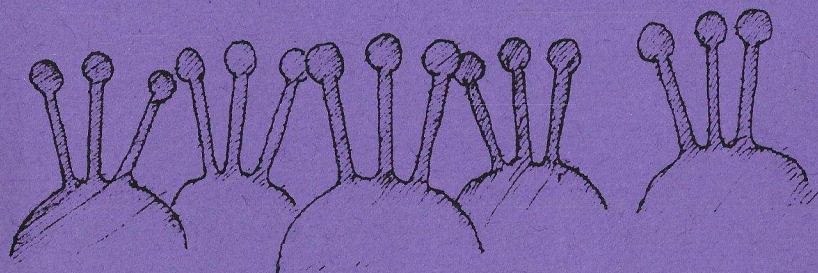
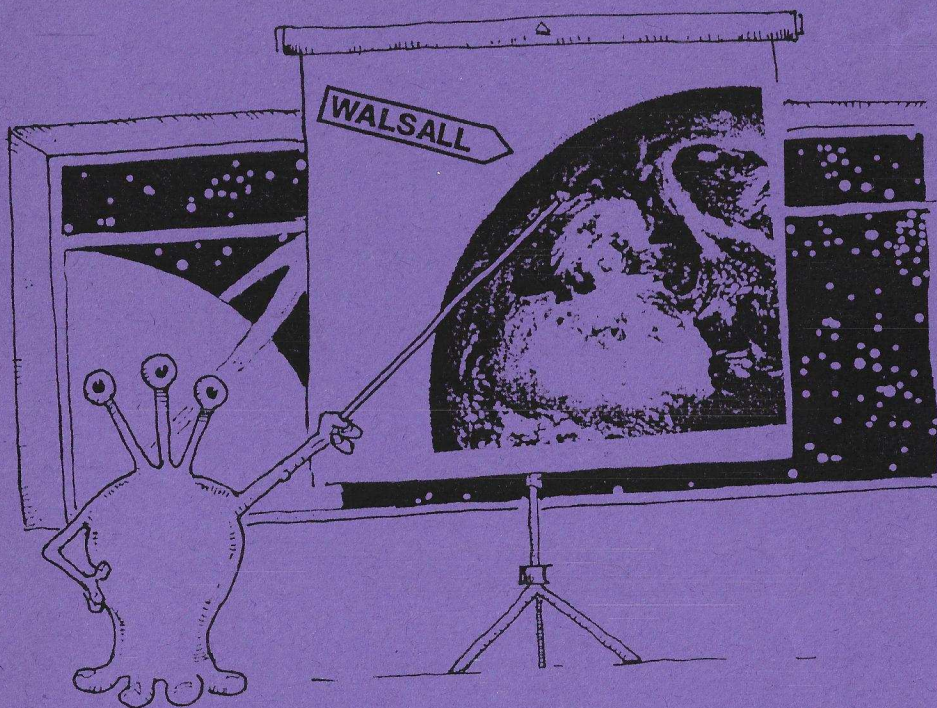


NOVACON 31



"75,000 light years to earth - nine minutes.
Spaghetti Junction - four and a half hours."

NOVACON 31

Date: 9th-11th November 2001.

Venue: The Quality Hotel, Bentley, Walsall,
(Junction10 on the M6).

Guest of Honour: Gwyneth Jones.

Membership & Enquiries: Attending membership costs £32 until Easter, then £35 from 18th April 2001 and will cost £40 on the door. Postal registrations should be received by 27th October 2001, after this time please join on the door. Supporting membership costs £15.00 throughout. Cheques/Postal Orders should be made payable to "Novacon 31" and sent with your completed form(s) to: **Steve Lawson, 379 Myrtle Road, Sheffield, S2 3HQ**. Further information is available at <http://www.novacon.org.uk>.

Room Rates: £32.00 per person per night for people sharing twin/double rooms and £45.00 pppn for single rooms (inclusive of full English breakfast). NB: Hotel booking forms, and deposits of one night's stay per person (£32 or £45), must be received by Steve Lawson no later than **30th September 2001**. Cheques for room deposits should be made payable to "The Quality Hotel". Enquires regarding hotel bookings should be sent to Steve at the address above or to x15@zoom.co.uk (tel: 0114-281-1572).

Advertising Rates: Advertising is welcome for both the next two Progress Reports and for the Programme Book. The rates are as follows (fan rates in brackets): Progress Reports - Professional £30.00 (£15.00) full page, £16.50 (£9.00) half page, £9.00 (£6.00) quarter page. Programme Book - Professional £75.00 (£35.00) full page, £40.00 (£17.50) half page, £20.00 (£10.50) quarter page.

Anyone interested in advertising should contact Martin Tudor at 24 Ravensbourne Grove, Willenhall, West Midlands, WV13 1HX (e-mail empties@breathemail.net). Deadlines for camera-ready advertising copy are detailed below.

Deadlines:

PR #2: 30th April 2001, to be distributed in June.

PR #3: 28th July 2001, to be mailed end August 2001.

Programme Book: 15th September 2001, distributed at Novacon 31.

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: Tony Berry (Chairman), 68 Windsor Road, Oldbury, West Midlands, B68 8PB, (morbis@zoom.co.uk); Cat Coast (Secretary), 1 St. Woolos Place, Newport, NP20 4GQ (little_jim@dial.pipex.com); David T. Cooper (Treasurer), 3 Yate Lane, Oxenhope, Keighley, West Yorks., BD22 9HL (elwher@ic24.net); Dave Hicks (Programme), postal address as Cat Coast's above, (little_jim@dial.pipex.com); Steve Lawson (Registrations), 379 Myrtle Road, Sheffield, S2 3HQ (x15@zoom.co.uk); Alice Lawson (Operations) postal address as Steve Lawson's above (fab@zoom.co.uk); Martin Tudor (Publications & Hotel Liaison), 24 Ravensbourne Grove, Willenhall, WV13 1HX (empties@breathemail.net).

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CHAIRMAN'S PIECE by Tony Berry

So here, at last, finally, after all is said and done, is Novacon 31 PR1. Things are running a little late this year due to our efforts to find a hotel that wasn't the Britannia Birmingham. Martin spent weeks trying to get a reply out of various likely venues, we went and looked at them, then Martin spent some more weeks trying to get formal offers. Why is it that hotels, which are in the business of selling rooms and function space, don't seem to give a toss about talking to potential customers? Needless to say, most of them didn't have the necessary function space/bedrooms/availability or wanted silly money.

Out of all the hotels we approached, only one gave us the dates we wanted, at the price we wanted, and a manager who is actually enthusiastic about having us there! Step forward the Quality Hotel, Walsall, which is not actually in Walsall town, but right next to junction 10 of the M6. It has a vast car park, the function rooms are all on the ground floor, access is excellent (dealers will be able to unload straight in to the room), and there are no lifts (whoo-hoo!). It also has a health club and pool for the half-dozen or so fit fans.

The Quality is a typical modern hotel in that it has no actual single rooms. Although they are offering some doubles as singles, numbers are very limited, so I would urge you to share if possible, or if you really want a single, get your booking form in promptly.

Our Guest of Honour this year is Gwyneth Jones, who writes in the Science Fiction and Fantasy genres, both adult and juvenile (as Ann Halam). Joint winner of the first James Tiptree Jr. Award, I'm sure she'll do an excellent job.

After the success of the CD ROM Artshow last year, we are planning to do it again, so let us know if you are interested. Of course we also want regular artwork as well, and stuff for the book and fan fund auctions is always appreciated.

Sharing responsibility for Novacon this year are Dave Hicks (Programme), Steve Lawson (Memberships), Martin Tudor (Publications and Hotel Liaison), Alice Lawson (Ops), David Cooper (Treasurer) and Cat Coast (Secretary). The website is maintained by Pat McMurray.

GWYNETH JONES by Dave Hicks

(A full appreciation of Gwyneth Jones will appear in the Programme book.)

Last year we had three Guests of Honour at Novacon. In 1995 we had four. Several times we've had two. This is great, because what really scares me about running the Programme is not the organising, or the technical side, or filling in for people who can't make it at the last moment. No, it's thinking of stuff in the first place, having ideas for items that hang together to give the weekend some substance. So the more Guests of Honour, the more starting points I've got for Programme items that will get you out of the bar and into the con hall, and then send you back to the bar talking and arguing about what you've heard.

So once again we've got several Guests of Honour.

Firstly, there's Gwyneth Jones, the science fiction writer. Her first adult novel was *Divine Endurance* (1984), while more recently *White Queen* (1991) shared the first ever James Tiptree Award, and is the first of three books - the others being *North Wind* (1994) and *Phoenix Café* (1997) - covering some 300 years of a future earth whose history is shaped by the arrival of aliens every bit as morally and sexually ambiguous as well, us. Gwyneth's adult fiction is clearly and explicitly for adults, in the mature sense that there's a depth of texture to the writing and some work is expected of the reader, since any convincing 'people meet aliens' scenario is rooted in profound mutual incomprehension.

