

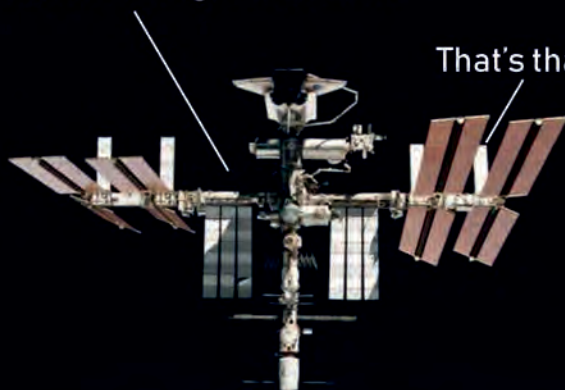
# NOVACON

**9-11 November 2018**

**Park Inn, Nottingham**

## **The Problems With Having Amateurs In Space No. 327**

Hey, I found another one of them "hole" things  
you've been having trouble with.



**Guest Of Honour**

**Chris Beckett**

PROGRESS  
**3**  
REPORT

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

# The Committee

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Alice Lawson, Doug Spencer  
AND Richard Standage.

## EDITORIAL.....

The other day I was in the lab, watching the mice run around, eating bits of food, cleverly squeezing though tiny gaps to get at things, and I started wondering.... HOW THE BLOODY HELL ARE THESE VERMIN GETTING IN HERE! Seriously, we are over-run, it's driving us all mad, you can't eat a sandwich without noticing tiny teethmarks.

Still, enough of that. It's almost that time of year... no, not Christmas....NOVACON time! I hope you are all excited, we certainly are. We have been planning and drinking.... mostly drinking I'll admit, but there has been a bit (a tiny bit) of planning going on to bring you the best Novacon we can.... sorry about that.

See you there!

Hello, Chuck Noris here, just to let you know that the Committee are personal friends of mine and if I find out you have been copying stuff from within these pages without their permission... well... let's just say I might not look too favourably on that... if you know what I mean?

# A ~~WARD FOR~~ WORD FROM OUR CHAIR



“**M**ay you live in interesting times” is a well known curse from an ancient civilisation - or the **Birmingham SF Group** as it’s otherwise known. Anyone who runs a convention knows that things can get “interesting, very interesting”\* rather quickly in the run up to the convention, but we’re keeping it under control (mostly). Meanwhile the world outside fandom seems to be getting more “interesting” too. It’s a theme our splendid Guest of Honour, **Chris Beckett** has raised, and we’ll be talking about how you write/make science fiction in such a dynamic environment.

We’re planning on giving you a convention that’s interesting in the *right* way. There will be some of the usual features of a **Novacon** (see later in the **PR**) because they work, and also within that framework we can enjoy talking about stuff that’s current, exciting and that matters, in the main hall. Hopefully with a lively audience (that’s you) and again later in the bar, *after* you’ve been to the programme. Remember our motto – Turn Up, Speak Up, Drink Up.

Remember, if you’ve got anything you want to launch, present, discuss, or something unusual that you’d like to exhibit to the members of the convention (*now you had to say that didn’t you... on your own head be it – Ed*) there’s the downstairs off-piste stream in the bar area. There’s also some function space available for “other” events too (talk to the Committee on the day or email us before and we can arrange something). We don’t programme for all of this but it’s there for you, if you want it. While you’re down there, remember to check out the art show too.

Above all, turn up and have a good time. I plan to.

Been told by the committee to point out that by joining Novacon, you give us permission to send you **Progress Report 1** for the following **Novacon**.

\* Adam vs Buffy, end of season 4 or Barry Davies commentating on Francis Lee’s goal for Man City v Derby in 1974, depending on your frame of reference.



Mansfield Road, Nottingham  
NG5 2TB



If you haven't booked your hotel room yet, it's time to extract your digit from wherever it's stuck.

Rates are:

£49pppn double/twin

£67pppn single.

There are a limited number of family rooms (2 adults and 2 children) for £110 per night.

Children under 4 years old get in free, 4-12 years half price, then full adult rate. Hotel forms can be downloaded from the website, then send them to Steve Lawson.

**IMPORTANT STUFF:** If you cancel your room less than one week before the convention, or don't show up at all, the hotel reserves the right to charge you for one night's stay. If you are going to arrive after 4pm on Friday (I'm guessing that's most of you), please ring the hotel on 0115-935-9988 and reserve your room with a card. Rooms will be released to the public 4 weeks before the con.

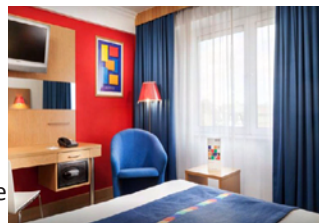
On Sunday evening there will be the usual Banquet and Beer-Tasting. This year our GoH has chosen Tex-Mex. So, if you want to partake of the nosh you must buy a ticket before 12noon on Sunday (price tbc - see the Committee room in the reception area).

For the Beer-Tasting you can either bring 3 bottles/cans of beer (the more interesting the better) to registration in return for a badge, or you can simply buy one for £6. A selection of soft drinks will be available at the event free to everyone.

If you want to book a table in the dealers' room the cost is £20 per 6ft table. You have to be a member of the convention to book a dealers' table. For information or to book contact me, Tony Berry (address page 2).

For Artshow space or a Con table there is no charge and again, contact me.

Finally, if you have books for the obligatory Book Auction just drop them off at Registration. Remember to label them with your name if you want the money from any sales.







## **By Car**

From the M1 leave at junction 25 and take the A52 (Brian Clough Way) to Nottingham. At the first roundabout take the second exit still following the A52.

At the next roundabout go straight across continuing to follow the A52.

2nd exit on the next roundabout, again staying with the A52.

At the next island take the second exit signed A6200 Nottingham City Centre.

Continue on here. You will pass the Three Wheatsheaves pub on your left.

Continue until you reach the next set of traffic lights. Turn left onto Lenton Blvd.

Continue on this road and pass through two large Traffic Lit junctions.

Continue until you pass a retail part on your left. At the next large set of lights you want to go straight on (Gregory Blvd), it's a small dog-leg to the right.

Follow this road, past the recreational ground until you reach the roundabout. Take the second exit, staying in the left hand lane as you leave.

At the next roundabout take the first exit and the hotel is on your right after a few hundred yards.

## **By Train.**

From Nottingham city station you can either take a Taxi or catch the tram.

If you take the tram get off at The Forrest stop. Then head downhill until you intersect Gregory Blvd. Turn right along here and follow the recreation ground until you come to a set of double roundabouts. cross both of these and you are now on the A60, Mansfield Road. Turn left down here and the hotel will be on your right.



# NOVACON CODE OF CONDUCT

**A** Convention is a private event and, as such, the Committee has always had the right and the ability to remove any attendee for antisocial behaviour. Over recent years, it has become standard practice for such events to publish a Code of Conduct providing guidelines as to what that antisocial behaviour may include.

For most people, the simple principle of, “Behave like a decent human being,” is enough of a guideline. However, just in case, these are the behaviours we feel lead to that result:

1. **Be welcoming.** We expect all our attendees to respect each other’s right to be at Novacon. In particular, discriminatory behaviour or harassment will not be tolerated.
2. **Be courteous** and aware we all have different sensitivities. If your language or behaviour is unwelcome to another attendee then stop. Anything else may be considered harassment.
3. **Be respectful** of other people’s boundaries. Physical contact should only occur with all parties’ enthusiastic consent. Remember, not everyone likes being hugged.
4. **Be aware** that communication may be verbal or non-verbal.

**Discrimination** includes, but is not limited to, discrimination on the grounds of: sex, gender, gender identity or expression, sexuality, ethnicity, age, religion and mental or physical disability.

**Harassment** includes, but is not limited to, any behaviour that can be reasonably expected to disturb or intimidate another convention attendee. It includes the wearing of symbols associated with fascism and racism, independent of the intent of the wearer. Harassment may be verbal or non-verbal.

## Dealing with discrimination or harassment

If you feel comfortable, address the person and the problem behaviour directly. In most cases this will be all that is required.

