

OUSFG Newsletter, Late Hilary 1994

Mark Charsley <mcharsley@cix.compulink.co.uk>, 22nd February 1994

The Ultimate Newsletter!

Discussion Meetings

They're in the Lady Brodie Room in St. Hilda's every Wednesday evening from 8.15. Tea, coffee and biscuits are served and afterwards we go to The Half Moon on the other side of Magdalen roundabout.

Week 5: OUSFG's resident Mad Scientist, Colin Jack is going to be talking about the science in SF: where it is, where it isn't and why it's usually wrong.

Week 6: Either Amanda is going to be talking about Sex in Zero Gravity, or she and Dave are going to think of something more tasteful in the meantime.

Week 7: Lucy on something involving religion and SF: watch the vitriol fly as religious war between the usual members breaks out again.

Week 8: Silly Games and Cookie Party. Everyone will no doubt be relieved to here I will no longer try to make 'Context the Party Game' work, so they'd better think of another silly game to play.

'Library Meetings' and AGM's

We still haven't found anywhere to put the books, so we go to The Angel & Greyhound just up St. Clements a bit from The Half Moon. And to all the people who moan that there's never anyone there, that's because you all turn up, see no-one and then leave again. One week I had six people wander past me in the street saying no-one had turned up. If you hang around for about five minutes from about 8.30, someone will turn up, honest. You really ought to turn up on Sunday of 6th week though, because that's when we're holding the AGM and electing Kathy Norman as Treasurer, Matthew Hunt as Secretary, Alex and Frances as co-presidents and almost everyone else as Newsletter Editor. None of them have bothered giving me a manifesto, and I couldn't be bothered to make them up, so we'll just have to do without.

The Banquet

This annual festival of hassle for the president three months before their finals is being held in Worcester, on Saturday of 7th Week (5th March). It will cost £21.50 for non-alcoholics, and £22.50 for their more chemically aware brethren. Note that the extra quid is just corkage, you have to bring your own booze (college prices were 3.95 + VAT for half a bottle of wine). Please don't claim you're teetotal, and then turn up with a bottle anyway, because I'll put Alex on you for defrauding our beleaguered finances. Anyway,

the menu for omnivores / vegetarians is as below:

Cream of Watercress Soup with Almonds / Vegetable Terrine
 Sirloin of Beef with Forrestière Sauce / Spinach and Cream Cheese Parcels
 with Seasonal Vegetables and New Potatoes
 English Apple Pie and Cream
 Coffee and Mints
 English Cheeseboard with Biscuits

The deadline for buying a ticket is Sunday of 7th week (27th February).
 Don't forget to give me those bitchy OUSFG award nominations (and categories
 for that matter).

Context

Neal: "Whereas most SF bookshops sell porn under the counter, central
 books is unique in my experience as being a porn shop that
 sells SF under the counter."
 Mark B.: "It's not the real world, it's somewhere more interesting."
 Mark C.: "I only vomited everywhere in Oxford once."
 Jeremy: "My career in toilet management has come to an abrupt end."
 Mark C.: "When it comes to the push, I'd want a chipolata behind me."
 Colin: "It's not a quote, it's a vibrator."
 Jeremy: "Let me show you why you want a vibrating pen_ WHEEEEEEEE!"
 Mark C.: "Ah ha! The wibble defeats the wibble."
 Ralph: "I find my hands useful for scratching my genitals."
 Mark C.: "I happen to find verucas highly interesting."
 Jason: "No-one else would overly exaggerate the size of my erect penis."
 Mark C.: "Admittedly, I put the head inside the eyes."
 Jason: "Some people would have the sense to keep their mouths shut at this
 point: but not me!"

The Editorial, or DunPenguin'

At last! My final newsletter! My previous issues have

- a) been slagged off a bit for being cynical and boring.
- b) threatened you lot with an entire issue based on Evolution if you
 didn't write some articles.