Then there's Ann Halam the children's writer. Except that's Gwyneth Jones, too. Winner of the Dracula Society's splendidly named Children Of The Night Award for *The Fear Man* (1995), Gwyneth-as-Ann has produced tales of gothic and contemporary ghosts, Norse and fantasy mythologies, science fiction and time travel since 1977.

Finally we've got a literary critic, and - wouldnchaknowit - it's Gwyneth Jones. A collection of essays appeared under the title *Deconstructing The Starships* in 1999 (choice material from which will be featured in the progress reports) and she has contributed to *Interzone*, *Foundation* and the *New York review of Science Fiction*.

So we've got a Guest of Honour who writes mainstream adult SF that explores gender, sexuality, politics and identity, children's fantasy at a time when it's never been so topical, and articulate criticism that considers SF to be worthwhile, relevant and exciting.

KAIROS: THE ENCHANTED LOOM

by Gwyneth Jones

Apocalypse: The last book of the New Testament, any book purporting to reveal the future or last things, a revelation or disclosure (Gr. Apokalypsis, an uncovering)

The Second Law (and the Seventh Seal)

The world is coming to an end. John Gribbin, British astrophysicist and popular science writer (and a neighbour of mine in Sussex) cites two striking pieces of evidence for this, in his study of the ultimate fate of the universe...¹ The first is that if you drop an ice cube in a cup of hot coffee the coffee will grow cold, whereas we never see ice cubes forming spontaneously out of cold liquid, while the remaining liquid stays hot. Heat always tends to even out. The second is that at night the stars are bright in a dark sky. If the universe had existed for all eternity, with the same number of stars and galaxies distributed in the same way as we see now, the stars - pouring out their energy - would have filled up the spaces between themselves with light, and the whole sky would be ablaze. The stars haven't been there forever, and they aren't going to last forever either. By making calculations about the fuel that a star burns and how long one of those candles can keep burning, we can tell that eventually all the energy in the known universe will be evened out to a flatline. The stars in the night sky prove that we are living in a place that changes. The darkness around them tells us the direction of that change. Though we inhabit a pocket of non-equilibrium, where the coffee and the ice cube have not reached lukewarm, motionless calm, our fate is inescapable. The universe as we know it was born; and it will die. The seventh seal will be broken, there will be silence in heaven.

Somehow that cup of cooling coffee, which always seems to turn up in descriptions of the second law of thermodynamics, fails to convince me. It's too culture bound. One has to be in the habit of drinking a hot liquid called coffee, one has to be in the habit of letting it grow cold. And the second clause is weak. 'We never see this effect...' meaning, strictly, we haven't seen it yet. How can I be sure a defiant ice cube will not fight its way back through the entropy barrier one day, if the scientists refuse to tell me for certain that that won't happen? Perhaps this childish resistance of mine is a reminder that cosmology itself is culturally bound. As John Gribbin also remarks, while introducing his readers to the Big Bang hypothesis version of the Last Things², wide acceptance of the idea that the universe has a beginning, a middle and an end is relatively new to human thought. For most of our history, the majority of our cultures have favoured either a cyclic universe, or a continual creation, or an eternal stasis. We may see

the success of this novelty as a sign of the powerful connections between our dominant scientific culture and Judæo-Christian theology. Modern physicists may believe themselves to be secularists. But the founders of modern science were theologians, and the cultural tradition of their belief informs our scientific concepts. Whatever way you look at it, it surely isn't a coincidence that the Big Bang itself bears a remarkable resemblance to the creation event of Genesis when suddenly, just on a whim (or a vacuum fluctuation) God said, let there be light... We had better accept it. Jews, Greeks, Christians, Muslims: we are all of us, here in Europe, still engaged in sailing from Byzantium.³ Even Ragnarok - the final struggle of the northern gods - quite possibly dates as a concept only from the tenth century, and was inspired by the Book of Revelations in the Christian Bible, also known as the Apocalypse.

We may also see the Big Bang hypothesis, and the onward-upward cosmic myth that lurks within it, as phenomena of population dynamics. When a critical threshold is passed in the growth and density of human population – either locally or in our case globally - maybe stories of this kind are bound to become important. In normal human life, a child's experience is of moving onward and upward, physically and socially: but when adulthood is reached that drive slows down. Life settles into the immemorial cycle of the generations: the cycle of the seasons, of marriage and bringing up children, putting down roots, growing old. It's only in special circumstances, of unusual success or unusual hardship, that the adult community has to start fragmenting and moving outwards, heading somewhere. But our lives are not normal, in terms of the many thousands of years that went before this Christian Era. For us the pace of population growth, which brings with it the idea of progress, that implies both a finite beginning and some unknown goal, is unceasing. Maybe that's why the Big Bang hypothesis has become the dominant Creation myth, not only locally but globally, of our culture. The universe can no longer be seen as a vast wheel, repeating the circle of the seasons on a hugely magnified scale, through cosmological aeons. To match our experience it must be a place of change and expansion. Trapped in permanent adolescence, we feel a Darwinian certainty that something's got to give, that every envelope of containment will be broken. We promise ourselves a day of doom, when we will escape from the prison of this earth as from the body of this death, and break through the crystal spheres into unlimited heaven.

Escape Plans

This adolescent project of escaping from the human condition is sometimes supposed to be the chief business of science fiction. When I started out as a writer I believed that this was true. My first two novels were devoutly eschatological. The first book, *Divine Endurance*, was set in a far future South East Asia, where I imagined the last scientific creation of

mechanist civilisation reappearing from the past, and mediating the final transition of the human race into a future of enlightened, peaceful, super-powered post-humanity. I followed the classic pattern, leading my far future characters (the ultimate machine is one of the characters, she's a metagenetic gynoid, a living doll who can grant every wish of the human heart) through death, judgement heaven and hell to childhood's end, and the brink of a new-made world.

Divine Endurance was an exercise in displacement. I set the book in South East Asia, and borrowed images from Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, because it's so much easier to write about big ideas in an alien language. You just don't have the vocabulary to tie yourself in knots. When I wrote the second book, *Escape Plans*, I bravely decided to tackle the same subject using the iconography of my own, 'Western', Roman-Greek, Judaeo-Christian culture. I've been fascinated by popular science for as long as I can remember. In the early eighties, when I was writing *Escape Plans*, I read a collection of articles on cosmology by Stephen Hawking that had appeared in *New Scientist*⁴. I was intensely struck, through this reading, by the points of similarity between the most cutting-edge cosmological theory, and Judaeo-Christian theology; and, also, the project of science fiction. I decided that my book would be about the way Outer Space can be mapped onto the sacred 'other world' of Heaven: how 'our' culture, the international culture based on the riches of the USA, has, (or had), developed almost a mediaeval idea of life on earth as merely a preparation for our real and much more wonderful future life out there in the empyrean, where everything in the shining corridors is clean and bright, and nobody dies, nobody drops litter, nobody farts. I wanted to examine this mysterious convergence, whereby both science and religion were insisting that something inimical to human life - like death, or life in a hard vacuum - is certain to be the gateway to perfect freedom and happiness. I set my story on a version of our earth where there had been no Christian-Era disruption. Classical civilisation had continued into the Space Age, the shiny ships had been launched, but then the inhabitants of my earth had found that the way was blocked. Their solar system was sitting in the middle of a trapped region of spacetime (a Stephen Hawking bubble universe), without any possibility of access to the big beyond. They'd discovered that they were the only occupants of this region. No one and nothing from outside could get in, no one inside could get out... short of a miracle.

'In the childhood of humanity we all believed that the world was ruled by great unseen presences called Death and Love and Chance and Harvest - personified but not controlled by us. There was another theory, almost as universal. Human beings looked up at the deathless stars and decided that we could be immortal too, if we could get up there. In one form or another,

this myth was everywhere. Its memory lingered on in the human psyche, until people began to make accurate multidimensional models of space-time. And whether our myths shaped our physics or the other way round, the vision of eternal youth and unbounded freedom was buried somewhere deep in the drive to space travel. So when we discovered that we are alone, we are trapped and we can never get out, that was the end of a very ancient hope, and also the end of exploration... Not that we really believed that we were going to live forever 'out there'. But it has an insidious, enduring effect on morale, to know that you are living inside a Black Hole.¹⁶

I gave my thwarted explorers a mediaeval universe: where the earth is at the centre of things, yes, but that means (as people who talk of the Copernican 'dethroning' of Man often forget) the lowest state of being. Then I presented them with the hope of rescue, a messenger from outside their event horizon. She told them that they couldn't beat the equations by building more powerful spaceships, or finding a way to mobilise ever more staggering amounts of energy. But if they would give up everything material, everything that bound them to human life: if they would strip themselves of everything physical, then they could achieve escape velocity. Few people really believed the saviour's good news. The path to glory she offered was too difficult, too demanding. But she caused trouble. She caused disturbances, she roused angry dreams of freedom of a more practical variety. She had come to earth among the Jews of my alternate earth, a highly argumentative subject race, whose priestly caste were 'plugged in' to their own private great computer; and had the annoying habit of being better than their rulers at dealing with the world-running computers of the empire. Naturally, the Space Age 'Romans' of my alternate earth executed her. Needless to say there were rumours, impossible to substantiate, difficult to disprove, that she had survived the experience. I'm sure you know the story. It has been recycled in countless science fictions. Along with eschatology in general, it's one of the ur-narratives of the genre. This predicament of ours, with all its grief and evil, is a temporary problem. Somebody knows the way out. You haven't met her and neither have I, but a friend of a friend of mine actually saw the evidence...

