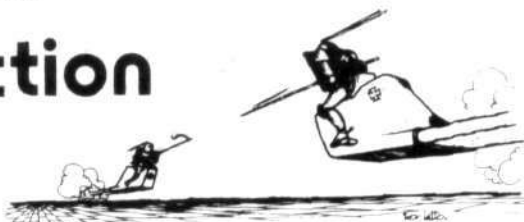


Birmingham Science Fiction Group

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



NEWSLETTER 105

MAY 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 16th May at 8.00pm. New members are always welcome. Our treasurer is Margaret Thorpe, 36 Twyford Road, Ward End, B'mham 8. The annual subscription is £2 per person.

MAY MEETING - Friday 16th May 1980

ROBERT HOLDSTOCK is our speaker this month. He is one of Britain's finest young SF writers. His novels Eye Among the Blind, Earthwind and Necromancer are all available, and his stories have appeared in many magazines and anthologies. He has also written a large illustrated book on fictional planets, Alien Landscapes (in collaboration with Malcolm Edwards) and has edited the Octopus Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction and a reprint anthology, Stars of Albion (with Christopher Priest). Through the medium of the BSFA magazine Focus (which he edits with Chris Evans) Rob tries to give help and advice to writers who are just beginning. Come along and ask him about his own books, about the problems of getting your own stories published, and about ancient Celtic history and mythology (a subject on which he is an expert).

APRIL MEETING

Les Flood gave an amusing talk on the history of literary agents, on the problems of being an SF agent, and on the subject of writing and publishing in general. He told us quite a number of tales of his dealings with famous authors, such as Fred Pohl, who allows Les to sign contracts for him.

FORTHCOMING MEETINGS

June 20th: this will be an open forum on the subject of the Brum Group (giving you a chance to say what you think is right or wrong with the group) followed by an auction---so start looking out any surplus books, magazines, etc to donate.

July 18th: Barge Trip and Buffet. This is a 3-hour barge trip along the canal, leaving Gas Street basin at 7.30pm. The barge is fully equipped with food (chicken & salad, pork pie, sausage roll, cheese & biscuits and a fresh cream eclair are all included in the price), a bar, and that all-important amenity if you're going to spend three hours drinking, toilets. This should be a marvellous social gathering---the last barge trip, two years ago, was a great success. The price is £2.50 per person. We are limited to 46 people, so book early. In fact, **BOOK NOW**. Get your tickets from our treasurer, Margaret Thorpe, at this month's meeting. Or, if you can't get to the meeting, send her the money (to 36 Twyford Road, Ward End, Birmingham B8 2NJ) **ENCLOSING A STAMPED, SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE**.

NEWS

NEBULA AWARDS: Arthur Clarke has just won the award for Best Novel with Fountains of Paradise. Other results not to hand.

TAFF, the TransAtlantic Fan Fund, has been won by Dave Langford, who will get a free trip to the 1980 Worldcon. Congrats, Dave. Hard luck, Jim.

HUGO AWARD NOMINATIONS: (novel) The Fountains of Paradise by Arthur C. Clarke, Harpist in the Wind by Patricia A. McKillip, Jem by Frederik Pohl, On Wings of Song by Thomas M. Disch and Titan by John Varley. I haven't got room to type out all the other categories in full, but British nominees are: (novelette) "Palely Loitering" by Christopher Priest, (non-fiction) The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction edited by Peter Nicholls (yes, I know he's Australian, but he does live in Britain), (fanwriter) Dave Langford, Bob Shaw.

ALBACON took place in Glasgow over Easter. It was not as dreadful as had been anticipated, though its chairman (the fake Bob Shaw, not to be confused with the respected author of the same name) was set upon and almost lynched by his committee afterwards. The BSFA awards went to J.G. Ballard for The Unlimited Dream Company, Chris Priest for "Palely Loitering" and Jim Burns for artwork. The Doc Weir award was won by author Bob Shaw.

TIME OUT OF MIND is being shown again on BBC TV, late on Sunday nights from 25th May. Four programmes on SF authors and one on Seacon.

BRUM GROUP member Ian Warner was married on 26th April to Elaine. It was a very smart affair, I'm told, with some participants in top hats and tails. Congratulations.

BIRMINGHAM SCIENCE FICTION FILM SOCIETY had a very successful first programme on Sunday 4th May, consisting of Phase IV, Forbidden Planet and a brief parody of Star Wars entitled Hardware Wars. Next month it will be Soylent Green, War of the Satellites and the first part of a serial, Radar Men From the Moon. That will be on Sunday 1st June at 11.00am. You can join for £2.50 (6-months subscription). Send it to Chris Smith, 49 Humber Tower, Francis Street, Birmingham 7. Programmes are shown at the Arts Lab cinema, Holt Street, Birmingham.

