

BRUM GROUP

NEWS

August
1990

Issue
No. 227

The monthly Newsletter of the BIRMINGHAM SCIENCE FICTION GROUP

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

1990 Committee: Chairman – Chris Murphy Secretary – Helena Bowles
Treasurer – Chris Chivers Newsletter Editor – Dave Hardy Reviews Editor –
Mick Evans Publicity Officer – Andrew White Novacon 19 Chairman – Bernie Evans

THIS MONTH'S PROGRAMME

Friday 17 August at 7.45pm Admission: Members £1.25 Visitors £2.00

This month's programme item is entitled

NEW ROOM – NEW BROOM?

It was in August 1979 that the Brum Group last moved to the Ivy Bush, and in August 1990 we do it again (see page 2). As we move to a new venue, the Committee felt it was time to give you, the members, an opportunity to air your opinions about your Group.

There have been quite a few comments in recent issues of the Newsletter: on the content of programme items – what sort of speakers should we or shouldn't we have? Is the 'formal' part of the meeting going on for too long? Should we be encouraging younger members – and if so, how? This is YOUR opportunity to have a say, so don't miss it.

PLUS: there will be a **Special Auction**, so please bring along books etc., as well as some money for all the goodies you'll want to buy!

*The BSFG meets on the third Friday of every month (unless otherwise notified) at **THE IVY BUSH**, Hagley Road/Monument Road, Birmingham at 7.45pm.*

Subscription Rates: £6.00 per person, or £9.00 for two members at same address.

Cheques etc. payable to the BSFG, via the Treasurer, c/o the Reviews Editor (below).

Chairman's Address: 126 McKean Road, Oldbury, Warley B69 4BA. (021 552 8912)

Book Reviews to Mick Evans at 121 Cape Hill, Smethwick, Warley B66 4SH, which is also the Novacon Chairman's address. (021 558 0997) **(NB. NEW ADDRESS)**

All other contributions and enquiries to Dave Hardy, 99 Southam Road, Hall Green, Birmingham B28 0AB (Telephone 021 777 1802, fax 021 777 2792)



Brian Aldiss (reviewed by Peter Weston)

Some professional authors talk about their latest books; others may discuss some new theory; some prefer simply to gossip. Last month Brian Aldiss did none of those things. Instead, he spoke honestly and at some length about his boyhood and the formative influences which have made him the great writer that he is.

I use the word 'great' with some deliberation, because it's about time someone said clearly and unequivocally that Brian Aldiss is possibly the nearest thing yet to a great writer to have come from within the SF field. And therein lies Brian's own personal tragedy, one which surfaced at our meeting.

You see, Brian feels a little hurt and rejected that the big prizes in science fiction have not gone to him. He doesn't get the big sales, the huge advances, the Awards. How does it feel to see the fans rushing to buy the latest Anne McCaffrey 'Dragon' novel, or Frank Herbert's 'Dune' epics, or even Terry Pratchett (with reported fees of £100,000 per book), when you are pretty sure that you are a much better writer, in every sense that 'better' means anything?

Brian told us about the pain and heartache he experienced when, at age seven, he was ripped from his comfortable East Anglia home and shipped off to a boarding school which sounded like something out of *Oliver Twist*. How he developed a reputation as a storyteller in the boy's dorm, and how, having been caught talking after 'lights out' he was flogged unmercifully by a sadistic master. So badly that when he showed the bruises and weals to his mother at the end of term, she fainted in shock, poor thing.

He told us of his True Love of a Chinese girl, when he was sent East in the Army. He told us about his early career as a bookseller, which led to his first novel, *The Brightfount Diaries*. He told us about his family's tailoring business in East Dereham and the one, inspired touch that his father made to the house: a piece of stained glass showing a country landscape, which now adorns the front dustjacket of Brian's latest book of reminiscences, *Bury My Heart at W.H. Smith's*. *

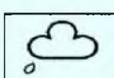
It was an excellent evening, a rare opportunity to hear about the life of a writer as it really is, and to be entertained by a true gentleman.

* Can I also say, having bought the book that night and briefly skimmed through it, that it is chock-full of super anecdotes about SF people and Brian's experiences over the last 30-odd years in the field.