If you are not comfortable with a direct approach, or it proves insufficient, then either:

- Report the matter to the Duty Committee Member (look for the gold waistcoat). He/she will contact the Designated People who will come to talk to you as soon as possible, or
- Contact one of the Designated People directly on the number below.

## Convention Response and Responsibilities

The Novacon Convention Committee is responsible for enforcing the Code of Conduct and for maintaining confidentiality.

Three people are designated to deal with complaints. These are **Helena Bowles, Alice Lawson and Douglas Spencer**. The complaint will be heard, in confidence, in a private place, and an appropriate response agreed upon with the complainant. This may be any of the following:

- Arbitration between the parties involved
- One, and only one, verbal warning.
- Rescinding of convention membership without refund and/or refusal of membership at future Novacons.
- Reporting the incident to the police.

The committee's decision in this matter is final.

If a complaint is made about you, either to your face via the Duty Committee Member or via the Designated People, your interaction with the complainant is over.

In cases of a dispute with the hotel, the committee will support the hotel and the hotel's own Code of Conduct.

The standard of judgement in these matters is the "reasonable person" standard as applied by the designated committee members. Attempts to "rules lawyer" the Code of Conduct will be seen as a sign of bad faith.

This Code of Conduct is considered to be a living document and is expected to evolve year on year. In advance of each convention, we fix the Code of Conduct for that convention. This is the iteration that will be in use Novacon 48. Constructive comments are welcome and will be considered when drawing up the Code of Conduct for next year's Novacon. Please address suggestions to the Code of Conduct team on the email below.

### Designated People: contact numbers and email

Helena Bowles, Alice Lawson and Douglas Spencer: number will be available at the convention

**Code of Conduct team email: [CodeOfConduct@novacon.org.uk](mailto:CodeOfConduct@novacon.org.uk)**





## **Friday Night**

If you've made it to the convention on Friday night after the ordeal of the M1 roadworks to the South, or the disappearance of functioning trains to the North, you'll be wanting some entertainment and edification.

Novacon 48 will start around 7 pm when we will introduce of Guest of Honour, the excellent Chris Beckett, share those vital messages from the committee to make your weekend fun and safe, and remind you that a few volunteers to help us run things smoothly would be appreciated. Remember that after Brexit our national currency will be Groats. Get yours in November by helping out at Novacon.

On Fridays, our usual focal point has been the Guest of Honour and this year will be no different. Chris Beckett may be a new name to some of you, so a civilised introduction will take place in the form of *Desert Island Books* (Yes, like the radio show but with more books and fewer tunes).

After that, the main room will be laid out 'cabaret style' (sooo cool) for the rest of the evenings entertainment. There will be ~~free booze~~ a book launch in celebration of Chris's work. This has become a popular Novacon tradition\* and should feature a reading by Chris, an opportunity to talk to him, buy his latest work, *America City*, and get it signed. Hopefully we will also have some reissues of his other recent work. It's also the prefect time to catch up with all the friends you haven't seen since the last convention as they finally turn up in need of refreshment, broken and defeated by our failing transport infrastructure\*\*.

We'll finish the evening with a game to entertain you. Nothing complicated or requiring an intimate recall of the works of Neal Stephenson, but there will be a science fiction theme to it.

**Saturday** is Prof Tony Padilla (I said a provisional time of 10/11)

## **Black Holes & Extra Dimensions**

Abstract: Why does the Universe even exist? Physicists believe that the answer to this question lies deep inside the mysterious world of black holes, where space and time is as strange and complicated as it was at the beginning, when the Universe was born. I will take us on a journey of discovery, from the black hole at the centre of our own galaxy, to the exotic world of string theory, extra dimensions and parallel universes. Find out what it's like to fall into



a black hole, why we believe in extra dimensions, and what this all has to do with a 9 billion dollar machine that smashes things together at almost the speed of light.

**Sunday** is Dr Julian Onions:

### **Making your own universe**

Science fiction often imagines different universes to live in, sometimes with different laws and properties. In this talk we will look at how astronomers build their own universes within large computers to explore the properties of own own place in space. This will take us across the whole spectrum of scales from the entire universe, to galaxies and to smaller objects in the hunt to understand what we have, and also to explore what is to come.

Both are from University of Nottingham.

We are currently finalizing the rest of the weekend but expect to offer you, among other things, science, poetry, clangers, more science, art, literature, and some lively panels. We will also be taking a look back at the life and works of Harlan Ellison and Ursula K Le Guin, both of whom sadly passed this year.

See you there!

\* Fannish tradition = Done it more than once.

\*\*You get the impression that writers have had a bad time travelling around the UK lately...

## **DEALERS TABLES**

Dealers' tables are available for £20 for the weekend, (when we say dealers.... you know what we mean right? We don't want to have to confiscate anything, or call the police, or have really wild room parties (Editor's Note: *Novacon* in no way advocates the use of illegal mind-altering drugs.... no matter how much they would MASSIVELY improve committee meetings.)).

If you want a table, but don't wish to attend the convention, we can talk about this too. Either way, contact Steve or Tony at the email addresses on page 2.

## **ART SHOW**

If you want to show your art it is free, but you will need to reserve space. So, if you need half a table, a whole table, a wall or, God forbid, you are planning to bring a whole installation, then it might be a good idea to let us know so that we can do a little planning (I know, why start now right?).

Contact Tony or Steve (see inside cover) and tell them what you need, you like, your hopes and dreams...

## **CONVENTION TABLES**

These are free to any poor damned souls who are also running a convention. God help you.

Contact Tony or Steve for reservations, help, support, drink, a massage... whatever you need.





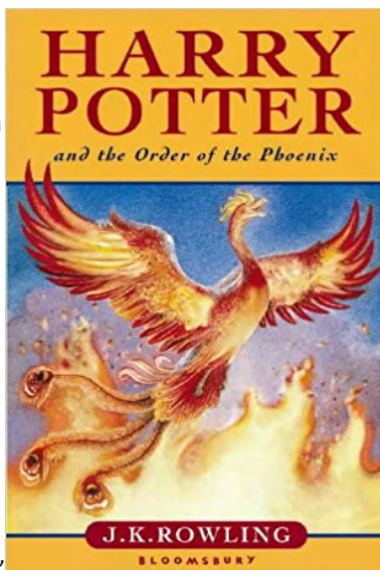
**T**here's an odd attitude amongst many adult SFF fans, and it's one that I find hard to understand. Mention the phrase "Young Adult SFF" and you're confronted with a look of glazed boredom and/or a rictus of distaste; basically, it's a look that suggests you've just dribbled down front of your shirt. It's odd, because the phrase "Heinlein juveniles", or similar, provokes looks of misty-eyed nostalgia, and encomiums about how great that kind of stuff was, and why don't we have that today?

Well, we do. The direct equivalent of those "Heinlein juveniles" are referred to either as 9-12 ('Middle School' in the US) or teen/YA, depending on the marketing group they're presumed to be aimed at. *His Dark Materials* is unequivocally Teen/YA. Anyone going to diss Pullman? No, didn't think so. As would *Enders Game* be if it was newly published today, not to mention *Starship Troopers*. So, why the resistance to contemporary SFF with teenagers/young adults as protagonists? Lyra was under fifteen or so for the entire trilogy! I've heard it decreed that *HDM* isn't teen/YA because Pullman claims he wasn't writing for any particular age group. So what? The place you will find *HDM* filed in libraries and bookshops is the teen section because that is the marketing category it is placed in. And that is all these groups are: marketing categories. They make no reference to quality or complexity of writing, as anyone familiar with Pullman's work will know.

One of the issues is that YA/Teen SFF is very big business at the moment. And, as SFF fans, we do like to think we're above the populist, don't we? The question is *why* is teen/YA – and children's fiction generally – so big? Just over twenty years ago it wasn't. Back then, the Kids' section of any bookshop was one of the smallest performing sections: an economic afterthought. Almost no children's authors were making a living as a writer, and there was much dismay over how little kids were reading. The first golden age of YA literature was over: the days of Lois Duncan, Judy Blume, Robert Cormier etc, with their social realism and kitchen sink ethos. So, what happened? *Harry Potter* happened, that's what. Oh, I can hear the literary snobs

groaning now! *Harry Potter* – when there so many *better* and *more worthy* children’s authors around! How terrible!

