

BRUM GROUP NEWS

August
1991

Issue
239

The monthly Newsletter of the BIRMINGHAM SCIENCE FICTION GROUP

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

1991 Committee: Group Chairman - Chris Chivers Secretary & Twentycon Chair - Helena Bowles
Treasurer - Richard Standage Newsletter Editor - Martin Tudor Reviews Editor - Mick Evans
Ordinary Committee Member - Bernie Evans Publicity Officer - Al Johnston
Novacon 21 Chairman - Nick Mills

Our guest speaker this month is
FREDA WARRINGTON

Freda Warrington finished her first novel, *BLACKBIRD IN SILVER*, in 1976 but it took three years of rejection slips before she found herself an agent in 1979 and a further four years before the book was accepted by New English Librery. The original *BLACKBIRD IN SILVER* was split in two and partly re-written before appearing both under its own title and as *BLACKBIRD IN AMBER*.

Since then Freda has had a third "Blackbird" fantasy published, *BLACKBIRD IN WAITING*, and more recently the much acclaimed *THE RAINBOW GATE* was published in paperback (NEL, £3.99). The last time Freda spoke to the group was in February 1988.

NEW VENUE: THE AUSTRALIAN BAR

The BSGF meets on the third Friday of every month (unless otherwise notified) at *THE AUSTRALIAN BAR*, Hurst Street/Bromsgrove Street, Birmingham city centre at 7.45pm. Subscription rates: £6.00 per person, or £9.00 for two members at the same addresss.

Cheques etc. payable to the BSGF, via the Treasurer, **RICHARD STANDAGE** at meetings or by post c/o **MICK EVANS** (address below).

Book Reviews to **MICK EVANS** at 121 Cape Hill, Smethwick, Warley, West Midlands, B66 4SH (021 558 0997).

All other contributions and enquiries to:

MARTIN TUDOR, 845 Alum Rock Road, Ward End, Birmingham, B8 2AG (021 327 3023).

The Jophan Report by Martin Tudor

The 44th Jophan Report.

Dr Jack Cohen has been in touch to apologise in advance for being unable to attend Novacon 21. Unfortunately for us, but not for him, he will be spending two weeks in California helping Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle with the sequel to *LEGACY OF HEROT*, he is also working on a novel with Steven Barnes.

If anyone fancies a trip to the USSR in September this year please contact Chris Chivers. Chris is thinking of attending Volgacon (8-14 September) which is to be held in a tourist hotel overlooking the Volga.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

16 AUGUST - The first BSFG meeting at the Australian Bar, Hurst St./Bromsgrove St., Birmingham city centre's "China Town" area. Meeting begins at 7.45pm in the function room upstairs, the speaker this month is fantasy author FREDA WARRINGTON.

23-26 AUGUST - MASQUERADE '91, the first major *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST* con, Grand Hotel, Birmingham. Attending £25.00. For details send SAE to: Jacqui Clarke, 12 Jessop Close, Leasingham, Sleaford, Lincs., NG34 8LJ.

7 SEPTEMBER - NASS '91, the first ever National Astronomy & Spaceflight Show, in the Paradise Circus Complex, off Chamberlain Square, Birmingham city centre. Lecture tickets £5 include admission to all lectures plus the Exhibition. Exhibition only £2 (pay on the day to see the Exhibition only), LECTURE TICKETS by advance booking only - call Stuart Williams on (0922) 406411 after 7pm to reserve your Lecture ticket.

7 SEPTEMBER - Birmingham Comic Mart at the Carrs Lane Church Centre, just off High Street near Marks & Spencers in the city centre. Opens midday. Details: Golden Orbit, 18 Nelson Street, York, YO3 7NJ.

20 SEPTEMBER - ANNE GAY, author of *MINDSAIL*, talks to the BSFG in the month that her second novel, *THE BROOCH OF AZURE MIDNIGHT* is published (Macdonald, £12.95). Meeting begins at 7.45pm in the Australian Bar, Hurst St./Bromsgrove St. in Birmingham city centre's "China Town" area.

18 OCTOBER - KEN CAMPBELL, renowned theatrical director and bit part actor, will (hopefully) be talking to the BSFG (to be confirmed closer to the date). Meeting begins at 7.45pm in the Australian Bar, Hurst St./Bromsgrove St. in Birmingham city centre.