[Editorial comment: of course it *would* be nice to have the Big Rewards, but I'm sure that everyone whose opinion Brian would care about feels the same way as Peter. And it must be worth a lot to know that you have the admiration and respect of so many people.]

WE'RE MOVING THIS MONTH !!!

See next page - and don't say you haven't been warned!



Next Month's Weather



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CONTINUED

The Brum Group's On The Move

As related last month, your Committee has tried every hotel, pub and bus shelter in the City Centre in an attempt to find us suitable alternative accomodation before the 'New' Imperial falls down around our ears, and we have finished up with a previous haunt: The Ivy Bush, on the Hagley Road just past Five Ways. There is a map below in case you do not know the area, and buses Nos. 9, 120 and 126 run along the Hagley Road. Service No. 8 runs along Monument Road, and No. 1 goes to Five Ways. There is a Rail station at Five Ways. (If you have a car and can give another member a lift, please do so.) We have been promised our own entrance to the upstairs room.

This Month's Meeting

Next month we are thinking of inviting Freda Fredbear to give a talk on Needtework. No, it's OK - she will show us how to embroider spaceships, robots, aliens, etc., and will intersperse her talk with mentions of SF books she has read (including Hal Clement's *Needle*), so it passes the Peyton Test of what constitutes a suitable talk for the Brum Group. But seriously, folks, this brings me to this month's meeting. Do you agree with Rog's comments, or with Vernon's, in the last BGN? This is your

opportunity to tell us what sort of meetings you want. Do you want more 'homegrown' events, quizzes, debates, etc.? Rog objects to the idea I put forward last month, that we might have a speaker from an environmental group (on the usual grounds that "it isn't SF"). But I feel - and I think that most of the Committee agrees with me - that as long as a talk contains the *stuff* of SF, ie. it consists of material which a science fiction writer could weave into a story (we're back to needtework), then it is valid for a meeting. But what do YOU think? I haven't had any other feedback to that piece.

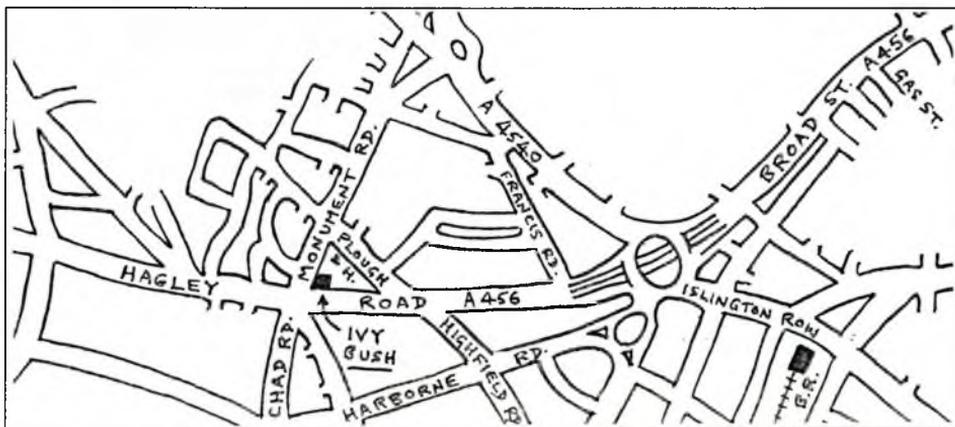
Incidentally, I happen to know that Rog intended to write a letter complaining about my 'interspersed comments'. He can't believe that I can't see why this is unfair; that it means I always have the last word, and the writer of an article should have the right to come back and have his say, uninterrupted.

Of course I can see your point, Rog - I was just winding you up! (Needling you?) And anyone who asks can have a reply printed without interruptions. Probably. (The only way anyone can *really* ensure that is by taking over the job of Newsletter Editor, which will be up for grabs in four months, as will virtually every other Committee Post, as few are standing for re-election. So it's not too early to start thinking about who will be running the Group, and writing these pages, next year. . .)

Dowsing: The Last Word?

I have had another letter from Wendell Wagner, but don't have room to publish it in full. He points out that he has a master's degree in mathematics, and gives the actual figures for the test which Michael Guest quoted from Arthur C. Clarke's *World of Strange Powers*. Wendell's point is that James Randi had agreed to pay \$50,000 to any one of the 11 dowsers in Australia who passed at least 8 out of their 10 tests, which would happen once in 2,000,000 times. Wendell's own £100 challenge would happen about one time in 20,000,000 at random.

