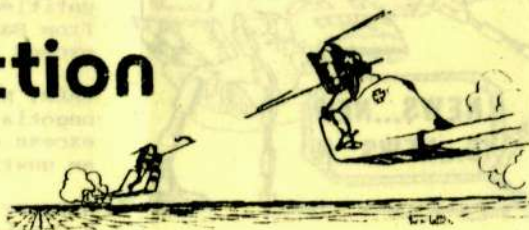


Birmingham Science Fiction Group

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



NEWSLETTER 121

SEPTEMBER 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 OLD ROYAL pub, on the corner of Church Street and Cornwall Street, Birmingham 3. (Church Street is off Colmore Row.) New members are always welcome. Our treasurer is Margaret Thorpe, 36 Twyford Road, Ward End, Birmingham 8. The 12-month subscription is £3.50.

SEPTEMBER MEETING - Friday 18th September 1981 at 7.45pm

Our joint speakers are **BOB SHAW** and **DAVID HARDY**

Neither of them really needs an introduction, but I'll just remind you that Bob is the author of such well known SF novels as The Palace of Eternity, Orbitsville, Vertigo and Dagger of the Mind. David is Britain's foremost space artist and a former chairman of the Brum Group. Together they've produced a book, Thomas Cook's Galactic Tours, a large-format, heavily illustrated paperback to be published by Proteus on 1st October. It describes package tours to a couple of dozen planets, and Bob will be reading us extracts, accompanied by slides of David's artwork. It's a meeting not to be missed!

AUGUST MEETING

At the EGM it was decided (by a large majority in each case) that the BSFG should (i) sever all relationships with the Birmingham Science Fiction Film Society and (ii) consider payment of the debts of the BSFFS to a maximum of £60.

Following that, Diana Reed talked about SF on radio, with the help of a variety of recordings. The meeting made a profit of exactly £5.

FORTHCOMING

- * October - we should have a visitor from The Aetherius Society, to talk to us on the subject of "Flying Saucers and Space".
- * November - Novacon 11 (Oct30th-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 Helen Eling, 124 Galton Road, Warley, West Midlands. Tel: (021) 420-1369.
- * Our November speaker will be a well known publisher.
- * December - a Christmas party at The Ivy Bush.
- * January 1982 - our Annual General Meeting, including election of committee members.

VENUE CHANGES FOR INFORMAL MEETINGS---SEE DETAILS ON PAGE 2.

Memories of STUCON

an article by Dave Hardy

The Kursall in Bad Cannstatt, Stuttgart, was the setting for Stucon, Germany's annual SF convention (their equivalent of Eastercon) from 14-16 August this year. And a fine setting it was, too, surrounded by beautiful gardens, woods and fountains. I was g-o-h along with Marion Zimmer Bradley (who promised to try to come along to the Brum Group next spring) but among the VIGs (Very Important Guests) who attended Stucon were Cherry Wilder, Anne McCaffrey and our own co-president, Harry Harrison. Bob Shaw had a last-minute commission and couldn't make it. Between four and five hundred fans from all over Europe and beyond (but none from England, apart from Ruth and myself; you should have been there) made them very welcome.

The disadvantage of the Kursaal was that everyone had to sleep in hotels outside. The advantage was that food and drink---including beer---were available continuously! I thought at first that it was going to be a bit sercon, but in fact, with a trip round the town by chartered tram complete with its own bar (a bit like our barge trips) and an evening sail down the river Neckar by river boat with food and drink laid on in lieu of a banquet, everyone had a happy time... The lady writers' performance of the Three Witches was a riot, too.

True, there was a tendency for fanzine editors to buttonhole one of the authors (or artists) and ply him or her with deep, serious and searching questions, at which time no-one dared interrupt, but the programme items were as disorganised as those at any British con. By pre-arrangement, I started my own 'speech' (on SF and space art) with a short piece in German, apologising for not being able to give it in German---which Linda, my translator, promptly translated into English... The audience seemed to appreciate that, probably because my German was unintelligible! But language was no great problem really, apart from the translation slowing down the talks given in English. Cherry quickly broke the ice by distributing colourful paper butterflies to anyone she took a liking to, the wearers being enrolled in 'secret butterfly fandom'.

