

Progress Report One

Novacon 27

14-16 November 1997,

the De Vere Abbey Hotel, Great Malvern,

Guest of Honour Peter F Hamilton.

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Novacon 27
14th to 16th November 1997,
the De Vere Abbey Hotel, Great Malvern,
Guest of Honour Peter F Hamilton.

Membership & Enquiries: Attending membership costs £23.00 at Novacon 26, rising to £25.00 from 11th November 1997; this will be the rate until April after which it will increase again. Supporting membership costs £10.50. Cheques should be made payable to "Novacon 27" and sent to Carol Morton at 14 Park Street, Lye, Stourbridge, West Midlands, DY9 8SS. Enquires regarding memberships and/or hotel bookings should be sent to Carol at the same address or you can call her on 01384 825386 (before 9pm).

Room Rates: £32.00 per person per night for people sharing twin/double rooms, £35.00 pppn for those sharing a four poster room, £28.00 pppn for those sharing a triple/quad room and £40.00 pppn for single rooms (inclusive of full English breakfast). NB: Hotel booking forms, and deposits £20.00 per person, must be received by Carol Morton no later than 20th July 1997. Cheques for room deposits should be made payable to "The Abbey Hotel".

Advertising Rates: Advertising is welcome for both the next three Progress Reports and for the Programme Book. The rates are as follows (fan rates in brackets):

Progress Reports -Professional £23.00 (£12.50) full page, £13.50 (£7.00) half page, £7.50 (£4.00) quarter page.

Programme Book -Professional £45.00 (£22.50) full page, £25.00 (£12.50) half page, £15.00 (£7.50) quarter page.

Anyone interested in advertising should contact Martin Tudor at 24 Ravensbourne Grove, (off Clarkes Lane,) Willenhall, West Midlands, WV13 1HX. Deadlines for camera-ready advertising copy are detailed below.

Deadlines:

Progress Report #2: 20th February 1997, to be mailed early April 1997.

Progress Report #3: 7th June 1997, to be mailed early July 1997.

Progress Report #4: 9th August 1997, to be mailed October 1997.

Programme Book: 27th September 1997, distributed at Novacon 27.

Book Room Rates: Tables will cost £15.00 each for the whole weekend. To book a table (or tables) you must be a member of the convention and complete and return the booking form enclosed with this Progress Report.

Committee: Martin Tudor (Chair & Publications), 24 Ravensbourne Grove, (off Clarkes Lane,) Willenhall, West Midlands, WV13 1HX. Carol Morton (Registrations & Hotel Liaison), 14 Park Street, Lye, Stourbridge, West Midlands, DY9 8SS. Sarah Freakley (Treasurer), Flat 1, 717 Stratford Road, Sparkhill, Birmingham, B11 4DN.

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Chairman's Piece

The eagle-eyed amongst you will have noticed that the committee listed above is not complete; most of you should have noticed that next year's Novacon will be held outside Birmingham. These two facts are not entirely unrelated.

Due to the increasing difficulty in getting a reasonably priced hotel with sufficient bed rooms and function rooms in the Birmingham area it took far longer than normal to secure a hotel for Novacon 27. In fact the deal was struck on the 21 October - until the hotel was sorted I was not inclined to tie down either a Guest of Honour or my committee. So it is only in the last couple of weeks that I have begun to do this.

The Guest of Honour was easy. I wanted Peter Hamilton and he was delighted to agree - if you don't know Peter's work you should! Start by reading the interview in this Progress Report and then rush out and buy his books!

The committee should be complete by the end of Novacon 26, as I have my eye on both programme and operations people and hope to "persuade" them during the course of the weekend!

As for the venue - the Abbey Hotel is a glorious building, situated in the picturesque Malvern's. The management are very enthusiastic about convention business in the winter months (they are already hosting one convention in February next year) and I'm sure Carol Morton will enjoy working with them as much as I have. I'm equally sure you will enjoy staying there - but only if you book early!

Registrations

The Abbey Hotel is about the same size and has a similar number of rooms as the Royal Angus. This breaks down as 78 twin/double rooms, 5 triple/quad rooms, 6 four poster rooms and 18 singles; so while it is big enough for a Novacon it isn't big enough to guarantee that everyone who wants to will get the room that they want (especially not if they want a single!). So, yet again, if you want to avoid being in an overflow BOOK EARLY!

Your hotel booking form should be accompanied by a £20.00 cheque per person as a hotel deposit - made payable to "The Abbey Hotel"; and should reach Carol Morton by the 20th July 1997. Bookings after that date cannot be guaranteed a room in the main hotel.