Last month was Wendell's last with the Group; we shall miss his input, and wish him well wherever he is - back in the USA, I believe.



H. P. Lovecraft - The Science Fiction Writer by Chris Morgan

In the avalanche of sentimental pre-publicity for the Queen Mother's 90th birthday and Agatha Christie's 100th, another anniversary has been all but forgotten.

Howard Phillips Lovecraft, one of the most influential of all 20th century writers of SF and horror, was born on 20 August 1890. The fact that Lovecraft is, today, revered and copied by horror readers while being either reviled or ignored by the SF community is just another of those strange injustices which seem to occur so often in literary circles.

'Bizarre' is the best description of Lovecraft's life. He was a sickly child who attended school only sporadically, being dominated by his neurotic mother to such an extent that he was never able to develop emotionally, and learning about the world solely from his reading. His own writing was much influenced by that of Edgar Allan Poe and Lord Dunsany, as well as by the old (by American standards) and menacing architecture of Providence, Rhode Island, where he lived throughout his life, mostly as a recluse. The only exception to this was his disastrous marriage, which occurred in 1924, three years after his mother's death, and was to a woman seven years his senior; they lived in New York, which Lovecraft loathed, and separated after two years.

Throughout his life Lovecraft was poor, earning most of his income from the revision and correction of manuscripts for other authors. His stories appeared in US magazines (first fanzines, then professional magazines) with increasing frequency from 1916, and by 1922 he had become a regular contributor to *Weird Tales*, though these stories brought him very little money. Amazingly, he found the time to write an estimated 100,000 letters over his short lifetime.

But what about the science fiction?

Lovecraft had a lifetime interest in science, his best subject at school. He was an amateur astronomer, at one time he set up his own chemical laboratory in the basement of the family home, and he owned a microscope and two spectrosopes. In his fiction (except for some early Dunsany-influenced fantasies) he always tried to operate by scientific principles in a rational world.

Some of his stories appeared in science fiction magazines, notably 'The Shadow Out of Time' in *Astounding Science Fiction* (June 1936), which deals with an American academic's mind being taken over by alien intelligences from Earth's remote past. This theme recurs in several other Lovecraft stories, including 'The Whisperer in the Darkness' and 'The Challenge from Beyond' (where an infinitely advanced alien race seeds the universe with mind-exchange communication cubes rather than using space travel). In 'Dagon' (written and set during World War I) a volcanic upheaval has raised a part of the ocean floor, revealing an underwater civilisation. 'From Beyond' shows the development of a machine which can transfer humans into other worlds or dimensions and

strange creatures ('inky, jellyish monstrosities') into ours. The twin themes of the superman and miscegenation are well used in 'The Dunwich Horror', a blend of SF and horror.

The best of all Lovecraft's SF is 'The Colour Out of Space', in which the landing of a meteorite not far from Arkham (his fictionalised version of Providence) precipitates the growth of giant fruit and vegetables, then deformity and death.

During his lifetime, Lovecraft's fiction was largely ignored. After he died in 1937 (aged 47) his friend August Derleth founded Arkham House to publish Lovecraft's work in book form; he also completed many stories from Lovecraft's notes.

Some of those Arkham First editions are now valuable items, especially *The Outsider*, worth up to £600. And Lovecraft's style, heavily descriptive and purple as it often was, has been extremely influential upon many other writers (particularly in the horror field), such as Ramsey Campbell and Brian Lumley.

Appointments and Awards

Kathy Gale has been made a Director of the Pan Management Board. She is now Editorial Director, with special responsibility for science fiction, fantasy and horror, in both hardcover and paperback, as well as other areas, such as crime.

Your Editor, Dave Hardy, has been made a member of the Board of Trustees of the International Association for the Astronomical Arts. He is already Vice President for Western Europe of the IAAA, and becomes the only non-American Board member.