As usual, though, some of my best memories are of informal moments. The weather was warm and sunny the whole time, and there was an open-air cafe attached to the Kursaal: Harry and Anne arrived rather late on the Saturday, and soon there was a huge circle sitting around the tables in the evening sunlight. For some reason Harry seemed to think I was feeling the lack of good old Scotch, and insisted on pouring me glasses from the bottle he had bought at the Duty Free Shop. I didn't object! Then on the Monday, with the con over, the VIGs were taken by coach to Rothenburg, a very picturesque and interesting medieval town. At lunch that day there were Germans (of course), Americans, Austrians, a Dutchman (Kees van Toorn, fan and editor of Orbit), a New Zealander (Cherry, of course) and British. There's nothing like SF for breaking down national barriers.

Thanks, Stuttgart!

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SILICON 5

a convention report by Vernon Brown

Over 28th to 31st August the fifth Silicon took place somewhere in the Northern Wastes of England. Just over fifty truefen turned up to spend a convivial few days talking, drinking, eating and, when the Spirit moved them, participating in one or other of the programme items scattered throughout the weekend. Designed, like the rest of the series, as a relaxation, S-5 lived up to its reputation and a good time was had by all.

Pat and I travelled up with Stan and Helen Eling and arrived at about 7 pm on the Friday evening. After settling in and having a pint or so of Scotch (beer, not whisky) we watched Starcrash on video---a well produced Japanese Star Wars rip-off. The record forecast of a line coming up must have been about five minutes. This was followed by charades, with extra

points for entertainment value. By some fluke of probability my team got the hardest and our opponents the easiest titles, or at least that's my story. I think we got to bed about 2 am.

After breakfast on Saturday we wandered around Newcastle, returning in the late pm to eat frogs' legs in the basket for the first time---a bit like sweet chicken---then to watch an SF quiz followed by "Famous Appendages of Fandom", which was just what it sounds like. The contestants had to identify both appendage and owner from blown-up bits of slides taken at previous cons. Have you ever considered what your left knuckle would look like upside down and three feet square? Surprisingly enough, most were identified. A badly scratched videotape from a local distributor drove us back to the bar again, where, if I remember correctly, we put the world to rights before retiring.

Sunday proved to be a full day. The morning was taken up by an x-a-side football match, x being a variable determined by who felt masochistic enough to play, who was lying groaning on the ground and how many people had their spectacles knocked off by the ball. After the match Pat and I found ourselves in a quandry---wandering off to find a pub we found four of them next to one another, all selling different beers, and with only 30 minutes' drinking time left... However, we survived and returned to a discussion on the TAFF and the Doc Weir Award. This lasted a good, acrimonious two hours, though no-one present was actually physically assaulted. Greg Pickersgill, who has already presented his views on the subject in Stop Breaking Down 7 and Ansible 20, said that fandom has changed so much since these were started that their raison d'etre no longer apply, and they should be abolished. One telling point here is that there has been great difficulty in finding two British candidates to go to the USA next time ---although there have been as many as seven at a time standing in the past, when fandom was much smaller. This was followed by a quiz on answers to a questionnaire previously circulated to members, with questions such as "who is the best-dressed / drunkest / most cuddly fan?". It was hilariously funny but is the sort of item that needs a small in-group audience.

But this time it was gone eleven pm and we all adjourned to a free buffet (from the committee) and curry (from the hotel) followed by the Charades Final, before returning to the bar. It seems that some people didn't bother going to bed. At least, I remember being woken about 4 am by a party downstairs and being admonished not even to whisper by a wan looking fan at the adjoining breakfast table in the morning.

And on Monday afternoon we returned to Brum, enjoying the feeling one gets after a good con---looking back on a non-hectic yet full weekend and forward to the next one.

BOOK REVIEWS

SPLIT SECOND by Garry Kilworth, Penguin £1.50, 191 pages

Reviewed by Dave Hardy.

The basic idea is simple enough. An amateur archaeologist employs a new device which produces a hologram of real events from the vibrations remaining in the bones of Stone Age people. His teenage son somehow makes contact with a Paleolithic boy of his own age, and a transfer takes place between their minds. Their personalities shuttle between ancient and modern times, and herein lies the story. Garry Kilworth has done his homework, and creates a plausible setting and events in the Cyprus of both eras (apart from the fact that both youths seem rather blasé about the transfer), and he writes a compelling story. I look forward to further novels from him.

SOLARIS / THE CHAIN OF CHANCE / A PERFECT VACUUM by Stanislaw Lem, Penguin £3.50, 543 pages. Reviewed by Dave Packwood.

