



PROGRESS REPORT EXTRA

12 – 14th November 2021



Guests of Honour

**Chris Baker, Emma Newman, Claire North,
Christopher Priest**

The Annual Convention of the Birmingham Science Fiction Group

COMMITTEE

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A WORD FROM OUR CHAIRS

Hello people and welcome to PR Extra. As I write this Nottingham has the highest Covid-19 infection rate in the country, which I find highly ironic, like it's saying "Ha ha, don't you wish you were here?". Well, obviously we do. As Science Fiction fans we've been reading about pandemics for years and knew it would happen one day, but couldn't it have waited a little longer? We wanted our party!



A typical Committee meeting using Zoom!

activities. If you go to the Novacon website you'll see it's been revamped, with more information, photos of previous cons and contributions from former Guests which will appear over the next few months. We have also started a blog and welcome your thoughts and comments there. Our thanks to Alex Storer for helping with this.

So, business as usual! Join the convention, book your hotel room and we'll see you in November 2021.

Tony and Alice

HOTEL & CONVENTION INFORMATION

Novacon 2021 will again be at the Mercure Nottingham Sherwood Hotel. At the time of writing, we have moved our 2020 booking across to 2021. The dates have been definitely



confirmed as **12th – 14th November 2021** so book the date in your diaries for then.

Further details will be in the next Progress Report (or on the website) next year.

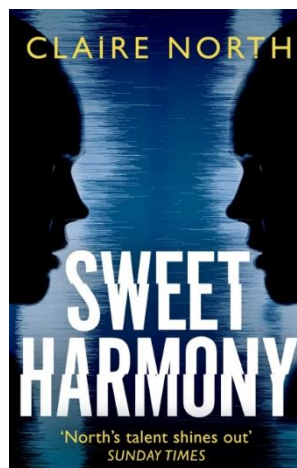
We are still taking bookings for the Dealers' Room, so if you want a table, please get in touch. The price of dealers' tables has been halved from 2019 to £10 for the weekend. Convention tables are free, just let us know if you want one. Please contact Tony if you want to book a table. Any bookings already made will be carried over unless you inform us you no longer need one.

We are happy to say that the Art Show will also be returning. If you want to show your art it is free to convention members, but you will need to reserve space. So, contact us to discuss what you need and so that we can do a little planning. If you have any questions related to the art show, please contact Serena. As above, if you have already booked for this year, we will carry over your booking info unless you tell us otherwise.

GUESTS OF HONOUR New Books

In addition to the bibliography listed in PR1, both Christopher Priest and Claire North had new books released this year.

Claire North has published a stand-alone novella, **SWEET HARMONY**. Set in the near future where nanomachines in your bloodstream can transform a person - physical appearance, intelligence, personality – the world is suddenly full of beautiful people. But each upgrade costs and when insurance or money runs out, the withdrawal effects can be brutal. It is published by Orbit as an ebook priced at a£1.99 (ASIN B0896XFTV6) or as an Audiobook.



Christopher Priest published a new novel, **THE EVIDENCE** which is set in his Dream Archipelago setting, and is reviewed in this PR, (thanks to Chris Morgan). For those interested it is published by Gollancz as a hardcover priced at £20 (ISBN 978-1-47-323137-5).

NOVACON Plus

As mentioned above, Novacon will be adding more regular updates and information to the website. Two extra sections (“tabs”) will be added to the top of the Novacon page with lots of interesting content.

The first is a **NovaNostalgia** section where we will be regularly adding photographs of past Novacons, and also pieces from previous Guests of Honour talking about their experiences of Novacons.

The second section is the **NovaBlog**, which we will give us the chance to share our thoughts with you and will provide you with the facility to comment and contribute.

Dave Hicks has suggested a number of ~~silly~~ excellent ideas for content. We hope to post reading suggestions, old Novacon con reports, photographs, silly intellectual games/quizzes (more Hicks) and much more. We would love to hear your thoughts and comments.

