

# NOVACON 39



PROGRESS REPORT ONE

# NOVACON 39

Guest of Honour **Justina Robson**

**13-15 November 2009**

The Park Inn, Nottingham

MEMBERSHIP RATES: Adults £38, 13-16 yrs £10; 12 and under free (age at 13/11/09). Rates apply until Easter and subject to review afterwards. Day rates will be available.

HOTEL ROOMS: Double or twin rooms will cost £40 pppn, while singles will be £56 pppn. Children: under 5 yrs free; 5-12 yrs £5.00; over 12 yrs adult rate.

Availability of singles is not expected to be a problem but we recommend booking early to make sure. Deposits are not required when booking. A booking forms is enclosed - you know what to do...

## Novacon 39 contact details:

General, Hotel & Membership: 379 Myrtle Road, Sheffield, SH2 3HQ  
e-mail [steve@altair-4.co.uk](mailto:steve@altair-4.co.uk)  
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after many years, note Steve Lawson's e-mail address has changed!

Publications: Dave Hicks. [davidhicks746@btinternet.com](mailto:davidhicks746@btinternet.com)

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**WEB SITE:** <http://www.novacon39.org>

# Chair

Alice Lawson

**T**ime to write the Chair's piece. For me, this is the worst part of being on a committee. I'm not as eloquent as Helena who did a great job as Chair last year, nor witty as some previous chairs. So here's the news.

Yes, indeed, there *is* news. We are on the move. Although the staff at the Quality have always been great, unfortunately the change of management has led to problems. It seems they assumed we'd accept any decision they made as we would not want to move after so long. That was a mistake on their part as move we did.



We looked at a few hotels and decided on the Park Inn located in Nottingham. There is more information about the Hotel later in the PR so all I will say here is that I am very happy with it and I hope you will be too.

Our Guest of Honour is the lovely and talented **Justina Robson**, author of - among others - *Silver Screen* and *Mappa Mundi*. Having attended previous Novacons, Justina has said she's really pleased to be asked as guest.

The Committee remains relatively unchanged apart the welcome addition of:

Shy and retiring **Martin Tudor** will take care of Publicity

**Cat Coast** and **Dave Hicks** will be responsible for Publications,

Meanwhile, **Helena Bowles** and **Richard Standage** will bring you a terrific programme;

**Tony Berry** will keep the hotel in line;

**Steve Lawson** will take care of your membership and hotel bookings, and

**Alice Lawson** (er..me) will take care of the money and keep control (a first time for everything).

More of us to share the load (or the blame!)

Elsewhere in PR 1 we've two reviews of Justina's work by Helena and Julian Headlong, who's positively bursting with delight that she's our Guest of Honour, with more people queuing up for the opportunity to write about her, Tony Berry writes about our new hotel and Dave Hicks comments on our move to the other side of the M1. Dave swears he doesn't mean it about Yorkshire.

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## **Now for a message from the Department Of The Bleeding Obvious.**

We cannot have a Novacon without you. We need your membership to enable us to plan the best programme we can. We also need volunteers to help us keep the convention running during the weekend. In the next PR we will have a bit more about volunteers. In the meantime if you want to help please contact us.

As before, we'll be rewarding the efforts of good-heated fans who help out with 'GRoaTs' (Gopher Reward Tickets) redeemable at the bar for food and drink.

We'll also be in a much better position to negotiate with the hotel over food and drink if you book your rooms early - and remember there's **no deposit required** this year.

Alice

# Justina Robson – Keeping It Real

Review by Helena Bowles

**W**ell this was a huge amount of fun! If you think of *The Bionic Woman* meets *The Lord of the Rings* via *Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy* you won't be far off. It's unashamedly a romp through the clichés of the genre, thumbing its nose at them and leaving most of them rolling in the dirt. Given that, it is also a novel with surprising depth.

Lila Black is a first generation cyborg security agent. Desperately injured in a mission to the elven dimension Alfheim she has been rebuilt with an impressive array of weaponry, an internal AI capable of chemically controlling her emotions and boosting her performance. Lila is left struggling with a radically altered body image as pretty much all that is left biologically is her head and torso and even her head and hair has been stained scarlet by the magical assault she endured. Lila's emotional responses to her new metal body are deeply ambiguous, especially in comparisons of how attractive she used to feel and how she feels now. She is, in many ways, a typical cyberpunk wish-fulfilment – a super strong, half-metal, leather clad babe with a seriously cool motor bike but one who covers up her enhancements in embarrassment and has nightmares about the attack that necessitated her creation.

