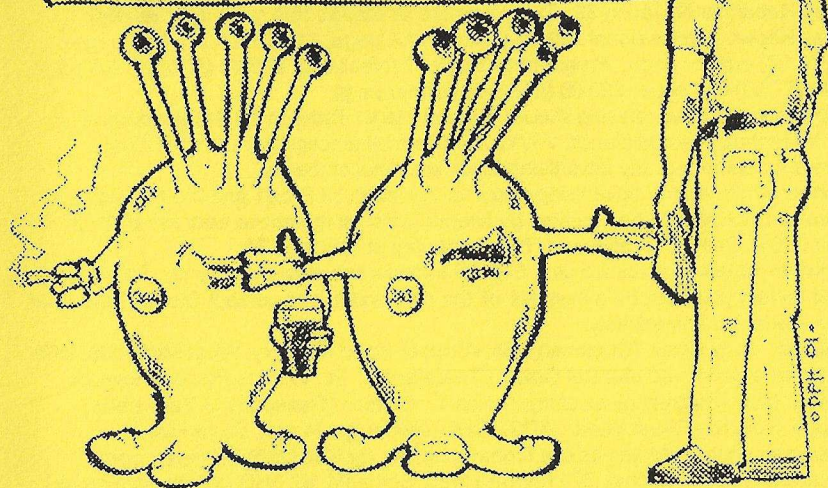
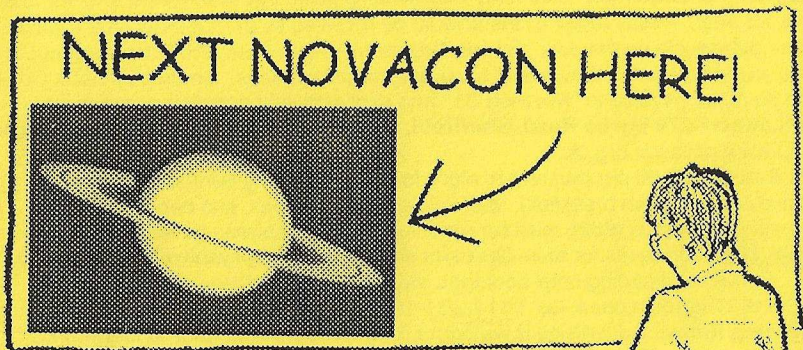


NOVA CON 31



WHAT DO YOU MEAN "IT HAS NO ATMOSPHERE"?
WEREN'T YOU AT THE BRITANNIA LAST YEAR?

Progress Report #3

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 £35 in advance 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 and entitles you to vote in the Novas and to receive all publications. 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 (inclusive of full English breakfast). NB: Hotel booking forms, and deposits of one night's stay per person (£32), must be received by Steve Lawson no later than **15th October 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 xl5@zoom.co.uk (tel: 0114-281-1572).

Advertising Rates: Advertising is welcome for the Programme Book and the first Progress Report for Novacon 32. The rates are as follows (fan rates in brackets): Progress Report - 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: Photo-ready advertising copy for Novacon 32 PR #1 and the Novacon 31 Programme Book should be received by Martin Tudor at the above address by 15th October 2001. Both publications will be 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 contact Steve Lawson at the above address immediately.

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, (or little.jim@dial.pipex.com); Steve Lawson (Registrations), 379 Myrtle Road, Sheffield, S2 3HQ (xl5@zoom.co.uk); Alice Lawson (Operations) postal address as Steve Lawson's above (or fab@zoom.co.uk); Martin Tudor (Publications & Hotel Liaison), 24 Ravensbourne Grove, Willenhall, WV13 1HX (empties@breathemail.net).

Acknowledgements: Thanks to Gwyneth Jones, Ann Green, Dave Hicks, Tony Berry and Steve Lawson for their written contributions and to Steve Green and Cat Coast for the questionnaires. Thanks again to Dave Hicks for his logo, cover art and map of Junction 10 and to www.upmystreet.com for the street map. All errors and uncredited contributions are the responsibility of Martin Tudor. This PR was printed on the CRITICAL WAVE photocopier.

Chairman's Piece

by Tony Berry

Welcome to the final Novacon PR. In here you'll find the Who, What, Where and How bits, plus another piece by our Guest of Honour, Gwyneth Jones.

So let's talk about hotel rooms. Firstly, *there are no more single rooms available*. We have taken our allocation. If you really want a single, you will have to use the Travel Inn down the road (details elsewhere in this Progress Report). Secondly, there are a whole bunch of members who have not yet booked a room. There are still plenty of doubles and twins, and some family (triple) rooms which contain an extra sofa bed and kitchen facilities. The hotel has been very generous, willing to give us almost exclusive use of the place and arranging the bar and restaurant the way we want them, but this does depend on filling most of the bedrooms; they are a business after all. From 15th October they may begin releasing rooms to the public, and if enough non-convention people are there it will change the whole dynamic of the place. So I would urge you to book your room RIGHT NOW or we could be sharing with a number of puzzled-looking mundanes!

Keys: Unfortunately, due to the particular system used by the hotel (they buy in sets of pre-punched keys), there is only one key per room. They can't make extra keys and if they issue a new key it locks out the previous one. Sorry about this, but I hope that with the layout of the hotel, all the rooms on two floors and a single central bar area, there won't be too many problems. If you really need to get into your room and can't find the keyholder, reception should be able to let you in with a master, but please don't get them doing this all the time. The hotel will require you to produce your keycard as proof that it is your room, so please ensure you carry it.

Please ensure you bring sufficient cash with you as the nearest cashpoints is in the 24-hour Spar a 15 minutes walk from the Hotel. Although there are lots of them in Walsall – a 5-minute bus ride away.

Dealers' Room: Because of a previous booking the dealers room won't be set up for them until 5pm on the Friday. We still hope to be open for business in the evening, but will leave that decision to the dealers themselves. If they decide against it, I'm sure everyone will just shop harder and faster on the Saturday.

But enough of this negative stuff. Most importantly, Novacon's 30th anniversary bash looks like being a good'un, with the usual mix of old and

new stuff to keep you entertained, and I'll leave it to the frighteningly-enthusiastic Dave Hicks to tell you more later on. Hope to see you there.

Programme by Dave Hicks

I love Novacon. Like most SF fans I know it's always going to be there, year in, year out, a fannish institution. So there's no rush to join, no pressure, just relax and turn up and have fun.

Yeah, well, that was until they asked me to do the programme. You try and schedule about twenty items when half the ideal participants haven't registered at the convention. Oh, I know they're coming. Probably. Some of them.

Moan over. Time for happy talk. In the same newspaper as our Guest of Honour, Gwyneth Jones's splendid review (see below), there also recently appeared a debate about the role of modern British women writers. There are, according to broadsheet literary supplement wisdom, two schools of women writers worthy of the attentions of the quality press: the orthodox literary tradition and 'chick-lit'. Beryl Bainbridge versus Bridget Jones. You're ahead of me here aren't you? If you go to SF conventions you *know* there's a third way, if I may use that phrase. To my surprise and delight, *The Guardian* received a ton of letters (they printed several, so the volume received must have been considerable) pointing out they'd completely ignored science fiction, listing many of the best contemporary women SF writers, including Gwyneth Jones.

