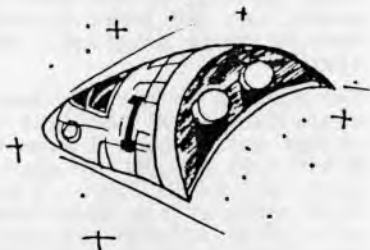


Birmingham Science Fiction Group

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



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The Newsletter is published once a month and is distributed to
all members of the Birmingham Science Fiction Group. Membership
rates are £5 per person or £7.50 for two people at the same
address. The treasurer is Stan Eling, 124 Galton Road, Smeth-
wick, Warley, West Midlands, B67 5JS to whom all membership
fees should be sent.

The Birmingham Science Fiction Group has its formal meeting on
the third Friday of each month in the New Imperial Hotel in
Temple Street, Birmingham City Centre. There is also an in-
formal meeting on the first Tuesday of each month at the General
Wolfe pub, on the corner of Aston Road and Holt Street (near
Aston University and the science park). Newcomers are always
welcome

M E M B E R S H I P S T A T U S

If your membership has expired or expires this month you will
find a cross in the box below.

Please renew.

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THE EDITORIAL

First, a reminder and an apology. The reminder is that the April meeting of the BSGF will be on the second Tuesday of the month, not the third in order to avoid a clash with the Season convention in Brighton. The date for your diary is Friday 13th April.

The apology is for the newsletter. Because I've only had three weeks instead of the four or five weeks in which to prepare things and because I seem to be doing a hundred and one other activities all at the same time I haven't produced an issue as good as I would like. I have, however, published the promised book reviews this time around and I hope publishers will take note of my address and send review copies. I have a few reviewers lined up at present but if anyone else would like a book to review or feels he can do a better job then please drop me a line.

All artwork credits this issue go to John Dell without whom this newsletter would look very dull indeed. Thanks John!

I had hoped that Cath Easthope's Amateur Press Association report last issue would stir up a few people into writing, but it was not to be. Unfortunately Cath handed me the report on the very day the newsletter was put to bed and so I had no chance to reassure her. The committee is fully committed to the idea of a Birmingham Science Fiction Group APA where members of the group are encouraged to produce their own fan-magazines (fanzines). Cath, as co-ordinator, was worried that the costs of mailing the fanzines to the APA members would not be reimbursed. Since the monthly costs of the APA are only in the region of a couple of pound then there's no question that financial support would be withdrawn. So, having straightened that out let's see a few more members join the APA, and let's have some of the old members, sorry Pete I mean lapsed members, rejoin.

Last months meeting was financially very successful. After a question time where four intrepid Brum Group members were quizzed on various sf topics an auction was held. Items in the auction were mainly from Pete Weston's attic and included an Eddie Jones painting, "Speculation" photo-montages, books and magazines and this years Hugo Awards....well, not quite. Those of you who didn't turn up to the meeting and haven't seen a Hugo Award in the flesh missed out for Pete had brought along about ten of them. I believe he's presently touting for business amongst the up-and-coming authors. "Hello. I wondered if you'd be interested in a Hugo. We're laying on a ceremony on the third Friday of the month. And while you're up here could you give a talk to the Group."

Talking of which, what have we got lined up for you for April? Well, we'll have to wait and see won't we but it should be good.

Jan and I are hoping to take part in the BRMB Walkathon. I say 'hope' because a month has gone by and despite a reminder and a personal visit we still haven't received our sponsorship forms. Hopefully we should get something through soon so howabout you all sponsoring us - please. It's a 25 mile walk around the outskirts of Birmingham sometime in May.

Finally, please write to me. I love receiving letters. Who knows, I may even publish it.

Reviews

FOUNDATION'S EDGE - Isaac Asimov

Published by Granada in paperback at £1.95. 432 pages

Reviewed by W. A. McCabe

If anyone doesn't know the story so far here's a rough outline. In the beginning there was the Seldon Plan that was supposed to restore the entire galaxy to a reasonably civilized state after a few millenia as the current state of the empire was falling apart rapidly and it looked like civilization would disappear forever. To this purpose two Foundations were set up. The first, a repository of all the physical scientific knowledge became a small empire in it's own right and continued growing. The second was not thought of for centuries and it appeared not to exist. It did, it was based on psychology, sociology and the other human sciences. It saw to it that the great plan continued to work, making adjustments where necessary to the societies of their galaxy. A disaster occured that brought their existence into the open but, by a trick, they managed to convince everyone of their destruction. Now read on.....