The first mission Lila undertakes after her recreation is to protect the rebel Elven rock star, Zal. Purist elements from his home dimension hate Zal's rejection of Elven mores and are issuing death threats. Zal, typically, doesn't believe he needs any help. Less typically Zal is intrigued by the monstrous nature of Lila's metamorphosis leading to Lila becoming embroiled in a wild-magic mediated Game with him. Games are randomly created magical contracts that ensnare all life forms but humans are particularly vulnerable. They are contracts that demand moves on both sides leading to a final situation and forfeit for the party that loses. Lila and Zal are locked into a Game leading to a final sexual situation that will also exact a large emotional price.

Despite being warned and trained not to accept games Lila's inexperience means that the establishment of the Game between them is the first mistake she makes.

Inexperience and emotional trauma leads Lila to make mistake after mistake. She has massive strength in her metal parts and enough weapons to be a one woman assault force but she still gets taken out by an elven magic blade in one incident and tears her body apart during another attack on Zal. When Zal is finally kidnapped Lila is forced to cross into Alfheim accompanied only by Dar, the elf responsible for her present condition. There follows a great deal of elven politics and a final kickass denouement.

It's probably best to skip the first chapter which bears all the hallmarks of something added at publisher insistence on the assumption that the general reader is too thick to follow the back story as presented in the story. All you need to know is that there was – or seems to have been – An Event that we Otopian's call the Quantum Bomb that has resulted in the opening of several other dimensions, including the Elven Alfheim, the demonic Demoniac, Faery and the land of the Dead Thanatopia. Cautious diplomatic relations exist and Faery has been issuing tourist visas for some time. Elves, fairies, demons, ghost and elementals all exist, sometimes uneasily, in our realm of Otopia. The true first chapter launches into the story of the No Shows, Zal's band, which is a little unusual as – famously – “Elves Don't Rock”. Here I felt the revered ghost of Douglas Adams leaning over Robson's shoulder to the point that I half expected Zal's Manager to be called Zarniwoop. Followed by the introduction of Lila burning up the road on her motorbike it appears initially that this is going to be a computer game on the page. The imagery of the book is drawn heavily from the area of gaming, from Manga and from comics like 2000 AD. It is hip, modern and slick.

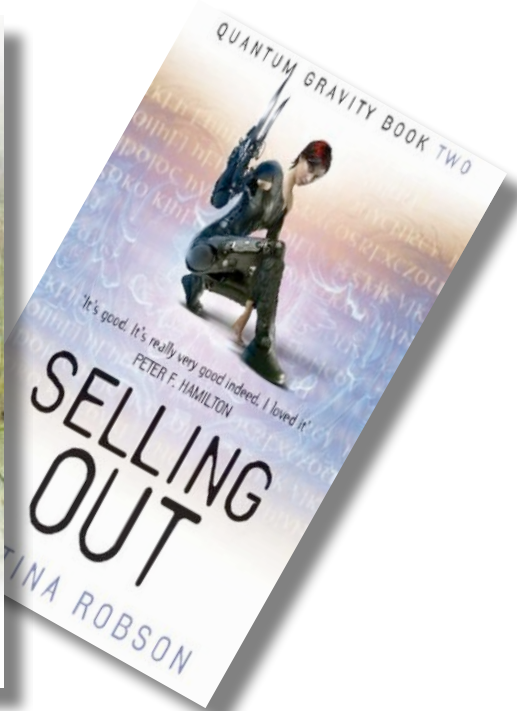
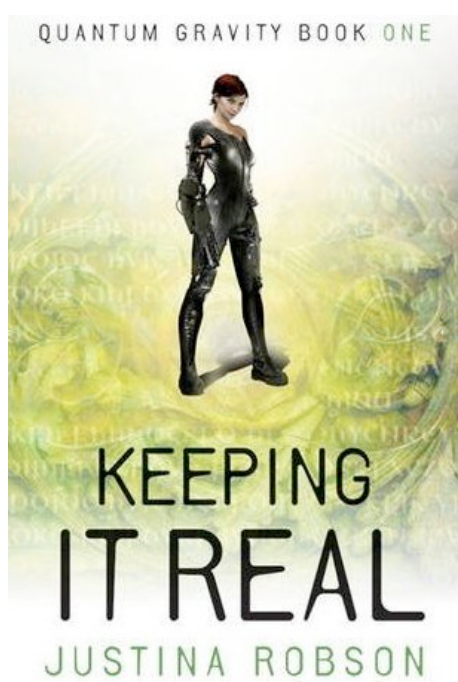
What gives the book depth is the careful characterisation. Zal, initially the stereotypical bad boy rock star, has his own secrets and traumas. He is facing many of the questions of identity that also plague Lila. He has abandoned his home due to an inability to feel at home in his own culture. A stay in Demonica has marked him in as irrevocable a manner as Lila's metal limbs. Perversely, for an Elf, Lila's metal intrigues him.