This omnibus of three works from Lem, the Polish writer and critic, provides a chance to observe his versatility and diversity. There are examples of different genres here, while A Perfect Vacuum is a vehicle for the author's idiosyncratic wit and invention. Solaris, the most familiar of Lem's work, is concerned with one of SF's predominant obsessions, the meeting and subsequent interaction of human and alien. The psychologist Kelvin is sent to the space platform which orbits the planet Solaris. The planet is one huge ocean of plasma with scattered islands. The occupants of Station Solaris are the meek Snow, the psychotic Sartorius and the dead Gibarian. Station Solaris is transformed from the clinical laboratory to the soul-searching cathedral of self-doubt by the ministrations of the sentient ocean, which conjures up dreams and hallucinations, using the source material of memory. Solaris's message is all too clear: man must either give way to a cruel and indifferent universe or use his compassion and humanity to simply survive. The Chain of Chance is an unconventional detective story in which a middle-aged astronaut-detective sets out across Europe to find the solution to the mysterious deaths of eleven men in Naples. Following a bizarre trail of terrorist attacks and surrealist horrors the puzzle is slowly unravelled. The solution is mundane and not at all to do with foul play. Lem's motive here remains irritatingly nebulous. It is either a discourse on the workings of probability theory or a straightforward psychological thriller. The last work in the book, A Perfect Vacuum, is the quintessential Lem---wordsmith and satirist. Set very much in the mould of Jonathan Swift and Samuel Butler, A Perfect Vacuum is a cluster of reviews of non-existent books. Amid the neologisms and metaphors Lem manages to send up many literary pretensions and trends.

GILES GOAT-BOY by John Barth, Granada £2.95, 813 pages. Reviewed by Mike Meara.

"An allegory that could well stand comparison with Pilgrim's Progress or Gulliver's Travels" enthuses the front cover blurb. Comparisons are odious, they say, and this one is no exception. Unlike Gulliver's Travels, this book contains little in the way of wit or interesting story-line, and in a much lesser book because of it. The half-man, half-goat protagonist does however become involved in a variety of sexual antics---I suppose goats have always had a bad press in this respect---as his education at West Campus progresses, but even this does not appreciably lighten the texture. Heavy work in every way, this is not SF, not even fantasy in the conventional sense, and is definitely not recommendable to the average genre reader.

THE PROBABILITY BROACH and THE VENUS BELT by L.Neil Smith, Ballantine distributed by Futura, £1.10, 273pp and £1.00, 211pp

Reviewed by Anne Gay.

Utopia---no overcrowding, no pollution and no taxes! Where? Hidden behind 30-odd pages of glutinous depression at the beginning of the first book, and through the Probability Broach. Our hero, a fat-and-forty Denver cop nicknamed Winnie (the Pooh) Bear is blasted through the Broach while hot on the trail of a murderer. He finds another Edward Bear with his fingerprints, the double of a girl back home, and no Denver in Colorado---in this parallel universe. Of course, there's a beautiful girl, with a gun-totin' veteran called Lucy slingin' wisecracks ever' which way. There's plenty of action, local colour and humour all the way. A porpoise and a gorilla called Fanshaw---spelt Featherstone-Haugh---help a rejuvenated Winnie to discover why-and-who dunnit; more gorillas and a couple of killer whales help out in the follow-up. All the loose ends are tied up---except enough for a third book---in an ingenious and enthralling plot. The best thing about these novels is the way anarchy actually works. Smith creates a very attractive society based on absolute respect for personal liberty. Very detailed, with great originality, thinks the reader. Wrong. The biography secreted at the back of the book grudgingly reveals that Smith stood as a Libertarian in the elections of 1978. It's still an exciting blend of humour, adventure and philosophy.

EARTHWORKS and GALAXIES LIKE GRAINS OF SAND by Brian Aldiss, Granada
£1.25 each, 126pp and 188pp Reviewed by John Farr.

Here are two more of Brian Aldiss's books reissued with new covers. Earthworks is a strange tale of a depressing near future, full of memorable images. Galaxies Like Grains of Sand is a collection of Mr Aldiss's early stories, linked to form a sprawling chronicle of man's future history; it has an introduction by Norman Spinrad. You really should have copies of these two books in your collection.

DRAGON'S EGG by Robert L. Forward, NEL £1.50, 308 pages
Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

This is a novel in the grand tradition of Arthur C. Clarke and Hal Clement. In other words it's been written with an almost total lack of characterisation and with a deaf ear for literary style. What it does have is a large measure of originality. You don't find many novels partly set among intelligent aliens evolving at high speed on the surface of a neutron star. Although the ways in which these aliens are shown stumbling over such advances as the development of mathematics are badly described, one can marvel at the author's imagination and ability to extrapolate many areas of science up to seventy years into the future. If you like your SF full of hard science and not cluttered up with things like believable people, you'll enjoy this. Better still, there's a 21-page technical appendix at the back of the book which omits even two-dimensional characters.

