

# BRUM GROUP NEWS

January 1993

Issue 256

The monthly newsletter of the Birmingham Science Fiction Group  
(Honorary Presidents: Brian W Aldiss & Harry Harrison)

GROUP CHAIRMAN - TONY MORTON, SECRETARY - CAROL MORTON, NEWSLETTER EDITOR - MARTIN TUDOR,  
TREASURER - RICHARD STANDAGE, REVIEWS EDITOR - BERNIE EVANS, PUBLICITY OFFICER - POSITION VACANT,  
ORDINARY MEMBER - MICK EVANS, NOVACON 22 CHAIRMAN - HELENA BOWLES.

## THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE BSFG WILL BEGIN AT 8.00PM ON Friday 15th January 1993 Admittance: FREE

If time allows the AGM will be followed by an Auction in aid of the BSFG.  
Donations of books and any other material you feel might be of interest is  
encouraged.

See inside for Agenda, Standing Orders, Constitution and Minutes of 1992 AGM.

The BSFG meets at 7.45pm on the 3rd Friday of every month (unless otherwise notified) in the upstairs function room of the White Lion, corner of Thorp Street and Horsefair/Bristol Street in Birmingham city centre. The annual subscription rates (which include twelve copies of this newsletter and reduced price entry to meetings) are nine pounds per person, or twelve pounds for 2 members at the same address. Cheques etc. payable to "the Birmingham Science Fiction Group", via the treasurer Richard Standage at meetings or by post c/o Bernie Evans (address below). Book reviews and review copies should be sent to the reviews editor Bernie Evans, 121 Cape Hill, Smethwick, Warley, West Midlands, B66 4SH (tel: 021 558 0997). All other contributions and enquiries regarding the Brum Group News to: Martin Tudor, 845 Alum Rock Road, Birmingham, B8 2AG (tel: 021 327 3023).

**THE  
CHAIRMAN'S  
BIT**

by Tony Morton

Somewhat surprised at winning the chairmanship considering the relative success of 1991, I took on the job only to be put in early with a 'special' meeting. I could call this the year of the special meeting. For my first meeting as chairman there was GREG BEAR, who actually asked to come to see us, this was followed by the regular meeting with JOHN BRUNNER (hosted by Chris Morgan), there were also specials in May - TERRY PRATCHETT, and September - KIM STANLEY ROBINSON. Not bad really getting 15 meetings in one year (including the AGM and Christmas Party). An interesting mix throughout the year provided me with plenty to research and hopefully variety for the Group.

Okay I *didn't* get too many meetings to run "on time" - unless you use the British Rail interpretation, in which case ALL meetings started "on time".

Throughout the year I have noticed one or two things I feel need changing, for this purpose (and hopefully to improve the BSFG) I am making two proposals: Firstly an amendment to the constitution to make the Reviews Editor a 'full' member of the Committee - I will give my reasons for this at the AGM ; and secondly, to introduce a "young person" membership (14-18 year olds) to widen the Group's base.

There have been one or two unhelpful suggestions throughout the year, but mostly constructive proposals have made it (for me) an eventful year. And yes, on the strength of that - and the arm twisting, I intend to stand again for re-election as Chairman for 1993.

1992 began by my handing over to Chris Morgan for the JOHN BRUNNER meeting and strangely ended with me doing exactly the same thing at the November debate (which of course we won), funny how these things happen - and thanks Chris for your help and for making my life a *little* easier!

Considering the on-going recession and people's economic situation, a surprisingly good year - enough people came to each meeting to allow us to at least break even on

costs. Hopefully this was due to members spreading the word, our Publicity Officer (Al Johnston - retired) doing sterling work prior to his move to Newcastle (thanks Al you've been missed) and the rest of the Committee helping out since.

I must thank the Committee for their work during the year, they've all worked hard and well, and the brainstorming sessions during the Committee meetings had to be experienced to be believed! Thanks for all your efforts Bernie, Martin, Richard, Helena, Mick and, of course, Carol - who has to put up with me anyway!

**PLATFORM:**

**Richard Standage  
- Treasurer**

If I am re-elected as Treasurer for a further year, I will endeavour to maintain the repayments on my Porche and Spanish villa. I will also be able to meet all my paternity suits and commence some rather tempting off-shore investments that my broker has been recommending recently. Oh yeah, and I might just do the BSFG accounts.

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Personal opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the committee or the membership of the Birmingham Science Fiction Group.