1-3 NOVEMBER - NOVACON 21, the annual convention organized by the BSFG at the Excelsior Hotel, Coventry Road (by the Cargo Airport). GoH COLIN GREENLAND. Attending £15.00, although membership is FREE to anyone who has attended ALL of the first 20 Novacons. Cheques made payable to "Novacon 21" should be sent to: BERNIE EVANS, 121 Cape Hill, Smethwick, Warley, West Mids., B66 4SH.

15 NOVEMBER - The BSFG's annual debate with a team from the Birmingham University SF & Fantasy Society. Meeting begins at 7.45pm in the Australian Bar, Hurst St./Bromsgrove St. in Birmingham city centre.

20 DECEMBER - No "formal" BSFG meeting this month, although there will be a Christmas meal at the Wagon & Horses in Oldbury. Space is limited so you will need to book early. Watch this space for further details.

17 JANUARY 1992 - BSFG AGM and Auction to raise money for the Group. If you have any Auction material please contact a committee member.

FEBRUARY 1992 - GREG BEAR has been in touch to say that he would like to speak to us this month. Further details as they are confirmed.

Thank-you to all contributors to this issue of the newsletter, especially Dave Langford for his Drabble, Dave Hardy for the DTP headings, Stuart Williams for the map and Paul Vincent for his con report.

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TWENTYCON

Report by Paul Vincent

The Birmingham Science Fiction Group's twentieth anniversary bash looks set to have been the year's most exclusive convention, a distinction almost as dubious as it was unintentional. The good news is that those brave few who battled the stormy waves of apathy were rewarded by a deftly-run, smile-inducing relaxacon. Having spent seven years away from the convention scene, I found myself nostalgically reminded of Ye Olde Silicons, largely due to the unhurried pace, the absence of multi-threaded programming and the cosy, intimate scale of the con. Or perhaps I spent too much time looking through Pam Wells' wonderful rose-tinted spectacles...

...For the con's greatest strength - its intimacy - was also its primary problem. Twentycon was heavily under-attended to the extent of falling 80 bodies short of its break-even point. I believe the final tally reached about 120, which raises a few interesting statistical questions. The souvenir booklet yields the factoid that BSFG membership has hovered just under the 200 mark for a number of years - in which case, where were they? This, after all, was their group's twentieth birthday party. I'd hazard a guess that at least 20 non-members were present (almost certainly more), which implies that at least 50% of BSFG members have little time for such frivolities as birthday parties. Perhaps the committee chose the wrong flavour of jelly and ice-cream. Or perhaps the prospective TwentyfiveCon committee would do well to spend part of the next five years pondering the subtle difference between sf readers and sf fans.

With this one major exception, it was difficult to fault the convention in any other respects. Both guests of honour acquitted themselves well, Harry Harrison taking the opportunity to refine his Larry Niven impression to still-higher peaks of perfection, whilst Anne Gay was a particularly appropriate choice, being the BSFG's first home-grown fan turned pro novelist. In fact, at times it seemed the pros outnumbered the fans, lured no doubt by the free drinks at Andromeda's epic multi-author signing party on the Friday night.

There were anecdote-inducing incidents aplenty. "Call My Bluff" panelist Jack Cohen confidently dismissed a definition involving recursive lifeforms as a bluff, since he'd invented them all and this wasn't one of them; oh yes it was! Meanwhile, Graham Joyce

evoked his own novel *DREAMSIDE* when he awoke in a steam-filled bedroom whose air-conditioning unit was emitting cascades of boiling water.

Perhaps the real star of Twentycon was the Holiday Inn itself. Staff were friendly and helpful, cheap food was good and varied, breakfasts were vast and the range of obscure bottled beers brought dazed smiles to the face of many a seasoned beer-hunter (well, to this one at any rate). Good grief, could this really be an sf con hotel? Alas, the answer to that one is probably "Not again"; with inexorable logic, the woefully low attendance by implication meant equally low bar sales, food sales and so on. I doubt they'll believe projected membership figures for any future science fiction con until time and changes of manager erase the memory.

[As Paul says above, despite the disappointing turnout from Bruu Group members Twentycon was a success. However, as 48% of our current membership failed to join the convention it did make a loss. Further details will be published as soon as they are available. If you did not attend Twentycon you may be interested in buying a copy of the Souvenir Booklet - available from Martin Tudor for £2.00.]

