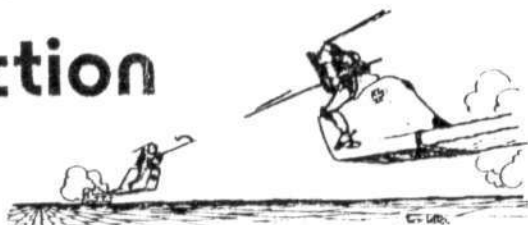


Birmingham Science Fiction Group

(Honorary President: Brian W. Aldiss, and many others)



NEWSLETTER 111

NOVEMBER 1980

The Birmingham Science Fiction Group meets on the third Friday of each month. Our place of meeting will vary over the next few months; 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.

NOVEMBER MEETING - Friday 21st November at 7.45 pm

- At the IMPERIAL HOTEL in Temple Street, off New Street, Birmingham.
- Our speaker is JULIAN ISAACS of Birmingham University, a researcher into many aspects of EXTRA-SENSORY PERCEPTION. He is well known for his telekinesis (spoon-bending) experiments with children. He is a dowser (like Michael Guest, who gave that impromptu demonstration last month), and he has appeared on television in connection with his researches. Come and hear the latest scientific theories about ESP/psionics/psychic powers---one of science fiction's most mysterious yet most common areas of pseudo-scientific speculation. This should be a particularly fascinating meeting. Bring your own spoons.

OCTOBER MEETING

Anthony Cheetham didn't manage to get to Birmingham, due to a series of roadworks on the M1 (see his letter on page 4). We hope to re-arrange his visit for some time during 1981. In fact the October meeting seems to have been an enjoyable affair despite having been reorganised on the spur of the moment. There was a short discussion on the Brum Group itself, then a demonstration of dowsing by Michael Guest (see page 3 for more details of this) and finally a quiz set hurriedly by Roger Peyton and Peter Weston.

FUTURE PROGRAMME

XMAS PARTY - on Friday 12th December (the SECOND Friday)

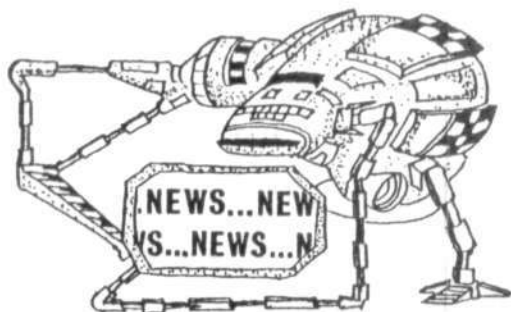
- at the White Swan pub in Harborne Road, Edgbaston. This will be a BEER & SKITTLES evening in the pub's own skittle alley. It's a return visit by popular demand, because the last beer & skittles evening there was such a great success. There will be a BUFFET of chicken, sausage rolls, sandwiches, etc, which costs £3.00 per head, and entry is by ticket only. Get your tickets from our treasurer, Margaret Thorpe, at the November meeting or by post (please enclose an s.a.e.) from 36 Twyford Road, Ward End, Birmingham 8.

XMAS PARTY

XMAS PARTY

* PLEASE NOTE: there WON'T be a meeting on the THIRD Friday of December.

* On Friday 16th January 1981 will be our ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, plus an AUCTION. By this time we should be back at The Ivy Bush, Hagley Rd. One of the AGM items will be the election of a committee for 1981. Who would YOU like to see running the BSFG next year? Nominations should be in writing with a named proposer and secondor.



GEORGE R. STEWART, whose only SF novel, Earth Abides, has become one of the classics of SF, has died at the age of 85. His other novels, including Fire, Storm and Sheep Rock, are also worth reading.

KATHERINE KURTZ, author of the Deryni books, will be signing copies of them at the Andromeda Bookshop (57 Summer Row) on Monday 17th November (which, by the time you receive this, may be yesterday) from 5.30 to 7.30 pm. The

actual signing will be done at Willie's Wine Bar, next door to Andromeda, which sounds like a good excuse for a drink.

