightly at this question.

"Well, Brother, it is a site of pilgrimage, you have seen it yourself have you not?"

"Yes"

"Well, what else is there about it?"

"There is more than just the catafalque, isn't there?", John saw the Abbot about to contradict this, so continued, "or at least that's what Brother David told me."

"Well, yes, there is a small chapel with the remains of St Cuthbert below the catafalque."

"Is there anything else you would like to tell me about it?"

"No, that's all there is to it, nobody goes down there nowadays."

"I see. Are there any legends surrounding the subterranean chapel?"

"No, no, none that I know of", said Michael, perhaps a little hastily.

He looked down again at his papers, indicating that he wished John to leave.

"It's interesting that you should say that," said John as he turned towards the door. "Brother Brendan had quite a lot to say about it, and he suggested asking you"

"I think you listen too much to the thoughts of a madman, and I think it is time that you left."

"As you say", said John, leaving. It occurred to him that it would shortly be breakfast, and he turned back towards the refectory.

As John walked down to the refectory he paused at a window and looked out across the water, noticing that the tide was once again nearly low and the causeway almost open. Near the entrance to the refectory he once again met Brother David and asked after his charges.

"Is there nobody in the village who could help them? An apothecary perhaps?"

Brother David frowned, "There may be. That would require the Abbot's permission; I will ask him".

"Ahh," said Brother John, "there's something else I would like you to ask the Abbot. I must see this chapel below Cuthbert's tomb, unfortunately I can't seem to draw the Abbot on this subject. He seems somewhat reluctant to talk about it. Do you think you could get his permission to have it opened up?"

Brother David gave him a long and mysterious look and promised to try it.

After they had finished breakfast Brother David excused himself and went off to try and find the Abbot. John, at something of a loose end, wandered around the monastery a bit and eventually decided to try and settle his mind by performing some of the devotions he had come for. He found a quiet corner of the chapel and sat down to meditate for a while. After a while the bell rang for Prime and the other Monks started to fill the chapel.

Brother David came and sat by John and whispered to him as the service was beginning. "The Abbot, indeed, seemed a little reluctant," he said, "but eventually I got him to agree to open the chapel tomorrow. I couldn't get him to agree to do it any earlier."

"And now," said David, "I really must return to the two who remain in my care."

"I'll come with you," said John.

David led him to the infirmary, where the two of them had been moved.

An old Brother whom John had not previously met, was bending over one of the beds. As David arrived he turned. "You are too late," he said "he has departed from us."

"Brother Luke," said David, "I feared that it would be so."

David stood solemnly for a moment, but it seemed to John that there was little genuine sorrow present in the heart of this Brother. From the next bed there was less quietitude, as moanings and thrashings could be heard.

"Aidan," said John, "my young friend. Do you hear me?"

In that fierce reddened face there was only a toothy grin and no talk.

"He is fighting it," said David, "he is young, perhaps he will survive."

Meanwhile in the grey skies above seven black crows circled clockwise.

"Tell me, Brother David," said John, "have you ever descended into the chamber below St Cuthbert's shrine?"

"I have," said David, with which he turned on his heel and walked out of the door.

And as John turned back to the bed in front of him, a flicker of memory brought back to him his dream of the night before.

Lost in contemplation, John walked slowly out of the infirmary and towards the abbey's main entrance. As he walked, he turned his night's dream over and over in his head but to no further conclusion, and his reverie was interrupted by the gatekeeper asking him what his business was outside.

"I was planning on travelling across to the village and seeing if I could find anything out about Brother Aidan. Do you think you could tell me when the next low tide is due so that I may return to the Abbey this evening?"

The other monk seemed quite happy with this explanation and informed John that he should start returning when the Vespers

bell rang. As he walked across the island to the causeway, John thought he saw someone watching him, but when he turned, he could see no-one behind any of the rocks and trees behind him. Other than that his passage to the causeway passed without event. Once again, he barely made it across the causeway before the tide came in, and then fishermen mending their nets on the beach seemed somewhat surprised that last night's visitor to the abbey was returning so soon.

As John walked up the hill into the village, the sun was rising in a crisp blue sky and the world seemed bright and new. He made his way to the Inn, and knocked on the door. The Innkeeper's wife appeared.

"Brother John," she said, "you return so soon. We weren't expecting to see you for days. Do come in and have a drink. What can I do for you?"

John paused. "There are strange things" he said, "Very strange things. Is there an apothecary in the village?"

"Why yes," she said, "It's just down the road. But what's going on?"

"There are goings on," he said, "two Brothers are dead, and Brother Aidan is, is... taken ill."

"Brother Aidan?" she said, "the foundling?"

"The very same. What do you know of him?"

"He was abandoned at this very inn. A cold, bright, spring morning with snow on the ground. Wrapped in a bundle on the doorstep. We took him into the house and he was near death. He was a strange one, because, well, you know how things are, usually something like this happens, and there's a girl in the village, but with Aidan, nothing. A strange child, and quiet. We took him to the monastery, they took him in. But anyway, I shall take you to the apothecary."

She led him out the door and down the cobbled street. The apothecary's shop was a humble affair, with the usual jars on display. A wizened old man behind the shop counter looked up as John and the Innkeeper's wife walked in.

"John, this is Aelfric the apothecary. I'll leave you now, as I have work to do."

"Brother John. What can I do for you?"

"Well," John sighed. "I was wondering if you could accompany me to the Abbey this evening. At least one of the Brothers there could do with your tender ministrations."

"I see. What ails him, that Brother David cannot cure? That man is a skilled physick indeed."

"I cannot say for certain. There is too much uncertainty at the Abbey, and it seems entwined with the legends of St Cuthbert somehow, and possibly with the foundling Aidan."

"Can you describe the problem a little more, so that I may better know what I should bring with me? It would be troublesome to have to return here before I could attempt a cure."

"That I cannot rightly say. Brother Brendan appears mad, and Aidan has been..." here John paused as if trying to find the right words "has been. Well. It's difficult to say."

"Brother, you seem uncomfortable all of a sudden?"

"You are a perceptive man. Yes, I am concerned. There are rumours that *something* is assailing the monks of Lindisfarne. The Brothers that died had strange wounds on their chests, yet their habits seemed undamaged. And Brendan raves of a fiend in the shrine of St. Cuthbert coming to devour him. And I feel the abbot is hiding something from me."

"This sounds to me that you may need more advanced skills than a humble apothecary such as myself can provide. Still, I shall come, and offer what assistance I may. Come back, and find me ere you return to the island. I shall ready a few likely remedies."

As John was about to leave the Apothecary's shop, a malformed and disfigured old woman walked in.

"Ah, Anna," Aelfric greeted her, "I assume you've come for your usual preparation."

Noticing John, she turned to face him, and said, "Ah, Brother. Something going on at the Abbey, then?"

John seemed somewhat taken aback by this, and before he could reply, she continued, "I have been having strange dreams of late about unusual events on the island. The foundling Aidan featured large in my dreams."

John, feeling rather disconcerted, merely replied, "Yes, my thoughts were inclined that way also," before departing.

Six white doves circled widdershins overhead.

