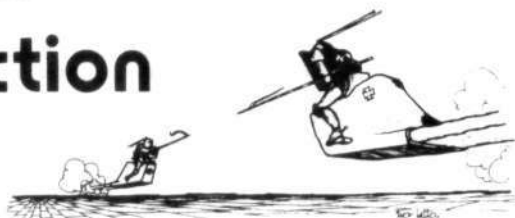


Birmingham Science Fiction Group

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



NEWSLETTER 108

AUGUST 1980

The Birmingham Science Fiction Group meets on the third Friday of each month. Our place of meeting will be altering over the next few months, so see below for details. New members are always welcome. Our treasurer is Margaret Thorpe, 36 Twyford Road, Ward End, Birmingham 8. The annual subscription is £2 per person.

AUGUST MEETING - Friday 15th August 1980 at 7.45 pm

- At THE IVY BUSH pub on the corner of Hagley Road and Monument Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham 8.

This will be a DAN DARE evening. Alan Vince, one of the greatest fans of Eagle comic's Dan Dare strip, will be coming along to talk and show slides. It's possible that he will bring Frank Hampson, the original artist of Dan Dare, along with him, though this is not certain.

PLEASE NOTE that admission charges of 60 pence per member and £1 per non-member will operate this month because we have a guest speaker.

Also, note that following a vote taken at the June meeting, those present are asked not to smoke during the business part of the meeting (during the talk and slide show) so that our speaker's voice won't be drowned by the extractor fan.

JULY MEETING

The barge trip was greatly enjoyed by all those present. It was (in some ways) nice to be able to chat all evening without a programme intervening.

FORTHCOMING

NOTE THAT THE SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER MEETINGS WILL NOT BE AT THE IVY BUSH DUE TO REDECORATION OF THE PUB. We'll probably hire a room in one of Birmingham's hotels—details in next month's newsletter.

We hope to have a well-known author for September (but we haven't confirmed arrangements yet, so can't tell you who). In October our speaker will be SF publisher and editor Anthony Cheetham, and in November it will be Dr Julian Isaacs of Birmingham University, a researcher into Extra-Sensory Perception.

BIRMINGHAM SCIENCE FICTION FILM SOCIETY's next programme, on Sunday 7th September, will be Woody Allen's Sleeper (1973), The Green Slime (1962) and two more episodes of the serial in which Captain Marvel will undoubtedly continue to escape the clutches of The Scorpion. It's all happening at Birmingham's Arts Lab cinema, starting at 11.00 am, and you can join for £2.50 (6-months subscription). Contact Chris Smith at 49 Humber Tower, Francis Street, Birmingham 7. Details and tickets also available from Andromeda Bookshop and the Arts Lab.

NEWS

BRIAN ALDISS and HARRY HARRISON, our joint Honorary Presidents, each have a new novel published this month. Brian's is Moreau's Other Island, coming out as a hardcover from Jonathan Cape, while Harry's is Homeworld, the first volume in a new trilogy, published as a paperback original by Panther. With a bit of luck reviews of both will appear in the September newsletter.

ISAAC ASIMOV is the latest author to have incorporated himself for tax purposes. He has become Nightfall Inc.

THE MARTIAN CHRONICLES, a 3-part TV adaptation by Richard Matheson from the Ray Bradbury book, is being shown on BBC1 on Saturday nights, beginning on 9th August at 8.25pm. It stars Rock Hudson.

ANDROMEDA BOOKSHOP's top ten sellers for July were:

1. The Russian Intelligence - Michael Moorcock
2. Steppe - Piers Anthony
3. The Stainless Steel Rat Wants You - Harry Harrison
4. The Jesus Incident - Frank Herbert & Bill Ransome
5. The Empire Strikes Back - Donald F. Glut
6. Conan the Mercenary - Andrew J. Offutt
7. Wild Talent - Wilson Tucker
8. The Fountains of Paradise - Arthur C. Clarke
9. Star King - Jack Vance
10. The Adventures of Una Persson and Catherine Cornelius in the Twentieth Century - Michael Moorcock

LAST MONTH'S COMPETITION: SOLUTION

Bortice the Ragon.