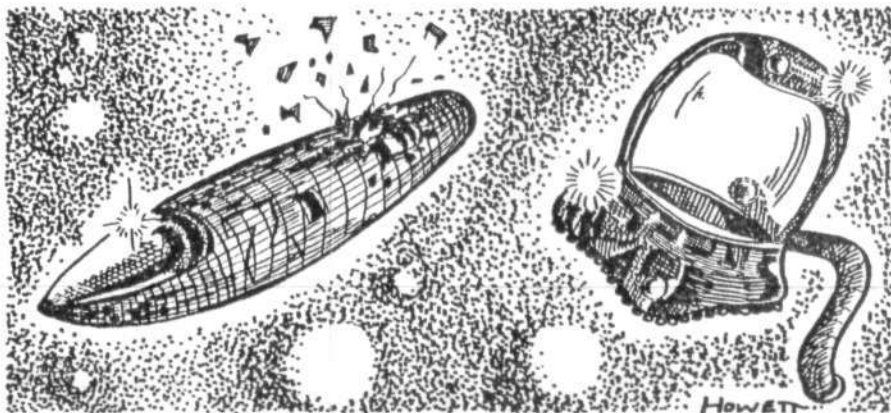
DOUGLAS ADAMS will be doing a signing session at the Andromeda Bookshop on Tuesday 9th December between 5.30 and 7.30 pm. His new book The Restaurant at the End of the Universe, the sequel to The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, will be published a few days earlier.

PETER JONES, the SF artist, will be signing copies of Solar Wind, his book of artwork, at the Andromeda Bookshop that very same evening as Douglas Adams—Tuesday 9th December from 5.30 to 7.30 pm. How does Roger Peyton manage to arrange all these exciting events?

PIERROT PUBLISHING, renowned for their large-format illustrated books (as remaindered in Hudson's, Smith's, Booksave, etc) are in financial difficulties. Their problem seems to be cash flow. Philip Dunn is reported to have left the firm.

STEPHEN DONALDSON visited Birmingham on 16th October, signing many copies of the first four Thomas Covenant volumes. He divulged that volume 5, The One Tree, should be published towards the end of 1981.

NOVACON happened (as it frequently seems to) over the first weekend of November at Birmingham's Royal Angus Hotel. About 450 fans attended and many more had to be turned away because of a lack of space. If I told you about all the wonderful things that happened there and about the excellence of Brian Aldiss as guest-of-honour you'd only want to go along to Novacon 11 next year and create even more space problems, so I shan't. Congratulations to Rog Peyton and his committee for doing a grand job.



Also, dowsing is nothing new. There is strong evidence that the Romans and ancient Britons were familiar with it. It is known that many standing stones are positioned above water sources, as are many pre-Norman churches. There seems to be no chance of coincidence here, since the association is so strong in so many cases.

The next step after divining underground water is to try and determine the depth of that water. It has been found that, if the dowser asks this question in the form 'Is the water between 20 and 40 feet down?' and accepts a convergence of the rods as 'Yes' and no movement as 'No', he can come up with an accurate depth figure. This may sound rather fanciful, but it works.

A variant of this was tried at the October meeting. Michael Guest says: "For me the highlight of the evening was reached when I was asked to dowse for the I.Q. of Stephe Edwards. To dowse someone's I.Q. was completely new for me and seemed impossible, but having been challenged I thought I had better try. I used the rods to give a Yes/No answer to a question of this sort: 'Does the I.Q. lie between 80 and 100?' If no reaction then try 100 to 120. And so on. So with Stephe sitting on the corridor floor I kept walking up to him with my rods, waiting for a Yes reaction. It eventually came between 140 and 160 and then I narrowed it down to 145 to 150. Feeling very diffident about the whole thing I then announced this result to Stephe who replied that he was a Mensa member and three tests had given values in the region of 148 and 153. He had to agree that my dowsed figure of 145 to 150 was therefore very accurate. We were both surprised and I don't know how I managed it."

If you think that sounds like a demonstration of telepathy, it's not the only case. Some dowsers---Michael among them---can dowse for water not only by walking over water-bearing ground but from a map. Instead of rods a swinging pendulum is used. And it doesn't matter whether the map covers a familiar area or not. Indeed, the technique still works when the map is face downwards. There is no explanation for such results except some form of telepathy or clairvoyance.

It just so happens that Julian Isaacs is not only a researcher into ESP; he is also a dowser. However enthralled or sceptical you are about the subject, come along to the November meeting and hear what he has to say.

((Some of the information for this article came from an article by Michael Guest in the Journal of the British Society of Dowsters for September 1979.))

LETTER COLUMN/LETTER COLUMN/LETTER COLUMN/LETTER COLUMN/LETTER COLUMN

From Anthony Cheetham, London, dated 20th October:

"This is to tell you how sorry I am that I didn't make it to Birmingham on Friday night. A determined attempt was made, but after a 4½ hour drive, mostly in first or second gear, through non-stop rain on a motorway which was (a) under repair and (b) packed with fanatical Motor Show pilgrims, and only a blossoming acquaintance with the Newport Pagnell services to show for it, I felt we really had to call it a day. I don't think we could have got to the hotel much before closing time short of arranging to be lifted out by helicopter, and my poor science fiction budget wouldn't run to it.