The banter between them, initiated by the Game Zal may or may not have deliberately started, becomes increasingly intimate.

The story is also concerned with boundaries and their transgression. Much of Lila's concern and pain is centred upon the physical boundaries of flesh and metal, boundaries that can be undone by Lila's ability to ignore and over ride the limits of their strength, just as the Quantum Bomb – or whatever it was – undid the boundaries between the dimensions. Her later possession by the dead elf Tath continues the theme of transgression, this time of Lila's bodily integrity. Zal's demon tattoo seems to serve a similar function. Then there is the Elf sex as a more prosaic erosion of physical boundaries. Zal invites elementals to enter his body, there are ghosts that can literally drink the essence of a being and leave the body transparent and empty. Almost every incident in the story involves some breakdown or transgression of a boundary.

Robson's writing is spare and down to earth with no word wasted. Keeping it Real is the only novel I've read so far and by all accounts it isn't typical of her work. Robson is a heavyweight SF writer who appears to have launched herself into a lighter form with a great deal of joie de vivre. Given the amount of depth she has managed to imbue what is essentially a bit of an inter-genre romp mixing SF and Fantasy - there's that transgression of boundaries again – I'm eager to see what she can do in her "more serious" books.



# The Park Inn

Tony Berry

**N**ovacon has a new venue in Nottingham. The Park Inn is situated on the Mansfield Road, one of the main roads into Nottingham, and is about a mile from the city centre with good transport links. It has 179 rooms, which have all been refurbished and look brand new. We don't expect problems with single rooms being in short supply at the moment, but it won't hurt to book early if you want to make sure. There are no "family" rooms either, but the hotel will put in a z-bed for a youngster. All rooms have a walk-in shower rather than a bath – the exceptions being the rooms for disabled guests which do have baths (there is a limited supply of these). It's a civilised venue which serves breakfast until 10.30 every day.



Double or twin rooms will cost £40 pppn, while singles will be £56 pppn. There is lift-access to all floors.

The main function space is all on the ground floor within easy reach of the bar (very easy for the dealers). Downstairs are 6 syndicate rooms all grouped together where the Art show and Dave Lally's programme will be. There is also another bar, though we may just use this for lounge area. The hotel has a leisure club with a small pool, sauna, jacuzzi and gymnasium, which we can all use. Okay, when I say "we" I don't include myself.

There is plenty of free car parking for guests.

The Park Inn is a **strictly no smoking** hotel. This includes the bedrooms. Anybody smoking in the room will be charged extra, and may be asked to leave. You have been warned!

If you're reading this on line, click [here](#) for more details.



# Justina Robson – Keeping It Cool

Julian Headlong

I think that Justina Robson must really have great fun with her characters, after all she gets to do so many fun things with them: they get to fight giant robot gargoyles while wearing super-soldier exo-armour; they get to zip through interstellar space at the speed of thought in their nano-tech enhanced bodies; they get to live out their fantasies as super-powered masked avengers zapping the bad guys; or they get to beat up hellish demons using their cool cyborg weapon implants. All this while, sometimes, trying to save the world.

But it can't exactly be much fun actually being one of those characters – they do get to hurt so much. And feel out of place and angry and depressed and nostalgic and unsure and happy and exalted and hungry and ...

Actually, while really enjoying reading about their adventures, I wouldn't want to be one of them, after all – adventure is somebody else having a very uncomfortable time, a long long way from here. Even if they do have really neat nano-tech enhancements.

But those adventures are just so much fun to watch on the silver screen of our imagination.

In an impressive start to her career as a novelist Justina Robson's first book was published just ten years ago. It was received with much praise and was immediately short-listed for the Arthur C Clarke Award, as were her next two novels.

The basic themes of that first book, 'Silver Screen' – artificial intelligence, strong nanotech, and altered or transcendent human consciousness – were to be re-occurring motifs in many of her other works, though later stories added big helpings of metaphysical strangeness, super-human mojo, and the odd dimension hop.

All of her novels deal with “big ideas” – human-machine interfaces, meme-wars, conceptual breakthroughs, and what it means to be human when both body and mind can be changed; all this while focussing on well fleshed out individuals trying to live their lives as best they can while weirdness and chaos swirl around them.