THE DRABBLE COLUMN

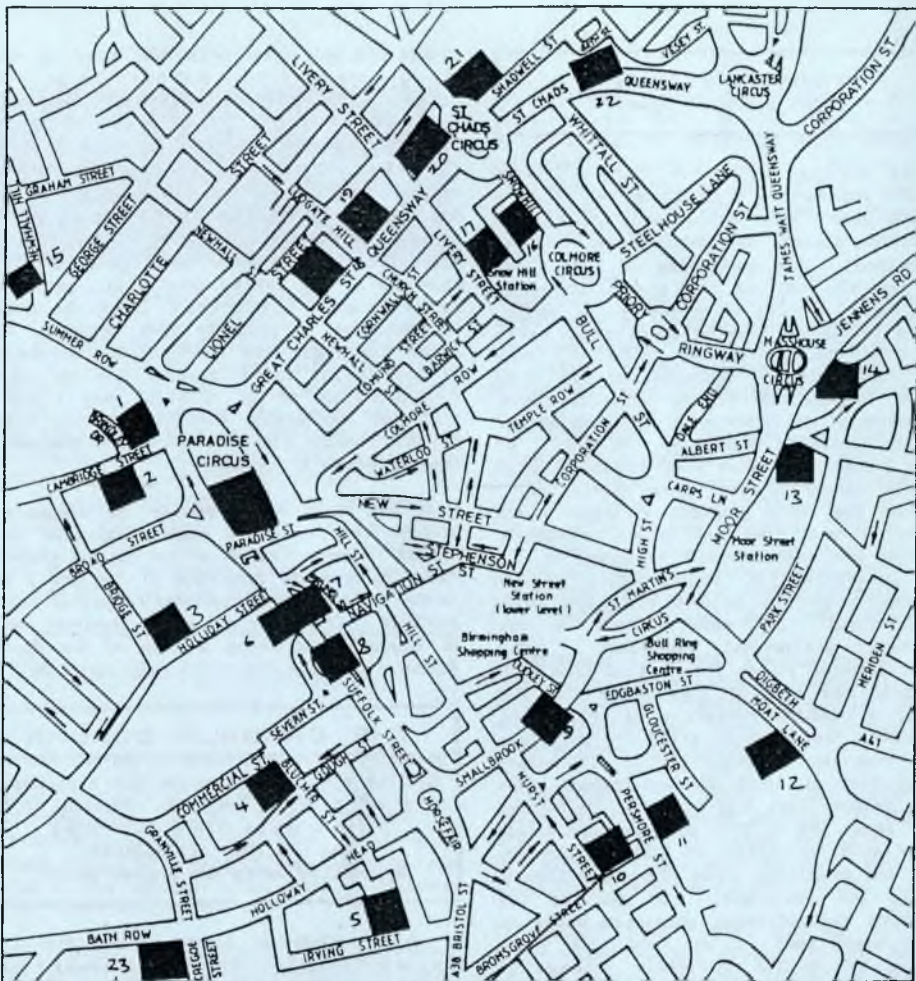
DRABBLE RULES: "One hundred words' must be EXACTLY one hundred words: not a syllable more, not a letter less. In addition, up to fifteen words (title, sub-titles and the like) are allowed. Hyphenated-words-are-argued-about."

A Drabble Inspired by Exceedingly Vague Memories of Twentycon's Call My Bluff Game

by Dave Langford

Sipping her steaming mug of *qujadin*, she stared out across the lush *pelki* with its gambolling flocks of *varelse*. Before another *quantch* had elapsed, she would have to make her move and tackle the problem of the *rown*. Adjusting the strap of her *periboob* and pulling on her *webbies*, she pondered the terrible situation of this entire *fratrin*. Could diplomacy save humanity's *deodand* even now, or must everything be abandoned to the *glotch*? Already the dread *sipstrassi* were massing for their attack...

"Oh *derg*," she swore. "I can't understand a word of this. It must be an early Cherryh novel."