The Nova Awards by Tony Berry

Created in 1973 by the late Gillon Field, the Nova Awards are presented annually for work in fanzines. Until 1981 only one award was presented, to "Best Fanzine" and decided by a committee of well-known fans. In 1977 voting was extended to all "Active Fans" who were members of Novacon, and then in 1981 two further awards were added: "Best Fanwriter" and "Best Fanartist".

For a fanzine to qualify for the 1997 award, one or more issues must have been published between 1st October 1996 and 30th September 1997. For a writer or artist to qualify, they must have had at least one piece of work published for the first time between those dates.

A "Fanzine" is defined as an amateur publication which is concerned with sf, fantasy, sf and fantasy fans and related subjects, copies of which may be obtained in exchange for other fanzines or in response to letters of comment. An "Active Fan" is defined as someone who has received six or more different fanzines during the year (different publications, not different issues of the same publication. The various official organs of a group, society or convention do not count as different fanzines).

Voting is open to full or supporting members of Novacon 27 who meet the requirements above, and can be made by post (ballots will go out with the fourth progress report) and at the convention itself.

[If you have any enquiries about the Novas or you want a copy of the Rules (50p to cover copying and postage), contact Tony Berry at 55 Seymour Road, Oldbury, West Midlands, B69 4EP.]

An Interview with Peter F Hamilton

[British sf author Peter F Hamilton was born in Rutland in 1960, and now lives near Rutland Water. He began writing in 1987 and made his first professional sale, to FEAR magazine, in 1988. MINDSTAR RISING, his first novel, was published by Pan in 1993 and followed by A QUANTUM MURDER in 1994, and then by THE NANO FLOWER this year; all three feature the psi-boostered private detective Greg Mandel. In addition to his professional sale of short stories to INTERZONE, IN DREAMS and NEW WORLDS, Hamilton's his work appeared in a number of small press magazines in the late 1980s. Heralded as the most exciting "sf technician" currently working in Britain, his fourth novel, THE REALITY DYSFUNCTION, marked a new direction to space opera and was published in hardcover by Macmillan in January 1996. Martin Tudor and Peter's sometime collaborator Graham Joyce spoke to him in March 1995. (This interview first appeared in CRITICAL WAVE #42.)

Martin Tudor: I understand that you were "discovered" by Pan; how did that happen?

Peter Hamilton: I had a short story in FEAR magazine and when they wrote and told me they accepted it, they asked for five lines of biography. You obviously can't describe yourself in five lines, so I put in this little thing and mentioned that I was writing a novel. One of the line editors at Pan read the story, read this

little bit at the bottom, wrote to me and said "May we see the novel please?", which was MINDSTAR RISING, and within three months they bought it.

How long did you wait before it actually saw publication?

Two years. There were a lot of changes of editors; I think I was on my fourth editor when they actually published it. One editor I had for a year, wrote a letter to introduce himself and a year later wrote another letter to say "I'm leaving", and that was the total contact I had with him. Which was why it got delayed for quite a while; but from writing to ask to see it, it took them about three months to sign me up.

Not everyone can be quite that jammy, so have you any recommendations for would-be writers?

These days, it would be difficult. There's not much, apart from INTERZONE and the new magazine BEYOND, opportunity to get yourself noticed that way. Publishers do read the slush piles, even if it is only the first page. I wouldn't know how to advise them other than the obvious way: writers write, keep writing, don't let them put you off with the first rejection slip.

You started writing in 1987, without any experience prior to that. How many stories did you have published in the small press before selling to FEAR?

About seven or eight stories before the FEAR one. I was in DREAM, which turned into NEW MOON; I was in there quite a lot. I was with THE EDGE, which collapsed; I was with THE GATE, which folded as soon as I sold them a story; I was in FAR POINT, which actually published one of mine before it folded. I think that's about it actually with the small press; they do seem to have a very short life-time.

When I interviewed Dan Simmons, he mentioned the same kind of thing, that magazines kept disappearing before his stories appeared, or they'd appear and the magazines would fold. How useful did you find it, writing for the small press?

I'd say it was essential. I hadn't written before — I didn't even take English 'O' level — so I didn't have any particular literary background, so certainly, to me, it was absolutely essential. An apprenticeship really, getting those letters from the editor who actually took the time — that's the thing with these small press editors, they take the time — to go through your manuscript and tell you "that part works, that part doesn't, you're not doing that right". It is a training ground, and it was a very useful one. As I say, when you send manuscripts to publishers, you either get a rejection or an acceptance; it doesn't help you. Probably the Orbiter group would help these days, certainly to get a semi-professional viewpoint on a story.