Anjuli O’Connell, the central character of ‘Silver Screen’ has been ‘hot-housed’ by corporate schooling in the same fashion as Alex in John Brunner’s ‘The Shockwave Rider’ and she too has some odd mind-quirks – hers are an infallible eidetic memory and a direct neural interface implant which makes plot enhancing flashbacks, and flash-sideways into other points-of-view, much more immediate to her, and to us. The novel looks at her relationships with the self-evolving AIs that the corporations have created but have come to fear, and what exactly it means to be a ‘person’.

As in ‘Kaleidoscope Century’ and ‘Candle’ by John Barnes, Justina Robson’s second book, ‘Mappa Mundi’, deals with memes and the question of selfhood when knowledge and ideas and motivations can be ingested like food or caught like infections. One can only imagine the plagues of religious mania or Japanese toy-cults that sweep through populations given the neural-mapping nanotech envisioned in this book.

Set in the same universe as ‘Mappa Mundi’, the short story ‘The Girl Hero’s Mirror Says He’s Not The One’ (found in ‘Fast Forward 1’ edited by Lou Anders), shows some of the consequences of the meme-wars being fought out in the aftermath of this neural Armageddon, and what it could be like to forget your own name in a world with fifty new shades of pink and no word for “hate”.

‘Natural History’ and its sequel ‘Living Next Door To The God Of Love’ use a fairly unique conceit in being a relentlessly hard science fiction novel with a sequel written using all the conventions of fantasy. This does kind of take Clarke’s ‘any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic’ and run away with it, but given the vastly advanced nanotech described in these books you can forgive the author this once.

'Natural History' melds people with their technology in many disturbing ways, and the difference between humans, up-loaded personalities, and true AIs begins to get hard to discern. Then you add in Aliens with a capital A, possible alien AIs, and magic-level nanotech and the pot begins to really boil. And in the sequel these possible alien AIs are more like gods and demons than any machine ought to have a right to be. Mind you getting a taxi to take you to an alternate reality is a neat idea.

I said that we could forgive the use of Clarkian magic-tech in 'Natural History' and its sequel once, but for her much more up-beat series 'Quantum Gravity' she does it again, only more-so. The Quantum Gravity sequence (so far – 'Keeping It Real', 'Selling Out' and 'Going Under') uses ideas similar to those found in John M Ford's 'The Last Hot Time' or Diane Duane's 'Stealing The Elf-King's Roses' – reality has fractured, other worlds impinge on ours, and elves and demons and fairies are running about all over the place causing havoc and scaring the children. Plus our heroine, Lila Black, is a magically enhanced cyborg spy with built-in machine-guns, flame-throwers, and jump-jets, who is only saved from serious mary-sueism by her relentless bad luck.

When reading this series I would recommend skipping the first chapter of book one ('Keeping It Real'), as the info dump includes many unnecessary spoilers for details that are all brought out more naturally during the course of the novel – and you can always go back and read it after finishing the rest of the book if you still can't work out what's going on.

That mystery: what the hell is going on here, is half the fun of these books.

So then, with seven novels since 1999, poetry and short stories since 1994, and lots of rilly triffic reviews of sf and fantasy books scattered all over the place, what will Justina Robson do next. We can only wait and see. While carefully reading the New Scientist each week to make sure nobody has invented mappa-ware neural re-programming just yet. Because that would be bad.

# Programme

Helena Bowles & Richard Standage

**W**hat are we planning this year? Well, quite a lot, actually, but we if we tell you we'd have to kill you. Seriously, one of the things we are passionate about is arranging items that put the science back into science fiction. There was long a tradition that Novacon started Saturday and Sunday with Serious Science Speakers. Last year we worked hard to resurrect this as a regular programme slot and we intend to continue this at Novacon 39.

There are two events that as a science fiction convention we feel *must* be commemorated. The first is that, as I'm sure you all know, it is the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* - one of the most important pieces of scientific writing in human history. *Origin* was actually published in November which gives us even more reason for celebrating.

The other event to be marked is that 2009 is International Year of Astronomy. Sadly, our new hotel isn't suitable for a mass sky observation and November in the Midlands isn't usually astronomer-friendly time of year but we'll think of something!

We have a loose theme, this year, based on ideas explored in our Guest of Honour's work: that of *boundaries and transgressions*. We have several ideas slowly gelling but if you have any ideas you'd like to see made real, drop us an e-mail.

So as usual for PR 1 the only thing we can say with certainty is that there *will* be a programme...

Watch this space.

