

# Birmingham Science Fiction Group

Honorary Presidents : Brian W. Aldiss  
and Harry Harrison

## NEWSLETTER 186

MARCH 1987



THE BSFG MEETS ON THE  
THIRD FRIDAY OF EACH  
MONTH IN THE LADBROKE  
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 :FRIDAY 20th MARCH

Well, this month's meeting could be entitled -

### "THE AUTHOR THAT NEVER WAS"

The author in question - **JONATHAN WYLIE** -

is in fact an evenings entertainment with  
Mark Smith and Julia Ethell who ar SF and  
Fantasy editors at Corgi.

We welcome them to the BSFG to launch their  
exciting new trilogy, SERVANTS OF THE ARK,  
with book one THE FIRST NAMED published on  
the day of the meeting as a special event  
and signing session.

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This newsletter was produced by Tony Morton,  
45, Grosvenor Way, Quarry Bank, Brierley  
Hill, West Midlands, DY5 2LJ.

Deadline for next month's newsletter is  
28th March.

## LAST MONTH'S MEETING.

So this was it! The FIRST official meeting at the new venue. What better way to kick off than a Techno-Fiction talk given to us by Dr. Bob Lambourne. An entertaining talk and evening began with him outlining his oratory and then it was 'on with the show'.

" - What is science based SF? A catch-all title describing not all SF; science based SF uses science (real or imagined) in an internally self-consistent way which doesn't conflict with 'known' scientific views - and if it does an explanation of the new principles is included. These explanations will help the reader to be convinced of what is going on in an effort to make the story plausible.

- How is science used and who writes it? Science enters SF in five basic ways;

- (I) Based on contemporary scientific knowledge (as in Brightside Crossing or A Fall of Moondust).
- (II) Invented Environments that are 'scientifically reasonable' (Ringworld/Integral Trees/Dragon's Egg).
- (III) A device or discovery of a scientific nature (Asimov's positronic brain in the Robot Series, also Cities in Flight/Fountains of Paradise)
- (IV) Where the scientific environments or devices form a background - (Dune/Lensmen/Foundation series's)
- (V) Where the scientific process is of importance (The Andromeda Strain/The Black Cloud).

Here a question from the floor interrupted the proceedings when it was pointed out that many SF novels include the 'soft' sciences which Dr. Bob has not allocated into his theory. Dr. Bob then clarified his position by categorising Physics, Chemistry, Astronomy and Technology based SF as 'hard' science and so included in his theory (he is biased of course towards his own fields) rather than the 'soft' sciences. Explaining advancement was easier, he felt, in 'hard' science rather than 'soft'. He then continued....

" - What problems for the author? This can be divided into two categories;

- (a) The author must supply the reader with enough background to enable them to understand the story. This can be handled in several ways
  1. 'Get it over quickly' - avoiding too much technical data.
  2. The 'Tell me Professor' approach which can slip into gobbledegook.
  3. Encyclopedia Galactica referenced in parts of the book equating to the story.
  4. A Technical Appendix - though when to read this can cause problems.
- (b) The author can engage his time on a research programme (or better still, get someone else to do it!). Hence gaining useful insights into the workings of his environment. Good examples are Clement's Mission of Gravity (the 'seasons' calculations for the planet Mesklin) and Niven and Pournelle's Ringworld (the stability of the world) with a bad example being Burroughs's Pirates of Venus (for it's errors).

- What science is used? Mechanics- forces/energy ie spin gravity; Celestial Mechanics- interplanetary flight: Electromagnetism/Classical field theory- force fields: Acoustics/optics- ie sound eater, slow glass.: Quantum theory- Parallel worlds, death ray lasers: Nuclear particle/elementary physics-neutrons/tachyons: Molecules/Matter: Thermodynamics- The Gods Themselves: Biophysics/ Cybernetics: Geophysics- holocaust/catastrophy: Astrophysics- Neutron stars, black holes: Relativity/cosmology- Tau Zero, Clash of Cymbals. Hence, most science (largely physics) is represented, but patchily.

- Do they get it right? Most stories don't contain enough science to allow detailed technical criticism- though this allows you to read and enjoy books without spoiling the enjoyment by being picky. However, some ideas can be criticised: Teleportation - consistency indicates that momentum and angular momentum are also conserved; also potential energy relating to heights.

Force Fields - 'fundamental' forces justified with known forces.

Jargon - Jargon must be used carefully and how it is used is also important. It can be valuable, as in communicating scientific terms, but abuse of science by jargon is wrong."

Colourful stuff and entertaining with the addition of the slides and quotations included. All round a good evening well worth attending - badd luck if you missed it.