All text by Martin Tudor except where stated otherwise. This publication was printed on the WAVE photocopier. Many thanks this issue to STAN ELING for his puzzle, CHRIS MORGAN, ROB WHITMORE, MOHAMMED TARIQ, BERNIE EVANS, STEVE JONES & STEPHEN BILLINGS for having a go at the puzzle. Thanks also to BERNIE EVANS for typing the Book Reviews, all of our reviewers, RICHARD STANDAGE for his platform, TONY MORTON for his Chairman's bit, AL JOHNSTON for his Phannish Fizzicks and TONY BERRY for the use of his spare room.

## FORTHCOMING EVENTS

22 JANUARY 1993: TOM HOLT, author of the comic fantasies *EXPECTING SOMEONE TALLER*, *WHO'S AFRAID OF BEOWULF?*, *FLYING DUTCH*, *YE GODS!* and *OVERTIME*, will be speaking to the BSFG at the White Lion, 7.45 for 8pm.

23 JANUARY 1993: TOM HOLT will be signing copies of *YE GODS!* and *OVERTIME* at Andromeda, 84 Suffolk Street, Birmingham, from noon. Call 021 643 1999 for details of this and other signing sessions.

23 JANUARY - 6 FEBRUARY 1993: *DRACULA IS UNDEAD AND WELL AND LIVING IN PURFLEET* by Charles McKeown, "Gothic humour, vampire bats, blood, beautiful young girls! Will Count Dracula triumph? Will the lovely Mina escape his clutches? Or is it already too late?" Crescent Theatre, Cumberland Street, Brindley Place, Birmingham. Call (021) 643 5858 for further details.

28 JANUARY 1993: ANNE RICE will be signing copies of *THE TALE OF THE BODY THIEF*, fourth in the Vampire Lestat series at Andromeda, 84 Suffolk Street, Birmingham, from 11.30am. Call 021 643 1999 for details of this and other signing sessions.

26-28 MARCH 1993: *TREK DWARF*. Combined *STAR TREK / RED DWARF* con. NOTE: change of date. The venue is the Holiday Inn, Leicester. GOHs (etc): Mike Okuda, Richard Arnold, Guy Vardaman, Mike Butcher, Adrian Riglesford. Membership limit of 500. Write to 47 Marsham, Orton Goldhay, Peterborough, PE2 5RN.

8-12 APRIL 1993: *HELICON 93*. 44th British national sf con, combined with the 1993 Eurocon. Hotel de France, St Helier, Jersey. GOHs: John Brunner, George R R Martin. FGOH: Larry van der Putte. Attending £28.00, Supporting and children's attending (age 8-14 years) both £14.00. Contact: 63 Drake Road, Chessington, Surrey, KT9 1LQ.

16-18 APR 1993: *SMOFCON 10*. First non-US venue for this annual relaxcon. Same site and contact address as Helicon, listed above.

19-24 APRIL 1993: *RETURN TO THE FORBIDDEN PLANET* will be showing at the Grand Theatre, Wolverhampton. If you are interested in seeing this production in the company of

other BSFG members please contact MARTIN TUDOR, 845 Alum Rock Road, Birmingham, B8 2AG, by Saturday 23 JANUARY AT THE LATEST! He needs to know which date you would prefer, and if there is sufficient interest will make a block booking for the most convenient date.

28-31 MAY 1993: *MEXICON V*. "Straight" science fiction con. St Nicholas Hotel, Scarborough. Contact: Bernie Evans, 121 Cape Hill, Smethwick, Warley, B66 4SH.

5-7 NOVEMBER 1993: *NOVACON 23* the Brum Group's own sf con, hopefully at the Royal Angus hotel in the city centre. GOH Stephen Baxter. Attending membership costs £20 until Easter 1993, then £25 until 1st October and £30 on the door. Supporting membership is £8.00 (please note that this will NOT automatically reserve an attending place, but it WILL ensure receipt of all of the convention's publications and entitle you to vote in the Novas). Although the hotel has agreed to increase the membership ceiling from 300 to 350 people the committee advises you to register early, as they will if necessary turn people away on the door. Further details from Bernie Evans, 121 Cape Hill, Smethwick, Warley, West Midlands, B66 4SH (tel: 021-558-0997).

1-4 APRIL 1994: *SOU'WESTER*. 45th UK national sf con. Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool. GOHs: Diane Duane, Neil Gaiman, Barbara Hambly, Peter Morwood. Attending £20.00 (£18.00 discount for pre-supporting members). Write to West Shrubbery, Redland, Bristol, BS6 6SZ.

## CAPTION COMPETITION

Amongst all the piles of bumpf enclosed with your newsletter this month you will find a picture of Dr Jack Cohen. If you can think of a suitable caption to go with this picture please write it in CAPITAL LETTERS in the space provided, write your name and address on the picture and send it to: Martin Tudor, 845 Alum Rock Road, Ward End, Birmingham, B8 2AG, or pass it to him at one of the meetings this month. Closing date is the 31st of January 1993. Jack's colleague, Ian Stewart, has agreed to judge the captions and we hope to announce the winner in next months newsletter.

