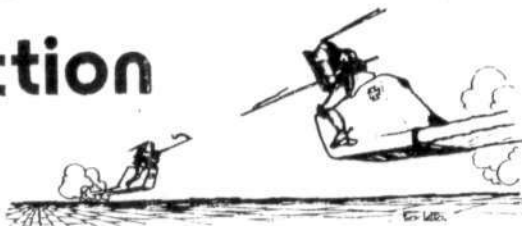


Birmingham Science Fiction Group

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



NEWSLETTER 120

AUGUST 1981

The Birmingham Science Fiction Group has its formal meeting on the third Friday of each month in the upstairs room of THE IVY BUSH pub on the corner of Hagley Road and Monument Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham 16. There is also an informal meeting on the first Tuesday of each month at THE GAIETY pub, on the corner of Church Street and Barwick Street, Birmingham 3 (just round the corner from the Grand Hotel). New members are always welcome. Our treasurer is Margaret Thorpe, 36 Twyford Road, Ward End, Birmingham 8. The 12-month subscription is £3.50.

AUGUST MEETING - Friday 21st August 1981 at 7.45pm

The first item will be an EXTRAORDINARY GENERAL MEETING to consider the position of the Birmingham Science Fiction Film Society and to discuss severing the relationship between it and the BSFG. Entry to this EGM will be FREE to all members of the BSFG.

* Our August speaker is DIANA REED, a BBC Radio producer, who will be talking about SF on radio. This is by popular request, following her appearance on a panel at our May meeting. She will be aided and abetted by taped excerpts including Journey Into Space (1954!), Second Foundation, A Wizard of Earthsea (produced by Diana Reed herself) and The Chrysalids. Come along and tell her what you think of the current radio versions of Star Wars or Lord of the Rings.

JULY MEETING

A panel of experts chaired by the famous Peter R. Weston and including such notables as convention organiser Stan Eling, writer Chris Morgan and SF bookshop manager Dave Holmes answered a fascinating selection of questions from the audience (who were mainly engaged in scoffing cake left over from the 10th Anniversary party). The meeting made a profit of £4.10.

FORTHCOMING

- * September - Bob Shaw and Dave Hardy's galactic tours described in great detail to publicise the appearance of their book of a similar title.
- * October - a speaker from The Aetherius Society.
- * November - Novacon 11 (Oct 30th-Nov 1st) at the Royal Angus Hotel, with Bob Shaw as guest-of-honour, and lots of other professional authors present. Send your £5.50 (for attending membership) to Jean Frost, 49 Humber Tower, Francis Street, Birmingham B7 4JX.
- * Our November speaker should be a well known SF publisher.
- * December - a Christmas party at The Ivy Bush.

DON'T FORGET SEPTEMBER'S INFORMAL MEETING: TUES 1st AT THE GAIETY OKAY?

...news...

ARTHUR C. CLARKE is reported to have been offered enormous sums of money to write a sequel to 2001: A Space Odyssey. But he has stated categorically, ever since the appearance of The Fountains of Paradise, that he won't produce another novel. So, will sufficient cash persuade him to change his mind? Watch this space!

LOCUS, the newspaper of the SF field, from which many of this newsletter's news items are pinched, has just published its reader poll results on the SF of 1980. Since the numbers of people voting are greater than for the Hugo and Nebula awards put together, the results are worth noting. Best SF novel: The Snow Queen - Joan D. Vinge; best fantasy novel: Lord Valentine's Castle - Robert Silverberg; best first novel: Dragon's Egg - Robert L. Forward; best novella: "Nightflyers" - George R.R. Martin; best novelette: "The Brave Little Toaster" - Thomas M. Disch; best short story: "Grotto of the Dancing Deer" - Clifford D. Simak; best anthology: The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction; A 30 Year Retrospective edited by Edward L. Ferman; best single author collection: The Barbie Murders - John Varley; best related non-fiction book: In Joy Still Felt - Isaac Asimov; best artist: Michael Whelan; best magazine: The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction; best publisher: Ballantine/Del Rey.

GEORGE O. SMITH has died at the age of 70. He produced a number of fairly hard SF novels and stories in the twenty years up to about 1960. Best known are his novels Hellflower and The Fourth "R" and his "Venus Equilateral" stories.

ANDROMEDA BOOKSHOP'S top ten best selling paperbacks for July were: 1. Death's Angel - Kathleen Sky, 2. Clash of the Titans - Alan Dean Foster, 3. Dark Crusade - Karl Edward Wagner, 4. The Priests of Psi - Frank Herbert, 5. Master of the Five Magics - Lyndon Hardy, 6. Roadmarks - Roger Zelazny, 7. The Ninja - Eric Van Lustbader, 8. The Ringworld Engineers - Larry Niven, 8. The Galactic Whirlpool - David Gerrold, 10. The Snow Queen - Joan D. Vinge, 10. Dune - Frank Herbert.