They were very patient with me. I'd got four or five years' worth of rejection slips. I was sending out stories once a month, if not more, to these people: when I first met David Pringle, who is the editor of INTERZONE, he took one look at my badge and said "Ah yes, the best known name on the slush pile", because I was

just bombarding them with these stories. But they took the time to write back to me.

Do you still write short stories for the small press now, or are you concentrating on novels?

I don't, not necessarily because I don't want to, but I haven't got the time at the moment. I think, as I say, there's only INTERZONE, possibly BEYOND; if one came along and I had a story at the time, then yes, I'd give them something.

Are you more comfortable writing short stories or novels?

When I started, I was very comfortable writing short stories. Now I find them extremely difficult. Whether that's because the ideas are slowing up, I don't know. I started out on what I intended to be a short story last year — the first I'd written for about two years — and it wound up as a 50,000 word novella. I planned it as about 8,000, but it kept going. I haven't written a short story, a proper short story, for about three years now. As I said, the ideas are coming few and far between, but I'd like to start on them again.

The novella is a real Locked Room mystery. I wrote it in response to all the appalling people who said "Well, I worked out A QUANTUM MURDER". I sat down, this was bad motivation probably, but I sat down and thought "Right, I'll get you!", and I wrote this perfect — perfect to my mind — locked room mystery. It is actually set in the same universe as THE REALITY DYSFUNCTION. But they're not going to publish it first, they're going to publish it last, after the three books of the trilogy.

You recently collaborated with Graham on a story that appeared in INTERZONE; how did that collaboration come about?

It was an agreement between the two of us. We both had a story which didn't work so we said, "We'll swap them, and just do what ever you have to, don't worry about my feelings". Graham didn't worry about my feelings and I didn't worry about Graham's feelings; we just did whatever we thought was necessary to make the story work. And work it did, because we got published in INTERZONE. That was originally Graham's story, which I modified and sent back to him. He worked on the last few bits of it, and we sent it to INTERZONE. And it got published.

I'm still waiting for Graham to get started on my story, three years now. He keeps promising me he'll do that! But yes, it was a very successful way of doing it; a nice way of doing it in that you don't have to do any of the initial hard work with the "big idea". Everybody's read stories and thought "Well, I wouldn't do it like that, it's a good idea wasted", and that was a tremendous opportunity to look at this idea Graham had and go "Well how would I treat it?" I put in the technology for him and it worked very well that time.

It was nominated for the Tiptree Award.

The James Tiptree Award. If you don't know what the James Tiptree Award is, it's the best gender-bending story in science fiction, which we didn't win. I'm not sure if I'm happy about that or not.

You actually met a character from the story when you were talking to the Leicester Science Fiction Group.

Er, yes, it really is an example of synchronicity. I was with Graham at the Leicester group the other week, and went down to the bar after the talk, and this bloke, who none of us had ever seen before, came up and introduced himself. His name's Gerald, and the hero of the story was called Gerald; he lived in Leicester, and it was set in Leicester; he worked at Leicester University, the hero worked at Leicester University. Nobody had ever met him, and he kept reading this thing, thinking "Well, I must know these people, because they've used me in it", and nobody had, it was a complete surprise. Amazing story, that you can just mesh-in with someone who really exists like that without knowing it.

Your three Greg Mandel books are based in a terrifyingly well-portrayed near-future world; how much research did you actually do for that?

You probably mean specific research. Well, as they were set after the Warming, I did a lot of research on biology, which plants would survive, what crops would we replace, and where pine trees would still grow; you have to have cold, frost or something, to make the seeds germinate, so you wouldn't get any new pine trees, that kind of thing. But a lot of the technology, the engineering background, comes from having read NEW SCIENTIST for the last 15 years. It all starts to store up in my mind, so I can see what will work and what won't. If I have an idea, I can think, well, no it won't, yes it will, and by and large I've generally been right.

Specific examples would be the cybofax, which went horribly wrong as far as I'm concerned. When I wrote the first novel, back in 1990, I had this marvellous gadget that I called the cybofax, which was pocket-computer, video-phone, voice activated, all this kind of thing. For 1990, this was quite futuristic, but you look at a laptop today, and you're just about there. So whereas yes, it was a nice bit of technology, I was hopelessly out with that, hopelessly out.

In your first three novels, you make extensive use of IT developments, computer technology, bio-ware, and the Net. How computer literate are you? Are you on the Net?

Just about computer illiterate, I would say. The only time I use a PC is for word-processing, for which I use LocoScript, which was developed for computer illiterates.