As well as Gwyneth, who's just been described as "...one of Britain's most brilliant SF writers..." in a rave review in *The Guardian* of BOLD AS LOVE (all right, they actually said 'sci-fi', but what are you gonna do?), also attending is the acclaimed and Hugo-nominated writer Nalo Hopkinson. Born in the Caribbean and now resident in Canada, Nalo's first book, BROWN GIRL IN THE RING, won the John W Campbell Memorial award for best first novel and her latest work, MIDNIGHT ROBBER was nominated for a Hugo at this year's world convention.

Novacon: riding the crest of the cultural wave.

The survey Maureen Kincaid Speller did at Novacon a couple of years ago told us that as well as a strong literary programme, fans want more science. So we've got American scientist Inge Heyer, a US convention regular who works at the Space Telescope Science Institute and whose interests include the search for extrasolar planets. We knew Inge was our

kind of scientist when we found a whole subsection of her web site was devoted to real ale. We'll also be asking whether it *matters* if the science in SF is terrible if the story's good. [For further information see Dave's piece on Inge Heyer below.]

If I can get the right people up on stage there *will* be a debate on what we should do with the auctions at conventions, about whether they can be more than "...jolly knockabout stuff where people sell junk and eat worms and wave their arms about a lot ..." as one eminent Welsh fan who shall remain nameless recently suggested to me. For simplicity's sake, this year I've split them up again, so bring lots of money. After the art auction we'll be debating the role of SF art.

I shall now continue Maureen's eminently sensible idea of giving you advance notice of the shape of Friday night's programme. Of course, this may be subject to change...

7.00pm Opening Ceremony.

7.30pm Childhood's End #1 (Remixing Reality). The first of a pair of items addressing the future of SF, whether it's still a separate genre. Given the direction many writers have taken in the last few years, a panel including Gwyneth Jones will ask if it's necessary to create whole new planets any more when you can just smash up this one and remix it.

9.00pm Novacons of the Future. Yes, Tony Berry will explain why all fans must have jet packs. More reasonably, what do the small scale changes in technology, the economy, fan culture and society suggest conventions will be like? Can we be optimistic about Novacon 32, 42, 72?

10.30pm The Last Ever Siddall and Hicks Game Show (featuring the death of a major character). Funnier than *The Blair Witch Project*, more chilling than *Are You Being Served?*

[The "rave review" of *BOLD AS LOVE* in The Guardian can be viewed at <http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/sciencefiction/0,6121,541930,00.html>]

Jack of Herts

– A Band and its Music!

Following their dynamic Novacon debut last year the awesome Jack of Herts will return to Novacon on Saturday night. We thought their many fans at Novacon would appreciate some background information from their web site:

Jack of Herts is one of those bands that just grew organically. Back in the mid 90's four friends, John Harvey, Andrew Clayden, Chris Rockall & Keith White, would gather at each other's houses to make a noise and gradually turn it into something approaching music. This was the proto Jack of Herts, although we didn't know it at the time.

Playing anything they could get their musical abilities around, Andrew sang & played acoustic guitar, Chris sang and played harmonica whilst John & Keith struggled to get their fingers round a few guitar chords (again all acoustic). A few self written songs from Andrew and Chris complemented



country music, Bruce Springsteen numbers and even some all out rockers. This early line up appeared at Hertford Music's Guitar Club a few times. (This was and still is a monthly gathering that gives those brave enough a chance to play in front of a 'fairly' sympathetic audience).

But of course times changed and electric instruments started to appear. A drummer was tried out but the time was not ready for that yet. Then one fateful weekend (for more than one reason) a barbecue was held at John's house and Chris Green invited to bring his drums. And that was it - he was part of the band.

Eventually a gig was found - a friend's birthday party and 5 very nervous people played a 60 minute set. But the seed was sown - nerves or not the adrenaline rush was habit forming. It was here that the name Jack of Herts was adopted (as most of us live in Hertfordshire!).

It was almost a year before the band had their next public outing - another party for a friend - and more significantly Steve King's début.

Just one more change when Chris Rockall moved onto pastures more Portuguese and the current line up was set - John Harvey (guitar, guitar synth), Andrew Clayden (vocals, guitar), Chris Green (drums, backing vocals), Keith White (bass, backing vocals) and Steve King (lead guitar). The music's a little more varied these days, material by the Beatles, Shadows, Eagles and Eric Clapton all appear in the set list and the original songs are more likely to have been written by Chris Green. But the nerves and excitement are still there.

Inge Heyer by Dave Hicks

We surveyed the membership of Novacon a while back. We established that, on average, you were a mildly inebriated thirty six year old computer programmer called Mike who wanted Novacon to find a new location (done it), and were particularly keen to see more science items.

Frankly, so are we. Science items always seem to be popular at conventions; they have that 'up to the minute' flavour, and the coverage of the subject on TV had diminished in both quantity and quality in recent years. Also, it's just nice to gain some firm reference point to see just how far the novelists are stretching the bounds of credibility.

So we're bringing Inge Heyer to the UK. Inge works as a data analyst at the Space Telescope Science Institute in Baltimore, and fortunately

happens to be touring Europe in November. She has been extensively published, particularly on the uses and performance of the Hubble Space Telescope and its deep-space observations. Her own fields of interest include the solar system (particularly Mars), the search for extra-solar planets and stellar evolution. She devotes a lot of time to giving illustrated talks about the universe we've discovered through the Space Telescope and the exploration projects within our own solar system (Mars missions, Galileo, Cassini).

Although Inge has not been to a British convention before, to say she's familiar with the convention scene is a colossal understatement. She's been appearing in (and co-ordinating) the science programming at North American conventions for some years and a quick count of appearances in 2001 listed on her web site (<http://www-int.stsci.edu/~heyer/>) suggests Novacon will be her *eighth* convention this year, (not to mention numerous talks at schools and colleges) including appearances at Balticon (which, I have since learned, has nothing to do with Birmingham curry houses) and this year's Worldcon.

In fact SF conventions remain one of the few places an accessible *and* adult introduction to modern scientific endeavour is to be had these days. It's a tradition worth supporting, so I hope you'll come to hear and see Inge's presentations.

2001: A Taste Odyssey

What could be a more science fictional and appropriate way of celebrating 2001 than a mashed potato tasting session? "*They peel them with their shiny knives, and mash them...*". So, on Sunday night (from 7pm) we will be combining the traditional beer tasting with a Sausage and Mash tasting! This will feature a selection of sausages and a choice of plain, Black Pudding or Cheddar mashed potato. Tickets for your Sausage and Mash Tasting (£5 per head) must be purchased in advance, either from Tony Berry at the address below or from the Novacon table before 5pm on Sunday of the con. (In addition, from 11pm-12am the hotel will be selling a late night snack of bacon rolls to help soak up the beer!)

This latest in a long series of Novacon Beer Tastings will be using the ever-popular BYOB (bring your own beer) format. To get the ball rolling the convention hopes to have a local beer on draught as well as a few interesting bottles - the rest is up to you!

To partake of the BEER, all you need to do is bring at least THREE bottles

of your favourite British or foreign beer to the convention and check them in at the Novacon Registration desk when you arrive. In return you will receive a Technicolor "BEER BADGE" which will entitle you to drink the beer at the Tasting on Sunday. Alternatively, you can also take part in the Tasting by buying a BEER BADGE for £4.50 from Novacon Registration.