Well, no-one wrote anything, so here we are: an issue which occasionally has
 something to say about OUSFG, but mainly consists of a long rambling stream
 - of - something - which - for - want - of - a - better - word - we'll -
 call - consciousness interview with the secretary of Evolution, with guest
 appearances of other aspects of Mark's ever more silly personality. Some of
 it is vaguely informative and useful, but most of it is senile wibblings
 (although mainly cynicism free). I've just been stopped from continuing the
 interview by a sensible aspect of that edifice, so I'm doing the Editorial
 instead. Right, as I said, this is my final newsletter, `cos from next term
 I'M NOT ON THE COMMITTEE ANYMORE! I don't have to worry about how crap I am
 at sorting out a location for the library, organising the banquet or
 inviting guest authors. My time in office as Newsletter Editor has been
 spent cutting it down to a sensible size (more due to laziness and lack of
 contributions than any economic sense), and my time as President has been
 spent mainly cutting out all activities that cost us money (and more through
 luck than judgement boosting our membership). As a result, our finances are
 once again looking vaguely alive once more. I ought to thank Alex for being
 a highly efficient Treasurer and Frances for being a Secretary. I thankfully

hand them the rather unpleasant task of being President, and welcome in whatever freshers we got drunk enough to stand for treasurer and secretary into those relatively pleasant tasks. Well, I would say this is me signing off, but there's several more pages of Evolution interview for you to get through yet, so I'll just leave with my now traditional

Seeya Around
Mark.

The Evolution Interview

The Ultimate Newsletter is pleased to announce an exclusive interview with the secretary of the '96 Eastercon bid everybody is talking about: none other than_ Mark Charsley!

Mark: "Look are you really sure this is a good idea, I mean I'm typing this in after drinking too much at a pub."

Mark: "Of course it's a good idea, the alcohol will loosen our inhibitions and make you tell all the juicy gossip about the con."

Mark: "There isn't any gossip about the con. What you mean to say is that, assuming incorrectly that the whole thing was a disorganised mess, I'd let slip it was a disorganised mess. It isn't: we got organised in November. I really think it would be better conducting this interview when I'm sober."

Mark: "No, no. Look, we'll ask the opinion of a disinterested observer."

Mark: "Like who? I'm the only person in the room."

Mark: "How about that small sub-personality of Mark that thinks he's Napoleon?"

Mark: "I'm not Mark: I'm Napoleon. I'm not going to give my opinion on this matter until I'm correctly titled."

Mark: "Oh alright then. Here you go_"

Napoleon: "Thankyou. Right: yes it is a good idea to do the interview now."

Mark: "I'm not trusting his opinion! He's mad: he thinks he's Napoleon!"

Mark: "Well, you just admitted that he was mad, he's a part of you and they say if you think you're mad then you've recovered."

Mark: "That makes very little sense and isn't funny. You're going to have to edit that a bit tomorrow when your critical faculties have recovered a bit^[1]."

Mark: "Ah ha! So if I'm to edit this tomorrow, then I'll have to write it tonight, won't I?"

Mark: "Oh alright then, I'll do the interview now if you really want."

Mark: "Brilliant! Is it okay if I stop writing Mark at the beginning of each sentence? I'm sure my readership will have got the idea that we're different aspects of the same person by now, and I'm getting bored typing 'Mark colon tab' at the beginning of each paragraph."

Mark: "Fair enough."

"Right that's better, so what is Evolution then?"

"Hang on, you're meant to ask me what a con is first."

"Oh bollocks! I'd forgotten. So what is a con then?"

"Well it's a bit hard to explain."

"So why did you want me to flamin' ask then?"

"Hang on, I'm going to try."

"Good, get on with it!"

"Well, cons have a large range of activities: the smaller ones often_ look I'm not going to try and explain what cons are like when I'm drunk: it'll be difficult enough when sober. I'll carry on some other night."

Adrian's Meta Gossip Column

Well, after last issue's Gossip Workshop, I received a rather bizarre missive in my pigeon hole. A typed letter purporting to be from St. Hilda's, it slagged off my book reviews for a bit, and then gave me the following piece of gossip:

N and F, after receiving a squidgey letter, left the pub early and were seen skipping hand in hand through the graveyard. At the stroke of midnight they fell to the ground, overcome by teenaged angst (empathic in the case of N). The St. Michaels flasher participated enthusiastically, until they discovered he was [Paul Sherliker scribbled out and replaced with P instead] in disguise.