ANDROMEDA BOOKSHOP has begun calculating its monthly best sellers. For April they were: 1. Fountains of Paradise - Arthur C. Clarke 2. The Enchanter Completed - de Camp & Pratt 3. Dr Who and the Androids of Tara - Terrence Dicks 4. The Best of Eric Frank Russell 5. Hot Sleep - Orson Scott Card 6. The White Dragon - Anne McCaffrey 7. Conan the Liberator - de Camp & Carter 8. Han Solo's Revenge - Brian Daley 9. Vertigo - Bob Shaw 10. Driftglass - Samuel R. Delany.



DICK HOWETT

NUMBER TWO IN A SERIES OF PROFILES OF THE COMMITTEE

ROG PEYTON



Roger must be the Brum Group's best known member. He's on this year's committee because of his chairmanship of Novacon 10, though he is a former BSFG chairman. But Roger is even better known as the proprietor of Andromeda Book Co Ltd, a multi-million page SF bookshop empire in the heart of Birmingham.

Yet Birmingham-born Roger was not always the stocky, cheerful, self-assured authority on SF that he is today. Back in 1957 he was just a shy and fragile youth of fifteen, discovering adult SF for the first time. In 1960 he founded a small, informal Birmingham SF Group,

together with Cliff Teague. Another member of that group was Peter Weston.

In 1964 Rog attended the Easter convention in Peterborough--- his first convention. He was already a member of the British Science Fiction Association, and he was persuaded to become the editor of its journal, Vector, a post which he held for two years, bringing out 15 issues. Since 1964 he has been a regular con-goer. At the last count he had attended over forty!

Having amassed an enormous collection of SF books and magazines, including many duplicates, Roger began dealing in them, in partnership with Rod Milner, in January 1970. This partnership became Andromeda the following year. Also in 1971, the present Brum Group was founded by Roger, Peter Weston and Vernon Brown.

Increasingly during the 1970s Rog became a convention organiser. He has been on the committee of three Eastercons, has chaired five Novacons and has acted as chief adviser to several Trekkie cons. (As I am writing this, Roger is at home typing out the Programme Book for a forthcoming Star Trek con.) In 1973, when Andromeda Book Co Ltd moved to its present location in Summer Row, Rog gave up his job as Assistant Buyer with a building firm to concentrate all his efforts on selling SF.

One of the functions for which Rog has become well known (even notorious) is the auctioning of books and artwork, particularly at conventions. Who else would dare to say, with a straight face, "Now we have a really rare item for you to bid for" while displaying a copy of the 12th printing of Star Wars? Who else would auction a particularly dire example of space opera or pyramidology page by page? In 1979 he was presented with the Doc Weir award for his enormous contribution to British fandom.

Roger's other interests include early Rock 'n' Roll records and high class food. He lives with the lovely Arline and two dogs in Bartley Green, surrounded by books and original SF artwork.

DOUE TO EVER-RISING COSTS (SPEAKERS' TRAVELLING COSTS, PRINTING & POSTAGE, ETC) THE ENTRANCE FEE HAS TO BE INCREASED FROM THIS MONTH TO 60P. FOR MEMBERS AND £1 FOR NON-MEMBERS.

HIS NUMBER WASN'T UP! ----- an article by David Hardy

Some members at the March meeting seemed almost relieved not to have won the first raffle prize---Robert A. Heinlein's new novel Number of the Beast. I haven't read it yet, but I've certainly heard several reports that it isn't Heinlein's best. However, before judging 'the Dean of science fiction writers' too harshly, read on. What follows is a series of extracts from Robert Heinlein's testimony before the Select Committee on Aging and the Committee on Science & Technology, U.S. House of Representatives, last July:

"Look at me, please! I'll never be Mr America; I'll never take part in the Olympics. I've climbed my last mountain. But I'm here, I'm alive, I'm functioning.

Fourteen months ago my brain was dull-normal and getting worse, slipping toward human vegetable. I slept about 16 hours a day and wasn't worth a hoot the other eight hours.

Were it not for the skill of Dr Norman Chater, plus certain spin-offs from the space program, today I would either be an utter human vegetable or, if lucky, dead of cerebral stroke.

Mr Chairman, shall I go on? My parents taught me that it is not polite to talk about symptoms and disease in public... but I am willing to do it today if it will help to shout the importance of spinoffs from space research.