Well, in the real world space travel is a cramped, ramshackle and smelly business; and nobody seems to get very far. In spite of NASA's best efforts, that space-age heaven has become (for the time being at least) the stuff of blatant make-believe. This rather spoils the point of *Escape Plans*, because when I chose the space race as my analogue for supernatural salvation, I thought I'd found a way to re-present the great escape as a practical reality. I didn't want my story to be a fairytale, I wanted it to make sense. I wanted my characters to be longing for redemption 'from the body

of this death' the way people might long to escape from poverty, or disease.

The cosmology strand, however, was safe from the collapse of space-age futures. It was, it still is, as close to the real hard science as I could get it. (*Escape Plans* possibly ended up being a lot closer to the science than to the Evangelists). I put my alternate earth in a bubble universe, so that I'd be able to make sweeping statements about the desperate isolation. But in this great big expanding universe of our own, we are still, as far as we know, absolutely alone. We know now, even better than we did in 1986, that we are not going to find it easy to get out there and meet our neighbours, if we ever find any. The distances are just too intractable. To travel conveniently to the planets of another star, we are going to have to do something very strange, like break the lightspeed barrier: which seems to mean we have to leave everything material behind. And things could be even worse. Current cosmology says that the earth is at the centre of a sphere, an envelope determined by the light that has reached us since the Big Bang. Suppose we manage to search that whole sphere and find nothing but hot gas and cold rocks, which is not totally unlikely, on the present evidence, it is logically, fundamentally impossible for us to break out any further. In the end, the predicament I described in *Escape Plans* could be the simple truth about our existence in this universe. We're in prison, alone, and we can never get out.

When I'd finished my eschatological trilogy, I was very tired of thinking about the last things, and very tired of trying to combine fiction with the rigour of the hardest of hard science. (I don't, by the way, ever advise people to read *Escape Plans*. It's kind of an eccentric apotheosis of cyberpunk, and it has its moments; but it is not easy going). I wrote next three books (*White Queen*, *North Wind*, *The Phoenix Café*) about the invasion, empire and eventual departure of some humanoid aliens called the Aleutians. The Aleutians are plausible fictional aliens, their story has many parallels with the European colonial adventure, and they invade earth in time to profit from the disruption caused by a horrendous development called the Gender Wars. One thing they don't have is faster than light travel (they stumbled upon our solar system by accident, after wandering around this arm of the galaxy for hundreds of years in a converted asteroid, completely lost). Most of the narrative drive that binds the three books together concerns the discovery and re-discovery of something called the Buonarrotti Device, which is a development of the *Escape Plans* idea that the best way to beat interstellar distances is to translate yourself into the form of pure information. The humans have it, the Aleutians want it... But before I could write *White Queen*, I had to finish my catalogue of cosmic escape attempts.

In Praise of Limited Solutions

The walls of our prison are high, but they're an awesomely long way off. In fact, as I noticed after a while, most science fiction is not apocalyptic. If science fiction is, as I have suggested, a response to a situation of population expansion – when through sheer numbers and appetite for resources, the human community seems to be heading for the limit of what's possible – the solutions the genre offers are usually less extreme than mine. There's no need to resort to utter and absolute change, to restore a sense of lebensraum. Through the ages, writers and storytellers have simply cleared the ground with some disaster movie scenario – such as Gilgamesh's and Noah's Flood – easily extrapolated from actual events, that leaves plenty of room for the immemorial cycles to reinstate themselves. In the modern era Global Thermonuclear War served the same purpose for a generation of science fiction writers. In the post-modern era, we have an embarrassment of possibilities. We can crash the population with a killer virus, a decade or two of low-intensity warfare, the failure of a major food crop, a mega-sized pollution incident; an asteroid strike... Not to mention plain old global warming, that can sink a lot of modern civilisation in a watery grave.

More optimistic storytellers see no need for the line on the graph to plunge at all. By their reckoning we will neither fall, nor leap into the unknown. We will simply find more and more efficient ways to harness the energy of the sun, until the least hospitable of the planets bows to the power of human territorial expansion, and finally the whole solar system is converted into a Dyson Sphere, with the sun in the centre of a vast hive of entirely mundane (as it were) technological achievement. The vintage model for this anti-apocalypse, where instead of reaching the moment of uncovering, we just go on spreading our own version of reality outward and outward forever, is probably Olaf Stapledon's *Last And First Men*. But recently Kim Stanley Robinson in his formidable Mars trilogy, has envisaged the expansionist future in extraordinary depth and detail; while Greg Egan of Australia has done the same job from a non-humanist point of view, in his highly informative hard science *Diaspora*. The Mars trilogy and *Diaspora* are both of them very important science fictions (with the caveat that *Diaspora* may not be comfortable reading, if you're not a sf buff, and trying to think in five dimensions alarms you). Both of them depict the apotheosis of the Industrial Revolution and the American Dream. In these futures, wave after wave of the brightest and the best of humanity, over-coming all obstacles, will build cities on the burning line between night and day on Mercury, swim like dolphins (with genetically engineered improvements) in the methane seas of Titan, send digitised clones of themselves to explore the farthestmost distant quarters of the galaxy. Of course, the Second Law still gets us in the end. Heat will even out. But there is no need to envisage or to fear dying fall. It will not happen to us, or to any imaginable seed of ours.

Before I go any further into my own apocalyptic progress, I want to acknowledge the value of limited solutions. Notoriously, on every scale and in every situation in human affairs, it is the misfits who make discontent into a revolution: not the patient, suffering poor themselves, but their political advisors. It is perilous to meddle with the fabric of the world. It is better to ignore the rubs and inconsistencies, and tuck those loose ends discreetly out of sight. If you pull on them, to see what happens, the whole web may begin to fall apart. Most science fiction is written for and by people unhappy with the idea of dying (immortality or indefinite longevity is phenomenally constant on the agenda), but otherwise broadly satisfied with things as they are. Like the poor in times of revolution, sf writers don't want anything different, just more (and more and more) of the same. And this is certainly a sensible approach. Progress has its price, (too bad, in terms of those optimistic futures, for the billions who are not among the brightest and the best...), but revolutions tend to have depressingly poor results. There's an awful symmetry, whereby the bid for freedom rebounds to a position more doctrinaire, repressive and harsh than the situation it set out to cure.

But to return to my history. I wrote my first two books without realising that my fiction was related to my life experience, except in the most banal sense. (I lived in South East Asia when I was writing *Divine Endurance*. As a child in the sixties, I had followed the Space Race obsessively). Eventually it dawned on me that I was writing about the end of the world, and the break through into some completely different state of affairs, for personal reasons. And I was not alone. Whatever complex of familial, genetic and historical factors had made me dissatisfied with the world, (this world that normal science fiction writers only want to see expanding forever) I had plenty of company in the mid-eighties. Social discomfort, and specifically sexual discomfort, seemed to be the secret force behind a very different kind of apocalyptic discourse, which had just attracted the attention of both feminists and science fiction writers. I had never been interested in modern literary theory, but through feminism I started reading the texts, and I was instantly deeply intrigued. I was especially impressed by Roland Barthes' landmark study *S/Z*, which anatomises (I first wrote, atomises, which may be a more accurate term) a story by Balzac, about a man who falls in love with an Italian singer, a castrato, a transvestite whom he believes to be a woman. In *S/Z* Barthes blows away the cobwebs of period romance and recovers the utter strangeness of this tale, which challenges first the fixed nature of human sexual relations, and then, as if the connection were inevitable, the fixed connection between words and things. Language itself, I learned, is a covering, an outer dress. It has hooks at the back: one can take it off. This was very interesting, because it was exactly what I was being told - and by the same sexual route - in feminist science fiction.