My 'anonymous friend' then signed herself off with a Kxxxx. Now we all know subtlety is not Kathy's middle name (mainly because her parents weren't that silly: a more relevant phrase would be that we all know Kathy isn't very subtle on the gossip front), but even she isn't that blatant. Adrian denies all, so I am led to suspect either Christine (the gossip is as coherent as the last lot she gave me, but the typing's far too good), or a certain other St. Hilda's member who has voiced doubts over the merit of my book reviews. All will no doubt never be revealed.

The Second Evolution Interview,

Being an account of what Eastercons are like that older OUSFG members won't find that interesting

Well after the rather useless first attempt, your intrepid editor finally tracked down the secretary of Evolution again, and pressed him with some more questions:

"Right, we're sober now, so you've got no excuse. What is a con?"

"Look, we really ought to be doing that work for the nuclear tutorial."

"No we don't, that's over a week away. I've got to get about eight pages of rubbish out before then, and this as a good a way as any. So I'll ask again, what is a con?"

"Well, it's a bit of a broad definition, but it usually involves people with a shared interest in something turning up somewhere and participating in activities related to that interest."

"I see_ and you really think that that sentence is going to make people think Evolution will be a fun place to be?"

"Hmmm, it is a bit dry isn't it? I'll try describing an Eastercon and ignore all the other types for the time being. Eastercons are held in a large hotel in England and last about three days. During the con there are many hour-long program items, which are somewhat like OUSFG discussion meetings: a broad range in seriousness, style and subject, but each having something to do with SF. These items are grouped into streams which have an overall theme, eg science, mainstream SF, fantasy, alternative etc. Smaller cons only have one or two such simultaneous program streams, but Eastercons have four or so. Con's always have some guests of honour: authors and the like, who give speeches, sign books and so on. The larger the con, the more GoH's there are. The larger cons usually have plenty of other authors who also sign books and give talks but are just normal members. In addition to that there are videos running 24 hours a day, art displays and auctions, a dealers room and a bar that opens at 11am, and shuts when people go back to their rooms, which

usually works out as about 6am."

"So it's basically like a distillation of OUSFG, with lots of SF based things to do, but can you give a couple of examples of these events?"

"Why not just nick a bit out of Lucy's report of the last Eastercon from a couple of issues ago? That way you don't have to type anything for a bit."

"Okay, hang on I'll just find it_ here we are, hmmm, it's a bit long so I'll edit it down a tad:

Bubble blowing workshop

With the aid of an American funky gadget and American washing-up liquid, truly ginormous, humongous bubbles were achieved, which, alas, really have to be seen to be believed.

Erotic SF

Porn, more like! Good for a laugh, and some very interesting points raised in the discussion, which I'd like to pursue further in a discussion meeting sometime... Oddly enough, several of the books mentioned appeared in the Turkey Readings on Monday.

Dr. Goldfoot and his Bikini Machine.

A film which really was so bad it was good. Starring Vincent Price as the evil Dr. Goldfoot and a load of dolly birds in gold bikinis, it's a must for the end-of-term bad taste video night - if only we can get a copy of it and a film projector.

Jack Cohen

SF fandom's favourite reproductive biologist gave a slide-illustrated lecture on reproductive biology, what's wrong with society today and his proposals for setting things to rights (with some interesting original versions of well-known fairy tales thrown in). And now I know what screwing worms look like.

If I ruled the Universe...

A panel of Ming the Merciless, Bodicea, Stupendous Man (and First Tiger Hobbes), Blackadder, Genghis Khan and Tim Illingworth gave their manifestos, answered questions and persuaded the audience to vote for them. They also had some great poster campaigns for several days beforehand.

Disco

The hotel even had a nightclub, which much to my surprise played some decent music! Enter one Lucy the next morning with a severe case of Headbanger's Neck.

