

OUSFG Newsletter, Early Hilary 1993

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Discussion meetings

I've run out of ironic ways of saying you already know where they are, so I'll just bluntly say: they're where they always are: 8.15pm at Peter Wells' room, HCl at Wadham. Then, after everyone shuts up (or is drowned out by cries of "Baaaaaaaar"), we invade St. Catz bar.

Week 1 Various people (including most of the committee) are authors stuck in an over-crowded balloon... You get to decide who gets the push.

Week 2 Mike Damesick on Alternate Worlds

Week 3 Mark Boyes' Modern Horror Archetype Creation Workshop: bring your own chianti!

Week 4 Religon Workshop, with spiritual guidance from Matt. Yes, in an attempt to boost society funds, we're gonna design our own religion! Well it worked for L. Ron Hubbard.

Library Meetings

Yup, it's still there (at least I hope the books weren't carried away in the floods). 8.15 onwards at 64 Banbury Road, at the rooms of those lovely librarians, Ian and James. With a bit of luck, we'll be able to use St. Hugh's bar afterwards; failing that it'll have to be the Gardener's Arms down Woodstock Rd.

Speaker Meetings

Storm Constantine is penciled in for Wednesday of 6th week, we may also have David Wingrove and/or David Gemmel turning up at some point during the term.

Video Nights

In contrast however, the Video nights have CHANGED! Due to the demise of RPGSoc's video nights, we've decided to go weekly. We're still going to show 8 films a term, it's just we'll do one a week, as opposed to 2 a fortnight. They will still be held at St. Hilda's South JCR but at 8.15, giving you plenty of time to arrive and get a drink at the bar. DON'T TURN UP AT 7.30: you'll look silly (and/or get drunk). Knowing you lot as I do, I wouldn't be at all surprised if we retire to the bar after the film's finished either. Right that's the waffle over, now what are we actually going to claim we'll show? All will be revealed any moment now:

Week 1 The classic Plan 9 from Outer Space

Week 2 Edward Scissorhands

Week 3 Killer Klowns from Outer Space

Week 4 Pet Sematary

I could say that any resemblance between the above list and what is actually shown is purely accidental; but that would be untrue and I'm sure we can all rely on Pete to get what he says he'll get.

PicoCon

A small, one day (and cheap) taste of SF cons, held at Imperial College in London. Due this year to be held on Saturday 13th March. I'll be going, as will several other members no doubt, so there ought to be spare lifts for anyone who's interested.

Bad Taste Section

It has come traditional to do an article in rather poor taste about any SF author that has died recently. Well Fritz Lieber popped his clogs recently, but I know nothing about him, so I can't do his OUSFG Obituary.

Banquet

Yes, it's time for me to go round asking people for money AGAIN! The excuse this time is the banquet. This would be a sombre, dignified occasion if it wasn't for the fact we don't have a single sombre dignified member. So instead we behave much in the same way as usual, only with better quality food and clothing. Yes clothing: that means all you gents need a Dinner Jacket, and the ladies need a decent dress.

"Yes, that's all very well," I hear you cry, "but when is it?" Worry ye not, good readers, the details are in in the very next sentence! It's on Saturday of 5th week (20th February), in Worcestor and it'll cost £19 for tee-totallers, and £23.50 for alcoholics. The menu is detailed below:

Tomato and Basil Soup

Roast Loin of Lamb with Rosemary Sauce,
Seasonal Vegetables and Sesame Potatoes

Creme Brulee

Biscuits and Cheese

Coffee and Chocolates

The cooks say they can serve any vegetarian food (within reason), so can all vege's out there contact a committee member with their menu before the end of second week.

Credits

Dave Langford for his fun with Senseless violence, Chris Ewels for last year's description of committee posts (and no thanks at all to the committee who skived out of doing new ones) and me for the rest of it.

Context

Ha ha! Just when you thought it was safe to come out with a double entendre (and Mark that quote about Marina and the orange needed a second interpretation in order to count as a double entendre).

Mark C. "The ability goes before the inhibition." Christine: "So why don't you lose the inhibition before you come?"

Adrian: "I've never known anyone personally."

Mike: "I'm not fat, I've just got thick ribs."

Pete: "Go on, peach me! I'm hot and ready!"

Jeremy: "He's been wandering around with a big smile on his face, staring into space and forgetting what he said five minutes ago." Mark C.: "That's not love, it's senile dementia!"

Dave: "Hang on: is this a signpost... oh, it's a bench."

Adrian: "Lucy's wearing a trousers, so Dan must be in a dress."

