



## HARRY HARRISON

— the peripatetic creator of the *Stainless Steel Rat*, was born in Stamford, Connecticut, and has since lived in New York, Mexico, England, Italy, Denmark, and twenty-seven other countries. He switched to freelance writing after a career as an artist, art director and editor, and now has over twenty novels to his credit, ranging from his deadly serious *Make Room! Make Room!* to humorous excursions like *Bill, The Galactic Hero*; *Technicolour Time Machine*; *Star Smashers of the Galaxy Rangers*; and of course, the *Stainless Steel Rat* series. Here he lets us into the secret behind *Slippery Jim*...

### THE SECRET OF THE STAINLESS STEEL RAT by Harry Harrison

*Slippery Jim diGriz* is not an anti-hero. Far from it. He is a hero who is anti-establishment. An individualist. He began with the idea that, as there are flesh and blood rats in wooden houses, so there will be stainless steel rats in the metal and concrete buildings of the future.

This is not meant literally. Rather that there will always be people without the law, people who are anti-establishment and wish to go it alone. *Slippery Jim* just tends to carry this idea too far.

The first book he appeared in was *The Stainless Steel Rat*. Kingsley Amis read it, enjoyed it I am happy to say, and commented that I had written the first picaresque science fiction novel. I nodded in sage agreement — and as soon as I could I rushed to the

dictionary. '*pic.a.reaque*, adj., applied to a type of fiction of Spanish origin, with a rogue or adventurer as hero.' I'll buy that.

Jim is a *rogue*. More often on the wrong side of the law than the right, his actions have a thin patina of legality since he does work for the Special Corps. Reluctantly I am sure. Anything law-abiding really goes against his grain.

Perhaps this goes to explain his popularity. As lawful as we all wish to be, we all must secretly desire at times to say 'what the hell!' and kick over the traces. We don't, not if we want to stay out of jail and on the right side of the law. But in reading fiction we can indulge that wish without any penalties.

We live in a law abiding age. A successful material culture, the kind we have in the west, means endless restrictive regulations. If we accept the fact that intrinsically worthless pieces of paper can be exchanged for goods, services, etc, we must be part of the system that protects the given value of these pieces of paper. And on and on. We are in the meshes of civilization and there is no real escape.

Only Jim diGriz can escape. He does it in a light hearted and jovial fashion that cheers us up. I know he cheers me up. Others as well. The first *Rat* story appeared in *Astounding* twenty years ago... and this and other *Rat* stories have been in print ever since. Not only in England and America, but in Italy, Germany, Spain, Japan, Holland, Sweden and Hungary as well. Apparently the desire to break the shackles of officialdom is universal. Small babies who teething on the *Rat's* steel hide are now grown up and, perhaps, raising a new generation of *Rat* readers.

Why not? Freedom speaks to all generations. And *Slippery Jim*, while crookeder than most people we meet, is certainly a lot freer and appears to be a lot happier. Why should he not march on into the future? Bringing light into the lives of millions... and loot into his own coffers as well.

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### MORE FROM NOVACON 8

Ian Watson  
receives an  
award

Bob Shaw and  
American writer  
David Kyle try  
out the exercise  
bikes



## NEWS BULLETIN

**Novacon 8** was held in Birmingham from November 3-5 with Anne McCaffrey as Guest of Honour. In this special article Robert Holdstock, author of *Eye Among The Blind* and *Earthwind*, reports on the convention and examines the reasons for what he sees as a sense of disillusionment that has crept into conventions in recent years.

● **NOVACON 8** by Rob Holdstock

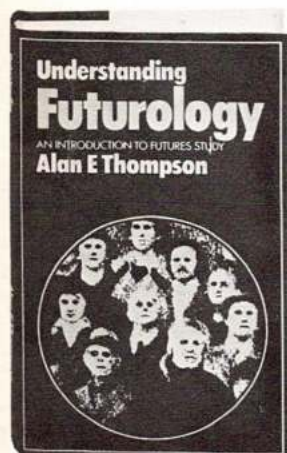


The idea for the November convention was initiated in 1971 by the Birmingham SF group. Ostensibly to break the 'monotony' of the year between the long established and excellently attended Easter Convention, in the early days the *Novacon* was also designed to be predominantly fannish, with considerably reduced emphasis on the 'heavy' science fiction side. In the last seven years, though, a certain sense of fatigue has crept into the SF side of both regular conventions, so much so that — save for attendances, which are higher at Easter — the conventions are nearly indistinguishable in tone, and that tone is lightweight and fannish, with the bar being quite as important as the Convention Hall.

To some people this is a depressing state of affairs. Ten years ago it was possible to enjoy long chats and drinks with friends and fans, and pick and choose which of a selection of excellent programme items to go and watch — visiting American writers, perhaps, bringing fresh insights; young writers bringing fresh aggressions; established writers talking wittily, yet seriously, about their work and their growing or fading disillusion with the genre. Ten years ago a convention was a place — an event — where many professional science fiction people enjoyed themselves and enjoyed their participation, to whatever degree, in the manic world of the SF fan. Alas, with prominent exceptions, this is no longer true; a handful of professional people attend year after year, enjoying themselves immensely: Bob Shaw, Chris Priest, Ian Watson, Ken Bulmer for example. But any professional programming aspects of a convention must inevitably grow tired with the over-familiarity of those few faces. I can think of no other reason for the eclipse of 'heavy' science fiction discussion at conventions.

*Novacon 8* was meticulously and conscientiously organised, but had quite obviously taken into consideration the recent tendency for 'lightweight' programming whilst unfortunately managing to under-accommodate the new phenomenon of fringe groups and the specialist fans who worship *Dr Who*, *Star Trek*, *Star Wars* or — God forbid — *Space 1999*. So *Novacon 8*, at times, seemed adrift, not quite sure whether it was a fannish convention or whether it was a science fiction convention and should rally around the excellent and immensely entertaining Guest of Honour, Anne McCaffrey. Anne was everywhere at all times, an exemplary GoH; she spoke about her most famous creations, Pern and its dragons, and ended by asking the audience which character she should write about next: they told her — she will do it.

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