No, I'm not on the Net; I don't think I have any use for it at the moment. Apparently, it's getting to be a very good research tool. Instead of running through these huge books on cosmology, you can actually just ask various people

little bit at the bottom, wrote to me and said "May we see the novel please?", which was MINDSTAR RISING, and within three months they bought it.

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this realism that you were on about. This mass of technology isn't anything particularly new, it's just what we've got — carried to its extreme.

MT: Returning to the question of research, when I read A QUANTUM MURDER, I wondered how well-versed were you on quantum theory?

I'll tell you how A QUANTUM MURDER actually got written: there were only going to be two Greg Mandel books, the first one and what is now the third one. I thought two was enough. And then I read a single-page article in NEW SCIENTIST on wormhole and quantum theory, and within about a day I got the plot for A QUANTUM MURDER. Which is why it got written; you just can't ignore ideas that good.

But no, again it's a very general knowledge about it. I'd say it was pitched at about NEW SCIENTIST level, which seems to explain it to laymen like me. It's interesting and I have read up on it since, but no, I had no vast knowledge. I can just about follow it at that level, anything more complicated loses me.

Well, I struggled with A QUANTUM MURDER, I must admit; I had to re-read bits to follow the plot, but once the penny dropped, it's very clever. You've recently sold all three of the Mandel books to America, but I understand the publisher has asked you to re-write them?

They've asked for little inserts. Basically, the books are very local, locally-set books. All three are set in England, specifically around where I live in Oakham, although the third one does branch out a bit more. But they wanted to know what was happening in America at this time, so I just put in a few extra paragraphs about how the Americans had managed to survive just a little better, but not much. You don't want to give them too big an advantage. [Laughs] I thought it was fair enough for them to ask this.

Actually, before it was bought by Pan, I did send the manuscript out to one agent who promptly sent it back, saying "It is far too parochial to sell". I nearly sent her a copy of the contract after I got it with Pan, but I was very good and didn't. But it was a worry I had originally, that it is parochial, which is nice for me; I know a lot of people have said how good it is, for once, to read a science fiction novel set in England rather than Los Angeles.

You expanded quite a bit on what was happening elsewhere in the world in the third novel; did you enjoy doing that?

Yes, I did. Part of the problem I have with writing is getting these ideas and extrapolating them. In this case, I had the future history of Europe, and certainly England, sorted out, and again it was nice to expand and see how the other countries would fit in. There's a big chunk in it about defence alliances that fitted in. That was good, you had to fit them geographically rather than politically, as they are now, so you have to build a bit of a background to that. Then you slot that into what you've got already and judge the result. It's a lot of

fun doing that, trying to get all the parts to fit, which you never originally intended to have.

As I say, it was set locally to start with and I've branched out and branched and carried on. And trying to get the new bits to actually fit what had gone before was fun: you have to juggle it around a bit.

I've heard the three novels have been auctioned for tv; how are things going with that?

Yeah, tv; you're through the looking glass when you go into tv production. Basically, the word went out from BBC and ITV that they are looking for science fiction programmes. So this production company, Diverse, phoned round all the publishers and asked what properties they had, and I was Pan's property. I got called down to this office to meet this producer and I walked in, shook hands, what have you, and he says "I really like what you're doing, it's excellent work, just what we need, I haven't actually read the books yet..".

But yes, it's going quite well, actually. What you have to do is put together a proposal, which then goes out to BBC and ITV, basically for the money, and yesterday they actually teamed me up with Adrian Hodges, who created KAVANAGH QC and wrote the film script for TOM AND VIV — the idea being that with my ideas and him knowing how to write in that medium, we should be able to get something worthwhile together, something that will go ahead. At the moment, I'm waiting for him to come up with the next stage of the proposal, which will go to ITV and BBC, and I hope we can get some money for it.

How did you get on with him?

Very well. He's about my sort of age, possibly a few years older, but we had the same sense of humour. Yes, very well.

Had he read the books?

No he hadn't. [Laughs] He'd read the proposals, but he hadn't read the books. I actually had to change them quite a bit — the politics, the groups are quite extreme — and I had to change the premise a bit, because I have the Warming.. I had to reset that to something they could actually film. You can't obviously have the Warming where I flood the fens and Peterborough's a coastal town; that would be a little bit difficult to film.

So I changed that so that the ecology was just messed up to the extent we have storms and hurricanes — very, very bad ones. And it was set after the collapse of Federalism, after the collapse of the PSP, which he found absolutely fascinating, you know. This was the way we were going, we're rushing headlong into Federalism, or certainly a unified Europe of some type, which he thought was an excellent twist. He said that a tv audience can believe in this kind of future, just as well as the readers of the books.