Autodeconstructionism

Now that it's all over, the project of feminist science fiction seems like some mad plan the CIA might have cooked up at the height of the Cold War. Our mission was to infiltrate and destroy the archetype of male sexual adventure. For science fiction is nothing else. James Tiptree Junior, legendary double agent in the sf gender wars, blew the cover on that in her series of superbly virile stories⁶. The whole fantasy empire built around science fiction's chaste technological diaspora, says Tiptree, is nothing other than an orgy of cosmic impregnation. The optimism of the expansionists, even the most humane of them, is secretly based on the law of might is right, on the endemic abuse of power: which is justified (sometimes openly, sometimes cryptically) by recourse to the natural sexual drive of the human male. It was fashionable at that time (we made it fashionable: one of our covert disinformation campaigns) for both men and women to complain bitterly about the inappropriately 'sexist' cover art of sf, that kept people from taking the genre's sober, intelligent, futurist speculation seriously. But we knew very well, (and so did the men, though most of them didn't dare say so), that the art -all those air-brushed spacegirls in the crotch-hugging suits; all those wispily clad or bronze-breasted females ravished (as far as public decency permitted) by monsters or spacemen, was telling the honest truth. Sf is an expansionist myth. It's about reproductive success. The genetic engineering and the space elevators are all very fine and dandy, but what we're always, really, talking about is how Man gets out there to the edge of the known, grabs hold of a chunk of that alien dark, and pumps it full of his seed...⁷ We feminist fans and writers had decided that we did not like being cast as the alien dark. We set about to give ourselves a different costume, and a little more variety. We proved, by fictional experiment, that men could be the ones who stayed at home, only fit for sexual pleasure and procreation, while the women made discoveries and had adventures. We replaced the void-piercing phallic engineering with an enveloping matrix of life sciences; we proved that the adventure story template would function under these conditions. We claimed that we simply wanted a piece of the action, a few strong female characters on the bridge of the Enterprise, but yes, of course we wanted to take over. For a while, we sincerely believed that by deconstructing and reconstructing our genre, this reactionary stronghold of the imagination, we would have some effect on the real world.

If only we'd been satisfied with those strong female characters. But it wasn't enough. We found that we didn't want to write about male impersonators, 'men with breasts' doing hero stuff. We wanted real women in our space adventures. But what, exactly is a real woman? Now that's where our problems began. We embarked on an ambitious project, trying to reverse the polarity of the myth: trying to make that female darkness the subject of the story, and banish the male principle of light to the sidelines.

In doing this, we ran up against the veil of language itself. The myth said male-bright-active equals win, female-dark-passive equals come second (at the best estimate). We tried to swap that round, Orwellian style. But how do you write an action-adventure where female-dark-passive equals win? It's difficult or impossible, because win is inexorably coded bright-active. Which (in the revised lexicon) ought to equal lose. We were trapped by an abstract system of differences to which we'd given moral weighting, and there seemed to be no way out. When articulate language itself is held to be an invention of the evil empire, how in hell do you write stories? When we realised what we'd done to ourselves, the movement splintered. Women, and other feminists, who were willing to burn a little incense at the shrine of might is right, simply became orthodox science fiction writers. And many of them prospered. Others found a modest niche for themselves writing correctly female, virtually adventure free, versions of the great adventure. The most rational and rigorous of the cadre simply gave up, laid the cards on the table and walked away.

In fact, the impasse that we had to reach had been predicted from an early stage. In an important story published in 1970, Joanna Russ⁸, the most assured polemicist of that feminist decade, describes precisely the predicament of a young woman who wants to be a science fiction writer. The story is called *The Second Inquisition*. It's set in small town Middle America (the period doesn't really matter). A young girl meets, or maybe fantasises this role onto her parents' rather odd female lodger, a visitant from the future. The woman is everything a woman cannot be, in the stifling conventional society of this small town. She awakens the hope of escape, but her complicated and mysterious adventure cannot touch the real girl's real life of dress-codes, peer-pressure, and social expectations. Two worlds collide, trying to occupy the same space, and the adventurer disappears, leaving the girl stranded with only the memory of a dream.

Any girl can enjoy reading science fiction, as long as she's prepared to become a male impersonator, or at least a 'tomboy' in her imagination. But when she tries to put herself into the dream, when she tries to remove that male dress from the adventurer, she does not uncover the unconditioned person, the ideal self of her desire. Instead she finds that there is nothing left beneath the words: the adventure vanishes. As long as the human world endures, (so obdurate is the great divide) there is no one she can be if she refuses to embrace either one role, or the other.

I say 'us' and 'we' out of solidarity: I wasn't involved in the struggle. Most of it happened in the USA, and it might as well have been on Mars. News bulletins reached me occasionally, a long time after the fact. Meanwhile the post-war economic boom that had been pumping through UK society in my childhood and adolescence had ground to a halt. My friends and I, the

feckless children and grand-children of European socialism, had made no attempt to build careers for ourselves. We were the Welfare State kids, who thought they never had to grow up. I remember telling people, when I was an undergraduate, that I wanted to live. I was happy to turn my hand to any kind of needful work, but I wasn't going to get distracted by pointless scabbling for money or position. In the nineteen eighties, reality finally began to bite. The newly rising generation was going after workaholic material success; and because we children of the dream had dismissed the whole idea of taking power, there was nothing we could do to defend Utopia, the Good State of equality and liberty, (free health and education for all), that we'd thought was our native land.

As I followed feminist science fiction through its encounter with deconstruction, I was also coming up against the realisation that my life's choices had made me doubly female: powerless by conviction as well as by biology and tradition. My friends and I had learned from the horrors of Maoism and Stalinism. We had no faith in politics, there was no party we could join. Our only consolation, was to fantasise (like so many dreamers before us) some kind of absolute change... a movement coming up from the streets, a violent overthrow that would somehow, this time, be good and innocent. This was my situation when I began to write my third eschatological novel, *Kairos* – equally uncompromising in theme, but another step closer to home. In *Divine Endurance* I had written about the end of the world as a long-haul tourist. In *Escape Plans*, I told the tale of supernatural break-through in the imagery of a world I'd seen on television. In *Kairos* I set the scene in my own here and now: in the grungy, defeated margins of feminist and socialist protest, in nineteen eighties Britain.

The two central characters in the book are a lesbian couple, Otto Murray and Sandy Brize. Otto runs a shoestring socialist-feminist bookshop. Sandy has been unemployed since they both left university. She's a clever working-class kid who bought the dream of escape, but caught that disease in the virulent form that destroys all hope of material success. There's also Candide, Otto's ten year old son (my characters tend to come in threes, but that's another story). At the opening of the story, Sandy's life is in crisis. She's tired of being Otto's 'wife', she has no faith in Otto's socialist programme. The relationship is falling apart and Sandy seems to be having a serious nervous breakdown. At this point Candide's pet dog disappears (Oh, the names we gave our children, when we were young and foolish. The dog, by the way, is called Vera, which means, 'the true image'). Vera has been kidnapped, by a sinister old acquaintance of the couple, who is now working for a very sinister cult organisation called Breakthru. Candide starts to get small pieces of his dog delivered in the mail, along with threats of more to follow if he doesn't hand over a McGuffin object that has accidentally fallen into his mother's hands.

Candide knows his mother won't deal with right-wing terrorists. He enlists Sandy, as his knight errant, and they set out to rescue the pet.

Sandy has now become the male-impersonator. Candide soon begins to suspect that she has the requisite super-powers. But poor child, his hero/ine is at an existential impasse: bright-active-positive on the outside, full of darkness and destruction within. Here's Sandy holding forth about the trouble with revolutions -

'It's lucky normal criminal human nature takes over so quickly. If revolutionaries ever followed things through, where would it end? First you unmask your enemies, then you unmask your friends, then you unmask yourself. You think you've got the world naked, free of bias, and then you see a little rough edge somewhere, and you start picking at it. That's what's happened to me. Scritch, scratch, another mask comes off: and another and another. It hurts worse than anything. But it is such fun to see the stuff coming away. You start off with politics, then you do it to sex and money. Before you know it, you're right through the skin of things. Unmask the street, unmask the trees...'⁹

This is an apocalypse indeed, making sense of the term but making the project extremely alarming. When we uncover what's going on inside a science fiction story, we come up against a truth that's exasperating for all feminists, and indeed for all political radicals, or even for all heterodox thought. Limited revolution is no revolution at all. James Tiptree Jnr put it succinctly 'Nothing's going to change unless it all changes - ' But where's the change going to stop? What if you start closely questioning those rubs and inconsistencies, and follow them back, and track them down, through history, biology, ecology, and on and on, until you reach the fundamental supports of reality itself? What if you find that establishing gender equality in the workplace is going to interfere with whatever makes the sun come up in the morning, or water run downhill (this is, after all, exactly the sort of thing outraged conservatives have expected us to believe, over the years)... Well then, what then? If it's up to you, what's your choice? What are you going to do?

Angels and Aliens

At the risk of trespassing onto biblical territory, (which has been strictly forbidden to me)¹⁰, I'd like to examine, briefly, the technical difference between apocalyptic writing and prophecy. According to the Biblical Commentaries, prophets speak about their own world and in their own voices, whereas apocalypses describe future events, and typically disguise their identities. Thus, the 'John' of Revelations, isn't making any claim to be the same person as 'John' the New Testament Evangelist, 'he' is establishing credentials, in time-honoured hermetic tradition, by using the

byline of a previous visionary. The prophet's career may be recorded by someone else, but he or she is ordered by God to speak, go and tell them in Nineveh; while the apocalypt is told by the angel to write: write it in a book. Wise advice. The prophet's news is humanly, personally convincing, (you've been wicked and you have to repent...). The Apocalyptic message is only credible if its origin is unequivocally supernatural, a dictation from the other side. On Judgement Day itself, repentance isn't exactly irrelevant, but it isn't going to make any difference to the main programme. The heavens are still going to be stripped bare of stars, the sea be no more, the world is still going to be rolled up like a scroll... Science fiction also comes in these two sizes. In my first two books I'd stayed (just about) on the prophecy side of the line. Now I was going to tackle the real, no-kidding, cosmic derailment, the day when, in the twinkling of an eye, everything changes. I needed to think about angels, and the end of time.