NB The comments section will be moderated, and when you use it for the first time please give your name and email address.

Maggie will continue to keep up our social media profile. The blog will be an additional communication method.

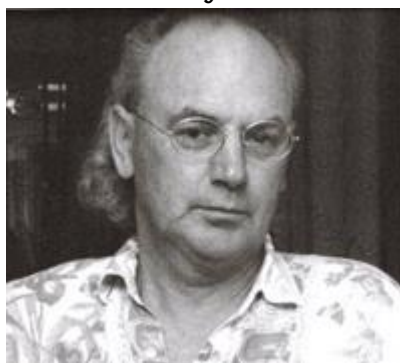
Below are two examples of items appearing on the new Novacon site: Firstly, a piece from one of our previous Guests of Honour, **Garry Kilworth**, to be found on the **NovaNostalgia** section; secondly, a blog post from **Yvonne Rowse**, programme “chief” on what she has been reading in lockdown, which can be found on the **NovaBlog** section.

Novacon 18 Guest of Honour – Garry Kilworth

I was GoH at Novacon 18 in 1988. (A lot of 8's there - the Chinese lucky number). I believe it was Rog Peyton who recommended me to the con committee, a lovely man and a great fan and bookseller. It

was a terrific experience, since I had just left my day job to become a full-time writer (though the word 'full' is used reservedly).

The novel I chose to centre my talk around was my first SF novel *IN SOLITARY*, a title that resonates with our current global situation, though I hasten to add it was not



prophetic. The theme centres around a lone human living on an Earth conquered by bird-like aliens. His loyalties are confused, since he has more than a touch of Stockholm Syndrome. I remember that I wrote that my aliens survived on aerobic bacteria.

My 12-year-old son read it and said, 'So why have they got big bird beaks?' (Oh, Darwin, why didn't I read your Origin of Species earlier?). It was a very short novel, just over a novella, and one critic (who shall remain nameless) accused me of having 'verbal anorexia'.

Novacons have been part of my life since 1976: full of interest, full of fun, full of great camaraderie. Long may they survive.

More information about Garry Kilworth including his latest work can be found at <http://www.garry-kilworth.co.uk/index.php>

I'D LIKE TO TALK ABOUT BOOKS...

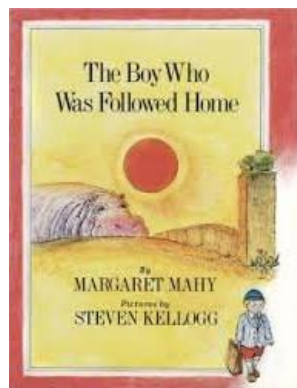
There seems to have been endless media stuff produced for lockdown. I've even had to watch a few because Ian has made me. We watched ONE MAN TWO GUVNORS and JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR and lots of little YouTube shorts. My favourite, due to brevity and immense charm, is the GOOD OMENS:

LOCKDOWN written by Neil Gaiman. I'm not a visual media person, however, so I read.

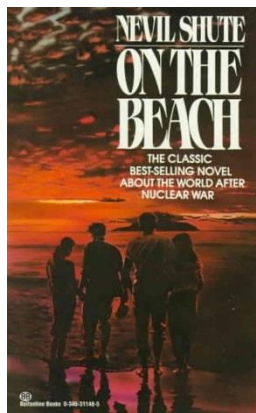
Mostly I have been reading Covid-19 stuff and I've had enough. I need to read something, anything, else.

The trouble is, I've been infected with dread. I'd be an awful apocalypse novel hero. Here we are, in the middle of a cosy catastrophe (we can, except for the key workers, avoid the virus) and I am filled with anxiety. And that means I have been frozen into immobility.

In situations of stress I normally knit and read. The first acts a little like meditation. The second takes me to different worlds where I am



integral (as the reader) to helping all the great characters do great things. In books I have many friends. We are doing things more interesting than singing happy birthday twice (maybe three) times while washing our hands and bickering about what essential item we forgot to buy and can't face going back for. In books exciting things happen, important things. Mostly no-one sits all evening eating a family size bar of chocolate.



