

BRUM GROUP NEWS

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Issue
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The monthly Newsletter of the
BIRMINGHAM SCIENCE FICTION GROUP
(Honorary Presidents: Brian W. Aldiss and Harry Harrison)

1989 Committee: Chairman - Bernie Evans Secretary - Chris Murphy
Treasurer - Chris Chivers Newsletter Editor - Dave Hardy Reviews Editor -
Mick Evans Publicity Officer - Helena Bowles Novacon 19 - Martin Tudor

This Month's Meeting is on:
Friday 16 June at 7.45pm

This Month's Programme

Admission: Members £1.25
Visitors £2.00

This month's Programme Item is:

A Booksellers' Forum

'Something Completely Different' this month. We have invited four experts - not in writing or publishing, but in SELLING science fiction books:

Bill Hornby has his own independent bookshop in Birmingham.

Rog Peyton owns the Andromeda specialist SF/fantasy/horror bookshop.

Simon Redgrave manages the SF section at Waterstone's, Brum's newest bookshop.

Malcolm Smith is books manager and buyer for W.H. Smith - and is also a SF fan.

All help to promote the Brum Group by displaying posters etc. And all have their own ways of selling and promoting SF books - and a fund of anecdotes about the people who buy them, authors they've met... Any questions?

The BSFG meets on the third Friday of every month (unless otherwise notified) at the PENGUIN (ex LADBROKE) HOTEL, New Street, Birmingham at 7.45 pm. Subscription rates: £6.00 per person (£9.00 for two members at same address)

Cheques etc. payable to the BSFG, via the Treasurer, c/o the Chairman (below). Book Reviews to Mick Evans at 7 Grove Avenue, Acocks Green, Birmingham B27 7UY (Telephone 021-707 6606), which is also the Chairman's address.

Other contributions and enquiries to Dave Hardy, 99 Southam Road, Hall Green, Birmingham B28 0AB (telephone 021-777 1802, fax 021-777 2792)

Last Month

David Gemmell

A rather disappointing turn-out by members for some reason, which is a pity - for those who didn't come. They missed a most entertaining evening, of the type that one has to experience to appreciate. However, I'll try to recall a few points (the subject *wasn't* 'The Craft of Writing Fantasy').

Dave's first SF convention was our Fifteencon. One night he rang for the Night Porter to come to his room. Said that worthy: "Are you the David Gemmell who wrote *Waylander*? All those werewolves and weird goings-on? What's the problem?" Dave: "Er - I've got a spider trapped under this cup!"

He says he made four mistakes before he became a writer. (1) Around 1972 he used to go into W.H.Smith and imagine his name on the books - but forgot about the writing in between. (2) He would tell people: "I *am* writing a book..." (3) He would 'talk out' a book with people, in detail, instead of getting down to write it. (4) He would ask "What's the point? Look at the stuff that's being published!" So he took up reviewing instead. Then he was told that he might have cancer. He didn't, but it concentrated his mind and he wrote a 50,000-word novel in two weeks, pouring everything into it. A friend at work (a newspaper) said that it had plastic characters. He took a year to re-write it, this time basing the central character on himself, warts and all. Now that character became real, but the rest were cardboard. The moral is to base them on real people, which he did - but they objected! If told that a character was *not* based on them, they got hurt because they were not considered interesting enough, so the author can't win either way!

His publisher turned down his second and third books. When asked why, they said they loved the titles, but nothing else. However, he now writes two books a year, and is now writing a historical novel. He says this is much more difficult than writing fantasy, since in fantasy "everything is where *you* want it". But it was the personal details of Dave's background and childhood - "not for publication" - which made the evening really fascinating. Next time - be there.



New Members — April (held over)

Actually it's 'member' in the singular this time, as only one new face joined us in April (and none in May. Please don't forget to tell your friends and colleagues about the Brum Group - the more the merrier). He is Simon John Dean, who is 21 and lives in Selly Oak. He says he "found our advert among the sci-fi in W.H.Smith" (suggesting that he has not yet had much contact with fandom), and enjoys reading Asimov, Pratchett, and Interzone.

