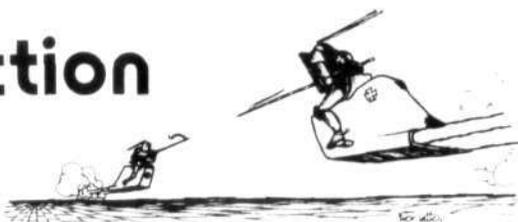


Birmingham Science Fiction Group

(Honorary Presidents: Brian W. Aldiss and Harry Harrison)



NEWSLETTER 106

JUNE 1980

The Birmingham Science Fiction Group meets on the third Friday of each month at THE IVY BUSH pub on the corner of Hagley Road and Monument Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham 16. This month's meeting is on Friday 20th June at 8.00pm. New members are always welcome. Our treasurer is Margaret Thorpe, 36 Twyford Road, Ward End, B'ham 8. The annual subscription is £2 per person.

JUNE MEETING - Friday 20th June 1980

This will be an OPEN FORUM on the subject of us---the Birmingham Science Fiction Group. Come along and say what you think of the group in the past, present and future. Is your committee providing the correct mixture of speakers? Would you like there to be more social events like next month's barge trip? Is The Ivy Bush a satisfactory meeting place, or should we be looking for somewhere larger or more adaptable? Where should the BSPFG be heading over the next few years?

Additionally there will be a SLIDE SHOW with pictures of our very successful float in last month's Lord Mayor's Procession, and an AUCTION. Conducting the auction will be a fit and bronzed Roger Peyton, just back from his holiday in the Mediterranean. So please bring along any surplus books, magazines, fanzines, space ships or death-rays to donate.

NOTE: BECAUSE WE HAVEN'T GOT A SPEAKER THIS MONTH, ADMISSION CHARGES WILL REVERT TO 30p FOR MEMBERS AND 60p FOR NON-MEMBERS.

MAY MEETING

Robert Holdstock began his talk by throwing free copies of a couple of his books into the audience. (Perhaps we can persuade all future visiting authors to do the same thing....) He spoke about several things which are important to him, including difficulties with US publishers and ideas for forthcoming novels.

FORTHCOMING

Next month, on Friday 18th July, will be a Barge Trip and Buffet. It will leave from Gas Street basin at 7.30pm and costs £2.50 per person (including food). Numbers are limited to 46, so get your ticket as soon as possible from our treasurer, Margaret Thorpe. If you can't get to this month's meeting you can send her the money (to 36 Twyford Road, Ward End, Birmingham B8 2NJ) ENCLOSING A STAMPED, ADDRESSED ENVELOPE.

Our August meeting will be a Dan Dare affair, with Alan Vince (one of the organisers of the recent Eaglecon) talking about Eagle comic's famous pilot of the future. If we're really lucky the original Dan Dare artist, Frank Hampson, will also be coming along that evening.

NEWS

NEBULA AWARD WINNERS: (novel) The Fountains of Paradise by Arthur C. Clarke; (novella) "Enemy Mine" by Barry B. Longyear; (novelette) "Sandkings" by George R.R. Martin; (short story) "giANTS" by Edward Bryant.

HARLAN ELLISON and BEN BOVA are to receive \$285,000 in damages following their plagiarism lawsuit against ABC-TV and Paramount Pictures. Ellison and Bova wrote a short story and TV play "Brillo" about a robot policeman, an idea which was judged to have been pinched for a TV series made by the companies.

DEATHS: In April John Collier died. He was the author of two good SF novels, His Monkey Wife and Tom's A-Cold and of many short stories which, collected as Fancies and Goodnights, won the International Fantasy Award in 1952. One was shown a couple of weeks ago in ITV's Tales of the Unexpected series: "Back For Christmas".

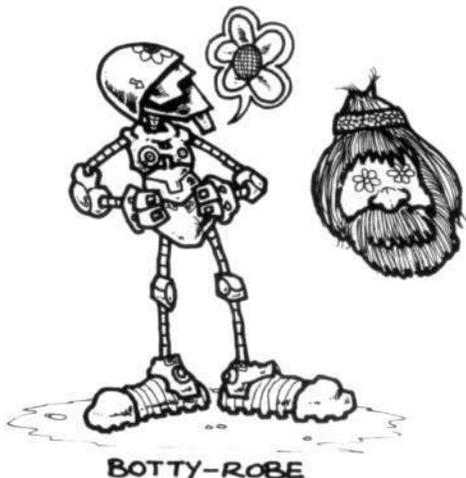
In May George Pal died. He worked on many SF and fantasy films, mostly as producer or director. Best remembered are Destination Moon (1950), When Worlds Collide (1951) and The Time Machine (1960).