Of course, this is a common reaction from the Guardians of Culture. Allow the hoi polloi – in this case defined as any person or group who is not a fully paid up member of the Guardians of Culture – free choice and they choose *the wrong things*! A similar thing happened with the embarrassment over *The Lord of the Rings* being voted the nation’s favourite book. So many classics! So many *worthy* books! And yet the *wrong thing* gets chosen by people who don’t know better. It’s almost as though current literary values are arbitrary, and have very little to do with what people actually like. Now, in my experience, you can con adults into thinking their tastes are somehow invalid for reasons that (in my opinion) come down to “just because” or “because I said so, and I have a literature degree and you don’t”, but children are too canny to fall for that. Children aren’t interested in “worth” or “literary merit” if boring is also in the picture. Children understand that, no matter what the literary snobs say, the major function of a book is to *entertain*. It’s not the only thing a book can, or should do, but if it fails in that then it fails as a piece of fiction.



Children, and later adults, found something in *Harry Potter* that was different to the other things they had been reading. Oh, there are legitimate complaints that can be made about JK Rowling; she’s far from being the greatest prose stylist in the world – but, by god, she could tell a *story* about characters that readers fell in love with. Yes, the plot got away from her a bit in the last three books, which sprawled quite badly, but she’s far from being the first writer whose publishers stopped editing her effectively. *Harry Potter* got kids reading, in a way that they had apparently stopped doing, and which had been despaired of – all those screens! (Turns out, just like adults, kids will put their screens down if something else engages their attention). Not only were they reading, they were talking, and play-acting, and dressing up, and overall creating a whole generation for whom reading was both a normal, habitual activity, and a great source of pleasure. By the fifth book, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, kids as young as eight or nine were confidently, happily, and eagerly, diving into a novel of 257,000 words. To put that in perspective, *Order of the Phoenix* is longer than any the three individual volumes of *The Lord of the Rings* (131,000 – 187,000) and almost as long as *A Game of Thrones* (284,000). If you want to be more literary, that’s longer than *Crime and Punishment* (211,500) or *East of Eden* (225,400). It’s nearly half the length of *War and Peace* (587,287). Any book(s) that can inspire kids to that degree need make no excuses for itself.

*Harry Potter* created a common reading culture amongst its target market – what we call the 9-12 market, with considerable spill over into the teen, YA and adult demographics. The response was a flowering of children’s books in general, and in the SFF genre in particular. While SFF has always had a good firm foothold in children’s literature, probably not since the 1950s has there been a group of young people



who have been so comfortable with the ideas and architecture of SFF. And, as that generation grew older, they took that love of stories with them. From about 1999, the year that *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* was published, and when it became clear that *Harry Potter* was a growing phenomenon, children from about eight or so upwards wanted *more*. More Harry, yes, but also more *stories*. The older, more mature, and better readers automatically gravitated to Pullman's, *His Dark Materials* (originally published in 1995: two years before the first *Harry*). Between them, the two series changed the face of the publishing world: *Harry* by showing that children's books could be a mass popular success (thus making lots of money) and *HDM* by showing there was an appetite for intelligent, complex fantasy regardless of the age of the protagonists.

This success was consolidated in the eyes of mainstream publishers when a second enormously popular series erupted, growing to prominence just as the last two *Harry* books came out. This was Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*. Now you can criticise *Twilight* in many different ways – and, believe me, I have – but the fact is that to become that popular Meyer must have hit on something that other books weren't providing. My own personal opinion is that her strength was in depicting the hot-house nature of teenage sexuality – when physical longing is so intense, but you *must not* give in to it (*certainly no one was giving in to my teenage physical longings, sadly* – Ed). Many older *Harry* fans moved on to *Twilight*, and, surprisingly, even teenage boys started to read it. The common publishing and book selling wisdom is that boys will not willingly read books with a female protagonist.

Whatever else *Twilight* did, it kept the *Harry* generation focussed on reading as part of their common cultural currency. Then the phenomenon of “hate-reading” appeared; you read *Twilight* in order to be familiar with how *bad* it was. Then you visited online forums and tore it apart. In other words, a significant number of teens and YAs were reading critically, reflecting on, and engaging with the narrative in highly sophisticated ways. *Twilight*'s (admittedly deplorable) depiction of a teenage girl's relationship actually led to in depth dialogues about sexual politics, amongst the young people likely to be most affected. In its own way it helped pave the way for a generation of young women (and to a lesser extent young men) who are supporting the drive for a better way of men and women relating to each other. Strange as it might be to contemplate, movements like *Everyday Sexism*, and *#MeToo* might not have gained the groundswell of support without a demographic who had been critiquing gender and sexual norms for some time. *Twilight* was, for younger people, a notable part of that.

I don't recommend *Twilight*, nor will I defend it as I will the *Harry* books, but it was a significant event in the reading lives of that generation. It showed that *Harry* wasn't a flash in the pan, and it confirmed there was a genuine hunger for reading among the under twenties. The next “Big Thing” was far better...

Back in 2007, I was working at a Waterstones and running the Children's Department thus having a ringside seat for this sea change that was occurring. Each year Waterstones ran a “Children's Book Award” for which the Children's booksellers could volunteer to be readers and judges. You got the longlisted books for free, and I took my big cardboard box away with me on a family holiday. I skimmed through them finding nothing special – except for one. This one I found I did not want to put down. It was compelling, had great characters, said some interesting things





about modern society and our voyeuristic TV habits, and, most importantly, had that *something* that made it stand out from other books. I was 38. My 10-year-old daughter picked it up and was engrossed for days. My 42-year-old partner read it. Then my 13-year-old son. We were united in our enjoyment. When I went back to work, those of us reading for the prize were unanimous. This book was head and shoulders above the rest, and we all agreed it could well be the Next Big Thing.

The book was *The Hunger Games* and we unanimously chose it for the 2008 Waterstones Book Prize. Alas, it was not to receive the award. The prize was reserved for authors who had no more than two published books under their belt. This was true of Suzanne Collins in the UK, but she had a four-book series published in the US, and so she was disqualified.

The film rights for *Hunger Games* were picked up in 2009, and it was made into a solid SFF film series. Between that and the films based on the *Harry* and *Twilight* series it was clear that here was another major income strand that had opened up for children's authors and publishers. The financial success of those films, allied to Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings*, proved that there was a major market for SFF films. In fact, the current golden age of SFF film and TV can be partially laid at the door of these commercial blockbusters.

A child who was eight when the first *Harry* came out, was 19 when *Hunger Games* was published, and is now thirty. That person probably has children of their own, and those children are growing up in a world where children's, teen and YA fiction is an enormous business. There is a vast amount of choice, and some of the most imaginative, most interesting writers in the business are writing for the YA and younger markets. One of the problems with engaging with these authors is that they are filed away in the Children's Section of the bookstore. This is a sound marketing decision in that this is the primary demographic being aimed at - and you want to put your books where people expect to find them - but this does tend to be a long way from the ghetto of the SFF section in most bookshops. Then there's the issue that children's books aren't split into genres as adult are, so children's SFF sits next to social realism, romance, etc. Without knowing what you're looking for, it can be hard to find the good stuff. Plus... there's *kids* in there. Fear not, just pretend you're shopping for a niece or nephew *who has exactly the same tastes as you* and you'll blend in perfectly.

So, who and what should you be looking for? Here's a few recommendations to start you off. They are purely personal recs, not intended to be exhaustive in any way, and I've deliberately picked authors whom I think will be new to adult SFF fans.