Also this month, Dave has been nominated for the 1990 Lensman Award (Artist), presented for 'lifetime service to the field and the ability to continue to spark the "sense of wonder" for which our field is so rightly famous'. The award will be presented to the winner (other four nominees not yet known) at MosCon XII on 16 September, by 'Doc' Smith's daughter, Verna Smith Trestrail.

signing ANDROMEDA sessions

Saturday 15 September: Ramsey Campbell to sign his new hardcover, *The Midnight Sun*.

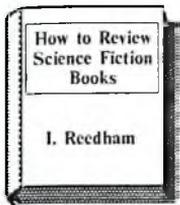
Iain Banks to sign his new hardcover, *Use of Weapons*.

Brian Lumley to sign hardcovers and paperbacks of *Necroscope 4. Deadspeak*.

Saturday 22 or 29 September*: Ursula LeGuin to sign the 4th Earthsea book, *Tehanu*.

Coming Up: Ian Macdonald to sign *Desolation Road*. Terry Brooks in October. MANY Signings at Novacon, including 4 (yes FOUR) artists...

*NB. It is always advisable to check with Andromeda (021 643 1999) to ensure that no last-minute changes have been made.



Book Reviews

All books reviewed here by members were provided by the publishers, who receive a copy of this Newsletter. Members may keep review copies (or may donate them as Raffle or Auction items. . .)

Please keep reviews to under 150 words unless instructed otherwise. Deadline for reviews: at least two weeks before next Group meeting.

EARTH by David Brin; Macdonald; 601 pages; £13.95 hardcover. Reviewed by Dave Hardy.

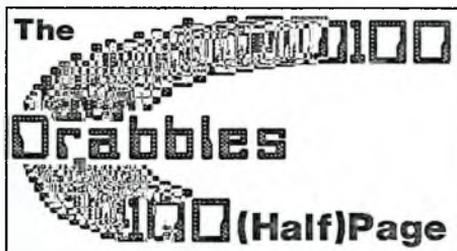
In which David Brin projects today's trends of global warming, pollution, ozone depletion, extinction of animal and planet species, etc., as well as the 'electronic revolution' (widespread use of computer nets and information services) fifty years into the future, and solves all of our problems – but does it by cheating!

This book is good for your muscles as well as your brain: it is over 50mm (2 inches) thick, and weighs nearly a kilo. But it is a remarkable work, as members who came to David's recent talk will realise, and reveals the depth of his thinking, and concern for our planet. On one level, the story is about a man-made black hole which 'accidentally' fell into the core of the Earth, and threatens to destroy our planet within about two years, although only a small group of people know about it, and try desperately to remedy the situation – with little hope at the start.

However, the novel is episodic, and just as we get interested in the actions of one set of characters, we have to leave them to follow another. We move from Earth-orbit to New Zealand to Easter Island to the USA to ... Although I understand the author's reasons for this way of writing, I find it rather irritating as it spoils the flow of reading. However, it all comes together in the end, in a truly dramatic climax, as rival factions do battle inside the Earth itself and the Earth-mother, Gaia, asserts herself.

I would have preferred the 'happy' ending (though not to some millions of people) to have been achieved by scientific rather than mystical or metaphysical methods, but the result is quite satisfying, and everyone should read it.

(BOOK REVIEWS CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE)



It has been claimed recently that dowsing has nothing to do with SF. As Editor I claim the privilege of having the last word (and if you don't like it, see page 3!), so I hope that the following drabble will close the matter ...

Also below is a sweet little horror (?) drabble by Steve Jones. We have a couple more 'on file' for publication when there's room, but meanwhile, why don't YOU have a go? You could enjoy it.

Divine Revelation

by David A. Hardy

Daphne paced the field, hazel twig held before her. Suddenly it dipped violently, wrenching her arms. Marking out the area affected, she found that it was enormous; other tests showed whatever lay below to be metallic.