ANDROMEDA BOOKSHOP'S top ten sellers for May were: 1. Perry's Planet (Star Trek novel) - Jack C. Haldeman II 2. The Empire Strikes Back - Donald F. Glut 3. Dr Who and the Power of Kroll - Terrance Dicks 4. The Fountains of Paradise - Arthur C. Clarke 5. The Adventures of Una Persson and Catherine Cornelius in the Twentieth Century - Michael Moorcock 6. Macrolife - George Zebrowski 7. The Enchanter Completed - de Camp & Pratt 8. The White Dragon - Anne McCaffrey 9. A Spell For Chameleon - Piers Anthony 10. Explorers of Gor - John Norman.

WHERE'S THE POINT in being newsletter editor if I can't get a bit of free publicity for my own books? Future Man by Chris Morgan is a serious work on futurology. But don't let that put you off. It outlines many possible lines of physical, mental and social evolution for mankind in the future, and it talks about science fiction at length. It's published by David & Charles at £6.95 and is available at all good bookshops. Ask me nicely and I'll autograph your copy. See the review later in this issue.

LORD MAYOR'S PROCESSION: a Brum Group float took part for the first time, on Saturday 24th May. Those who constructed the Apollo Capsule were Mike Field, David Hardy, Alan Cash and Pauline Morgan. Displaying themselves in alien and spaceman costumes on the day were the same four, plus Mike's two children, Mark and Emma. The launch vehicle was driven by Peter Weston. Many thanks to all for a marvellous effort.

BIRMINGHAM SCIENCE FICTION FILM SOCIETY'S next programme, on Sunday 6th July, will be King Kong (1933), Not of This Earth (1956) and two more episodes from The Adventures of Captain Marvel (1940). You can join for £2.50 (6-months sub.). Contact Chris Smith, 49 Humber Tower, Francis Street, Birmingham 7. Come and hear Fay Wray scream.



BOTTY-ROBE

STAR WARS: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK (Episode V) a film review by Dave Hardy

I'm not deliberately trying to scoop the Film Society (really, Chris!) but having seen a preview in Birmingham, a quick review does seem in order.

First - I enjoyed it. Admittedly it lacks some of the magic of the original, inevitably, especially in view of the host of look-alike films which followed in the wake of STAR WARS, making weird landscapes, massive exotic hardware and laser-battles almost commonplace. But it makes up for that with some new characters and alien creatures---including Yoda 'performed' by Frank Oz of Muppet fame, who seems all set to join C3PO and R2D2 in the toy shops, some really fine and believable alien settings, some humour (mostly intentional), a certain development of story, and perhaps above all by that feeling of meeting old friends (as in the STAR TREK movie).

The special effects are well up to scratch (ignoring the fact that asteroid belts just aren't like that---they are millions of miles apart usually!), but don't expect too much of the much-vaunted 'love interest'. There are some 'surprises', which I won't give away; but be warned---this is Episode V, and it definitely is an episode. You'll have to go and see the next... and the next... and the next...

COMPETITION BY PAULINE E.MORGAN

Win yourself £2 worth of SF books!!

Solve the clues below, then rearrange the letters in the central column to find the name of an American writer and editor of SF. Give or send your answers to Chris Morgan (39 Hollybrow, Selly Oak, Birmingham B29 4LX) before the end of June. Answers must be in writing, and the first correct solution opened on 1st July will be the winner. The prize is £2 worth of SF books from Andromeda---the winner can choose.

- 1. A Niven-Pournelle conflagration
- 2. Blish's mediaeval doctor
- 3. A grey mouser's best friend
- 4. Moorcock's cold ship
- 5. Dragon's world
- 6. Guest of Honor at Novacon 10
- 7. For whom there is a way station
- 8. Really Alice Sheldon
- 9. Vice President
- 10. Dreamsnake
- 11. Andrew Stephenson does this in the dark.

