

NOVACON 47

10 - 12 November 2017

Hey kids, Steve McQueen Says.....

I'd rather be at NOVACON 47 than have my face chewed off
by a pulsating blob from outer space!



PROGRESS
1
REPORT

GUEST OF HONOUR ADRIAN TCHAIKOVSKY

**THE ANNUAL CONVENTION OF THE
BIRMINGHAM SCIENCE FICTION GROUP**



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Editorial.....

Yes, it's time to put the "fun" in dysfunctional.....iiiiiiiiit's **NOVACON!** Back for a 47th time by popular (?) demand we once again tread the grapes of fun to bring you the wine of...of..., no, it's gone.... Sorry.

Anyway, here's the first **Progress Report** bristling with facts and figures. You will receive three of these along the way, and it's my job to ensure that they go out on time (*mostly*) and contain interesting stuff (*depending on your definition of "interesting"*). Again, this year, the travelling Clown Circus has let us down, and Brian Cox claims he will be ill that day, but I'm sure we will think of something.

So without further ado (*what is an "ado"?*).... Let's go.

Again, sorry about the lack of clowns.

(Committee not withstanding)

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Welcome to Progress Report One for Novacon 47.

Yes, we've been around for 47 years. We must be doing something right, eh?

Or are we?

This is something we're discussing a lot this year. We want to try new things, be fresher and even more interesting. How we do that while keeping the essence of a **Novacon**?

This is where *you* come in. Our members are what makes **Novacon** special so, what do you think of what we're doing? Are there things you'd like to see more of? Less of? Utterly new things we haven't thought of? We're always open to new ideas and we positively welcome suggestions. We're *your Novacon*, you tell us what you want us to do. You can contact us either by our Facebook page, or by the website. Or scribble your ideas on a bit of paper and hand it to us whenever you see us at a convention.

I would like to welcome **Adrian Tchaikovsky** to the ranks of **Novacon** Guests of Honour. Adrian's an all-rounder, writing a ten book sequence known as *The Shadows of the Apt* and last year's **Arthur C Clarke Award** winner, *Children of Time* described as "epic spider space Opera". We're delighted to be able to honour him this year.

So, what will happen this year? Well, all the usual. No, seriously, there will be the expected stuff – the Serious Scientific Talks, the panel discussions, the Big Sociable Thing on Saturday night, the art auction, a book auction, some excuse for wine and nibbles on Friday, the beer tasting and guest banquet on Sunday night, and so on – but there will also the new, the amazing, and the original.

Just as soon as we've figured out what they are.

On a more sombre note, it has been a sad few months for **Novacon**, having lost three of our extended family and we would like to say a few words about them.

Pete Weston: known to many of you as a long-standing member of the **BSFG**, he was at one time a regular **Novacon** attendee. Although we had not seen him in a while, he will always be remembered for his dry wit and love of all things SF.

Vicky Stock: someone who, perhaps, not all of you would know. She was membership secretary for the **BSFG** and was on a couple of the **Novacon** committees. She was full of enthusiasm and energy.



THE CHAIRS SPEAK



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Dave Holmes: a long time **Novacon** member and a fixture of the dealer's room. He also supplied the ale for the beer tasting on Sunday nights. His loss will be deeply felt, not only for the beer, but also his sense of humour and, dare I say, cheek.

They will all be sadly missed.

Helena and Alice

My original brief from Gary for this piece was, basically, just lie at this point; they are never going to remember. So, I can exclusively reveal that Friday will kick off with a trip on *Virgin Galactic*, on Saturday Tim Peake is going to take us up in a Soyuz for a guided tour of the ISS (strictly limited numbers) and Sunday we will wind down with a trip in a prototype time machine that has just come out of CERN and start all over again.

OK, possibly not what Gary had in mind? In that case, I can say that we are looking to cast a fresh eye over the programme this year and possibly even shake things up a bit (eek!). In particular, we would like to have a fuller off-piste programme. While we have no ambitions to join in with the big kids in the playground and be multi-stream, we are looking to expand this and run a broader range of informal items. So, if anyone out there wants to use this space for an event that we can support then let me know. Anything considered, embarrassment no issue.

We are, of course, really lucky to have the fantastic **Adrian Tchaikovsky** as our Guest of Honour. As is traditional, we will be featuring Adrian himself and his ideas on the programme throughout the weekend. The highlight of this will be the usual Guest of Honour slot on Saturday, but there will be plenty of other opportunities for you to get to know Adrian and his work.

Whatever shape the final programme takes, I can of course promise all the **Novacon** regulars that we all know and love such as the Friday night party (we will think of an excuse nearer the time), a couple of science speakers and the Sunday night buffet and beer tasting. Throw in a whole load of fannish panels, some silly games, informal off-piste tomfoolery and of course our aforementioned fantastic Guest of Honour Adrian and I can promise you a weekend to remember.