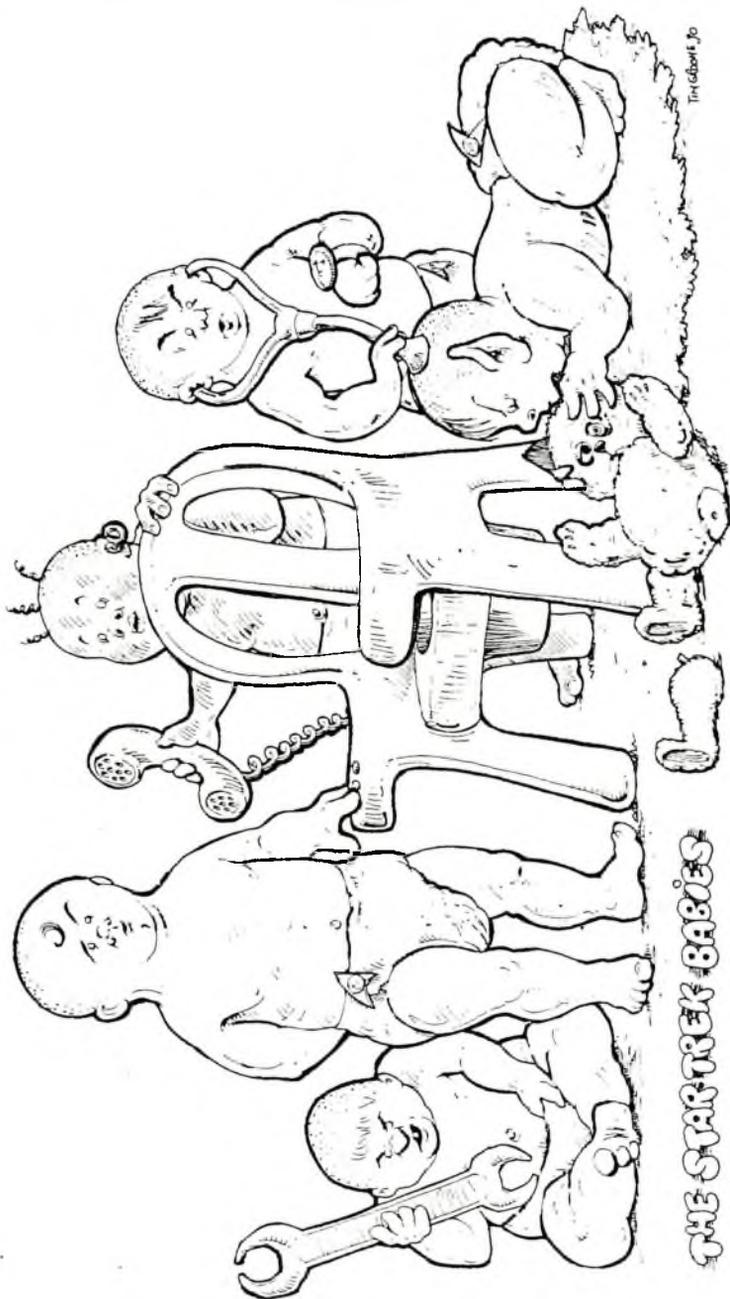
Permission was obtained for a dig, and several days later the object was revealed. It seemed to be in the shape of a huge wishbone, with a bulge in the centre containing weird instruments – and a metallic logbook or manual. Lettering or hieroglyphics were engraved on the inside of the curved arms. Linguistics experts deciphered these. Roughly translated, they read: "The Acme Planet Detector".

Ye Olde Shaggie Vampyre Storie

by Steve Jones

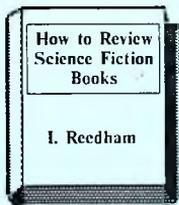
Charm was the man with the Vampire Eye (the result of a blood splash at an overenthusiastic staking). He had to keep a patch on it during the day of course, but its hypnotic properties more than made up for this petty inconvenience.

One evening he bewitched chaste Lady Zarifa, and led her dreamily to his bedchamber. Unfortunately, at their first embrace, he found that she had been eating garlic, which always made his Eye water. The enchantment broke, and startled she punched him in the Eye. This was bad enough, but then some bloody fool but a steak on it. . .



THE STAR TREK BABIES

by Tim Groome



Book Reviews

(The Rest of 'em)

N.B.: There are a number of reviews outstanding. Please, if you 'owe' any, get them to Mick A.S.A.P!

Sorry, no Jophan Report this month. Normal service will be resumed as soon as possible. . .

