

NOVACON 41

Progress Report 2



“Just because Brian Aldiss arrived by helicopter last year *you* have to go one better!”



Park Inn, Nottingham

11th – 13th November 2011

Guest of Honour: **John Meaney**

Membership Rates

Adults: £40 13-16 years: £10 12 and under free

Rates are subject to review.

Day rates will be available at the convention.

Hotel Rooms

Double or Twin: £42 pppn Single: £ 59 pppn

Children: under 5 years free, 5-14 years £5 pppn (ages at the date of the convention)

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Yes it's that difficult second album progress report. Here we are enjoying an occasionally sunny, warm summer and we have to think about a cold, dark November weekend with only the excitement of the 41st Novacon to keep the frost away.

But on with the show; in this PR you will find out more about our Guest of Honour than you thought humanly possible. Joe Abercrombie gives us a personal point of view and John Meaney provides a brief life story. Plus we have a photo of the genius at work.

There's an update on what you can expect from the programme and as part of our series on differing viewpoints of Novacon, Vernon Brown tells us what it looks like not only from a participant's point of view, but also as a programme participant and chairman.

And don't forget the Nova Awards. In the 21st century the paper fanzine is perhaps becoming an endangered species, so Christina Lake asks the question 'Could an electronic fanzine win the Nova?' See the website www.novacon.org for details of eligibility and a list of fanzines.

And that just leaves us the hotel. As usual, negotiations are continuing and Tony will have much more to say in the next PR.

John & Eve Harvey

P.S. Thought we'd ring the changes with some of the footnotes – hope you like them.

TO AVOID DISAPPOINTMENT DON'T FORGET TO BOOK YOUR HOTEL ROOM NOW!



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John Meaney: A personal view

Joe Abercrombie

There aren't that many people who can honestly say that John Meaney has charged at them, roaring at the top of his voice, with a knife. I am honoured to stand among that fortunate few. Though I think I could safely say that, for this particular honour, once was probably enough . . .

John was one of the first authors I met when I first signed a deal with Gollancz, way back in 2005, and our paths have crossed frequently ever since, not always with drawn steel, but never without a bonecrushing handshake. He's a man who is always inclusive and enthusiastic, bubbling over with ideas and energy. A man who writes in many different styles and areas of science fiction, fantasy and thrillers, and is expert and interested in many different subjects – in technology and computing, in hypnotism, in fitness and martial arts, in tv and film – but who most of all is always interested to talk about you. Which is great, because I love talking about me as well.

I'm always pleased when I see John in a room, because I know there's going to be someone there well worth talking to. And if I ever do fancy being brutally stabbed to death, he'll be the first man I call . . .



John does an impersonation of a Bond villain with the aid of Bonbon.

Which writer, in his conrep on travelling to a Novacon, described which station as resembling a 'failed Swedish prison'?

John Meaney: A quick autobiography

I was born in the 'Irish ghetto' of northwest London, of Irish parents, and grew up in Slough, famous for the Poet Laureate's words (addressed to the Luftwaffe): "Come friendly bombs and drop on Slough/It isn't fit for humans now."

When I was five, my mother took me to the local library to join up. There, I found a book about a little boy who hid behind wooden crates next to a launch pad, sneaked on board a rocket, and flew to the moon. This was the time, on TV, of Fireball XL5, the first Dr Who – yes, I watched the first episode in November '63 – and surreal offerings like Torchy, the Battery Boy. Aged six, confined to bed with simultaneous mumps and measles, I read the first Dr Strange and Spider-Man, with Steve Ditko's quirky, compelling artwork.

Within a year or two I was reading the 'juveniles' (as publishers used to call them) of Robert A. Heinlein and Andre Norton, two very different writers, dragging apart the boundaries of my worldview in opposite directions.

Aged ten, I discovered adult SF, starting with Clifford Simak's Time is the Simplest Thing. The book begins with a robot crawling across a grey plain, discovering an alien who broadcasts this thought to the robot's linked-in human operator on Earth: "I trade with you my mind." What an opening.

What other scenes struck me? I remember the first human being in a million years to see a sunrise, peeking out from the enclosed city of Diaspar; Paul Atreides tied up in the back of the ornithopter flying through the sandstorm over the desert of Arrakis; and the amnesiac Corwin, driving with his unremembered brother Random in an altering car as they shifted between realities on the road to Amber.

Outside books, well... I was overweight, asthmatic, and everyone else at Slough Grammar School was taller than me. The least athletic kids played hockey rather than football or rugby. The least athletic of the least athletic played in goal, meaning that an asthma sufferer, wearing a cotton sports jersey and shorts – no extra layers allowed – was required to stand still for hours at a time in chilly winter winds. It might have put me off physicality for life. (Can anybody spell 'operant conditioning'?)