As John stepped ahead, the lowering clouds which had been gathering during his time with the apothecary chose that moment to release their contents. A torrent of weighty raindrops began to fall, and a tide of mud rode around him in the street.

John, caught in this downpour, ducked into the nearest doorway, and found himself in a small, smoke-filled, low-ceilinged room. A few men sat around silently, although he suspected there had been talk before he entered. Unperturbed, he walked further into the room. One of the men spoke.

"Who are you? You are not from these parts."

"I am Brother John," he said, "I have been visiting the Abbey."

"Ah," said the man, "Strange things in the Abbey."

"What do you know of such things?" asked John.

"I was a novice at the Abbey many years ago. It," he paused, "It was not for me. It was not that the life of the Abbey was difficult, I found that comforting somehow. It was a strange place, and not as you would expect." He seemed to collect his thoughts. "I know not. It was many years ago."

"Was there anything in particular?" asked John.

"No, nothing I could put my hand on as such. Well, I've had a good life," he said.

"When was this?" Asked John.

"It must be ten summers since," said the man. There was silence in the room. It seemed the man's words were as much a surprise to his friends as they were to John.

"Do you know Brother Brendan?" asked John.

"Now, there's a story. Brendan came to the Abbey, oh, towards the end of my time there. He appeared one day, a grown man, wanting admission as a novice. He, well, he was always quiet. He never played the novices' games, he never spoke of his past. Some of us didn't trust him. But the abbot thought him a good man, and honest. Anyway, I left. But yes, Brendan." John was silent.

John thanked the man. He looked around the room, and there seemed little evidence of anyone else joining the conversation, so he left and made his way down the muddy street where the worst of the rain seemed thankfully to have abated.

Aelfric and John walked across the causeway together, each apparently lost in thought. It was still cloudy, so they were just a pair of figures in the blackness, walking from one light to the next. They arrived a little later than they had intended, the meal being over. The usual monk was not on the door, instead he recognised the older Brother from the infirmary.

"Ahh," he said. "Brother John, a word if you will. Possibly it was best that you weren't here today. The Abbot is ... best if you come

in, it may rain again." The Brother paused briefly to collect his thoughts, before restarting. "The Abbot came to dinner looking haggard, distracted. He must have been thinking, worrying all afternoon. Suddenly he stood up, we were expecting grace, and, well, he announced that he had been thinking very hard and that he was very worried about something, and then... well, he sort of trailed off at that point. He was very, very distracted, well, not mad, but a very worried man. If you've ever seen a very worried man, that was him. He said that he was very worried about the situation, and that he was worried for us, and that he was ... he really, well he was obviously worried. I don't think he was as reassuring as he hoped. Then he announced a funeral for the two Brothers who died, to take place tomorrow. Then he casually mentioned, I don't think he fooled anyone, that the catafalque was badly repaired and would be bricked up further tomorrow morning. Then he left, and we heard him collapse outside. David is looking after him."

John and Aelfric shared a long look, and then Aelfric gestured that John should lead on, and they headed swiftly towards the infirmary. The corridors were busier than might be expected, but no-one tried to stop them, or even pay much attention. Arriving at the infirmary they found it empty except for Aidan who appeared to have fallen into some kind of slumber. Aelfric raised an eyebrow in query, and then, with an answering nod, moved to examine the boy. John settled into a chair to await the diagnosis. John sat by Aidan's bed as the night darkened, and Aelfric investigated. Occasionally he asked for an opinion, and John ventured his best guesses, but neither could really tell what had happened. A novice brought them some food, and they ate in a corner of the infirmary, discussing in hushed tones. Aelfric rummaged in his supplies and extracted several bottles which he placed on the table beside the bed. Muttering to himself he dripped some liquid into Aidan's mouth, talking of restoratives and tonics. He rubbed a salve onto the wounds on Aidan's chest. Finally he sprinkled some strongly scented water on the bed linen. He walked back to John.

"That is all I can do," he said. "I have given him a tonic for strength, and a salve to heal his wounds. The rest I fear is with the Almighty."

John and Aelfric sat by Aidan's bed, watching over him. Eventually the bell rang for Compline, but Aidan seemed a little agitated, so John stayed by his bed side to watch, rather than dashing off to Compline. A short time later the door to the infirmary burst open, and Brother David came dashing in. He rushed around the infirmary, muttering under his breath.

"I told him not to get out of bed!" he said. On seeing John's confused look he explained, "The Abbot came to Compline, we had a very rushed service, and at the end he made an announcement. He seemed very agitated and distracted. He's decided that to prevent any more unexplained accidents the monastery will be locked up tonight, all the dormitories locked and the monks kept locked safely away from any danger. You must leave the infirmary now, I must get it locked up, and prepare a bed for myself."

Surprised, John and Aelfric left the infirmary. The main courtyard of the monastery was full of monks hurrying to and fro. From a corner of the courtyard the Abbot dashed up to them, keys jangling at his waist.

"You must leave here now," he said, "I must lock up. You will of course not be offended if you both sleep in the outbuildings

again. We still have no free rooms." He ushered them hurriedly out of the gate, pausing at the last moment to grab a lantern from the gatehouse. "Here you go" he said and bundled them through the gate.

As John and Aelfric stood bewildered outside they heard the sound of the bars being closed and the gate being locked behind them.

They made their way to the outbuildings and settled down to sleep. They talked for a while, and eventually drifted off to sleep. John dreamt of storms and of locked gates. Eventually the storm of his dream blew the gate open and it banged wildly to and fro. Suddenly, John woke up at a real bang. The door of the stable slammed shut. John lay awake for a moment, listening to the silence. Gradually he became aware of small shuffling noises, as of an animal moving about downstairs. The noises became louder and more violent. There were sounds of fighting and of sheep in pain. Disturbed, John kept still, afraid to go down the ladder to investigate. There were growls, and then the door slammed again.

When he was sure of the silence, John crept down the ladder. He worked his way across to the door, occasionally tripping over the form of a suspiciously still animal. He opened the door, but the night outside was dark and cloudy and provided no illumination. Disturbed and unwilling to return to sleep John wandered towards the shore, to try and settle his mind. He gazed out across the waves, and paused and muttered a swift Angelus to calm his worried thoughts. As he gazed contemplatively across the waves he became aware of a silvery light as the clouds parted to reveal the moon. Reassured by this he stood in thought until he realised that the sky was still overcast, and the moon was not to be seen. In fact, the light seemed to be coming from behind him. He turned to see the monastery bathed in a silvery glow.

Already it seemed to be fading, and he ran in order to try and get there before the source disappeared. He came to the gate, and was surprised to find it still open. Entering the gradually dimming monastery, he emerged from the gatehouse to find that the glow was now merely outlining the chapel. He dashed to the deserted chapel, the light fading around him all the time. As he entered the chapel, he was just in time to see the last glimmers of light fading around St Cuthbert's tomb.