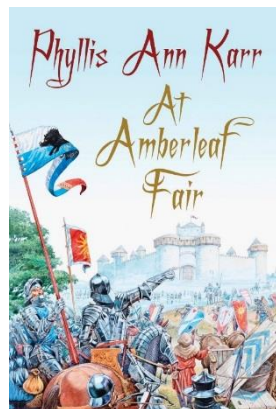
The problem has been finding suitable books to read. I am really struggling at the moment with even mild peril. I mean, even when I'm pretty sure that everything will end up alright. I'm not just talking about death or injury; even mild embarrassment is causing me to leave a book unfinished. Jo Walton, our former Guest of Honour, has two potential

solutions, as described on tor.com. Either [Books in Which No Bad Things Happen](#) or [Books That Grab You](#). In the first there is no worry, in the second you are immersed so deep that the 'real' world has been left behind.

Before finding these two articles I had been reading the Chalet School books and Georgette Heyer. All were pretty much re-reads, though there are some Heyer books that I can't finish due to fear of impending (but not terminal) dread. But I've read all I've got.

I can't read PALADIN OF SOULS again. I think it has one more read in it before it is sucked dry of all goodness. I'm saving that for my deathbed. My Margaret Mahy books are in pretty much the same state, even the short stories and although I could read and reread THE BOY WHO WAS FOLLOWED HOME every day it doesn't take long, even when the pictures are examined minutely.

So, I am working my way through the books recommended both in the articles and the comments. It is worth reading all the comments as some dispute other recommendations. And Nevil Shute is recommended in the 'grabby' books. I can certainly say that ON THE BEACH did not let me go once started but it has a devastating finish and, along with ANCIENT LIGHT, is on my list of books to never ever read again. Not that they are bad, just that they'll tear your heart out and leave you traumatised for weeks.



So, I re-read AT AMBERLEAF FAIR (Phyllis Ann Karr) and have the Moomin books piled up ready to go. What books are keeping you sane and why?

Yvonne Rowse

www.tor.com/2020/03/20/books-in-which-no-bad-things-happen/

www.tor.com/2020/04/21/books-that-grab-you/

PROGRAMME TEASER

Yvonne Rowse

So. There will be a programme.

Normally at this time of the year we would be finalising the programme, participants would have been contacted, and last-minute panics would be being resolved. This is, obviously, not the case this year. The first draft of the programme was tentatively presented to the committee at the end of March and accepted as a reasonable starting point. And then, of course, it was put on hold as we rescheduled Novacon 50 to November 2021.

That doesn't mean that the programme has gone dormant, just that it's growing much more slowly. One of the things that I can confirm is that Friday night will be as tradition demands, Desert Island Books split into two halves to accommodate all four of our guests, followed by the Novacon 50 birthday party. Hurrah!

At the time of the original programme grid I had at least two Covid/pandemic related items. I am really hoping there will be other things to talk about by next November but given how it has dominated all our thoughts, culture and life choices over the last year this may still appear in some guise.

I was also reserving a spot on the programme for a topical subject. This may be food-related (we have such a lot of potential topical issues!) or may not, but whether it is an issue or not by 2021 we have invited Carolyn Steele, author of HUNGRY CITY and SITOPIA, to talk about the future of food. Don't worry though; we'll still have a 'hard' science talk in the morning to drag you all out of bed.