If you have any ideas, or, dare I say, a burning desire to run, or be involved in, any item then please get in touch with our friendly programming team (me). It will make me look really on the ball when we get to programming at the next committee meeting and everyone looks at me expectantly...

Richard



Mansfield Road, Nottingham
NG5 2TB



Well, despite a massive bribe and threats of death from the hotel management, we are once again at the Park Inn, Nottingham.

The thorny path of negotiation that we walked last year to get the things we requested is on again, but we hope that the progress we have made so far will stand us in good stead. We are hoping to have all the same facilities available to us this year. I think we all agree that the hotel served us well for all the events we held last year and will continue to do so for all the things we are hoping to bring you this year.

As the eagle-eyed will have spotted, room rates have increased by a tiny amount but nothing that is going to break the bank. You can always claw your money back by going gonzo with the breakfast buffet until you feel some level of equilibrium has been reached.

There are a small number of interconnected rooms for the families amongst us, but you will have to get in touch with me as soon as you can. It's first come first served, or three falls and a submission depending how game you are feeling.

As usual, the hotel will start filling up any rooms we don't take, so it is important to get your booking in to the hotel as soon as possible. The address can be found on the hotel booking form or on the website. If you have any special needs feel free to email me at the address provided on the committee page, and I will present your requests to the hotel. Dietary restrictions should also be noted on the hotel booking form, but, again, if you have any questions, please email me.

Despite the Committee's best efforts, complementary bottles of gin in all the rooms will, once again, be missing this year. Looks like you'll all be buying your own drinks again. Having said that we will be having real ale on the bar so it's not a total loss. There are also lager, and other drinks if you are that way inclined.

Don't forget, as part of your room rate you will have access to all the hotels facilities, such as the pool and gym. I remember seeing some of you last year looking in through the gym windows and wondering what the hell it was. It's free, give it a try. If nothing else, it will give the rest of us a good laugh.

Tony.

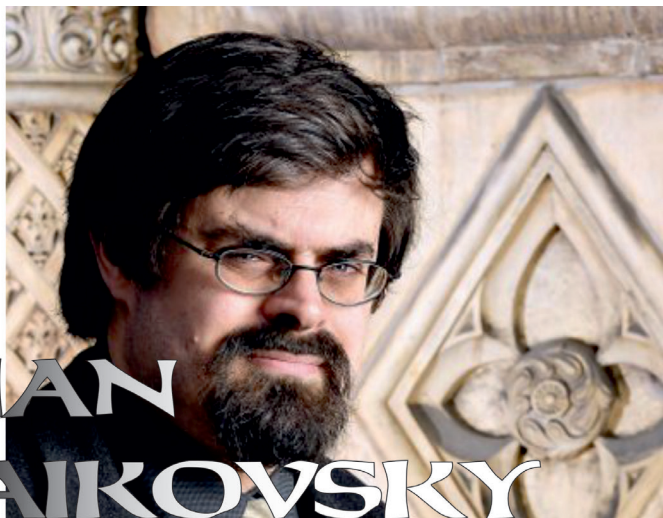


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G.O.H.

ADRIAN TCHAIKOVSKY



Well, well, well. Looky who we have as a **Guest of Honour** this year. It's none other than ya geezer **Adrian Tchaikovsky**, innit!

Not only is this geezer the author of the *Shadows Of The Apt* series, but he only went and flippin' won the **Arthur C. Clarke Award** last year for his well good book, *Children Of Time*!

Bloomin' 'eck.....

Sorry, sorry..... Not sure quite what's going on here.....Let's begin again.

Cor, blimey.....

Bum!

Right. Clearly I'm having some sort of episode, so if you refer to the webpage you will find the following information about this year's **G.O.H.**

Adrian Tchaikovsky was born in Lincolnshire, and studied zoology and psychology at Reading before practising law in Leeds. He is a keen live role-player, occasional amateur actor and is trained in stage-fighting. His literary influences include Gene Wolfe, Mervyn Peake, China Miéville, Mary Gentle, Steven Erikson, Naomi Novak, Scott Lynch and Alan Campbell.

His first novel, *Empire of Black and Gold*, was published in 2008. Since then, Tchaikovsky has published another nine books in the series known as *Shadows of the Apt*. He has also published several standalone novels, and contributed to several series. In 2016, he won the **Arthur C. Clarke Award** for *Children of Time*.

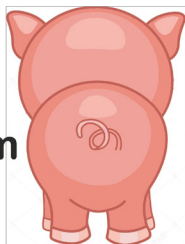
The *Shadows of the Apt* series is set in a world where humans are divided into groups, or “kinden” by certain insectile characteristics. The kinden are further divided into the “apt” (mechanistically able), and the “inapt” (magic using). The first book opens seventeen years after the invasion of the Wasp Empire. Stenwold Maker, a Spymaster from the unconquered Lowlands, witnessed that invasion and strongly believes his city will be menaced one day soon. As no one else seems inclined to take this seriously he takes it upon himself to train four young kinden to resist the upcoming attack.

