

Novacon 37

Bentley, near Walsall: 2-4 November 2007

Our Guest of Honour: Charlie Stross

Novacon 37 is delighted that the award-winning British sf author Charlie Stross has accepted our invitation to be this year's guest of honour.

His novels *The Jennifer Morgue* and *A Family Trade* will conveniently be out in time for the convention (from Orbit and Pan MacMillan, respectively), just two of eight books by Charlie scheduled to land in British bookshops during the year. All members of Novacon 37 will also receive a special limited-edition souvenir chap-book written by Charlie. [A very limited number of last year's - by N36 GoH Alastair Reynolds - are still available from the Birmingham Science Fiction Group via replayer@rogpeyton.fsnet.co.uk.]



Equally adept with "hard" science fiction, fantasy, crime, space opera and Lovecraftian horror, our GoH is carving out a prolific, award-winning writing career on both sides of the Atlantic. He's also active on the British convention scene, neatly reflecting Novacon's own dual personality.

Whilst working towards degrees in both pharmacy and computer science, Charlie produced role-playing articles for the magazine *White Dwarf* before scoring his first fiction sale with "The Boys", published by *Interzone* in 1987. His debut novel, *Singularity Sky* (2003), was nominated for a Hugo, and many of his short stories have

reached the Hugo and Nebula shortlists. *Rogue Farm*, a short film based upon the eponymous short story, was released in 2004.

The following year, Charlie won a Hugo for the novella "The Concrete Jungle", whilst *Accelerando* (a novel constructed from previously published interlinked material) received the 2006 *Locus* Award for best science fiction novel, as well as being shortlisted for the Hugo, Arthur C Clarke and John W Campbell Memorial Awards.

Charlie writes: "When Novacon 37's esteemed chairman asked me to write a few words by way of introducing myself, I was a bit at a loss. 'Introduce myself? Why on earth would I want to do *that*?' I asked. He thought for a moment (or so I inferred from the delay in his email response): 'you can touch upon your introduction to sf and sf fandom, why / how you became an author, what you're working on right now... whatever you like.' Which only made my headache worse. Because the terrible fact is, the answer to every one of those questions is, 'I can't remember.'

"I can't remember my introduction to sf, because it happened some time before I was five years old. However, I *do* remember that the route to and from primary school was fraught with perils, and one particular peril lurked behind the bushes, just waiting to trap and debauch an unwary toddler: the local library, whose entire collection of Andre Norton juveniles I drained by my sixth birthday. I was late starting to read, but once I got going, I was voracious; and my parents left library tickets just lying around the house, like needles in a shooting gallery.

"As for why I started writing: that probably happened at the same time. I put it down to an accident of imprinting. For every writer who finishes a novel, at least ten begin one -- and some of my earliest memories are of my mother sitting at the kitchen table, bashing away laboriously on a manual typewriter. She never finished her novel, but somehow, at around the same time I was abusing library cards, I latched onto the idea that there was a *connection*, that books were something adults I looked up to hammered out on typewriters before they somehow went to live in the library.

"Most of us grow up consuming media, be it music or film or tv or books, but we don't make the concrete connection between the stuff we're enjoying and the act of creation. But before I could pick up the usual message that I should just lie back and be a passive consumer, I saw that writing was just one of the things that people did; so when

at fourteen I shoved aside a Dungeons and Dragons project I was working on, and an Airfix model kit, and borrowed my sister's typewriter in order to try writing a space adventure, it didn't feel unnatural or strange -- it was just another teenage hobby.

"I can't remember exactly how I got into sf fandom, either. I suspect it was a Yorkshire Post article about Yorcon III, back in 1984 in Leeds; I went along for a day, bounced around a bit, and was hooked. Here, clearly, was a pool of people who shared my obsession! I must go to more conventions! And indeed I did. Acquiring a more nuanced view of fandom took me several years - and, I suspect, drove several SMOFs to distraction - but along the way, I learned to hold my beer a bit better, sold a handful of short stories, did some growing up, and figured out that as long as I kept my embarrassing hobbies to myself, people wouldn't automatically guess that I was more than a little bit weird.

"... Until quite recently something I still don't entirely understand happened, and people started talking to me *because of* the weird stuff, rather than in spite of it.