The great plan is working well, too well. Foundation 1 realises that it must be 2 and they haven't been destroyed after all, so they send out an expedition to try and draw them into the open. They are only partly right. Foundation 2 realise that this is not entirely their doing and give chase hoping to catch the real culprit. In the last section of the book they all find the real meddlers but in the last couple of pages it is revealed that they are not as entirely responsible as everyone thought. Now we wait for the next episode. There were other books too. Books about robots and the mythical planet Earth the supposed source of the human race. Asimov drags these in too. This is apparently the first part of an attempt to tie together all his novels (or as many as possible). It is a pity that the customary encyclopaedia references have now been discontinued.

This is Asimov's third novel since 1958 according to the list on the inside cover (after FANTASTIC VOYAGE '66 and THE GODS THEMSELVES '72) He appears to be returning to the field as a new one came out in hardback this week (THE ROBOTS OF DAWN).

The best reason I can think of to buy this one is to find out what happened next in the story of just about everyone and the best reason not to is that it doesn't end there. The standard of writing is the same as the previous episodes' and, as usual, reads like something between a history book and an adventure story.

Friday - Robert Heinlein

Millenium - John Varley

Reviewed by Peter Weston

DISAPPOINTMENTS TWO

I don't get a lot of spare time these days, so when I picked up two titles by my favourite authors, I was looking forward to a good read, a spot of old SF-magic.

The books were FRIDAY by Robert Heinlein, and MILLENIUM by John Varley. Yes, well, I know the Heinlein looked a bit of a risk, but still, Rog Peyton assured me that it was just like his old stuff (some of his customers had said), and Dave enjoyed it. I was willing to take the chance - maybe Heinlein had got back into his old stride.

He hasn't
BLOODY RUBBISH!!!

How on Earth can someone as sensible as Fred Pohl say (in the dust-cover blurb), that "it is as tight and fast-paced as THE PUPPET MASTERS, and even more fun to read?" He can't mean it; he must have owed old Bob a favour, because in truth the book is the exact opposite to PUPPET MASTERS.

Look for a start, what's the story in FRIDAY? There isn't one! Lots of action, chasing around the USA and Canada to no particular purpose, but no central, convincing reason for heroine to go from A to B. Even the author can't actually think of any name or rationale for the organisation which employs Friday; in the end, he conveniently winds-up that operation and turns the last half of the book into a spaceship adventure (totally out of keeping with the world picture presented in Part 1).

It's not fun; it's turgid, with the same sort of mushy love everyone/screw anyone dialogue as in I WILL FEAR NO EVIL etc.

And while much is made of Friday being an Artificial Person, that turns out to be a total fallacy before the book is through, when she wonderingly realises that although she was born via artificial womb, she is still a human being. We realised that 100 pages earlier.

All I can say is that Heinlein hasn't recovered his touch, his editors and publishers ought to be ashamed, and so should Fred Pohl.

DISAPPOINTMENTS TWO Cont...

MILLENIUM, I thought, would be better. After all, John Varley is a young, fresh writer; the novel is an expansion of 'Air Raid', a superbly handled short story that was a minor stunner when it appeared, a year or two back. I really couldn't wait to get into this one...

And I read, and read, and worried, and worried. 'Air Raid' gave us the intriguing idea of "what if victims could be spirited away, just before the otherwise-fatal crash?" There's also a brief, but nicely-done portrait of a far-future world where most of the inhabitants are actually clinically dead.

MILLENIUM doesn't really add one bit to that scenario. Instead, it borrows a lot of stuff about time-travel paradoxes, taken shamelessly from such classics as 'By His Bootstraps', 'The End of Eternity', and so on, with one important difference; Varley doesn't believe in all that stuff, and it shows in the mechanically-contrived storyline.

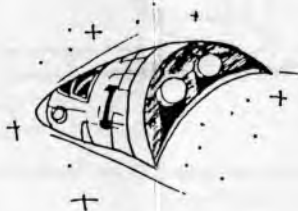
Then there's a whole lot about the future, which comes over as sub-Larry Niven (the world of Svetz, the time traveller). There isn't any core of the original, interesting stuff which made the short story so successful; instead, to fit the structure of the novel, some of that gets thrown out (almost no description of those 'clinically dead').

And some loose ends never get tied up, like those wrist-watches that go backward (or did I miss something).

Finally by the end, Varley is as obviously sick of the mess as I was, so he brings in a gigantic cop-out, shunts his whole crew into problematic future, and gets all metaphysical (and even suggests the physical condition of his heroine - supposedly one of the pivots of the whole novel - is a delusion).

What a disappointment; what a shame. Varley is a wonderful conceits man, a short story writer, but he just can't handle the longer lengths.

Now I'm looking at the new Asimov, and wondering if I dare.....