Scientist on Stephen King's latest TV thing, about his particle accelerator: "It's more powerful than a super-nova!"

Editorial

Okay, okay, so it was a duff font. The last title wasn't v for newsletter: it was nu for newsletter. A nu looks like a curved v, and is apparently what the greeks use instead of n. Well, I did tell you incorporated the worst features of the last two. The best I could come up with this time was an attempt to make penguin into a present participle. Also people (well, Lucy and Christine at any rate) have been moaning that there haven't been any little 'toons in recent issues. To fit in with the general penguin' mad theme, there is a penguin floating around these pages, coming out with stupid comments. Any suggestions for his name (or what penguin someone involves, for that matter) will probably be printed next issue.

It has come to my notice that this journal is slowly becoming full of in-jokes and gossip, and is lamentably lacking in proper SF. This means we're forming a clique again. If you think this is a bad thing, write some decent SF stuff and give it to me and I'll print it. If, however, you're not entirely averse to cliqueishness, I'd really love to know the truth about Colin and the haddock...

Adrian's Gossip Column

Well, yet another article that has nothing to do with SF, but is just full of cliquey in-jokeness: do you realise this stuff is going in the Proctors and the Bodlein? Adrian's calmed down on the rabid gossip front recently (although after Wendy's birthday do, I've been considering changing the name to John Bray's gossip column) so I've had to make stuff up. Not that Adrian ever did that, of course...

For some bizarre reason, Dan wants me to print the following bit of 'hot gossip': "Adrian and Alex! Worr! Eh? Eh?". Well there you go Dan. Which reminds me, while we're on the subject of secret, clandestine relationships, has anyone noticed that he and Lucy seem to be spending a lot of time together?

In a desperate attempt to get into these hallowed pages, Peter Wells refused to comment on rumours about his liking of wearing nothing but caviar. This would be all very well if it wasn't for the fact that he was

the only one spreading these rather unpleasant tales.

In a similar, if slightly more bizarre, manner, our very own Dan Mitchell (the one with the violent leggings) recently announced publicly that he would get engaged to the pope if he had any hair. I tried to phone the Vatican for their opinion on the matter, but I couldn't find their number.

So Luke, you wish to become a fish like your father...

That time of year is coming upon us, when all of OUSFG drops its pretence and shows its true colours. Every meeting becomes full of political hackery, with the committee desperately trying to keep its grip on total executive power, while eager young freshers try to displace them. And all the time the great old ones plot and scheme in secret, planning devious changes to the constitution to bring themselves back to their former pre-eminence... NOT!

What really happens is that any fresher who turns up to the AGM is likely to walk away with a committee post, while the older members try desperately to get Lemon Curry installed as a constitutional amendment again. If any of you lot want to try and choose which post you want rather than be told on the night, read the charming little pieces below, and then tell one of your fun-lovin' committee members. By a strange coincidence, they're also the people to give any constitutional amendments to.

President:- currently Lucy Marsterson

This committee post is probably the best to choose from the point of view of CV-points, as to be able to put that you were president of something is useful. What you are required to do is very little. The president is the public face of OUSFG, and must be ready with a quick answer to any question. The task of organising the banquet is probably the most onerous one in the hectic OUSFG calendar.

Secretary:- currently Christine Braban

A truly excellent job that balances fun with deep intellectual fulfillment, provides a challenge if you're prepared to rise to it, and hones those word-processing skills into an artform. Then quickly remove the rose tinted spectacles, stop filming the TA advert, and see what's really involved: writing letters to famous authors and arranging the talks (the fun bit), taking minutes at meetings (another excuse for creative outbursts), 'organising' punt parties ("Oh no, no punts again..."), handling all the OUSU and Proctor paperwork, contacting our senior member, organising any trips etc. etc.

Treasurer:- currently Mark Charsley

The treasurer, funnily enough, is in charge of the society accounts. Which means that you're the one that has to hassle people for money all the time. You also get hassled by George for T-shirts every time she sees you, but you soon learn to avoid her. You don't have much to do in Trinity, but Michaelmas sees you getting money off freshers and having to sort out the Christmas Party.

Dogsbody:- currently Peter Wells

This covers any of several posts to take some of the work from the three

senior posts. Job titles in the past have included "Video Rep", "Rag Rep", "Public Relations Officer" and "Presidential Sex Object". The jobs of these posts are self explanatory, and may be combined, overlap or be left out altogether.