(If you're interested in the details of how to get this answer from the information provided, see Stan Eling at the August meeting.)

The winner of a voucher for £2 worth of books for the first correct solution opened is Gordon Bolton. Well done.



BOOK REVIEWS



THE RUINS OF ISIS by Marion Zimmer Bradley, Arrow £1.35, 298 pages
Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

The society of Isis is a matriarchy; the men, although kindly treated, are regarded as an unfortunate necessity. An archeologist is invited to the planet to survey the ancient ruins which have survived intact despite frequent earthquakes. The sociology of Isis has been carefully and plausibly worked out and is fed to us through the eyes of Cendri Malocq, who poses as the archeologist as a front for her husband who, being male, is not acceptable as an authority figure to the matriarchs. The events portrayed are telescoped into too short a time period. The book is primarily concerned with the people of Isis, the ruins being almost as enigmatic at the end as they were at the beginning.

THE ENCHANTER COMPLETED by L. Sprague de Camp & Fletcher Pratt, Sphere £1.00, 157 pages
Reviewed by Margaret Thorpe.

The Enchanter Completed, here published in the UK for the first time, is the long-awaited last volume of the adventures of Harold Shea and his wife Belphebe as they search for Walter Bayard and Pete Brodsky in alternate worlds of myth and legend. In these universes magic actually works, and its outcome is predicted by the use of logic and mathematics. The logic, however, is that of the particular myth which they are currently inhabiting, so magical duels with Finnish wizards from the Kalevala or amorous Irish Druids are both entertaining and unpredictable. The book lives up to the promise of the first in the series, The Incomplete Enchanter, and my only regret is that there are no further stories in this series planned by Sprague de Camp.

RITE OF PASSAGE by Alexei Panshin, Magnum £1.25, 254 pages
Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

This Nebula winner from 1968 (the copyright page gets it wrong by ten years) is superficially an impressively crafted story about a space-roving human culture, whose members only live on planets during their coming-of-age survival tests---the rite of passage into adulthood. But the fact that colonised planets are used for these tests without permission---are effectively invaded by teen-aged aristocrats who are contemptuous of the surface-dwellers---leaves a nasty taste in one's mouth. And when a planet has the guts to object to such an invasion it is blown out of existence. The novel was previously published in Britain by Sphere Books.

THE STARCHILD TRILOGY by Frederik Pohl and Jack Williamson, Penguin £1.95, 508 pages
Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

Chronologically, both in plot context and publishing history, the three novels, The Reefs Of Space, Starchild, and Rogue Star are printed here in reverse order. Rogue Star is a far more sophisticated book than the other two. Many stars are intelligent beings and the newly created rogue has to adjust to its universe without outside help. A lot of careful thought has been put into its creation and development. Starchild steps back in time to the beginning of the fall of the Plan of Man, a scheme for mankind to subjugate the entire solar system. With the Reefs of Space the only source of resistance, this volume is more of a straight-forward adventure, as is The Reefs Of Space. This steps further backward to the hunt for a jetless drive which animals of the Reefs have, but the science of Earth hasn't, yet. Reading the three novels in the order presented gives a deeper understanding, in historical perspective, to the latter two volumes.

WILD TALENT and **THE LONG LOUD SILENCE** by Wilson Tucker, Coronet, 85 pence each, 188 pages and 156 pages Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Wild Talent is an excellent telepath novel, perhaps the best ever written. Although first published in 1954 and set in the two decades before that, it remains highly credible. Paul Breen, the young man who has to learn how to cope with his developing ESP talents and who becomes the US government's most secret weapon in the cold war with Russia, is a beautifully realised character. Note the dedication: "For PAUL BREEN wherever he may be hiding." The Long Loud Silence is less exceptional---just another story about a young soldier trying to stay alive in a disintegrating USA after a plague. It's a good read, though, because Wilson Tucker has always been an entertaining---and underrated---writer. Interestingly, this is the original version with references to World War II rather than the revised version which refers to Vietnam.