PRISONERS OF POWER - Boris & Arkady Strugatsky

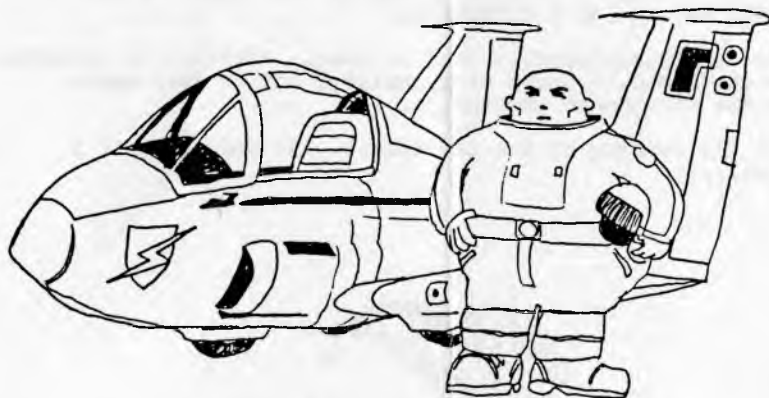
(Translated from the Russian by Helen Saltz Jacobson)

Published by Penguin at £1.95. 316 pages.

Reviewed by Martin Tudor.

Maxim, a naive young superhuman explorer from the Independent Reconnaissance Unit of Earth, is stranded on an alien planet. The humanoid inhabitants of the region in which he has landed believe him to be an amnesiac from a remote mountain area and so accept him. He soon learns their language, makes friends, and is enlisted in the Legionnaires, a crack group of soldiers who are fighting a war against the degens (or degenerates their term for mutants). The society in which he finds himself is highly militaristic and the story follows Maxim's gradual discovery of how the masses are being manipulated by the ruling elite.

Despite this uninspiring storyline this proves to be an interesting novel. The plot develops at a pleasant pace, with each revelation about the 'true' nature of the society changing both Maxim and the readers perspective of this world. But as well as spinning a ripping yarn the Strugatskys attempt to attack pointless bureaucracy, futile wars, political in-fighting and the more ludicrous aspects of both capitalism and socialism, before moving on to question the necessity of freedom. Unfortunately for the most part their attempt fails, proving that pulp and political philosophy don't mix. An interesting, entertaining but ultimately disappointing book.



I USED TO ENJOY KNOCKING OFF ON FRIDAYS ~ UNTIL
I READ HEINLEIN

THE RETURN OF NATHAN BRAZIL - Jack L Chalker

Published by Penguin at £1.95 239 pages

Reviewed by Anne Gay

"But flash, we only have 14 hours left to save the world!"

Well, not quite. Nor is it particularly a swashbuckler, this is fourth in the Well World series.

In the war against intelligent microbes, known as the Dreel, a superweapon is developed. Unfortunately it begins to unmake the universe. Only Nathan Brazil - who probably belongs to the ancient race who made it in the first place - can fix the well world computer which will save us all. And he's not sure he wants to.

Confused? You won't be, or at least, not overwhelmingly. It would no doubt help if you had read vols 1 - 3 of this pentology, but even if you haven't half the pleasure lies in unravelling it all.

This is a rich, not to say complicated, novel: a blending of pseudoscience and pseudomyth which is quite interesting. Added to this is an intriguing mixture of borrowings such as centaurs and the wandering Jew syndrome, given a new slant and generally revamped.

What is original is the working out of the plot. The characters are fun, and given the background, credible - the sort of beings you'd like to get to know better and have a laugh with. But I couldn't hate the Bad Guys as much as I was supposed to - my acquaintance with them in this single volume was too brief.

I'd like to read the last episode, though, to see who (and how) wins.

Not one of the greats, this book, but a cut above the average in many ways. Crawl out and buy it.

ELECTION OF ORDINARY COMMITTEE MEMBER

The Committee has noticed the lack of it's member. Whilst at first glance this appears not to be a major defect, in order to restore this body to it's correct posture an election will be held on Friday 13th at which the afore-said member will be replaced and the committee made whole again.

Those desirous of standing should be in firm condition, sound, capable and upright.

If you are a member in good standing and yet find something lacking in your life then you are possibly the missing member (it sticks out a mile!)

Simon Norburn - P.R.

For those of you confused the above is to tell you that we will be holding an election to fill the vacant ordinary committee member post on Friday April 13th. Those interested in ~~fill~~ the ~~post~~ job please let a member of the committee know.

Graham Poole



YEP! YOU'RE RIGHT - THIS IS A PAGE FILLER ILLUSTRATION.
AND NOT A PICTURE OF YOUR EDITOR!