The crossword puzzle grid features a central vertical column of 11 squares. From the top of this column, a horizontal bar of 11 squares extends to the left, labeled '1'. From the second square of the vertical column, a horizontal bar of 10 squares extends to the right, labeled '2'. From the third square, a horizontal bar of 10 squares extends to the left, labeled '3'. From the fourth square, a horizontal bar of 15 squares extends to the right, labeled '4'. From the fifth square, a horizontal bar of 6 squares extends to the left, labeled '5'. From the sixth square, a horizontal bar of 7 squares extends to the right, labeled '6'. From the seventh square, a horizontal bar of 10 squares extends to the right, labeled '8'. From the eighth square, a horizontal bar of 10 squares extends to the left, labeled '9'. From the ninth square, a horizontal bar of 6 squares extends to the right, labeled '10'. From the bottom of the vertical column, a horizontal bar of 11 squares extends to the left, labeled '11'.

THE NOVELS OF 1979 - a retrospective disembowelling by Chris Morgan

Each year the number of awards given for science fiction and/or fantasy novels seems to grow. The Hugo and Nebula are best known but there are also the BSFA award, the World Fantasy Award, the British Fantasy Award, The American Book Awards, the Balrog Award, the Prometheus Award... If there were just a few more awards on offer there would be enough for every SF or fantasy novel to receive one.

In fact, only the Hugo and Nebula have much meaning---and even this isn't always true. Take the latest Nebula winner, Arthur C. Clarke's The Fountains of Paradise. I don't imagine that any voters really considered it to be the best SF novel of the year. Clarke had already announced that this was to be his last novel, and I'm sure that the award was made for his forty years of devoted service to the SF genre, in the hope that he wouldn't write anything else. The Fountains of Paradise is Clarke's space elevator novel, about the building of a "stairway to heaven" connecting a mountain in Sri Lanka to a satellite in synchronous orbit, 23,000 miles up. "Nobody else could have written the novel" as Clarke so modestly puts it in the BBC TV programme about him and his work in the Time Out of Mind series. In fact, this is true: nobody else would have dared to waffle on about Sri Lankan history at such length without saying anything, or to present characters quite so bare of characterisation. The novel has a patina of slickness which Clarke has developed over the years, but its excitement is all contrived and the treatment doesn't do justice to the idea. The one really mind-blowing bit is the suggestion that as many as a score of towers could be built around Earth's equator, all connected to orbiting satellites and each other, forming a vast wheel in space. Alas, this is only a mention and nothing more. I would place the Clarke novel in fifth place out of the six Nebula nominees (and last among the five Hugo nominees).

The poorest Nebula nominee is, I'm afraid, the only other in the bunch by an English author---Richard Cowper. His novel The Road to Corlay is a sequel to that excellent story "Piper at the Gates of Dawn". As always, it is beautifully written, for Richard Cowper is nothing if not a craftsman with words. But it always seems to me that he lacks a basic knowledge of what has already been written in the field of SF, and this leads him to make use of some themes and revelations as if they were brand new, while they are in reality awfully familiar. The Road to Corlay has (partly) a pseudo-mediaeval setting far in the future, which I found highly unconvincing. This is linked to the near future by a form of astral projection which is out of place here and unsupported by any other psychic advances.

Of the two Nebula nominees which have not been short-listed for the Hugo, one is Cowper's and the other is by Kate Wilhelm. Despite her Hugo for the novel Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang only three years ago and a consistently impressive standard of work, Kate Wilhelm does tend to be neglected by readers and award-givers. Her 1979 novel Juniper Time is available only as a US hardcover, so few people will have read it yet. It is a marvellous piece of work, deep, deliberately slow, and presenting a believably harrowing view of future USA. I'll say more about this one when the UK paperback comes out from Arrow, but I'll place it second amongst the 1979 nominees, which is high praise indeed.