### **Chaos Walking trilogy – Patrick Ness**

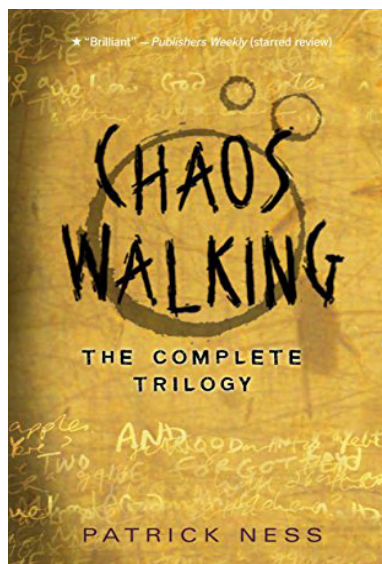
*The Knife of Never Letting Go* (2008), *The Ask and the Answer* (2009),  
*Monsters of Men* (2010)

Of all my recommendations, this trilogy is the most sophisticated, as regards both style and themes. It rivals Pullman's, *His Dark Materials*, in the seriousness of the material, and it is surprising that it is not as well known amongst adult SFF readers. After all, *The Knife of Never Letting Go* won the 2008 James Tiptree Award and *Monsters of Men* made the Arthur C. Clarke Award shortlist in 2011.





Todd Hewitt is the “last boy in Prentisstown”, the youngest member of an all-male community. There used to be a different kind of person, called girls or women, but Todd has never met one. All the women and girls, including his mother, died or were mysteriously killed during a war with the planet’s indigenous species, the Spackle. Ben and Cillian, the men who raised Todd, have told him that his mother was the last woman to die. Todd thinks that every boy probably gets told this. He doesn’t entirely trust the community he has grown up with – how can he when secrets are nearly impossible in their world? For on New World no man’s thoughts are his own. Some kind of virus has released a latent telepathic ability in the Earth creatures, but this is no useful method of communication, just the bubbling, roiling mess of thoughts, desires and imaginings that fill men’s heads all day every day. So, while Todd knows something is being held from him, he doesn’t know what it is.



*“I know what yer thinking: how can I not know if all day, every day I’m hearing every thought of the two men who run my house? That’s the thing, though. Noise is noise. It’s crash and clatter and it usually adds up to one big mash of sound and thought and picture and half the time it’s impossible to make any sense of it all. Men’s minds are a messy place and Noise is like the active, breathing face of that mess. It’s what’s true and what’s believed and what’s imagined and what’s fantasized and it says one thing and a completely opposite thing at the same time and even though the truth is definitely in there, how can you tell what’s true and what’s not when yer getting everything?”*

*The Noise is a man unfiltered, and without a filter, a man is just chaos walking.”*

Todd spends time away from the township to escape the noise. He roams the swamp with his dog, Manchee (*“The first thing you find out when yer dog learns to talk is that dogs don’t got nothing much to say. About anything.”*) when he comes across something entirely new. Something that can’t be: a space in the Noise..... and that space is a girl.

This discovery plucks Todd from the life he knows and propels him out into the unknown settlements and communities beyond the boundaries of Prentisstown. He cannot conceal his discovery, and, to his shock, he finds that Ben and Cillian have a longstanding plan for getting him away from the only place he has ever known – before his manhood ritual takes place. Todd, the girl, and Manchee have to run, even though he does not understand why. Something bad happened, and it is tied up with the loss of the girls and women, and Todd knows the fragments he picks up are unreliable.

*“Men lie, and they lie to themselves worst of all.*



*In a for instance, I've never seen a woman or a Spackle in the flesh, obviously. I've seen 'em both in vids, of course, before they were outlawed, and I see them all the time in the Noise of men because what else do men think about except sex and enemies. But the Spacks are bigger and meaner looking in the noise than in the vids, ain't they? And Noise women have lighter hair and bigger chests and wear less clothes and are a lot freer with their affecshuns than in the vids, too. So, the thing to remember, the thing that's most important of all that I might say in this here telling of things is that Noise ain't truth. Noise is what men want to be true, and there's a difference twixt those two things so big that it could ruddy well kill you if you don't watch out."*

As is clear from these quotes, Todd has not had the best education, though he is both intelligent and perceptive. His upbringing in Prentisstown is analogous to being raised in a strict fundamentalist sect – and one of the themes Ness is examining is belief, and how belief is used to justify and support secular power, and social conformity. If Todd rebels against the norms of Prentisstown, it undermines the control held by the Mayor, and the Preacher, Aaron. It invites the other men of the town to question their beliefs and actions – and that is dangerous on both a societal and a personal level.

Todd's and Viola's flight brings them into contact with several independent New World communities and, slowly, the story of what exactly happened on New World is uncovered. New questions are raised, and new tensions created by the revelation that Viola, the sole survivor of a shuttle crash, is an outrider for the next wave of colonists who threaten to overturn the political order of New World.

Ness's canvass is large and his themes broad. While focussing on Todd's journey to maturity, he poses questions about our perceptions of masculinity, and the toxic nature of many of those formulations, while showing us a Todd who is actively choosing what being a man means to *him*. Along the way Ness also manages to cover racism, sexism and genocide – in a book that is far more hopeful than any of that would suggest.

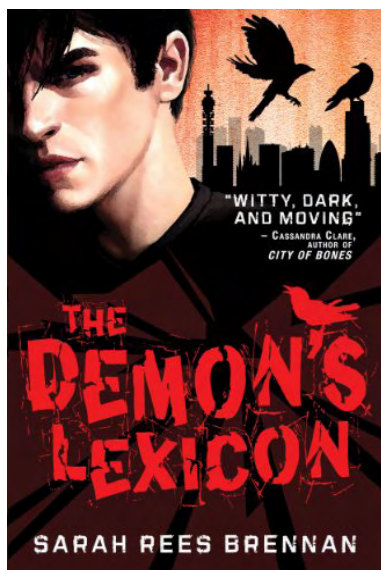
### **Demon's Lexicon trilogy – Sarah Rees Brennan**

*The Demon's Lexicon* (2009), *The Demon's Covenant* (2010), *The Demon's Surrender* (2011)

*"My life was going to flash before my eyes, but it decided to hide behind my eyes and quake with terror instead."*

Sarah Rees Brennan is of the generation of writers who grew up heavily influenced by *Buffy*.

Without ever actually being copies, their books have a similar quickfire humour and dialogue. Their characters tend to be sassy and





fast talking, with large doses of deadpan snark. Though surprisingly underrated, Brennan is one of the best of her generation (*far* better than her more famous contemporary, the hugely successful Cassandra Clare). Her prose crackles on the page, driving a whip fast narrative, and disguising a sure touch with the emotional content of her work.

Nick is the narrator of the first book. He is the teenage Romantic Hero – an immature version of Rochester or Heathcliff (at least, of the *perception* of Heathcliff, not the actual psychopath from *Wuthering Heights* the novel. Although, now I come to think about it...). He is tall, dark and saturnine. He exudes an air of danger and emotional aloofness. He is what most teenage boys would like to be – and a lot of teenage girls would like to know better.

*"He had called girls to him before. There was nothing so easy whether you were walking into a classroom, a club, or down the street. All you had to do was send out the right signals, give her the right look, turn your body the right way, and never for a moment let it cross your mind that she might not be interested."*

Except... Nick is the real deal. That emotional aloofness is actually a complete lack of emotion, or even any real understanding of emotion. The dangerousness is not feigned. Nick is skilled in blades and the disposal of bodies. He and his brother, Alan, are on the run, and have been for Nick's entire life. Alan is the responsible one. He is the one who has kept Nick in school, and safe, ever since he was four and Nick was a baby. Their father made him responsible for Nick, and, since their father was killed, Alan has kept the faith.

Nick doesn't quite understand why. He knows that hurts Alan – but he doesn't quite understand that either. Nick is pointed and precise deconstruction of a type of hero currently *extremely* common in YA literature (and, indeed, in many adult novels). *This*, Brennan is saying, is what that type of character would *actually be like*. Though, unlike Edward Cullen and his ilk, Nick does have something of a sense of humour. A dark, somewhat twisted one, but a sense of humour no less.