Newsletter Editor:- currently Mark Charsley

Not actually a senior committee post, but arguably the most important. You get to produce six booklets like the one you're currently reading a year. If you're lucky, you get articles given to you, otherwise its just a massive ego-trip as you foist your own views on lots of poor, innocent (but not unexpectant: just wait for the complaints if it's late) victims.

Quick Book Reviews

Mostly Harmless, by Douglas Adams

As might have been thought of a fourth sequel, this book isn't very good. Having said that, it's miles better than the last two in the series. Lots of Trillian, Arthur and Ford; but no Zaphod, no Marvin and precious few jokes. There's one decent moan about hotel receptionists, but the rest rarely raises a smile. The best thing about the book is the ending: not even Douglas Adams could come up with a sequel after that. You probably won't regret reading it, but you'd kick yourself for buying it, especially in hardback.

Witches Abroad, by Terry Pratchett.

This is the god-alone-knows-I-lost-count-ages-ago-th book in the Discworld series, and in contrast to the abortion mentioned above, it is very good. It features Granny Weatherwax and the other two witches that were in the Wyrd Sisters. This trio go touring the discworld while saving the world from some typical Discworld-like potential disaster. Mr. Pratchett has obviously thought of some good tourist jokes since we bade farewell to Twoflower all those years ago. All these plus the good witches themselves (although alas no more verses of the Hedgehog Can Never Be Bugged At All) make this book the best in the series for a long, long time. Definitely worth buying -especially as it's out in paperback.

The Hope, by James Lovegrove

'Five miles long and one mile high, carrying a million passengers to a promised new land, the good ship Hope was the fulfilment of a philanthropists dream. Yet a generation later land has not been sighted, rust cakes her gigantic hull, in the bowels sinister creatures proliferate and her motley human cargo dance, degenerate or die.'

This is a good book, even without my predeliction for huge, ancient, arcane machines (probably caused by looking through the windows on Playschool too many times...), I'd have loved this book. It's a collection of twelve interwoven short stories, each won referring to events in the others, which build up into a bleak picture of a society falling into ruin and despair. Well worth a read, if a little depressing, and written by an Oxford graduate, what more could you want?

Mathematical Methods for Scientists, by Mary J. Boas

Oops, seem to have got a bit carried away here, sorry.

The penultimate episode of Dave Langford's Fun with Senseless Violence

Of course, in science fiction, these low-budget weapons consisting of pure information are also popular for use against people. I suspect that writers - pallid, flabby and inept creatures that they are - like them because they're easy to lift and require little skill to aim. The idea is that this deadly data, once it gets into your mind, will cause you to fall over twitching, bleeding from the eyeballs and frothing at every orifice, like a very young fan who's just read his first William Gibson story.

These infant fans all seem to think that the notion of brain- bursting information - "concepts that the mind cannot stomach" - was invented by Gibson in the 1980's. Just to show my superior erudition, I can't resist pointing out the weird coincidence that it cropped up twice in October 1969, with the appearance of two similar works, Piers Anthony's Macroscopic and the first episode of Monty Python's Flying Circus. Remember the sketch about the funniest joke in the world, which no-one could hear and live? The German version apparently goes: "Wenn ist das Numstock git Slotermeyer? Ja! ...Beiherhund das Oder die Flipperwalt gersput." Not many people know this is a quotation from Wittgenstein and translates as, "Whereof we cannot speak, thereon we must remain aaaaaaaaargh."

Anyway, British SF pundits go on about how Fred Hoyle used the idea of unthinkable information years before, in The Black Cloud, 1957, and really offensive nitpickers like myself remind them that the world's funniest and deadliest joke features in a poem by that famous American, Oliver Wendell Holmes, who in 1894 died laughing.

Which is nearly what I did when I read about the methods of the arch-villain in Charles Sheffield's recent "hard science fiction" novel Proteus Unbound. This fiend has the unsocial habit of driving his potential enemies insane, by mercilessly beaming them animated pictures of himself dancing backwards in red tights. Talk about psychological warfare.

All these non-macho software weapons sound too much like magic spells to the true fan of hard science fiction, who insists that stories be based on rigorous extrapolation from known scientific facts about anti-gravity, faster-than-lightcraft, instantaneous communication, infinity generators and time travel...

For example, people were quite cruel to Bob Shaw for his astrological cover-up in The Ragged Astronauts. Just as you're fretting that the twin planets sharing a common atmosphere can't possibly work, Bob cunningly inserts a mention that this is, er, another universe, where pi happens to be exactly three. In other words, anyone wanting to prove the set-up is impossible must first ask Bob for the value of the gravitational constant in these foreign parts. The reply is always: "It's defined as whatever makes my solar system work."

