

the
Birmingham
Science Fiction
Group



HONORARY PRESIDENTS:

BRIAN ALDISS and HARRY HARRISON.

newsletter - 168

august 1985

FRIDAY AUGUST 16th ... 7.45. NEW IMPERIAL HOTEL.

THIS MONTH'S SPEAKER IS -- MAT IRVINE.

THE BSFG MEETS
ON THE THIRD
FRIDAY OF EACH
MONTH IN THE
NEW IMPERIAL
HOTEL, TEMPLE
STREET, IN THE
CITY CENTRE OF
BIRMINGHAM.
DETAILS OF SOME
FORTHCOMING
MEETINGS ARE
GIVEN BELOW.
MEMBERSHIP OF
THE GROUP COSTS
A MERE £5.00 A
YEAR FOR ONE
PERSON (£7.50
FOR 2 PEOPLE AT
THE SAME PLACE)
OR £2.50 FOR 6
MONTHS (£3.75
FOR TWO AT THE
SAME ADDRESS).
ALL CHEQUES &
POS, PAYABLE TO
BSFG, AND SENT
TO TREASURER,
CHRIS CHIVERS,
51 BOUNDARY RD,
STREETLY, SUTTON
COLDFIELD, WEST
MIDLANDS.

THIS NEWSLETTER
IS PRODUCED BY
MARTIN TUDOR OF
845 ALUM ROCK
ROAD, WARD END,
BIRMINGHAM.

This month's speaker is well-known to watchers of BBC Television (and who isn't?). Mat Irvine has been with the Beeb's SFX Department for 14 years now, being perhaps best known for his work with DR. WHO and BLAKE'S SEVEN; but you will also see his name among the credits for serious programmes like HORIZON and comedy series such as DAVE ALLEN (and others he says he'd rather forget!).

Mat has also contributed articles on modelling etc. to STARBURST magazine, and was responsible, with Ray Rimell, for launching SPACE VOYAGER on an unsuspecting public. He has talked to the Brum Group before (remember that spider?), and will be bringing along some of his latest models to show us.

(Notes supplied by Dave Hardy)

Albacon 85

— "Where's The Fun?" A Report By PAM WELLS.

July 19th-22nd 1985. Central Hotel Glasgow. Guests of Honour - Harlan Ellison and Anne McCaffrey.

What can I say about ALBACON'85? In many ways I'd prefer to say nothing and consign it to that dark place in my memory reserved for disappointing experiences; but I promised to write a report and must dredge it to the forefront of my mind. I write this report to fulfil a promise, not to slag off a convention. But to report my feelings honestly, I have to say that not only did I not enjoy ALBACON, I also thought it was a bad convention.

I can pinpoint many reasons for its 'badness'. Firstly, the atmosphere was all wrong. I'm not saying this just because I knew very few people there; that much I'd expected in advance. I can understand a cohesive atmosphere even if I'm not a part of it: one can see the community and observe its interactions even as an outsider. That is how I perceived general fandom before I became involved; the atmosphere was easily identifiable. But at ALBACON I couldn't see a sense of community at all; no cohesion, merely an amorphous mass of individuals passively sampling what was laid out for them by the con organisers. Accepting that premise, it shouldn't be too difficult to go and do likewise. Take the convention as an individual and deal with what it offers you on that basis. Forget interaction for one weekend. Sure, but to do that you need an exciting and stimulating programme.

One of the things I'd been led to believe about ALBACONS is that the programming is always well organised and interesting. But I found the list of items offered almost without exception looked uninspiring, repetitive and uninteresting. The only exceptions I can single out were the items involving Harlan Ellison: a true professional, a great performer and a bundle of charisma. But I've never known a con committee work a guest so hard. Harlan must have been involved in about three items a day, and I'm sure if I'd seen each and every one of them even Harlan's charismatic presence would have irritated me by the end. Take Ellison off the programme, and the rest would have been about as inspiring as treading in a dog turd. Where was the fun? Where was the excitement? Where was the inspiration?

To me, the obvious thing to do when you're involved in something you are finding tedious and boring is to liven things up. I tried, I really hoped to hit the peaks of desperate fun on Sunday night by helping to organise a People's Disco. The Central Hotel is an ideal place to organise a disco; there are a lot of function rooms, and a disco in one of them would not be likely to disturb those people who'd rather not have their convention spoiled by the intrusion of music. So we set up the disco in the room next to one of the bars. We put up posters inviting people to come along. We played a variety of good dance music. Less than twenty people showed up. It became clear to me that I couldn't understand what other people get out of ALBACON. The one thing I look for more than anything is Fun; that desperate last night sensation of wanting to be with people and talk and dance and SHARE the con with them. When the disco failed I felt totally beaten; unsure of what to do next I slunk off to bed, defeated.