But our school had an arrangement with the local college, and in the fifth form (in the old way of designating school years), aged fifteen, I went along to my first judo lesson, taught by a 70-year-old gentleman called Alf; and it changed my life. In the following year, the instructor was a weightlifting ex-commando called Jack Gayson (not sure of that spelling), and that's when things really kicked off. While continuing in judo (and Jack's after-lesson close-quarter-combat training with the keenest students) I took up wu shu kwan, a hard style of kung fu.

At Birmingham University in 1975 I switched to shotokan karate (becoming the club captain), and began serious weight training and running.

And one Friday in November '78, I popped in to Andromeda where Rog Peyton asked: "Are you coming to our convention tonight?" That moment changed everything!

After leaving Brum, I lived in Wales (having met Yvonne), Hampshire then Kent. In '89 I began working for Europe's largest software house, which meant commuting to London; and that allowed me to train at Enoda Sensei's famous Marshall Street dojo for five or six years.

That was a period when I spent at least four and a half hours commuting every day (or worked away from home), while fitting in my writing and martial arts training. But once you're in your thirties, you have to realize that it's time to take the writing seriously. (Most first-time novelists are over 35, having spent fifteen years to twenty years learning the craft. Like a martial artist, you're in it for the long haul. If you begin with novels and not short stories, realize that the first novel you get published may well be the fifth novel you write.)

I sold my first short story to David Pringle (Gawd bless 'im!) at Interzone in 1992.

I wrote *To Hold Infinity and Paradox* while travelling on trains. The first drafts, at least. You work where you can, not where you would like. (And you write because you must.)

Martial arts remain a huge part of my life, despite my 50th birthday being a distant, fading memory. I cross-train in disciplines outside karate whenever I can, and I've trained with world class people. (For those who

At which 21st century Novacon did Harry Harrison turn up completely unannounced?

follow MMA – it rocks, as far as I’m concerned.) I have a personal dojo in my back garden, and I train in a honbu (main) dojo with some tough and capable guys. I’m proud to do so.

As for computers, I wrote my first programs in 1976, in BASIC, on a PDP11 minicomputer and a Univac mainframe; while in the financial IT arena, my first language was RPG II. That’s the one with the real logic cycle, none of yer namby-pamby later RPGs. (And there was no such thing as a mouse, unless it was furry and squeaked.) These days, if I were to write code it would be Java or even Haskell, and I would design the heck out of the system using UML, incorporating design patterns. Given half a chance, I’ll specify the operations formally, using OCL; and if you give me total freedom, I’ll specify it in Z (i.e. symbolic logic and set theory) and mathematically prove the design before coding.

Some of the software engineers that I’ve taught absolutely love this approach. They’re the ones who, if their software fails, have to live with the fact that someone has probably died.

Less technically, I’ve taught business analysts to use lightweight UML, and enhanced their soft skills: I’m as interested in psychology as software. During one course, besides teaching the official subject, I used hypnosis to cure a delegate’s stuttering.

Elsewhere, I’ve cured phobias and addictions, and that special fear known as writer’s block.

I loved my IT career... although when I started in the industry, the term “IT” did not exist. I worked in IT departments mainly in the finance sector, then spent over a decade in Big Software House in a range of consulting roles, and became a trainer, which combines psychology with software engineering and a touch of showbiz. Perfect for me.

I’ve taught software engineering and business analysis all over the place – often in the States and Switzerland – and had great fun with it. I still do a tiny, tiny bit of training (and a while back, I resumed studies as a very part-time graduate student at Oxford University). Right now I need to write full-time in order to meet deadlines, and so here I am. Finally.

For someone who remembers the little boy hiding beside the launch pad, and the alien offering to trade minds, what else could I do?

The Novacon Programme

Richard Standage

Well we've reached that stage in the planning where we have lots of ideas for panels and talks and the people we think will be really good to have presenting, moderating, participating or at least placed strategically in the audience to heckle, so keep an eye on your inbox for a begging email that starts something along the lines of "how would you like to be on a panel...". We can be very persuasive - you have been warned.

Ideas currently taking shape at the moment are the inimitable Steve Green engaging the GoH in some light hearted banter, Chris Morgan talking about the history of the paperback and Dave Hicks reprising his talk from Corflu on fannish artwork for those of us not lucky enough to catch it first time round.