Mrs Heinlein and I spent 1976 and '77 on blood drives at conventions all over this nation. We criss-crossed the country so many times we lost track. I spoke about our space program, then one of us usually led off the blood donations.

It was quite worthwhile; we recruited several thousands new blood donors. But it was very strenuous. By the end of '77 we badly needed a rest, so we took a sea voyage. We were taking a walk on Moorea, Tahiti, when I turned my head to look at a mountain peak ---and something happened.

I stood on my left leg and said, "Darling, I'm terribly sorry but I think I've had a stroke. Something happened inside my head and now I'm seeing double and my right side feels paralyzed."

Mrs Heinlein half carried, half dragged me to the landing---got me back aboard.

A shipmate friend, Dr Armando Fortuna, diagnosed what had happened ---not a stroke but a transient ischemic attack. As soon as we reached California this was confirmed by extensive testing. However, a TIA is frequently a prelude to a stroke.

Remember that spinoff, computer-assisted tomography (brain scan)? That was done at once to rule out brain tumor. No tumor. The neurologist my physician called in started me on medication to thin my blood, as the clinical picture indicated constriction in blood flow to my brain. This was supposed to go on for six months.

But in only two months I was failing so rapidly that I was shipped to the University of California Medical School in San Francisco for further diagnosis. Remember the image enhancer? They did it to me, with no anesthesia; it did not hurt."

The testimony continues with a description of the procedure, and how he was fascinated to be able to watch his own heart beating, etc., on the fluoroscope. It continues:

"They spotted what was wrong: my left internal carotid was totally blocked. So the left half of my brain was starved for oxygen, as it was receiving only what little leaked over from the right side or from the vertebrae where the network interconnected, primarily at the Circle of Willis under the brain.

No wonder I could not write, could not study, could not read anything difficult. This is your speech center, your word processor, the place where a writer does all his work.

My left internal carotid is still blocked; the stoppage is too high up in here for surgery. So they hot-wired me instead. Dr Chater moved my left superficial temporal artery to feed the left side of my brain. This operation is pictured on pp. 62-63, April 1978 Scientific American; I omit grisly details; you can look them up there if surgery interests you."

After the four-hour operation:

"They placed me in a cardiac intensive-care room. When I woke I found in my room a big screen with dancing lights all over it. These curves meant nothing to me but were clear as a print to the nurses and to my doctors---such things as EKG, blood pressure, respiration, temperature, brain waves. I don't know what all. The thing was so sensitive that my slightest movement caused one of the curves to spike.

I mention this gadget because I was not wired to it.

A space technology spinoff: this is the way NASA monitored our astronauts whenever they were out in space.

NASA had to have remote monitoring for its astronaut patients. For me it may not have been utterly necessary... but it did mean that I was not cluttered up with dozens of wires like a fly in a spider web. The microminiaturized sensors were so unobtrusive that I never noticed them. Yet the nurses had the full picture every minute, every second."

The testimony concludes:

"The surgery itself is not a spinoff from space technology... but note how repeatedly spinoffs were used on me before, during and after surgery.

I was far gone; I needed every edge possible. Several things that tipped the odds in my favor are spinoffs from space technology. I feel that I have proved one of two things: I have either fully recovered... or a hole in the head is no handicap to a science fiction author."

Even at my tender age (?) I can remember when most people looked upon space travel as nothing but science fiction. (Today there are still people who think that SF is nothing but space travel, but that's another story.) Then came the politically-accelerated Mercury, Gemini and Apollo programmes---boosted as much by Soviet achievements in the 1950s and 60s as by their own step-rockets, ending with a wave of enthusiasm with the Moon-landings.

Since then there has been something of a backlash, and even some people in science fiction circles, who should know better, are asking "What use is space travel anyway?" Quite apart from philosophical statements such as "Mankind must expand into space or stagnate---even regress" (which I happen to believe), there are many benefits which we now take for granted---as Robert Heinlein knows only too well. In future issues of this newsletter I hope to mention a few of them.

David Hardy



BOOK REVIEWS

THE EARLY POHL by Frederik Pohl, Dobson £5.25, 183 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

It was Isaac Asimov who started it, with The Early Asimov--- a lot of his earliest and previously unreprinted stories gathered together, interspersed with biographical commentary. Now Frederik Pohl has done the same thing. Here are eight stories and a poem, first published between 1937 and 1944, while Pohl was in his late teens and early twenties. They aren't great stories; most are routine space opera, set in various parts of the Solar System; the last couple are noticeably better than the first. The linking comments are very good---informative about Pohl's early life as well as being fun to read. He talks of his first contacts with SF fandom, of becoming an SF magazine editor at the age of nineteen, and of his struggle to get into the US army during the war. Worth reading.

