

Birmingham Science Fiction Group

Honorary Presidents : Brian W. Aldiss
and Harry Harrison

NEWSLETTER 185

FEBRUARY 1987



THE BSFG MEETS ON THE
THIRD FRIDAY OF EACH
MONTH IN THE LABROKE
INTERNATIONAL HOTEL,
NEW STREET, IN THE
CENTRE OF BIRMINGHAM.
DETAILS OF THIS MONTH'S
MEETING ARE GIVEN
OPPOSITE.

MEMBERSHIP OF THE
GROUP COSTS A MERE £5.50
PER YEAR FOR ONE PERSON
£8.00 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 MID'S.

THIS MONTH'S MEETING - 20 th Feb..

When our special AGM Extension Meeting collapsed, we had to do some quick thinking about a replacement programme. However our new Chairman, Dave Hardy, went to a SF Day School in Oxford recently (it was advertised in your newsletter) he made a note to ask one of the lecturers there if he would come and talk to the Brum Group. Fortunately, he is free on 20th, so we are glad to welcome

DR BOB LAMBOURNE

WITH AN ILLUSTRATED TALK ENTITLED

TECHNO-FICTION !

Bob (Dr. R.J.A.Lambourne to his friends) makes science programmes for the Open University, but is a keen SF reader and gives a very entertaining talk, illustrated with slides and an overhead projector ; it also involves some audience participation (not compulsory, but if you think you know your SF quotations...).

The name may be new to you, but this promises to be an evening NOT TO BE MISSED, so do come along.

B.S.F.G. COMMITTEE FOR 1987.

With the Publicity Officer position appointment going to 'volunteer' Mick Evans, the 1987 Committee is as follows ;

CHAIRMAN : Dave Hardy - 99, Southam Road, Hall Green, Birmingham, B28 0AB.

TREASURER : Chris Chivers - 51, Boundary Road, Streetly, Sutton Coldfield, West Midlands, B74 2JR.

NEWSLETTER EDITOR : Tony Morton - 45, Grosvenor Way, Quarry Bank, Brierley Hill, West Midlands, DY5 2LJ.

NOVACON17 CHAIRMAN : Bernie Evans - 7, Grove Avenue, Acocks Green, Birmingham, B27 7UY.

PUBLICITY OFFICER: Mick Evans - 7, Grove Avenue, Acocks Green, Birmingham, B27 7UY.

ORDINARY MEMBERS : Carol Morton - 45, Grosvenor Way, Quarry Bank, Brierley Hill, West Midlands, DY5 2LJ.
: one vacancy

As yet the Group has no SECRETARY with no nominations received or from the floor at the A.G.M.. This is an important position and must be filled. Please consider yourself and when you decide to volunteer contact Dave Hardy at the above address - remember it's YOUR Group.

NOTICE : If anyone requires a table at meetings (for instance to sell books) a charge of £1 is to be levied for this facility.
A charge of 50p will be made if selling from a suitcase.

If you have any news, articles, artwork (especially artwork) or opinions which you feel are suitable for inclusion in newsletters, please send them along to Tony Morton at the above address, or at meetings. If you are willing to review books for the newsletter could you contact me at this month's meeting, also if you feel that a book/film necessitates comment again let me know. Contributions for the Members' Soapbox (see paragraph three of 'Dave's Page') should be handed to the newsletter editor at the Group meetings.

ANDROMEDA'S TOP TEN

JANUARY

1. The Postman by David Brin
2. Dr. Who - Slipback by Eric Seward
3. The Light Fantastic by Terry Pratchett
4. Wizards and Warriors by Hugh Cook
5. The Colour of Magic by Terry Pratchett
6. Artifact by Gregory Benford
7. Groa's Other Eye by Dennis Schmidt
8. The Practice Effect by David Brin
- 9=. Sundiver by David Brin
- 9=. V- Alien Swordmaster by Somtow Sucharitkul

THE 1987 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

For the benefit of those unable to attend, due to the weather or other reasons, here is a resume of certain items discussed at the AGM which, it was agreed, need further discussion. Notice was given that the February meeting will therefore be a continuation of this discussion, in order to resolve it as quickly as possible. A copy of the full Minutes is available by writing to Dave Hardy.