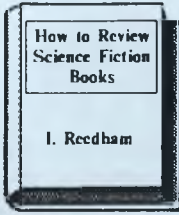
KEY TO CAR PARKS

*Multi-Storey Car Parks

- | | | | |
|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Brindley Drive* | 7. Brunel Street* | 12. Moat Lane* | 18. Gt. Charles Street |
| 2. Civic Centre | 8. Royal Mail Street | 13. Albert Street | 19. Ludgate Hill |
| 3. Holiday Street* | 9. Dudley Street | 14. Masshouse Circus | 20. Lionel Street |
| 4. Blucher Street | 10. Hurst Street | 15. Newhall Hill | 21. St. Chads Circus |
| 5. Irving Street | 11. Pershore Street* | 16. Snow Hill | 22. Bath Street |
| 6. Navigation Street | | 17. Livery Street* | 23. Cregoe Street |

**THE AUSTRALIAN BAR,
ON THE CORNER OF
HURST STREET &
BROMSGROVE STREET.**

Entering through the Lounge Bar you walk through to the stairs, past the bar on your right, our Function Room is Upstairs.



Book Reviews

DREAM WEAVER by Jonathan Wylie
Corgi, 655 pp, £4.99 p/b

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

Despite its massive size, this is a refreshing change. Wylie has moved away from the fantasy world of the previous two trilogies that had grown into the conception. This is good because the authors (Jonathan Wylie is Mark and Julia Smith) have developed their storytelling skills since that first book *THE FIRST NAMED*, volume one in the "Servants of Ark" trilogy. They have also learned to develop character better, though their focal characters are still young people in or not long out of adolescence.

The principle characters here are Rebecca, only daughter of the Baron of Edge, her friend Emer and Galen, Emer's paramour. The two girls are very different in temperament (almost conventionally so), Rebecca being quiet and restrained while Emer is headstrong and rebellious. The castle of Edge is situated on the shore of a vast sea of salt crystals. Thousands of years ago the salt had buried a city - a cross between Sodom and Gormorrah and Atlantis.

The story begins when Rebecca is informed by her father that she is to be married. Not only does she object to this on principle, but the rumours she has heard about her intended do not inspire trust. The moment she meets him seem to justify her doubts. In an attempt to get out of the proposed marriage, Rebecca discovers an old custom. The groom, Cranne, must win his bride in a public chess game, something which annoys him but he is assured is merely a formality. Rebecca needs to make sure that Cranne loses, but that it should seem to be an accident. Between them she, Galen and Emer rig up a series of signals so that she, as the queen to be captured, can direct Galen, as the Queen's Champion, on the moves to make. When their plans seem to be going wrong, something else seems to take over - Rebecca falls into a trance and linked with Galen and Emer causes the desired outcome. This is a signal for the start of far more sinister

events. Cranne and his father, defeated in this particular plan to take control of the Castle forment open rebellion against the king ; Galen forced to flee from Cranne's wrath at the end of the game agrees to become a spy and cross the salt as an archeologist ; Rebecca explores the dreams she has been having since a child and discovers the magic in them. Parrrtly this magic is the ability to shape events and partly it allows her to gather information that she needs to solve the problems that beset her world.

Although *DREAMWEAVER* has familiar elements - good versus evil, riddles to solve, romance, cyclical history, it also has its delightful moments. I don't think it gives too much away to say that three of the archeologists that Galen travels with, by the names of Peyton, Milner and Holmes end their part of the story by running a hostelry by the name of "The Drunken Dragon." The whole book may be classed as a good read. It has pace, the plot is sufficiently complex to satisfy most readers and although there may not be a great deal of depth to it it leaves a satisfying aftertaste.

CATFACE by Clifford D Simak
Mandarin, 251 pp, £3.99, p/b

Reviewed by Chris Chivers.

Asa Steele's farm was just like any other. Until his dog Bowser started to turn up with fresh dinosaur bones. Asa's apple orchard also concealed the remains of an alien spacecraft. Bowser with Asa's friend Hirem had managed to make contact with a surviving alien, who was the key to breaks in the fabric of time.

Clifford D Simak has, over the years, produced a variety of totally unique science fiction stories. The setting for this story is an area of the USA which modern life has overlooked. Peopled with characters that could have come from any small hillbilly town, with a lifestyle all their own, and where anything is possible.

CATFACE, first published in 1978, has all the hallmarks of one of Simak's classic tales. The reader slips comfortably into the yarn as one would with a favourite overcoat.