## **STANDING ORDERS FOR GENERAL MEETING OF THE BIRMINGHAM SCIENCE FICTION GROUP**

1. The meeting shall be chaired by the Legal Officer or his appointed deputy.
2. The word 'Chairman' in these Standing Orders shall refer to the Chairman of the meeting, not the Chairman of the Group.
3. All motions shall have speeches for and against until it is deemed by the Chairman that there has been proper debate, at which time there shall be a vote of members present.
4. An amendment to a motion should be proposed before the speeches on the motion concerned, but may be proposed at any time before the vote at the discretion of the Chairman . There will be one speech for the amendment and one speech against, followed by a vote of members present on the acceptance of the amendment into the motion.
5. All candidates for committee posts shall have an opportunity of addressing the meeting before a vote is taken, at the discretion of the Chairman.
6. Questions may be directed to the speaker at the end of his speech, at the discretion of the Chairman, through the Chair.
7. The Chairman may rule the meeting closed at any time, at his discretion, any business remaining will be deferred to the next appropriate meeting, the date of which to be arranged by the committee.
8. A challenge to a ruling of the Chairman may be made by any member and will take precedence over all other business. There will be one speech for the ruling by the Chairman , and one against by the challenger, followed by a vote of members present.
9. The Chairman may place a time limit on any speeches, including those by nominated candidates.
10. The order of precedence of motions is:
  - 1) A challenge to a ruling of the Chairman.
  - 2) Amendment to a motion.
  - 3) The business in hand.

# ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE BIRMINGHAM SCIENCE FICTION GROUP AGENDA: 15TH JANUARY 1993

## *MEETING TO BE CHAIRED BY TIM STANNARD, GROUP LEGAL OFFICER*

1. Adoption of last year's AGM Minutes (Proposer & Seconder required)
2. Group Chairman's Opening Remarks.
3. Group Treasurer's Report.
4. Group Publicity Officer's Report.
5. Novacon 22 Representative's Report.
6. Adoption of reports (Items 3-5 above). Proposers & Seconders required).
7. The 1992 Committee will stand down.
8. Proposed amendment to paragraph 3 of the constitution as follows:  
Delete "and not more than two Ordinary Committee Members" and insert "the Reviews Editor, and not more than one Ordinary Committee Member".

Amended paragraph to read as follows:

"3. THE GROUP will consist of the elected Committee, the Chairman of Novacon, the Legal Officer and the Ordinary Members. The Committee will consist of the Chairman, the Treasurer, the Secretary, the Publicity/Recruitment Officer, the Newsletter Editor, the Reviews Editor, and not more than one Ordinary Committee Members, who shall be elected at the AGM."

The remainder of paragraph is unaltered.

To follow this paragraph 4 to be amended to read as follows:

"4. THE OFFICE of Treasurer and Secretary may be held by one member of the Group, the Office of Newsletter Editor and Reviews Editor may be held by one member of the Group, at the Committee's discretion."

9. Election of Group Chairman (Tony Morton stands for re-election).
10. Election of Committee Members:
  - a) Secretary (Helena Bowles stands unopposed).
  - b) Treasurer (Richard Standage stands for re-election).
  - c) Newsletter Editor (Martin Tudor stands for re-election).
  - d) Publicity Officer (No Nominations).
  - e) Ordinary Members (2) (Mick & Bernie Evans stand for re-election).
11. Confirmation of Novacon 23 Chair - Carol Morton has been appointed to this post by the 1992 Committee.
12. Appointment of Legal Officer.
13. Any Other Business.
14. Vote of Thanks to Our Presidents.
15. The 1993 Annual General Meeting will be concluded.

# PHANNISH FIZZICKS

by Al Johnston

Politically Correct Language, or to be more accurate "Culturally Sensitive Terminology" has taken a firm grip on the Arts Faculties of the World's Universities. You may have thought that the Sciences would be more resistant to this. Unfortunately you have achieved a deficiency in your cerebro-cognitive processes regarding this conclusion.

In fact ("existential exactitude") Science has, in many ways, been at the forefront of sensitivity on this issue. An early attempt was in Chemistry. Helium, neon, argon, xenon and krypton were once collectively known as the inert gases. Unfortunately "inert" has connotations of inferiority so the term was exchanged for "Noble gases". Sadly this is now realized to have insensitive feudal/patriarchal/imperialistic associations and to be potentially elitist and pretentious. Henceforward these gases will be described as valently inconvenienced.