All Novacon members are welcome to attend the Tasting. The convention is supplying an assortment of exotic and/or unusual non-alcoholic drinks at the Tasting, which will be free to everyone, but only those with BEER BADGES will be entitled to drink the beer and only those with SAUSAGE & MASH TICKETS will be able to partake of that culinary delight.

For further information please contact the 2001: A Taste Odyssey organiser, Tony Berry at 68 Windsor Road, Oldbury, West Midlands, B68 8PB, (morbius@zoom.co.uk).

[Please remember, although we have come to an arrangement with the Quality Hotel regarding the Beer Tasting, this does not extend to you bringing in your own supplies of drink elsewhere during the con. The Hotel can and will charge corkage to people smuggling food or drink into the hotel!]

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.

For a list of eligible fanzines, see the reverse of the Nova ballot which is included with this PR. The list is by no means exhaustive, but is there to jog a few memories. Completed ballot papers can be posted to me before Novacon, or placed in the ballot box at the con by midnight on Saturday 10th November.

For further information contact me at 68 Windsor Road, Oldbury, B68 8PB. If you want a copy of the rules please enclose 50p to cover copying and postage – or check out www.novacon.org.uk.

Book Room

If you wish to book tables in the Book Room please contact Steve Lawson at the address below. 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).

Crèche

We are 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).

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 appear elsewhere in this Progress Report.

The Quality has about 150 twin/double rooms – no singles. Twin/doubles

are £32 per person, per night (inclusive of full English breakfast). *We have now used all of our allocation of rooms that could be used as singles.*

The Quality Hotel, however, are still holding *all* of their available twin and double rooms for us until 15th October 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.

If, however, you *insist* on a single room you will have to contact Travel Inn at Bentley Green, 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, but if you are on a very tight budget it is worth bearing in mind that Travel Inn charge per room, rather than per person, and many of their rooms will accommodate up to two adults and two children under 16. The address for the Travel Inn is Bentley Green, Bentley Road North, Walsall, West Midlands, WS2 0WB, tel: 01922-724485 (www.travelinn.co.uk). It is next door to the Bentley Green Brewsters from Brewers Fayre (where Travel Inn's breakfasts are served – full English for £6, Continental breakfast £4).

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

Art Show by Ann Green

This year's Art Show is being run by yours truly, Ann Green. If you're planning to show any work please contact me to let me know your display needs. If you'd like to help out in any way please get in touch either by contacting me beforehand or early at the Con. The Show is 'under new management' at a brand new venue so all help and advice is greatly appreciated. 33 Scott Road, Olton, Solihull B92 7LQ, 0121 706 0108 (if you get the answerphone leave a number) or e-mail neergnna@yahoo.co.uk

The CD-Rom Artshow

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!

What to do at Novacon by Tony Berry

As you enter the hotel the bar will be right in front of you, with the restaurant beyond it. Try and resist the temptation to go in there straight away and instead go to the hotel reception on your right. Here you will be given a key for your room and your Key Card – keep this with you at all times! Having dumped your luggage in your room, grit your teeth and go back past the bar and along the corridor with the Bookroom (King Charles suite) on your left (shut your eyes and mutter "Get thee behind me Peyton") to the convention foyer where convention registration is located. Pick up your convention pack and membership badge (please wear this throughout the con) and note that the main Programme room (Oliver Cromwell suite) is also off this foyer. Now you can go to the bar.

Everything else is on the bedroom side of the hotel. Past reception you'll find the syndicate rooms containing Ops (Dudley), the Artshow (Sedgley and Brierley), CD Rom Artshow (Netherton) and the Video programme (Bescot), and the hotel's leisure facilities, which are free to residents. We have arranged childminding facilities, run by Richard Standage and Helena

Bowles, which are in the Ashmore at the end of the corridor past the Artshow.

Two Surveys; Two Free Memberships

The eagle-eyed amongst you will have noticed that there are TWO surveys for you to complete with this Progress Report. Some of you may remember completing a previous survey two years ago for Novacon 29, for which we thank you; the information you provided was cogitated, digested and found to be very useful – so useful, in fact it made us realise we needed *another* survey... or two.

Cat Coast has compiled the general survey. Seasoned convention-goers will have come to recognise that hotels exist to make a profit, and that the membership will end up providing them with this one way or another, be it the part of the membership fee covering function space hire, or the cost of rooms, or the cost of food and drink. The latter is what is concerning us most; we would like some information on what the Novacon Membership would like to eat and drink at Novacon, and how much it is willing to pay for it. The intention is to use this information for subsequent Novacons to help ensure that we give you what you want.

The purpose of Steve Green's Programme Survey is, we feel, self-evident. You tell Steve the kind of programme you want next year and he'll do his best to supply it – or at least take your views into account.

To ease the pain of completing these forms if you put your membership number in the top right hand corner of each, one of each form will be drawn at random at the end of the convention to win **free memberships for Novacon 32!**

(Please send completed forms to 24 Ravensbourne Grove, Willenhall, WV13 1HX or deposit in the appropriate box at the Novacon Registration table at the con.)

Novacon 31 Members Since PR#2

145	Elaine Coates	170	Carol Claydon
146	Mark Slater	171	Keith White
147	Lilian Edwards	172	Chris Green
148	Jae Leslie Adams	173	Justina Robson
149	Nalo Hopkinson	174	Austin Benson
150	David Findlay	175	Caro Wilson
151	Teresa Davies	176	Jennifer Swift
152	Robert Bryson	177	Guy Dawson
153	Rog Peyton	178	Sue Dawson
154	Helena Bowles	179	Cherith Baldry
155	Richard Standage	180	Michaela McNeill
156	Al Johnston	181	David McNeill
157	Nic Farey	182	Dave Lally
158	Bobby Farey	183	Robert Newman
159	Dave Holmes	184	Tony Ibbs
160	Tim Evans	185	Joan Paterson
161	Pete Young	186	Michael Ibbs
162	Judith Lewis	187	Thomas Ibbs
163	David Row	188	Stuart Williams
164	Huw Walters	189	Malcolm Davies
165	Danielle Ray	190	Kate Solomon
166	Alistair Maynard	191	Martin Smith
167	Steve King	192	Henry Newton
168	Kim King	193	Cherry Newton
169	Andrew Claydon		

