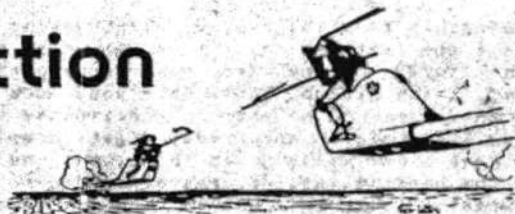


# Birmingham Science Fiction Group

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



## NEWSLETTER 177

JUNE 1996

THE BSFG MEETS ON THE  
THIRD FRIDAY OF EACH  
MONTH IN THE NEW  
IMPERIAL HOTEL, TEMPLE  
STREET, IN THE CENTRE  
OF BIRMINGHAM. DETAILS  
OF THIS MONTH'S MEETING  
IS GIVEN BELOW.

MEMBERSHIP OF THE GROUP  
COSTS A MERE £5.00 PER  
YEAR FOR ONE PERSON  
(£7.50 FOR TWO AT THE  
SAME ADDRESS) OR £2.50  
FOR SIX MONTHS (£3.75  
FOR TWO PEOPLE AT THE  
SAME ADDRESS).

ALL CHEQUES AND POSTAL  
ORDERS PAYABLE TO BSFG  
AND SENT TO THE TREASURER  
CHRIS CHIVERS AT 51,  
BOUNDARY ROAD, STREETLY,  
SUTTON COLDFIELD, WEST  
MIDLANDS.

Our guest at this month's meeting on 20th  
June at 8 pm is

### Kim Stanley Robinson

He is at present on holiday in Switzerland  
but is flying back to England especially  
to give us a talk at the meeting. And also  
to do a signing session at Andromeda on  
Saturday 21st, where he will be signing  
the hardback copies of THE WILD SHORE.

Kim has a PhD in literature and teaches  
writing at the University of California.  
He has been nominated 5 times for the nebula -  
alas he has not yet won it, but he did win  
the World Fantasy Award for his novella  
BLACK AIR. He also won The Phillip K. Dick  
memorial award for THE WILD SHORE.

His latest book is THE MEMORY OF WHITENESS -  
see review on page 4. No doubt Rog will have  
copies of these books, plus his other novel  
ICEHENGE, available at the signing session.

For the future he has a short story collection  
called PLANET ON THE TABLE due out sometime  
later this year.

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This newsletter was produced by Carol and Tony  
Morton, 45, Grosvenor Way, Quarry Bank,  
Brierley Hill, West Midlands, DY5 2LJ.  
Deadline for next month's newsletter is 4th July

FIFTEENCON-THE FINAL UPDATE by Bernie Evans.

Membership is still rising, although far too many are still waiting until the last minute, but enough of my complaints, you want news don't you?? We now have appearances confirmed by Anne McCaffrey, Bob Shaw, Brian Aldiss, Harry Harrison, Jack Cohen, Ramsey Campbell, Shaun Hutson and others. In addition to which we have the joint party with Andromeda on the Friday night, complete with cake, and we intend to have a few silly games throughout the weekend. As the heading implies, there will be no more updates in the newsletter, the only way to know any more is to read P.R.2, to be issued very soon. TO MEMBERS OF FIFTEENCON ONLY!!!

I have recently recieved a short letter from John Brunner, in my capacity as Fifteencon chairman, which I think will be of interest to all group members, part of which I have therefore reproduced here.

"John Brunner reports with heavy heart that his beloved Marjorie suffered a stroke on 14th April 1986. Her recovery, if she is fortunate enough to make one, will certainly be a matter of many weeks and could take months or even years.

12th July will be our 28th Wedding Anniversary. I doubt whether I would be in much of a mood to enjoy the Brum Group party even if I could spare the time to come. But say hello to everyone on my behalf. "

As many of you will already know, Pauline Morgan bought a card on behalf of the Group, which was signed by as many members as possible, and was then posted off the day after the last meeting. At the meeting we also had a collection, which raised in excess of £13.00. This was used to send via "Interflora" a large bowl of plants to John and Marjorie. Plants were chosen rather than flowers as they last longer, and give years of pleasure. I am sure you are all with me in wishing Marjorie a speedy recovery, and many good years in which to enjoy her plants.

LAST MONTH'S MEETING. A report by Bernie Evans.