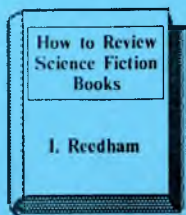
In culturally sensitive terms the suffix "-on" is used as an ambigenic/non gender-specific ending for job titles or roles. Examples include "Waitron", "Laundron", "Sorceron" and "Seductron" to name but a few. High-energy physicists ("Squanderers of precious resources pursuing esoteric knowledge-base enhancement") have realized that this raises the cognitive uncertainty potential of their subject beyond any acceptable threshold; protons and gluons etc are confusing enough as it is. As a result many have attained an enhanced existence satisfaction deficiency level so as to cause them to utilise monopedal oscillatory locomotion. They have had to invent new names and have gone for a simple approach; readily grasped by the most cerebrally challenged. In future all sub-nuclear particles will be known by a single term, differentiated only by size ("degree of dimensional challenge"). The new term is: Sub-NanOmetric sized Wave/particle FLuctuations that we All Know Exist Somewhere, Snowflakes for verbally contractualised convenience. So, from now on, electrons are very dimensionally challenged Snowflakes and quarks are extremely dimensionally inconvenienced Snowflakes. High-energy physics has been abandoned in Siberia, due to a seriously advanced terminological indeterminacy condition.

Sadly I have now attained a high cortical neurone overutilisation plateau that would be enjoyable to a differently pleased individual. I must therefore terminate this article. Before I go a competition: ethically sound individuals may like to attempt to discover the remaining examples of culturally insensitive terminology in the article. There will of course be no prize, as this would be offensive to the competitively marginalised. A translation of this article is available for the cranially atmospheric.

## STAN ELING'S FESTIVE PUZZLE: THE SOLUTION

NAME	OCCUPATION	HOME PLANET	PASSTIME
Fred Cortes	Pianist	Zoon	Eats J-Fish
Bill Cooper	Teddybear Maker	Boist	Reads Joyce
Roy Dijon	Space Pirate	Uleeda	Drinks Pyr
Tom Collie	Bookseller	Earth	Flies Kites
Joan Cook	Biologist	Yikon	Reads Twain

The 6 correct answers we received by the deadline of the 1st of January 1993 will go "into a hat" at the AGM and the winner will receive a glorious Andromeda Bookshop token.



# Book Reviews

## EXPECTING SOMEONE TALLER

WHO'S AFRAID OF BEOWULF

FLYING DUTCH by Tom Holt

Orbit. £4.50 each, p/b's

Reviewed by Martin Tudor.

The excellent Josh Kirby covers on these books clearly indicate to potential readers that contained within are comic adventures in the 'tradition' of Pratchett (and if phrases like that don't make Terry feel his age I don't know what will...).

Although you probably won't get *quite* as many laughs per line in these books as you would in vintage Pratchett, you *won't* be disappointed. Holt specialises in wonderful, irreverent, treatments of legendary and/or historical figures. From the entire cast of Wagner's Ring Cycle, to Hrolf Earthstar and the twelve greatest Viking heroes of the eighth century to the tragic Flying Dutchman and his odourous crew.

All three of these novels are packed full of laughs. I highly recommend them, and I'm sure that Holt's latest two, *YE GODS!* and *OVERTIME*, are equally as funny, unfortunately as this newsletter went to press they weren't on sale and the publisher, Orbit, didn't supply us with review copies. However, they will be on sale by the time you read this so you can join me in the rush to grab copies...

## UNCANNY BANQUET edited by Ramsey Campbell

Little Brown, 338 pp, £14.99 h/b

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Although this anthology is subtitled "Great Tales of the Supernatural" and contains ten pieces, including a new story by Campbell, it must stand or fall as a book by the quality of the one novel-length tale that occupies half its bulk. "The Hole in the Pit", the only piece of fiction by Adrian Ross, was published as a book in 1914 and sank without trace. It is a supernatural horror tale set in 1645, describing how an evil monster living under water (and discernible only by a foul stench, traces of slime and vague sightings of

grey pseudopods) is woken by sorcery and kills off lots of people. The 17th-century setting is very well done, but the plot is silly and predictable (though fast-moving) and the characters are mere ciphers of good or evil. The atmosphere and some plot elements are strikingly similar to the work of William Hope Hodgson, who was no doubt an influence on Ross. This is an interesting story, rather less of a masterpiece than Campbell would have one believe.