THE BONE FOREST by Robert Holdstock
Grafton, 229 pp, £13.99, h/b

An excellent collection of eight stories from Holdstock, including a 'new' Mythago novella - "The Bone Forest". The title story explores the wood with George Huxley, father to Steven and Christian. It lays the foundations for

what follows in *MTHAGO WOOD*, with the writing of the journal and Huxley's discoveries. Wonderfully told and superbly written.

This, of course, does not overshadow the seven other stories in the collection. Holdstock's grasp of myth, legend and human nature forms a nucleus from which he leads the reader through adventure, fear and wonder leaving you gasping at it all. "Thorn" tells of a stone mason's work on a new church and the influence of the 'old ways' on him, presenting a superb insight into the jealous ways of man. "The Shapechanger" follows the apprentice of a shaman in ancient England with startling results. Each tale is well told, with elegant pace.

This collection is a worthy addition to any bookcase. Very highly recommended.

FACE OF THE WATERS by Robert Silverberg
Grafton, 348 pp, £13.99 h/b

Reviewed by Carol Morton.

This novel is about a rag-tag group of Earthmen stranded on the water planet Hydros. There is no starport on Hydros, so there is no return. The Earthmen survive on small fabricated islands, made and inhabited by a bipedal aquatic humanoid species native to the planet. But their existence is under sufferance, and when one man causes the deaths of three aquatic mammals known as divers, all the humans on the island are told to leave. They make their way across the planet-wide oceans, encountering a myriad of exotic, and in some cases intelligent, aquatic animals. All other human settlements refuse to accept them into their communities, so they set sail again for the only permanent land mass, known as the Face of the Waters, which is sacred to the natives and out of bounds to humans.

An interesting idea this, the aquatic creatures are particularly inventive, but the ending of the story is so reminiscent of the ending to *DOWNWARD TO THE EARTH* that the whole thing falls a trifle flat. Different, but disappointing. Only for completists.

DREAMS OF AN UNSEEN PLANET

by Teresa Plowright
Grafton, 348 pp, £3.99, p/b

Reviewed by Chris Chivers.

Gaea, home of the Ventura space colony, turned out to be far stranger than the first probes had led Earth to believe. The planet exerts a subtle influence over the colonists, initially cutting them off from their mother world by altering the atmosphere around the

planet. Then the colonists' reproduction rate rapidly declines, and a form of hysteria starts to spread through the colony.

Miera, one of the botanical workers in the colony's life support plant, starts to suffer from unexplained dreams that seems to indicate that the planet Gaea is a living entity in its own right.

Teresa Plowright's first outing into the science fiction field is an unusual novel, that seems to suffer from Ms Plowright's feminist leanings. The story line is told in a very credible manner, but the reader gets the feeling that the book has a political bias towards the far left. This has the affect of ruining what could have been a good science fiction novel.

THE QUIET WOMAN by Chris Priest

Abacus, 286 pp, £4.99, "C" format p/b

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Here Priest continues with the subtlety of narration and the ambiguity of genre which characterized his two previous novels, *THE AFFIRMATION* and *THE GLAMOUR*. A middle-aged author, Alice Stockton, seems to be the victim of a security cover-up. Her latest biography has been seized by the Home Office for uncertain reasons. Her neighbour and best friend (Eleanor Hamilton) in the Wiltshire village where she lives alone with a cat, has apparently been murdered. Eleanor's son attends her funeral - except that she had never mentioned a son and he seems to hate her. This is certainly a psychological thriller, tense and fast-moving. It has elements of SF in its background - pollution of southern England by a French Chernobyl-type accident and enough small differences to make one believe that it's set in an alternate world very similar to our own. But can the reader believe everything that appears to happen? At least some of the events are the subjective fantasies of one of the characters. A clever and fascinating read, well above the level of most sf.

THE DRAGON IN THE STONE by Allan Scott

Orbit, 301 pp, £3.99 p/b

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

This is a mixture of fantasy and horror and owes a lot to the Grendel legend from *BEOWULF*. Peter Brockman is a young American who is looking up his ancestors in a Danish churchyard when he discovers an old man lying injured on an ancient grave-mound. By seeking help for him he becomes involved in the struggle between light and dark elves. On the

surface it might appear that this is a familiar story. It is, but the way the plot is handled, and the unexpected twists that are included, make this particular version different. It has a lot of action, it has good versus evil, but it might just awaken a few jaded palates.