1. Under 'Any Other Buisness', it was asked whether the Committee confirm or deny a rumour that there will be no Novacon 18 in 1988. This came as something of a bombshell to many of those present, but Rog Peyton explained that a World Fantasycon will be held on Halloween weekend 1988 (29/30th October), while it was believed that the committee of Mexican intend to hold their Con on either the weekend before or after, in Nottingham, in order to take advantage of big-name authors who will be in the country. If the weekend after, this would be 5/6 November, which is traditionally the weekend of Novacon. The date for Novacon is, however, quite flexible around the 1st November.

Since then, Rog has spoken to Greg Pickersgill, one of the original Mexican committee. This committee is always consulted on future Mexican policy, and Greg stated that there is no way he would ever go along with a date which clashed with Novacon. He was quite keen on the idea of a 50:50 'NovaMex' (etc), if the idea were ever mooted, but added that it was far too early to even talk about this yet.

So, it seems that the whole matter was rather a case of making a volcano out of a molehill (we won't mention who the 'mole' was), and we will have to arrange a proper meeting for February at short notice - see page 1 for details. There is, however, one other proposal left over from the AGM, on which we shall vote (as quickly as possible) :

2. A second motion, by Vernon Brown (seconded by Rog Peyton) is that "Donations outside the field of SF must be voted on by the whole group".

And now in view of all this talk about conventions, here is our

CON GUIDE '87

The newcomer to SF fandom often asks "What is a con, and why should I go?" Cons are many things to many people, but in general a con is a weekend-long party (Friday night to Sunday night - sometimes longer), with programme events for those who want them. These consist of films, talks, slide-shows, quizzes, debates, etc. There is also a Book Room full of dealers offering a range of merchandise - from the oldest mags to the latest publications, as well as other items. There is an Art Show, auctions of books and artwork (often at ridiculous prices), and there may be a disco, fancy dress masquerade - even a barn dance - on Saturday night.

But for many fans a con centres around the BAR, where they meet old friends, drink, make new friends, drink, continue discussions (which may become heated arguments) started at previous cons. It is also a chance to meet your favourite author, artist or other professional, and get him/her to sign the books you buy. For many fans, pros and cons go together.

CONVENTIONS ORGANISED FOR 1987 include :

BECCON - 17-20 April, at NEC Birmingham, G.O.H. - Keith Roberts.

contact: Beccon, 191 The Heights, Northolt, Middlesex UB5 4 BU.

A con organised in aid of Children in Need - 18 April, at The New Imperial Hotel, 'T.V.' con on early '60's television SF plus surprise guests - £18.

contact: P. Banezis, 132 Cambridge Drive, Marston Green.

CONNOTE 8 - 3-5 July, at New Hall, Cambridge, G.O.H. - Geraldine Harris, £8

contact: Connote 8, Trinity College, Cambridge CB2 1TQ.

CONSPIRACY '87 - 27 Aug. - 1 Sept., at Brighton, G.O.H. - Doris Lessing, Alfred Bester, Arkady & Boris Strugatsky, Ray Harryhausen, etc. £25

contact: Conspiracy '87, PO Box 43, Cambridge CB1 3JJ.

NOVACON 17 - 30 Oct. - 1 Nov., at The Royal Angus Hotel, Birmingham, G.O.H. - Iain Banks, £8.

contact: Mick Evans, 7 Grove Avenue, Acocks Green, Birmingham B27 7UY.