THE WEB BETWEEN THE WORLDS by Charles Sheffield, Sidgwick & Jackson £6.95, 274 pages Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

This is just the novel for those people who prefer future technology to characterisation. Charles Sheffield is not a good writer, and despite padding out this story of the construction of the first space elevator (as in Clarke's The Fountains of Paradise, but separately developed) he fails to make any of his characters come alive. There is some exciting adventure, though, and the novel's climax, on a converted asteroid, is worth reading despite its predictability.

WE by Yevgeny Zamyatin, Penguin £1.10, 223 pages

Reviewed by Martin Longley.

This was written in 1920 by a Russian living in Russia, but has never been officially published there. A forerunner of 1984 and arguably far superior, We is set in the world of The One State where people do things by the clock, according to the Tables of Hourly Commandments. D-503, the protagonist, meets E-330 and falls 'in love' with her. Gradually he begins to realise his individuality, the existence of his soul. The first half of the novel is very engaging. Towards the middle D-503's conflict with himself becomes rather one-sided, and therefore less interesting. The final climax redeems the story, though, and overall We is very good, recommended, etc. Also take note of the author's style, remembering the period of writing. Surprisingly modern and, you guessed it, years ahead of its time. Buy it.

CONAN THE MERCENARY by Andrew J. Offutt, Sphere £1.00, 191 pages

Reviewed by Malcolm Thorpe.

Conan, in his late teens, attempts to steal from a sorcerer but loses the booty to a rival and his soul to a magician. He regains both, and as bodyguard to a royal cousin saves the realm of Khauran. Offutt keeps to the originator's style and ideals. Although well written, it lacks Howard's scope and imagination.

THE BLACK CLOUD by Fred Hoyle, Penguin 95 pence, 219 pages

Reviewed by Dave Hardy.

This is the 13th reprint in paperback of a book which first appeared in 1957. It is the sort of book that, if you read it way back then, may remain a 'classic'. If you are reading it for the first time you will probably find it dated, and will find the concept of Earth threatened by an intelligent cloud from space quite familiar territory. But the science is good.

NERVES by Lester Del Rey, Ballantine, distributed by Futura, 85 pence, 180 pages

Reviewed by David C. Holmes.

Originally written as a novelette in 1942, five months before the Manhattan Project was established, this 1952 novel tells the story of an accident at an atomic plant. Though it is of interest for its speculation on the future of the nuclear industry, it is badly marred by its style. Like a poor fifties "B" movie, it is the amateur hero here who "saves the world", instead of the people who should know what they are doing.

SPACE, TIME AND NATHANIEL, STARSWARM, HOTHOUSE and BAREFOOT IN THE HEAD all by Brian Aldiss, Panther, 95 pence each, pages 190, 190, 206 and 236 respectively

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Panther have many of Brian Aldiss's books in print. Space, Time and Nathaniel was his first collection, from 1957; it even includes "Criminal Record", his first published SF story. Some of the fourteen stories have become dated, though they are still worth reading. The themes are largely those of traditional SF---aliens, spaceships and future wars---though from a more cerebral viewpoint than was usual during the 1950s. Starswarm, from 1964, is a more stylish collection of eight stories, dealing with aliens and changed humans. It must be said that all these earlier Aldiss stories are easier to read and more entertaining than his more recent trios of enigmas. Hothouse is that splendid episodic novel of a devolved humanity on a dying Earth. Though including much high adventure as the sub-human protagonists battle their way through hosts of vegetable predators and inadvertently journey to the Moon, this novel has more to it than adventure: it is in part a fanciful study of Earth's last gasp, with all differences between species, even between animal and vegetable, becoming blurred. Barefoot in the Head is one of the novels responsible for Brian Aldiss's reputation as an experimental writer. It portrays a Europe saturated with an LSD-type hallucinogenic drug. Not only are the characters affected but also the third-person narrator, resulting in the running together of words and meanings and the frequent absence of punctuation. All this is enormously cleverly done, and full of allusions which the reader has to be equally clever to spot. To have maintained this style throughout the book is a considerable tour de force which a less brilliant author would not have attempted. Even so, the difficulty of picking one's way through the words does, in the end, become tedious.