Children of Time is very different, being a chunky, eon-spanning, far future space opera. After an act of sabotage, terraforming scientist, Avrana Kern, is forced to release a nanovirus onto the planet she was terraforming for human use. While she is in protective cryosleep, the virus “uplifts” unlikely creatures: the spiders. From there one strand of the story follows the spider civilisation, while a second focusses on the human colonists who arrive in cryosleep, expecting the planet to be ready for colonisation.

Novacon 47 is delighted to welcome Adrian as our Guest of Honour in 2017.

Gawd bless ya, that sums it up sumfin’ marvellous..... *Christ!*

moonpig.com



For when
just words
aren't enough.



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Why Do I Travel 700 Miles To A Novacon?

by
Eve Harvey



When I started fandom, if you liked **Eastercons**, and wanted to do more, **Novacon** was virtually the only next step for those who were most interested in SF in general, and meeting people. **Novacon** was where you actually started to talk to people. Being university students, we couldn't afford two cons a year though, so our first Novacon was after we graduated - **Novacon 6**, in 1976, at the Angus Hotel, Birmingham.



At that time, there were distinctly three 'layers' of attendees. There were the youngsters who were coming up from Eastercons, then there were the people who had already started to get involved with fandom, and finally the 'old hacks', who came to meet people rather than attend the programme, except for when they were part of it. Gradually, however, the number of people in the first two 'sections' have become smaller and smaller.

John and I missed a few cons in the 1990s when we dropped out of fandom, but since **Novacon 25** we've been attending every year, even though we now live in France. So what makes **Novacons** so important to me when they have changed so much from those early days? I think it is various aspects, the most important being the sociality. I love to meet new people, and at a Novacon the smaller number of members compared to **Eastercons** (usually between 200-300) means you can see and meet everyone. You can start chatting in the bar area, or in the dealers' room – or

at breakfast, since almost everyone is in the same hotel. So there are very few private parties, and lots of communal enjoyment.

In addition to the meeting of people, I also value the programme at a convention, and at **Novacon** these two items are linked.

For instance, there are usually new book-launch events on the main programme, which are also social events offering wine, as well as audience-wide quizzes. Also, like **Eastercons**, **Novacon** is not a specialist convention and covers a wide range of interest. I like this because I not only want to see programme items on topics I like, but also something completely new. For instance, in the early days the scientific programme items first thing in the morning from local university members were of great interest to me. Nowadays, though, I've usually been up too late in the bar to be able to get up in time for the programme!! Unlike **Eastercon** and other multi-programme conventions, however, you are not often forced to make a choice between different programme items because they clash with each other.

The other key element that makes **Novacon** programme good is that with only one schedule you don't have to miss anything. Not only that, but with there being only a single line, the programme items are quite different from each other. And there's the art show, and also the 'banquet', oh, and the beer tasting, and... and... and...

So, despite the change in the convention, I still enjoy it, and hope that we will be able to continue with the journey from France for many a year to come. I also hope we can entice the youngsters again to keep us 'old hacks' up in the new age!!

Hope to see you in November!!!



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EMPIRE

in Black and Gold

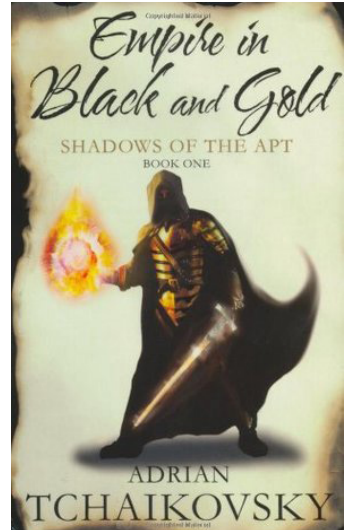
Book 1 of the *Shadows of the Apt* Series

by Adrian Tchaikovsky

Review By Helena Bowles

A fantasy novel, whose setting is about as far from the generic mediaeval European background as one can get. I will admit I was a little leery about the whole idea. Insectile races of men? An evil empire poised to sweep over everything in its path? Four young people sent out on a quest to stop the war?

I am happy to state I was utterly and completely wrong. The concept of the insect clans is fascinating and thoroughly original. The Empire in question not so much evil as just a bit worse, and much stronger than everyone else, the four young people at the centre of this story are well drawn and their quest isn't exactly a quest at all.