"Please give my apologies to everybody who turned out for the meeting. I would have liked to be there myself, but the odds were against me."

((By a strange quirk of fate your newsletter editor was heading south down the M1 that very same evening and experienced similarly lengthy and frustrating delays.))



"Yes, Earthlings, we too used to feel threatened by an accelerating arms race, until we found a very simple solution..."

BOOK REVIEWS

THE FANTASY WORLDS OF PETER BEAGLE, Souvenir Press £6.95, 430 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

On the strength of just two novels and two short stories---all included in this omnibus volume---Peter Beagle is the world's greatest living fantasy writer. His secret is that he writes about Real People. Whether they're ghosts or unicorns or werewolves they are described with sufficient warmth and compassion to make them come alive on the page. Best known of Beagle's fiction is The Last Unicorn---a unicorn's quest for the rest of her species, presented as a mixture of fairy tale, allegory and reality. Beautiful as that is, I slightly prefer Beagle's first novel A Fine and Private Place, set in a New York cemetery and written when he was only 19; it is a far more accomplished and perceptive work than an 19-year-old has a right to be able to produce. The two short stories "Lila the Werewolf" and "Come, Lady Death" are gems---flawless creations which whet the appetite for more. Everybody who enjoys fantasy should have a copy of this superb volume.

SCIENCE FICTION: ITS CRITICISM AND TEACHING by Patrick Parrinder, Methuen £2.75, 166 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

In an extremely rigorous text-book, Patrick Parrinder defines SF and examines various approaches to it for the purposes of criticism or study. Though an admirable piece of synthesis by one who is clearly familiar with all previous theories of SF, this is very much written by an academic for other academics. Its largely abstract approach (there are few references to specific novels) and the difficulty of finding the source articles mentioned will limit its readership. The high price (for a slim paperback) won't help, either.

THE VENUS HUNTERS by J.G. Ballard, Granada 95 pence, 144 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

J.G. Ballard is always worth reading, even when a "new" collection of his stories turns out to be most of the 1967 volume The Overloaded Man with just three more recent stories added. Some of the pieces here are clever but essentially shallow treatments of standard SF themes; others show the development of Ballard's magnificent obsessions with the hardware of war, modern technology and subjective reality. I particularly enjoyed "The 60-Minute Zoom", one of three stories in this book about husbands revenging their wives' infidelities.

PRISON OF NIGHT by E.C. Tubb, Arrow £1.10, 160 pages

Reviewed by Margaret Thorpe.

Number 17 in the Dumarest Saga: Earl Dumarest takes time out from his search for Earth to fight for land given as a reward for overcoming a tyrant, and finds himself the target for three opposing factions. Better than most novels of its kind---some interesting ideas, and the characterisation is well handled.

THE WOUNDED LAND by Stephen Donaldson, Fontana £1.75, 508 pages

Reviewed by Pauline E.Morgan.

Thomas Covenant has been back on Earth for 10 years since the events of the first trilogy. Then he is summoned to the Land again and finds that thousands of years have passed there; it has become terribly deformed. Although Covenant has come to terms with his alienation from society, and his behaviour is now more rational, the image presented by the Land is still a reflection of his warped personality. The Wounded Land is better written than its predecessors and is a smooth and easy read despite its length. Highly enjoyable, but read the first trilogy first.

URSHURAK by The Brothers Hildebrandt & Jerry Nichols, Bantam distributed by Corgi £3.50, 406 pages

Reviewed by Pauline E.Morgan.

This is a disappointing, simplistically-told fantasy novel culminating in an all-too-familiar Final Battle between Good and Evil. It is supplemented by many superb Hildebrandt illustrations---16 of them in colour. Ignore the text; just enjoy the pictures.

EMPHYRIO by Jack Vance, Coronet £1.10, 222 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

At last one of Vance's best novels (first published in 1969) is available in Britain. The hero is not content to spend his life carving wooden screens in relative poverty on an underdeveloped planet. His dislike of the authoritarian regime leads him to rebel and become a space-pirate. But, like all Vance heroes, he is basically honourable, returning to lead a people's revolution. A thoughtful and exciting novel: recommended.