For the early risers the Saturday and Sunday morning science talks this year are courtesy of the School of Physics and Astronomy at the University of Nottingham. Dr Frazer Pearce is going to do a very cheerful talk entitled 'Megadeath', looking at potential catastrophes that could kill a million plus people, such as asteroid strikes, plague etc., giving the scientific background. Dr Meghan Gray will do a talk on 'The Dark Side of the Universe'.

Our Guest of Honour will of course be dragged into as much as he can humanely bear, so there will be ample opportunity to get to know him and his work over the weekend.

This is of course all in addition to the stuff that a Novacon really wouldn't be the same without: a Friday night party, book and art auctions, a Sunday beer and food tasting, and of course a Big Saturday Night Thingy, details of which are still being kept under wraps.

As usual if you have any ideas or want to volunteer, then get in touch, we'd love to hear from you. You know how...

Donald Duck comics were banned from Finland because he doesn't wear pants.

Views Of Novacon

Vernon Brown

At first glance a request for an article about one's different perceptions of Novacon as attendee, occasional programme participant and NC40 Chairman appears simple, if a little reminiscent of the "compare and contrast" questions of yesteryear's examinations. But perceptions are personal things that depend on experience and expectations, likes and dislikes, and such an article can range from a brief uninformative "I found it interesting/ boring/- - -" to a tedious discourse. I shall strive a middle course, otherwise, *mea culpa*.

As an attendee at every Novacon so far I have found something to enjoy at each, although some have had more "somethings" than others. I used to enjoy the slightly formalised Saturday banquets, which were replaced with discos which have since gone their way to leave a more lightly programmed evening with many people eating out. I think that over the years Novacon has evolved and matured to become a comfortable weekend, which is not to say that it has become staid, there is an overall structure but the details vary from year to year

What I particularly like about the con is that it is single programmed – there's nothing more frustrating than having items of particular interest appearing simultaneously in different streams. The choice is simple: attend a programme item or go to the Bar and drink/chat, the Bookroom and buy/chat, the Artroom and look/chat and so on. Being born somewhat before Novacon I prefer to relax and enjoy myself rather than dash about trying to convince myself that I'm having a good time. Novacon is a fannish con with an excellent balance of things to do and people to meet, with enough attendees to allow them to circulate without either rattling about or feeling hemmed in. And the meal and beer tasting on Sunday is a good way to end the weekend although it's a pity that many people miss it because of work commitments the next day.

But what about Novacon as a programme participant? I can only remember being so at Novacon 38 when I was Fan GoH. For two of my items I was a panellist and for the third I was interviewed, the difference

between the two types was unbelievable. I am used to discussion groups and committees both professional and amateur and to addressing rooms full of students so I thought that being a panellist would, in effect, be a combination. 'Twas not to be.

The first panel was to be based on 1984 and Brave New World so I reread my copies and bought the sequel to one and an analysis of the other so I was full of confidence when I joined the other panellists. I think that everyone mentioned the two novels in their first sentences before going on to something else. There was presumably an underlying thread somewhere but I was soon lost and waiting for the end. I was never sure whether I should pick up on someone's points straight away or wait my turn so I'd do the latter, by which time the discussion would have moved on. Similarly, I had researched the second debate, "SF future versus present reality" and found the same problems. Perhaps my old job made me think too carefully but it's more likely that good panellists are born not made, having a mixture of self confidence, knowledge and assertiveness.

My interview as Fan GoH, on the other hand, went well. Pauline Morgan is an excellent interviewer and, as I had provided her with a brief history, she could formulate questions that would elicit the answers that she thought would be of interest to the audience. So I expanded on what I had written for the Novacon publications, answered questions and found out afterwards that things had gone down reasonably well. I enjoyed the experience, partly, I think, because of Pauline's skill and partly because there was a path to follow. And in future I'll have a slightly different view of these types of programme items.

Oddly enough the most important of my three "perceptions", being NC40 Chairman, was the easiest. When I chaired the first Novacon none of the committee had run a con before so the weekend was a bit fraught, but the other NC40 committee members were experienced in such matters so my job as chairman was mainly a matter of contributing to committee meetings and to the Progress Reports, and contacting several of the Guests. The Committee ran smoothly so most of the work of organising the con was done before the event. We all turned up on the Thursday to do last minute stuff like stuffing envelopes but I had little to do over the weekend itself except during the opening and the adjourning ceremonies.

At which Novacon/which year was COFF (the Concrete Overcoat Fan Fund) invented?