"Which brings me back to Novacon, and how I ended up here. The answer is, *I can't remember*. Time changes us all, and I'm blessed - or cursed - with a really crap memory. It might have been something to do with that long-ago library, ten minutes' walk from the front door for a determined eight year-old with a bunch of filched lending cards. Or it might be something to do with a drunken late-night bull session with Steve Green at a con gone by. Perhaps it was my mother banging away on the manual typewriter one rainy mid-term afternoon. Or it could have been John Brunner at a writer's workshop, graciously taking my short story seriously enough to explain what I was doing wrong, nudging me in the right direction. I really don't know *why*: that would be an answer, and all I've got are questions.

"Starting with, which way to the real ale bar?"

Our Venue

Located in Bentley, just off Junction 10 of the M6 and a short distance from Walsall, the Quality Hotel has been Novacon's venue since 2001, offering a location easily reached by car or public transport, single-floor facilities, central bar and free parking.

An extensive refurbishment programme began in early 2006; by this November, all 154 bedrooms and bathrooms will also have been fully refurbished. All public areas of the hotel are now non-smoking and the building is wifi-enabled.

We've negotiated excellent accomodation rates for 2007: £37.75 per person per night for twins and doubles, or £50.00 pppn for the limited number of rooms the Quality has agreed to set aside as singles. This includes VAT, full English (or continental) breakfast and free parking adjacent to the hotel.

Joining Novacon 37

Full membership costs £35.00 per person, rising to £38.00 on 1 May 2007. A fresh registration form has been included with this progress report for all members of Novacon 36 yet to sign up for Novacon 37; additional copies can be downloaded from our website (see below). Cheques should be payable to "Novacon 37" and forwarded to Steve Lawson at 379 Myrtle Road, Sheffield, S2 3HQ.

Our website: www.novacon37.org.uk

Our LJ forum: http://community.livejournal.com/novacon_37/

Attending Contemplation?

If you're planning to spend 6-7 April in Chester at Contemplation, the 2007 Eastercon, and have yet to sign up for Novacon 37, please note Alice and Steve Lawson will be valiantly manning our table over the weekend and will be delighted to help you empty your wallet.

Special thanks to: Charlie Stross; Peter Weston; Mark Plummer; Steve Rogerson and the Redemption '07 team; Chris O'Shea, Fran Dowd and the Contemplation crew; Tony Berry; Phil at Paper & Print, Solihull.

The Thirty-Year Road Trip

Steve Green

Saturday, 5 February 1977: the day everything changed. I'd wandered into the Andromeda bookshop on Summer Row (never a wise move: back then, Rog Peyton could scent spare change at fifty paces; he's now down to forty-nine). I can't recall if I was already aware of the Birmingham Science Fiction Group, then at the top of its game, but it can't be a coincidence that I turned up for a barnstorming gig by co-president Brian Aldiss thirteen days later.

More crucially, I learned that Birmingham was the venue for these weird gatherings of like-minded individuals, *conventions*, and whilst the first of these I experienced firsthand - Fantasycon 3, two months short of my seventeenth birthday - was reassuringly non-interactive, I'd soon handed over my membership fee for another event in the city centre, Novacon 7. My life has remained intertwined with the UK's longest-running regional sf convention every since.

After running Novacon 13's alternative programme in the bowels of the Royal Angus Hotel (leaving in our wake scenes of decadence and destruction unknown since Caligula's Rome), I actually found myself chairing Novacon 14. This instalment proved so successful, the following two had to quit Birmingham and relocate to Coventry.

And now, a mere twenty-three years later, I'm back at the helm (I have much to thank the Rehabilitation of Fannish Offenders for); even more surprisingly, Charlie Stross was relatively sober when he accepted my invitation to be our guest of honour. As for my committee - Alice Lawson (treasurer), Ann Green (secretary), Kevin Clarke (internet), Steve Lawson (registrations) and Vicky Cook (programme) - they've all known me long enough to deserve everything they get, including my immense thanks for their support.

We'll have more concrete information on the actual programme in our next progress report, but in the meantime, you can turn the page and read the first in a series of essays by Peter Weston and Mark Plummer commissioned to complement our celebration of seven decades of UK science fiction events.

See you all in Bentley!

70 Years of British Science Fiction Conventions

1937-1959 by Peter Weston

Quick, who's the oldest science fiction fan still active (in any sense of the word)?