As a 'part two' of both the A.G.M. and the February meeting, and to tie up loose ends, the outstanding motion of 'Donations outside the field of SF must be voted on by the whole group' was raised. Again Tim Stannard, as Legal Officer, chaired the 'discussion'. The Chair began by stating that an SF orientated charity does not exist, although the donation to the Talking Books was within the Constitution as it 'forwarded the aims of SF' (Rule 2).

This was enhanced by a comment from the floor that it is 'nice to make charitable donations' and quoted Fifteencon's donation as only possible due to sufficient funds, without it necessitating a precedent for future cons.

Another view from the floor accepted this point but stressed the need for donations outside SF should be voted on by the whole group.

The Chair answered this by pointing out that the Committee was voted on by the members of the group and have full power over controlling the group and its assets. If therefore the Committee want to make a charitable donation there was 'very little reason' it couldn't (Rule 5a.).

It was taken up from the floor that the group should have a say where the money goes and to define the limits of finance. The Chair responded by saying that as far as it is laid down in the constitution the Committee has carte blanche over finances.

A spurious point then followed from the floor that therefore a 'radical' Committee could further the aims of SF by a political bias and a political donation.

The Chair answered that the line was specifically drawn in the constitution, and that where a donation doesn't forward SF it cannot be made because it is outside the constitution.

The Chair then decided that enough time had been spent on the debate and as no further relevant points were being put forward that a vote should be taken. The motion was then amended to allow a majority of votes received to decide any issue.

The motion put to the attending members was 'That any donations outside the field of SF must be approved by a majority vote'.

The motion was carried by a majority vote.

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#### Andromeda Signing sessions.

IAIN BANKS - will be signing copies of his new book CONSIDER PHLEBAS (see enclosed flyer) over the weekend of the BECDN convention 17th 20th April.

LOUISE COOPER - will be signing copies of her books at Andromeda on Saturday 18th April from noon onwards.

PATRICK TILLEY - will be signing copies of AMTRAK WARS 3: IRON MASTER on Saturday 15th May from Noon.

# NEWS

IMPORTANT REMINDER April Meeting is one week early due to Easter; the meeting will be on 10th April.

We have a secretary ! Geoff Williams responded to last month's newsletter articles for the position and joins the Committee - welcome to him. Geoff can be contacted at - 6 Willow House, Mitton Road, Handsworth Wood, Birmingham B20 2JR.

Well done to Stan and Helen Eling for winning the Egg and Cress Award for Best Fannish Couple in the Ova Awards presented by Conception.

Our illustrious Chairman (Mr. Hardy) has done it again! Not only has he done the cover artwork for the March edition of Analog, he also has some 'computer artwork' inside!

Dr. Who? We appear to have a new Doctor when the series returns in the autumn. The BBC appointed the 'zany' Silvester McCoy recently, he becomes the seventh Doctor.

Once upon a time.... a young lady walked into Andromeda and enquired unto Holmes where to send her newly finished manuscript. Strangely enough, he happened to be talking to a rep from futura who asked to see said manuscript. Duly impressed, he further inquired if he could take it 'to his leader' who was so impressed (he hadn't read anything as good in ages) that he signed her up and the book comes out in July. Her name is Storm Jamieson and we hope to have her with us for the July meeting.

Sounds impossible? Well, it happened. Keep writing you guys.....

## ANDROMEDA'S BEST SELLERS FOR FEBRUARY.

### Paperbacks.

1. Dr. Who - Black Orchid  
by Terence Dudley.
- 2= Anvil of Ice  
by Mike Scott Rohan.
- 2= Speaker for the Dead  
by Orson Scott Card.
4. The Postman  
by David Brin.
5. Ender's Game  
by Orson Scott Card.
6. The Colour of Magic  
by Terry Pratchett.
7. Major Operation  
by James White.
8. Light Fantastic  
by Terry Pratchett.
- 9= Peace Machine  
by Bob Shaw.
- 9= Artifact  
by Greg Benford.

### Hardcovers.

1. Forge in the Forest  
by Mike Scott Rohan.
2. Equal Rites  
by Terry Pratchett.
3. Cosmic Puppets  
by Phillip K. Dick.
4. Enemy Within  
by L. Ron Hubbard.
- 5= Time Out of Mind  
by John Maxim.
- 5= The Insider  
by Christopher Evans.

# MEMBERS' FORUM

On this page YOU have the opportunity to share with fellow-members your comments, complaints, praise (?), reviews of favourite books, new films or videos, information, articles on pet SF-related subjects, artwork, cartoons, computer graphics, short fiction, anecdotes - whatever. We will also accept small-ads for sales and wants. As explained in the last Newsletter, if this page is empty it is because it is waiting for



For a limited period of three months free entrance to the next group meeting will be given to the author of the best article published that month. Your newsletter Editor's decision is final and not open for negotiation.