SOLIHULL SF GROUP will be changing the date of their September meeting to avoid clashing with Unicorn 2. Revised date: Friday 4th Sept, 8.00pm, still at the Mason's Arms, High Street, Solihull. Their group newsletter/zine issue no.2 has just appeared. It includes part of Garry Kilworth's speech to the Brum Group, and it's available from Steve Green in exchange for (actually it doesn't say, but knowing Steve I'll make a guess) alcohol.



As with wine, there are good and bad years for SF novels---years when there's nothing published that deserves an award of any kind and years when such a cluster of praiseworthy things appears that even to be nominated for an award is a tremendous achievement. 1980 was something of a vintage year, with the publication of two great novels and several other very worthy ones.

I'll begin with the nominees for the Nebula; although the award has already been made, a little thing like that isn't going to prevent me from perusing the list and pontificating on what should have won. Just to remind you, the nominees (alphabetically by title) were: Beyond the Blue Event Horizon - Frederik Pohl, Mockingbird - Walter Tevis, The Orphan - Robert Stallman, The Shadow of the Torturer - Gene Wolfe, The Snow Queen - Joan D.Vinge and Timescape - Gregory Benford.

The Pohl novel is the sequel to Gateway (1977), which won both the Hugo and Nebula. Yet Beyond the Blue Event Horizon is not the usual sort of sequel; it's not merely a continuation but a surpassing of Gateway. It may be traditional SF (aliens and spaceships) but it has enough originality and excitement to have won an award in a normal year. Pohl's stature as a writer has grown considerably over the last five years, and he must be regarded now as the most consistently good novelist working wholly within the SF genre.

Walter Tevis is not normally an SF writer. His previous appearance, The Man Who Fell to Earth (1963), was quite well received and is still remembered because of the 1976 film made of it. Mockingbird is flawed but has a very moving first third, showing a future USA with a tiny, mostly illiterate population, in which the only "person" of intelligence or learning is a robot. Later on in the book a number of cliches creep in and the sense of wonder is dissipated.

The Orphan was Robert Stallman's first novel, and almost his last, since he died early this year. It's a most marvellously written version of the werewolf theme set in mid-west USA in the 1930s and 1940s. The descriptive writing is extremely sensual---full of sounds and smells. There is excitement in the plot, and more originality than you would imagine from my pigeon-holing of it. Its great fault is that it is not really a novel, but two episodes, without a proper beginning or end. (There is a sequel, The Captive, which I've not yet read.)

For almost ten years Gene Wolfe has been regarded as a writer's writer, producing occasional stories and even more occasional novels which were often difficult to read but were usually well received by the critics. Although he had been threatening to write something very good, I think the extraordinarily high quality of The Shadow of the Torturer took everyone by surprise. I raved about it in the April newsletter, so this time I'd better just state that it was unquestionably the best novel of 1980---deeper and more satisfying than any of the others that I read.

The Snow Queen by Joan D.Vinge was certainly the most advertised SF novel of the year, with free copies and exhortations to vote for it being sent out to enormous numbers of people by its US publisher. It's a very substantial volume---over 500 pages, the largest of all the nominees. Briefly, it's about love, hate and political scheming on alien planets, with a cast of thousands. It's firmly in the "good read" category, with some passages being enormously impressive but some of the underlying assumptions being rather shaky.

I've never regarded Gregory Benford as being much of a writer, but Timescape is considerably better than anything else of his that I've read. He is also a physicist of international repute, and he uses his knowledge to postulate (in the novel) that the scientists of an ecologically threatened 1998 might employ tachyons to send a warning message back to 1963, so that different critical decisions can be taken. It's a fascinating mixture of science and speculation, dragging in real people among the fictional characters. There's a great deal of good writing in it, though some of the English scenes and characters are unconvincing, and it is a very depressing book to read.

As you should know (if you bother to read this newsletter regularly) Timescape won the Nebula award for the best novel of 1980. I would have

We must count ourselves lucky that such an able writer as Kingsley Amis produces SF novels occasionally, as he does here with an entertaining tale of Britain occupied by Russian troops 50 years hence. The invaders have dominated and indoctrinated the British people to such an extent that all speak Russian and few have any idea of what life was like prior to the invasion (allowing the author to make satirical references to our own culture and to put humorous mistakes into the mouths of his characters). The Russians (upon whom the action dwells) are not the super-efficient communists backed by advanced technology which one might expect, but instead are most interested in alcohol and sex, enjoying a kind of czarist opulence and using little technology---preferring horses for transportation, for example. This is in part a pastiche of 19th century Russian novels. Beneath its surface humour and wit is a tragic plot. It was one of the best novels of 1980. Highly recommended.

THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS by Ursula LeGuin, Futura Orbit £1.60, 256pp

Reviewed by Chris Murphy.

This is a welcome reprint of a novel which first appeared in 1969. It tells of politics, friendship and treachery on a world where it is always winter, whose inhabitants are physically and psychologically bisexual. The outstanding presentation of setting and characters makes this a book worth reading and rereading.

THE HIGH CRUSADE by Poul Anderson, Corgi 95 pence, 144 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

A 14th century English baron and his men capture an alien spaceship and use it to fly to the stars. Various adventures ensue, in which the wily Earthmen outwit hordes of technologically superior but less intelligent aliens. If any of it were intended seriously one could accuse Anderson of supporting imperialism and racial prejudice; but it isn't, so one can't. Instead it is intended as farce and succeeds well as such, its inherent incredibility adding to the humour. It's good, shallow, escapist reading, superior to most of Anderson's work. Amazingly, this is the first UK edition of a 1960 Astounding/Analog serial.

CACHALOT by Alan Dean Foster, NEL £1.50, 275 pages

Reviewed by Vernon Brown.

Different from the author's usual style, in that it could well take place on Earth in the near future, with little alien content, Cachalot describes an ocean world given to the intelligent remnants of the whale families, almost made extinct by Man. Floating cities, existing on sufficiency, harvest the surface for drugs and perfumes, but some unknown force is destroying the cities one by one. Two marine biologists are brought in to investigate but meet with little success! Reasonably well written and worth reading.

ESPER'S WAR by Roger Perry, Hale £6.25, 188 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

This routine tale of war between Terrans and aliens on a colony planet lacks both the technological slickness of Haldeman's The Forever War and the assured imperialism of Heinlein's Starship Troopers. The plot is nicely complicated by the rivalry between the political and military wings of the Terran forces, and by the hero (a reluctant soldier) being surgically made into a telepath. Too much of the military detail comes straight from WWII. The novel is of interest because its author is a Leicester (and Brum) SF Group member.

DARK CRUSADE by Karl Edward Wagner, Coronet £1.25, 222 pages

Reviewed by Malcolm Thorpe.

The latest in the Quest of Kane series has the swordsman commanding a demon's forces in a bloodthirsty war, plundering neighbouring kingdoms. Kane plots to rule, but his plans are upset by a defeated general. Wagner's writing here leans towards gothic horror with a 'hero' as evil as the villain, though Kane wins through in a well written and fast moving finale. A good swords & sorcery read, more for Elric fans than those of Conan.

ILLUMINATUS! 1: THE EYE IN THE PYRAMID (£1.50, 304pp), 2: THE GOLDEN APPLE (£1.50, 272pp), 3: LEVIATHAN (£1.10, 253pp) all by Robert Anton Wilson & Robert Shea, Sphere Books; SCHRÖDINGER'S CAT 1: THE UNIVERSE NEXT DOOR by Robert Anton Wilson, Sphere £1.75, 256pp

Reviewed by Brian Wilson (no relation).

Illuminatus! is, of course, a re-issue. It is my unrepentant view that this trilogy ranks among the most brilliant and original books of the last 15 years and it contains the first genuinely new political writing for a century. If you have not already read Illuminatus!, do so. It may change your life. Since then, Wilson has continued to carry the banner on his own in Masks of the Illuminati (Sphere) and the non-fictional Cosmic Trigger (Abacus). Both are superb. The Universe Next Door is the first volume of a new trilogy. For the uninitiated, all these works draw on a very heady brew compounded of sex, drugs, Aleister Crowley, anarchism and quantum/relativity physics (and quite a lot of other things). Summarising the plot of this book is an almost impossible task, involving as it does such characters as Justin Case, Epicene Wildblood, Furbish Lousewart, The Committee to Nuke the Whales, and so on. Fiction, reality and several parallel universes are woven together into a multiple helix that simultaneously disarms criticism, and even sanity. This is part of the purpose. The deliberate and stated intention of Wilson's books is to transform consciousness. All the above volumes are controversial, challenging, demanding and, above all, very, very, very funny.