Congratulations are in order for several of our members for their success in selling their work professionally - proof, if it were needed, that the advice given by some of our recent speakers does work.

Anne Gay has sold her first novel, *Mindsail*, to John Jarrold, to be published as a Macdonald hardcover and a Futura paperback in 1990. It is a long novel, and is currently undergoing some reworking.

Anne and Chris Morgan have collaborated on a short story, 'A Planet Named Isolation', which has been accepted by the new magazine *The Gate*. It will probably appear in the third or fourth issue.

And Pauline Morgan, writing under her *nom de plumet*/maiden name of Pauline Dugate, has sold a short story, 'Trick or Treat' to a Women's Press horror anthology, edited by Lisa Tuttle, also to appear in 1990. It is the third story she has sold.

Now - who's next?

Artwork by Roy Barclay, who is about to leave school. More of his work later.



ConRep

Mick Evans on MEXICON III

Mexicon III made no bones about its being a convention for SF *readers*, and in general we got what we were looking for.

The main guests were American writers Algis Budrys, Jonathan Carroll and Sidney Jordan, the creator of the Jeff Hawke comic strip. Budrys I found to be an amiable and accessible man, and the interview of Carroll by Roz Kaveney was a personal highlight for me.

There weren't many 'solo spots'; the larger part of the programme consisted of panel items. These were interesting, with a variety of guests including Iain Banks, Keith Roberts and Brian Stableford, and a great variety of topics, ranging from 'What's wrong with SF today?' to censorship.

There was great debating on conventions, with several panel discussions devoted to various aspects, such as 'What are conventions actually *for*?', 'Do they fulfil their intentions?', 'Is the *programme* really necessary?'

Most of the panels seemed to generate a lively interplay with the audience, especially the ones on censorship and those on conventions. The relaxed yet lively atmosphere was greatly assisted by the use of lapel mikes on panellists, which meant no stopping and starting for hand mikes to be passed round, picked up, etc. This is the first time I have seen lapel mikes used at a convention, and I strongly recommend their use at others. Congratulations to Nic Farey on the success of his experiment.

This was my first Mexicon, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. Greg Pickersgill promises us a Mexicon IV, around 1991/1992, and I'll look forward to that.

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Thanks to Tim Groome for artwork (Page 2), to Martin for his Jophan Report, Mick for the above Conrep, and to all book reviewers.

NEWSFILE

THE JOPHAN REPORT #27

We ran out of space in the last issue before getting to the nominations for the **JOHN W. CAMPBELL AWARD FOR BEST NEW WRITER OF 1987-1988** (which is sponsored by Davis Publications). Although not a Hugo, this award is customarily awarded at the same time. The nominations are as follows - P.J. Beese & Todd Cameron Hamilton; Melanie Rawn; Michaela Roessner; Kristine Kathryn Rusch; William Sanders (all in their first year of eligibility); Christopher Hinz; Delia Sherman (in their second, and final, year of eligibility). (Although Elizabeth Moon and Daniel Keys Moran received enough votes to appear on the ballot, they were ineligible because of prior publication: both were first published in 1982. Kristine Kathryn Rusch appeared in 1987 in *ABORIGINAL SF*, which at that time was still a semiprozine; 1988 is therefore her first year of professional publication, which governs Campbell Award eligibility.)

Back in Britain April saw the launch of *MANDARIN*, the Octopus Group's newly-created mass-market paperback imprint. With its larger than usual promotional budget (presumably meaning a bit more than the usual fiver a year), *MANDARIN* hopes very shortly to challenge the likes of *PAN* and others of that ilk. While *GOLLANCZ* beat *PAN* for the rights to publish a six novel continuation of Harry Harrison's *BILL, THE GALACTIC HERO* series. Their winning bid was a mere £71,500... The first novel will be by Harry on his own, the rest will be collaborations with Dave Bischoff, Arthur Byron Cover, Jack C. Haldeman, Robert Sheckley and A.N. Other. Mind you *SFC* reports that *PAN* have got a "very high floor bid" in for Melanie Rawn's *DRAGON* series.