John stood in the now darkened chapel, and wondered what to do next. On impulse he turned on his heel and strode decidedly out of the chapel, and then out of the Abbey, pausing only to collect and strike a lantern from the gatehouse. He walked as swiftly as he could to the stable where Aelfric lay, careful not to extinguish the lamp, and pushed the door open. He opened the door, and stopped, staring at what the light of his lamp revealed.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God, have mercy on us sinners now and at the hour of our death."

He paused to regain control over his churning stomach, and stepped gingerly across the mess on the floor to reach the ladder. He dashed up the ladder and over to the prone form of Aelfric.

"Aelfric, Aelfric." He received no response, so shook Aelfric with great vigour. Aelfric stirred slowly. "Whatever is the matter?" John silently indicated that Aelfric should come to the edge of the hayloft and look down. The old man turned somewhat pale and looked away.

"What on earth did *that*?" asked Aelfric.

"I don't know, I heard the door bang, and sounds from below, and

the door sound again. I had no light so I went for a walk to calm myself. I saw a light from the Abbey, and as I returned the gates you heard locked against us stood open in the night. The light faded around the Abbey, finally fading around the chapel of St Cuthbert. I am afraid, Aelfric, but I know that we should not allow the Abbot to brick up the catafalque before the evil has been purged from this holy place."

Once Aelfric had recovered his composure he picked up his bag and they, somewhat reluctantly, crossed the floor to the door, and gratefully cleaned the soles of their shoes as they returned to the Abbey.

"Where shall we go now?" asked Aelfric. "I think we should go to the infirmary, and see how Aidan and Brother David are."

And so they hurried along the deserted dark corridors, and started at the shadows that darted around as they ran. And they reached the door of the infirmary and found it unlocked, they pushed it open and stepped inside.

The door stood wide open, the room they saw was empty. As they stood in amazement a powerful voice spoke out from behind them.

"Remove, O princes, your gates, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of glory shall come in."

"Quick," said Brendan, for he it was, "we must follow them," and he turned and strode off down the corridor into the courtyard. Too perturbed to protest, John and Aelfric followed apace. As they came out into the courtyard they could see two figures - one tall, one short disappearing into the chapel. They hurried on, and as they entered the chapel they saw two figures struggling at the catafalque, wrestling with each other, or so it seemed.

"No!" cried one voice!

"It must be!" cried the other, distorted with tension and pain. Brendan rushed to the catafalque and laid his hands on the smaller figure, "easy lad, easy, there's plenty of time for that." The struggling quietened, David stood back, panting.

"I awoke, he was raving, the door, the door had burst open, I followed him here, he was mumbling something over and over, he said he had to Open The Way."

"Yes," said John, "I think on the whole it probably is the time that we saw what lay under this tomb."

The five of them stood and looked at each other, assessing the weight of the great marble block.

Meanwhile, unseen by the monks, five bats flitted overhead.

"Very well," David said reluctantly, "I suppose that given everything, particularly Michael's plans for the morrow, we should probably see what lies below, though I am afraid to look myself. The catafalque moves this way, it will only need two of us."

He and John applied themselves to the catafalque, which moved smoothly aside, leaving two grooves in the ground. Once moved, it revealed a spiral staircase descending into the blackness.

"So," said John, with a certain mock bravado, "who wants to go first then?"

There was a telling silence.

Aelfric said, "I will follow you down."

John sighed, muttered a Paternoster under his breath, and, holding the lamp firmly in front of him, descended. The staircase wound down, and John found himself in a small memorial chapel. His eye was drawn to the East Wall where there was a little altar, and he was alarmed to discover that the crucifix thereon was inverted, and the icon on the wall disfigured beyond recognition. John turned, and looked to where the bones of St Cuthbert lay, and found that instead of the orderly manner in which they had no doubt once been laid they had been scattered from the alcove in which they once were and were strewn haphazardly across the floor. Within the alcove there was a shadow his lamp would not penetrate, and an ancient malevolence glowered at him.

Four spiders scuttled from cobwebs around the alcove and made their way up the spiral staircase.

As Aelfric descended and stood by John three voices in unison spoke from the blackness of the alcove. "Three of us below, to match the three above. We who confounded St Cuthbert, whose bones we scattered, what have you to say to us?"

Aelfric spoke up at this point, somewhat to John's surprise. "The foundling is alive, you have failed to undo him, and in doing so have sealed your own undoing."

John looked at Aelfric; "I don't understand".

"Well, no, you wouldn't would you? You see, those three that within this tomb do lie were, well, St Cuthbert struggled with them when he was alive, and in the ordaining of his tomb, imprisoned them within. And so the legend grew up around this tomb that when the foundling returned - "

"The foundling?"

"Ahh, did you not know? St Cuthbert himself was a foundling. When the foundling returned then St Cuthbert's demons could be vanquished. Now our Abbot, in his arrogance, assumed that this meant that with a foundling in our midst he himself could vanquish these demons. In his naive attempt he, well, I don't know what he did, but he undid St Cuthbert's entrapment. But now that Aidan has survived their onslaught, he, and the Abbot, and you - the three above against the three below can finally exorcise these demons, and St Cuthbert can finally rest in peace."

A Tale for Advent-Eve was the result of a Storytelling held in Michaelmas 2002. At a Storytelling, a long-standing Jónsborg tradition, each person in turn contributes a part of the story before passing it on to the next. The fun, and the challenge comes in trying to produce a conclusion that fits.

There will be a Storytelling this term, so watch CUSFS missives for details.

On the web:

<http://www.greenend.org.uk/rjk/red-prince.html>

The result of an online storytelling.

Double Zero

Jason Indigo

Steve Ameson was tired. He was only an hour and a half into his shift but he had been up late the night before with his baby. In the seat next to him sat Greg Ovaney, who was now eagerly trying to start a discussion.

"Come on Steve, you can't just keep avoiding the topic. Surely it should be foremost on your mind."

"I just don't want to think about it. As far as I'm concerned, when the order comes through we just put the keys in and press the red button. It's as simple as that."

"Haven't you ever thought what will happen after we press it?"

"Yes. The shift will end early."

"You're damn right it'll end early. These missiles are targeted-"

"Please don't use the m-word. Just let me get back to my job."

"Your job is what we're talking about, Steve. It is your job to destroy civilisations."

"No, my job is to press this button. Destroying civilisations is the President's job. God knows, he's made a good enough job of ours."

"Yeah, but think about the other side. When we launch, they're going to launch a counter-offensive. They may have already fired at us: haven't you ever thought about this?"

"Look Greg, there is a reason I took this job: the pay. D'you know why it's so well paid? It's because of the stress of being responsible for launching nuclear weapons. The way I see it, if I don't think about the responsibility, I'm getting something for nothing."

Greg looked away in disbelief. How could Steve not think about this? If the order came, it would mean the end of the world as they knew it. They would launch; the Reds would launch; all the European countries would launch. Between them, they would annihilate over ninety percent of the Earth's inhabited landmass. The lucky ones would die instantly, killed by the massive heating effect of the explosions. Their bodies would be vaporised before they knew the war had come. The rest would survive the initial exchange of fire: it would be hardest on them. They would see loved ones melting before them, would watch each other slowly die out from radiation poisoning. With most of the Earth's plants and animals dead, food shortages would become a pressing concern. But that was nothing compared to the nuclear winter. Scientists still disagreed on what would happen then: maybe some individuals would become resistant to the radiation, and find new food supplies. Maybe they would be able to set up small communities, start reproducing, repopulating the Earth, replanting crops, herding animals for food. Maybe it would be what the New Age people wanted: a return to mankind's agrarian lifestyle. Or maybe not. In the end, only one thing was certain. Neither side would win. All bets would be off.