THE COURTS OF CHAOS by Roger Zelazny, Faber £5.50, 183 pages

Reviewed by Pauline E. Morgan.

A writer of brilliant imagination, Roger Zelazny has used his abilities well in the series of five books that began with Nine Princes in Amber and culminates with this volume. The Courts of Chaos is not a book that can be read in isolation as there are many references to events, people and places that appear in previous volumes. No repetitious explanations of these are given, nor would the follower of the series expect them. The Courts of Chaos deals with the final battle between Amber and the Courts of Chaos, which stand at opposite extremes of a continuum of worlds known as Shadow. Like many final parts of a series where loose ends have to be tied up, this does not have quite the same excitement as the previous volumes. Nevertheless, the "Amber" series is well worth reading. It is worth noting that the way is left open for a sequel. I hope the author gets around to it soon.

THE OUTER REACHES by Michael Vyse, Faber £5.95, 158 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Writing good short stories is a difficult business, and the shorter the stories the more difficult it becomes. If one is writing stories of only seven or eight pages---so brief as to be anecdotal---one must either concentrate on characterisation, as Gerald Kersh did, or on the originality of one's last line, like Fredric Brown. Michael Vyse does neither in the twenty stories here. His characters are all too impersonal and under-described; the reader cannot identify with their triumphs or failures and does not care when they die. His situations and endings are reiterations of the standard alien and spaceship variations. Occasionally there is a powerful image, as in "Tomorrow Today", but the overall standard of the collection is disappointingly low.

TIME AND AGAIN by Jack Finney, Weidenfeld & Nicolson £5.95, 399 pages

Reviewed by Pauline E. Morgan.

Many people have felt, when visiting an antiquity or an ancient battle ground, that given the right circumstances they could almost step into the past. That is the theme of this novel. An artist, Simon Morley, steps back into the New York of 1882 as part of a controlled experiment. He observes everything in minute detail. The resulting descriptive passages tend to interrupt the flow of the story---a crime mystery---slowing the pace. It is a copiously illustrated novel, with the pictures an integral part of the book, mentioned in the text so that the reader is made to look at them. It has been very well researched and beautifully written but would probably mean far more to somebody who knows New York, rather than the average English reader. This is one of the books which Roger Peyton raves about.

LIFE IN THE WEST by Brian W. Aldiss, Weidenfeld & Nicolson £5.95, 310 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

This is a novel of contemporary life, rich in wit and wisdom. Thomas Squire, an upper-class Englishman in his late 40s, has become a respected pundit on the subject of popular culture following his TV series Frankenstein Among the Arts. He has been invited as guest of honour to an international conference on future culture at Ermalpa (a thinly disguised Palermo) in Sicily. But this time of greatest success is also, for Squire, the time of greatest upset and soul-searching. His marriage seems to be breaking up and he may be forced to sell Pippet Hall, the home of his family for centuries.

Although Thomas Squire's problems are central to the novel, Brian Aldiss uses them as a pretext for commenting upon many facets of present-day existence. Chapters set at the Ermalpa Conference alternate with flashbacks of Squire's earlier life. Culture, in its various manifestations, gets a good deal of space, beginning with an episode of Frankenstein Among the Arts and continuing through various papers presented at the conference on such subjects as science fiction and pin-ball machines. There is a heavy seasoning of politics, particularly at Ermalpa, where almost all the delegates (most of whom are well-to-do academics) profess a kind of phoney Marxism; an exception is one of the Soviet delegates, Rugorsky, an anglophile.

This is an indulgent novel; Brian Aldiss spends much time describing things which, I felt, are important to him. Fortunately these things are interesting to the reader, and are put across with such a sure descriptive touch accompanied by shafts of irony and wit that one cannot fail to be entertained. Even so, this is a long, discursive book with little action, intended for the intellectual rather than the person who wants an easy read.

STAR BRIDGE by Jack Williamson & James E. Gunn, Magnum 95 pence, 213 pages

Reviewed by Pauline E. Morgan.

The Empire is held together by golden Tubes, the star bridges of the title, which reduce passage time between solar systems to three hours. When the General Manager of the Empire is assassinated the oppressed people of the centre world, Eron, revolt. Necessary background is neatly fed in as historical inserts before each chapter. The story lopez along at a steady pace, quickening towards the final climax, with sufficient twists and turns to keep the reader interested. A clever and enjoyable book.