Dave's Page

(Or, A Letter From Your Chairman)

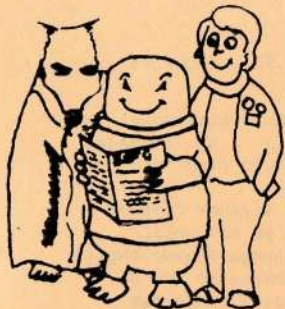
No, this isn't another case of 'a new broom sweeps clean'. After all, I'm quite an old broom really - as I said at the AGM, I was Chairman in 1979, when we had a Worldcon in Britain (and also in 1980 and 1981, which incidentally is a Group record for consecutive terms of ~~punishment~~ chairmanship. I'm nothing if not hardy...) I've also served several terms as Publicity Officer and Secretary.

However, I do want to introduce one or two items, initially with the help of our Newsletter Editor. With all the brouhaha about Novacon 18, plus this being Worldcon year, it seems a good idea to bring out a Con Guide, which may help newcomers to understand what the rest of us are talking about, and to decide where and when to take the plunge themselves. (Imagine one's first con being a Worldcon!) We intend to update this from time to time, so if you know of any obscure (or important) conventions we may have missed, please let us know. New members joining the Group will be given the latest Con Guide, along with other items, in a 'Membership Pack'.

From the next issue on, one page will be devoted to a sort of 'Group Fanzine'. This will be YOUR page: it's your chance to get into print your comments, gripes, information, reviews of books you've enjoyed (or hated), articles on pet subjects (provided they are somehow SF-related), artwork, cartoons - even fiction, as long as it will fit on one page. The Editor, and if necessary, Committee, will have final say on what is published, but please note: THE COMMITTEE WILL NOT FILL THIS PAGE. If we don't get any contributions, there will be a BLANK PAGE in your Newsletter. If this happens, don't complain - help fill it!

With a membership of 72 there must be more than enough talent out there to fill the page many times over. Which brings me to the question of holes in the Committee. No, we're not falling apart, but we may do if the positions of Secretary and Publicity Officer are not filled very soon. The Group cannot continue to function satisfactorily with a Committee of only five. Apart from the actual duties involved - see below - we need new blood, to join in discussions on the management of your Group. All that's required is a few hours each month. The Secretary's main job (since I tend to write my own letters) is to take notes at each monthly Committee Meeting, type them up in coherent form, and send them out to each Committee member within a week; so he/she needs access to a typewriter or word processor. The Publicity Officer should be able to get into the City to ensure that posters and notices advertising the Group and meetings (don't forget that we expect some big names this year) are placed in suitable shops, libraries, etc. He/she will also try to arrange publicity on radio, TV and in the local rags, but will always have the back-up of other committee members who have more experience. Above all, we need IDEAS.

So come on - you get many hours of pleasure from the Group each year; surely you can offer a few hours of your own time to ensure that this continues. It's hardly fair to expect the rest of this year's depleted Committee to shoulder the load - now is it? Don't let the Group grind to a halt - and don't assume that we will manage somehow without you, or that 'someone will do it'. The ball's in YOUR court - and you may even find that you enjoy playing instead of spectating!



BOOK REVIEWS

Anthology by Piers Anthony, Grafton, 432pages, £2.95
Reviewed by Margaret Thorpe.

Piers Anthony is perhaps best known for his Xanth series, so this collection of 21 short stories may come as a surprise to his fans. However the humour remains in several of the stories, peppered with shots of Anthony's pungent comments on editors and editorial policy which in themselves make highly entertaining reading.

The stories include previews of two of his novels, 'Prostho Plus' and 'Ghost' and Anthony's attempts to enter other SF markets, namely porn and horror: the latter carry suitably amusing health warnings by the author. Excellent value for money.

The Watcher by Jane Palmer, The Womans Press, 177pages, £2.50
reviewed by Bethan Davies.