"Fifteen down," announced Steve, "Odd bet to make in a wheel, six letters. Any ideas?"

"Impair," answered Greg with an authoritative air. "It's a bet on the odd numbers in roulette."

"Thanks." Try as he might, Steve still couldn't get what Greg had been saying out of his head. If the order came through, it would mean the end. He hadn't really been paying attention when the result had been explained to him, when he started the job, but he knew that it wasn't a good one. Terms like 'mutually assured destruction' were not used lightly. For the first time since he'd

started, he found himself hoping the order never came. His attention went back to his wife, and his little girl, only a few months old. He hoped there was still a world for her to grow up in. One worth growing up in, anyway. Bad as the world was, it could very easily get worse.

"How did things get so bad that we need nuclear weapons anyway?" he asked.

"It didn't *get* this bad. The first cave people probably only invented clubs so they could hit each other over the head with them. It's just more high-tech nowadays. It's weird in a way. It's like we have this deep, evolutionary need to hurt each other, but we can't do it because of guilt, so we invent ever more complicated machines to do it for us."

"Yeah. Probably some future civilisation will spend centuries wondering why we bothered." A thought occurred to him. "Don't we have enough problems without creating more?"

"Have you ever read *1984* by George Orwell?" asked Greg. He was known in all the bases he'd worked as having strange political views, mostly built up from satirical fiction. Rare was a conversation in which he failed to mention this book, or *Gulliver's Travels*, another favourite of his which he'd first read as a twenty-year-old student, the time when it is traditional to espouse some cause and march on it.

"I saw the film," replied Steve, who in contrast had built up a reasonably consistent set of ideals from watching the news programmes that tended to be on at the end of his shifts.

"You need to read it to get the full effect. Orwell builds up this whole universe based on nothing but one man's..." He looked over at Steve and saw his eyes start to glaze over. "Anyway, he discusses war extensively. He says that the superpowers chiefly engage in war for the morale of the people, to make them more patriotic."

"Is that all?" It seemed excessively cynical to Steve, who had always naïvely believed that there must be some good in the world.

"There were other minor considerations, but that was the main reason given. They don't have nuclear missiles in *1984*, but something Orwell called rocket bombs. They fired them off at each other at regular intervals. That'd certainly make an interesting twist to the cold war." As the idea sank in, both men fell silent, and Greg regretted his afterthought. Suddenly, and he didn't know why, Steve developed a strong desire to ask one question: on the face of it a simple question, with only limited options, but one that Greg would not be able to satisfactorily answer. "Will the cold war ever end?" Greg considered for a moment.

"Probably, at some point. It has been normal throughout history for there to be some tension between the great powers, always the threat of invasion or sea battle, but now we have a much more pressing standoff. In the past, it would take weeks or even months to assemble and launch a proper invasion force, but with modern weapons, the war could be declared, fought, and over in about ten minutes."

Steve was shocked. He hoped Greg was exaggerating.

"So hopefully, this may be the trigger for a more relaxed relationship. When it only takes one cross word to end the world, people's words may become a little less cross. But of course, this would be a long-term resolution. Whether we will have peace, or at least something like it, in our lifetimes is even less certain."

Steve had asked the question hoping for a bit of reassurance. He

should have realised that Greg was not the person to go to. He wasn't a deeply religious man, but still believed deep down that there was probably a god of some denomination or other, so he silently prayed. He prayed that the world's leaders were sensible enough not to launch today. His meditations were, however, interrupted by a loud, screaming noise throughout the compound. He didn't have to look up to know what it was.

"My God, this is it," said Greg. His statement was unnecessary since everyone who worked in the military knew what the sound meant. It meant the order had come.

"It looks like those future civilisations are going to have a mystery on their hands after all," commented Steve dryly.

"This is it," repeated Greg, "put your key in the red box and extract the codes."

"I know the procedure," said Steve angrily. They both opened their boxes and took out the sheets with the launch codes. Silently, they both checked the codes coming through against the codes on the sheets.

"I have delta-nine-two-lima-four-yankee," said Greg, "do you concur?"

"I concur," answered Steve solemnly. There was almost a tone of regret in his voice, as if he wanted the code to be wrong.

"On my mark, insert your key into keyhole B and turn it ninety degrees to the right. Three, two -"

Steve drew his hand back from the panel. "I can't do it."

"What do you mean, you can't do it? This is your job. As you said before, this is what you get paid to do."

Steve suddenly realised why they were paid so well. "Look, I can't blow up the world like this."

"You have to. It's the president's job to decide this, not yours. For whatever reason, he has decided that this country needs to fire nukes at Russia, and it is your duty to help him do this."

"How can it be in our interest to make Russia bomb us?"

"There could be any number of reasons. They may already have launched. If they have, I would say we have about three minutes before we can expect the missiles over the coast." This figure was a wild guess on Greg's part, much as he skillfully concealed the fact.

"I don't care, I just... can't do it."

"Steve, you have to. The order has come through, and it's been confirmed. It's not just us. All over the country, there are people like us in missile silos, plugging in the keys and turning ninety degrees to the right. It's not your choice, nor is it mine. We have to do this."

Steve nodded reluctantly. This was the end of the world. When travellers arrived from far planets, as he believed they eventually would, they would see the radiation, the wrecks of major cities throughout the world, and they would nod to each other, and say how all this was the fault of a man who didn't have the courage to say no. What would become of his daughter now? Would anyone survive? He didn't want to think about these things.

"Right then, on my mark, insert your key into keyhole B and turn it ninety degrees to the right. Three, two, one, mark." They both inserted and turned their keys as prescribed. The ten-second countdown appeared on the display.

"This is it," said Greg for a third time. The enormity of what he was about to do suddenly overtook him. He didn't have any family to worry about, but now it struck him why it was that Steve had always avoided the subject. He had always looked upon nuclear war detachedly, from a political point of view, as

something fairly likely, but which would never happen to him. He had never before considered the full significance of the phrase 'the end of the world'. "Press the button," he said.

Steve reached up and flipped open the cover on the red launch button. He pressed his thumb down on it hard, so hard that he bent his thumb back. "It's done," he said, almost automatically. "There's no going back."

The countdown read :09 in large, red, squared-off digits. Greg reflected that it was not man's great scientific discoveries that were responsible for the ravaging of the Earth, but the small accomplishments. Without the little details like the switches, the semiconductors, the mathematical calculations on the missile's trajectory, the complex computerised tools that crafted the missile casing; without these things, the vast power that would rip the world to shreds would be unharnessed and insignificant.

The countdown read :08. Steve thought back to all the post-apocalyptic films he had seen. It seemed likely that there would be life after the war: there always was in the films. But then, that was because it made the films more interesting. He didn't see himself as much of a Mad Max.