In our present millennial era, supernatural agents bearing messages from the beyond are called aliens: but it's fairly clear that the physical phenomena giving rise to these reports have been the same throughout human history. Eyewitness accounts of the spectacular celestial displays at Fatima, Portugal, at the beginning of the last century, would certainly pass equally well as descriptions of UFO activity¹¹. As a sceptic, I'm bemused by the way modern ufologists blithely embrace this continuity as confirmation of their own beliefs. See! The aliens have been visiting for hundreds of years! What is it that stops them from dropping the other shoe, and accepting that these lights people see in the sky - the glowing shapes, the whirling wheels - have always been strange lights in the sky: and the supernatural scolding (which is also part of the ufo myth) has been added after the fact, dressed to the taste of the times. The bottom line seems to be that signs and wonders simply aren't thrilling, unless there's a human interest element. Personally I deplore this attitude. I'm prepared to be awed by a meteor shower, or an Aurora Borealis show, that doesn't care (so to speak) if I live or die. But what's really strange, when you look at the idea closely, is the way both the alien-hunters and the religious visionaries are so determined that their Small Grey sightings, and their close encounters with the Virgin Mary, have to be material experiences. How does that confirm the validity of the vision?

Material like what? Like thought? Like neutrinos? Like quarks?

I suppose if there have been strange lights in the sky from time to time throughout human history, it may be because the angels, or the aliens, have always been warning us that the end is nigh. If a thousand ages in their sight is but a moment gone, they probably have a different idea of what 'nigh' means. Or perhaps they are just talking to us in our own language - telling us that the end of the world is coming real soon now, in a very human sense: this project will remain incomplete for the indefinite

future... I suppose, (equally) that meteor showers, magnetic aurora, and other, one-off, storms of visible energy, can be perfectly well explained by science. But what about the Day itself? Obviously, according to the currently most favoured theory of the Second Law, that inexorable fade-out, there will be no spectacular Day of Judgement, no matter how unimaginably distant. However, there are other choices on the menu. Science fiction to party on in capitalist expansion mode until the whole machine runs down. Nothing's ever going to change. Happily, there are other choices on the menu. To give one example, there's the Dark Matter theory, which holds that there has to be far more mass in the universe than can be accounted for by the bright stars. If there is enough of this mysterious Dark Matter (most of which has yet to be identified),¹² then instead of expanding to heat death, the universe will reach a maximum and start to contract. At that point of involution all the fundamental laws will collapse. The cosmos will start folding over on itself like an orange being unpeeled: and time will run backwards (whatever that means) towards the Big Crunch. I think we can safely envisage some very strange observable phenomena, a whole Book of Revelations of special effects, around that turning point... with the slight problem, for the Apocalyptic storyteller, that planet earth and all things human will have been interstellar dust for aeons by then.

Definitive, final, solutions in cosmology come and go. As I revise this essay (in the autumn of the year 2000) the Steady State universe (where nothing changes) is looking strong, while the whole Big Bang paradigm, with all its ramifications, is looking shaky¹³. But to return to the Big Crunch, which was fashionable when I was writing *Kairos*, there is, as I soon realised, a simple 'solution' to the problem of the intractable timescale. There are many scientists who claim to believe that the universe only exists in so far as we observe it. The slow attrition of heat-death is something we observe all the time, in everything around us and in our own mortality: so heat-death is safe. It makes perfect, science fictional sense to assume that this is equally true of the End of the World. If it's going to happen, then in some sense we have to be there. All bets are off, time ceases, every fundamental law is undone... that's what the science really says: and this science, remember, is describing the behaviour of the fundamental particles that make up my body and my brain, as well as the gas clouds between the stars. Without tying myself in too many logical knots, I think this means the Apocalypse Experience (although, er, of course, it's really happening already, or all the time, sub species aeternitas) could start tomorrow. And if it does, I think I can safely predict that we'll be having some weird neurological experiences, to go with the (objective?) lights in the sky. So what will the end of all things be like, experienced as a human event, dressed in the language and the desires of the human mind? I tried

to imagine what it would feel like: and here's Sandy again, a little further along the road:

'Oh, I see it... This is what it is, it's a mind flying apart. If someone tries to dismantle their mind, there comes a level of incredible resistance. And then the sun bursts open. Flying apart, flying apart! And I said, "I want what is not". I stepped out of the middle dimensions, into the other world, the other side of things. And I carried everything that I touched with me.' She held up her hands, grubby and grey, with the white skin showing blue veins through the grime. 'Look, look. These aren't hands anymore. They are words now. And soon, and soon...' The dead angel had vanished... Sandy went on covering the old factory floor with exploding universes: trees and dreams and chairs and memories - all breaking, all spinning, all returning through the channel of her mind to the unnameable, the undivided...'¹⁴

Wings That Can't Be Broken

Apocalyptic writing is called 'gospel' - that means good news - 'for bad times'. The current proliferation of ufo sightings, alien abductions, and bleeding statues too, seems - broadly speaking - to be the province of the Fundamentalist Right, my natural enemies. If those folk are feeling hard pressed, and taking refuge in daydreams about winding up the whole shebang, this should be good news for me, (not to mention for all of life on this small planet). Alas no. People who believe in apocalyptic warnings don't tend to alter their moral behaviour, (they're among the blessed, after all); and on the other hand, I'm afraid the aliens can't be trusted any better than the angels of the Lord. They are not going to turn up, and whisk the abductees and the chat-show hosts away to some Seventh Heaven or better planet. No, Sandy's dream is not going to come true. In the real world, I have no faith in signs and wonders.

Once, I saw the Holy Spirit. It (or rather She, since I understand Santa Sophia may be regarded as female, in the same sense as the Father and Son are called male) appeared as a patch of glittery, scratchy golden light, hanging in the air in the bathroom, above the toilet cistern. I was three. I think my vision had something to do with sandpaper, a pleasing phenomenon that I'd recently met for the first time. Once, when I was nine, my mother reported telepathic contact. She had heard my voice, saying in her mind 'Mummy', with such strange clarity of internal locution that she investigated, and we established that it could have happened at the very moment when I, in Woolworths in Barrow-in-Furness that afternoon (which is a town in Cumbria, not far from the UK's most notorious Nuclear Power Plant; that probably had something to do with it) had spied a bin full of nougat, her favourite candy, and decided to buy some for her.

Luckily for me, there are no further incidents to report. I was in no danger of getting caught up, like the three children of Fatima, in the tidal forces of adult need, which might have transformed my strange moments into a huge, helpless edifice of lies. But I remember also, and better than either of those barely-there brushes with the paranormal, that once I dreamed, with unearthly sweetness, that my father was teaching me to walk on air. It was in the back yard of the house where I grew up. He was standing on the path, in his shirt sleeves, encouraging me by lifting his hand in time. I was stepping easily, like climbing upstairs, about a metre above the damp patch of turf we called our 'lawn'... My father, the storyteller, taught me to tell stories. He taught me how to free myself (really, truly) from the prison of the middle dimensions, from the body of this death.

In the Middle of a Dark Wood

The Greek word *kairos* means opportunity: the critical moment, right proportion or due measure. It was adopted in the first centuries after Christ by early millenarians, as a term to describe Christ's Second Coming, which they believed to be imminent. The *kairos* isn't death, judgement, heaven or hell. It is the moment of discontinuity: it is change itself. In my third and last eschatological novel, *kairos* is first described as 'a reality changing drug'. Designer drugs were much talked about at the time, so it seemed a suitable disguise. As the concept gradually unpacks itself through the plot, this 'drug' turns out to be an event. In the world up to the *kairos* all the normal rules apply. When the change begins there's political and social chaos, accompanied by the traditional range of wonders. After it, everything seems normal again, except that in strange small ways it is evident that different fundamental laws apply. Things which were once utterly impossible, like ghosts, magic, social justice, gender equality, are quietly on the increase. *Kairos* is a punning game, a cosmological play on words: and a version of the Gospel for Hard Times adapted for the consolation of those people - such as feminist science fiction writers - whose habitat is fixed, for as long as the laws of this world endure, between a rock and a hard place. But there is something else.

I have a great deal of sympathy with the apocalyptic writers. I express myself differently, I don't feel obliged to convince my readers that an angel came and told me the plot. Yet we clearly share a hunger for the truly extraordinary, and a need to express outsize ideas in bizarre, gaudy imagery. We are frequently told, by people who want to believe in religion and yet appear rational (modern cosmologists never seem to be worried about the second bit...) that we are not to take those lakes of fire and so on literally: it's all in the mind. In *Kairos* I tried to take that idea itself 'literally'. As Sandy, in possession of the substance that changes reality, approaches the headquarters of the sinister Breakthru, the dead rise, the stones speak, angels walk among men. What's happening (in Sandy's

view and mine) is that the relationship between mind and matter is being turned inside out. Ideas have become material, things are falling apart.