The clans of Insect kin (singular *kinden*) are Tchaikovsky's most noteworthy piece of world-building. His lands are inhabited by many different races of humans who are divided by their having adopted the aspect of a totem insect. This aspect is biological but by meditative practices they can gain access to an *art* associated with their kin and often with their race's insect totem. In-world this is considered different to magic which the *kinden* we are initially introduced to - the hard-headed, mechanically minded Beetle kin - reject as mere superstition belonging to an earlier, less civilised age. The kin themselves are further divided into the *apt* or mechanically able and the *inapt* who, while just as intelligent, educated and civilised as the *apt* kin, are congenitally incapable of grasping even the simplest mechanical device - down to the level of a trigger on a weapon or a door handle. I will admit this last caused me some slight difficulty with the level of suspension of disbelief required, as I couldn't entirely reconcile the concept of whole groups whose thought processes generally seemed pretty similar to your basic model human yet were unable to learn that pressing this lever makes a door open or a weapon to fire. Especially as they do seem to use long bows so must have some grasp of basic physics. This is a minor niggle though. It isn't clear how humanity adopted these aspects but, as this is only book one of a ten book sequence, I'm happy to wait to find out.

The world - for which we don't have an overall name - is in the throes of an industrial revolution spearheaded by the *apt* kin. Beetle-*kinden* make excellent artificers and engineers and they are in the forefront of the technological expansion, at least in the Lowlands. Stenwold Maker is a middle-aged Beetle Master-Engineer at the Collegium, the Lowlands centre of culture and learning (think Oxford University meets Ancient Greece). He is not a popular figure. As a much younger man he was witness to the last phase of expansion carried out by the enormous Wasp Empire. Since then he has been trying to warn the self-satisfied Collegium leaders that the

Lowlands will be next. No one has listened and no one is prepared to listen now. Stenwold has done what he can, recruiting students to go abroad and report back, building contacts in other cities, keeping his finger on the pulse of the world beyond the Lowlands. Finally, he sees the signs that the day is coming and prepares to send his latest group of student-agents out, partly to keep them safe, partly so they can start work.

The four students are good friends. There's Stenwold's ward, the beautiful, tricky spider-kin Tynisa, the flamboyant dragonfly-prince Salma, the sturdy mixed race Totho, and the young woman who Stenwold wanted to keep safe and out of this business, his niece Cheerwell. They are sent away from the Collegium to the Lowland's industrial powerhouse, the city of Helleron but things are moving faster than Stenwold anticipated and Helleron, is no longer safe. The Wasps are trading furiously with Helleron and the city believes this will keep them safe, despite treaties being rewritten and territory being nibbled away. Helleron, like Collegium, is complacent. The four friends are betrayed and separated, two being taken further into Wasp controlled territory. A frantic rescue mission is mounted.

Some of this may sound – and undoubtedly is – a little clichéd but the engaging characterisation and fast moving narrative mean this doesn't niggle as much as it might. Yes, I guessed who Tynisa was within two paragraphs of her being introduced, yes, there actually is a rescue via a fortress's sewers, but Tynisa, herself, and her relationships are clearly, if economically drawn and the details of the rescue raise it above that one aspect. With the insect-kin it would be easy to fall into the Eddings-esque trap of geographically determined personality but, while there is a little of this (spiders are cunning, Beetles are handy etc.) there is enough intra-kin discussion and conflict for each character to be more than just "a spider" or "a Beetle". Equally it would be very easy to present the Wasp Empire as somehow less human and qualitatively different to the other kin we meet, but this is averted by the character of the Wasp officer, Captain Thalric. Thalric is an honourable man who is absolutely loyal to the Empire. He will do whatever he must in order to serve and protect that ideal, whether that is committing infanticide, an act that haunts him though he would not admit it and would do the same again in the service of the Empire, or threatening to rape and torture a young Beetle woman whom he believes holds important information. He takes no pleasure in these things except, possibly, for an austere satisfaction in the idea of service. He is polite, courteous, and urbane – and all the more chilling for that. He is the silkily polite Nazi interrogator, somewhat of a Rommel, who forms a surprising bond with Cheerwell Maker.

The Wasp Empire is one where adult males are all soldiers and all other tasks are undertaken by slaves. It would be easy to see this as something that separates them from the other kin but the narrative undermines this by having Salma and Cheerwell both acknowledge the economic servitude that keeps their factories and farms productive. The Wasps see themselves, like Ancient Rome, as a civilising force – as, of course, does the Collegium. Even in this first book we get a good look at the Empire and its workings and I strongly suspect it and its people will be further explored in later books.

One caveat: this is not a visual book. Description is kept to a minimum which helps to speed the pace of the narrative but for the most part things and places are not delineated. This leaves me with some questions like, if the inapt can't use door handles, are there no doors in the lowlands? How does that impact security – not to mention insulation. I would have liked more description of the great Moth city, built into a mountain peak. But this, again, is a minor quibble and overall this is a highly original, hugely entertaining read.



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10 - 12 November 2017

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