WAY STATION by Clifford D. Simak, Magnum 65 pence, 189 pages;

A CHOICE OF GODS by Clifford D. Simak, Magnum 70 pence, 158 pages;

A HERITAGE OF STARS by Clifford D. Simak, Magnum 95 pence, 219 pages

Reviewed by Jean Frost.

The oldest book, Way Station, is by far the best novel of the three, mostly because the characterisation is much more plausible and the writing far deeper than in the other two novels. However, Way Station suffers slightly in having an old-fashioned story line---Earth on brink of nuclear war is saved at the last minute and then admitted to a Galactic Federation---but it is well worth reading all the same. A Choice of Gods has a message to preach---"technology is bad"---and this gives the reader the impression that he/she is being lectured to for most of the story. It would perhaps make a good novel for a school class---'To discuss the implications of the underlying philosophy'---but it does not, unfortunately, make good entertainment. The third book, A Heritage of Stars, is badly written, extremely boring, superficial and pointless. This book also carries the message "technology is bad", amended at the end to "maybe it isn't" with no explanation at any point to show why these views should be held. I'm afraid it took me a long time to struggle through this book. In conclusion I would recommend Way Station to be read any time, A Choice of Gods to be read if there's nothing else, and A Heritage of Stars to be read only if the alternative is slow death.

LAST MEN IN LONDON by Olaf Stapledon, Magnum £1.25, 269 pages

Reviewed by Mike Meara.

A companion to, and expansion of a tiny part of, Stapledon's earlier Last and First Men. The same historian of the Last Men recounts his researches amongst ourselves, the First Men, in early twentieth-century England. Neither book is a novel in the conventional sense, but this later work does at least have rudimentary characters and some semblance of a plot, albeit intermittent. Both books are essentially philosophical tracts or sermons disguised as fiction, a practice which I consider is both deceitful and arrogant. Worth keeping only for the powerful, moving description of the final disintegration of the Last Men which concludes the book.

THE CASTLE KEEPS by Andrew J. Offutt, Magnum 85 pence, 202 pages;
MY LORD BARBARIAN by Andrew J. Offutt, Magnum 95 pence, 189 pages

Reviewed by Margaret Thorpe.

The Andrews live in a fortified hilltop house out of town, the Caudills in a protected apartment block in the city. Both are struggling to live normal lives in an overpopulated, polluted world, where mindless violence is unchecked. The Castle Keeps is an action-packed novel that has been well researched, with plausible characters. Definitely a very readable novel. Unfortunately My Lord Barbarian is not up to the standard of the previous book. It is well written, but is just another barbarian story. The cover says it all. A barbarian warlord is wrongly accused of murdering the Emperor, and subsequently overcomes impossible odds to prove his innocence. Thoroughly predictable in treatment, characterisation and storyline.

THE MASTERS OF SOLITUDE by Marvin Kaye and Parke Godwin, Magnum £1.50, 397 pages

Reviewed by Margaret Thorpe.

Humanity is divided into factions; those in The City are isolated---none enter and none leave: work is everything, emotion and feelings are considered to be time-wasting to the incredibly long-lived inhabitants. Judith Singer leaves to research the Shando, a group of humans that possess telepathy and live close to nature. The son of Judith and Garrick (leader of the Shando) is a misfit, not able to share in the group sensitivity, and yet unable to pass through the Self-Gate into the City. When plague threatens to wipe out the Shando, Garrick uses his son and the knowledge of the City gained from the now-dead Judith to obtain help from the City. Skilfully put together, combining all the best elements of an adventure narrative while conveying a profound philosophy, which means that this is a very thought-provoking book. Not for casual reading.

WE WHO ARE ABOUT TO... by Joanna Russ, Magnum 75 pence, 125 pages

Reviewed by Pauline E. Morgan.

A handful of passengers crashland on a deserted planet. The first consideration is survival. But while the women think in terms of short-term survival (i.e. food and drink) the men think of long-term survival (i.e. sex). One has come to expect Joanna Russ's books to be rampantly feminist. Cleverly handled, the story is told through the emotional conflicts of a lesser member of the party. This is a book for the more intellectual reader rather than for somebody who expects continuous action.

EDITORIAL NOTES

There was no room this time for my article on the Nebula-nominated novels or for the Used Spaceship Column. The Hugo nominations are reprinted from Locus, and some bits of news have been pinched from Ansible. Artwork this issue: Ivor Latto p1, Dick Howett p2, David Hardy pp3 & 5. Many thanks to all contributors. This issue has been typed and cobbled together by Chris Morgan, 39 Hollybrow, Selly Oak, Birmingham B29 4LX.