Last month was a departure from what has lateley been the norm, and I was pleasantly surprised by the attendance. Although, as Chris Morgan pointed out, we really needed to get to the people who WEREN'T there, rather than those who were, we as a committee found it illuminating to listen to the membership's views, and hope to incorporate some of the ideas we were given into future programme items. To those who didn't attend I can only say you missed a golden opportunity to tell us what you want, and can only assume you are already well-satisfied with what is provided.

Whilst the audience didn't take the chance to slaughter the committee, the charades team who played us in the latter part of the meeting did. I didn't make a note of the score, sorry, but we were soundly beaten. It was a lot of fun, and thoroughly enjoyed by all.

U.F.P. Con. 21st Major Star Trek Convention.  
By Paranoid Android.

In keeping with the 20th Anniversary of Star Trek, the 21st Convention was held at the Metropole Hotel in Birmingham; where next the N.E.C.? The hotel was very unsure what to expect on May 2nd with their first Star Trek Con depending on them. By May 5th they had found out with a vengeance. The size of the hotel gave the large number of fans that attended plenty of room to move around in. For the first time at any convention the entire film programme was shown in a proper cinema which gave a much better atmosphere to the weekend.

With the events spread over 6 rooms the guests were kept busy and David Gerrold, at his second British con, not only did a solo guest item and took part in a writers panel, but also ran a writers workshop over the three days. David was ably supported by the American writer Diane Duane. The surprise guest of the convention was John Levine, who happened to be staying in the hotel, and was roped in to do a short talk on the Sunday morning on Dr. Who.

Andromeda was well represented with Rog selling everything in sight, did he really offer to sell the hotel manager? and Dave and Co doing their impression of O.T.T.'S balloon dance at the adult cabaret on the Sunday night.

Jim Pauly and Chinatown did a stirring job on the Friday night and at the Masked Ball which proved very popular. As usual the Star Trek conventions prove to be popular events, and this was no exception. With a hotel that could hold up to 1500 fans comfortably, this could turn out to be a major venue in future years.

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Thankyou this month go to Bernie Evans for her Fifteencon articles, review and report on last month's meeting. Chris and Pauline Morgan for their reviews, also Bethan Davies, Anne Gay and W. A. McCabe for reviews.

A special thankyou to Tim Stannard for letting us use his photocopier to print this newsletter.

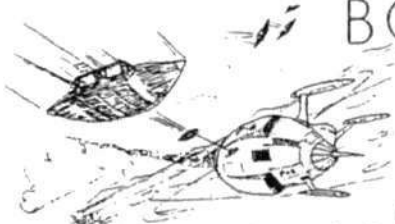
An extra special thankyou to Chris Chivers for letting us borrow his typewriter when ours went phutt.

\* \* \* \* \*

Your Newsletter Editors do apologise for their non-attendance at the May meeting, but circumstances got the better of us, and they resulted in the safe delivery of a Son, Iain James, at the uncivilized hour of 1.03 am Saturday May 17th. Mother and Son are doing well, Dad is doing his best to cope.



# BOOK REVIEWS



THE MEMORY OF WHITENESS by Kim Stanley Robinson, Macdonald, £9.95, 351 pages, reviewed by Pauline Morgan.



Like the title, the book is an enigma. On one level, it is the story of the Grand Tour of the solar system by the Holywelkin Orchestra, an immense construction of all possible instruments played by remote control. In this future, the outer planets and numerous moons and asteroids are lit by whitsuns, an extrapolation made possible by Holywelkin physics; understanding of the universe is as far beyond Einstein as Einstein was beyond Dalton. Yet there is an old fashioned flavour woven into the text. Rules are broken, but it doesn't matter as the overall effect draws the reader in. The mixture of metaphysics, surrealism and poetry make a unique blend. The novel is woven like a complex symphony. Each stop on the Tour is the recurring melody on which variations are based. As Johannes Wright plays, and changes the score at each concert, so the things that happen to and around him form a rich tapestry, sometimes resonant, sometimes discordant. Like music it is extremely difficult to convey the essence of the piece. It must be experienced to be appreciated.