By contrast, the rest of the book consists mainly of subtle ghost stories a decade or two old and generally unfamiliar. Some are outstanding, especially "The Loony" by Alison Prince, about the terrifying ordeal of a girl at the hands of ghosts and originally written for teenagers, as well as "Behind the Stumps" by Russell Kirk and "The Hill and the Hole" by Fritz Leiber. Campbell's own story is a convincing oddity set in the offices of a local newspaper. This is an anthology worth reading for the rarity of most of its contents.

## THE LOST PRINCE by Bridget Wood

Headline, 566 pp, £5.99, p/b

Reviewed by Carol Morton.

The sequel to *THE WOLFING* tells of Ancient Ireland where the magic of the beastline is fading, weakening the royal line so much that the powers of Dark Ireland, in the guise of the evil sorcerer Medoc, have overthrown and exiled Graine, the High Queen. She and her ex-lover Fergus, together with the exiled court, set off to regain her throne by taking different paths. Graine goes to Scathach, the castle where her Grandfather Cormac was exiled and where now are rumoured to live creatures with powerful enough magic to defeat Medoc.

Fergus must travel to the future, to the time of the Apocalypse which devastated Ireland, to harness the power of the Apocalypse. The only way to do this is to sell his soul to the Lad of the Skins, one of Medoc's minions, in return for the power to call Fael-Inis, whose chariot can travel through time. They must succeed and return before Medoc unleashes the twelve Dark Lords and discovers the hiding place of the Lost Prince who, it is said, will be the saviour of Ireland.

A very dark, very Gothic novel, extremely well told, with a story-line that grips the imagination from the first page and holds the reader to the last. Bridget Wood is most certainly an excellent storyteller, and a new talent to look out for.

BORDERS OF INFINITY by Lois McMaster Bujold  
Pan, 311 pp, £4.99, p/b

Reviewed by Tony Morton.

This comprises three episodes relating to Miles Vorkosigan, two as (presumably) follow-ups to the original 1987 title for Freelancers. Beginning with "The Mountains of Mourning", we meet Miles newly passed out from the Academy, and an infanticide which he must clear up. The backwater folk still cling to the old ways, from before the planet's being cut off from Earth's aid, and they resent intrusion. The town speaker further proves unhelpful, leaving Miles with numerous riddles to solve. A clever plot and an insight into prejudice. Ms Bujold gives us a lively story and well worked out scenario.

"Labyrinth" deals with more brash events. A corrupt planet, claimed by its inhabitants to exist only to fill a need, presents Miles with problems. He must remove a scientist, without his employers' consent. Again he is undermined when the scientist refuses to leave without his special work, which turns out to have been injected into a fighting machine mutant developed on the planet.

The final episode and title story takes place on a prison world where Miles is to free a specially gifted leader. Events turn out differently, and Miles ends up attempting to empty the gaol!

Whilst each plot is somewhat similar to the others, each is presented in a vastly different way, making interesting reading. Especially interesting is her choice of hero, a short brittle-boned hunchback, affected in the womb by a poison gas attack on his mother. He uses his intellect to win, the typical "brains over brawn" stance. It works well in a story, but I am left wondering about real life. After all, a large part of reading is the believability of the story and the characters within it. It's a good yarn, but seems to lack *something*.

THE COLOUR OF HER PANTIES by Piers Anthony  
NEL, 345 pp, £15.99, h/b

Reviewed by William McCabe.

Some of you will only need to know this is Xanth Volume 15 before you stop reading. Others won't even bother because they've seen the title and believe it's sexist. This is a pity. The truth is that this isn't at all bad, it's quite fun really. Some of you may already know of Piers Anthony's sense of humour (slightly complicated puns and maybe the odd effect here or there), but I only heard about it from someone when I took the

book, so it can't be that well known. It's been a long time since I've seen puns done so often or so well (either Carroll or Muir & Norden on the radio), but that won't help if you don't like that sort of thing.

On to the story. There are actually one or two stories here, and considering this is vol 15, they stand up well enough without having read vols 1-14. Three characters seem to be left over from previous books (Jenny Elf, Gwendolyn Goblin and Che Centaur) because their origins aren't given in this book. Another three (Ida Human, Okra Ogress and Mela Merwoman) are obviously new because you get their histories, such as they are, here. For each set of three you get a quest (this is a fantasy novel). The first three want to make Gwenny onto chief goblin (who said this was sexist?), and the latter three seem pre-occupied with finding some more obscure destiny for themselves. Everything works out around the end of the book, although it does slip into the closing credits a bit.

This isn't a great book, but if you want comic fantasy with a different sense of humour then you should consider it. It's a pity the cover is the only part of the book in English, the rest is American, with "colour" spelt "color" throughout.