Turkey Reading.

Raising money for the Jersey Wildlife Trust, on this occasion. Bid to get the panel to stop reading a truly awful book, or, if you're a real masochist bid for them to carry on.

There we go, seems all a little silly, really."

"Well, yes but the more serious items don't make interesting reading in a con report. Rest assured at least half the items are a bit less trivial than

those above, but 'cos there are around four events on at any one time, you can pick and choose between them, or just spend some time speaking to people in the bar."

"Hmmm, but if this is the first time I've gone to a con, I won't know anyone to talk to."

"That doesn't really matter, you'll have about six of the OUSFG lot to talk to for a start, and if you walk up to anyone in the con and say `this is my first con' then they'll be dead friendly, involve you in their conversation and on occasion even buy you a drink. Even at my first Eastercon I spent more time (and had at least as much fun) with people I'd met at the con than I did with the OUSFG lot."

"But aren't most of the people there complete weirdo's you'd pay money to avoid? I mean they dress up as daleks and stuff."

"Okay there are some people who are, how shall I put this, socially different, but then look at OUSFG, none of them are that bad are they?"

"Well_"

"Alright, alright, I walked into that one, but even some of the people who dress up as daleks (there is a fancy-dress masquerade at every Eastercon if you are interested in making costumes) are fun to know, and if they're not, you can avoid them: they're hardly difficult to miss after all."

"So it's three days in a hotel, with OUSFG type people, doing OUSFG type SF things. But we all know there's another principle ingredient to OUSFG as well as SF, what about that?"

"Well as I said, there's a bar open from 11 to about 6ish in the morning, and they often don't even bother closing it at all. Now the combination of such a bar and walking between events every hour usually results in a pint an hour, `til about 8pm or so when the events wind down, there are then several parties thrown by people publicising forthcoming cons and book launches with free drinks, and there are usually several room parties later in the evening. The more perceptive of you will have now noted that it is very easy to get very drunk at these events, my memories of my first Eastercon aren't very detailed for possibly this very reason, but because its spread out over the day, you don't really feel that bad."

"Okay, so that's what an Eastercon is like, what's so special about an Eastercon compared to other cons?"

"Hang on, I'll get back to you, I'm getting hungry and need some lunch."

Various membership things

In a pathetic attempt to fill up some space, I thought it should be pointed out that Frances (admittedly a long time ago) paid out for Eternal membership. This means she is the only fully paid up member of OUSFG for all eternity (David Icke is also rumoured to be an eternal member, but that's purely honorary, and he doesn't know about it). So three cheers for Frances, or possibly just pitying, puzzled looks, depending on your cynicism score.

While we're on the subject of membership, certain St. Hilda's ladies (namely Jo and Lorna) have declared themselves OUSFG groupies. I'm not sure quite what this entails, but I have a sneaking suspicion it just means they can turn up at OUSFG bar meetings without being members or feeling embarrassed.

The Third Evolution Interview

Being a rather pathetic attempt to fill up some space while having no useful information whatsoever

"Well, you're back from lunch, so how about answering that question."

"Look I had lunch hours ago, I've just got back from the pub. I'm in no fit state to answer questions, especially when I can't remember what 'that question' is."

"Considering I haven't written anything after the second interview yet, all you have to do is look up a couple of lines, look: it's 'what's so special about an Eastercon compared to other cons?'."

"I don't care, I'm drunk, and I'll edit out anything I let slip about Evolution so go away."

"Look, I need to fill this newsletter somehow."

"Get someone to write an article then, or get that Napoleon fellow in to gibber a bit."

"Yes! Ask me how to invade Russia! I have several good plans."

"Unfortunately they either involve letting your army starve after you burnt all the food they could have eaten, or being Frances and ending up in Finland by mistake. Go away."

"How about me?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm Einstein, look: $E=mc^2$!"

"You're the sub-personality of someone who's going to be doing finals in Physics in three months time, and the best proof that you're Einstein is some quote even Conservative voters have heard of? You're utterly pathetic! Is there a single sub-personality of Mark that has anything interesting to say?"