THE BOOK OF THE STARS by Ian Watson, Granada/Grafton, £2.50, 263 pages reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Ian Watson has always written SF for the intelligent reader---for those who are prepared to think about what they read, and who demand more than simple adventure stories. However, it's always good to find a book which possesses an adventure plot as well as considerable depth. Watson's new trilogy, dealing with Yaleen, an engaging young woman, succeeds in combining both these attributes. THE BOOK OF THE STARS, second in the series, is very fast moving, yet it is frequently mind-boggling too, constantly stretching the readers' imagination. Yaleen, born on a distant planet, dies and is reborn more than once, making vast instantaneous journeys along a psychic link light years in length. This is a much more metaphysical novel than its predecessor, THE BOOK OF THE RIVER, also more outrageously clever. Recommended---but read THE BOOK OF THE RIVER first.

A HERITAGE OF STARS by Clifford Simak, Methuen, £2.50 219 pages, reviewed by Anne Gay.

I do like Simak. What with the porches and the rocking chairs, it's all as comforting and comfortable as an old pair of jeans. This one's not like that, but still good and enjoyable, all novel ideas and interesting beings. The hero, Cushing, starts off hoeing potatoes but from there on in, it changes. He finds a Quest, and goes after his goal, meeting a variety of characters and artifacts. A HERITAGE OF STARS leaves you feeling satisfied and positive, with a sense of humanity's continuity. Maybe his faith in mankind is greater than mine, maybe more could have been made of some of the minor characters, but it's still a wonderful book.

THREE GO BACK by J. Leslie Mitchell, Greenhill, £3.95, 254 pages  
reviewed by Dave Packwood.

First published in 1932, THREE GO BACK is a romantic novel which concerns itself with time-travel, anthropology and the idiosyncratic behaviour of (as the title implies) three people thrown together by chance and fate into an uncanny situation.

The story opens when the airship Magellan's Cloud crashes leaving Dr. Keith Sinclair, Sir John Mullaghan and Clair Stranlay stranded in the terra incognita of prehistoric times. Presently, they begin to realise what has happened, and, more pertinently what their predicament entails, for everything points towards them being in a year between thirty and twenty thousand years B.C., their only companions being ancestors of the French Cro-Magnards.

From here on the novel steadily loses credence with Proto-Cro Magnon Man offering the hand of love to twentieth Century English middle-class woman - I'm afraid that I just can't accept Mitchell's idealization of primitive man, the noble savage.

My attitude towards this book is, to say the least, ambivalent. As an exciting, rattling good yarn of time-travel to prehistoric times it succeeds - to a point; but this is only through the author's intelligent and imaginative use of words and techniques in English. This can't carry the book alone and, alas, as the novel progresses the action flags: Mitchell substitutes short lucidly descriptive scenes for philosophical meanderings on 'the origin of the species', God and Man, inter alia. This is a great pity, for with a greater degree of self-control and discipline, THREE GO BACK could have been a more than pedestrian work. Still the purple passages could be used as exercises for practical criticism in schools.

THE INNER HOUSE by Walter Besant, Greenhill, £7.95, 199 pages, reviewed by W. A. McCabe.

This is the first of a series of SF novels from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries chosen by Brian Stableford. The difference between that era and this is, because it came before mass-markets and classified fiction, that the novel had to stand up as a novel rather than an idea. This book probably stood up well in it's own time (1893) but as SF or a modern novel it still falls very flat.

The background is simple, sometime in the late 19th century a famous scientist discovers a means of prolonging life indefinitely and decides to give the secret to the world. The plot skips to a future that contains the youth of this time at the same ages they had at the Discovery. The new age is a kind of 'socialist' paradise in which everyone acts and dresses the same. A small group are trying to re-establish the old values of 'individualism' and gentility of the Victorian ruling class but they face heavy opposition in the form of Sam Grout the ruler of this little kingdom (less than 300 people), a brewers boy from the Mile End Road who believes a return to the Past would produce the poverty and disease that it had before. Somehow the story manages to put the case for both sides evenly despite the fact that it is apparently narrated by Grout who is supposedly a malicious radical.

There is a great many flaws. Much is made of the fact that the immortality treatment is a secret but, from the introduction, it was supposedly made known to everyone and, everyone has had (or still is receiving) the treatment. All the characters in the story act as if their community (of less than 300) is all that remains of the world but this is never confirmed or explained.

The one thing that grates more than anything else is, because society is based on Victorian ideals both of the social ideals seem distasteful whereas one was probably better presented for the people of it's time.