THE FACE by Jack Vance, Coronet £1.10, 224 pp Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

A space opera detective novel; the fourth in the series. This time Kirth Gersen tries to revenge himself against Lens Larque, the 4th of the "Demon Princes" who killed his family long before. Like most Vance novels this is cleverly written with a great deal of fascinating planetary description and cultural detail.

THE AVATAR by Poul Anderson, Sphere £1.95, 404 pages

Reviewed by Dave Hardy.

Rugged, homely father-figure and sexual athlete Dan Broderson leaves his wife and children behind on Earth, collects his Irish girl-friend Caitlin, and secretly flits into space to help the crew of the Emissary, forcibly quarantined when they return through a 'T machine' built by 'the Others' with an alien aboard. In their subsequent travels through one T machine after another they encounter Sagan-type gas-bag aliens who communicate by music (a la CE3K), pulsars, black holes, and the end of the universe... Meanwhile, Broderson and Caitlin dispense psychotherapy---usually in the form of sex---to the neurotic crew. No very original ideas here, but Anderson melds what he has into a satisfying finale. He could have cut it by half with advantage.

THE GOLDEN MAN by Philip K. Dick, Magnum £1.50, 336 pages

Reviewed by Steve Green.

The short story format is a particularly successful vehicle for SF, allowing the author to develop his central concept---the SF element---unencumbered by the characterisation required of a novel. Dick, however, is untypical of his breed, managing to blend both the concept and the characterisation together in a surprisingly high number of his stories, as shown in this new collection of unanthologised material---even if the quality dips in the uninspired time paradox tale "Meddler". Oddly, Dick enthuses at some length about this uninnovative non-shocker in his closing notes, which just goes to show that even an author with his talent occasionally needs a healthy dose of objectivity.

WAR GAMES by Brian Stableford, Pan £1.50, 205 pages

Reviewed by Chris Murphy.

First, the bad news. This is a derivative novel with a stereotyped hero (another Clint Eastwood clone), a supporting cast from Rent-an-Alien (humanoids with feudal lifestyles), an off-the-shelf theme (espionage) and a stock background (a desert region on an Earth-like planet). Now for the good news. The story is well constructed and narrated, and the characters are handled better than they usually are in books of this kind. Entertaining if you don't expect too much.

THE DIRECTORY OF POSSIBILITIES edited by Colin Wilson & John Grant, Webb & Bower £8.95, 255 pages

Reviewed by Eve Devereux.

The idea of bringing together in one book all those areas of knowledge (particularly of science) about which there is uncertainty is a very good one. This is especially so as most of the knowledge has been drawn upon and extrapolated in numerous SF and fantasy novels. Included are Atlantis, Mythical Monsters, Ghosts, Vampires, Vanishing People, Time Travel, ESP, Life After Death, Antigravity, Black Holes, Hyperspace, Genetic Engineering, Immortality, Utopia and many more. Unfortunately, with so many topics, there is insufficient space to do more than introduce any of them, so that quite a few articles told me nothing new. In addition, some articles display excessive credulity; perhaps greater space would have enabled more balanced assessments. Even so, it's a very useful book for quick reference purposes.

MOORCOCK'S BOOK OF MARTYRS by Michael Moorcock, Granada £1.25, 175 pages

Reviewed by John Farr.

A heady mixture of transcendental stories, written mainly during the 1960s but set in the remote past, present and far future. The mixture is too extreme for a single collection, featuring satire, wish fulfilment, heroism and despair. Pick of the bunch is "Behold the Man", but every reader will find something here to enjoy and to dislike.

ENEMIES OF THE SYSTEM by Brian Aldiss, Granada £1.25, 124 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

This is a reprint (with a new cover) of Brian Aldiss's political satire of the far future, showing how Homo uniformis is pretty useless when actions are called for rather than words. Cleverly written. I wish it had been longer.

A PRINCESS OF MARS, THE GODS OF MARS, THE WARLORD OF MARS and THUVIA, MAID OF MARS by Edgar Rice Burroughs, Ballantine Del Rey distributed by Futura 90 pence each, 159pp, 190pp, 158pp & 158pp

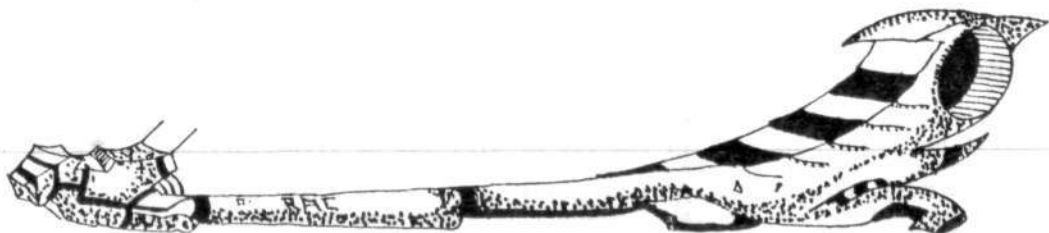
Reviewed by Colm Maguire.