I SING THE BODY ELECTRIC by Ray Bradbury
Grafton, 331 pp, £3.99 p/b

Reviewed by Tony Morton.

A re-issued volume of Bradbury's short stories, covering 30 years to 1977. Unfortunately, the majority of these stories have failed to age well, and come over as uninspired. There are exceptions, notably the title story, "I Sing the Body Electric", which tells of a 'robot' and its effect upon three motherless children with poignant insight, and "Night Call, Collect" which considers the lonely vigil of a man stranded alone on Mars.

Three other stories are worth a mention. "Any Friend of Nicholas Nickleby's is a Friend of Mine", exploring peoples expectations of one another; "The Man in the Rorschach Shirt", offers a dig at psychiatry and how to be patient (sic) and "The Lost City of Mars" provides an sf view of how Bradbury sees Martian cities and how they may survive after the populace has gone. Overall not a classic collection, one or for Bradbury fans only.

PRINCE IVAN by Peter Morwood
Legend, 279 pp, £3.99 p/b

Reviewed by Carol Morton.

This story is set in a parallel Russia during the Middle-Ages, a world where magic works. It concerns Prince Ivan, born late in the life of, and heir to, the Tsar of Khorlov. The Tsardom is a small one surrounded by avaricious enemies. The Tsar has three daughters and one son, who must all marry well to protect his realm. Three powerful wizards appear in turn, each bringing valuable bride-gifts, and marry the daughters. With the assistance of his new brothers-in-law Ivan meets, falls in love with and marries, Mari'ya, ruling Princess, battle leader of her people and a powerful sorceress. While Mari'ya is away leading her armies, Ivan wanders her kremlin and, despite being warned, opens a cell door and releases Koshchey the Undying - a very powerful sorcerer, who escapes and kidnaps Mari'ya. Ivan only has one moon to rescue his wife, or she will be Koshchey's prisoner for eternity.

This is a lightweight readable story not requiring much in the way of concentration,

almost a fairy tale, but set in an unusual fantasy location.

WALKER OF WORLDS by Tom De Haven
ROC, 342 pp, £6.99 "C" format p/b

Reviewed by David T Cooper.

Tom De Haven is one of Harlan Ellison's favourite authors but this book is one of those Byron Preiss productions (oh dear !) and it shows.

The story concerns two universes, ours and another, where magic works. The universes are in trouble. An evil mage (who else ?) has unlocked the door which will lead to the end of the Whole of Creation. Jack, a Walker (someone who can move between the universes) and his wasp have discovered this. They are on their way to tell the King when they are accosted. They escape into our universe and gather about them various companions (who are all tied together in this universe by the major sub-plot involving drugs and pharmaceutical companies). Jack, with his companions, crosses back to his universe and saves the day.

The book is packaged as fantasy, unfortunately the author is not a fantasy writer. The contemporary scenes which make up most of the book are gritty and "real". The fantasy scenes are almost caricature, flat and unconvincing, which means that as a whole the narrative is unbalanced.

Also disconcerting is the strong American style which occasionally intrudes into the story - particularly the usage of such words as "winterize" and "macadamized". The author also misuses the word "oubliette" where he means "cell".

The story ends a chapter short, most of the plot lines are left flapping - to be picked up in book two, I presume. If you really want this, wait until the standard paperback comes out.

THE FOLK OF THE FRINGE by Orson Scott Card
Legend, 301 pp, £3.99, p/b

Reviewed by Chris Chivers.

In America's future, after World War III, people are having to re-learn all the old skills of the original pioneers. Only six missiles flew in the war, but they were enough to smash the old way of life for America's citizens. Jamie Teague makes a precarious living out of scavenging bits and pieces from the old cities which were abandoned as civilisation broke down. On one of his return trips he comes across a group of people who are making their way to the

Mormon stronghold of Salt Lake City. The subsequent journey through the heart of the USA makes up one of the five loosely interlinked stories in this novel.

Unfortunately Card has inserted an advert for the Mormon religion into this standard post-holocaust story, thus spoiling what could have been a good collection of stories.