HOME LIFE WITH CATS by Brian Aldiss  
Grafton, 64 pp, £6.99, h/b

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

To demonstrate his versatility, here's something completely different from Brian Aldiss - a volume of comic verse about cats. Most of the thirty-four pieces concern cats he has lived with, or been owned by. Of course, it's almost impossible to write about cats one has known without sentimentality, and Aldiss doesn't try. In fact he wallows in the irrational behaviour of cats and in the disruptive antics of kittens, becoming very soppy in the process. In shape, the verse is often more concerned with rhyme than with rhythm or line length, so it is what is known as doggerel. (Did Aldiss use this form deliberately for the irony of its name?) He also shows a penchant for bathos, frequently descending from the sublime to the trivial.

There is considerable variety here, and I much enjoyed the satire of "The Cat Improvement Company", the surrealism of "A Lion for Tea" and "How I Swam Out to Sea with My Cat", and the sheer originality of "On a Favourite Goldfish Drowned in a Bowl of Cats". And just occasionally, especially in "The Lost Grave", the verse takes flight and becomes poetry.



BURYING THE SHADOW by Storm Constantine

Headline, 406 pp, £4.99, p/b

Reviewed by Tony Morton.

Since Stoker's undeniably brilliant interpretation of the oft told myth/legend leading to Dracula, emphasising the "lone" qualities of the vampire stories and the Vlad myth, it has taken almost a century for someone to clarify the ethos successfully.

Storm Constantine looks at the vampire legend and, rather than re-define the actions of a lone entity or renegade, she develops a people (the Eolim), she creates, evolves and urbanises them into another's upper society, as artisans. She does all this superbly and in an enlightened way. These artisans are protected by patron families, who keep them apart from the citizenry at large, whilst providing the sustenance which is exchanged for Eolim culture. Truly revealing is the origin of the Eolim, which also provides a well thought out sub-plot, concerning an Emperor who refuses to comply with tradition by standing down, instead casting out his heir and his faithful followers. There are perhaps some subtle sf connotations here.

The main story follows a soul-scaper, Rayojini, who has been chosen by two Eolim to help save their race from a mysterious ailment of the mind. The dual storyline provides plenty of action, description and tension as it builds up to an unusual ending.

Overall a compelling story, well told, well written, thoroughly researched and cleverly put together. The current vogue for this type of "Gothic" story should also serve to highlight this novel. It is a good re-working of the vampire myths and, though not my usual read, I found it a worthwhile diversion.

THE FOREVER KING by Molly Cochrane & Warren Murphy

Millennium, 364 pp, £9.99, c format, £14.99 h/b

Reviewed by Carol Morton.

Hal Wocznial, ex-FBI agent, alcoholic, very much down on his luck, is given a ticket to a television show, "Go Fish", by an old man he literally bumps into. Hal gets called upon to take part in the show and, seemingly by trickery, wins the major prize, an all expenses paid trip to London. Arthur Blessing, a ten-year old New Yorker, finds a greyish-green metal cup, dropped by thieves after a robbery. Not long after this he inherits a ruined castle in England, and so has his picture in English papers, with the cup in the background. An escaped lunatic sends his "followers" to the USA to find the cup, which proves to have

healing powers when Arthur's aunt is shot. Arthur and his aunt go to England to escape the would-be killers, and meet Hal and the old man. Coincidence? No, The old man is Merlin, the lunatic is Saladin, Hal is Sir Galahad, the cup is the Holy Grail and Arthur is ..... Saladin, who originally lost the Grail, wants it back and will stop at nothing. Hal must protect Arthur.

An unusual slant on the Arthurian legends, but making Arthur a young American boy is a somewhat novel move. Still, it is a high adventure story, lightweight, but non-the-less entertaining.

INTIMATE ARMAGEDDONS edited by Bill Congreve  
Five Islands Press, 144 pp, £5.95 p/bpages

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

This is an anthology of horror stories by Australian authors, and it is not particularly impressive. It is not dreadful either. At best, it can be described as containing eleven little stories, and very few of the authors will be known to readers in the northern hemisphere.

On the whole, these are not gory tales of horror but a mixture of the various faces of the genre. "Dem Bones" by Robert Hood is supernatural horror. It tells of the grisly revenge a walking skeleton has on the youth that dismembered him. "A Sprig of Aconite" by Sue Isle is billed as a story about her pair of psychic detectives. Unfortunately they didn't get into their stride and didn't really do any detecting of any kind. It is more a story of one man's delusion that there are werewolves around. In "They Found The Angry Moon" by Terry Dowling, two small time crooks get their comeuppance and go to hell. It could have been a good story, but it was much too short in length and short on atmosphere.