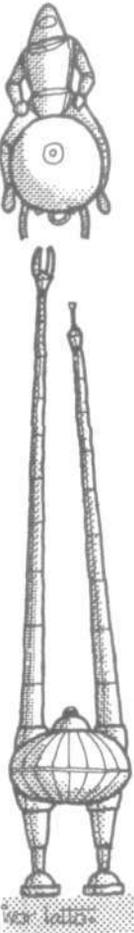
The one novel which has been nominated for the Hugo but not the Nebula is Patricia A. McKillip's Harrist in the Wind, an oddity in this company in that it is high fantasy and the last of a trilogy. Not that it's a bad book; in fact it contains the most

beautifully poetic descriptive writing of any of these nominees. Although Ms McKillip does her best to explain what has happened in the previous two volumes and includes both a map and a glossary of names, I wouldn't recommend anybody to read Harpist in the Wind in isolation (as I did). The book is full of wizards and shape-changers and enormous mental powers. The main characters rush from end to end of the map, barely knowing what they're looking for, but gradually gathering power and knowledge for the Final Battle between good and evil. (Except that the shape-changers are only the baddies because "our" side brands them as such.) The major events of Harpist in the Wind are very predictable, though excitingly told. I have some reservations about the names of people and places (inconsistent and sometimes bearing the wrong connotations). Also, the dialogue is poorer than the descriptive writing and there is a lack of clarity at times. Even so, I enjoyed this more than the Cowper and Clarke novels.

John Varley has made a name for himself in a very short time. His novel Titan is typical of his work--outrageously inventive and always entertaining, occupying that knife-edge between advanced hard technology and fantasy. Essentially this is an adventure story set on something similar to Larry Niven's Ringworld. The only depth is in the characterisation, and Titan is, in any case, just the first volume of a trilogy. It is rather spoilt because Varley refuses to let any of his characters be killed by the perils they face. Really, the less I say about the setting and action the better, because the element of surprise is all-important. I would place it equal third among the Nebula nominees, or equal second among the Hugo nominees.

Equal with Titan, though totally the opposite in its strengths and weaknesses, is On Wings of Song by Thomas M. Disch. Set on a near future Earth as dystopian as in Juniper Time, Disch's novel is unusual (to say the least) and occasionally totally zany. Although published as a fantasy its only fantasy strand is that, by using a special machine and the power of song, one can free one's spirit from one's body, allowing it to go flying off in the air. Few are able to achieve this. Yet although this is the long-term ambition of the novel's protagonist it is not the main subject matter, which seems to be early 21st century society--unpleasant unless one is very rich. There are many delightful characters here, and without much physical action there is a great deal of interest. Towards the end Disch becomes too whimsical for my taste, but the novel remains a considerable achievement.

And so, having left the best to last, I come to Jem by Fredrik Pohl. Very briefly, this describes the difficulties encountered by three competing human survey groups in dealing with an extra-solar planet and its three species of intelligent aliens. At home, Earth is sliding into war between its three power blocs--a war which spreads to the planet Jem. This novel grabbed me right from the start. It is fast-moving (with skilful shifts of location and jump cuts across days or weeks of time), dreadfully plausible and, most impressive of all, enormously mature. This maturity is evident both in the way in which the full spectrum of political, military, economic and scientific considerations is dealt with, and in the human relationships. Pohl seems to be going from strength to strength these days. My only reservation about Jem is its smugly utopian final chapter. This is my favourite of the year; it has already won The American Book Award and I hope it wins the Hugo.



BOOK REVIEWS

FUTURE MAN by Chris Morgan, David & Charles £6.95, 208 pages

Reviewed by Margaret Thorpe.

Future Man is an attempt by Chris Morgan to review the evolution, progress and future achievements of mankind, and to predict in what direction social, medical and technological discoveries will lead us in the future. The book opens with a resume of human evolution and continues with a review of the modern trends and opinions which continue to shape mankind today. He concludes by speculating and attempting to predict what mankind will be able to achieve with further advances in knowledge and ability. Altogether a useful and interesting book, written in an entertaining fashion, which means that despite the daunting subject matter, it is a very readable book, even to the layman with no technological knowledge, and it is certainly very useful as a work of reference. It incorporates a review of Science Fiction in predicting the future, and Chris Morgan shows how these ideas have been either vindicated or shown to be impracticable.

WEB by John Wyndham, Penguin 85 pence, 141 pages

Reviewed by Pauline E.Morgan.

John Wyndham never intended this book for publication, believing it not to be of a sufficiently high quality. But the style is recognisably Wyndham's and now, eleven years after his death, it will be welcomed as a "lost" novel. The story is set around a group of people hoping to create a utopian state on an uninhabited Pacific island. Unfortunately they run into difficulties with the indigenous wild life, aided and abetted by the previous, displaced human inhabitants. The style and treatment are old-fashioned, though not objectionably so.