*"And what are you doing here, Nicholas? Decided to watch me sleep?"*

*"Yes," said Nick, and bowed his head over his sword again. He had tissues, oil, and sandpaper laid out on the windowsill in front of him, and a little stone block he was passing his sword up and down, very carefully. "I came to gaze upon your sleeping face. Only you had the blanket over your head, so I just had to gaze at a lump I thought was your sleeping face, and that turned out to be your shoulder. Which just wasn't as special."*

Take that, *Twilight*!

Alan is a more sensitive, poetic kind of guy. The kind of sensitive, poetic guy who carries a gun and can use a sword very effectively. He'd probably be very popular, especially with girls – and he'd rather like that – if his entire attention wasn't taken up by Nick. He's the only one who can look after Nick. After all, left to themselves, their mother would do her best to kill Nick...

*"Nick thought that if a succubus ever got to Alan, he would probably want to take her out to dinner and talk about her feelings before he'd accept any dark demonic delights."*



The problem started with their mother. She was a Magician, and loved an even more powerful one. Sadly, in Nick's and Alan's world, magic only comes with a price, and that price is blood, pain and sacrifice and *not* The Magician's own. There is no ethical magic. To be a Magician means agreeing to kill and torture to gain power. *Repeatedly*. Eventually, Nick's and Alan's mother ran away; exactly why, Nick and Alan don't know, but when she did so she took something very powerful with her. Ever since then the three of them originally four – have been on the run from several Magician's Circles all of whom are prepared to kill them (and probably feed them to a demon) to regain the lost item. Neither Nick nor Alan know what it is – a talisman or amulet, maybe, perhaps one of the many she wears around her neck to help hide her – but they have been running, hiding, fighting, and killing, their whole lives, with no end in sight, because of it. The fact that their mother is mostly insane – and loathes Nick with every fibre of her being - does not make their lives any easier.

Into this nomadic, isolated, existence burst two “ordinary” kids: pink haired, flamboyantly dressed weirdo Mae, and her brother Jamie, utterly hilarious, physically inept, and gay - which the narrative treats in an understated by-the-way manner. Jamie gave into temptation one night and opened his bedroom window to an incubus. And then did it again. Twice. He has been *marked* by the demon and Mae, frantic to understand what this means and to save her beloved younger brother, has followed a rumour that Alan and Nick are something a little more than just a pair of brothers new to the area and their school. To Nick's disgust, Alan is touched by Mae's care for her brother and agrees to help them. Jamie and Mae are now part of Nick's life in a way he does not want or need. Over the course of trying to help the brother and sister, Alan and Nick find that Mae and Jamie become part of *their* life, and an integral part of trying to solve the problems of their mother and the forces hunting her.

Brennan very cleverly misleads the reader by placing the narrative of *Lexicon* in Nick's hands. There are certain assumptions made because of Nick's one sided, emotionally illiterate point of view, so that there is genuine surprise when Brennan pulls the rug from beneath our feet. Not least of the mysteries posed is who, or what, Nick is - is he Aspergers, emotionally damaged because of his upbringing, or is there something else going on? In fact, there are several assumptions on the part of most readers that will turn out to be completely wrong. It's rare for an author to be able to mislead me without cheating – but Brennan managed it two or three times throughout the trilogy.

Each novel is taken from the viewpoint of a different character: something Brennan pulls off with aplomb. Mae takes over *Covenant*, giving us an outside view of Nick, Alan and their odd family, and expanding a thread initiated in *Lexicon*, showing us the rather wonderful Goblin Markets - a meeting place of the magical world's demi-monde; those people who have a touch of power but refuse to sully themselves as Magicians do. Mae and Cyn, a young woman born to the market, become rivals in many ways, not the least of which is control and ownership of the market itself. (“At least,” says Mae, “We aren't going to fall out over a *boy*.”) Cyn takes the narration of book three.

Brennan creates attractive, oddball characters with distinct voices. Yes, at first, you're disappointed the narrator has changed, then you fall in love with the new character. Not all authors can pull that off.



The *Demon* books are gritty, disturbing, touching, heart-breaking, *funny* (Brennan has genuinely funny voice, and the ability to make you laugh, cringe and be horrified all at once), clever and very different from anything else on the book shelves.

*"I-" said Nick, his voice halting. "I don't mind it as much when - when people touch me. Some people."*

*Mae looked down, and Nick, who looked more relaxed when he'd been stabbed, slowly lifted his hand from his chest and laid it on the tumbled sheets between them, fingers half-curved into his palm. He was still regarding the ceiling with a fixed glare.*

*"Because you trust them not to hurt you?" Mae asked tentatively.*

*"No," Nick said, his voice harsh. "Because I'd let them hurt me."*

### **Mortal Engines series – Philip Reeve**

*Mortal Engines* (2001), *Predator's Gold* (2003), *Infernal Devices* (2005), *A Darkling Plain* (2006), *Night Flights* (2018)

*"It was a dark, blustery afternoon in spring, and the city of London was chasing a small mining town across the dried-out bed of the old North Sea."*

*Mortal Engines* is a beautifully imagined, steampunk dystopia. We are in a future that developed after an apocalypse – the "60 Minute War". The Earth is a barren wasteland populated by mobile communities called "traction cities", of which London is one of the greatest. These cities roam the vast, dry ocean basins, and survive by hunting each other down. Once caught, a city is stripped down for its metals and possessions, and its population is enslaved. The system is referred to as "Municipal Darwinism", and the majority of the remaining population live like this. There are a few oddball communities who are static – the "Anti-Tractionists" – and a few outlaw settlements which are largely aerial and serve the airship pilots.



Tom Natsworthy is a lowly apprentice Historian, working down in the bowels of London. He is proud of his association with the great city and has never doubted the moral principles of Municipal Darwinism. He is sure of his place in the world and hero-worships London's Indiana Jones-like, Old Tech collector, and Airship Explorer, Thaddeus Valentine. Tom has the great fortune not only to see Valentine, and his beautiful daughter, Katherine, but to save his hero from a masked assassin. Unfortunately, that moment of heroism costs Tom dearly. He finds himself marooned





on the open ground while London thunders away into the distance.

Tom is not alone. He finds himself reluctantly joining forces with the would-be masked assassin who turns out to be an appallingly scarred teenage girl called Hester Shaw. Hester is an amazingly complex character; scarred both physically and mentally, she is living solely to get revenge on Valentine, who killed her family. She and Tom get picked up as slaves by the city of Speedwell then rescued by an airship pirate called Anna Fang – another vividly memorable character – and taken to the outlaw air city of Airhaven. For much of the novel they are on the run from a terrifying, unstoppable mechanical being called The Shrike (I assume this is a shout out to Dan Simmon's *Hyperion*, though it is possible Reeve came to the name independently).

Meanwhile, back on London, Valentine's beautiful, and hitherto docile and dutiful, daughter Katherine, is doing some investigation of her own. Aided by a London Engineer, Bevis Pod, she starts to find holes and inconsistencies in the stories her father tells of his past and his discoveries. Digging hard for information, she unearths a very different picture to the heroic one that usually depicts her beloved father. Horrified, she has some hard decisions to make: decisions that will test her loyalty to her family and that could destroy the comfortable, attractive lifestyle she has.

Katherine's discoveries are only part of the story being revealed to the reader. Tom and Hester's story strand slowly uncovers other elements of the complex, and dangerous, history underlying their lives. The connection between Hester and Katherine, Hester and Valentine, Valentine's true history and his responsibility for certain unpleasanties, the whole history of the 60 Minute War and the weapons left from it, and the history of The Shrike, are all drip-fed to the reader.

Reeve's worldbuilding is first class. The traction cities are wonderful in that "Oh, so cool!" way, and Reeve scatters many puns and references throughout his work (One city – a pirate suburb – is called Tunbridge Wheels, and almost all the Airships have names that are drawn from songs or poems – there's an *Idiot Wind*, a *My Shirona*, an *Invisible Worm* etc). However, where Reeve really shines is in his characters. There isn't a single 2-D cardboard cut-out hero in there. Rather, they are all deeply flawed, spiky, often unpleasant people brimming with their own motives, drives and desires. All must choose to compromise their sense of ethics in order to achieve their goals.