The countdown read :07. Thinking about films made Steve think about all the time he had wasted. He would have spent it better had he known the world would end. Or would he? He probably would have wasted it in drowning away the sorrow of the approaching end. Was everyone like this? On knowing the world would end tomorrow, would people repent, or would they be completely irresponsible, spending the last twenty-four hours of their lives doing things they knew they wouldn't be able to regret?

The countdown read :06. Greg was thinking on a similar subject. He regretted not finding someone to share his life with. He'd had relationships, sure, but none of them had lasted very long. He hadn't been too worried; he thought he was just waiting for the right woman to come along. He'd left it a bit too long though. He had lost the chance.

The countdown read :05. Steve was lucky, thought Greg. At least he had loved, not just temporarily, but had truly loved, had loved enough to bring a new being into the world.

The countdown read :04. Greg was lucky, thought Steve. At least he had no family to worry about, no one to be concerned about when the missiles touched down.

The countdown read :03. Both men looked up to it, and then at each other. They didn't say anything. There was no point. There was no use in having last words when there would be no one to laugh at them, no one to compile them in books for other people to laugh at and say how witty they were.

The countdown read :02. They each realised what the other was thinking, and it struck them. It didn't matter how they had lived their lives. They had each lived different lives, different from each other, and different from the other six billion people in the world. Neither one of them was lucky, for how could it be lucky to die in this manner?

The countdown read :01. Privately, each one wished that they would be among the first to die, would not have to live through the nuclear winter, even though they didn't know if there would

be one. They both wanted to turn off the missiles, to stop them launching, but they knew there was no way to do so. It had been designed like that. On the CCTV screens, they saw the missiles slowly and gracefully lift off from the bottom of the silo, bound for a target, where there were undoubtedly other people, just like them, thinking the same thing.

The countdown read :00. Double Zero. The bank takes all.

Jason Indigo is a pseudonym. He lives in Essex with a small family of robot badgers.

On the web:

<http://www.doublezero.uklinux.net/>

Reviews

Finding Helen

Colin Greenland

Paperback, £6.99

ISBN: 0-552-77080-9

Colin Greenland is a local author, who I've met on several occasions (mostly beer festivals), so I was delighted to be offered the opportunity to review his new book, *Finding Helen*. I wasn't quite sure what to expect from his first foray outside his more usual genres of SF and Fantasy in which he is celebrated.

You know it's going to be a dark book when it opens to Christopher Gale recalling meeting the sweet innocent chemist's assistant soliciting in an underpass. His unease at how what was, and perhaps still should be "clean and lovely and hopeful" has become shabby and sordid is a reflection of his life, his relationship with Helen Leonard, and remained with me as I read this book.

Christopher Gale was once at University, where he studied dope and an inability to deal with the opposite sex. He then went to live with Helen Leonard, the woman he idolised, whilst writing her biography. Somewhere along the line he traded it all in for a respectable but soulless job, and a similarly unrewarding marriage. Then, one morning, he hears an old song by Helen on the radio, and wonders what he left behind. Could he go and get it all back? Does he want to?

This is not a tale of old love recovered, nor another travelogue-as-analogy-of-life. It is altogether darker, dealing with the wasting of lives. Chris realises that just as he wasted his life with Helen, so he has wasted his life since then. The sense of loss haunts him, along with the realisation that he has never been the master of his own destiny. Even as he approaches the end of his journey, he still needs to create someone else to help him make his decisions.

But is it any good? Chris is a believable character, the descriptions are convincing (and betray more of Chris' character) and the dialogue excellently paced. It is not a tale to warm you, however; there was not really any light at the end of the tunnel, and even the ending spoke to me more of continued drifting than of hope. There is beauty in the darkness, however, and this is a strangely compelling, subtly crafted and satisfying read. Highly recommended.

Matthew Vernon

I've heard lots of good things about local author Colin Greenland. He writes strange science fiction, entertains at the occasional pub meet and donates books to the CUSFS library. So when I found myself at drinking free wine at the launch of his first mainstream book, *Finding Helen*, I found myself more than obligated to buy a copy.

Christopher Gale, ensconced in marriage and middle age, hears a blast from the past on the radio. Helen Leonard was the star he idolised, the soundtrack of his youth, the songstress who inspired him to put pen to paper and actually do some coursework. What if he were to get in his car and try and find her?

As the story, and our hero, unravels, he attempts to introduce us to the relations, observations and motivations that have made his world. After all, you can send people postcards but they can never come and visit where you live.

Forget memory lane. *Finding Helen* is a journey down memory motorway. It is often said that the journey is more important than the destination. But the destination may surprise you. You'd never think such dark beauty could emerge from the mind of such a nice guy.

Lucy McWilliam

Beauty

Sherri S. Tepper

Book 14 in the Fantasy Masterworks Series

ISBN: 1-85798-722-5

The story of *Beauty* is based around the old fairytale of the Sleeping Beauty; except here, Beauty sidesteps her sleeping curse, only to be kidnapped by a film crew from the future, filming key events in the death of magic - the first of her many travels through and beyond time and space.

This may all seem a bit silly, but in fact the book turns out to be a serious and powerful and moving work, with some of the strangeness providing much needed light relief from the book's often dark tone. The future she is dragged to is a dark overpopulated dystopia (she does find somewhere worse, later), and her own personal life is suitably laced with suffering. This is certainly not a children's story.

The book is helped somewhat by the fact that Beauty is an appealing main character - she seems reasonably bright and capable, and the diary format allows her to have a view on everything without becoming obnoxious. I certainly found it quite easy to identify with and to care for her. The various settings throughout the book are well drawn, and the time travel aspect of the plot is reasonably unobtrusive - a way of adding a very broad scope to the book, rather than a central theme in its own right.

The book does have some weaknesses. The number of fairy stories referenced can become quite fatiguing, and people that violently disagree with the sentiments expressed in the book will probably become frustrated with it. However, all in all, it is a very good book, both moving and refreshingly different, and I would certainly count it among my favourites.

Peter Corbett

Threats and Other Promises Vernor Vinge

Threats and Other Promises is a collection of short stories by Vernor Vinge. While it appears to be out of print, all seven stories in it appear to be available in *The Collected Stories of Vernor Vinge*, and it is also available from the CUSFS Library.

Apartness and *Conquest by Default* are set in a world rebuilt after a major war in the North. Both are a bit weak, in my opinion, and *Conquest by Default* suffers from the problem that the aliens have unpronounceable names like %wrylg. *Conquest by Default* does however give an interesting (if somewhat predictable) answer to the question of how to deal with alien invaders.

The Whirligig of Time is the shortest story of the set, with perhaps the simplest plot, but along the way it manages to paint a good picture of the world in which it is set. *Gemstone*, on the other hand is strange, and never seems to quite know where it is going. There are bits in it I like, but overall I find it dark in an off-putting way. I also don't like *Just Peace*, in which a post-Singularity human attempts to help a pre-Singularity planet. I found that it failed to engage, and felt like another poorly-written cold-war story. *Just Peace* was a collaboration with William Rupp.