Trying to write?

Are there any more budding writers of SF, Fantasy or Horror out there? If you're writing stories (or maybe novels) and want help in the form of an all-day criticism session, please get in touch.

We're putting together another small group of writers for occasional critical meetings. Contact Chris and Pauline Morgan at any Brum Group Meeting or on 021-777-2777.

Need a costume for Masquerade/Fancy Dress? If so Pat Brown has some Gold and Silver Fabric for sale (selling fabric at cost)- see Pat at meetings or see your newsletter Editor for a contact address.



# BOOK REVIEWS

Equal Rites by Terry Pratchett, Gollancz, £9.95 (hardcover), 200 pages,  
reviewed by Pauline Morgan..

This book, according to the author, is not wacky, or zany, but it is undeniably fun to read. It is a sequel to The Colour of Magic and The Light Fantastic only in that it is set on the same fantastic world and that it happens afterwards. (This is the disc-shaped world that is carried on the backs of four gigantic elephants standing on the shell of the Great Turtle). When an old wizard dies he passes his staff to his successor. The problem is that in this case the recipient is a girl—and women can't be wizards. As soon as she is old enough to recognise her powers (nearly nine) Eskarina is determined to strike a blow for women's lib (although she wouldn't explain it that way) and go to the Unseen University. With her goes the witch, Granny Weatherwax.

It reads very much like the kind of children's book that equally captivates and charms adults alike. For most of the book the tone is just right, but towards the end something is lost and the climax becomes confusing. Nevertheless, it will be enjoyed by children everywhere aged between eight and eighty-eight--- after all, on the Disc world, eight is a magic number.

The Proteus Operation by James P. Hogan, Century/Hutchinson, £11.95, 496 pages,  
reviewed by Glyn Jackson.

It is 1974; and the Third Reich has emerged victorious from the Second World War, and Fascism holds sway over Europe and Asia. While in Africa, a 'genocidal war' has laid waste the continent. Only in North America and Australia do any remnants of democracy survive, and when warfare is imminent even here, desperate measures have to be taken.

Hence, 'Operation Proteus'— a top secret project involving a team of scientists being sent back to 1939, so as to establish contact with the great minds of that era; and bestow upon them knowledge of a revolutionary energy source, which could turn the tide of the present war and subsequently alter the course of history, and free the world of Fascism. Needless to say, you don't need to be an 'Einstein' to surmise what the 'energy source' might be.

However, Hogan has pieced together a complex and exciting war-drama, in which he has used the real-life characters of the day, with great skill and effectiveness; and the novel culminates in a dramatic struggle for the future of mankind.

If you like James Hogan, you'll love this.

Sandwriter by Monica Hughes, Magnet, £1.75, 159 pages,  
reviewed by Margaret Thorpe.

Monica Hughes is an extremely competent writer who has apparently decided to specialize in Juvenile SF. Sandwriter is the story of Antia, a young woman, in this case a princess, wanting to break free of adult supervision and make her own choices. Her determination to have her own way causes many problems, which may result in planet-wide repercussions, as her headstrong and selfish nature lead her to betray the soul of a people.

A kind of Dune for juveniles, but still well worth the read even if you are, shall we say, 'over eighteen'.

God Game by Andrew M. Greeley, Century, £9.95 (hardcover), 305 pages  
reviewed by Carol Morton.

Imagine this - if you can! - You are testing a new computer game, "Duke and Duchess", which has superior graphics and an interactive storyline, when there is a storm; lightning strikes your satellite dish and flows down the aerial to the computer. When you come round, you find that "something" has happened to the disk you are playing with and the game is no longer a 'game' as such, but the characters and events are real, controlled by you; you become their God. If you say "kill", someone dies; if you say "rain", the characters get wet.

This is the basis of Greeley's God Game. The character of the narrator is well developed, the 'game' characters are equally well described and the interaction between them makes for what is an original storyline, though at £9.95 I would wait for the paperback, and then treat yourself.

In Memory of Whiteness by Kim Stanley Robinson, Orbit, £2.95, 351 pages,  
reviewed by Tony Morton.

The story follows the fortunes of Johannes Wright, ninth Master of the Orchestra, from initiation through the 'Grand Tour of Holywelkin's Orchestra'. Highly entertaining and coherent, the book takes you on an extravagant tour of the solar system, visiting planets, moons and asteroids 'powered' by whitsuns - an extension of physics by Holywelkin surpassing all before - from far Pluto spiralling inward to Mercury. The music follows the events; with Wright manipulated by forces unknown writing additions for each concert to suit the mood and ambience of the relevant world towards a final score to resemble the 'ten forms of change' of Holywelkin theory.