Slowly, Reeve shows us how the 60 Minute War could have happened, and the kind of people who could have caused it. Those people were just like the ones we now care about, acting in a way they honestly believe is justified and for the best. If you're looking for cosy, you won't find it here. *Mortal Engines* is dark even to an adult eye, and some of the decisions certain characters make are quite clearly horrific – *but we understand why that character cannot act in any other way*. We even sympathise with them while we recoil from the actual act.

*Mortal Engines* has been filmed – by Peter Jackson, no less – and is due for UK release on 14/12/18. Let us hope he takes the approach he took with *The Lord of the Rings*, and not *The Hobbit*...

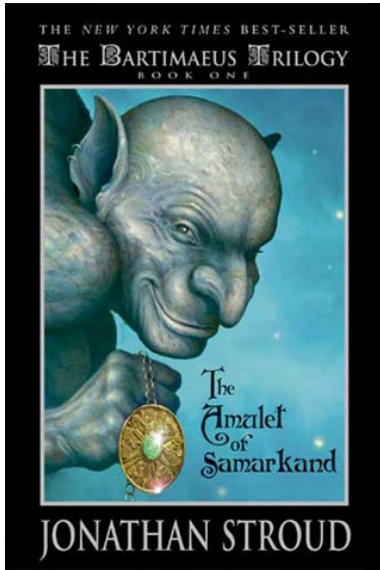
*"You aren't a hero and I'm not beautiful and we probably won't live happily*



ever after “she said. “But we’re alive and together and we’re going to be all right.”

## **Bartimaeus Series– Jonathan Stroud**

*The Amulet of Samarkand* (2001), *The Golem’s Eye* (2004), *Ptolemy’s Gate* (2005),  
*The Ring of Solomon* (2010)



*“A small piece of advice,” I said “it isn’t wise to be rude to someone bigger than you, especially when they’ve just trapped you under a boulder.”*

*“You can stick your advice up....”*

*This brief pause replaces a short, censored episode, characterized by bad language and some sadly necessary violence. When we pick up the story again, everything is as before, except that I am perspiring slightly and the contrite imp is the model of cooperation.”*

Meet Bartimaeus. He’s the best kind of spirit. Much better than the comparatively powerless Imps and Foliots, and much cleverer than the spirits who rely on raw power, the Afrits and the Marids. Bartimaeus is a Djinni of the fourth level and has been in and out of the first plane of existence – that of human beings and

the physical Earth – for the entirety of human history. He spent many years enslaved at King Solomon’s court, and was extensively used against the British during the war with the magicians of Prague. Like all demons he loathes being enslaved to human magicians and, like all demons, will spend all his time watching for his Master, the magician who summoned him, to make one tiny mistake. When that happens the demon will feed, the magician will die, and the demon will return to its own plane – until the next summoning.

Bartimaeus is an old hand at all this, so he feels the indignity greatly when he is summoned by a six-year-old magical-prodigy called Nathaniel. Not that the magician’s age will save him from the consequences...

*“I had a chance at him now. Things were a bit more even. He knew my name, I knew his. He had six years’ experience, I had five thousand and ten. That was the kind of odds that you could do something with.”*

Unfortunately for Bartimaeus, Nathaniel is genuinely good at this stuff, so Barty is trapped, and bound to Nathaniel’s destiny. That destiny appears to be the fulfilling of all Nathaniel’s ambitions which are both political and magical because, in this alternate England, magicians rule over the common, unmagical people.

Stroud’s alternate England has a whole carefully drawn alternate history that asks what society might look like if magic was real – where would things have changed? In this world, Gladstone was a famous magician, as well as Prime Minister.



He defeated the magicians of Prague, making England the preeminent magical power which it has remained ever since.

The two sides of society are represented by Nathaniel, the Magician, and Kitty the Commoner. Nathaniel, having displayed magical aptitude, was sold to a magician to be an apprentice. This is a hard life, and it is unsurprising that magicians seem uniformly unpleasant as they grow up. They are brought up harshly and enter a cut-throat, dog-eat-dog world where to show kindness or mercy is a weakness. Nathaniel internalises this and looks forward to a life of power and influence. With Bartimaeus's grudging help he learns to manipulate the system. Kitty is brought up in a society that fears the Magicians, but teaches that they are needed for protection. As she grows up, Kitty experiences and witnesses the vicious inequities of a system where one class has considerable power and privilege at the expense of the other. Her views alienate her from her family and, cast alone into London, she joins a nascent resistance movement that inevitably brings her into contact with Nathaniel.

The narration switches between the third person and sections written from Bartimaeus's point of view, and these are by far the most entertaining. Bartimaeus is witty, a champion deadpan snarker, self-important, cynical, sarcastic, world weary, and callous. His voice is the most modern in the text, and he charms even as he plans dire revenges on the magicians who enslave him. His experiences reinforce what a pernicious system magic is. Magicians and demons are locked in a battle of wits: magicians must control their demons' behaviour by locking them in to a water-tight agreement and enforcing their cooperation with torture. Demons watch, eagle eyed, for any tiny loophole in the magic, and do their best to achieve anything *but* what the magician wants.

*"One magician demanded I show him an image of the love of his life. I rustled up a mirror."*

Over the first three books we follow Nathaniel's rise to power and his developing relationship with Bartimaeus. Much against both their wills, they end up developing something approaching a partnership, and much to their mutual surprise, a certain degree of respect, but not exactly friendship. Bartimaeus knows much more of Nathaniel's world and his regard grows from an initial amused and cynical contempt.

*"Despite his crimped shirts and flowing mane (or perhaps because of them) I had seen no evidence as yet that Nathaniel even knew what a girl was. If he'd ever met one, chances are they'd both have run screaming in opposite directions."*

The unusual thing about Bartimaeus, the thing that enables this relationship to develop, is that once, long ago, Bartimaeus had a friend who was a human magician. The boy, Ptolemy, was a magical researcher; one who sought to change the relationships between spirits and humans. Bartimaeus actually became fond of the boy. In fact, as Ptolemy's story is revealed throughout the initial three books, it becomes evident that Bartimaeus loved Ptolemy dearly and still, thousands of years later, mourns his death. This idea that there could be mutual respect and even friendship across the planes also highlights the essential *wrongness* of the magician's system. It is the ending of this system that pulls Nathaniel, Kitty and Bartimaeus together.



The fourth book is a prequel depicting Bartimaeus's time at King Solomon's court, and his relationship with a young woman who is a warrior of Sheba, who has been sent to protect her country by assassinating Solomon.

## Lockwood and Co Series by Jonathan Stroud

*The Screaming Staircase* (2012), *The Dagger in the Desk* (novella - 2015), *The Whispering Skull* (2014), *The Hollow Boy* (2015), *The Creeping Shadow* (2016), *The Empty Grave* (2017)



*"When you go out hunting wicked spirits, it's the simple things that matter most. The silvered point of your rapier flashing in the dark; the iron filings scattered on the floor; the sealed canisters of best Greek Fire, ready as a last resort..."*

*But tea bags, brown and fresh and plenty of them, and made (for preference) by Pitkin Brothers of Bond Street, are perhaps the simplest and best of all.*

*OK, they may not save your life like a sword-tip or an iron circle can, and they haven't the protective power of a sudden wall of fire. But they do provide something just as vital. They help keep you sane."*

Yes, two Jonathan Stroud series. I think he's just that good.

Similarly, to the Bartimaeus series, *Lockwood and Co* is set in an alternate universe England. In this case, the change started about fifty years before the present (year unspecified) with the birth of The Problem.

The Problem started in Kent when two young psychical researchers, Marissa Fittes and Tom Rotwell became aware of an upsurge in paranormal activity: ghosts were appearing and multiplying in number. From there, The Problem spread to the rest of England and, now, ghosts are a common menace. Get touched by one and you'll probably die. The difficulty is that adults can't see ghosts at all although they can dimly feel their effects – fear, malaise, and "ghost lock" – an inability to move. However, *children*, to greater or lesser degree, *can* see them. Thus, it is that children, from a very young age, have become the backbone of the psychical defence forces. The children work for Agencies and the largest and most prestigious of these are the Fittes and Rottwell agencies, established by those first researchers. Children do not all have the same degree of sensitivity to psychic phenomenon: those with lesser talents become patrollers with the Nightwatch, guarding buildings and streets and reporting signs of psychic trouble. The more strongly talented are taken on by the Agencies where they are trained to investigate phenomena, and eradicate ghosts, under the eye of adult ex-Agents.