SWORD OF THE DEMON by Richard A. Lupoff, Sphere £1.25, 224 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

This retelling of Japanese mythology is full of magical events and good descriptive writing. It follows the adventures of Kishimo from her apparent creation as a possessionless young woman through her meetings with various gods and rulers and her travels to lands of ice, and an underwater kingdom, as she gains powers and status. The Japanese names are a bit too much to follow at times, and events move rather slowly, but it is a most unusual book. Worth trying.

THE BLACK CASTLE by Leslie Daniels, Sphere £1.20, 232 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

It's vampires versus the Spanish Inquisition in the Basque country of the early 16th century. The approach is standard gothic horror, with scenes (many of them at night) in an old castle, deserted narrow streets, a torture chamber, etc. Despite the opening scene of half-naked men and women being whipped through the streets, there's relatively little sex or violence. Unconvincing, and so seriously written as to provide plenty of unintentional humour. It was short-listed for the World Fantasy Award last year, though I can't imagine why.

KARMA by Arsen Darney, Sphere £1.75, 366 pages

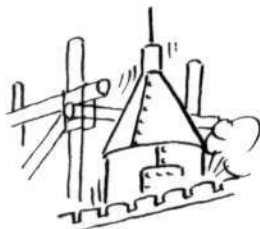
Reviewed by Chris Smith.

This is so slow-moving and wordy that I was halfway through before it started to become interesting. The first third is set in the halls of power in Washington D.C. (in the recent past but post-Watergate) and is hard to believe. There is a lot about reincarnation, with machines that capture souls as people die. Later comes an Atomic priesthood in a future where people have gone back to living in caves. This could have been a good book if the story had gone a little deeper. ESP and life after death are not the easiest of things to write about, especially in an SF (rather than fantasy) novel. It finishes too abruptly, without a proper ending.

MOLLY ZERO by Keith Roberts, Gollancz
£6.95, 224 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Far too much new SF concerns itself with depressing near-future dystopias, showing the US or Britain falling apart for self-made reasons like war, pollution or energy shortages. Keith Roberts follows this fashion, but having said that I can find little else to criticise in Molly Zero. It is a rich, absorbing novel, describing the development, from naivety to cynicism, of a teenaged girl. Character and relationships are all-important here and are handled with great skill and delicacy. Molly narrates her experiences, startlingly but effectively, in the second person present tense, which provides a breathless immediacy throughout, as well as allowing a free flowing subjectivity which flits between past and present. For much of the book it is Molly's developing character which provides the interest, since the plot is slow and jerky until near the end. Underneath are various lessons to be learnt, particularly that we all live in prisons of our own making. There are some touches of satire and---obtrusive only occasionally---elements of intentional staginess. Molly Zero is a fine and thoughtful work, better even than Pavane.



"Fred says we're having
a change from Margate
next year."

THE HOUSE ON THE BORDERLAND by William
Hope Hodgson, Sphere 95 pence, 173 pages

Reviewed by Dave Hardy.

One has to bear in mind that this book was first published in 1908; even so, its style makes it rather difficult to read---especially the punctuation, since the author, so to say, seems to suffer, from an excess, of commas (thus).. There is also very little dialogue, since the story purports to be mainly the diary of a recluse. If you can stand this, the scope of the book---from strange creatures from the Pit to the farthest reaches of space and time---and a blend of fantasy, horror and SF make for an unusual read.