Peat Marwick McLintock, the renowned accountants (in the recent study for the British Library and the Library Association) found that during 1986 & 1987 alone, European and US publishers spent around \$5.75 billion in buying each other up. During the same period the average price of books in Britain went up by double the increase in the RPI - most of the increase being in paperbacks. They also reported that print runs have come down while the cost of promotion, and of advances to authors, has risen sharply.

News and Gossip from the world of SF, including Martin Tudor's celebrated JOPHAN REPORT.

If you have any information, don't keep it to yourself - send it in. (This does mean YOU!)

Book Club Associates have picked up Diane Duane's *SPOCK'S WORLD* and Dean R. Koontz's *MIDNIGHT*, for future selections, whilst Garry Kilworth's *HUNTER'S MOON* has recently appeared as a book of the month selection.

Storm Constantine, who spoke to the Group last year, stands a chance of hitting the big time in the States with the 'Wraethu Trilogy' being bought by Tor for (quote) the "mass market" (meaning perhaps they might even publicise it...). Kevin D. Randle's six book military SF series *GALACTIC SILVER STAR* has been sold to Ace.

On the film front, Amblin' Entertainment and Universal Pictures have announced they will make two sequels to *BACK TO THE FUTURE*: the first for US Christmas release, the second for summer 1990. The more cultured among you (are you listening, Holmes?) will be delighted to hear that a sequel to the SF porn movie *FLESH GORDON* is in the works, entitled *FLESH GORDON MEETS THE COSMIC CHEERLEADERS*, it will feature kick-boxer Vince Murdocco in one of the title roles (go on, guess...). The plot details how *Flesh* defeats Emperor Wang's evil plan to make the men of Earth impotent with his ray gun... And they said they didn't make them like that any more!

The Nebula Award results came in just too late to be included last issue, the winners were as follows - **Novel:** *FALLING FREE* by Lois McMaster Bujold, **Novelette:** "Schrodinger's Kitten" by George Alec Effinger, **Novella:** "The Last of the Winnebagos" by Connie Willis, **Short Story:** "Bible Stories for Adults, No. 17: The Deluge" by James Morrow.

Still with awards, the winners of the British Science Fiction Awards were announced at Mexican 3 - **Novel:** *LAVONDYSS* by Robert Holdstock, **Short Story:** *Dark Night in Toyland* by Bob Shaw (appeared in *INTERZONE*), **Dramatic Presentation:** *WHO FRAMED ROGER RABBIT*, **Artist:** Alan Lee for the cover of *LAVONDYSS*.

Finally, the results of *INTERZONE's* first readers poll was also announced at Mexican 3. Eric Brown picked up the £100 prize for Best Short Story with "The Time Lapsed Man" and SMS won £50 for being voted Best Artist. The Best All Time Writers were first Philip K Dick, second Arthur C Clarke and third J G Ballard.



All books reviewed in these pages by members have been provided by the publishers, who will receive a copy of this Newsletter. Members may keep books reviewed by them (or may donate them as Raffle Prizes, or Auction Items, if feeling generous...) Please keep reviews to under 150 words, unless instructed otherwise. Deadline for reviews: at least 2 weeks before next meeting

THE NET by Loren J MacGregor; Futura; 225 pages; £2.99 paperback.

Reviewed by Anne Gay.

Jason, daughter of a noble trading house, and master of its fortunes, is bored. She also, despite her transexual name, takes a feminine delight in jewellery and risks. So when temptation is offered, with the chance to defeat her main rivals on the way, she sails her modern Argo into dangerous skies. The net of the title is a derivative of Sam Delaney's 'Nova' but from there Mr MacGregor departs in an emotional interpretation of the mechanical-sensory-telepathic link. This is a clever, subtle almost swashbuckler, and despite a few irrelevant asides I for one enjoyed it. I hope you do too. Mr MacGregor deserves a future.

DREAMS OF FLESH AND SAND by W T Quick; Orbit; 301 pages; £3.50 paperback.

Reviewed by Colin Wheeler.

The story is set in a computer orientated culture, with giant corporates, and the advancing technology of "meat matrices" - bio-computers of massive power. Protection for information stored in these computers is provided by Berg. His ex-wife Calley breaks through this protection to sell the information. The action is quite fast paced, but there are similarities with *Neuromancer* by William Gibson. There are few new ideas expressed here, the ending good, leaving obvious pointers towards a sequel. However, even with characters like Toohi-Berys friend/extremely nasty body guard, the feeling that you have read the book before is very hard to escape.