Being an ex-agent is revealed to be a scary business. As their own perceptions fade, supervisors are acutely aware of their own vulnerabilities, and this can lead to less than adequate supervision. And that can lead to horrific disasters.

Lucy Carlyle is a young teenager who grew up in a largely uncaring household in the north of England. At an early age she displays a strong talent for seeing and especially *hearing* ghosts. Within her family though, her talent is mainly valued as a replacement for her father's wage after he drunkenly fell under a train.

*"The Priests scattered iron on the tracks [...] they hung an iron charm round its neck to break any connection with his ghost. These precautions did the job fine. He never came back. Even if he had, my mother said, it wouldn't have caused us any problems. He'd only have haunted the local pub."*

Lucy starts with the local Agency at the age of about eight. She learns the ropes, passes all but one of her exams, and, by the time she's twelve or just thirteen, she is well on the way to being a fully qualified Agent. Then disaster strikes. Lucy's acute senses tell her something is wrong with a case her team are investigating. She does inform her supervisor, but, being twelve, is unable to stand up to him when he dismisses her vague fears. However, she is right, and her team are all killed. Stunned, angry, and bitter, Lucy quits her home town and heads for London, hoping she can talk herself into a job that she technically isn't quite qualified for.

Unsurprisingly, without that last certificate, none of the big Agencies will look at her. She starts at the Fittes and Rotwell Agencies and works her way down. Finally, when she is down to her last pound, she answers a small advertisement for an Agency she has never heard of: Lockwood and Co. It is run by the eponymous Anthony Lockwood, out of his old family home on Portland Street. When Lucy turns up for the interview she finds an attractive set up. There's Lockwood himself, a Byronic, shiny toothed, floppy haired, badass-longcoat wearing teenage boy. There's the fact that there is not a single adult in the agency. Lockwood and Co are independent teenage operatives. Best of all, Lockwood doesn't seem to care about that last certificate... And she gets her own room. OK, there's also George, Lockwood and Co's researcher, who is both hygienically and sartorially challenged, flabby, untidy, and given to strange and distasteful experiments on ghost relics.

*"I was testing the ghost's reaction to heat."*

*"And to bubble bath? There were bubbles all over the jar. You put some nice soapy fragrance in that water, and . . ." I stared at him. "Do you get in the tub with it, George?"*

*His face flushed. "No, I do not. Not as a rule. I – I was saving time. I was just getting in myself when it occurred to me I could do a useful experiment about the resistance of ectoplasm to warmth. I wanted to see if it would contract—" He waved his hands wildly in the air.*

Both Lockwood and George are deeply impressed with Lucy's talent and hire her on the spot, much to the dismay of Inspector Barnes of DEPRAC – the Department of Psychical Research And Control – who does not approve of Lockwood





and Co operating without adult supervision and is deeply cynical about Lockwood's entrepreneurial skills and heroic mien.

*"We've neutralized a major cluster of Visitors and overcome a determined and ruthless foe. And all without a single adult supervisor in sight, Mr Barnes." He switched on his fullest, most radiant smile.*

*Barnes winced. "Put those teeth away. It's too early in the morning and I haven't had my breakfast . . ."*

Barnes isn't entirely wrong. All three agents have been working since they were very young – about seven or eight years – so they have capabilities and responsibility beyond their years, but they are still recognisably immature teenagers. They bicker, they are impulsive, and they make mistakes. All this leads to a disaster that threatens to destroy the Agency.

Lockwood and Co are called to a domestic haunting. Much to George's anger and chagrin, Lockwood and Lucy charge in without waiting for his research into the property's history. What seemed to be a petty matter – a recently dead husband who seems to have returned – turns into something far more sinister and dangerous as they find themselves dealing with the body, and spirit, of a murdered young woman. Their careless preparations lead to them burning the house down while trying to save themselves. Their clients are less than pleased by this and sue, and Barnes informs them that DEPRAC won't be helping them out. They need a lot of money and they need it fast.

Into this moment of despair comes Mr Fairfax who is a famous and extremely wealthy industrialist. He offers to cover their debts if they will spend one night in Coombe Carey Hall (loosely based, I suspect, on Buckland Abbey, often described as the "Most Haunted House in Britain"). No, they aren't stupid, and yes, they are all suspicious – but Lockwood, to both George and Lucy's dismay, accepts the offer. The alternative is the end of Lockwood and Co.

Stroud gives us a wonderfully well-rounded character in Lucy Carlyle. Lockwood and George are initially more lightly sketched, but we come to understand both more deeply as the series progresses – not unnaturally, as this mirrors Lucy getting to know them. Lockwood is delved into the most, as the narrative regularly, but gently, lifts him off the heroic pedestal his Byronic Hero role places him on. He is always the flashy, sexy, wide-boy hero, but, as we learn about his past and the tragedy that happened to his family, we come to understand how much of this is a front. We also see how irritating this type of character can be when placed in a real-world style of relationship. Lucy likes Lockwood a lot – but every so often she wants to slap him upside the head, and this is a desire the reader will fully identify with.

If you thought the book title was a little reminiscent of William Hope Hodgson's *Carnacki the Ghost Hunter* stories, you'd be right. The 'Screaming Staircase' is located in Coombe Carey Hall, as is the 'Red Room' which displays the kind of paranormal phenomena with which Carnacki would have been very comfortable.



*"I turned and held the blade above us all as an ineffective shield."*

*The bloodstain on the ceiling now spread almost wall to wall; in our corner, a single triangle of clean space remained. Elsewhere torrents of blood fell in curtains, roaring, driving, gusting like rain waves in a thunderstorm. The floor was awash. It pooled between the floorboards and lashed up against the wainscoting. The chandelier dripped with it: the crystals shone red. Now I knew why the chamber was without furniture of any kind, why it had been deserted for so many years. Now I knew why it had the name it did."*

*The Screaming Staircase* is part mild paranormal horror (it's aimed at younger teens, but some bits are genuinely creepy), and part murder mystery. On top of that it lays seeds for an overarching plot which explores the nature and origin of The Problem. Once again, Stroud's world building is solid. He has a strong sense of both the ridiculous and the genuinely funny while never neglecting the emotional weight of events. Working as an Agent is dangerous and stressful, and it impacts all three of the teenagers in different ways. Lucy's special connection to the murdered girl, Annabel Ward, adds an additional stress on Lucy even as it highlights a solidarity between two women. Lucy is angry on Annabel's behalf, even though she admits to herself that, in life, Annabel would not have been the type of girl she would like or admire. She has connected to the murdered young woman by *listening* to her psychic echoes, the replaying of a toxic relationship which ended in death

*"I waited for any echoes that might come.*

*And very soon they did come, same as before. First a man and woman talking; the woman's high-pitched laughter, the man's voice joining her as one. Then a sensation of fierce joy, of passion shared; I felt the elation of the girl, her feverish delight. A great bulb of happiness spread out to fill my world . . . The laughter changed, became hysterical in tone. The man's voice grew harsher, the sound twisted. I felt a cold, sharp jolt of fear . . . And then at once the joy was back, and all was well, well, well . . . Until the next reversal, until contentment curdled, and the voices rose once more in anger, and I was sick with jealousy and rage . . . And so it went on, back and forth, back and forth, the mood-swings flashing past, like I was on that merry-go-round in Hexham as a kid, the one time my mother let me go, and I was full of joy and terror mixed together, and knew I couldn't get off no matter how I tried. And all at once came sudden silence, and a cold voice talking in my ear, and a final blaze of fury that ascended to a desperate shriek of pain – a shriek I realized was my own."*

There is also Lockwood's backstory, and how his losses tie into the overall picture. As the books progress we learn more and more about The Problem, its history, and how it is getting worse at a frightening pace. As Lockwood, Lucy, and George dig deeper into The Problem, they begin to wonder about Marissa Fittes and Tom Rotwell, and how they came to be the ones to originally deal with it. The truth is both sinister and disturbing...