"Harry Turner" was a good answer, folks, but you forgot Arthur C. Clarke! And yet there he was, aged just twenty, at the world's very first science fiction convention in 1937. We even have a battered picture to prove it! And rival claims from Sam Moskowitz that Philadelphia beat us by three months have now been conclusively disproved thanks to some excellent detective work by Los Angeles fan Fred Patten.¹

Yet again, Britain was first with a good idea, which the Americans then proceeded to take over and claim all the credit for; that sounds familiar! However, we don't actually know very much about that first historic convention



Leeds, 1937: Walter Gillings, Arthur C. Clarke, Ted Carnell. [Photo courtesy Graham James]

tion except that it was held on Sunday, 3 January in the Theosophical Hall, Leeds, and that 20 people came along, mostly local but with six prominent fans from out of town. Besides Clarke, other names you might recognise included Eric Frank Russell and Ted Carnell, who later became long-time editor of the British professional magazine, *New Worlds*. The proceedings included a talk on the state of rocketry and the recently-founded British Interplanetary Society, and messages of support were read out from Olaf Stapledon, HG Wells, John Russell Fearn and, for some reason, from the Oklahoma Science Fiction Association (!).

It was at Leeds that the "Science Fiction Association" was set up, which duly organised "The Second Convention", this time in the English capitol and again on a Sunday, 10 April 1938, with an attendance of 43. In May 1939, the "London Convention" took place

with 48 attendees, after which most fannish get-togethers understandably ceased for the duration of hostilities, apart from two small "regionals" in 1943 and 1944.

After the War, fans in London had the great good fortune to find a pub with an obliging landlord (Lew Mordecai), who welcomed their presence. In 1948, they began meeting every Thursday at the White Horse in Fetter Lane (a series which continues to this day), and from there it was only a short step to organising a full-scale convention in the room upstairs. They called it *Whitcon*, 'Number One' in our system of numbering conventions, although it was a modest little affair of fifty-odd members, held between 6.30 & 10.00 on the Saturday night. Still, some fannish traditions were established - the con had a distinctive name of its own, there was a Guest of Honour (A. Bertram Chandler), Ted Tubb auctioned unwanted rubbish with great flamboyance, and Ken Slater was unable to attend but sent £2.00 to buy drinks all round (!)

A repeat performance on a slightly larger scale was staged in 1949, while apathy reigned supreme in 1950. But the following year saw what can be regarded as our first full-scale convention with *Festiventon*, over Whit weekend in 1951, timed to coincide with the Festival of Britain. With Ted Carnell in the Chair and Vince Clarke as Secretary, this was a highly ambitious international event with Thursday & Friday nights in the 'White Horse', followed by two full-day sessions at the Royal Hotel (later, scene of the infamous 1970 *Sci-con*), and a final wrap-up session in another London pub on the Monday evening. It cost 17/6d to attend all sessions. Guests of Honour were Forry & Wendayne Ackerman from the USA, with visitors from Sweden, Holland, Canada and New Zealand, and the whole of Irish fandom. There were talks by Arthur Clarke and other professionals, film shows ('Metropolis'), and the presentation of the first 'International Fantasy Awards', the predecessor to the Hugos.

All very serious, you'll notice, as was the 1952 *Loncon*, though this one was on a smaller scale and was notable for the outbreak of Northern discontent with London fandom. The Manchester group was planning *Mancon*, a regional convention to be held later in the year, and was also eager to run a national con in their city in 1953 - the *Supermancon*. At the first-ever con bidding session they were heavily defeated in favour of London yet again, but in October the group held

Mancon, which was surprisingly successful and attracted over 100 people. No London fans attended, however, saying that "Manchester was too far away", a claim greeted with derision by Northerners who had regularly travelled to London for the past few years.

"Bloody provincials" was a remark that deepened the North/South rift at *Coroncon*, and the 1953 convention was a shambles: the programme was full of gaps, many items were cancelled, and Bert Campbell (editor of *Authentic*) put his foot in it by telling the Manchester fans that they "could hardly expect celebrities to come to their convention". Somehow, they won their bid to stage *Supermancon* at Whitsun in 1954 but Londoners didn't like Northern comments that "this would show them how these things should be run", and afterwards they secretly plotted sabotage with 'Operation Armageddon'. This was a plan to "brighten-up the convention... without the cooperation of the Manchester group". Schemes ranged from setting-off indoor fireworks to Chuck Harris' idea of releasing a live mouse during the opening ceremony and shouting "A Rat!" as the London women screamed and jumped onto chairs.