The only story that takes real advantage of the heritage that Australia has is "Holiness" by Rosaleen Love. A nest of dinosaur eggs is unearthed at a site of significance to the aborigines. But the place is protected. The despoilers find their hearts' desires, but in a way they don't expect. Again it is too short. The two road stories, "Going Nowhere" by Sean Williams and "Sirensong" by A G Clarke, could just as easily have been set in America - another place with long straight highways that seem to go on for ever. Probably the most powerful story in the book is "Dream" by the editor, Bill Congreve. He has taken time to tell it at its proper length and explores the borderline between reality and fantasy.

On the whole these are the kind of

stories that you would tend to find in the better semi-professional magazines in the UK and USA which are the breeding grounds of potential, new talent. With perseverance, some of these authors may be good but most are not ready yet for the big time.

THE KING'S BUCCANEER by Raymond E Feist  
Harper Collins, 465 pp, £14.99, h/b

Reviewed by Carol Morton.

Set in the world of "The Riftwar Saga" and ten years after *PRINCE OF THE BLOOD*, this tells of Nicholas, the club-footed youngest child of Arutha and Anita. Nicholas has always been delicate so he cannot be sent, as his brothers Boric and Erland were, to the border for toughening up in the periodic skirmishes there. Instead he is sent to be a page in his Uncle Martin's court in Crydee. Shortly after his arrival Crydee is attacked, the city is burned, and Martin's daughter Margaret, along with her friend Abigail, with whom Nicholas is in love, are kidnapped, as are some of the population of Crydee.

Nicholas and Martin were on a hunting trip, and return to find the town in chaos and the remaining populace demoralised. Nicholas and Amos Trask, the ex-pirate turned Admiral, give chase, and uncover the true reason for the kidnappings. It is intended to send duplicates back to Crydee, infected with a virulent plague which will decimate the population, enabling the Serpent People to take control of the Lifestone at Sethanon, and bring back from limbo their evil goddess.

"The Riftwar Saga" started with the excellent *MAGICIAN*, but then tailed off. *PRINCE OF THE BLOOD* was worse, but this is more like *MAGICIAN* in quality. A tense action adventure yarn set on the high seas, a swash-buckler almost, but with dark, evil undertones. Feist can certainly tell a good story when he wants to, and this is one of them.

EURO TEMPS ed by Alex Stewart & Neil Gaiman  
RoC, 366 pp, £4.99, p/b

Reviewed by Tony Morton.

The follow-up to the successful *TEMPS*, presenting thirteen stories as we go into Europe. I was surprised that *all* the stories took the same approach - that of the British Temp being the real hero, over his or her dim-witted European counterpart. "Call in the UK experts to solve the mystery" rang through all the stories taking place abroad. Was this Stewart & Gaiman's brief to the writers? Are

British authors secretly jingoistic even by Pournellian standards? I fail to see why all the experts had to originate from our shores, in fact, having someone foreign to solve our mysteries would have provided a counter-point.

Of the stories themselves, the quality and story-lines all attract, and prove good reading. For me the highlights were "Sortilege and Serendipity" by Stableford, pure farce, Roz Kaveney's "Totally Trashed", witty and completely off the wall, Liz Holliday's "El Lobo Doradi is Dead, is Dead", poignant and moving, and Storm Constantine's "The Law of Being" is well balanced and creative. Not that the others were any lower in standard. Langford's sleuth in "If Looks Could Kill" works really well, and our own Anne Gay's love of the pun provides an entertaining sojourn. Remember Asimov's favourite pass-time was writing the story-pun, Anne has the ability but not yet the fame!

The whole book reeks of good copy, I wonder what the editors had to turn down! Well worth reading for the differing perspectives, with just that one reservation about the inherent jingoism.

A YEAR NEAR ALPHA CENTAURI by Michael Martin  
Corgi, 157 pp, £4.99, p/b

Reviewed by Carol Morton.

This novel bears more than a passing resemblance to Peter Mayle's *A YEAR IN PROVENCE*, even down to the cover, but the story is an excellent spoof.

A creature, a Conimunculi, and his wife retire to live on the planet Provender. It is a gastronomic paradise, anything and everything that lives on the planet is edible, and delicious. In fact, the more sentient an animal, plant or even liquid, the more an epicure's delight it is. That is not to say the planet does not provide our couple with problems. Their house needs extending and they pick inept builders and plumbers. The Grebble, delicious crustaceans, over-spawn in their lake and their pets get eaten, despite being coated with a disgusting tasting spray. It is said that if you survive a year on Provender without being eaten you will probably become a permanent fixture. You do have to be careful when wording your dinner party invitations, if you say you are cooking this could be taken entirely the wrong way!