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK by Donald F.Glut, Sphere £1.00, 215 pages

Reviewed by Margaret Thorpe.

The Empire Strikes Back is, of course, the sequel to Star Wars. It opens with the Rebel Alliance forming a new headquarters on the ice planet Hoth, until discovery by the Imperial Forces---led by Darth Vader---causes them to leave. Luke Skywalker becomes a disciple of Yoda, the teacher of all the Jedi Knights, and learns how to become one with the Force. Meanwhile, Han Solo and Princess Leia, after various adventures, are betrayed to Darth Vader. It's the same Star Wars formula; no moral or Message, just Good Guys against Bad Guys; pure escapism and fun. It comes complete with a section of colour pictures from the film.

THE DARK by James Herbert, NEL £5.95, 336 pages; **THE SPEAR** by

James Herbert, NEL £1.00, 253 pages

Reviewed by Jean Frost.

The first of these books, The Dark, is little more than a catalogue of sick atrocities which rapidly became boring after the first ten or so perversions. The plot is almost non-existent and the surprise ending became apparent about half-way through the book. The second book, The Spear, was slightly more interesting and at one point, when two protagonists are being chased by a Chieftan tank, it became almost exciting, but then it degenerated into yet more atrocities. What really spoilt it for me was the point at which Himmler's ghost puts in an appearance! Both books lack any literary merit. Herbert's favourite trick is changing viewpoint in the middle of the narrative, which is extremely confusing to the reader. I'll finish with a quote from The Spear (page 166, my underlining): "The hole looked natural enough, except the sides had been smoothed with concrete all the way down and there was a circular staircase running around the edge." Nuff said?

((But obviously there are lots of people who enjoy sick atrocities. The Spear has been in the Sunday Times best-seller charts for five weeks now. --- Editor))

COLONY by Ben Bova, Magnum £1.35, 470pp, Reviewed by Dave Hardy.

Ben Bova's Colony is one of the new breed of novel which extrapolates from present trends, in politics as well as science. The main setting is an L-5 space colony, almost exactly as proposed by Gerard O'Neill in 1969. We accompany a female reporter on a guided tour of the colony, allowing us to discover the layout in the traditional manner. But the increasing intrigues within the World Government, multinational corporations which control the Solar Power Satellites, a People's Revolutionary Underground terrorist movement led by a beautiful woman known as 'Scheherazade', and a genetically-perfect scientist with a computer implant add up to a well-paced novel which seems horribly plausible at times.

UNIVERSE NINE edited by Terry Carr, Dobson £5.25, 182 pages; THE WORLD'S BEST S.F. 5 edited by Donald A.Wollheim, Dobson £5.95, 270 pages

Reviewed by Pauline E.Morgan.

Universe Nine contains nine original stories, including "Options" by John Varley, runner-up for this year's novelette Nebula and a Hugo nominee---a disturbing story set in a society where sex-change is commonplace. "Frost Animals" by Bob Shaw is a neatly told SF crime-mystery. Also worthy of mention are "Time Shards" by Gregory Benford, which uses few words to ask a pertinent question about today's values, and "Will the Chill" by John Shirley, which tells of a bizarre planet-hurling contest. As in the previous eight Universe volumes, there is a range of subject and style so that all readers should find something to their taste.

By contrast, Donald A.Wollheim has put together ten stories which he considers to be the best published during 1977. Two of these are Hugo winners: novelette "Eyes of Amber", a beautifully told story of communication between human and alien by Joan Vinge, and short story "Jeffty is Five" by Harlan Ellison. Among other authors represented are Joe Haldeman, John Brunner and Clifford Simak. For me the most memorable story is "Particle Theory" by Edward Bryant, in which an unprecedented number of stars go nova.

Not only do these two anthologies present good stories by well known authors but they are an excellent way of finding out about the best of the new writers.

HAVEN OF DARKNESS (Dumarest no.16) by E.C.Tubb, Arrow 85 pence, 166 pages

Reviewed by Vernon Brown.

Still searching for his lost home planet, Terra, Dumarest is beset by sundry nasties, including spectres of his past killings and the local aspirant Warlord. Although with no great depth of characters or societies, Haven of Darkness is competently written and is reasonable light reading, better than much of its type on today's market.