There was a certain amount of lugging stuff around but that was all. So my perception of NC40 itself was actually little different from my other two perceptions, except towards the end when a number of attendees said how much they had enjoyed the weekend and I felt honoured to have been a part of the Committee. And the weekend certainly demonstrated what so many people don't realise, that the smoother such an event runs, and the more effortless it appears to be, the more work has gone into making it so.

Overall then, my perceptions of Novacon from all three viewpoints are, to all intents and purposes, the same. There are slight differences but they are negligible in comparison with the overall feeling of being there. It's perhaps a little like going to a favourite old backstreet pub: the beers may change and there may be strange faces but whether you go with a book, a loved one or a few friends, it's the ambience that makes the occasion. Long may the Novacon ambience last.

Miscellany

Art Show

Serena Culfeather has agreed to run this again after her excellent work over the last two years. Artists looking to exhibit work (for auction or otherwise) should contact her soon:

serena@ravensquill.org

Dealer's Room

As in previous years, this will be in the large room next to the bar! £20 per 6ft table for the weekend and you have to be a member of the convention to book space. Interested dealers should contact Tony Berry:

morbius@altair-4.co.uk

Parents' co-op

As usual Novacon will not be operating a crèche but we will be setting aside a room 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

Again as usual, and whenever Tony has any say in the matter, there will be real ale and a good cider provided in the bar, plus a range of snacks and meals throughout the weekend.

Could an electronic fanzine win the Nova?

Christina Lake

This was going to be my thought experiment for this article until I read the latest issue of *Chunga* and realised that as far as Andy Hooper was concerned, one already had. I suppose there should be no novelty in the concept in any case as Dave Langford's *Ansible* won a Hugo for many years on the basis of votes from readers who never saw a physical copy. While I can vouch for the physical reality of *Journey Planet*, last year's Nova award winning fanzine, there's no doubt that being available on e-fanzines does no harm for your visibility and readership. The efanazines.com website represents an important stage in the evolution of the fanzine from printed paper to electronic medium. It's now much easier for the keen fanzine fan to see what's around, for new fans to discover fanzines and for the gaffiated to rekindle their interest. Hurrah for Bill Burns! But what then of that special relationship between the fanzine and its reader, or the rituals of exchanges, locs, "the usual", and physical matter flying through letter boxes? What of the intimacy of writing for a known audience, all of whom the fan editor can name?

What of it!

Paper only or paper-first fanzines can still opt for that route. But for those who are comfortable on the net, who blog, tweet and do the social networking thing, there also an intimacy – intimacy 2.0, if you like, which comes from a sense of belonging to your internet community, and wanting to build social capital within it. Steve Green's *The Fortnightly Fix*, an e-only zine, certainly has the personal feeling of a frequent paper fanzine, and doesn't seem to suffer from its e-only status. At Eastercon, Alison Scott was so pleased with how the latest issue of *Plokta* looked on the iPad that she was distinctly reluctant to hand round paper copies, and looked like she wanted to declare it the first iPad-first fanzine.

I don't have an iPad, but I have started to read contributions to e-apa (an electronic apa also hosted on e-fanzines) on the Kindle, to cut down on time spent at the PC. The Kindle's not ideal for the job. Some contributions are difficult to read, or don't work at all, and you can't click on hyperlinks, but it does mean that I can take the apazines on the train and into the garden, or even down the beach (though I'm a bit scared of getting sand in my Kindle!) The Kindle works for fanzines too, providing the print is not too small or there aren't too many columns, an art which Chris Garcia seems to have mastered for his many Internet productions.

A giraffe can clean its ears with its 21-inch tongue.



Chris Garcia is totally underwhelmed when he learns that he is the first winner of a Nova outside the UK

So it would seem that the rise of the portable e-reader in all its forms has the potential to liberate fanzines from the electronic limbo in which the fanzine has been living ever since it was banished from its paper form by the converging forces of rising postage and rapid internet communication, and bring it back out into the bathrooms and gardens of fannish households, or onto the tube and buses, without the need for gallons of printer ink or backache from lugging a laptop around.

If it's true that we're living in a transitional period between paper fanzines and a fully portable electronic format then perhaps it's premature to declare the death of the fanzine? It's also making me wonder whether in future there will be such a thing as a national fanzine scene? For example, no-one has seen the need to start an e-fanzines.co.uk. Whilst paper copies of fanzines are more likely to be available closer to source, particularly at conventions, fanzines from all round the world can now be read anywhere in the world without the barrier of postal costs or waiting for the slow boat carrying the Surface Mail fanzines from Australia.