Original Sin and *The Blabber* are where the collection really shines though. *Original Sin* turns the head on the traditional SF trope of an intelligent and fast-living human race constrained on Earth by a more knowledgeable, but slower, set of aliens. The viewpoint character represents a human corporation who want to break the blockade and trade with the aliens, and has been dropped on their world to research immortality for them, but is being followed by the human enforcers. *The Blabber*, on the other hand, ties into Vinge's Tines universe, and is about a young lad who wants to escape the top of the Slow Zone for the Beyond. The aliens who have pierced the top of the Slow Zone, however, want to take his pet (the eponymous Blabber) in payment.

The collection doesn't really form a coherent whole, although it is easy to see the thread of threats and promises throughout. It is, however, in my opinion, well worth seeking out just for the last two stories - particularly if you have previously enjoyed *The Fire Upon The Deep*.

Jonathan Amery

Ash - A Secret History
Mary Gentle
Trade Paperback, £9.99
ISBN: 1-85798-744-6

It is rare for a book to be reviewed twice in successive TTBA's, but in the case of *Ash* I feel it is justified. In my opinion, this is one of the most impressive books of the last ten years, maybe longer. I believe the previous review sought to avoid all "spoilers" - but in doing so it failed to convey a sense of the elements which make the book such a compelling read.

Mary Gentle is a master of incisive and compelling description: *Ash* is full of the colour and diversity of fifteenth century Europe. That the business of the eponymous protagonist is war inevitably influences much of the book - yet all the fighting has a necessary and integral part in the development of the

characters and plot. The characters themselves are skillfully developed, and the author's obviously detailed knowledge of medieval warfare, history and life in general, provides a vivid depiction of the life and times of a female mercenary captain. All this makes a good book.

Ash is not a good book. *Ash* is, in my opinion, a *great* book. What makes it great - what lifts it beyond a merely well-executed historical novel - is the plot, and the ideas which lie behind it. *Ash* is presented as the translation of a series of medieval biographical manuscripts (the life of Ash herself) by a late twentieth-century academic, Pierce Ratcliff, framed by the correspondence between him and his publisher. The book starts predictably enough, perhaps, with scenes from Ash's childhood. Elements of things apparently alien to our own history start to appear - for example, a survival of Mithraism - but it is still close enough for disbelief to remain suspended. The history may be alternate, but not very much so. Then we move on to Ash's adult life, and the events of one extraordinary year which comprise most of the remainder of the book.

At first we see Ash as a determined and successful mercenary captain, holding her company together and maintaining it amidst a variety of vicissitudes. Then strange things start happening, which suggest that the history is perhaps a lot more alternate than we were first led to believe (I will leave a veil over the details). Ash is tested in ways she could never have expected, and we see her survive and grow. Meanwhile, Ratcliff the modern historian is also surprised, not only by what he is finding in the texts he is translating, but by the fact that the nature of the texts themselves is changing - what had been indexed as biography becomes a medieval fantasy, and then seems to disappear altogether. Little by little, information is revealed, and Ratcliff and the reader follow Ash on a journey of discovery.

So, what sort of book is *Ash*? Science fiction or fantasy? Yes - either or both, depending on taste. Mystery? Yes - a large part of my enjoyment of the book was trying to work out what was going on and how the pieces fitted together, as Ash herself was struggling to do this.

Un-put-downable tour de force? Certainly!

Mark Waller

The Praxis
Walter Jon Williams
Trade Paperback, £10.99
ISBN: 0-7434-6110-X

What happens when a totalitarian regime built on terror and obedience suddenly disappears? And no, I'm not actually talking about Iraq, but about the premise of *The Praxis*, the first volume in Walter Jon Williams new *Dread Empire's Fall* series. The Shaa have ruled their universe-spanning Empire with an iron fist for ten thousand years, and suddenly begin to commit ritual suicide. What happens when the last of them is gone?

The Praxis is very much a book in two parts. The first part sets the scene on Zanshaa as the last Shaa (named Anticipation of Victory in a peculiarly Banksian touch) prepares to commit ritual suicide in a highly formalised culture of noble families of peers, marriages of allegiance, and bonds of patronage, with individuals in the system all striving for promotion in the ranks of the Fleet. Two are our human protagonists, Caroline Sula and Gareth Martinez, one the last of a family, her parents having

been played alive for crimes against the state, and the other a minor Lord, losing his privileges as his patron opts to commit ritual suicide in the company of the last of the Shaa.

The second half of the book takes us into the intrigues, plots, rebellions, and ultimately battles as the unity once imposed by the Shaa crumbles. This space opera section is as fast and gripping as the first half of the story is slowly intriguing, and I'm loath to say much more about it because I accidentally read the blurb on the back of the book and slightly wished I hadn't.

Finally, shot throughout the book are flashbacks to Sula's early life which lead us to realise that she is not quite who she claims, although any effects this may have on the main thread of the story are yet to be seen, perhaps in the next part of the trilogy *The Sundering*, due out in October.

Williams' universe is an interesting one, with the hierarchical society of the Shaa's empire very well drawn and detailed. Interesting too are the various alien species which fill the universe, from the bear-like Torminel to the chameleon Naxids who flash patterns on their skins to communicate among themselves. Highly recommended, but the ending will have you aching to know what comes next, for which you'll have to wait six months...

Owen Dunn

Jeremiah

J. Michael Straczynski and others
Sky One, Tuesdays 1:50am

After J. Michael Straczynski finished the *Babylon 5* five-year story in 1998 the question on the lips of many fans was 'What next?' for the man who brought us B5's strong over-arching story. Over the next few years the answers were disappointing; *Babylon 5* TV movies and the series *Crusade* which failed after half a season revived memories of past glories but didn't deliver the *Babylon 5* magic: a rich universe and a good story, well told.

Jeremiah is JMS's latest answer, and it's made it over the hurdles of the American TV production process to complete a first season, with a second on the way. Set in a near-future world, fifteen years after an apocalypse known as the 'Big Death' killed everyone past puberty, *Jeremiah* follows its eponymous hero, played by Luke Perry, and his initially-unwilling sidekick Kurdy (Malcolm Jamal-Warner) as they seek to unify rebuilding communities and Jeremiah looks for the mysterious Valhalla Sector for news of his father who he had presumed dead. Mankind has reacted to the new situation in many different ways, from strong barter-based communities, through almost animal bandit groups, to Thunder Mountain, a mountain complex from where Markus (Peter Stebbings) leads one of the most technologically advanced groups. (Incidentally, Thunder Mountain is also known as Cheyenne Mountain, which may be familiar to some from *Stargate SG-1* and *War Games*...)

The story is not JMS's own. It's adapted from a European comic book by Herman Huppen, but Straczynski has had a large part in that adaptation and writes many of the episodes. It's something you can see in fragments of the dialogue, with characters sometimes perhaps a little too prone to launch into impromptu speeches. The JMS sense of humour is there too, as Perry and Warner bring their characters to life with the same relish we saw with Peter Jurasik's Mollari and Andreas Katsulas's G'Kar.