"Yup I'm the sensible bit, and all I have to say is this entire part of the interview is a pathetic waste of space and it ought to stop now."

The Fourth Evolution Interview

Being another attempt to fill up some space, in what some people might call a blatant rip-off of Monty Python

"Hang on I'm still the sensible bit of Mark, and you started typing this one minute after I stopped the last one. When I said 'stop it' I meant it. You're not to start any more interviews until after you've sobered up a bit."

The Fifth Evolution Interview?

Being a waste of space no more useful than the last two Interviews

"And when I said 'a bit', I meant after several hours not five seconds. STOP IT! Go and write the Editorial or something."

The Union

Now it's not often that this institution, symptomatic as it is of everything bad about Oxford University, gets mentioned in this august journal, but they're holding something they're calling a 'Sci-Fi Fair' on Friday of 6th week. There's going to be talks by the editor of 2000AD, and various SF authors. Unfortunately the letter we got sent was a little short on details, and the only such author they named was Andrew Harmon. This is the fellow who wrote The Sorcerer's Appendix: a book so good it was given away free at Helicon last Easter and has since been cut up in both William Burroughs Workshops by the lucky recipients. Despite this it'll probably be worth turning up to, especially as Dave Clements is offering them the benefits of his con-running experience and possibly some of his famous government grant. We've been invited to have a stall at this fair, so if anyone fancies helping out for an hour or so, can they let me know.

The Sixth Evolution Interview

Being a more useful and sensible article for a bit, but which sadly regresses into silliness, and some might say outright incomprehensibility later on.

"Right, here we are again. Now you've told us something about what

Eastercons are, and let's say a hypothetical person is interested. What do they have to do to go to one?"

"A hypothetical person is -"

"NO! You can't do that crap joke, 'cos this is the printed word and it is perfectly obvious I didn't put that phrase you just tried to say in quote marks, so stop wasting time, or everyone will skip to the next article."

"Okay. Right the next Eastercon is called Sou'Wester. It's held in Liverpool, over the Easter weekend (1st to 4th April). If you want to join then send £27 to Sou'Wester, 3 West Shrubbery, Redland, Bristol. BS6 6SZ. Bear in mind that you'll have to pay for accommodation on top of that, but have a word with other OUSFG members beforehand."

"Why? Might there be crash space available in various hotel rooms?"

"Definitely not. That's against hotel rules, so there's no way I would say that."

"Well, not in print at any rate. Anyway, those last few rather boring sentences tell me how to join Sou'Wester, but why would I want to?"

"Well, it's got all the usual Eastercon activities I mentioned earlier, and it also has Neil Gaiman as a guest of honour (the others include Diane Duane, Barbara Hambly and Peter Morwood), a Cabaret, and a Writers' Workshop manned^[2] by professional SF writers, as opposed to SFinx editors (no offence intended to that worthy body of people by the way). Oh, and it might have an event called the 1996 Eastercon bid session or something."

"The what?"

"It's a meeting where British Fandom decide who's running the 1996 Eastercon."

"Who are they choosing between exactly?"

"Erm, well, there's probably several people bidding for it."

"And you wouldn't happen to be one of them would you?"

"Well, you know, I might pop in briefly to have a look."

"Just popping in briefly? Not, for instance, being one of the people convincing all of British Fandom to let you loose on the 1996 Eastercon."

"Well, if necessary, I might help a couple of friends out at their presentation."

"If, for instance, they need their secretary to help them."

"Erm, no."

"You sure?"

"Oh, okay then. Yes: I will be helping present the bid for Evolution at the bid session at Sou'Wester."

"Why do I get the feeling that it's the only reason you've mentioned Sou'Wester at all?"

"Cos you're paranoid?"

"Possibly, but more likely because I know you like I know myself."

"Are you really suggesting that I'm advertising Sou'Wester purely in an attempt to get more of my friends and acquaintances to vote for a convention I'm helping run?"

"Yes."