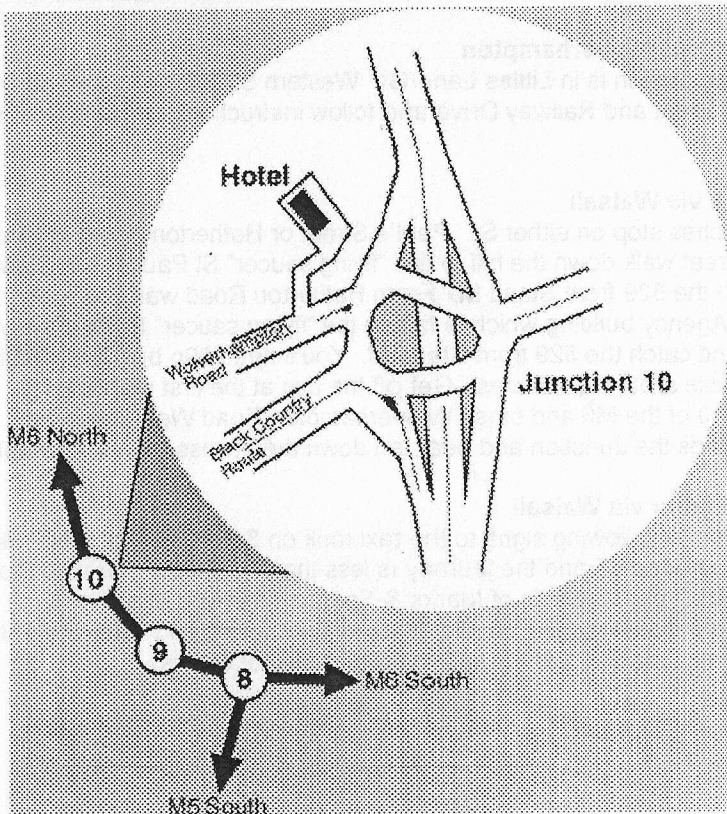
Pull Out & Keep: How to Get There

By Car

The hotel is right next to J10 of the M6, but is not visible from the motorway.

From the North come off at J10 and turn right heading for Wolverhampton, but as you go over the motorway DO NOT go in the left-hand lane for Wolverhampton as this will take you down the Black Country Route, which you don't want. Stay in the right-hand lane to the traffic lights and take the second exit signposted "Buses and Hotel" (the lane is also marked Hotel) and then the first right into what looks like a regular suburban service road. Follow this round and it will bring you to the hotel. Go in through the car park barrier, but remember to get a token for the exit barrier from Reception when you leave.

From the South, come off at J10 and DO NOT go in the left-hand lanes, but keep to the right as you go up the sliproad to the traffic lights. Then follow directions above.



By Train via Wolverhampton

The nearest Inter City train station to the Quality Hotel is Wolverhampton. If you exit Wolverhampton Station on to Railway Drive you can get a taxi to the Quality Hotel (at Junction 10 on the M6 in Bentley) for about £8, it is a journey of about 10 minutes. If there are no taxis in the rank you can call Associated Taxis on (01902) 425591.

If you prefer to save your money you can catch a 529 bus to the Hotel for 90p off peak (9.30am-3.30pm and after 6pm) or £1 during peak times. The 529 was the first major route in the country to be completely serviced by gas powered vehicles (using Compressed Natural Gas) and most of the buses on the route are wheelchair-friendly, easy access buses with "kneeling suspension". These run every 6 minutes throughout the day and every 20 minutes during the evening. Walk past the taxis rank down Railway Drive to the clock and turn left into the Bus Station. Cross at the first crossing and continue through the lines of shelters until you come to Stand F on your right. Catch the 529 bus. It is a 20-25 minute journey depending on traffic, you get off the bus at the stop after the Lane Arms pub and walk past some houses towards the motorway junction bearing left down Wolverhampton Road West access road to the hotel.

By Coach via Wolverhampton

The Coach Station is in Littles Lane/Gt. Western Street, head toward St. Patrick's Street and Railway Drive and follow instructions for taxis or buses above.

By Coach via Walsall

Most coaches stop on either St. Paul's Street or Hatherton Road. From St Paul's Street walk down the hill to the "flying saucer" St Paul's Bus Station and catch the 529 from Stand M. From Hatherton Road walk towards the Benefits Agency building which is facing the "flying saucer" St Paul's Bus Station and catch the 529 from Stand M. You'll need 80p bus fare and the journey lasts around 5 minutes. Get off the bus at the first stop after Junction 10 of the M6 and cross Wolverhampton Road West, then walk back towards the Junction and bear left down the access road to the hotel.

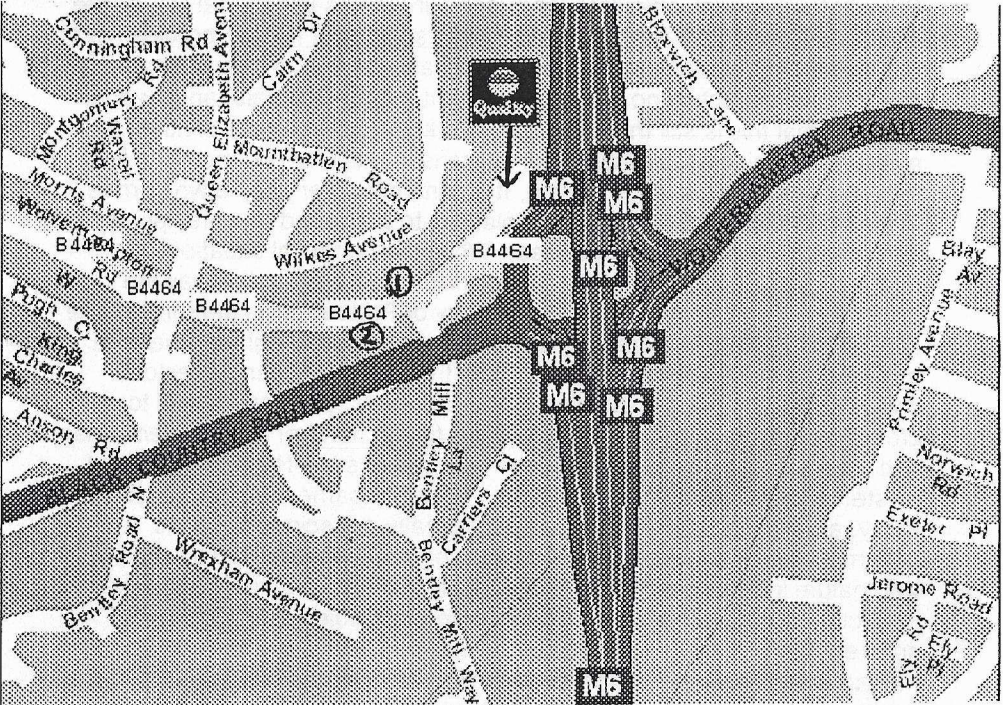
By Local Train via Walsall

Exit the station following signs to the taxi rank on Station Street, taxi fare should be around £5 and the journey is less than 5 minutes. Or walk down Station Street past the side of Marks & Spencers to Park Street and cut through Butler's Passage (the alley way near Littlewoods) to St Paul's Bus Station, catch the 529 from Stand M (see above for details).

By Bus

From Birmingham catch the 51 bus from outside McDonalds on Dale End in Birmingham to St. Paul's Bus Station in Walsall. The 51 is every seven minutes through the day and every 20 minutes in the evening. Fares are 90p off peak (9.30am-3.30pm and after 6pm) or £1.30 during peak times, the journey takes about 40-45 minutes. Disembark at Stand G and cross the bus station to Stand M, there you catch the 529. You'll need 80p bus fare and the journey lasts around 5 minutes. Get off the bus at the first stop after Junction 10 of the M6 and cross Wolverhampton Road West, then walk back towards the Junction and bear left down the access road to the hotel.