There were some good moments over the weekend. Sunday afternoon at Loch Lomond, a break from the tedium of the convention. Going up to someone's room for a cup of tea and a smoke; a break from the amorphous mass in favour of a small and private community break. Missing breakfast and sharing pancakes in a nearby restaurant, joking and laughing with friends and forgetting the alienness back in the hotel. But I think it's fair to say that the brief periods of enjoyment I managed to salvage from the weekend were all nothing whatsoever to do with the organisation of the convention.

So, how does this bode for next year's Eastercon? I remain optimistic; I've heard from a number of sources that ALBACONS are normally better experiences than this one, and I'm not prepared to write Eastercon off just because ALBACON'85 didn't work for me. The hotel has a good layout, and with more inspiring programme items a convention there could be very successful indeed. My advice, for what it's worth, is to put much

more thought and effort into the fan room (a complete washout this time), and to try involving the convention members as much as possible. From past experience, a convention is much more enjoyable if you feel a part of it, rather than feeling set apart by it.

I don't want to feel negative, but I don't believe any effort was made by the committee to make me feel otherwise. When I was asked to write this piece, a couple of weeks before the convention, I hoped to write a favourable report. I'm only sorry that I can't. But there is hope. The convention had so much good-time potential that wasn't realised on this occasion, and I fully intend to go to another ALBACON to see whether it can reach the heights to which it clearly has the potential to reach.

— PAM WELLS.

Unfortunately I haven't received the BECCON report that I had hoped to include at this point...despite delaying the newsletter several days. With a bit of luck it should appear next month. Instead I don't suppose it would hurt to launch into a short list of some future conventions...

ENTERPRISE ONE. Liverpool Crest Hotel. August 23-26. Guests (subject to work commitments) James Doohan, Gerry Webb, John Shackley & Wendy Graham. For information and registration forms send s.a.e to Mrs Sharron Rowe, ENTERPRISE ONE CONVENTION, 24 Hayward Close, Clevedon, Bristol, Avon, BS21 5ER.

FANTASYCON X. Royal Angus Hotel, BIRMINGHAM, September 6-8. Guest of Honour Rob Holdstock. Master of Ceremonies Charles L. Grant. Membership £9 (or £1.50 supporting) to FANTASYCON X, 15 Stanley Road, Morden, Surrey. CANCON (UNICON 6). Guest of Honour John

Christopher. Membership £7 (£4 supporting) to CANCON c/o Nigel Taylor, Perspective Design Ltd, Top Floor, 9 Pembroke St., Cambridge, CB2 3QY. Sept 13-15.

UK COMIC ART CONVENTION 85. Sept 21-22. University of London Union Malet St., London, WC1. Membership £7.50 to UKCAC85, 100 Sydney Road, Hornsey London, N8 OEX. Accomodation available at University Halls of residence for the Saturday night only for just £12. Guests confirmed so far to quote SMALL MAMMAL "include more artists than you could shake a spider's web at."

BENELUXCON'85. Oct 26-27. Leiden, The Netherlands. Guest of Honour AnneMarie van Ewyck. Details from Roelof Goudriaan, Postbus 1189, 8200 BD Lelystad, The Netherlands.

NOVACON 15. Nov 1-3. De Vere Hotel, Coventry. Guests of Honour Dave Langford & James Wite. Details from Graham Poole, 86 Berwood Farm Road, Wyde Green, Sutton Coldfield, West Midlands B72 1AG. PROGRESS REPORT TWO AND BOOKING FORMS OUT NOW SO DON'T DELAY JOIN TODAY!

ARTICON. (SHOESTRINGCON'85). OCT 4-6. Hatfield Polytechnic. Guest of Honour Bryan Talbot. Registration £5.50 to Jaine Fennell, 17 Royston Road, St. Albans, Herts (Cheques payable to Hatfield Polytechnic Students Union, please enclose sae for reply).

MEXICON 2. Feb 7-9 1986. Birmingham. For readers and writers of SF, speculative literature and fanzines. Registration £9 to Pam Wells, 24a Beech Road, London, N11 2DA. (Cheques etc payable to MEXICON 2).

ALBACON III. March 28-31 1986. The Eastercon, Central Hotel Glasgow. Guest of Honour Joe Haldeman. Registration £9 (£12 after Mar 1st 1986.) to ALBACON III, c/o Vince Docherty, 20 Hillingdon Gdns, Glasgow G52 1PR. Again BOOKING FORMS are out now!

Thanks to ever reliable SMALL MAMMAL for most of the above information copies of which are available from Martin & Margaret at the One Tun, or by post send an SAE to 5 Bosworth Road, Grange Park, Swindon, Wilts, SN5 6AL.