TEMPS devised by Neil Gaiman & Alex Stewart

ROC, 354 pp, £4.50

Reviewed by Carol Morton

This is a series of short stories concerning individuals who have, or discover they have, Paranormal powers. Not only the 'mundane' abilities to teleport or perform telekinesis, but the more bizarre talents such as invisibility, the ability to be bullet-proof and strangest of all to be able to turn into a frog! These 'talents' are supposed to register themselves with the Department of Paranormal Resources, they are then paid a pittance by the DPP to hold themselves in readiness to undertake assignments for the Government - hence 'temps'.

The stories are all (with one glaring exception) great yarns, particularly "Leaks" by Dave Langford. This tells of Ken Varney who is sent to investigate what appears to be a blackmail threat against the motor pool (!) at the nuclear centre on Robinson Heath. The blackmail note turns out to be a ruse to get a 'temp' into the hands of a mad professor for dissection and study. This story is told with Langford's inimitable style, wit and tongue-in-cheek humour, great stuff. "Frog Day Afternoon" is an admirable pastiche that puts me in mind of some of those 50s B movies. It has terrorists, a medium and our hapless hero trying to save London using his ability to turn into a frog.

"Pitbull Brittan" by Jack Yeovil (*otherwise known as Kim Newman*) is the one story in the collection that I did not like (and that is putting it mildly). The story concerns one Richard Lionheart Brittan, who by raising his blood pressure can turn himself bullet-proof, this unique ability has one drawback - unless he can get "sexual relief" he will explode. What I found so unacceptable about this story was the coy references to 'sexual relief' after the lengthy, repeated and unnecessary descriptions of his genitalia. Also the callous and off-hand manner in which Brittan's supposed boon companions are killed makes for a most unsavoury tale. I'm no prude but this story revolted me.

Back to the good stuff. "The String Man" is a whimsical tale of one man's revenge against the woman who spurned him and how her children and descendants now have little or no affinity for gravity. "The College Spirit" by Storm Constantine has three disparate and newly discovered talents undergoing training at one of the department's establishments. Possibly the best story is the last "A Lonely Impulse" by Roz Kaveny which tells of Carrie, a lesbian, finding she has the ability to

fly. When discovered she is used by the department in a high profile PR job but jealousy of her talent causes attempts on her life. Carrie then uses her flying to protect women from street thugs with little thanks.

In the main this is a wonderful series of tales, but the thing that welds them together is the short (one or two page) vignettes which appear between each of the stories, instilling the belief in the reader that there really are such talents in our world. I particularly liked the "20 Things You Never Knew About The Temps" à la the *SUN* newspaper. Apart from "Pitbull Brittan" this is a collection of exceptional quality. Buy this and be prepared for a real treat.

SKINNY LEGS AND ALL by Tom Robbins

Bantam, £5.99,

Reviewed by William McCabe

OK, so this is a mainstream novel and has no real place in an sf group's newsletter, but if some people out there will drop their prejudices for a moment I'll explain. There are a lot of mainstream writers nowadays who use throwaway ideas that stretch the imagination further than the logical progressions of sf, and this is one of them. This guy is one of the best.

A lot of this novel has to do with its structure - a dance of the seven veils, a slow process of revelation with each veil revealing one more of the great mysteries (not that we didn't know about these mysteries already). Each of these is represented in several ways throughout. And of course there's a plot.

The plot involves the relationship of Ellen Cherry Charles and Boomer Petway, who are brought together when Boomer creates a work of art out of a mobile home and Ellen ceases to be an artist. It also involves the great journey of five characters from the southern USA to Jerusalem, which is made more difficult because these five (Painted Stick, Conch Shell, Spoon, Can O'Beans and Dirty Sock) are inanimate objects trying to get there under their own steam. And of course there's a whole lot else.

The story is told with a style and humour that comic fantasy writers like Pratchett and Asprin can only dream of.

Re-issued with this are *JITTERBUG PERFUME*, Robbins' last novel with the Greek God Pan working as a janitor and *EVEN COUGHTS GET THE BLUES*, a book so successful that they even try to sell Robert Silverberg novels on the strength of it.

[A WORD FROM BERNIE EVANS: "I don't know why you say this is "out of place". Quite apart from the fact that the boundaries between fantasy, sf and 'mainstream' are blurred these days (witness Chris Priest and Graham Joyce to name but two), unsolicited reviews of enjoyable books, that we may otherwise have missed, are always an asset. We could do with more of them, from ALL of you."]