# Over There

Dave Hicks

Novacon has moved to the *East Midlands*

**T**here was a time when the idea of moving Novacon more than 200 metres from the centre of Birmingham caused drink to spill and sensitive souls to faint. Times and hotels have changed and - in common with much of fandom - we have to cast a wider net. So we've abandoned the West Midlands completely, although we all think a location in central England remains desirable and we've chosen Nottingham.

It's a modern, thriving (pace the recession) city with plenty of shops, museums, galleries and eateries from takeaways to Michelin-star quality.

The Park Inn is about a mile from Nottingham city centre, not far from the M1 and from East Midlands Airport.

Travelling *up* the M1 you'll pass the National Space Centre at Leicester (about 20 mins off the motorway) which is worth a visit. Of course, travelling *down* the M1 means you'll be going through Yorkshire so just keep your foot hard on that gas pedal.

Nottingham, as you *may* be aware, has a castle with a spot of folk lore attached: see how many chip shops are called 'Fryer Tuck'; visit the spot where Robin made Marian. It also offers "the oldest pub in Britain": *The Trip To Jerusalem*, and yes, we know that's disputed. Your committee is diligently researching the matter and when the room stops spinning we will deliver our findings.

# Nottingham

*The serif of  
Nottingham*



# Miscellany

## Art Show will be all in one room again!

The new venue means we can return to an art show all in a single space. **Serena Culfeather** has agreed to run it again after her excellent work last year. We will run the CD-ROM art show if we have enough material. Artists looking to exhibit either actual work (for auction or not) or electronically should get in touch soon.

## Bigger Dealers' Room

We'll have a bigger dealers' room and it's right next to the bar! Interested dealers should contact **Tony Berry** at:

## Nova awards

A tradition of Novacon for more than 30 years, the Nova Awards will be presented for outstanding achievement by fan editor, writer and artist, as voted for by the membership of the convention. We'll start listing eligible work in PR2 and on the web site.

## Parents' co-op

Novacon will not be operating a crèche but we will look into setting up a parents' co-op, where a room is set aside for smaller children to play under parental supervision if there is sufficient demand. If you're interested let us know as soon as possible.

## Food and drink

We're still in discussions with the hotel but expect to provide both real ale and a good cider plus a range of affordable snacks and meals throughout the weekend.

As always our hand is stronger when negotiating if everyone books hotel rooms as soon as possible - **book early, book often.**

# Membership

January 2009

1	Justina	Robson	40	David	Thomas
2	Ian R	MacLeod	41	Margaret	Croad
3	Charles	Stross	42	Caroline	Loveridge
4	Feorag	NicBhríde	43	Gavin	Long
5	Ken	MacLeod	44	Dave	Cox
6	Brian	Aldiss	45	Tony	Rogers
7	Harry	Harrison	46	Dave	Tompkins
8	Alice	Lawson	47	Paul	Dormer
9	Tony	Berry	48	Niall	Gordon
10	Helena	Bowles	49	Michael	Abbott
11	Cat	Coast	50	Anne	Wilson
12	Dave	Hicks	51	Ian	Maughan
13	Steve	Lawson	52	Stephen	Dunn
14	Richard	Standage	53	Ian	Sorensen
15	Martin	Tudor	54	Yvonne	Rowse
16	Vernon	Brown	55	Adrian	Snowdon
17	Pat	Brown	56	Gwen	Funnell
18	Ina	Shorrocks	57	Peter	Wareham
19	Gavin	Shorrocks	58	Peter	Mabey
20	Neil	Summerfield	59	Brian	Ameringen
21	Chris	Stocks	60	Meriol	Ameringen
22	Tim	Stannard	61	Caroline	Mullan
23	Chris	O'Shea	62	Sue	Jones
24	Gerry	Webb	63	Dave	Hardy
25	Mali	Perera	64	Julia	Daly
26	Kostya	Milayev	65	Douglas	Spencer
27	Chris	Bell	66	Jim	Walker
28		½r	67	John	Dowd
29	George	Ternent	68	Fran	Dowd
30	Linda	Ternent	69	Rog	Peyton
31	Calvin	Ternent	70	Claire	Brialey
32	Anne	Woodford	71	Mark	Plummer
33	Alan	Woodford	72	Julian	Headlong
34	Pauline	Morgan	73	Penny	Hicks
35	Chris	Morgan	74	Steve	Davies
36	Barbara-Jane		75	Giulia	De Cesare
37	Marcus	Thierstein	76	Liam	Proven
38	James	Odell	77	John	Harvey
39	Roger	Robinson	78	Eve	Harvey
			79	Steve	Green
			80	Dave	Lally
			81	Al	Johnston
			82	Heloise	Tudor
			83	Jennifer	Swift