Having just managed to destroy the original four sides of Book Reviews which I typed up for this months Newsletter - amazing the amount of damage a large mug of coffee can do - I'm afraid I'm going to have to resort to the ready typed reviews of the Morgans again this month...so prepare yourselves for a sudden change of typeface....

ISAAC ASIMOV PRESENTS THE BEST HORROR AND SUPERNATURAL OF THE 19TH CENTURY ed by Isaac Asimov, Charles G. Waugh & Martin H. Greenberg, Robson Books £9.95, 368 pages Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

While not "the best" this is certainly a perrepresentative and entertaining anthology of twenty-five stories. There is a brief foreward to each piece but this is in no way a scholarly compilation; Asimov's shallow and uninteresting introduction is aimed squarely at the ignorant reader rather than the academic. The selection of stories varies from the exceedingly common and well-known (Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart", Wells's "Pollock and the Porroh Man" and Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge", for example) to the rare and unknown. The latter category is too poorly represented for my taste, though it does include notable stories by Robert Barr and Lorimer Stoddard. It's a very good anthology for anyone not familiar with 19th century horror stories.

THE MAN IN THE TREE by Damon Knight, Gollancz £8.95, 246 pages Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Here is the life-story of a very tall man---a freak---with special powers, who suffers from other people's unkindness throughout his life yet who tries to help the world by making it a better place. It is, in part, a religious allegory. It is, in other parts, rather boring, because not much happens, beyond trivia, for the middle hundred pages of the book. Yet Damon Knight---who seldom writes fiction these days, but was once highly regarded for it---shows that he is still a clever and subtle writer. His characterisation is very good, especially of the protagonist. Knight underwrites, minimising action and emotion (sometimes to an infuriating degree) though he succeeds in retaining interest. I found this an entertaining novel, but I can imagine a lot of readers giving up.

WORLD'S END by Joan D. Vinge, Futura £2.50, 230 pages

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

Readers of The Snow Queen may remember BZ Gundhalinu, the police inspector who loved the woman that became a sibyl and Queen of Tiamat. She and her planet are now beyond the reach of himself and the Hegemony, but they are inextricably linked in his thoughts and his motives. Although there is no love lost between BZ and his brothers, their disappearance in a region known as World's End begins to affect his work. He finds himself forced to search for them. World's End is a region of constantly changing wilderness. It is easy to get lost there. At its centre is Fire Lake which has the ability to drive men insane. As the novel progresses we see its effect on BZ. His character is skillfully developed and this is a book well worth reading.

THE WARRIOR WHO CARRIED LIFE by Geoff Ryman, Allen & Unwin, £7.95
173 pages

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

An interesting and original first novel. When her father rebels against the Galu, Caro and her family are hideously mutilated. She vows revenge and in desperation joins the Wensenara, a group of old women, whose claims to perform magic she doesn't really believe. They teach her a spell which they say, will turn her into another kind of beast for a year. To her surprise, Caro becomes a warrior. Each problem that is set up within this novel is carefully thought through, even to the fate of the child Caro fathers. Issues are not hurried over in the hope that the reader won't notice. Geoff Ryman won the B.S.F.A. award for his novella "The Unconquered Country" and if he continues to write this well, his will be a name to watch out for.

THE LAST OTTER by A.R.Lloyd, Hamlyn £1.95, 186 pages

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

This attempt to bring Tarka the Otter up to date fails miserably. Henry Williamson concentrated on his animals and dealt with man only when he intruded upon their lives. In his previous novel, Kine, A.R. Lloyd used the same approach to good effect. Here, by trying to combine human activity with otters, the result is a mess. To begin with, the book is overwritten, for example, rarely do the otters swim but rather travel, plunge, vector, breast, stroke or surge. Secondly, the otters are anthropomorphised alarmingly. The human side of the plot is totally unbelievable: A.R.Lloyd should have made up his mind whether to tell the story of an otter struggling for survival against poachers, pollution and other threats not even considered here but very real, or the tale of the run-away boy determined to protect them. This mish-mash, though of laudable conservationist intent, does not succeed.

THE TIME OF THE DARK by Barbara Hambly, Unicorn £2.50, 284 pages

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

An interesting first novel to a trilogy containing a few twists on old themes. In her dreams, Gil Patterson crosses the Void into a parallel world under dire threat from a subterranean predator, the Dark. In his attempt to escape with the baby Prince Tir, the wizard Ingold is followed across the Void to Earth by a Dark. During the battle between Ingold and the amorphous creature (they become more "solid" as the tale progresses) Gil and Rudy Solis are dragged into the other world. Rudy is a failed biker - he is not aggressive enough - and it is he that seems more in need of protection than the tough, cold-hearted Gil. Although this book has its flaws it still makes enjoyable reading.