I must admit I was pleasantly surprised by this one. It's well written, I wouldn't say it was compelling, but it's enjoyable enough. The plot is rather involved, it starts at a planet called Ojal where the bird-like inhabitants are hermaphrodites and extremely intelligent beings whose planet is being attacked by a 'star dancer' which is absorbing all their life giving energy resources. They send a robot (the Kybion) to the planet where the 'star dancer' originates which is (surprise, surprise) Earth. The story then continues with four Victorian humans to whom the Kybion gives longevity to help him find the star dancer. The action is then brought up to the present day, with the story taking on some of the attributes of a thriller. The plot is wound up satisfactorily, it is not predictable although not particularly inventive, but it suffices.

If you should pick up this book, don't read the blurb, it is awful, enough to put anyone off the story - it reiterates the fact that the people who write these things do not read the book very carefully.

Brightness Falls From The Air by James Tiptree Jr., Sphere, £3.50, 327pages
reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

Seven years is far too long to wait between novels from this talented writer. Both this and that first novel (Up The Walls of the World) are set on alien planets with the natural history of the indigenous species convincingly worked out. Both books concern change but here the similarities end. This planet, Daniem, was once the scene of some of the most horrible and barbaric acts imaginable. Now it is the only place where the remnants of a nova explosion can be seen as a magnificent autal display as they pass through the planet's atmosphere. The source of the nova is also a source of tragedy and so, it turns out, is its passing. The interaction between the small group of humans that gather to watch is superbly handled. The immediacy of the action is enhanced by the unobtrusive use of present tense throughout. Very highly recommended.

Footfall by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle , Sphere , £3.95 , 700pages
reviewed by Tony Morton.

Niven and Pournelle have created a niche an SF with the blockbuster novel (Lucifer's Hammer, The Mote in God's Eye, etc.) and Footfall , at 700 pages falls into this category. It is a story of alien invasion told from both viewpoints ; that of human and the invading fifthp. Initial contact is made, unknowingly to humans, during the Voyager flypast of Saturn where the alien vessel, Message Bearer, lies. It is not until 15 years later however that the truth is realised, when Message Bearer begins its approach to Earth. Ideologists decide to meet the newcomers in space on a Russian space station, as a friendly gesture. This proves misguided as the aliens destroy the station and move on to Earth. Will Earth 'surrender' do we know how ?

With Washington and Moscow reaction well documented, the story is very believable. The attempts to take over Earth, the use of the 'Foot' (hence the title) to subdue mankind and 'our' reaction are all first rate. I particularly liked the handling of the alien viewpoint and their reaction to mankind's response.

Like all Niven/Pournelle books, well worthy of a read, although I found the end a slight anti-climax after a wonderful (and gripping) build up- my initial reaction was "what happened to Michael?".

I enjoyed the book and the backgrounds set up to tell the story, the characters are alive and believable. RECOMMENDED.

The Centauri Device by M.John Harrison , Orion , £2.95 ,
reviewed by Chris Chivers.

In the halfbreed John Truck, M.John Harrison has created the character of a total loser. A drifter, bum and alround dreg of humanity, Truck holds the key to a last ditch weapon in his genes. As one of the few living remnants of the Centaureans that were defeated in an interstellar war, Truck suddenly gets caught up in a desperate conflict between the Israeli World Government and the Union of Arab Socialist Republics for control of the doomsday weapon that has been discovered below the surface of the Centauran home world.

Truck's journey takes him through the slums of the universe, worlds that are inhabited by drug addicts, anarchists and the general flotsam of humanity to the final destination of his journey.

M.John Harrison's book has been chosen as one of the best 100 SF novels, however I feel that the novel falls short of this accolade. The story jumps from planet to planet with disjointed steps it follows Truck in his attempt to outwit his pursuers, and in the epilogue there is an attempt to tidy up the loose ends, as the narrator tells us that this is not solely fiction but a dramatized account of a major upheaval in the universe. But M.John Harrison doesn't quite grasp the style properly and leaves the story not quite living up to expectations.

The Two of Them by Joanna Russ, Womens Press, 181 pages, £2.25
Reviewed by Helena Bowles.