No kind of realist fiction, (including no kind of rational sf) can contain the wild landscapes that thought weaves on the loom of the mind. Maybe all the stories we tell ourselves about the supernatural, and all our dreams of escape, can be traced back to our impatience with the gulf between the limited world we perceive out there and the unconstrained freedoms of the mind – where time can run backwards and distance is no object, where we can easily visit the future or speak to the dead. The first book in which I tackled this intimate discontinuity was *Escape Plans*, where ALIC, my neo-Roman protagonist has to grapple with the notion of a kind of redemption through interstellar quantum physics. In a sense the same thing is happening in *Kairos*. Strip the special effects out of the narrative, and you will find my characters (who have either lost or never possessed the soothing distractions of material comfort and power) struggling to come to terms with the contradiction of being human. Nothing more than that. Is there anywhere, in any state of being, a world that measures up to the magic of consciousness itself? Is there a native land for us, exiles stranded in this extraordinary separation from every other animal, vegetable, rock or gas? Well, maybe there is. In the late twentieth century, modern physics and cosmology were startlingly open to the romantic interpretation of writers like Fritjof Capra, whose *Tao of Physics* of course fascinated me. It seems (or seemed, there is no guarantee that post-modern science will continue to tell the same story) that the conditions of mind are mysteriously reproduced in the world of the very small. Where did the colour and charm and strangeness of the quantum world come from? Did we invent it because we can't do without the supernatural, or are we constrained to invent such ideas, because these bizarre conditions are indeed the truth about reality? Perhaps there's no answer to that. Ancient theologies have shaped modern science; the design of an experiment defines the results. As quantum physicists are fond of saying when cornered, some events are inextricably entangled. But wherever it came from, the weirdness doesn't go away. It just gets folded down, (whatever that means) into the chinks, along with the other eleven or so dimensions that share the cosmos with the four we know. To put it another way, maybe there's no need to search the skies for messages from the kingdom of heaven. The freedom from limitations is within us.

Kairos: The Enchanted Loom

Science fiction takes us to the brink of a new creation: but no further, because it wouldn't be any fun. When I wrote *Divine Endurance* I described the death (after a long decline) of mechanist culture. I cautiously did not attempt to describe the new age of gentler, organic, female rule. The moment of change is portentous, the reality of change is going to be a

world just like this one: except for some novel technology, or a new kind of income tax. When William Gibson conjured up cyberspace in *Neuromancer*, the global data network gave birth to a divine intelligence. In our world we have the Internet. Even the aliens won't be supernatural anymore, the day they actually arrive. As I've explained, my fictional eschatologies are obedient to this law. The special effects look dangerous, but the brave new world is only this one, with a bow to the strange conditions of quantum reality. But there is always that moment...

Kairos means opportunity. Kairossen means close woven, and the kairos are also the loops that hold a piece of weaving to the loom. This double meaning at once suggests (it did to me, anyway) the famous and prescient metaphor of human consciousness as an 'enchanted loom'¹⁵, and I had that metaphor in mind when I was writing. Just as in a piece of weaving, no single thread tells you anything about the picture, our experience of selfhood is the experience of a system of differences: the single, coherent picture is an illusion. I wanted to reach a point (an imaginary point) of reconciliation between the restless, magical human mind, and this stubborn world of ours that wears its bizarre magic only on the inside. But I also wanted to describe the state of someone willing to risk everything: willing to cut those threads that hold our existence in shape, no matter what should follow. When you were a child, sometimes, maybe you wished there could really be witches on broomsticks, talking animals, spirits in the forests. Maybe, on one of those cold dusky evenings at the beginning of winter, with the stars coming out, you dreamed that you had the strangest powers... Now that you are grown and you know how much it would cost, do you really want to change the world: to reverse the vital polarity between light and darkness, male and female, real and unreal? Are you sure?

"It occurred to her, last of all, that the ghost was real to her. "You wanted something different?" it said, in silent intolerable progress towards her and the child. "Well, here I am. How do you like me?"

Sandy stood up. She forgot that she was afraid, though her body was still howling that this was worse than death. Since she had given up on normal life, she had penetrated a few layers of self-deceit, that was all. She was no better off now than she had been as a political activist, waving banners and marching. She only saw more clearly how she was trapped: up against the wall of the world. It was nothing circumstantial that was making her suffer, it was things as they are. What I want is what is not, she thought. And this, as I told myself a little while ago, is one of those. And here it comes.

She did not abandon the rational position she had outlined to Candide a few minutes ago. Let this be a dream or a delusion, that made no difference to its meaning in the world of Sandy. Or to the meaning of what Sandy chose to do, on being confronted with her heart's desire. "Welcome," she said. "Do what you like to me, I don't care. I am glad that you're here..."¹⁶

Welcome, to all the powers of darkness...

Does anybody feel any different? No? Well, it was worth trying.

Maybe it takes a little time...

The original version of this paper was read at KUTU4, a seminar celebrating the Apocalypse held at the University of Oulu, Department of the Humanities, Finland, October 30th-31st 1997. If you are reading this, then maybe the ritual failed, but maybe not. The end of the world can be a subtle explosion.

Notes:

1 *The Omega Point*, John Gribbin

2 *The Omega Point*, John Gribbin, *Introduction*, p11

3 *The golden smithies of the Emperor/Marbles of the dancing floor/Break bitter furies of complexity/ Those images that yet/Fresh images beget... Byzantium*, W. B. Yeats

4 Notably, 'The Edge of Space Time', *New Scientist* 16th August 1984. A recent book publication *Black Holes and Baby Universes*, Stephen Hawking, gives an updated overview of these ideas.

5 *Escape Plans*, Gwyneth Jones p39

6 An overview of the work of 'James Tiptree Jnr', the pseudonym of Alice Sheldon, can be found in *In the Chinks of the World Machine*, Sarah Lefanu, pp105-129

7 'Love is the Plan, the Plan is Death', James Tiptree Jnr, in the collection *The Alien Condition*, ed Stephen Goldin

8 Joanna Russ, an extraordinarily influential figure in feminist sf, is alas nowadays far too little read outside academic circles, and far too much perceived as 'only' a polemicist. Her science fiction ideas, along with those of 'James Tiptree Jnr', may truly be said to have paved the way for the dazzling cyberpunk revolution of the eighties, but at what a cost. We cyborg-mainfesto feminists of sf read *Neuromancer* perhaps with much the same feelings as those unfortunate elven-smiths in *TLOTR*, when the Dark Lord unveiled his new creation. We knew that the One Ring had been forged, and there wasn't a thing we could do to save ourselves, and what's more, we had helped him to do it.

9 *Kairos*, Gwyneth Jones, p162

10 At the conference for which this presentation was originally written, the biblical Apocalypse had a programme strand all to itself.

11 'The sun, a few moments before, had pierced the thick clouds that held it hidden so that it shone out clearly and strongly... It looked like a burnished wheel cut out of mother-of-pearl... This disc span dizzily round... it whirled round upon itself with mad rapidity... then, preserving the celerity of its rotation, detached itself from the firmament and advanced, blood-red, towards the earth, threatening to crush us with

the weight of its vast and fiery mass... ' Quoted from the account of a professor from the University of Coimbra, A. Garrett, who witnessed the events of October 13th 1917 (*The Message of Fatima*, C.C. Martindale S.J.pp77-78; London, Burns & Oates Ltd, 1950).

12 *The Omega Point*, John Gribbin, pp29-149

13 To bring the situation right up to date, in *New Scientist* 14th October 2000, Marcus Chown reports, in an article called 'Double Or Quits', on British physicist Humphrey Maris's current claim to have split the electron. If that's true, then the whole edifice of modern physics theory, from quantum mechanics to the Big Bang, is in serious trouble.

14 *Kairos*, Gwyneth Jones, p204

15 The 'enchanted loom' metaphor was first used by Sir Charles Sherrington, English neurologist, in an extraordinarily prescient public lecture given in the 1930s

16 *Kairos*, Gwyneth Jones, p158-159

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Gwyneth Jones, *North Wind*, London, Gollancz, 1994

Gwyneth Jones, *Phoenix Café*, London, Gollancz 1997

Sarah Lefanu, *In The Chinks Of The World Machine*, London, The Women's Press, 1988

Joanna Russ, 'The Second Inquisition', collected in *The Adventures Of Alyx*, London, The Women's Press, 1985

PROGRAMME by Dave Hicks

Yes, there will be one.

Oh – you want to know more? Okay. Like its physical location in the Midlands, I think Novacon occupies a special middle territory in the landscape of a SF fandom that's become so broad and varied. At its best it's inclusive and engaging, an accessible central meeting point for many different interests, many different points of view, whether you want to talk about structuralism in the work of Samuel Delaney, the plot inconsistencies of *Babylon 5*, or just drink beer and be sick. And no, I'm not scheduling any of those (well, not officially), but I've done them all at Novacon.