Do you think that Mandel will make it onto the big screen eventually?

If it becomes a tv series, I wouldn't have thought so. It would be nice to do a film sometime, but I think it would use it up too much if it was on television. If you're looking at a series, you've got six or 13 episodes each year. I think that would use up the material too quickly.

Then again, if you've got a successful tv series, it could ease the move to the big screen...

Yeah, but I'm not sure I'd be involved; it would depend how much input I have. If I'm there just as an advisor, fine; if I've got to come up with 13 plots a year, there won't be a second series, never mind a film.

Ideally, who would you cast as Greg and Julia?

If he was British, for the look of him, possibly Michael Bean. For Julia, er, possibly Liz Hurley when she was 20.

You mentioned the politics. A number of reviewers, when MINDSTAR RISING came out, targeted you and claimed that you are right wing. How did you feel about that?

Initially, it was just pure surprise. I think the people that thought this tended to be fairly "right on", looking for this kind of thing. I'll give you an example: the review in, I think it was INTERZONE, for A QUANTUM MURDER. This woman did the usual trick of mentioning that early reviews had said I was right wing, so she got out of saying I was right wing directly. She then went on to say (one of the characters in the book is Professor Edward Kitchener, who gets murdered, in chapter two), "The name Kitchener evokes imperial resonances". Now, if you are going to read a book and think "Oh, he was part of the British Empire", then there really is nothing I can do or say that is going to change your mind. If you're looking for it, you will find it, no matter what. So I think that was a big part of the problem.

The second part is the character Julia Evans, who is very young, and very rich, and quite clever. There is a scene in A QUANTUM MURDER, where I was trying to get across the fact that, although it's a marvellous technological age and people sit at computers working all day long, or they work in cybernetic factories, you still, with all this technology, need jobs for people that can't do that. There are people who cannot sit at a computer all day, there are people who cannot design. You have to have manual jobs provided for some people, which is something we can get onto later if you like. So there is this scene where Julia Evans is at a ceremony to lay the foundation stone of a new complex her firm has built, and I had one of these characters, one of these builders, come over and thank her for giving them jobs. I think that came over very much as Noblesse Oblige, in which the aristocracy would be generously handing out jobs to the other people. In retrospect, that scene could have been either written very differently or just

scrapped and the point put across in a different kind of scene. Certainly, looking back on it, that was probably a mistake, I quite freely admit it.

Whether there were other little bits like that which build up in peoples' minds.. I mean once you see it, once you see that Kitchener is an Imperialist, you will tend to look for these things; if you are of that mindset, you can find it in there. As I say, it was early writing, it was a crude bit of writing and probably, I would hope, I could do it better today.

GJ: It seems to me that what you're saying in the books is that technology, as a force for change in society, is probably stronger than politics or ideology..

I think so, yes. Specifically computer technology. I mean we're getting now this idea that everybody should be sitting at home working at their computer. And people are doing that. But, whereas you can have a certain amount of people doing this, you cannot have everybody doing it. So I've looked at that in the books to some degree. You still have to find jobs for people who can't do this. You and I can, we sit at home typing; bank work can be done from home; design work can be done from home. But still a lot of people cannot do this. You have to have physical jobs, and one of the aspects of this technology is people believe that it will cut all this out, and it won't, not at the kind of level we've got in here. You have to have jobs for folk. The Net as it's developing is only giving jobs for half of us, and there's a lot of social pressure which will build up because of this. Politicians are all leaping onto the Net idea, but there's still a lot of people who can't work on it.

So what do you see as the human fallout to all this technological change?

I don't actually answer that question in the book.

Why not?

Because I don't know the answer. But as I say, you have to provide jobs for manual workers. The ultimate expression of this computer technology, the way it's going, is artificial intelligence, which is going to take over our job..

What, do you mean as interviewers and all that?

No, I mean as writers. At the moment, everyone's saying, "Well, you live at home and you all work through the Net and you're typing your own creative ideas. You're either a designer or a creator." That's fine as long as computers remain more or less at this level. Once they start to develop this artificial intelligence, this AI, then certainly simple jobs like engineering design, can be handled by computers. You get from that to graphics design. You get from that into actual creative work. There will be no jobs for us.

[The interview will continue in Progress Report #2 - out at Easter; or, if you can't wait, copies of CRITICAL WAVE #42 are available from Martin Tudor at the address on page 2, for just £2.45.]