National barriers are also blurring in the business of editing fanzines. While the multi-continental fanzine is not a new phenomenon, it's easier to do than ever before, and *Journey Planet* is the first to deliver a Nova Award outside of Britain. Also the ease of electronic submissions means that art work and articles from all round the world appear in British fanzines. Maybe we're approaching a time when the British only criterion for the Novas will become meaningless? In cyberspace, how can you even tell where a fanzine came from and does it matter? But that's a problem for future Nova Award administrators. To my mind, the opportunities that electronic publishing bring for increasing readership and participation in the fanzine community, and the collaborations and experimentation that a larger pool of fanzine contributors offers can only be a good thing, and as the availability of portable reading devices increases, I wouldn't be at all surprised if an electronic-only fanzine wins a Nova Award in the not so distant future.

Novacon 41 Members

as at 19/03/2011

1	John Meaney	59	Margaret Croad
2	Yvonne Meaney	115	Helen Cross
28	½r	120	Nelson Cunningham
23	Michael Abbott	111	Julia Daly
6	Brian Aldiss	18	Michael Davidson
86	Brian Ameringen	19	Christine Davidson
88	Meriol Ameringen	98	Steve Davies
124	Margaret Austin	102	Malcolm Davies
3	Iain M Banks	122	Robert Day
96	Barbara-Jane	117	Simon Dearn
27	Chris Bell	99	Giulia DeCesare
113	Alan Bellingham	40	Vincent Docherty
49	Austin Benson	93	Paul Dormer
10	Tony Berry	125	Martin Easterbrook
11	Helena Bowles	121	Cathryn Easthope
20	Claire Brialey	57	Sue Edwards
69	Michelle Broadribb	78	Gwen Funnell
70	Tim Broadribb	68	Ron Gemmell
42	Vernon Brown	56	Niall Gordon
43	Pat Brown	100	Dave Hardy
114	Ian Brown	7	Harry Harrison
116	E.D. Buckley	14	John Harvey
54	Jonathan Cain	15	Eve Harvey
53	Marianne Cain	89	Susie Haynes
52	Steven Cain	71	Julian Headlong
33	David Carlile	84	Dave Hicks
29	David Cluett	85	Penny Hicks
30	Joyce Cluett	127	Martin Hoare
12	Cat Coast	128	Al Johnston
72	Del Cotter	65	Sue Jones
109	Dave Cox	44	Leigh Kennedy

47	Tim Kirk	67	Ian Roll
126	Dave Lally	76	Yvonne Rowse
9	Alice Lawson	77	Sally Rowse
8	Steve Lawson	94	Geoff Ryman
46	Peter Mabey	26	Jamie Scott
5	Ian R MacLeod	51	Alison Scott
119	Clarrie Maguire	107	Ina Shorrock
118	Tim Maguire	108	Gavin Shorrock
95	Rory McLean	16	Harpal Singh
63	Pat Meara	55	Adrian Snowdon
64	Michael Meara	101	Kate Solomon
34	Chris Morgan	75	Ian Sorensen
35	Pauline Morgan	110	Douglas Spencer
103	Carol Morton	13	Richard Standage
104	Tony Morton	17	Tim Stannard
87	Caroline Mullan	80	Chris Stocks
48	James Odell	22	Neil Summerfield
37	Omega	83	Calvin Ternent
60	Andrew Patton	81	George Ternent
38	Hal Payne	82	Linda Ternent
39	Jodie Payne	97	Markus Thierstein
36	Harry Payne	58	David Thomas
62	Mali Perera	90	Neil Tomkinson
123	Rog Peyton	91	Alison Tomkinson
106	Catherine Pickersgill	66	Dave Tompkins
105	Greg Pickersgill	25	Jim Walker
21	Mark Plummer	79	Peter Wareham
45	Christopher Priest	61	Gerry Webb
112	Colette Reap	73	Nik Whitehead
92	Thomas Recktenwald	24	Anne Wilson
41	Roger Robinson	50	Caro Wilson
4	Justina Robson	31	Anne Woodford
74	Tony Rogers	32	Alan Woodford

Acknowledgments

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Thanks also to Steve Green and Kevin Clarke for running the Novacon website:

www.novacon.org.uk

Since 1972, Novacon has been organised by the Birmingham SF Group, which celebrated its fortieth birthday in June. Meetings of the BSFG are held on the second Friday of each month at the Briar Rose Hotel, Bennetts Hill.

For more information on future meetings look on their website:

www.birminghamsfgroup.org.uk

BSFG Membership costs £16 per year which includes a monthly newsletter. For further information, a copy of their newsletter or a membership application form contact their Membership Secretary Vicky Cook on:

bhamsfgroup@yayoo.co.uk

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