Happy Reading!



# THE ALL POWERFUL NAPA DOM TELLS YOUR FUTURE



## Aries

(Mar 20-Apr 18)

Pluto is firmly in Uranus this week indicating that an unexpected friendship is really going somewhere. Avoid cats this week, you know you're allergic so why do you insist on picking them up?



## Taurean

(Apr 19-May 19)

Jupiter jumping over Venus later in the month will cause you issues with those bees you've been breeding in the shed. No-one wants to eat bees, why are you persisting with this nonsense? Your father would have been very disappointed.



## Gemini

(May 20-Jun 20)

Your sister will send you a cryptic message from the hospital this week, causing you to go on a long journey. Don't worry about it too much but keep your sister hidden and wear brown.



## Cancer

(Jun 21-Jul 21)

You will be cold this week, and mostly dressed in Black. The snow will bring an unexpected life changing event. Just remember that you know nothing.



## Leo

(Jul 22-Aug 21)

Logic is the beginning of wisdom, not the end. The miracle is this: the more we share, the more love we have. Change is the essential process of all existence. I have been, and always will be, your friend.



## Throne of Swords

(Aug 22-Sep 21)

You may find yourself unexpectedly invisible this week. Avoid tramps and former medical school colleagues. Be wary around landladies, try not to show your hand.



## Libra

(Sep 22-Oct 22)

Now, hobbits are peace-loving folks, you know. They're never in a hurry and they take things slow. They don't like to travel away from home, they just like to eat and be left alone! But one day Bilbo was asked to go on a big adventure to the caves below, to help some dwarves get back their gold that was stolen by a dragon in the days of old.... This may not seem to apply to you.. but it does.



## Scorpio

(Oct 23-Nov 21)

The moon paradoxically nebulous to andromeda indicates that you should avoid onions unless there is a strong likelihood of the planets aligning. In which case the old ones will probably rise so onion breath will be the least of your problems.



## Red Panda

(Nov 22-Dec 20)

You will feel a strong connection to a handsome stranger this week. Try to avoid falling for him, he may turn out to be your son, sent back to the past. The last thing you need is for him to become his own father.



**Plantain**  
(Dec 21-Jan 18)

As ages pass the wheel turns, souls are born and born again to repeat the cycle and be reborn. Mars in Neptune says the chosen one is here, could it be you? Signs say no. Avoid riding a bike.



**Aquarius**  
(Jan 19-Feb 17)  
The ancient

texts speak of an unspeakable horror dormant beneath the oceans. This fallmoon, his vast unearthly bulk will shift and an awakening begins. A good time to decorate the house.



**Pisces**  
(Feb 19-Mar 19)

You will be entering a brave phase today, and you may feel inspired to try something new.

Something in your life (a recent victory, a supportive friend, some bloodletting) is giving you the courage to try to make all your wishes come true. The future is completely up to you, so why not craft it the way you want it to be? Smash the skulls of your enemies and drink their blood! For honour!



# NOVACON

## MEMBERSHIP LIST OCTOBER 2018

- |                      |                      |                       |
|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 Chris Beckett      | 21 Markus Thierstein | 44 Martin Easterbrook |
| 2 Adrian Tchaikovsky | 22 Tim Broadribb     | 45 Harpal Singh       |
| 3 Juliet McKenna     | 23 MEG               | 46 Arthur Cruttenden  |
| 4 Dave Hicks         | 24 Dave Hardy        | 47 Chris Stocks       |
| 5 Tony Berry         | 25 Julia Daly        | 48 Roger Robinson     |
| 6 Helena Bowles      | 26 James Odell       | 49 Roger Earnshaw     |
| 7 Cat Coast          | 27 Chris Bell        | 50 Jim Walker         |
| 8 Eve Harvey         | 29 Pat Brown         | 51 Niall Gordon       |
| 9 John Harvey        | 30 David Carlile     | 52 Steve Rogerson     |
| 10 Alice Lawson      | 31 A C Baker         | 53 Claire Brialey     |
| 11 Steve Lawson      | 32 Peter Wareham     | 54 Mark Plummer       |
| 12 Douglas Spencer   | 33 Gwen Funnell      | 55 Anne Woodford      |
| 13 Richard Standage  | 34 Brian Ameringen   | 56 Alan Woodford      |
| 14 Gary Starr        | 35 Emjay Ameringen   | 57 Steve Dunn         |
| 15 Vanessa May       | 36 Caroline Mullan   | 58 Sue Edwards        |
| 16 Luke Smith        | 38 Neil Summerfield  | 59 Steve Jones        |
| 17 Rob Jackson       | 40 Dave Tompkins     | 60 Peter Mabey        |
| 18 Sally Rowse       | 41 Martin Hoare      | 61 Julian Heathcock   |
| 19 Laura Wheatly     | 42 Tim Kirk          |                       |
| 20 Barbara-Jane      | 43 Margaret Austin   |                       |





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|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| 63 Al Johnston        | 110 Dominika Klimczak | 142 Cuil Short               |
| 64 Marcus Rowland     | 111 Tom Denton        | 143 Clint Wastling           |
| 65 Tim Stannard       | 112 Vanda Denton      | 144 Ian Maughan              |
| 66 Penny Hicks        | 113 John Dowd         | 145 Helen Gould              |
| 67 Christine Davidson | 114 Fran Dowd         | 146 Mike Gould               |
| 68 Michael Davidson   | 115 Pat McMurray      | 147 Peter Cohen              |
| 69 Harry Payne        | 116 Julie McMurray    | 148 Terence Johnson          |
| 70 Omega              | 117 Ron Gemmell       | 149 Andrew Bannister         |
| 71 Hal Payne          | 120 Jilly Paddock     | 150 Kate Solomon             |
| 72 Jodie Payne        | 121 Dave Brzeski      | 151 Malcolm Davies           |
| 73 Morag O'Neill      | 122 Peter Wilkinson   | 152 Lennart Uhlin            |
| 74 Stan Nicholls      | 123 Robert            | 153 Joanna Ray               |
| 75 Anne Nicholls      | Hummerstone           | 154 Dominic Dulley           |
| 76 Giulia de Cesare   | 124 Tony Rogers       | 155 Magdalen                 |
| 77 Steve Davies       | 125 Jackie Burns      | Standage-Bowles              |
| 78 Anthony Smith      | 126 Tobes Valois      | 156 Nigel Price              |
| 79 Wendy Smith        | 127 Bridget Wilkinson | 157 Catherine Price          |
| 80 Gerry Webb         | 128 Ian Whates        | 158 Jessica Price            |
| 81 Mali Perera        | 129 Christina Lake    | 159 R. J. Shannon            |
| 82 Alan Webb          | 130 Doug Bell         | 160 Robert Smith             |
| 83 Pauline Morgan     | 131 Colin Fine        | 161 Jamie Scott              |
| 84 Chris Morgan       | 132 Mike Scott        | 162 William Armitage         |
| 85 Paul Dormer        | 133 Flick             | 163 Philip Cooper            |
| 88 Melica Smith       | 134 Sue Mason         | 164 Peter Harrow             |
| 89 Martin Smart       | 135 Claire Gamble     | 165 Yvonne Rowse             |
| 90 Michael Abbott     | 136 Chris Baker       | 166 Ian Sorensen             |
| 91 Anne Wilson        | 137 Gary Andrews      | 167 Noel Collyer             |
| 92 Hazel Ashworth     | 138 Peter Buck        | 168 Richard Giddings         |
| 93 Serena Culfeather  | 139 Alison Buck       | 169 James Shields            |
| 94 John Wilson        | 140 Eira Short        | 170 Fionna O'Sullivan        |
| 95 Alison Scott       | 141 Smuzz             | 171 Esther MacCallum-Stewart |



"It's supposed to be all one word!"