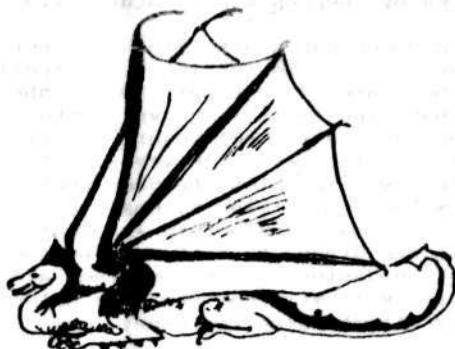
THE SUNSET WARRIOR (182pp), SHALLOWS OF NIGHT (216pp), DAI-SAN (246pp)
by Eric Van Lustbader, Star, £1.75 each Reviewed by Margaret Thorpe.

The first volume of this trilogy is a disappointment. The writing style is disjointed, and the reader remains totally uninvolved with the characters, good and bad. The world they inhabit is only hazily sketched, and the customs and levels of society are incomprehensible. The hero, Ronin, finds himself embroiled in a political plot which places him in the middle of warring leaders of the underground city. Above them is a kilometres-thick ice-cap, onto which Ronin and the Magic Man, Borros, manage to escape. The whole book seems little more than a rambling introduction to the second volume, Shallows of Night. This concerns Ronin's duel with the Dolman, a supernatural being whose advent marks the end of the human race. In contrast with the first book, this captures and holds the attention, having everything the previous volume lacked in the way of professional polish. It is fast paced, fully descriptive and well constructed, with that most difficult storytelling device, the flashback, being very well handled. The flagging storyline also picks up, with Ronin and Borros making a frantic effort to escape Freidal, the evil warlord, over the frozen seas to the inhabited temperate regions. The city there is vividly described, reminiscent in some ways of Fritz Leiber's Lankhmar. More colourful characters are also introduced. For once, in the case of Dai-San, the advertising blurb on the back cover is accurate. That third and final episode really is exciting, colourful and action-packed from beginning to end. Ronin, on the last part of his quest, finally discovers the weapons and skills to defeat the Dolman and save mankind. Volume three almost makes up for the first. Volumes two and three are definitely a must for devotees of Moorcock and similar ilk.

THE DEATH GOD'S CITADEL by Juanita Coulson, Ballantine distributed by Futura £1.25, 386 pages
Reviewed by Pauline E. Morgan.

This book reads like a sequel, even though it isn't one. (The only connection it has with Ms Coulson's previous novel, The Web of Wizardry, is the same fantasy world setting.) We are introduced to the heroes midway through their quest to hunt down and destroy an evil wizard. At this point evil wizard kidnaps beautiful princess, and everybody else charges off to the rescue. From an author who has sold thirteen novels I would expect a higher degree of characterisation, a greater convolution of plot, more consistency of background and a smoother style. Not recommended.

"From Anne McCaffrey I got no royalties. From Ursula Le Guin I got no royalties. So from Roger Zelazny should I expect royalties? Hah!"



ROADMARKS by Roger Zelazny, Macdonald Futura £4.95 (hardcover) and £1.50 (paperback), both 189 pages

Reviewed by John Farr.

Roger Zelazny always provides a good read, though with his natural talent he should be doing more than that. His latest novel is a sort of time travel fantasy---you travel through time by following certain fairly minor roads. (This is a similar process to travelling through Shadow in Zelazny's Amber series.) There are plenty of good ideas here, though without exception they are under-used. In fact, Zelazny has thrown in a whole time-travelling sub-culture (causing paradoxes, more often than not), a main plot, several subsidiary plots and a load of nice gimmicks such as talking books. There are even dragons. It reads like the outline for a series, and it cries out for a sequel. A fun book.

THE RIDDLE-MASTER OF HED (£1.00, 228pp), HEIR OF SEA AND FIRE (£1.00, 213 pp), HARPIST IN THE WIND (£1.25, 256pp) by Patricia A. McKillip, Futura

Reviewed by Pauline E. Morgan.

A fantasy trilogy in which the personae become characters from the first page. In the first volume Morgon, Prince of Hed, is driven to Erlenstar Mountain, the home of the High One, in order to seek the answer to the riddle of the three stars that have adorned his forehead since birth. The Heir of Sea and Fire is Raederle who, in turn, travels towards Erlenstar Mountain in search of Morgon. Both, in their travels, begin to realise the extent of the powers inherited by them. The final volume brings them to the height of their powers in a struggle against the shape-changers, the enemy from out of the sea. In the first two volumes the story is simply told and charged with emotion, but in Harpist in the Wind Patricia McKillip weaves an extraordinary tapestry of illusion. The trilogy is worth reading for the powerful imagery of this final volume.