VACUUM FLOWERS by Michael Swanwick; Arrow Legend; 335 pages; £3.50 paperback.

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

There's a frequent complaint that nobody is writing good SF anymore, with real science. Well Michael Swanwick is. In *Vacuum Flowers* he's created a startlingly original future, brim-full of new technology and bizarre characters. So far so good, but what makes this into a great novel is that the author cares about his characters (and makes the reader care, too) and that the plot moves along with the speed of light. The main technological thrust is wetware - artificially constructed personalities which can be bought and 'worn' in the same way we assume a new persona today through a change in hairstyle or clothing. Usually the wetware is only temporary in its effects, disappearing after a few weeks. But a new persona has been created, a strong and capable one called Rebel Elizabeth Mudlark. A tester samples the only copy of it and then goes on the run. There are so many wonderful scenes and ideas in the book, including zero gravity colonies around some of the Asteroids, brand new weapons, a four personality mind and the Comprise, a hive mind which encompasses almost all the people still on Earth. Here's the first U.K paperback of a 1987 U.S novel which, for my money, was the best novel of that year.

THE BOOK OF THE DAMNED by Tanith Lee; Unwin; 229 pages; £2.95 paperback.

Reviewed by Steve Jones.

This is the first of *The Secret Books of Paradys*. It contains three novellas loosely connected by being set in the French city of Paradys (which is one of those places that cartographers seem to forget). The first, *Stained with Crimson*, is a vampire story in which no character is what they seem. *Malice in Saffron* is about Jehanine, a nun by day, who at night takes hideous revenge on the men she believes wronged her. In *Empire of Azure* an Egyptian ghost and a sapphire spider are involved in the investigation of a bizarre suicide. If the stories have a theme it is of men disguised as women, or women disguised as men, for various nefarious reasons. The cover is striking and attractive, far better than that on *Women as Demons*. Highly recommended.

ETHAN OF ATHOS by Lois McMaster Bujold; Headline; 237 pages; £2.99 paperback.

Reviewed by Al Johnston.

Athos is a world peopled only by men, the population must be maintained by artificial means and Dr Ethan Urquhart, as Chief of Biology at a district reproduction centre, plays a key role in this process. Unfortunately the vital ovarian cultures are decaying through old age and a replacement shipment is found to be worthless offal. Ethan is dispatched to rectify the situation and becomes embroiled in a hunt for a genetically engineered telepath. All this, while he tries to cope with culture shock, prejudice and, worse yet, women. An interesting mix of SF and espionage thriller, this book is enjoyable and I would recommend it, however some further explanation of the history, sociology and religion of Athos would not have gone amiss.

THE ENIGMA SCORE by Sheri S Tepper; Corgi; 383 Pages; £3.60 Paperback.

Reviewed by Bernie Evans.

Mountain ranges made from crystal, which destroy humans unless they are sung to, and sung to very correctly, form the basis for this novel. Oh, you've read all about people singing to crystals before, have you?. Perhaps you have, but not like this!! Several SF devices become apparent:- are the crystal ranges intelligent?, is there indigent animal life?, is THAT intelligent, if these two premises are true how will the large corporation that is exploiting the planet get round it?, will they kill to prevent the facts becoming common knowledge?. (There are definite similarities with H Beam Piper's *Little Fuzzy* books there). All this and more, interwoven into a complex story of plot and counter-plot, makes for a fast-paced read which I really couldn't put down until I'd finished it. Very highly recommended.

A DARK TRAVELLING by Roger Zelazny; Millenium; 109 pages; £6.95 hardback.

Reviewed by Colin Wheeler

Three young people are thrown into a fight with the dark band when their father is kidnapped. But Becky is a witch, Barry an assassin and Jim is a werewolf, and so they decide to travel between the bands to rescue their father. The story is fairly simplistic, apparently written for the "young adult" age bracket, the group to which the main characters in the novel belong. It is interesting and enjoyable reading, as one would expect from Zelazny. The action moves fast, with a well thought out plot and ideas which are easy to grasp. It would prove light reading for anyone, though seasoned SF fans might not find the substance they prefer.