A member of the von Bek family, a soldier by profession, journeys to the fantasy lands of the Mittelmarch and has contact with both the Devil and the holy grail. If this sounds a little familiar it is because THE CITY IN THE AUTUMN STARS is a continuation of the saga begun in THE WAR HOUND AND THE WORLD'S PAIN (1981). It is some 150 years later, and the young Manfred von Bek escapes from the Paris Reign of Terror following the French Revolution. He travels to Lausanne, Vienna, Prague, and on to the great fictional Slavic city of Mirenburg. Behind him, perhaps in pursuit, comes Montsorbier of the Committee of Public Safety, von Bek's enemy. Along the way von Bek meets others who are to play important roles in his destiny: Libussa the Duchess of Crete, St Odhran a Scottish Balloonist, and the mysterious Klosterheim, sometime servant of the Devil.

This may be a continuation of theme and family, but THE CITY IN THE AUTUMN STARS is a very different book to its predecessor. It is much less overtly fantastic (at least, for its first two thirds) and more heavily philosophical. It is a far more solid piece of work, full of historical allusions and political arguments. One gets the feeling that a great deal of scholarship has gone into its writing. All of which might sound off-putting to the fantasy fan, though in fact the novel is big enough to contain a great deal of action and excitement too. There is von Bek's passionate affair with Libussa; there is considerable wit in the dialogue; there are fascinatingly odd characters on every page; there are two of the best set-piece action scenes in all of Moorcock's work.

Here is a mature and stunningly competent Moorcock, weaving politics and religious mysticism into a glorious tapestry of late-18th century historical fantasy.

XAN. by Patrick Tilley. Grafton Books, £2.50, 332 pages, reviewed by Bernie Evans.

The book opens with an alien being in trouble, needing a source of energy before it can continue its journey. Guess the energy source!! After this short prologue we find ourselves in the company of a typical American family on vacation, about to visit an old friend who lives in a small and fairly isolated community. It is the sort of small American town where strangers are not liked, so the odd behaviour of the locals is not unduly disturbing to the family, until their small son disappears. They are offered no help, quite the opposite, and discover this is only one of many such disappearances. The father and his friend are a scientist and an ex-scientist turned S.F. writer, who begin to suspect the reason for the disappearances, but who are hampered by officialdom. One fairly unusual aspect to the book, considering the type of story, is that the leading female character, the mother, is a fighter, not the more usual simpering foil for masculine strength to be shown at its best. I'm afraid this book didn't work for me. The story was a mere variant of many I've read before, and the characters just didn't come to life. I just couldn't work up any sympathy, or anger, or hope, or fear. I simply read the story, and it didn't seem real, or even probable. Unless you want to kill a couple of hours pleasantly, without having to think too hard, don't bother to buy it.



DRAGONSPANE by Barbara Hambly, Unicorn (Unwin Paperbacks), £2.95, 292 pages, reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

Gareth of Magloshaldon travelled north in search of his hero, Lord John Aversin, Dragonslayer. The man he was expecting to find is a myth, woven by ballad makers. Gareth discovers John standing ankle deep in mud discoursing about pigs. Disillusioned but desperate, Gareth persuades John to go south with him to try and rid the country-side of the Black Dragon, Morkeleb. With them goes Jenny Waynest, a witch and the mother of John's children.