From Sutton Coldfield catch the 366 from Lower Parade, fares are 90p off peak (9.30am-3.30pm and after 6pm) or £1.30 during peak times, the journey takes about 35-40 minutes. Disembark at Stand G and cross the bus station to Stand M, there you catch the 529. You'll need 80p bus fare and the journey lasts around 5 minutes. Get off the bus at the first stop after Junction 10 of the M6 and cross Wolverhampton Road West, then walk back towards the Junction and bear left down the access road to the hotel.



(1) 529 bus stop from Wolverhampton.

(2) 529 bus stop from Walsall.

Aliens in the Fourth Dimension: When Two worlds Collide by Gwyneth Jones

The aliens can always speak English. This is one of those absurdities of pulp fiction and B movies, like saucer shaped spaceships and hairdryer machines that track your brain waves, that might well come true - suppose the visitors avoid those disconcerting forms of long haul space travel, that whisk you across the galaxy and dump you in the concourse of Lime Street station before you have time to say 'Non Smoking'. If they come in slowly they'll spend the latter part of their journey travelling through a vast cloud of human broadcasting signals, which they'll easily pick up on the alien cabin tv. They'll have plenty of time to acquire a smattering of useful phrases. Or so the current received wisdom goes - I'd love some expert to tell me if this idea makes sense, by the way. By now it's not *completely* inevitable that they'll speak English, and with a United States accent, in the traditional manner. They might get hooked on Brazilian soap opera.

But whatever formal, articulate language our visitors use in real life, all the aliens we know so far speak human. They speak our human predicament, our history, our hopes and fears, our pride and shame. As long as we haven't met any actual no kidding intelligent extraterrestrials (and I would maintain that this is still the case, though I know opinions are divided) the aliens we imagine are always other humans in disguise: no more, no less. Whether or not hell is other people, it is certainly *other people* who arrive, in these fictions, to challenge our isolation: to be feared or worshipped, interrogated, annihilated, appeased. When the historical situation demands it science fiction writers demonise our enemies, the way the great Aryan court poet who wrote the story of Prince Rama *demonised* the Dravidian menace, in India long ago. Or we can use imaginary aliens to assuage our guilt. I think it's not unlikely that our European ancestors invented the little people who live in the hills, cast spells and are 'ill to cross' - who appear so often in traditional fiction north of the Mediterranean and west of Moscow - to explain why their cousins the Neanderthals had mysteriously vanished from public life. I see the same thing happening today, as science fiction of the environmentally-conscious decades becomes littered with gentle, magical, colourful alien races who live at one with nature in happy non-hierarchical rainforest communities. Even the project of creating an *authentically incomprehensible* other intelligent species, which is sporadically attempted in science fiction, is inescapably a human story. Do we yet know of any other beings who can imagine, or could care less, what 'incomprehensible' means?

More often than not, the aliens story involves an invasion. The strangers have arrived. They want our planet, and intend to wipe us out. We have arrived. The native aliens - poor ineffectual technologically incompetent creatures - had better get out of the way. The good guys will try to protect them: but territorial expansion, sometimes known as *progress*, is an unstoppable force. This pleasant paradigm of intra-species relations obviously strikes a deep chord. We, in the community of science fiction writers and readers at least, do not expect to co-exist comfortably with *other people*. Which ever side is 'ours', there is going to be trouble, there is going to be grief, when two worlds collide. And whatever language everyone is speaking, there is definitely going to be a break down in communications.

When I invented my alien invaders 'The Aleutians' I was aware of the models that science fiction offered, and of the doubled purpose that they could serve. I wanted, like other writers before me, to tell a story about the colonisers and the colonised. The everlasting expansion of a successful population, first commandment on the Darwinian tablets of stone, makes this encounter 'the supplanters and the natives' an enduring feature of human history. Colonial adventure has been a significant factor in the shaping of my own, European, twentieth century, culture. I wanted to think about this topic. I wanted to study the truly extraordinary imbalance in wealth, power, and *per capita* human comfort, from the south to the north, that came into being over three hundred years or so of European rule in Africa, Asia and the Indian subcontinent: an imbalance which did not exist when the Portuguese reached China, when the first British and French trading posts were established on the coasts of India; when European explorers arrived in the gold-empire cities of West Africa. I also wanted - the other layer of the doubled purpose - to describe and examine the relationship between men and women. There are obvious parallels between my culture's colonial adventure and the battle of the sexes. Men come to this world helpless, like bewildered explorers. At first they all have to rely on the goodwill of the native ruler of the forked, walking piece of earth in which they find themselves. And then, both individually and on a global scale, they amass as if by magic a huge proportion of the earth's wealth, power and influence, while the overwhelming majority of those native rulers are doomed to suffer and drudge and starve in the most humiliating conditions. But why? I wondered. How did this come about? Why *do* most of the women get such a rough deal?

I felt that my historical model would be better for throwing up insights, mental experiments, refutable hypotheses about sexual politics, than other popular 'alien invasion' narratives based on the history of the United States. The possibilities of an outright *lebensraum* struggle would soon be exhausted; a situation involving any extreme division between master race

and slave race would be too clear cut. I needed something in a sense more innocent. A relationship that could grow in intimacy and corruption: a trading partnership where neither party is more altruistic than the other, whichever manages to win the advantage. Most of all, I needed something *slow*. I needed to see what would happen to my experiment over hundreds of years: over generations, not decades. So, the Aleutians appeared: a feckless crew of adventurers and dreamers, with only the shakiest of State backing, no aim beyond seeing life and turning a quick profit; and no coherent long-term plans whatever.

Interview With The Alien

Some stories about meeting the aliens are recruiting posters for the Darwinian army. Explicitly we're invited to cheer for the home team, or enjoy the pleasurable sad and moving defeat of the losers. Implicitly we're reminded that every encounter with *the other*, down to office manoeuvring and love affairs, is a fight for territory: and the weak must go to the wall. Some people invent aliens as an Utopian or satirical exercise, to show how a really well-designed intelligent species would live and function, and how far the human model falls below this ideal. I confess to adopting elements from both these approaches. But above all, I wanted my aliens to represent an alternative. I wanted them to say to my readers *it ain't necessarily so*. History is not inevitable, and neither is sexual gender as we know it an inevitable part of being human. I didn't intend my aliens to represent 'women', exactly; or for the humans to be seen as 'men' in this context. Human women and men have their own story in the Aleutian books. But I wanted to make them *suggestive* of another way things could have turned out. I planned to give my alien conquerors the characteristics, all the supposed deficiencies, that Europeans came to see in their subject races in darkest Africa and the mystic East - 'animal' nature, irrationality, intuition; mechanical incompetence, indifference to time, helpless aversion to theory and measurement: and I planned to have them win the territorial battle this time. It was no coincidence, for my purposes, that the same list of qualities or deficiencies - a nature closer to the animal, intuitive communication skills and all the rest of it - were and still are routinely awarded to *women*, - the defeated natives, supplanted rulers of men - in cultures north and south, west and east, white and non-white, the human world over.