"That's untrue."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes I'm sure. Admittedly, that might be a motivation, but Sou'Wester will be fun and I'm sure any member of OUSFG who turns up will find it extremely enjoyable. Unless, he mutters darkly, they fail to turn up to the bid session and vote for Evolution."

"Okay, now we've got that blatant plug out the way, can we have some slightly more disinterested opinions on cons?"

"Oh go on then, blimey, we're on page 6 already! You don't have much more space to fill by now do you."

"You're not getting away with it that quickly, I've got nothing else except an Iain Banks book review."

"We could let Dean (our room mate for those who don't already know him) loose on the newsletter; hang on I'll get him _ Take it away, Dean!"

Dean: "There were these two allegorical blokes. One of same was of distinctly ginger extraction and found this riled him, his friends and his non-immediate brethren. And no mistake. The other chap, Brian, shall we say, was propounding a leguminous theorem of anal domination. He was having (not unrelated) problems getting permission from the local authorities.

He would scream at people in Superdrug. This earned him little but scorn.

The relevant structures were under threat from the courts, and, despite picketing by a burley, unpleasant, Greek bloke, were soon removed. There was more than a tang of corporate intervention and both Brian(1) and Brian(2) felt that arbitration had to be sought. HENCE the entry into our well-thumbed scenario of a high up fellah from Custom and Excise. His schemes were cosmopolitan and Brians felt somewhat at a loss. The council took absolutely no notice and before long Brians' children were put into care. As were their chickens.

And the relevant structures."

Mark: "Okay, that's enough. Time to wrap it up. Though quite frankly, how you're going to wrap that up is beyond me."

Dean: "Disrepute spread like wildfire. Alan (Brians' idiot, half-baked cousin) was lacking in the department of his ontology. For, much after the fashion of Brian(1&2), he was not a master of his destiny. Counselling from Doris Stokes led to buboes. There was infection all over the show. Totally untreatable."

Mark: "I see. And you really think that OUSFG at large wants to read stuff like that?"

Mark: "Well, they read Christine's stuff, and that made even less sense. By the way, I think we can drop the `Mark colon tabs' again."

"Okay, but we still haven't exactly finished the convention topic yet."

"Yeah, but I think we'd better start another interview, that last bit might have caused people to stop reading this one."

"What another interview?"

"Good call."

"Excellent!"

Zool

No-one's actually written an episode yet this term, so if someone doesn't offer Ralph and I will write the next episode together, taking turns to write a sentence. And you thought the previous episodes of Zool offended your literary sensibilities - you ain't seen nothing yet!

The Seventh Interview

Where Mark gets his flamin' act together and finally tells his readership some vaguely useful, albeit con-related information.

"Okay, so I'm interested in conventions, but lets say I'm busy at Easter or something. Are there any other con's I could go to. And before you start on that crap joke again, please note the lack of quote marks in the sentence."

"Well, there's usually some convention going on virtually every weekend. But these are small-scale affairs and usually concentrate on one very precise aspect of SF, like Doctor Who, Star Trek or Filking."

"Filking?"

"A rather twisted hobby consisting of taking a well-known song (or even worse writing a completely new one), changing the lyrics to suit an SF theme (eg. `I want to ride my dragon steed, I want to ride my wyvern' to the tune of I want to ride my bicycle) and then singing it at people."

"Why on Earth would people want to do that?"

"Why on Earth would people want to watch Star Trek? There's a lot of

strange people out there. Anyway, before you drag me back to the original subject, I'll go of my own free will. The Eastercon is the largest and most wide ranging convention in the year, with about 1000 people. Then there's Novacon in November which has about 600 people and the Unicon, aimed especially at students, in the summer with about 200 attendees. They're the only other general SF cons that I know of each year. Any other con will probably be smaller and more specialist. The only exception is Intersection: the 1995 Worldcon which will be held in Glasgow, have several thousand attendees and be even more wide-ranging than the Eastercon. I've been to a couple of smaller cons and while they're enjoyable and cheaper than Eastercons, they're not as much fun and have less variety."