ALIEN ANIMALS by Janet & Colin Bord, Granada £2.95, 196 pages
Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

Everyone knows of the Loch Ness monster. Most people have heard of the elusive Surrey puma. We all know of the mysterious Yeti, Sasquatch and Bigfoot. This book brings together sightings of six groups of "alien" animals that scientists tend to dismiss as figments of the imagination for want of concrete proof (it is strange that cameras fail to work or are forgotten when these aliens are around). It considers possible explanations and leaves the reader to make up his own mind. The chapter on Big Cats is of interest as Bob Rickard, founder member of this incarnation of the B.S.F.G., is credited for his collection of puma reports from south-east England.

THE DRAGON WAITING by John M. Ford, Corgi £3.50, 341 pages
Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

This is a Europe where wizards have real power, vampirism is an infectious disease and religious diversity is such that Christianity is a minor cult. A few twists to real events have given rise to the background of this imaginative historical fantasy. At the time that would have been the dawn of the renaissance the Byzantine empire is attempting to expand and Edward IV of England is struck down by magic. A wizard, a mercenary, a vampire and a female doctor combine forces with Richard, Duke of Gloucester to prevent England becoming an annex of Byzantium. In this alternate world Ford provides another reason why Richard had killed the princes in the Tower. The plot moves intricately towards its climax and this book is one that I will read again. I would, however, urge you to read the historical notes first; they are to be found at the end of the book.

OBSESSION by Ramsey Campbell, Granada £8.95, 280pp
Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Don't accept favours without knowing what you must give in return. Four teenagers do accept favours (presumably from the devil), so that two people die and another is crippled, while the fourth favour is a pools win. It takes twenty-five years for the four to discover what they've given up in exchange---then their lives begin to fall apart. This is a restrained, fast-moving novel of psychological horror set in the fictional East Anglian coastal resort of Seaward, where everybody knows everybody else. The four teenagers have grown up to become pillars of the community, and they have to cope with their personal crises in public view. While this is a readable novel, and better than most horror novels, it is too short for sufficient character development. Also, it is a little too restrained and the plot is too neat and contrived at the end.

THE CONTINENT OF LIES by James Morrow, Gollancz £9.95, 274 pp

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Quinjin is a critic, a freelance reviewer of cephapples---an artform and entertainment medium consisting of an organic tree-fruit (not unlike an apple) the eating of which will precipitate a particular and vivid full-sense dream. Because he is relatively inured to the eating of cephapples, he is persuaded (by a large financial incentive) to sample a new and potentially lethal one. He survives its horrors and is further persuaded to embark on an interstellar quest to find and destroy the particular cephapple tree and its designer/programmer. With Quinjin go a former girlfriend (Urilla), his 12-year-old daughter (Lilit), and others. After much investigation and a false lead Quinjin's daughter samples one of the dangerous cephapples and is driven mad by it. Further adventures occur, some very dreamlike.

This is a rich and complex novel, innovative, humorous, satirical and with deeper levels; it promises to be of the very highest quality but is flawed and doesn't quite live up to its early promise. The cephapple industry is presented as being analogous to today's film industry, with dangerous cephapples as video nasties (plus undertones of dangerous drugs). There are many delightful satirical passages--- brief cephapple reviews, a cephapple convention (a thinly disguised SF convention). Not only is this a good adventure story, but it's also a critic's delight.

THE SONG OF MIDDLE EARTH by David Harvey, Allen & Unwin £10.95, 143 pp

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

This is the latest in a long list of books trying to explain what Tolkien meant when he wrote The Lord of The Rings and The Silmarillion. According to Harvey's interpretation he was writing a mythology for England, to place alongside those of Wales and Ireland. He examines the themes common to Tolkien and virtually all cultures of the world--- the tragic hero, the quest hero, myths of creation etc. To be fair, Harvey has made his piece of academia very readable and one wonders if what is necessary to catch the imagination in the way that Tolkien did, is to include these themes, whether consciously or unconsciously, in any epic tale. Perhaps this is where so many fantasy writers before and since Tolkien have gone wrong.

Undoubtedly there will be scholars of English literature who will find Harvey's ideas interesting, or that kind of enthusiast who must see motives behind every word and allegories on every page. But for those of us who just wish to read Tolkien for enjoyment this little volume is best left on the shelf.

Birmingham Science Fiction Group

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

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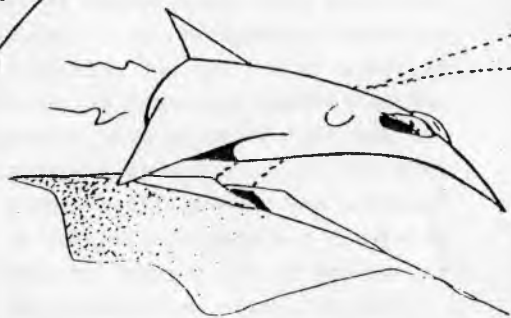
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