Once again available---this time with smashing covers by award-winning artist Michael Whelan---are the first four in Burroughs' Martian series. Against the vivid alien back-cloth of a Mars which never existed John Carter of Earth battles for his own survival and for that of Dejah Thoris, his Martian princess. The fourth volume concerns the adventures of their son, Carthoris. Written in 1911-14 these four are amongst Burroughs' earliest works, displaying enormous amounts of imagination and zest which are diminished in his later books. Every SF or fantasy collection should contain at least a couple of these exciting adventure stories.

DEATH'S ANGEL by Kathleen Sky, Bantam distributed by Corgi £1.25, 213pp

Reviewed by Pauline E. Morgan.

A routine Star Trek novel, reminiscent of the TV episode "Journey to Babel". The opening chapter, although important to the plot, seems contrived. The rest of the story concerns some alien ambassadors (varied and not always biologically plausible) being taken to a meeting to discuss a treaty of detente with the Romulans. In places the writing seems amateurish. This volume does not live up to the potential shown in Kathleen Sky's first Star Trek novel, Vulcan!.



DANSE MACABRE by Stephen King, Macdonald £5.95, 400 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

For once King has written not horror fiction but about it. In his inimitable, marvellously readable fashion he has taken the lid off horror in novels, stories, radio, TV and films over the last 30 years, seasoning the mixture well with chunks of autobiography. If you look beneath his extravagant, hard-hitting approach you can find a carefully reasoned structure. Even in 400 large pages (this is a massive paperback edition) there is insufficient room to do justice to the subject, but King's analysis is impeccable. My only complaint is that at times his presentation is too American, using slang and cultural references which left me gaping. If you enjoy King's fiction and/or are interested in horror the chances are that you'll love this book.

CELESTIAL CHESS by Thomas Bontly, Magnum £1.50, 279 pages

Reviewed by Alan Cash.

Translating a collection of 12th century poetry, an American scholar realises that concealed within it are the details of a chess game with the devil, the prize being the poet's soul. The poet lost but left clues to his redemption in the closing lines. Interspersed with the scholar's attempts to solve those clues, the climax of which creaks noisily, is the more gripping account of the poet's life in the 12th century.

THE HAUNTING AT WAVERLEY FALLS by Hugh C. Rae, NEL £1.25, 288 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

There's an interesting near future background to this competent but uninspired horror novel, with the USA controlled by a few large corporations who represent the only effective law and order remaining. Life independent of the protection of a corporation is difficult and dangerous---particularly for the wandering bands of hippie types, called "roachbacks". When seven of these are murdered (for being different) by some corporation miners, the roachbacks hit back for once, via gruesome hauntings. It's fairly standard stuff, though with less gratuitous horror than one would expect and a rather facile explanation/finale.

THE GHOST PIRATES by William Hope Hodgson, Sphere £1.10, 138 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Hodgson's 1909 tale of strange and terrible things happening on a ship at sea---shadowy figures, deaths amongst the crew and so on---seems rather tame and unbelievable today. That's despite a good slow build-up and Hodgson's own experience of life at sea. Of interest to Hodgson fans and to horror fiction historians only.

LEMMINGS ON THE EDGE by Neil Oram, Sphere £1.75, 311 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

The worst thing about book-reviewing is that however atrocious the volume one feels morally bound to finish it. Therefore I am probably the only person in the country to have read right through Lemmings on the Edge and thus be able to testify to its cover-to-cover awfulness. It is concerned with sex, drugs, UFOs, a Scottish commune and hordes of weird people, all in the late 1960s, with lots of words printed in CAPITAL LETTERS for emphasis. If 300 pages of this tripe appeals to you your name is probably Neil Oram. I note that the first volume in the series, The Storm's Howling Through Tiflis, was remaindered only nine months after publication, and I have no doubt that this one will follow suit.

Editorial Notes

Many thanks to all contributors, especially to Locus for news items. I'm still not receiving much in the way of articles or illustrations, which is why there's a predominance of book reviews. Art credits this issue: Ivor Latto (p.1), Euan Smith (p.2), Phill Probert (pp.4 & 7). Next month we'll have a profile of a committee member, at least one film review and, with a bit of luck, lots more exciting book reviews. This August 1981 issue has been produced and edited by Chris Morgan, 39 Hollybrow, Selly Oak, B'ham 29.