They had to be humanoid. I didn't want my readers to be able to distance themselves; or to struggle proudly towards empathy in spite of the tentacles. I didn't want anyone to be able to think, *why, they're just like us once you get past the face-lumps*, the way we do when we get to know the tv alien goodies and baddies in Babylon 5 or Space Precinct 9. I needed

them to be irreducibly weird and *at the same time*, undeniably people, the same as us. I believe this to be a fairly accurate approximation of the real-world situation - between the Japanese and the Welsh, say, or between women and men: or indeed between any individual human being and the next. Difference is real. It does not go away. To express my contention - that irreducible difference, like genetic variation, is conserved in the individual: not in race, nationality or reproductive function - I often awarded my Aleutians quirks of taste and opinion belonging to one uniquely different middle-aged, middle-class, leftish Englishwoman. And was entertained to find them hailed by US critics as 'the most convincingly *alien* beings to grace science fiction in years'. Now it can be told...

Since they had to be humanoid, I made a virtue of the necessity, and had someone explain to my readers that all those ufologists can't be wrong. The human body plan is perfectly plausible, for sound scientific reasons. This led me into interesting territory later on. Whether or not it's true that another planet might well throw up creatures much like us, I don't know. But humanoid aliens certainly make life easier for the science fiction novelist. The control our physical embodiment has over our rational processes is so deep and strong that it's excruciating trying to write about intelligent plasma clouds - if you're in the least worried about verisimilitude. It's a trick, it can be done. But the moment your attention falters your basic programming will restore the defaults of the pentadactyl limb, binocular vision and articulated spine. You'll find your plasma characters cracking hard nuts, grappling with sticky ideas, looking at each other in a funny way, scratching their heads, weaving plots and generally making a third-chimpanzees' tea-party of your chaste cosmic emanations.

They had to be humanoid, and they had to be sexless. I wanted a society that knew nothing about the great divide which allows half the human race to regard the other half as utterly, transcendently, *different* on the grounds of reproductive function. I wanted complex and interesting people who managed to have lives fully as strange, distressing, satisfying, absorbing, productive as ours, without having any access to that central 'us and themness' of human life. I realised before long that this plan created some aliens who had a very shaky idea, if any, of the concept 'alien' - as applied to another person. Which was a good joke: and like the cosmic standard body plan, it led to interesting consequences. But that came later.

Once my roughly humanoid aliens reached earth, interrogation proceeded along traditional lines. I whisked them into my laboratory for intensive internal examination, with a prurient concentration on sex and toilet habits. In real life (I mean in the novel *WHITE QUEEN*) the buccaneers resisted this proposal. They didn't know they were aliens, they thought they were merely strangers, and they didn't see why they had to be vivisected before

they could have their tourist visas. The humans were too nervous to insist, but a maverick scientist secured a tissue sample... With this same tissue sample in my possession, I was able to establish that the Aleutians were hermaphrodites, to borrow a human term. (I considered parthenogenesis, with a few males every dozen or so generations, like greenfly. But this was what I finally came up with). Each of them had the same reproductive tract. There was an external organ consisting of a fold or pouch in the lower abdomen, lined with mucous membrane, holding an appendage called 'the claw'. Beyond the porous inner wall of this pouch, known as 'the cup', extended a reservoir of potential embryos -something like the lifetime supply of eggs in human ovaries, but these eggs didn't need to be fertilised. When one or other of these embryos was triggered into growth - not by any analogue of sexual intercourse but by an untraceable complex of environmental and emotional factors - the individual would become pregnant. The new baby, which would grow in the pouch like a marsupial infant until it was ready to emerge, would prove to be one of the three million or so genetically differentiated individuals in a reproductive group known as the 'brood'. (I should point out that I'm going to use the human word 'gene' and related terms throughout, for the alien analogues to these structures). These same three million *people*, each one a particular chemically defined bundle of traits and talents, would be born again and again. In Aleutia you wouldn't ask of a new-born baby, 'is it a boy or a girl?'. You'd ask, 'who is it?' Maybe there'd be a little heelprick thing at the hospital, and then the midwife would tell you whether you'd given birth to someone famous, or someone you knew and didn't like, or someone you vaguely remembered having met at a party once, in another lifetime.

So much for reproduction, but I needed to account for evolution. How could my serial immortals, born-again hermaphrodites, have come to be? How could they continue to adapt to their environment? It was a major breakthrough when I discovered that the brood was held together by a living information network. Every Aleutian had a glandular system constantly generating mobile cell-complexes called 'wanderers' which were shed through the pores of the skin, especially in special areas like the mucous-coated inner walls of the 'cup'. Each wanderer was a chemical snapshot of the individual's current emotional state, their status, experience, their shifting place in the whole brood entity: a kind of tiny self. The Aleutians would pick and eat 'wanderers' from each other's skin in a grooming process very like that which we observe in real-life apes, baboons, monkeys. To offer someone a 'wanderer' would be a common social gesture: '*Hello, this is how I am-*'. Once consumed, the snapshot information would be replicated and shuttled off to the reproductive tract, where it would be compared with the matching potential embryo, and the embryo updated: so that the chemical nature of the person who might be born was continually being affected by the same person's current life. It

was a Lamarckian evolution, directly driven by environmental pressure, rather than by the feedback between environment and random mutation, but it looked to me as if it would work well enough. Nothing much would happen from life to life. But over evolutionary time the individual and the whole brood entity would be changing in phase: growing more complex, remembering and forgetting, opening up new pathways, closing down others. I noticed, when I was setting this up, that the *environment* to which my Aleutians were adapting was the rest of Aleutian society, at least as much as the outside world. But that's another story...

I had done away with sexual gender. But if I wanted a society that seemed fully developed to human readers, I couldn't do without passion. I had no wish to create a race of wistful Spocks, or chilly fragments of a hive-mind. The Aleutians must not be deficient in personhood. Luckily I realised that the wanderer system gave me the means to elaborate a whole world of social, emotional and physical intercourse. The Aleutians lived and breathed chemical information; the social exchange of wanderers was essential to their well being. But they would also be drawn, by emotional attachment, infatuation, fellow feeling or even a need to dominate, to a more intense experience: where the lovers would get naked and *lie down* together, cups opened and fused lip to lip, claws entwined, information flooding from skin to skin, in an ecstasy of chemical communication. They would fall in love with another self the way we – supposedly - fall in love with difference. Romantic souls would always be searching for that special person, as near as possible the same genetic individual as themselves, with whom the mapping would be complete.

More revelations followed. The whole of Aleutian art and religion, I realised, sprang from the concept of the diverse, recurrent Self of the brood. Their whole education and history came from studying the records left behind by their previous selves. Their technology was based on tailored skin-secretions, essentially specialised kinds of wanderers. Their power to manipulate raw materials had grown not through conscious experiment or leaps of imagination, as ours is held to have developed, but by the placid, inchworm trial and error of molecular evolution. Arguably there was only one Aleutian species - if there had ever been more - since this process of *infecting* the physical world with self-similar chemical information had been going on for aeons. The entire Aleutian environment: buildings, roads, furniture, pets, beasts of burden, transport, was alive with the same life as themselves, the same self.