The serious stuff is important but so is the fun. We have four excellent guests and will be inviting them each to a Guest of Honour talk/interview/slide show as they choose. We will have a Sorensen

"Highly sustenance and beautifully written"
Rae Wilson

Sitopia

Sitopia is foodies (I like) mixed + people



How Food
Can Save
the World

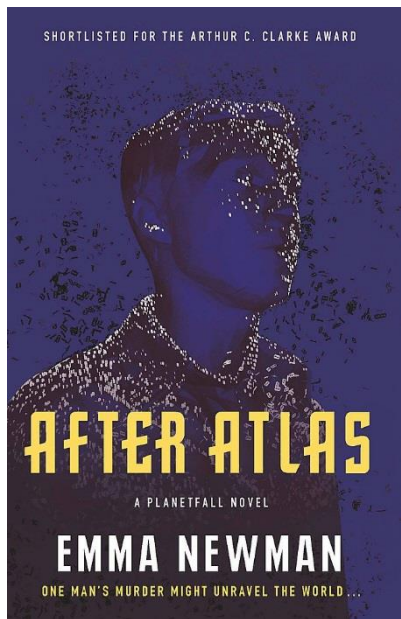
Carolyn Steele

Production on Saturday night (I'm sorry) and as much light-hearted programming as we can manage.

Now I only have a year to finalise the programme so I'd better get onto it.

Yvonne Rowse

AFTER ATLAS - Emma Newman



There is a recent reality TV series which I enjoyed watching, *Hunted* where a group of people try to evade capture by a team who use all the modern methods of tracking and surveillance. This includes CCTV, social media tracking and appeals, and tracking data from cars, phones and traffic monitoring systems etc. Although clearly manipulated to a degree for television, it is frightening how effective this can be and how much our privacy is being eroded by changes in technology.

In AFTER ATLAS, a near-future SF novel by Emma Newman, this has been extrapolated to a world where most people now manage all their devices, shopping, money etc via

an “APA”.

This is a chip implanted in their brain (think of this as a semi-intelligent virtual secretary). The ubiquity of “chipped” people means that most crimes are effortlessly solved as people and their activities can be easily traced. For the rare remaining crimes which need more detailed investigation, there are a few highly trained and skilful investigators. Carl(os) Moreno is one of the best of these detectives.

When a wealthy, foreign, high-profile cult leader is found dead at a country hotel that specialises in offering private and personal service, Carl is assigned to the case. In a very politically sensitive atmosphere, he is the only one deemed acceptable by the US, European and British governments who all have their own interests and agendas in solving (or covering up) the mystery. Whilst part of his selection is for his skills, it is also because of his previous connection to the dead man (and his cult) from when he was

a child. Having fled the North American cult as a youth, Carl was a refugee to Britain. Unbeknown to many, he is now indentured to the Ministry of Justice. He must work to pay off the constantly accumulating “debt” he owes to them and the “hothouse” company that educated him. These companies take talented refugees and train them as expert assets to be sold to the highest bidder. Any infraction or bad performance review can add penalties and increase his debt.

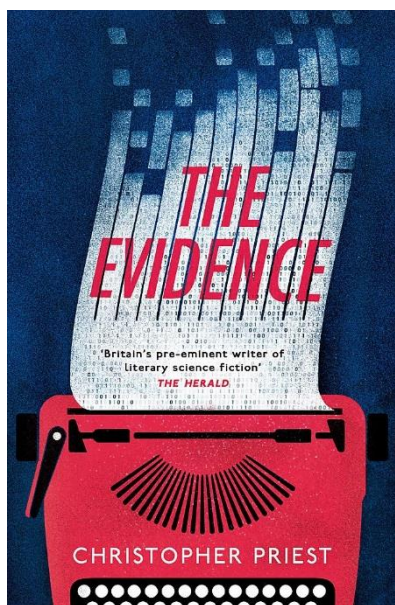
Whilst he tries to determine why Alejandro Casales is dead and who was involved, his job is complicated by all the political ramifications, his own grief and unresolved feelings about Casales (who was an important part of his childhood) and also by the constant monitoring of his own behaviour via the APA in his head. As in the previous book in this series, PLANETFALL, this is a superbly imaginative yet very realistic extrapolation of currently developing technology that has the potential to make a huge impact on people’s lives. Emma Newman also continues to show a superb ability to write subtle, multifaceted characters who have been emotionally and mentally marked by their experiences, with a perceptive and sensitive eye that is rare particularly in the SF field. Whilst this book is number 2 in a series, the setting is completely different and can easily be read as a stand-alone. I really enjoyed this intelligent and convincing novel. The emotional toll of constant monitoring and slavery in all but name was convincing and at times genuinely disturbing. If I have a criticism it is that I felt it could have been longer. The latter part of the book when Carl visits the Circle cult in the USA felt a little rushed at times and wrapped things up a little too quickly for my liking. Despite that caveat, Emma is, in my opinion, a talented SF author who is writing some very fine, different and thought-provoking Science Fiction. *Carol Goodwin*