PROJECT PENDULUM by Robert Silverberg; Millenium; 139 pages; £6.95 hardcover.

Reviewed by Carol Morton.

Identical twins Sean and Eric are chosen to take part in the very first time travel experiment, Project Pendulum. The idea is that as the time pendulum swings each twin will be sent to opposite ends of its arc in time. Thus, first one twin will be sent to the future whilst the other goes to the past, and then they swap. As the swings of the pendulum increase they go further back or forward in time. An interesting concept this, and one that should appeal to the juvenile readers this series is aimed at. Even if this is meant for the younger SF readers it is still a story that is worthy of the master and one well worth reading. Highly recommended, especially if you have young children.

FIRESHAPER'S DOOM by Tom Deitz; Futura; 306 pages; £3.50 paperback.

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

The Sidhe worlds overlie and touch ours, and the Straight Tracks that join them run through Georgia. In *Windmaster's Bane* Davy Sullivan became involved with the Sidhe when he developed second sight. In *Fireshaper's Doom*, two Sidhe women oppose each other, one seeking revenge for the death of her son, the other freedom for her brother, the boy's killer. Davy is dragged into the conflict as he is mortal and can touch iron and thus is the ideal person to steal a horn guarded by iron. His friends follow in search of him. This is an excellent adventure story with a convincing mesh of Sidhe and human characters and realms. Deitz does not neglect the fact that Davy and his friends are adolescent and finds time to steer them through and into changing relationships within and beyond their peer groups. Recommended.

LIGHTNING by Dean R. Koontz; Headline; 439 pages; £3.50 paperback.

Reviewed by Sarah Freakley.

When Stephen rescues Laura from a birth that would have left her paraplegic fate tries to re-assert itself. Each time it tries there is a storm and lightning flashes across the sky. Stephen becomes Laura's 'special' guardian, but to the reader Stephen is a time traveller, trying to stop the past from changing the future, but whose future? An exciting and incredibly readable book, from start to finish, which is dripping with suspense, and unexpected twists and turns. If this is the standard of writing produced by Mr Koontz I WANT MORE.

ABOVE TOP SECRET by Timothy Good; Grafton; 590 pages; £5.99 paperback.

ABDUCTION by Jenny Randles; Headline; 240 pages; £2.99 paperback.

Reviewed by Dave Hardy.

I suppose one shouldn't lump these together really, but the cover photo on *Above Top Secret* is by Jenny Randles, and there is a certain similarity of subject matter. The first is about the 'worldwide UFO cover-up' and is certainly thorough. It quotes case after case, divided into countries, and there is an appendix containing facsimiles (often unreadable) of letters and messages from various organisations. The chief factor that always boggles my mind is the variety of shapes and sizes of these 'craft'. It's as if every car manufacturer started from scratch, and some produced vehicles fifty feet long with twelve wheels, while others made an enclosed moped...As a reference book for Ufologists, though, this must be a must. *Abduction* is said to be 'A scientific explanation of alleged kidnaps by Alien Beings'. Again we have many case histories, some of which would be at home in the Sunday Sport, 'Mum gives birth to 8lb trout'; Space aliens turned our son into an olive'; etc. (No, I didn't make those up.) To be fair though, Jenny Randles (a well known UFO researcher) does attempt her own psychological explanations for these phenomena, and many of these cases have never been published before.

THE ELFIN SHIP by James P. Blaylock; Grafton; 379 pages; £3.99 paperback.

Reviewed by Mick Evans.

Hard to review this novel written in the early eighties without the obligatory nod towards Tolkien, with that out of the way this is a very enjoyable work in its own right. Blaylock's a fine story teller and I slipped effortlessly into his imagined world. Johnathon Bing of Twombly Town sets off with friends on a river journey to the land of the Elves, it's full of adventures with mad goblins, a magician, a cloak of invisibility and an evil dwarf with a watch that stops time. This may not sound very original but it's so beautifully done that I just couldn't help enjoying it and I'll certainly be investigating Blaylock's other output.