PROFUNDIS by Richard Cowper, Pan £1.25, 158 pages

Reviewed by Margaret Thorpe.

A schizoid computer with a strong self-preservation instinct, a lunatic nuclear submarine captain who is convinced he's God, and a naive telepath who can communicate with dolphins are the main ingredients of this highly entertaining post-holocaust novel. It is totally different in concept and treatment from Twilight of Briareus, being a light-hearted version of a sombre theme, and while the characterisation is sketchy, the interplay between the humans, computer and androids is very good.

RENAISSANCE by A.E.Van Vogt, NEL £1.00, 159 pages

Reviewed by Margaret Thorpe.

Aliens solve Earth's problems by inducing myopia in all males. Females become the dominant sex and, of course, being less intelligent, cause no trouble. One man breaks his glasses and outsmarts the aliens, reasserting male dominance. The basic assumptions are too facile, the female characters are stereotyped, and the whole concept is totally unbelievable.

INTO THE SLAVE NEBULA by John Brunner, Millington £5.95, 176 pages

Reviewed by Vernon Brown.

Written in 1960 as Slavers of Space and revised in 1968, this is good early Brunner, smoothly written with clean characterisation, albeit cardboardy here and there. A bored young dilettante finds a dead android alongside a murdered human. Tracing the killers proves rather dangerous for Perry Horn, especially when he tries to discover where androids are manufactured.

OVERWORLD by Michael Vyse, Faber £5.95, 154 pages

Reviewed by Brian Stableford.

An ill-assorted bunch of extremely unpleasant people do extremely unpleasant things to one another until they have contrived to destroy the whole human race---and a jolly good thing too, according to the author. Personally, I stopped caring on page ten, and I would like to think well enough of my fellow men to assume that most of them would feel the same way.

TALES OF KNOWN SPACE by Larry Niven, Orbit
£1.35, 238 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

This dovetails with Niven's Neutron Star and Gil Hamilton collections and most of his solo novels to round out one of the best organised future history series which exists. The quality of these 13 stories is uneven; all are entertaining and some are very good indeed, particularly "Becalmed in Hell", "The Jigsaw Man" and Hugo-winner "The Borderland of Sol". Also included is a Niven bibliography, complete to 1975. Recommended.

STAR WARS GIFT SET: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK by Donald F. Glut, 215pp; STAR WARS by George Lucas, 220pp; SPLINTER OF THE MIND'S EYE by Alan Dean Foster, 222pp; THE MARVEL COMICS ILLUSTRATED VERSION OF STAR WARS, 124pp; published by Sphere £4.10

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Christmas seems to come along earlier each year, and specially produced for the occasion is this handsomely slip-cased set. Anything I say about the contents would be superfluous, but this is the perfect gift for anybody interested in the Star Wars saga who hasn't already bought the books separately. The total of over 780 pages could keep your children—or even your spouse—quiet throughout the festive season.

CATFACE by Clifford D. Simak, Magnum
£1.25, 251pp

Reviewed by Dave Hardy.

This is not a reprint of one of Simak's 50s or 60s novels—even though it concerns dinosaur safaris (with guns...)—but was first published in 1978. A favourite Simak setting: a man living hermit-like in the backwoods finds evidence of a crashed spaceship, then an alien creature. The story's main theme is time travel; it lacks much real excitement until towards the end.

TIMEWARPS by John Gribbin, Sphere £1.25, 180 pages

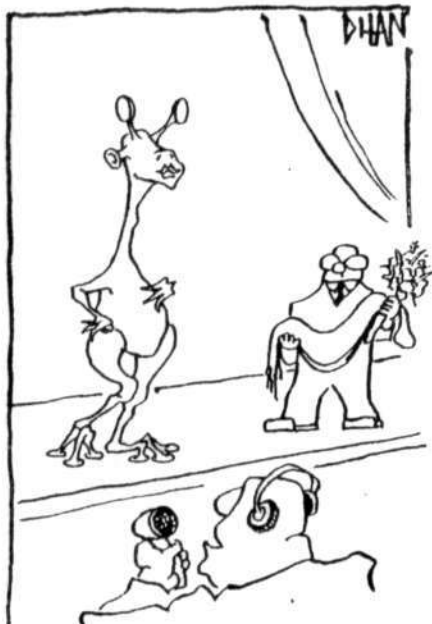
Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

I had hoped that this non-fiction study of the peculiarities of time would show up the weak points in novels about time travel, parallel worlds, FTL travel and time paradoxes, thus enabling me to write even more brilliant and perceptive reviews about such novels. It doesn't. After a couple of unnecessary and simplistic chapters about clocks and date-lines, Dr Gribbin takes brief looks at Einsteinian relativity and various parallel world possibilities, referring to SF books but not to very many or to the best examples. The overall impression is of a book cobbled together hurriedly out of ill-fitting pieces of science and speculation. Disappointing.