Once I'd started this machine going, it kept throwing up new ideas. I realised their society was in some ways extremely rigid. Any serial immortal might be born in any kind of social circumstances. But no one could change their ways, or even retrain for a new job, except over

millennia of lifetimes. An Aleutian couldn't *learn* to become a carpenter; or to be generous. You were either born with a chemically defined ability or it was not an option. Aleutians, being built on the same pattern as ourselves but with a highly conservative development programme, revert easily to a four-footed gait. This is good for scaring humans, who see *intelligent alien werewolves* leaping at them. The obligate cooks use bodily secretions to prepare food: a method quite acceptable in many human communities, where teeth and saliva replace motorised food mixers; and Aleutians all use toilet pads to absorb the minor amount of waste produced by their highly processed diet. I made up this because I liked the image of the alien arriving and saying '*quickly, take me somewhere I can buy some sanitary pads...*'; but then I noticed this was another aspect of the way they don't have a sense of the alien. They don't even go off by themselves to shit. Aleutians live in a soup of shared presence, they are the opposite of Cartesians. They have no horror of personal death, (though they can fear it). But things that are intrinsically *not alive* -like electrons, photons, the image in a mirror or on a screen, they consider uncanny... I could go on, but I won't. We'd be here forever. I believe the elaboration, the proliferation of consequences, could be continued indefinitely. It all goes to show, if anyone needed another demonstration, how much complexity, and what a strange illusion of coherence within that complexity, can be generated from a few simple, arbitrary original conditions.

It's said that the work of science fiction is to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange. I often find that what we do is to take some persistent fiction of contemporary human life, and turn it into science. By the time I'd finished this phase of the interrogation my Aleutians had all the typical beliefs and traditions of one of those caste-ridden, feudal tropical societies doomed to be swept away by the gadget-building bourgeois individualists from the north. They were animists. They believed in reincarnation. They had no hunger for progress, no use for measurement or theory, no obsession with the passage of time. They were, in short, the kind of people 'we' often wish we could be, except we'd rather have jet transport and microwave ovens. But in the Aleutians' case, everything worked: and their massively successful ambient-temperature bio-technology was exactly tailored - as if by a malignant deity - to blow the mechanisers away. They were on course to take over a world, although they didn't know it. Not because they were sacred white-faced messengers from the Sun God or what have you: but because they were *not* weird. *By chance* they had arrived at the historical moment when that jaded mechanist paradigm was giving out, and they had the goods that everybody on earth was beginning to want. They could do things the locals could do themselves, they had skills the locals could well understand, and they were just that crucial half a move ahead of the game.

Speech and Silence

I interrogated my aliens in the language of science, looking for differences that would work. Eventually I became uneasy about this process. If the Aleutians were in some sense 'supposed to be women', it was disquieting to note that I'd treated them exactly the way male-gendered medicine has treated human women until very recently - behaving as if their reproductive system was the only interesting thing about them. I approached their own speech and language with more humility: deliberately trying to remove the division between experimenter and experiment. I had travelled, fairly widely. I had been an alien in many contexts. Not least as a girl among the boys. I had observed that though the colour of my skin and the shape of my chest would always be intriguing, I could often be accepted and treated like a person, *as long as I made the right gestures*. Wherever you go there will be busfares, light switches, supermarkets, airports, taps, power sockets, street food, tv cartoons, music cassette players, advertising hoarding, motorway landscape. Watch what the locals do, and you'll soon adjust to the minor variations in the silent universal language.

One can look on the sameness of the global village as an artefact of cultural imperialism, another bitter legacy of White European rule in all its forms. But I felt that these narrative signs of a single human life, repeated the world over, must be connected to that animal-embodiment we all share, or they would not survive. I had invented new forms of difference, now I wanted to celebrate sameness. I made my Aleutians silent, like dumb animals, for many reasons, but first of all because I knew that I could pass for normal in foreign situations as long as I didn't speak. And I made human body language intelligible to them, on the grounds that just as our *common humanity* makes and recognises the same patterns everywhere, the aliens' wordless natural language had been deeply shaped by the same pressures as have shaped the natural languages of life on earth. The whole bio-chemical spectrum is missing, from their point of view, because we have no wanderers, no intelligent secretions at all. But every human gesture that remains is as intelligible to them as another brood's dialect of the common tongue, that everyone shares at home. To make sure of my point I raised and dismissed the possibility that they were time-travellers returning to their forgotten planet of origin; and the other possibility that they had grown, like us, from humanoid seed sown across the galaxy by some elder race. They were an absolutely, originally different evolution of life. But they were *the same* because life, wherever it arises in our middle dimensions, must be subject to the same constraints, and the more we learn about our development the more we see that the most universal pressures - time and gravity, quantum mechanics; the nature of certain chemical bonds - drive through biological complexity on

every fractal scale, from the design of an opposable thumb to the link between the chemistry of emotion and a set of facial muscles. And this sameness, subject to cultural variation but always reasserting itself, was shown chiefly in the aliens' ability to understand us.

In line with my model of Aleutians as 'women', and 'native peoples' it was right for them to be wary and rather contemptuous of spoken language. I wanted them to be silent like the processes of cell-biology, like social insects exchanging pheromone signals: like larger animals conversing through grooming, nuzzling, eyecontact and gesture. And I wanted the humans, convinced that the barrier between self and other was insurmountable except by magic, to be deeply alarmed by these seeming telepaths - the way characters in classic male-gendered science fiction are so absurdly impressed at an occult power they call *empathy*: whereby some superbeing or human freak can *actually sense* the way other people are feeling. (God give me strength: my cat can do that). But I didn't want to do away with spoken language altogether. Words are separation. Words divide. That is the work they do. I know this because I've felt it happen: whenever I open my mouth and speak, and prove by my parlous accent and toddler's vocabulary that I don't belong; whenever I make a public, female-gendered statement in a male group. Everything else that we think we use language for we can handle without what the Aleutians call 'formal speeches'. But for the Aleutians not to have this means of separation, this means of stepping out of the natural cycles would have made them less than people. So I invented a special class of Aleutians, the 'signifiers', who were obligate linguists the way other Aleutians were obligate food-processors or spaceship-builders. Of course they assimilated human articulate languages with dazzling speed. (This is another of the space-fantasy clichés that I think has been unfairly derided. I wouldn't be able to do it. But then, nobody would sign up an obligate monophone such as myself on a trading mission to another planet, would they?)

It also transpired that the aliens did have a kind of no-kidding alien-life-form telepathy for long distance contact: another proliferation of the wanderer system. But that's another story. There was no problem with the mechanics of speech, by the way. I gave them teeth and tongues and larynxes more or less like ours: why not? I had made the Aleutians into self-conscious intelligences who still manipulated their surroundings the way bacteria do it; or the even simpler entities manufacturing and communicating inside our cells. In their use of all forms of language I elaborated on this conservatism. They were beings who had reached self-consciousness, and spoken language, without abandoning any of the chronological precursor communication media. All life on earth uses chemical communication; then comes gesture, and vocalisation comes

last. Humans have traded all the rest for words - so that we have to rediscover the meaning of our own gestures, and the likely effect of the hormone laden scent-cells we shed, from self-help books full of printed text. To the Aleutians, by the way, this lack of control gives the impression that all humans have Tourette's Syndrome: we're continually babbling obscenities, shouting out tactless remarks, giving away secrets in the common tongue. I pictured my Aleutians like a troop of humanly intelligent baboons, gossiping with each other silently and perfectly efficiently, having subtle and complex chemical interactions: and just occasionally feeling the need to vocalise; a threat or boast or warning, a yell of 'look at me!' It only occurred to me later that I'd made the Aleutians very like feminist women in this: creatures dead set on *having it all*, determined to be self-aware and articulate public people, without giving up their place in the natural world.