THE ANNOTATED HOBBIT by J R R Tolkien - annotated by Douglas A Anderson; Unwin Hyman; 336 pp; £14.95 h/b.

Reviewed by Wendell Wagner Jr.

For the past year I have been compiling a list of British English terms in Tolkien which are unfamiliar to Americans. Amazingly, Anderson (who is American) misses these and some other obscure words that both Americans and Britons find difficult. For instance, 'gamblers' on page 207, 'homely' on page 56, and 'quoits', 'shooting at the wand', 'bowls' and 'ninepins' on page 169 should all have been annotated. Anderson does give us notes on the personal and mythological sources of 'The Hobbit', an appendix on the revisions made in later editions, and a gallery of art used in the foreign language editions of the book (which is mostly dreadful). Take a look at Martin Gardner's *The Annotated Alice*, another British book annotated by an American, with twice as many notes per page, for a good example of what an annotated edition should be.

THE BOOK OF THE BEAST by Tanith Lee; Unwin; 196 pages; £2.95 paperback.

Reviewed by Steve Jones.

The second of *The Secret Books of Paradys* is a novel, unlike its predecessor. It concerns an ancient curse, which I will not give away as its ramifications are central to the plot. The scholar Raoulin falls victim to the curse, and seeks the aid of the Jewish sorcerer Haninuh. The middle of the book skips back to the Roman Empire, where Centurian Vusca begins the sequence of events which will lead to this scourge. The final part is about the attempts to end the curse once and for all. As with first book, highly recommended.

THE GATE TO WOMEN'S COUNTRY by Sheri S Tepper; Bantam; 278 pages; £6.95 lge paperback. Reviewed by Tony Morton.

A post holocaust book (though you only assume this until late into the story) where, under the premis that men created the weapons, were the diplomats and so caused the war, women take over (or don't ???). Upon a son's 5th birthday he's incorporated into a garrison, to train in warfare to protect the women who, in townships, continue the arts and sciences and all manual labour to preserve the race. On reaching 15 a man chooses to become a warrior or return to Womens Country as a servitor. The story is of one woman, Stavia, her growing up in this society and acceptance or denial of their life. A very emotional story full of twists, fully believable in content and character. My only worry was (being male) of the death/destruction or cowardice ritual between warriors and servitors, until I worked out what was going on. Read this for its views (feminism?) and for a society trying to cope after a nuclear devastation has all but wrecked a world. Recommended.

NEVERYONA by Samuel R. Delany; Grafton; 544 pages; £4.50 paperback.

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

The plot of this fantasy novel covers a few weeks in the life of Pryn, an intelligent fifteen year old girl who leaves home and travels to the city of Neveryon. Delany uses this as a device to re-examine some of the characters and themes from *Tales of Neveryon*. Pryn meets Norema (who is a peripatetic teacher via the telling of tales) and Gorgik (who is still liberating slaves). As for themes, Delany shows the reader (often playfully) the ways in which technology is invented and forgotten, how communication is achieved with and without a written language, and how little people really know what goes on around them (or what has gone on around them, without the benefit of a written history). It's a curious mixture of fast moving action (flying on a dragon, swordfights) and lengthy argument (several characters lecture Pryn and the reader for excessive numbers of pages). Overall it's a clever novel (occasionally breathtakingly so) but overlong.

DOWNRIVER by Stephen Gallagher; N.E.L; 272 pages; £10.95 hardback.

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

On the surface this is a horror thriller, sharply written and realistically nasty, about a corrupt policeman in contemporary England. He is John Mays, on plainclothes duties in an unnamed city (which could be Birmingham), who uses his position to get what he wants. Anybody who thwarts him, even in a small way, is written down in Johnny's grudge book and is liable to be dealt with severely. Nick Frazier is Johnny's much more honest duty partner, who tries to cope with all this. A complication is that Nick and Johnny were at school together. The plot is full of gripping twists set against decaying landscapes. But the novel is also an examination of people's roots - can they ever be returned to or recaptured? It questions self-images and the facade of personality behind which we all hide. It's a good piece of writing by an author who seems to be improving with each successive book.