WARLORD OF HEAVEN by Adrian Cole; Unwin; 345 pages; £6.99 1ge paperback

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

This series, of which *Warlord of Heaven* is the third, inches towards a climax. The natives of Innasnorm prepare to do battle with the intruders who do not even know they are threatened. The story loops away from the anticipated bloodshed to follow Pyramors, one of the people who have fled to Innasnorm from the alien Czendook. Until now he has been a bit player, here he takes centre stage as he returns to the Czendook worlds in search of his lover who was left behind in the flight. Despite some gems of imagination this volume fails to excite. The characters do exactly what is expected of them and the hoped for surprises do not materialise. Disappointing.

THE CENTRE CANNOT HOLD by Brian Stableford; NEL; 304 pages; £9.99 paperback.

Reviewed by Tony Morton.

This third volume of the Asgard trilogy finds Rosseau et al having further problems within the macroworld. The conflict, they conclude, can only be solved by an expedition to the mystical "centre" - this in two spearheads: a "computer copy" or "software persona" biocopy of Rosseau is inserted into "software space", and the "real" variety via the levels. Here the story diversifies into the two trips undertaken until Rosseau finally reaches his goal - however the problem of the "baddies" getting there first arises, to provide the climax to the novel. Well told, and nice concepts litter this book - in fact the trilogy works well and scampers along its twisting way through many highs as Rosseau struggles with the hinderances in his path. This third volume wraps up the saga nicely and delivers the promises a good yarn should.

MASTERS OF SPACE by Robert Vardeman; NEL; 550 pages; £4.99 paperback.

Reviewed by Al Johnston.

Thick enough to destroy most household pests, this tome combines three volumes of good old L.C.O. space opera into one. Whether this is to save you the money for three books, or to stop you avoiding volumes two and three having shelled out on one is a moot point. The plot concerns the transformation of Barton Kinsalving from workaday planetary mining supervisor to Galactic Saviour. As this occurs more by good luck than good judgement, involving several *dei ex machina* and a monumentally incompetent "master assassin", the result is rather unsatisfying. The stereotypical characterisation and shallow treatment of the aliens do little to help, while the anticlimactic ending brings nightmare visions of sequels to come. As cerebral chewing gum for hanging round airports this will do fine. Otherwise avoid.

FORESTS OF THE NIGHT by Tanith Lee; Unwin; 299 pages; £3.99 paperback.

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

In a rich landscape precariously balanced between ripeness and decay, populated by creatures of folktale and myth, is where Tanith Lee operates. She is perhaps the most exquisite stylist writing fantasy today. In her stories, past, present and future are the same: innocence is always corrupted, danger always lurks and the characters are really ourselves seen through slightly distorting mirrors. This 20 story collection (8 new, 12 reprinted) is fattening food, to be consumed slowly at several sittings. While some tales are mere tit-bits, most are satisfying courses. It would be invidious to praise one story over others or to select a personal favourite, but since it's a reviewer's job to be invidious I'll mention "Black as a Rose", one of her Flat Earth stories, as being the most out-standing.

GYPSIES by Robert Charles Wilson; Orbit; 911 pages; £6.99 1ge paperback.

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

I'm sure we all wish we had special abilities, and when we were children perhaps we believed that we did. But adults don't really believe in such things. Karen, now grown up with a teenage son, can recall having strange powers when she was young - but she no longer gives them much credence. On the other hand, her son, Michael, does have such powers. And the same frightening man, dressed all in grey, who haunted her own childhood, is now threatening Michael. It's time for Karen to do what her parents so regularly did: move on elsewhere in present-day USA. Eventually, though, she has to confront her childhood nightmares and find out what she's been running from and why. This is a stunningly believable novel of parallel worlds, reminiscent of the early part of Roger Zelazny's *Nine Princes in Amber*, but better.

SUNFALL by C J Cherryh; Mandarin; 158 pages; £3.50 paperback.

Reviewed by Helen Wake.

Six stories from the old age of the world, capturing the atmosphere of six different cities after centuries of solitary development. Read them for poetry and philosophy rather than for the rollicking action of some of her books - but read them anyway. Powerful, moving and convincing.

STRANGE TOYS by Patricia Geary; Corgi; 248 pages; £2.99 paperback.

Reviewed by Al Johnston.