What isn't there, unfortunately, is the immensely intricate universe JMS brought to *Babylon 5*; *Jeremiah* is a much smaller world and we've only seen fragments of it so far. The other significant way *Jeremiah* is different is in following fewer plot threads in each episode. Where *Babylon 5* was notable for very busy episodes, with A, B, C, and sometimes D and E stories vying for the viewer's attention, *Jeremiah's* approach focuses much more on our two protagonists. In good episodes where the story is strong, this is great. Poor episodes stand out that much more without the redeeming features of the subplots to distract the viewer.

Straczynski has said that *Jeremiah* will run for five years. As you can tell from this review, it's hard not to draw parallels with *Babylon 5*, but *Jeremiah* is a quite different beast. Whatever its faults, it's thoughtful, entertaining SF from a man with a passion for story, and in a world still dominated by *Star Trek* and *X-Men* knock-offs, that's no bad thing. We can be hopeful that *Jeremiah* will build and develop its universe and storylines over the next five years.

Owen Dunn



Library Update

Clare Boothby

The borrowing catalogue (available on the web at <http://www.chiark.greenend.org.uk/cusfs/cat.html>) is up to 2693 books and counting, with a few hundred awaiting cataloguing at my house. To borrow any of these, simply find what you want in the online catalogue and send me a mail (soc-cusfs@lists.cam.ac.uk) or ask me at a meeting. I've been in touch with the Union librarians and the Union part of the library once more has an official home there (though there are other problems, such as damp, which mean we might have to move out anyway). All that remains is for me to re-catalogue it...

The CUSFS AGM

Owen Dunn

The CUSFS Annual General Meeting was held at Trinity College on 16th February. The Chairbeing, Kate Stitt, said that the year to date had been really good with all events being well received. The Treasurer and Membership Secretary confirmed this with their reports of a generally healthy society. After last year's worries about the future of the CUSFS Library holdings in the Union Society building, the Librarian (Clare Boothby) was able to report some more positive correspondence with the Union's Librarian which should mean that our collection has a home at least in the short term. She also reported that CUSFS will be making a donation to the National Liver Foundation to fulfil a commitment associated with a generous donation of books to the Library.

A motion was put to the AGM that the Constitution should be modified to remove the restriction that prevents re-election of the Chairbeing to a second term in office. The motion was voted on and passed with twelve votes in favour and one against.

The elections to the Committee were as follows:

Chairbeing

Nomination: Kate Stitt Elected Unanimously

Secretary

Nomination: Christine Clarke Elected Unanimously

Treasurer

Nominations: Peter Corbett, Helen Cousins
Helen Cousins elected.

Membership Secretary

Nominations: Matthew Vernon, Ian Jackson
Ian Jackson elected.

Librarian

Nomination: Clare Boothby Elected Unanimously

TTBA Editor

Nomination: Owen Dunn Elected Unanimously

Sally Clough, Peter Corbett, Tony Evans, and Matthew Vernon volunteered to help the Committee when needed.

Convention Report

Seacon 03, Hinckley

(Or: The Secret Astronomical Reason for the Fannish Colonisation of Hinckley)

Clare Boothby

This year, Eastercon returned to the popular Hanover International Hotel in Hinckley, Leicestershire. It's a bit of a strange place to be. There's a giant statue of Poseidon in the lobby, and the corridors are lined with faux Victorian shop windows, but somehow the decor only manages to make 500 fans (dressed in everything from T-shirts and jeans to Robin Hood costumes) look less out of place.

The guests of honour this year were author Christopher Evans (*Aztec Country*, *Capella's Golden Eyes*) and artist Chris Baker (a.k.a. Fangorn, responsible for the covers of Brian Jacques' *Redwall* books and design work for Spielberg's *A.I.*, among other things). Mary Gentle had been promised, but had to cancel at the last minute. Fortunately Peter Hamilton, Ken MacLeod, John Courtenay Grimwood, Christopher Priest and M John Harrison were all around to help assuage the disappointment.

The programme this year was quite busy and varied. Programming themes included a series of panels on 'Milestones in SF / fantasy / comics / films / science / etc.', and the presence of an artist as GoH made for an unusually strong set of art talks and discussions. Particularly enjoyable was a talk by one of Babylon 5's graphic designers, Alan Kobayashi. Science also featured quite strongly in the programme, with a variety of interesting talks on everything from the real International Rescue to bizarre calendrical rants, via aliens and vampires and everything else in between. One small group of intrepid laymen spent the weekend designing a new alien species - we expect to receive a postcard from their giant purple squid any day now... And of course there was the usual gamut of quizzes, workshops, films, plays, silly games, award ceremonies(*), costumes, *Robot Wars* re-enactments, etc., etc.

Highlights for me included a couple of fascinating literary discussions on the way SF and fantasy authors make their worlds believable, and the large number of readings, which were for the most part very entertaining and have left me with several new authors to find out more about. Lowlights were a higher than usual level of bad moderation (making several discussions less interesting than they would have otherwise been) and the fact that someone had let a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fanatic loose on the programme (do we *really* need an entire panel on one scene?). Overall, though, a very enjoyable weekend.

Next year we're off to Blackpool. I have my bucket and spade packed already...

(*): If anyone's interested, the BSFA awards for 2002 went to: Christopher Priest, for *The Separation* (best novel) Neil Gaiman, for *Coraline* (best short fiction) Dominic Harman, for his *Interzone 179* cover (best artwork), David Langford, for his introduction to *Maps: the Uncollected John Sladek* (best related publication) and the Tiptree Award ('for science fiction or fantasy that expands or explores our understanding of gender') went to: M. John Harrison, for *Light* and John Kessel, for *Stories for Men*

The CUSFS Guide to Cambridge Bookshops

Clare Boothby and Mark Waller

This guide is intended to help SF and fantasy readers new to Cambridge find places to buy books and other merchandise. It is based on the knowledge of book-buying CUSFS members, and specific surveys, but has no claim to infallibility. If you find anything missing, mistakenly included, or just wrong, please let us know.

Introduction

There are three basic types of book-seller in Cambridge:

1. about half a dozen "mainstream" bookshops, including the usual High Street names.
2. a number of smaller shops with varying numbers of second-hand books.
3. market stalls and other "part-time" traders

The only shops and other outlets included are those which are known to stock worthwhile quantities of SF and fantasy. There are many other bookshops in Cambridge (typically specialist or antiquarian) which do not stock SF/fantasy, and many other places which may well have a few SF books at any given time.

Mainstream Bookshops

Those selling mostly or only new books. In alphabetical order:

Borders

Address: 12-13 Market Street (next to W H Smith)

Open: Mon Sat 09:00 22:00 Sun 11:00 17:00

Comments:

SF department on the ground floor, in the back half of the shop (up a few stairs). Good selection of UK current editions and imports, reasonable selection of graphic novels. Watch out for interesting (free) talks in the evenings (recent speakers include Michael Marshall Smith and the *Lord of the Rings* film guide authors) and for student discount days (typically 20% off, once a term or so).