TARZAN OF THE APES (245pp), THE RETURN OF TARZAN (221pp), THE BEASTS OF TARZAN (159pp) and THE SON OF TARZAN (222pp) by Edgar Rice Burroughs, Ballantine distributed by Futura, 95 pence each

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

I've always felt that the Tarzan books fall into the category of heroic fantasy, though of course some of them are more fantastic than others. The whole series of 24 volumes is being reprinted (again!), and here are the first four, with cover art by Neal Adams. You must be familiar with Tarzan of the Apes, the story of Tarzan's upbringing by the apes, his gruesome battles to become their king, his self-education, his meeting with Jane, and his discovery that he is really Lord Greystoke (or "Greystroke", as this particular edition puts it). To a certain extent it is the second book, The Return of Tarzan, which sets the format for the series, introducing Rokoff and Paulvitch (Tarzan's arch enemies) and also the city of Opar. The other two volumes are similar, except that The Son of Tarzan is what its title suggests, dealing with Tarzan and Jane's son Jack, who becomes Korak The Killer. The four books share the same robust, all-action style.

FIRESTARTER by Stephen King, Futura £1.95, 510 pages

Reviewed by Pauline E. Morgan.

Charlie McGee can start fires with her mind. She's an 8-year-old child, and her ability is the result of an experiment in drug-induced psionics in which her parents took part before she was born. The government which started that experiment is known as the Shop. It wants Charlie---to use her if she can control her power; to kill her if she can't. The terrible destruction that Charlie can wreak is frightening, but more terrifying is the ruthless way in which the Shop hunts down Charlie and her father. Apart from their psi talents, Charlie and her father are---like most of Stephen King's main characters---normal human beings to whom the reader's sympathies are drawn. By contrast, personnel of the Shop are almost without exception devious and nasty. They are the ones to be frightened of, not Charlie. Well written, the book holds reader interest from start to finish. Excellent value for money.

SONGMASTER by Orson Scott Card, Macdonald £5.95, 338 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

In the far future the only institution able to defy the galactic emperor is the Songhouse, on the planet Tew. There, very young children, usually orphans, are taught not just to sing but to use their voices as the finest of empathic instruments, imbuing their (frequently wordless) songs with strong feelings and emotions. The best of these children---known as Songbirds---are sent out to good homes between the ages of 9 and 15 (when delayed puberty intervenes). This basic situation, in which neither the true horror of the children's lives nor the Songhouse's close parallels with a religious organisation is mentioned, is not particularly believable. The plot, following the fortunes of a particular Songbird, Annsset, in training, in his service with the emperor, and afterwards, is highly emotional but not without merit. Overall the book is worth trying; it's better read than analysed.

VANISHINGS by Michael Harrison, NEL £1.25, 190 pages

Reviewed by Margaret Thorpe.

For those who haven't studied the Bermuda Triangle mysteries in detail, this gives a fairly comprehensive synopsis. It also describes some less well publicised disappearances over the years, including those of Glen Miller and Ambrose Bierce. The author also correlates some rather esoteric statistics. Apparently, you are more likely to vanish if your name is Miller, Oliver or Carter, during the months of April, August or December, and if you're under stress, although I doubt if the sample is large enough to be valid. An interesting book, and a refreshing change to find that UFOs are cited as only one of several possible explanations.

THE ETERNAL CHAMPION by Michael Moorcock, Granada 95 pence, 159 pages

Reviewed by Malcolm Thorpe.

This book heralds the immortal Erekoze (the sum of all Moorcock's heroes) as mankind's champion against the Elden. Amidst comment on mankind's failings he changes sides and removes them from the Earth. There is relatively little action, the book being used to give an insight into the hero character. Only recommended to Moorcock fans.

Editorial Notes

As you may have noticed, my pleas for contributions have borne fruit, with two articles and two illustrations by new artists in this issue, with more articles and pictures promised to me. Please keep your contributions coming. My thanks this month go to Locus, Ansible and all contributors. Art credits this issue: Ivor Latto (p.1), Phill Probert (p.2 top), Mike Taylor (p.2 bottom), and Margaret Thorpe (p.7, though you must blame me for the caption). Next month's issue will be even better; just you wait and see. This September 1981 issue of the Birmingham Science Fiction Group newsletter has been edited and produced by Chris Morgan, 39 Hollybrow, Selly Oak, Birmingham B29 4LX.