The characters are well developed and they interplay convincingly to give a balanced story. However, it is difficult to convey this book in full, but it comes highly recommended from this reviewer. An excellent book.

(A review of the hardback can be found in issue 177 page 4, reviewed by Pauline Morgan)

The Song Called Youth Trilogy, Vol.1: Eclipse by John Shirley, Methuen, £2.50, 310 pages, reviewed by Helena Bowles.

Take the archtypical 2nd World War 'Grim Reality Resisting the Nazis' story, update it to just after a tactical nuclear conflict, add a neo-Nazi organisation complete with Christian Mystery Cult, Ariosophy, and Designs on World Freedom. Throw in a background of future drugs and music, the first space colony and somewhat contemporary obscenities and surroundings. The result is a mildly amusing book that is far better than the tacky blurb suggests (how about forcing the people who write these blurbs to undergo Polygraph tests to prove they really have read the book in question ?)

The Ladies of Mandrigyn by Barbara Hambly, Unicorn, £2.95, 311 pages,  
reviewed by Carol Morton.

The 'Ladies' of the title are pampered chattels; that is until the evil wizard king, Altioakis sacked the city of Mandrigyn and forced their men to work in his mines. Alone and unprotected, the ladies find hidden depths and talents in themselves and determine to free their men from slavery. They realise they do not have the experience or knowledge to achieve this, so try to hire the best in the mercenary leader, Sun Wolf - but he refuses. Undaunted, the ladies drug him, take him to Mandrigyn and force him to help them.

With this, Hambly is fast becoming one of the more readable, entertaining and memorable authors in the quiescent field of Fantasy. I do urge you to read this.

The Sultan's Turret by Seamus Cullen, Orbit, 252 pages ,£2.50  
reviewed by Helena Bowles.

Marginally better than its predecessor, A Noose of light, this "enchanted"(!?) sequel is set during the Spanish reconquista. The heroine, 12 year old Dinah the daughter of the Moorish Sultan's personal physician, has been dabbling in black magic. Armed only with a libidinous gnome and equally lecherous Nubian slave she requests the help of the demon Hutti in rescuing her father who inconsiderately got himself captured. In trying to escape she learns to dance the Ultimate - the infamous dance of the equally infamous hours of paradise - and the rest of the book is even sillier. The writing is of a very poor standard and the story, though faintly amusing in places, is pure tedium.

Starclipper on the Snowstone by Brian Earnshaw, Methuen, £5.50 (hardback)  
126 pages, reviewed by Anne Gay.

A cheerful tale, this, for children around 11 years of age. A brothers- and-sisters rock group travelling on their own space-yacht have just won a music contest when they run into evil record publishers. They also get a lead on their mother who has been abducted. Will they get her back again? Imaginative trappings to old themes, and characters you can identify with, make this a pleasant adventure. Some difficulties may be found by children not familiar with the furniture of sf (F.T.L., telepathy, etc ) and it may be easier for them to start with Starclipper and the Song Wars, the first book in the series. But this one's a lot of fun.

The Unconquered Country by Geoff Ryman, Unicorn/Unwin, £2.95, 134 pages  
reviewed by Dave Packwood

Geoff Ryman first came to prominence with a story -Oh Happy Day! - that was published in the ground-breaking magazine, "Interzone". Ryman consolidated his literary relationship with "Interzone" with another short story, The unconquered country.

The story was so well received that Ryman decided to develop it into the charming vignette that constitutes this edition, complete with vivid and eye-catching line drawings by Sacha Ackerman. I'd truly recommend the book to anyone, be they readers of fantasy, science fiction mainstream, or whatever. It's a truly fantastic dance of dreams, simultaneously beguiling and disturbing. Yet, for all that Ryman's feet are firmly planted on terra firma; the root matter of this fiction by the author's own admission is his fascination with the much ravaged state of Cambodia.

The unconquered country is concerned with the refugee who strives to gain sense of a situation that is complex, and where the solutions to the complexities of life are out of the hands of the common man.

The author's plea for the defence of the down-trodden takes the form of a description of the life of a refugee, Third Child. Third Child is a close-knit family that exists in a land controlled by outside political influences such as The Big Country that gives arms to the neighbours of Third's homeland.

Not surprisingly Third's people rebel against this incursion, and fight. With her home and family in a state of disintegration Third Child ventures out of the city of Saprang Song hoping that she can survive. Outside, she meets a soldier, Crow, falls in love and marries ; but I've said too much; it is up to you to experience the lyrical beauty of Geoff Ryman's imaginative tale of trial and triumph.

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Thankyou this month go to:

Dave Hardy for the members forum page

Pauline Morgan, Glyn Jackson, Margaret Thorpe, Helena Bowles, Anne Gay and Dave packwood for their reviews.

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