I'm well aware that some fans can go to a convention, have a perfectly good time, and never actually make it to the programme until the closing ceremony. Sometimes one of those fans may have been me. Nevertheless, without a programme, you don't got a convention; without a *good* programme you don't got a *good* convention. Bizarrely enough, this

seems to apply even for the fans who don't go to any programme items. A poor programme just seems to leech the atmosphere out of the place. Whether you camp out in the programme, or just look on it as a guacamole into which you occasionally dip the tortilla chip of your curiosity, the programme dictates the rhythm and pulse of the convention.

Some of what I'm hoping to put on will stem from the varied work of our Guest Of Honour, Gwyneth Jones, a real Swiss Army knife of a guest (see elsewhere), who's written hard SF, fantasy, horror, adult fiction, children's fiction and criticism. I like this because fandom's so eclectic now, people read all across the genre, and outside it, looking for new themes and new takes on old ones, and I'm keen to look at what works, what themes, still lie at the core of science fiction fandom in Britain. Also, I still remember in '99 Ken MacLeod opining that SF was "ultimately disposable" during a debate. I disagree, I find lasting value in the work, but as much as I might find elsewhere if I looked? Samuel Delaney and structuralism might get a look in after all.

Of course what we read (and watch) shades into who we are, our fan culture and how it's changed, and is changing still. To some our past is at the heart of us, to others (fan) history is bunk. We'll try to give you some new anecdotes and some fresh analysis.

Which brings me to arguments. I'm equally keen to schedule an argument. I'm sure there's at least one treasured fannish institution to be found that hasn't been denounced as an anachronistic impediment to progress lately, and I'm sure I can find someone to denounce it.

Oh dear. All a bit serious and constructive coming from a man whose usual programme appearances involve things like brandishing a life size cardboard model of David Mellor. Never fear, there will be light entertainment as well – Siddall and Hicks will die on stage again for fandom.

THE NOVA AWARDS by Tony Berry

The Nova Awards are given for work in fanzines. There are three awards: Best Fanzine, Best Fan Writer and Best Fan Artist. All members of Novacon who are active in fandom can vote. For a fanzine to qualify, one or more issues must have been published between 1st October 2000 and 30th September 2001. For artists or writers to qualify, a piece of their work must have been published for the first time between those dates.

Listed below are fanzines which have come my way so far this year. They are available for "the usual", in other words a large SSAE, your own fanzine in trade or a letter of comment.

ANSIBLE #159-164. Dave Langford, 94 London Road, Reading, Berks, RG1 5AU.

BARMAID #10. Yvonne Rowse, Evergreen, Halls Farm Lane, Trimpey, Worcs., DY12 1NP.

BOB #17. Ian Sorensen, 7 Woodside Walk, Hamilton, ML3 7HY.

BOGUS #5. Sandra Bond, 46 Stirling Road, London, N22 5BP.

CONNECTION #3. Simon Ounsley, 47 Birkdale Drive, Leeds, LS17 7RU.

GLOSS #2. Lilian Edwards (& Victor Gonzalez), 39 Viewforth, Edinburgh, EH10 4EJ.

GUFFAW #5. Paul Kincaid, 60 Bournemouth Road, Folkestone, Kent, CT19 5AZ.

HEAD #3. Doug Bell & Christina Lake, 12 Hatherley Road, Bishopston, Bristol, BS7 8QA.

PARAKEET #8. Claire Brialey, 26 Northampton Road, Croydon, Surrey, CR0 7HA and Mark Plummer, 14 Northway Road, Croydon, Surrey, CR0 6JE.

PLOKTA Vol. 5 #5 – Vol. 6 #1. The Cabal, 52 Westbourne Terrace, Reading, Berks, RG30 2RP.

THE THOUGHT POLICE GAZETTE. Steve Green, 33 Scott Road, Olton, Solihull, B92 7LQ.

THREE MINUTE ACCESS. Kev McVeigh, 30 William Street, Millhead, Camforth, Lancashire, LA5 9HE, UK.

THIS HERE #6-7. Nic Farey, c/o 24 Ravensbourne Grove, Willenhall, WV13 1HX.

TORTOISE # 9-10. Sue Jones, Flat 5, 32/33 Castle Street, Shrewsbury, SY1 2BQ.

VIVA TOM SPRINGER! Christina Lake, 12 Hatherley Road, Bishopston, Bristol, BS7 8QA.

XYSTER #22-24. Dave Wood, 1 Friary Close, Marine Hill, Clevedon, N. Somerset, BS21 7QA.

For further information, contact me at 68 Windsor Road, Oldbury, West Midlands, B68 8PB. If you want a copy of the Nova Rules, please enclose 50p to cover copying and postage.

BOOK ROOM

Enclosed with this PR you will find a membership form, if you wish to book tables in the Book Room please complete the relevant section of this form

and return it to Steve Lawson at the address below. If you are already a member of Novacon 31 (see inside back cover for list of current members) simply endorse the form accordingly and complete the Book Room section as appropriate. Tables cost £15 each for the weekend, the Book Room will be open from Saturday Morning until Sunday afternoon (although set up can begin on Friday evening).

For further information contact: Steve Lawson, 379 Myrtle Road, Sheffield, S2 3HQ (e-mail xl5@zoom.co.uk or telephone 0114-281-1572).

OPERATIONS

As we are sure you are aware Novacon, like most conventions in Britain, is run by volunteers and we can't have too many of them! So if you are willing to help out at the convention – anything from moving chairs to helping with tech ops or working on the programme, please contact our Ops Manager, Alice Lawson, at 379 Myrtle Road, Sheffield, S2 3HQ (e-mail fab@zoom.co.uk).

LOST AND FOUND by Tony Berry

A carrier bag of books was left at Novacon last year: 2 hardbacks and 3 paperbacks. If you can identify them, please contact me at 68 Windsor Road, Oldbury, West Midlands, B68 8PB (morbius@zoom.co.uk).

Also some sweets in unusual containers! Not as important I guess and probably past their best-by date (though looking at the ingredients they should last 1000 years at least).

HOTEL INFORMATION

The Quality Hotel, Bentley, Walsall is situated beside Junction 10 of the M6 – so access by road couldn't be easier. The nearest Railway Station is Walsall and the nearest Inter City Railway Station is Wolverhampton – full details about travel will appear in our third and final Progress Report.

The Quality has 150 twin/double rooms – no singles. Twin/doubles are £32 per person, per night (inclusive of full English breakfast). The General Manager has agreed that we can use 30 of these as singles at the special rate of £45 per person, per night (inclusive of full English breakfast). So if

you want a single room complete the enclosed Hotel Booking form *now* – singles will be allocated on a strictly first come basis!

For those who insist on a single but don't book in time there is an overflow nearby. This is a Travel Lodge, ten minutes walk from the Quality Hotel (fifteen minutes back – as it is *up* hill on your way back!). Rooms there are currently £40.95 each – further details available on request.

The Quality Hotel are holding *all* of the available rooms for us until 30th September 2001 – after which time they will start taking non-Novacon bookings. So you *must* get your bookings to Steve Lawson by that date.

Children under 5 will be accommodated free of charge, and children aged 5-12 will be charged £10 per night to include breakfast.

All residents will be able to enjoy full use of the Quality's Leisure Club, which comprises indoor heated swimming pool, spa-bath, sauna, solarium, and gymnasium.

For further information contact: Steve Lawson, 379 Myrtle Road, Sheffield, S2 3HQ (e-mail xl5@zoom.co.uk or telephone 0114-281-1572).

CRECHE

We are looking into the possibility of running a crèche this year. If you are interested in using such a facility please contact Tony Berry at the address below.

Please let him know names and ages of the children who might be using the facility, along with any special requirements or other relevant information (allergies, special needs etc). Contact: Tony Berry (Chairman), 68 Windsor Road, Oldbury, West Midlands, B68 8PB, (e-mail morbius@zoom.co.uk).

ART SHOW

Enclosed with this PR you will find a membership form, if you wish to book space in the art show please complete the relevant section of this form and return it to Steve Lawson at the address below. If you are already a member of Novacon 31 (see inside back cover for list of current members) simply endorse the form accordingly and complete the art show section as appropriate.

For further information contact: Steve Lawson, 379 Myrtle Road, Sheffield, S2 3HQ (e-mail xl5@zoom.co.uk or telephone 0114-281-1572).

THE CD-ROM ART SHOW

Following the success of last year's innovative CD ROM Art Show we are again inviting contributions.

If you have work you wish to exhibit on CD-ROM or you know of someone who has, please contact Tony Berry, (Chairman), 68 Windsor Road, Oldbury, West Midlands, B68 8PB, (morbius@zoom.co.uk).

NOVACON'S RNIB RAFFLE

As usual we will be selling raffle tickets to raise money for the Royal National Institute for the Blind's "Talking Books for the Blind Project". So, if you have anything you would like to donate as a prize for the raffle please contact Martin Tudor at 24 Ravensbourne Grove, Willenhall, WV13 1HX (e-mail empties@breathemail.net).

Make sure you buy a ticket or two from Anne Woodford at the convention as well!