THE EVIDENCE – Christopher Priest

This is the latest addition to Priest's *Dream Archipelago* series that stretches back over forty years through THE AFFIRMATION, THE DREAM ARCHIPELAGO, THE ISLANDERS and THE GRADUAL. But if you haven't read (or can't recall the details of) all of those, don't worry. You can start here with THE EVIDENCE, a stand-alone crime thriller full of surprises, matching or exceeding the quality of the previous volumes.

The narrator, Todd Fremde, is a crime novelist, never happier than when he's at home with his female partner and the cat on the subtropical island of Salay Raba, writing novels and admiring the sea view. But he's agreed to deliver a lecture on crime novels to an academic audience on the

far-off island of Dearth. On Dearth, Fremde is confronted by numerous problems, in particular the wintry conditions (for which special outdoor clothing is necessary) and the fact that the island is subject to mutability details of time and space change without warning. Early on in the novel



Fremde seems to be a Kafkaesque protagonist persecuted by society and unable to achieve any satisfaction. But after his lecture he meets an older woman who offers him a lift back to the airport (a couple of days away) in her souped-up sports car. It's a seeming stroke of good fortune that gradually pushes Fremde into being at the centre of a real-life crime thriller.

Parts of the novel use the device (as old as novels themselves) of a tale or memoir told by a character other than the narrator. There's plenty of subtext here to speculate on. Is Dearth meant to equate to death? Would we have less crime if we called it by another name?

The Dream Archipelago islands are amazingly varied, with different

cultures, laws and languages. And there are usually odd SF or fantasy elements in the mix, creating a surreal ambience. Are all the islands satirised parts of Britain? Priest may claim that all the details of the archipelago were planned decades ago (not that I've heard him doing so) but with each new book the place seems different—and that's part of the appeal. Just as with dreams themselves, you never know what you're going to get. In this series, all you can be sure of is an entertaining read presented in an immaculate writing style.

Because this is Priest, he's never content merely to tell a story. Part of this novel is Fremde's analysis of the architecture of the crime novel and its plot clichés such as twins and the locked room murder. He (Fremde) would never write a novel including either of them. But would Priest? And he (Priest) has great fun satirising the non-academic author speaking at an academic conference, though I hope none of his experiences have been as bad as Fremde's.

It's another gripping read from Priest. If the plot seems to jerk or jump tracks from time to time, it must be the effects of mutability. *Chris Morgan*

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.

The Code of Conduct is a living document. It evolves, intending always to reflect current best practice. The version in use at each Novacon is fixed in advance of the convention, and the version for Novacon 50 is available on the website (www.novacon.org.uk/n50/) and will be printed in Progress Report 3 and in the convention Programme book.

It should be noted that the Code of Conduct governs not only behaviour at Novacon, but also in certain spaces elsewhere, including but not limited to activity online, such as in messages or replies to Novacon accounts on social media, and posts in Novacon pages and groups. The Novacon Code of Conduct team receives complete information from preceding Novacon Code of Conduct teams, and passes complete information to future Novacon Code of Conduct teams. It also maintains an awareness of activity which has been of concern to other conventions. For most people, the simple principle of, “Behave like a decent human being,” is enough of a guideline. However, if in any doubt, please consult the Novacon website or contact the team at CodeOfConduct@novacon.org.uk