THE GATE OF WORLDS by Robert Silverberg, Magnum £1.25, 244 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

1967, when this was first published, marks the start of Silverberg's period of top-class writing. Although The Gate of Worlds is a juvenile novel (a teenaged protagonist; plenty of fast-moving adventure; no sex) it is very good of its type. Particularly interesting is the background---a universe in which history happened differently, with most of Europe long dominated by Turkey, and North America split between the Aztecs and the Russians. The historical basis is so carefully worked out that the book is worth reading for that alone. The plot concerns Dan Beauchamp, a young Englishman, who seeks his fortune in the New World and learns maturity. I enjoyed this one; it's a pity there isn't a sequel.

JEM by Frederik Pohl, Granada £1.25. 300 pages

Reviewed by Malcolm and Margaret Thorpe.

This 1980 Hugo Nominee is an extrapolative novel concentrating on the modern paranoidias about oil resources, food production, overpopulation and the bomb. The nations of Earth are familiar, but there are three power blocs: the Greasies, in control of oil (including Britain), the Fats who produce the food (USA and the Soviets) and the Peeps, who have 60% of the population (the Third World and China). They all have the Bomb, and an uneasy peace is maintained, due to their mutual interdependence. The story relates how the discovery of a habitable planet causes the destruction of civilization by the interbloc rivalries produced when each contingent seeks total control of Jem. Jem has an unstable sun, emitting only a 'blood-red light', and is inhabited by three novel sentient species. Although these prey on each other, they do respect each others way of life, and refer to the humans as the 'creature that kills, but does not eat.' The alien viewpoint is well conveyed, but the humans' ideals were governed too much by the American attitudes. A thought provoking novel on several levels, being overtly pessimistic, and highly political, written in a thoroughly modern style.

POSTMARKED THE STARS by Andre Norton, Magnet 80 pence, 223 pages

Reviewed by Margaret Thorpe.

Dane Thorson, cargo master of the Free Trader "Solar Queen" is involved in a plot to sabotage the valuable living cargo on board the spaceship. Landing on the planet of their destination, the crew of the "Solar Queen" uncover a plan to wreck the whole economy of this frontier world. The book's cover incorrectly claims this to be the third "Solar Queen" story, when in fact it is the fourth in a series first published in the late sixties. This is not one of Miss Norton's best books; she works far better in a fantasy framework than a scientific one. It is, however, an action-packed introduction to SF for young people.

SHOCK 4 by Richard Matheson, Sphere 95 pence, 183 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Although Matheson is a very able writer of horror fiction, this collection is not his best work. Too many of the stories are very slight; they offer some slick writing and a quick flash of horror but say nothing new and are soon forgotten. In some instances the author seems to run out of ideas, as with "Dying Room Only", which ends tamely after a good start. "Fingerprints", about a deaf and dumb woman's manipulation of those around her, is memorable. "Prey" contains the best sustained horror of any story here, perhaps because I recall the TV film made from it. On the whole a disappointing book.

EDITORIAL NOTES

Despite the bumper helping of book reviews in this issue there was no room for even a brief review of The Snow Queen, Joan Vinge's marvellous new novel. That will appear next month.

In last month's newsletter, in my review of Capella's Golden Eyes by Christopher Evans, I mentioned a technological error. In fact there was no such error in the book, and I apologise both to the author and to Faber, the publishers.

Thanks to all contributors. Art credits this issue: P.1 Ivor Letto, P.2 Euan Smith, P.3 David Hardy & Anthony Naylor, P.4 Euan Smith, P.7 David Hardy & Anthony Naylor.

This issue has been edited and produced (with a little help from Pauline) by Chris Morgan, 39 Hollybrow, Selly Oak, Birmingham B29.