I pointed out that if you decide like this to make your own rules, it seems entirely reasonable that this different universe will also have its own special grammar, syntax and spelling, so that the publishers could save a fortune in proofreading. Mr Shaw's reply was not printable, but by the end of the third book (The Fugitive Worlds) the use of an intergalactic mega-weapon has changed the value of pi to... about three and one-seventh. You can imagine people stalking around scratching their heads and muttering, "That circle looks a different shape somehow."

Funnily enough, no-one seems to protest half as much when writers dream up space drives that change another important constant by furtively pushing up our universe's maximum speed limit up towards infinity. And not many authors have picked up on the very useful implication that if c approaches infinity and Einstein's dear old $E=mc^2$ still works, you get an awful lot more output from a nuclear reaction. I mean, the fusion of one hydrogen atom could provide all the energy you need to zoom right round the universe detonating suns and wrecking galaxies, and there'd be an infinite surplus which would have to be either stored in infinitely many batteries or converted back to a single subatomic particle.

I assume that this kind of rigidly scientific power source is what makes AKKA work. AKKA, you might possibly remember, is the plot-saving gadget from Jack Williamson's *The Legion of Space*, which when all else fails can be hauled out of your sleeve to destroy entire invading spacefleets, plus any odd moons and planets that stray into the line of fire. It's conveniently portable, it needs no batteries, all the parts can be bought from Radio Shack except for the bits of wood, and I've always been impressed by the luck of the inventor who first stumbled on this world-wrecking principle and just happened not to be pointing it at anyone, or at the Earth, or the moon, or the stars...

Similarly, the eponymous plot device of Barrington J. Bayley's *The Zen Gun* (1983) is carved from rough wood and does not require ammunition, but on one of its more interesting settings will detonate suns at three light years' range by projecting a murderous blast of pseudoscience (based on the sometimes disputed theory that gravity is not a pull, but a push). By way of a safety catch, this apocalyptic facility can only be used by a trained Zen master who is too enlightened actually to use it.

My favourite device with no visible power supply appears in David Duncan's *Occam's Razor*, where an eccentric mathematician scores high marks for style by announcing, "Gentlemen, we are about to short-circuit the Universe!" It's a slight anticlimax when the fabric of space/time is rent asunder, and the world's nuclear arsenals disabled, by a collection of wire frames supporting films of aqueous solution - or in lay language, soap bubbles.

This is all because of topology, which was just making its first appearance as an explanation for everything in SF. Previous explanations for everything included atoms, rays, radium, magnetism, mesmerism and General Semantics: invoking one of those magic names automatically meant that you didn't have to explain any more. Of course new catch-phrases still arrive every year or so. 1950's futures were full of people taking cooling drinks of heavy water. Later on they did their hair in gravity waves, and today's SF characters can't so much as tie up a parcel without resorting to superstrings. Not to mention burying their dead in a supersymmetry.

(I once planned a trend-setting story to be called *Cyberfractal Wetware meets G=94del's Infinite Black Hole Designer Psychosis in the Quantum Gutter*; but I found it had already been written... by almost everybody.)

Film News

Rumour has it that *Star Wars I to III* are being made back to back (in a similar manner to *Back to the Future 2 and 3*) at the moment, with part 1 to be released in two summers time. "But hang on, they've already been made!" I hear you cry. Well no because as all pedants will know, *Star Wars* was part IV of a nine film series. These new films will feature the *Clone Wars*

and the secret origin of Darth Vader.

While on the subject of follow up films, Aliens 4 (they seem to have run out of mathematical operators) is definitely going to be made. They are going to have one of two possible plots:

1) Aliens vs Predator, after the success of the Dark Horse series of comics, or

2) It was all a dream! Yes, that's right, in an attempt to save both Ripley and the plot continuity, Alien3 is going to be declared a nightmare. Funnily enough, everybody who saw the film has been saying that for months now...

Jurassic Park, directed by Steven Spielberg has been finished, and is due for release in '93. This seems to be about Dinosaurs being re-created from their fossilised DNA, and put in a park. As this sounds more like a future Horizon programme than a feature film, I warrant some Dinosaurs escape and eat people a lot.

Video versions of Blade Runner seem to be multiplying. There are now going to be at least two different director's cuts made (a small amount compared to the combination possible depending on whether you include chopped scenes, voice-over, happy ending etc.). Finally Robocop 3 has been made, but its release has been delayed by the financial problems of its distributor. Good job they didn't have any large robots with large machine guns and 40 second patiences around.

Online copy courtesy of

[John Bray](#)