"So you're saying that while people will enjoy other cons, an Eastercon is an ideal introduction to SF conventions, 'cos it covers virtually every aspect of fandom, whereas the smaller cons, by necessity, don't have such a broad range."

"Yup, that's about it."

"Okay, so we've covered cons in general, and Eastercons in particular, let's move onto Evolution itself. Why should those people at the bid session vote for you?"

"Two good reasons: both to do with Intersection, that enormous Worldcon I mentioned earlier. Intersection is the largest British SF con of the decade, and most of fandom's experienced con-runners are devoting all their attention to it, and don't have the time to run an Eastercon 9 months later. This means that we're going to be the only serious bid for 96 as far as we know. It also means that the committee isn't mainly comprised of the same old people who've been running British SF conventions for years. We'll bring a new approach to Eastercons."

"An approach like not knowing what to do, getting ripped off by people and completely screwing the entire thing up?"

"Well, no. We have a few experienced con-runners on the committee as well, including John Bray who most OUSFGites know, and several highly experienced unofficial advisors."

"But Mark, you're involved in running it. I have seen your attempts at organising things before, like OUSFG banquets for instance, and truly I say unto you: 'You're crap at it.'"

"Ah but you see, it's a committee, and to be fair a vastly better functioning one than OUSFG's, so the capable people do all the work; I just occasionally come up with ideas and write the minutes. I'm the secretary of the committee, and we all know how much work that actually involves."

"So to sum up then, Evolution is being run by a mixture of new people who can have all these novel ideas and old people who can tell them how to put them into practice without cocking things up."

"Yeah that's right. Okay, that seems to be about it, I'll send this off to the committee to okay it (or more likely just look at it with a mixture of puzzlement and distaste before junking it). Meanwhile you've got a bit of space to fill. Shall we wibble on a bit, or are you going to write that Iain Banks review?"

"I'll leave you to make your own farewell, possibly in a wibbling fashion, and then I'll put the review below that."

"Noo-war!"

"Good grief, anyway thankyou Mark for allowing me to fill this space up so effectively, and now, something vaguely related to SF_"

Review

Against a dark Background, by Iain M. Banks

Well, he put an 'M' in his name so it's an SF book, but is it any good? To save you skipping to the end, the answer's 'no not really'. As most of you know, Banksy's SF books to date have been set in 'the Culture': a generally fun place to be where the machines are vastly more capable and intelligent than most of the human-like inhabitants and generally do most of the work, leaving the biological lot to have a good time, leading to an optimistic atmosphere. This book, however, avoids the Culture and is set on the planet Golter: a rather depressing place that has bombed itself out of the space age several times before, and the book implies it's going to do it again soon.

The plot revolves around a woman named Sharrow, who is under a legalised death threat from a fanatical religious cult called the Hushz. The only way she can survive is to avoid detection for a year, or give them a spectacularly powerful weapon called a Lazy Gun. These funky little gadgets are the best bit of the book. You focus the gun-sight on an object and pull then trigger, at which point something unpleasant happens to the target. These events range from earthquakes and meteor strikes through being drowned in mercury, right down to having two electrodes appear out of nowhere just long enough to electrocute the target.

Most of the book details Sharrow's hunt for the Lazy Gun, while escaping rather unpleasant situations via the intervention of several other interested parties. Just as the book builds up to a climax however, it all sort of dribbles away and ends with a rather depressing non-event of an ending. I almost wondered whether my copy had been the result of a printing error and was missing the last chapter. All in all then an average SF book with some fun Banksian ideas which fades away to nothing much for an ending. Full of sound and fury yet signifying nothing, I'm afraid.

The Last Bit (Ever)

Well, that's it: my last ever newsletter. I almost feel emotional about it really_ Oh well, send all articles/quotes/gossip to Adrian Cox from now on. He has got a pigeon hole in St. John's, but I don't know how often he looks in it.

[1] Sorry, I couldn't be bothered.

[2] or whatever non-sexist PC distortion of the English language you prefer

Online copy courtesy of

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