Irene, a 1950's teenage runaway landed upon Ernst Newman, a Trans Temp agent in a bid for freedom from her suffocating world of Polish middle-class suburbia. Now an agent herself and Newman's lover, they are assigned to Ala-ed-deen, a world resembling a hi-tech ancient Persia. She rescues Zubeydeh, A 12 year old aspirant to the rank of poet - denied to her because of her sex. So far so good. However, after a fairly intriguing start the story tails off into a welter of confused emotions and, I'm afraid, Irene comes across more paranoid than wronged by her partner. Her motivation is difficult to understand, especially her murdering Newman - at which point the only emotion I felt was irritation. Nonetheless, as would be expected from Russ, the standard of writing is good and the characters well drawn (at least in the first half of the book).

Maggots by Edward Jarvis, Arrow, £1.95, 235 pages, reviewed by Dave Packwood

This book seems to be aimed at the Shaun Hutson corner of the horror market; that is to say that it is a book chock-a-block with descriptions of terrible eldritch horrors. Maggots is strewn with corpses gushing forth gore; extremely lurid descriptions of skin being ripped to ribbons; characters that are not so much wooden as cardboard.

I found Maggots to be absolutely incredible in its banality; quite simply a dreadful book and I suspect even Shaun couldn't pen such bilge as this (sorry, Shaun). One is led to believe that beneath the Earth's crust - in the asthenosphere, to be precise - lurk maggots whose prime source of energy seems to be oil. The solution to eliminate the maggots is to destroy their power source; this of course is impossible so a gun is fixed up that will emit "infrasonic" sound waves that will destroy the maggots, an idea which seems both ludicrous and scientifically implausible. With due respect to Mr. Jarvis, it would be better for all concerned if he were to lay down his pen and not to write about maggots but to go fishing using maggots themselves for bait. That way he would not inflict his asinine, fatuous, illiterate dreck on the public at large.

Strike a blow for good taste and good writing - leave this book on the shelf.

The Silver Metal Lover by Tanith Lee, Orion, £2.95, 240 pages, reviewed by Bethan Davies.

This book has a futuristic setting, concerning a 'poor little rich girl' who has an extremely liberated mother, and who has fallen in love with a very human robot. Tanith Lee explores the world she has created with subtle humour, and her futuristic scene is very convincing. The romance between Jane and Silver is sensitively portrayed, and as it is supposedly written by Jane, her confusion caused by 'first love' would appeal especially to the teenage audience. It is very tastefully done, well written, and the ending isn't even predictable. Definately for the uncynical.

The Silver Metal Lover by Tanith Lee, Orion, £2.95, 240 pages, reviewed by Dave Packwood.

Tanith Lee has a clear, pellucid style of writing, almost antiseptic and clinical at times; indeed, this novel fairly shines with Lee's beautiful polished gems of prose. For all that, I can't say that I enjoyed it: it was too perfect, and dare I say it, a little twee.

My main bone of contention would be the plot, or to be more precise, the absence of one. What started out as a good idea seemed to degenerate and regress into a series of beautiful images linked by the slight semblance of a storyline. Still, I would be derelict in my duty of reviewer if I did not set down essentially what the novel is about.

The Silver Metal Lover is set in a futuristic and hedonistic world where one is either poor or extremely rich (like the protagonist Jane, in the latter respect), and where robots threaten to steal employment from humans. The novel concerns itself with Jane's love affair with a robotic Adonis, S.I.L.V.E.R. (Silver Ionized Locomotive Verisimulated Electronic Robot). Jane, in a naive way falls for S.I.L.V.E.R. - much against the wishes of her dominant mother - and elopes with him/it to "The Arbors", the other side of the tracks. S.I.L.V.E.R. and Jane contrive to support themselves by busking in the streets - Jane has a serious cashflow problem due to her mother cutting off her allowance.