But inevitably, insidiously the 'signifier' characters, the aliens with the speaking parts, became an elite. I had already realised that I had to 'translate' the wordless dialogue of Aleutian silent language into words on the page. In this I was up against one of the walls of make-believe. Science fiction is full of these necessary absurdities: I accepted it with good grace, the same way as I'd accepted the human body-plan; and used some funny direct speech marks to show the difference, which the copy-editor didn't like. But now I felt that the male-gendered mechanist-gadget world was sneaking back into power, with historical inevitability in its train, in the Trojan Horse of articulate language. I did everything I could to correct this. I began to point out the similarities between the Aleutian *silent* language, and our spoken word as it is used most of the time by most humans. I found myself listening to human conversations and noticing the gaps: the unfinished sentences, the misplaced words, the really startling high ratio of noise to signal. I realised that most of our use of language fulfils the same function as the grooming, the nuzzling, the skin to skin chemical exchange that other life-forms share, but which with us has become taboo except in privileged intimate relations. I further realised that everything humans 'say' to each other, either in meaningful statements or in this constant dilute muttering of contact, is backed, just like Aleutian communication, by a vast reservoir of cultural and evolutionary experience. We too have our 'soup of shared presence', out of which genuinely novel and separate formal announcements arise rarely - to be greeted, more often than not, with wariness and contempt.

Re-inventing the wheel is a commonplace hazard in science fiction. It makes a change to find one has re-invented post-structuralist psychology. I recognised, some time after the event, that in the Silence of Aleutia I had invented the unconscious in the version proposed by Lacan, the unspoken plenum of experience that is implicit in all human discourse. Then I understood that my 'signifiers' represented not a ruling caste but the public

face of Aleutia; and the Silent represented all those people who don't want to 'speak out', who 'just want to get on with their lives': the group to which most of us belong, most of the time. In Aleutia, as in human life, the 'signifiers' may be prominent figures. But who is really in charge? The intelligentsia, or the silent majority? Which is the puppeteer? The fugitive, marginal latecomer, consciousness? Or the complex, clever, perfectly competent wordless animal within?

Convergent Evolution

It's now several years since I started writing about the Aleutians, and nearly a decade since I first outlined the project... on a beach in Thailand, one warm summer night in 1988. A lot of history has happened in that time, and much of it somehow affected the story. The 1989 revolutions in Europe made a great difference to WHITE QUEEN. The war in the former Yugoslavia had a grim influence on the second episode, NORTH WIND. The nature of the enduring low-intensity conflict in Northern Ireland had something to do with what happens between human men and women in all three books. The third instalment, PHOENIX CAFE, is bound to have a *fin de siecle* feel. I've read and shakily assimilated lots of popular science, and science itself has become more *popular*, so that concerns which were completely science-fictional and obscure when I began are now topics of general interest; and that's made a difference too. Even the battle of the sexes has changed ground, both in my mind and in the real world. I'm not sure how much, if any, of my original plan survived. But this is okay. I intended to let the books change over time. I wanted things that happened at first contact to appear later as legends that couldn't possibly be true. I wanted concerns that were vitally important in one book to have become totally irrelevant in the next. I wanted phlogiston and cold fusion in my science, failed revolutions and forgotten dreams in my politics. I thought that discontinuity would be more true to life than a three hundred years' chunk of soap opera, (or so, it's difficult to say exactly how much time has passed, when the master race finds measurement boring) that ends with everybody still behaving the same as they did in episode one. It's true to the historical model too. I don't think anyone would deny that the European Empire builders had lost the plot, sometime before that stroke of midnight in 1947, climactic moment in the great disengagement.

My son Gabriel tells me stories. Not surprisingly, given his environment, he tends to tell me science fiction stories. I'm delighted when he comes up with some motif or scenario that I recognise as a new variation on a familiar theme: and he's furious (like some adult storytellers I could mention) when I point out to him he's doing something that's been done countless times before. Always, already, what we say has been said

before. A while ago he came up with an adventure where the characters kept being swept away into the Fourth Dimension, an experience that transformed them, partially and then permanently if they stayed too long, into horrible gargoyles. That was where I found the title of my paper. Sadly, I can't fault his argument. There's no getting away from it, the Fourth Dimension makes monsters of us all. My Aleutians, though, have managed to change the process around. There's a sense in which aliens can represent not just other people, but some future other people; some unexplored possibility for the human race. Maybe my Aleutians fit that description. It has been a surprise even to me, to see how *human* they have become, how much I've found myself writing about the human predicament, about the mysteries of self and consciousness. But that's the way it has to be, unless or until the great silence out there is broken. Until we meet.

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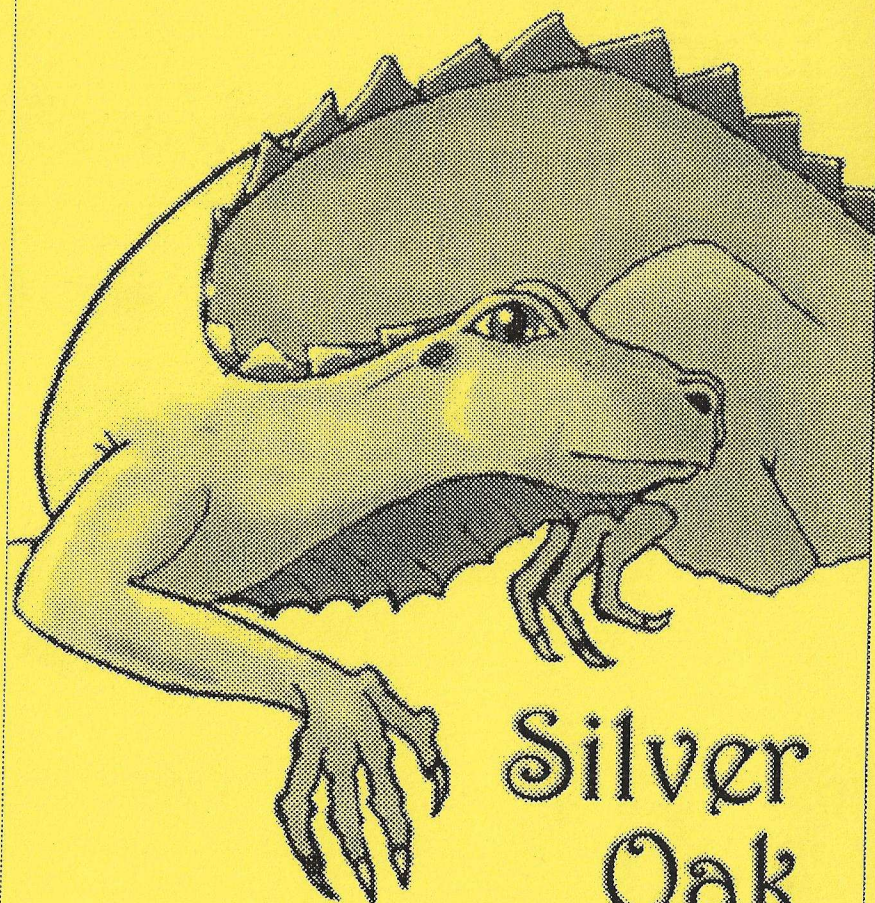
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