Fortunately, none of this was necessary. *Supermancon* had a superb programme book (designed by the great Harry Turner) and 150 people turned up, but the programme started to disintegrate almost immediately. As Rob Hansen notes, "Far from being the disaster it could have been, this proved the salvation of the convention, the chaos being so complete that both committee and attendees treated it as a joke." And Walt Willis wrote about 'The Magnificent Flop', commenting: "It was as if all the sins of British fandom - the smugness of the North, the malice of the South, the snobbery of the Old Guard - as if they were all expiated by the *Supermancon* committee as they crucified themselves in the Grosvenor Hotel. The point was that they bore their agony in such a way as to demonstrate the inherent goodness of fan... The official programme was allowed to die peacefully by mutual consent. It was the way it died that was important. Last year in London it lingered on in agony. People sat around bored, waiting for life to be pronounced extinct. This year people realised at quite an early stage that the programme was already part of the pavement of Hell, and it was at this point that the British convention completed the transition that had begun the previous year."²

What Willis meant is that fans had discovered they could enjoy their own company without too much need of a programme. Hansen

again: "This marked the end of the traditional British lecture-hall convention, the process begun at *Coroncon* reaching culmination in Manchester. From this time on fans now felt free to attend only those items that interested them and to ignore the rest of the programme in favour of conversation, the bar, and whatever other activities took their fancy." At *Supermancon* these included zap-gun battles (water-pistols), and the first-ever fancy dress costume party at a British con, where Ina Shorrocks and her friend Pat Doolan appeared as 'Bergey Girls' from the covers of the pulp magazines.

Not surprisingly, no bids had been made for the next convention, but after the event the small and previously-unknown Kettering group volunteered to put on *Cytricon*, this time over the Easter weekend, 1955. Despite being in such a relatively remote location it attracted over 120 attendees - the first sf con anywhere to take over an entire hotel - which had the most helpful and accommodating staff anyone could remember. "It was a happy, friendly affair," Willis wrote approvingly, "it was whole-heartedly a fannish convention, and as such the best of all time."

At Kettering the fans wore propeller beanies, the Fancy Dress was greatly expanded, they had films and room-parties, but there was very little serious programming. *Cytricon I* was tremendous fun, so much so that it was repeated again, and again, and again. In 1956 the Cheltenham fans turned up with a full-size alien BEM, and in 1957 they launched 'St Fantony', with a mock 'ceremony' that was originally intended as a private joke between Cheltenham and Liverpool groups, the two best-organised local clubs.

And so began a period in British fan-history which some will look back on as a 'Golden Age', although others might consider it to have been a blind alley. The only trouble was that numbers attending steadily declined, down to 80 in 1956 and fewer than 50 by 1958, and the reason was pretty clear to see; with no publicity, no programme, no publications, and little obvious connection with the old magnet of science fiction, there was nothing to attract a newcomer to what had become a series of large parties run for the convention 'regulars'.

And yet in the same period British fandom had proved what it *could* be, given the right circumstances, by holding the first London World Convention - some say the first truly *international* Worldcon - in August 1957. This was a hugely successful event, attended by

nearly 300 fans including a North American contingent of 76 who chartered a plane for the occasion. One might have expected it to have given a huge boost to the dwindling numbers at Kettering but this was far from the case; instead, *Loncon* seemed to be more of a 'Last Post' for old-timers who had crawled out of the woodwork one final time, authors like John Wyndham, Sam Youd, Eric Frank Russell and others who had not been seen for many years - and were not seen again, afterwards. As Vince Clarke subsequently remarked, it was an opportunity lost, with no registration desk for the following year's Eastercon and no mention in the worldcon programme book. Fandom had become entirely incestuous and - as the well-known story runs - at the final Kettering event the BSFA was founded in order to run conventions and to try and re-gain the momentum lost after *Supermancon*.

Which brings us to *Brumcon* in 1959, where the fannish organisers found they had to make a conscious attempt to turn back the clock and re-create an 'old-style' convention focussed on science fiction, in the hope of making it more accessible to newcomers brought in by the BSFA. They didn't entirely succeed, for reasons which I have recently written about at length³, but this was a complete change of direction and from now onwards Eastercons would be regarded as a 'shop-window' for sf fandom rather than just an annual reunion for the in-crowd.

References

- ¹ *The Story So Far* by Rob Hansen (published for Conspiracy, 1987)
- ² *Then* by Rob Hansen (now available at www.efanzines.com)
- ³ "Disappointment at Brumcon" in *Prolapse #4* (now available at www.efanzines.com)

The Nova Awards

In 1973, Novacon instituted the annual Nova Awards to celebrate achievement in British sf fanzines. Originally handed down by a panel of judges, these accolades are now decided by Novacon members who can demonstrate a basic knowledge of current fanzines.