STAR RIGGER'S WAY by Jeffrey A. Carver, Arrow £1.25, 237 pages

Reviewed by Vernon Brown.

Trainee rigger Carlyle pilots by becoming his ship, which translates hyperspace into familiar imagery. Stranded by his trainers' deaths he rescues an alien similarly adrift; together they pilot his ship to safety. Now an accepted rigger, Carlyle searches for old friends to form an integrated team. On his way he has adventures! A juvenile novel on the verge of erotic adulthood, Star Rigger's Way is smoothly written but lacks depth.



"Ladies and gentlemen—
Miss Universe 2005!"

THE ROAD TO SCIENCE FICTION: vol 1 FROM GIJGAMESH TO WELIS, £1.50, 404pp;
vol 2 FROM WELIS TO HEINLEIN, £1.50, 535pp; vol 3 FROM HEINLEIN TO HERE,
£1.75, 656pp, all edited by James Gunn and distributed by NEL

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

James Gunn has assembled a vast anthology of 76 stories and extracts by which he tries to show the historical development of science fiction. He introduces each in a scholarly fashion, saying something of its historical importance and author. In addition each volume has useful appendices, including a 30-page index. In effect, then, this is a 1600-page history of SF, with most of the space given up to important examples of the fiction itself. Almost all the stories and excerpted books are fairly well known; many are regarded as classics of the genre; many are the best known work by that author. If, like me, you've read a great deal of SF, you may be disappointed to find that nothing here is new to you, not even the information contained in the introductions. But if you are a relative newcomer to SF this is a marvellous historical introduction to the genre and I strongly recommend that you buy all three volumes.

THE FOG by Dennis Etchison (or, as it says on the cover, Etchinson),
Corgi £1.00, 180 pages

Reviewed by Chris Smith.

This is yet another in a long line of books that have started out as a film. It's a one-sitting book that is meant to be a tale of terror, as ghosts rise from the fog to take their vengeance. I found very little terror. Maybe it works better in the film, but there was little in the way of suspense. The people were shallow and the plot did very little to make them seem real. If you like film tie-in books, well...

THE FANTASTIC WORLD OF KAMTELLAR by R.Chetwynd-Hayes, William Kimber
£5.50, 189 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Ronald Chetwynd-Hayes is a patchy writer, incapable of sustaining the necessary atmosphere of horror for long, or of making most of his characters come alive. His work is not entirely without merit, though; "Kamtellar", which occupies more than half this collection, is a fascinating creation up to the point where it becomes clear that it is a solipsist fantasy, in which the hero is really in control and cannot be harmed. The other four tales are mainly routine horror, about vampires, hauntings and things that go suck in the night.

GENESIS by W.A.Harbinson, Corgi £1.75, 613 pages

Reviewed by Dave Hardy.

Be warned: although it doesn't say so on the cover, this is a UFO novel. The saucers have quite a different origin from those in Close Encounters, and there is a sprinkling of sex and violence. "Dialogue" often consists of lengthy case histories (fact mingled confusingly with fiction) from the characters' apparently encyclopaedic memories...

THE STORM'S HOWLING THROUGH TIFLIS by Neil Oram, Sphere £1.75, 281 pages

Reviewed by Margaret Thorpe.

This is announced as the first volume in a psychedelic fantasy: incoherent fantasy would be nearer the mark. There is no proper storyline, it is poorly written, and characterisation is non-existent. What little story there is concerns a search for self discovery by an unsuccessful London-born poet. His search reveals that he is the reincarnation of a Bavarian peasant who, by defying the 'Baron' in 1457, set up a cosmic imbalance which echoes down the centuries. Definitely a waste of money.

EDITORIAL NOTES

Thanks to all contributors, especially artists Ivor Latto (p.1), Philbert (p.2, top), Dick Howett (p.2, bottom), Euan Smith (p.5) and Dave Hardy & Anthony Naylor (p.7). All errors and omissions are indisputably attributable to Chris Morgan who edited and produced this 'Nelson' issue (and I'll buy a drink for the first person who can tell me why I call it that) at 39 Hollybrow, Selly Oak, Birmingham B29 4LX.