FINALLY WE HAVE A QUALITY HOTEL... by Martin Tudor

As Tony Berry mentioned in his piece earlier, this PR has been delayed because we had a few problems finding a Hotel that wasn't the Britannia in Birmingham. "But why did you need to find another Hotel?" I'm glad you asked....

Firstly, if you have to ask that question you probably weren't at Novacon last year. Despite allegedly spending over £6 million on refurbishing the Hotel the Britannia looked much the same as the previous two years, only more run down.

We had the usual complaints from members about cold/boiling hot bedrooms (obviously no money had been spent on the heating system). But it was with the lifts that the Britannia truly excelled itself. One of the

two public lifts broke down on the Thursday and no one came to fix it (despite strong protestations from Committee, con attendees and other guests) until Monday. The remaining lift couldn't cope with demand and so we were forced to use the service elevator, which broke down itself - forcing several con members to be rescued by the Fire Brigade!

We had discovered a few days before the con that the Britannia had double-booked one of our function rooms (the Art Show) and despite our strong protests insisted they could do nothing about it. (We have since, after complaints to their Head Office, received a hefty refund of the money we'd paid for function room hire!)

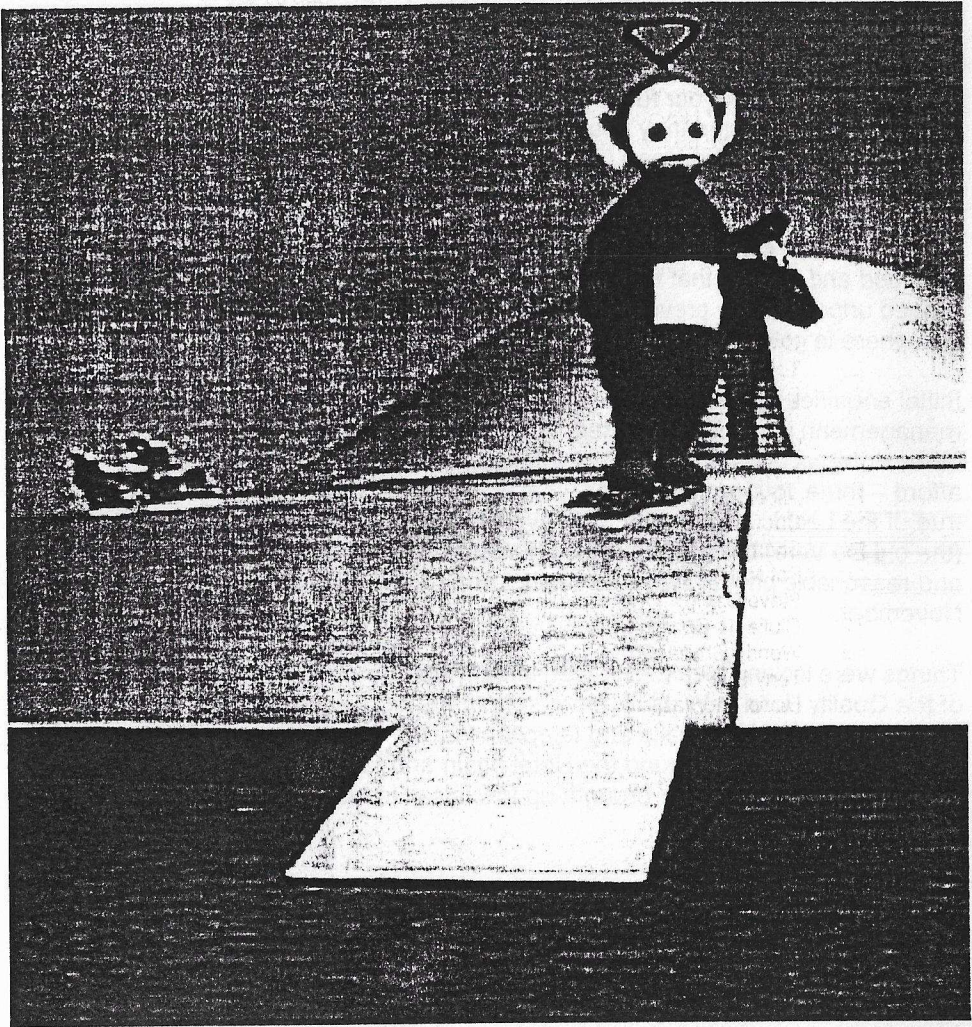
All of the above combined with the excessive cost and poor quality of the con food and the fact that they insisted on buying in a Real Ale that had proved unpopular the previous year, meant we really did not what to return. But where to go?

Initial enquiries proved that the Abbey in Great Malvern (now under new management) were not interested. The Grand Hotel, along with every other Hotel we approached in Birmingham, wanted more than we could afford - three, four or more times what we normally pay! The same was true of the Leofric in Coventry. We even spoke to the Britannia in Coventry (the old De Vere) but despite initial interest from their General Manager and reasonable prices, they eventually failed to give us any dates in November.

Things were looking bleak. But then in early January the General Manager of the Quality Hotel in Walsall returned from his sick leave and started bombarding me with e-mails and telephone calls. Tony Berry and I went to meet with him, looked around the Hotel again and fell in love with it. The rest of the committee were brought up to Walsall to view it and agreed that it was ideal for Novacon.

Why? Well as you step into reception from the large car park you are faced with a large comfortable bar, with an even larger restaurant beyond. Off to the left are the large function rooms, and off to the right the smaller function rooms, Leisure Club (featuring indoor heated swimming pool, spa-bath, sauna, solarium, and gymnasium) and bedrooms. This means that for the first time since the Royal Angus you will be able to sit down in a comfortable central location and know that everyone at the con will pass eventually.

But best of all the bar, restaurant, all of the function space, all of the facilities and at least half of the bedrooms are on the same ground floor level - no lifts!



“Gort – destroy! . . . Gort?!”

NOVACON 31 MEMBERS

Please note that this PR is being mailed to all members of last year's Novacon so receipt of it does not indicate that you are a member of Novacon 31. Below is a list of fully paid up members as of 25th March 2001. Unless you have joined since then you need to complete the enclosed Membership Form and send it with your payment to: **Steve Lawson, 370 Myrtle Road, Sheffield, S2 3HQ.**

1. Gwyneth Jones
2. Tony Berry
3. Dave Hicks
4. Steve Lawson
5. Martin Tudor
6. David T. Cooper
7. Alice Lawson
8. Cat Coast
9. Sherrie Powell
10. Pat McMurray
11. Steve Davies
12. Giulia de Cesare
13. Wendy Graham
14. Tony Keen
15. David Thomas
16. Peter Mabey
17. Ina Shorrock
18. Yvonne Rowse
19. Susan Francis
20. Claire Brialey
21. Mark Plummer
22. Bob Shaw
23. Chris O'Shea
24. Caroline Mullan
25. Brian Ameringen
26. Roger Burton West
27. Chris Bell
28. Arthur Cruttenden
29. Lynn Edwards
30. Chris Stocks
31. Roger Robinson
32. Tony Rogers
33. Pauline Morgan
34. Chris Morgan
35. Caroline Loveridge
36. Gavin Long
37. Laura Wheatly
38. Alison Scott
39. Steven Cain
40. Noel Collyer
41. Sue Jones
42. Carol Morton
43. Tony Morton
44. Julie Faith Rigby
45. Alec McLintock
46. Vernon Brown
47. Pat Brown
48. George F. Ternent
49. Linda Ternent
50. Peter Wareham
51. Gwen Funnell
52. Simon Bradshaw
53. Bridget Bradshaw
54. Dave Hardy
55. Paul Dormer
56. Michael Abbott
57. Anne Wilson
58. Sue Edwards
59. Paul Oldroyd
60. Chris Donaldson
61. Simon Hovell
62. Sue Oliver
63. Neil Tomkinson
64. Alison Tomkinson
65. Eira Latham
66. SMS
67. Anne Woodford
68. Alan Woodford
69. Erhard Leder
70. Steve Cooper
71. Vincent Docherty
72. Niall Gordon
73. Julian Headlong
74. Mike Ford
75. Adrian Snowdon
76. Ian Sorensen
77. Stephen Dunn
78. Ken Slater
79. Helen Hall
80. Gerry Webb
81. Mali Perera
82. Alan Webb
83. Roger Earnshaw
84. Tim Stannard
85. Neil Summerfield
86. Mike D. Siddall

**After 30 years NOVACON
finally has a Quality Hotel!**

NOVACON 31

9th-11th November 2001

at the **QUALITY HOTEL**, Bentley, Walsall,
(Junction 10 of the M6)

**Guest of Honour:
Gwyneth Jones**



**NOVACON 31: a Quality Hotel,
a Quality Guest of Honour, but a bargain price!
Just £32 if you join at Eastercon!**

Attending membership costs £32 until Easter, then £35 from
18th April 2001 and will cost £40 on the door. Supporting
membership costs £15.00 throughout. Cheques/Postal Orders
should be made payable to "NOVACON 31" and sent to:

Steve Lawson, 379 Myrtle Road, Sheffield, S2 3HQ.

Further information from <http://www.novacon.org.uk>