Following Novacon 32, the three categories - best fanzine, best fanzine writer, best fanzine artist - were extended to cover fanzines produced in Eire. In addition, electronic fanzines are now eligible, provided a file hardcopy is lodged with the current administrator, Steve Green, at 33 Scott Road, Olton, Solihull, B92 7LQ.

At Novacon 36, the Nova Award for best fanzine was presented to Claire Brialey and Mark Plummer for *Banana Wings*; the runners-up were *Zoo Nation*, edited by Pete Young, and *Plokta*, edited by Mike Scott, Steve Davies and Alison Scott. Claire Brialey was also named best fan writer, with Mark Plummer and James Bacon in second and third place respectively. The Nova for best fan artist was awarded to Sue Mason; Alison Scott and Pete Young were the runners-up. A total of 35 ballot forms were received.

The following were received by the Nova Awards administrator between 1 October 2006 and 3 March 2007, and are eligible for the 2007 awards, which will be presented at Novacon 37: *A Cry For Help* #2 [16p, A5], John Toon; *Ansible* #231 [10/06], #232 [11/06], #233 [12/06], #234 [1/07], #235 [2/07], #236 [3/07; all 2pp, all A4] Dave Langford; *Banana Wings* #28 [32pp], #29 [36pp, both A4], Claire Brialey & Mark Plummer; *The Banksoniain* # 11 [12pp, A5], David Haddock; *Brum Group News* #421 [10/06]; #422 [11/06, both 12pp], #423 [12/06], #424 [1/07; both 8pp, all A5], Rog Peyton (for the Birmingham SF Group); *Head* #7 [27pp, A4], Doug Bell & Christina Lake; *iShoes* #1 [20pp, A5], Yvonne Rowse; *The League of Fan Funds Newsletter* [11/06; 2pp, A4]; *Prolapse* #3 [21pp], #4 [24pp], #5 [28pp, all A4], Peter Weston; *Snapshot* #8 [6pp, A4], Ian Sorensen; *Tortoise* #23 [22pp, A4], Sue Jones. We also understand an issue of *Fanzine of the Teledu* was distributed at Novacon 36.

A more detailed listing is available at www.novacon37.org.uk.

Novacon 37 Membership

(as at 11 February)

Charles Stross
Karen Hetherington
Ken MacLeod
Alastair Reynolds
Ian Watson
Steve Green
Kevin Clarke
Vicky Cook
Alice Lawson
Steve Lawson
Ann Green
Neil Summerfield
Jennifer Swift
Tara Dowling-Hussey
Claire Brialey
Mark Plummer
Tim Stannard
Stephen Dunn
Erhard Leder
Caroline Loveridge
Gavin Long
Tony Rogers
Chris O'Shea
Mark Sinclair
Sally Sinclair
Douglas Spencer
Chris Bell
Brian Ameringen
Meriol Ameringen
Caroline Mullan
Dave Hicks
Cat Coast
Penny Hicks

Steve Jones
Dave Tompkins
Andrew A Adams
Roger Robinson
Niall Gordon
Pat McMurray
Julie Rigby
Vernon Brown
Pat Brown
Adrian Snowdon
George Ternent
Linda Ternent
Calvin Ternent
James Odell
Thomas Recktenwald
Al Johnston
Neil Tomkinson
Alison Tomkinson
Rachel Tomkinson
Stephanie Tomkinson
Deborah Tomkinson
Anna Feruglio Daldan
John Harvey
Eve Harvey
Ina Shorrock
Gavin Shorrock
Peter Wareham
Gwen Funnell
Tony Berry
Laura Wheatly
Anne Woodford
Alan Woodford
Steve Cooper

Sue Edwards
Pauline Morgan
Chris Morgan
Dave Hardy
David Thomas
Margaret Croad
Nicholas Jackson
Vincent Docherty
Paul Dormer
Barbara-Jane
Markus Thierstein
Ian Sorensen
Helen Hall
½r
Sue Jones
Austin Benson
Caro Wilson
Julian Headlong
Farah Mendlesohn
Dave Holmes
Peter Mabey
Jim Walker
Yvonne Rowse
Judith Proctor
Steve Davies
Giulia De Cesare
Fatima Ahad
Bridget Bradshaw
Simon Bradshaw
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