As an indication of the book's lack of narrative momentum I will say that this does not occur until approximately halfway through the novel. Don't get me wrong; I admire Tanith Lee (anyone who can write the scripts "Sand" and "Sarcophagus" can't be all bad) but I feel that this book will lose a lot of readers by about page 150 because Lee is not disciplined in her approach to the story, and as a consequence the novel increases in superficiality and decreases in interest. I must add, however that I found the cover both luscious and gorgeous to behold; it's a pity that I couldn't work up the same enthusiasm for the novel per se.

The Phoenix Legacy: Book One: SWORD OF THE LAMB by M.K.Wren, NEL, £2.95, 436 pages, reviewed by Helena Bowles.

It is refreshing to find an American book that does not treat America as the centre of the world. Set in the 33rd century, it is based upon the politics of the ruling oligarchy, of whom Alexand is the teenage heir to the House of DeKovan Wolf. The book spans nine years in the lives of himself, his sensitive crippled brother (which should be a cliché, but isn't), and his betrothed, Adrien Eliseer. The plot is well handled and the characters convincing. The book does carry a lot of excess wordage but surprisingly this does not irritate. My only complaint is that the story seems to have been intended to end on page 327 and the next 109 pages tacked on to provide a lead into the next book. This unfortunately blunts the impact of the tragic (and highly satisfying) logical ending. Nonetheless, I highly recommend this as an antidote to all blood'n'guts Future Empire epics.

The Phoenix Legacy: Book One: SWORD OF THE LAMB by M.K.Wren, NEL, £2.95, 436 pages, reviewed by Chris Chivers.

M.K.Wren's Sword of the Lamb is part one of The Phoenix Legacy and the 436 pages will put it in the same league as the Dune saga purely for the size of the book if nothing else.

The novel deals with the collapse of the Peladeen Republic as it is overthrown by the Pan Terra Confederation. A thousand years after the nuclear holocaust on Earth, the Confederation has rebuilt Earth and made for itself an interstellar empire, but the seeds of its own destruction have already been sown, as the Confederation is a semi feudal system with the major industrial barons forming the elite.

From this background came the two sons of Phillip DeKovan Wolf, Alexand and Rich. The story unfolds as the two sons grow up and their lives help to shape the future of the Confederation. Secretly Rich has become the leader of the Society of the Phoenix, an underground organisation dedicated to the overthrow of the Confederation.

The novel has a large and fairly complex plot that will need several volumes to unfold all its details. The Sword of the Lamb as an introduction to the saga could have been more compact and still given the same detail, and it may need several readings to understand all of its complexities. A somewhat unwieldy but still a fairly enjoyable read.

The Phoenix Legacy: Book Two: SHADOW OF THE SWAN by M.K.Wren, NEL, £2.95, 338 pages, reviewed by Helena Bowles.

Not so much 'book two' as "the middle of the story" as this picks up where SWORD OF THE LAMB left off (though I still feel the last 20 odd pages of book one should be the first 20 odd of book two). The Lord Alexand de Koven Wolf is dead and Commander Alex Ransom, head of Phoenix navy is in his place. However, the capture of the figurehead of the Phoenix Society by the police precipitates a schism in the organisation. Alex is tortured by SSB interrogators for three months and then, as if Ms. Wren hadn't done enough to him, he learns that his beloved of 10 years is to be betrothed to the cruel and callous Karlis Selasis, there is no way to stop the marriage and that she will probably end up as dead as Karlis's first wife. Good, gripping stuff this (and better read than explained). I recommend this trilogy highly. I found them most entertaining and the most exciting books I've read in about five years.

Thank you's this month go to : Margaret Thorpe; Bethan Davies; Pauline Morgan; Chris Chivers; Helena Bowles; Dave Packwood; Dave Hardy for his articles; Bernie Evans for con news; Tim Stannard for use of his photocopier; and John Dell.

This newsletter was produced by Tony Morton : deadline for March newsletter is Fri.6th March at the address on page 2.