Forbidden Planet

Address: 60 Burleigh Street

Directions:

Starting from Bradwell's Court, head (past the bus station) towards the Grafton Centre. At the top of (pedestrianised) Fitzroy Street, approaching the main entrance to the Grafton Centre, do not go in, but bear right into (pedestrianised) Burleigh Street. Forbidden Planet is on the right.

Open: Mon - Sat 10:00 - 18:00 (sometimes later if the staff can't be bothered to chuck people out!)

Comments:

The place in Cambridge for comics, graphic novels, SF videos and merchandise. The book stock (on the left at the back) is relatively small, but largely new editions / US imports.

Galloway and Porter

Address: 30 Sidney Street (next door to Sidney)

Open: Mon - Fri 08:45 - 17:00 Sat 09:00 - 17:15

Comments:

A very large, if rather random, stock of remaindered or otherwise reduced-price books. There does not seem to be any obvious shelf-order system, but there are many excellent bargains (e.g. hardbacks well under a fiver, paperbacks one or two pounds) if you can find them! Good places to start looking are the free-standing bookcases on the right-hand side of the ground floor, and to the left of the stairs in the basement. They also hold occasional warehouse sales of varying quality, at 347 Cherry Hinton Road; check the shop window for details.

Heffers (main shop)

Address: 20 Trinity Street (opposite Trinity Great Gate)

Open: Mon - Sat 09:00 - 17:30 (except Tues 09:30 17:30, Wed 09:00 19:30) Sun 11:00 - 17:00

Comments:

SF section on the gallery, third alcove along on the left side of the shop. New titles are often to be found on one of the tables at the front of the shop, on the left. The section is rather squashed after a move from more spacious shelves downstairs, but has quite a good selection, with a high proportion of imports, and a helpful and interested SF specialist looking after it. The stock is complementary to the Paperbacks + Video stock. A very good place to try if you can't find what you want elsewhere they are good at finding books not in stock, including US imports not in print in the UK. Watch out for interesting talks in the evenings (free but you often need to get a ticket from the shop beforehand; recent/upcoming speakers include Diana Wynne Jones and Colin Greenland) particularly for *Fabulous Harbours*, a roughly annual event with a dozen or so SF and fantasy authors in attendance.

Heffers, Grafton Centre

Address: 28A Grafton Centre

Directions:

As Forbidden Planet to the top of Fitzroy Street, then enter the Grafton Centre. Go through the Centre to the second "square", with the escalators. Heffer's is in the back left corner.

Open: Mon Fri 08:00 17:30 (except Wed 08:00 19:30) Sat 08:30 18:00, Sun 11:00 17:00

Comments:

Reasonable stock, mostly of current UK editions. Useful if you're in the area and need something to decent read, but probably not worth going out of your way to visit.

Heffers Plus

Address: 31 St. Andrew's Street (on the corner of St. Andrew's and Pembroke Streets, opposite Emmanuel)

Open: Mon - Sat 09:00 17:30 (except Tues 09:30 17:30)

Comments:

SF/fantasy section on the left-hand side, close to the entrance. A good stock, mostly UK current editions. Complementary to the Trinity Street stock.

Waterstone's

Address: 22-24 Sidney Street (near Sidney and Sainsbury's)

Open: Mon - Sat 09:00 - 20:00 Sun 11:00 - 17:00

Comments:

SF department on the ground floor, towards the rear on the right (as you enter from Sidney Street). Wide selection and large stock-holding of current UK editions, relatively few imports, a small-ish selection of graphic novels displayed so as to occupy maximum shelf space.

Other Shops

Second-hand only, and those selling books as a sideline. In alphabetical order:

Amnesty

Address: 46 Mill Road

Directions:

Starting from Parker's Piece, go to the corner furthest from the University Arms hotel. Bear right into Mill Road (keeping the new swimming pool on your right). A couple of hundred yards along, on the right-hand side.

Open: Mon Sat 12:00 17:00

Comments:

Cheap second-hand bookshop, profits to Amnesty International. Small but good selection of second-hand SF/fantasy at the front of the shop, on the right.

Browne's Bookstore

Address: 56 Mill Road

Directions:

Starting from Parker's Piece, go to the corner furthest from the University Arms hotel. Bear right into Mill Road (keeping the new swimming pool on your right). A couple of hundred yards along, on the right-hand side.

Open: Mon Fri 09:00 18:00 Sat 09:00 17:30

Comments:

Neighbourhood bookshop. Excellent selection of second-hand SF/fantasy in the left-hand half of the shop, at the back. A very small stock of new books.

Cambridge Central Library

Address: Lion Yard

Open: Mon Fri 09:00 19:00 Sat 09:00 17:30

Comments:

Second-hand sales area on the first floor (Lending Library), on the left-hand side beyond the lifts. Not categorised, and books inevitably well used.

Borrowing:

Paperbacks are on a stand in the "Recreational Books" area by the returns and borrowing desks. Hardbacks are in the main fiction section, around the outside wall behind the non-fiction; the fiction is shelved in one continuous run, by author.

Oxfam Books

Address: 28 Sidney Street (next door to Galloway & Porter)

Open: Mon Fri 09:00 17:30 Sat 09:00 18:00, Sun 12:00 17:00

Comments:

SF/fantasy section on the left, at the top of the entry ramp. Reasonable selection, properly sorted.

Market Stalls etc.

Note: stall-holders may not always turn up on their allotted day. For purposes of orientation in the Market Square: Rose Crescent is on the north side, Marks & Spencers to the east, the Guildhall on the south side and Great St. Mary's church on the west. There are three north south aisles, but the west aisle has no northern half.

Alister & Garon Books

Where: Middle aisle, second stall from north on the west (church) side

What: Stock categorised by type; extensive selection of SF/fantasy on the right-hand side.

Days: Monday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday. Also at: Garon Records & Books, 70 King Street small SF/fantasy section in back room

Hugh Hardinge (of Over)

Where: West side, second stall from north

What: Stock not categorised; some SF/fantasy included

Days: Tuesday, Thursday.

Note: Tuesday is paperbacks; Thursday is hardbacks

Book Barrow (F. A. Edwards of Chesterton)

Where: East aisle, third stall from south on the east side

What: Stock categorised by type; reasonable selection of SF/fantasy

Days: Thursday.

W. Brown (of Cherry Hinton)

Where: West side, second stall from north

What: Stock not categorised; reasonable amount of SF/fantasy

Days: Friday.

unnamed stall

Where: Middle aisle, third stall from north on the west side (next to Alister & Garon)

What: Good SF/fantasy stock at the back left.

Days: Friday, Saturday.

Peripatetic book-sales

There are also occasional book-sales held in various (usually church) halls around the centre of Cambridge. Look out for posters around town. Popular locations include St Michael's Hall (Trinity Street, opposite Caius), Fisher Hall (on Guildhall Street, the narrow street between the Guildhall and the west side of Lion Yard) and Henry Martyn Hall (on Market Street, opposite Borders).

Disclaimer: The contents of this guide are based on the best information available to CUSFS at the time of going to press. CUSFS appreciates any feedback which will help make this guide more accurate and helpful, but cannot be held responsible for any disappointment or expense arising from information contained within it, or omitted from it.