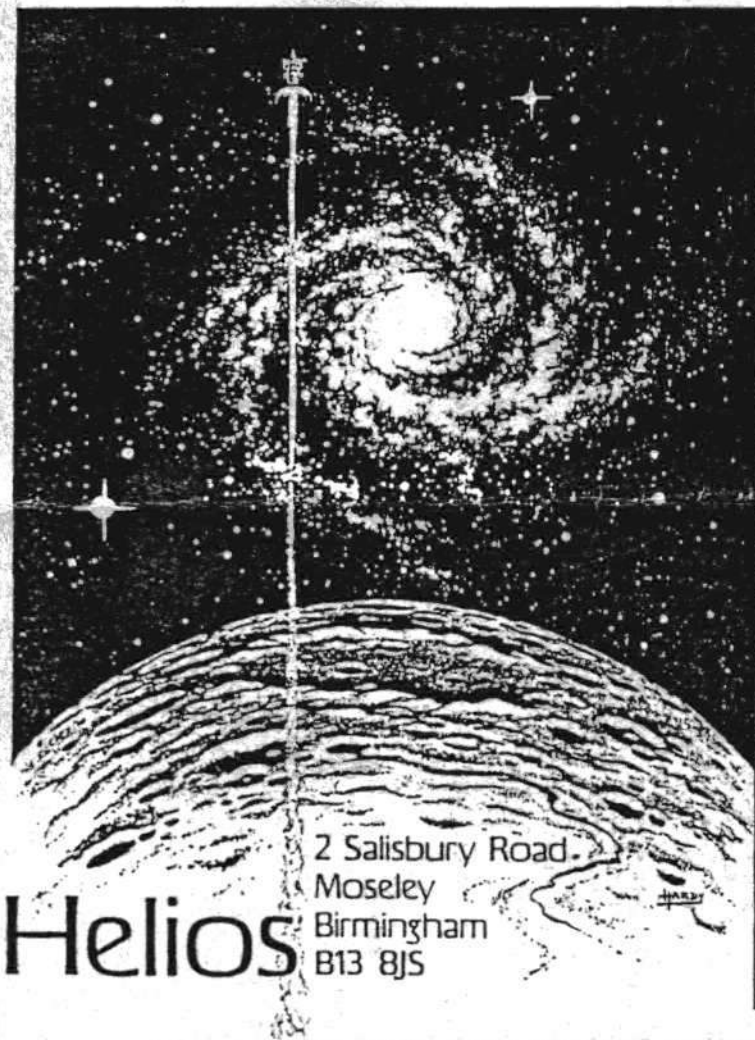
There are similarities in the working of magic and the feel of this fantasy world between this and the author's DARWATH TRILOGY and this novel could easily be set in a corner of that universe. The story is about ordinary people who reluctantly perform heroic deeds and thus it is easy to identify with the characters. It will be enjoyed by fantasy lovers everywhere.

THE NIGHT OF THE SCORPION by Anthony Horowitz, Magnet, £1.75, 159 pages, reviewed by Bethan Davies.

This is a children's book, and it is so average, there is little to say about it. There are a few relatively interesting elements, such as the weaving in of the Incas, the Nazca lines and the Mad Monk of Cordova into the plot. The plot itself is very simple, and fairly predicatable. The book involves the idea of 'gates' through which the old ones (baddies!) can enter the world. In the first book, the 'hero' Martin Hopkins destroyed one gate in Britain and goes on to destroy a gate in Peru in this book, but of course, Horowitz makes the ending indecisive so that he will be able to stretch the already thin plot into the almost obligatory trilogy. The standard of writing is reasonable, although Horowitz has an unfortunate tendency to over-do it in places. My main complaint is that the characterisation is non-existent and I couldn't have given a damn what happened to any of the 'people' in this book. The novel also tries to be a thriller, with people standing on window ledges (original eh!), lots of chases and guns. You get the feeling the author is trying desperately to throw all these 'modern' elements such as drugs to attract readers - he should't have bothered. If the people quoted in the blurb seriously think this book is "imaginative" or "compelling" I would hate to read anything they thought was boring.

TOM O'BEDLAM by Robert Silverberg, Gollancz, £9.95, 320 pages, reviewed by Chris Morgan.

In his latest novel Robert Silverberg returns to a kind of transcendental mysticism that has figured several times in his past work, most notably in SON OF MAN. It is the early 22nd century, in an America where east and west coasts are separate entities, divided by radioactive wastelands. In California, where this story is set, is some advanced technological gadgetry but also much poverty. A new religion springs up to give poor people the hope of a better afterlife. Connected with this are peculiar dreams of alien planets, that seem to be occurring to more and more people all the time. Characterisation is first rate, but the plot rolls on with an awful inevitability to provide an easily anticipated but unsatisfying conclusion. Much of the book is entertaining, with some brilliant passages. It's a flawed gem---worth trying.



**YOU** are invited to have a glass of wine with **DAVID HARDY** on the Opening Day of his Exhibition entitled **THE ART OF SCIENCE FICTION** at the **HELIOS GALLERY**, Moseley (by the Alcester Road / Salisbury Road traffic lights) on Saturday 14 June 1986, from 12.30pm onward.

This Exhibition, of paintings and illustrations produced over the last few years, has been organised to coincide with the 15th ANNIVERSARY of the **BIRMINGHAM SCIENCE FICTION GROUP**.

*The Exhibition runs from 14 June to 19 July, Monday to Saturday, 9.45am to 6.00pm.*

Please ring 449 7301 for more details of the Exhibition, or 777 1802 for information on the Birmingham Science Fiction Group.

2 Salisbury Road.  
Moseley  
Birmingham  
B13 8JS

**Helios**