This modern-day fantasy won the Phillip K Dick award for Patricia Geary, and deservedly so. The penetrating mixture of real and unreal, sinister and mundane creates a powerful disturbing atmosphere. The story follows three key periods in the life of a young woman; when she is nine, sixteen and thirty. As if her life isn't tough enough anyway, with the family fleeing her elder sister's "friends" across the USA, Pat is also on the edge of the occult, possessing her sister's book, whose pages give glimpses of the future. At nine Pat trades the book for futile protection from a voodoo priest. As a sixteen year old orphan she hunts down her sister, involved with the same voodoo priest, to find a sacrifice ritual she must re-live at thirty to exorcise it and free herself from her past. Definitely off the beaten track, this is well worth reading.

CRYSTAL EXPRESS by Bruce Sterling; Legend; 317 pages; £12.99 Hardback.

Reviewed by Tony Morton.

A series of short stories published between 1982 and 1987, combined into a collection presented under three headings. Firstly, in "Shaper/Mechanist", there are five stories in the cyberpunk style; from "Swarm", a tale of manipulation of an alien race with unexpected consequences, to "Cicada Queen", about life on an artificial planetoid and the economic problems suffered by its collapse. The second section, "Science Fiction", has three stories set in the near future - "Green Days in Brunei", of life after the oil has run out, with isolationism from technological advancement in favour of tradition, stands out as a superb story. Lastly, "Fantasy Stories" gives a further four tales, which as can be guessed, take a fantasy line. Here "The Little Magic Shop" a story of an owner/customer relationship based around the extraordinary contents of some bottles, is well told and extremely enjoyable, as is "Flowers of Edo" a tale of Japan becoming industrialised. Overall, a very good collection, well balanced and well written, presented in (understandable) classified genre areas. Every story is readable and stands alone as a good yarn, this book is well worth buying.

THE EMPIRE OF FEAR by Brian Stableford; Pan; 520 pages; £7.99 1ge paperback.

Reviewed by Tony Morton.

A well researched alternative history set largely in the 17th century, with a difference that the "leaders" (kings, princes and their entourage) are vampires. Not of the Hammer movie variety I hasten to add, these vampires live everyday existences and require only a little "common" blood to survive. The story revolves around the Cordrey family; firstly, father Edmund killing off a senior vampire lady in Richard's court causing son Noell to flee and secondly, a long narrative of Noell's exploits - particularly in Africa, where the "source" of the vampire "curse" is believed to be. It seems Noell's idea is to turn all into vampires, thus reducing the aristocracy's power over "common man" (those who serve well are rewarded with "eternal life"). Several of the ideas in this story stand up well and overall it's not a bad tale - my one criticism is that it is overlong. At times the storyline lingers whistling to itself while the narrative rambles through tedious explanation slowing the action almost to a stop. The final section of the book, explaining the background found from archaeological study and "modern" science is well worked out to balance the "mystical" ideas from 17th century Europe and African myth. While in places an interesting story, the book's length did not maintain the momentum for me. For fantasy freaks only.

BEYOND LIES THE WUB by Philip K Dick; Grafton; 510 pages; £5.99 1ge paperback.

Reviewed by Mick Evans.

This is the first in a five volume series containing the complete shorter fiction of PKD. A lot of collectors will probably have many of them in some shape or form but it's a good idea to have them all easily accessible. It includes stories (some never collected before) written in a nine month period in 1951 & 1952 when Dick was in his early twenties and making his first impact as a writer. What I found to be an interesting aspect of this collection is the claim that the stories are arranged as closely as possible in chronological order and for this we can thank Paul Williams and Greg Rickman. There's a preface by Dick (a letter written in 1981), an interesting introduction by Roger Zelazny and notes and comments by Dick in the back (most of these have been in print before). Many of these stories I'd read before and still found they retained their early charm, there are a few that seem dated and some delightful surprises. The stories are lighter than his later work although they already contain his idiosyncratic world view which was to flower in his novels. I think it would be wrong to claim that this is the best of Dick, that would be unfair on his marvellous work to come, although in his notes Dick says of "Roog":- "I love this story, and I doubt if I write any better today than I did in 1951 when I wrote it, I just write longer". This is a good collection with care and attention to detail by its compilers and well worth having, Roger Zelazny says of Dick in his introduction "he is possessed of a sense of humor for which I am unable to locate an appropriate adjective" I can only agree with that and recommend this book.