As I said, a wonderful spoof, most entertaining and amusing. The illustrations are a hoot, especially the clothes on the washing line.

### CHILD OF AN ANCIENT CITY

by Tad Williams & Nina Kiriki Hoffman  
Legend, 80 pp, £7.99, "c" format

Reviewed by Carol Morton.

Set in Baghdad, this novella has Ibn Fahad and Masrur al-Adan sitting round a dinner table spinning yarns about their past when, in their youth, they were caravan guards. These two close friends met when the Caliph of Baghdad sent a caravan to the land of the Armenites, loaded with gifts and carrying an emissary from the Caliph. It was well on its way when it was attacked by bandits. Only a handful of people survived, including our storytellers, and now they must make their way back on foot, with little in the way of weapons or supplies.

They capture a young man, a native of these parts, intending to use him as a guide. He tells them, however, that they are in the domain of a vampire, who will probably kill them all, unless they keep it entertained at night with stories. They soon run low on stories to tell, so the vampire offers them a chance to escape if they tell it the saddest story of all..

This novella draws on many sources, including the in-vogue vampire myth and Scherazade's Arabian Nights story-telling. The artwork, both inside and on the cover, is excellent, but at almost £8.00 for only 80 pages it's vastly overpriced. This will put people off, which is a pity because the story deserves to be read.

THE EINSTEIN INTERSECTION by Samuel R Delany  
Grafton, 155 pp, £3.99 p/b

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Not just another reprint from a quarter of a century ago, but an award-winning novel, recipient of the Nebula and a runner-up for the Hugo, *The EINSTEIN INTERSECTION* deserves more than a short review. It is the briefest of all Nebula-winning novels and yet probably the deepest and cleverest.

On a far-future Earth, radiation causes widespread physical and mental differences in the remnants of humanity. There, people still believe in myth, placing 20th century figures like the Beatles and Jean Harlow alongside Orpheus, Phaedra and Billy the Kid. Yet the background is little more than an extended metaphor, enabling Delany to examine (as he so often has) the difference between societies. His hero, Lobey, is a young man used only to a simple village existence. He needs to become Theseus in order to destroy

the Minotaur-figure that threatens the village, and he must then become Orpheus, travelling on a quest to a great city little different to Hell in an attempt to recover Friza, his dead lady love - or at least to kill her killer. At the same time Lobey is the rural black man who must take his difference to the white-controlled establishment and bring about change.

So Lobey takes music as a weapon (he carries a machete with a flute in its handle) and destroys the symbols of science and religion in the city so that fresh change can occur, thus asserting the free will of the individual.

But don't let the complexity of the sub-text put you off. This is an exciting and very fast-moving story, involving lots of action, weird characters, dragons and even a giant computer.

THE HAWK'S GREY FEATHER by Patricia Kennealy  
Grafton, 448 pp, £4.99, p/b

Reviewed by Carol Morton.

Ms Kennealy gave us *THE TALES OF AERON* and now goes further back into the Keltians' past to tell us of Arthur and his struggle against the Druid theocracy.

The evil and powerful Archdruid Edeyrn has slaughtered nearly all of the royal line and has made himself Dictator of the Keltian system. But there is a counter-insurgency. Arthur and his foster brother Taliesin, who narrates this tale, grow up as rebels against Edeyrn, secretly undergoing the outlawed Bardic, Druidic and Fian Warrior training until they become leaders among the rebels. Arthur manages by force of arms to regain the planet Gwynedd for the rebels, and publicly proclaims Uthyr as High King of the Kelts. Now the battle must move from Gwynedd to Tara, the throne world, and a battle with Edeyrn himself.

This is a very different treatment of the Arthurian legends, transferred from Earth across space to Keltia. Purists may not like their pet legends being messed about, but even they will have to admit Ms Kennealy tells a grand yarn.

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*Prospective reviewers are reminded that reviews should be between 300 and 500 words long and must be received by the Reviews Editor within one month of accepting the book or handed to them at the following month's meeting.*

# BRUM GROUP NEWS

January 1993

Issue 256

The monthly newsletter of the Birmingham Science Fiction Group  
(Honorary Presidents: Brian W Aldiss & Harry Harrison)

GROUP CHAIRMAN - TONY MORTON, SECRETARY - CAROL MORTON, NEWSLETTER EDITOR - MARTIN TUDOR,  
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ORDINARY MEMBER - MICK EVANS, NOVA CON 22 CHAIRMAN - HELENA BOWLES.

## TOM HOLT

will address the BSGF at a Special Meeting on  
Friday 22nd January 1993, 7.45pm for 8.00pm  
Admittance: Members £2.50 Visitors £3.75

Tom Holt was born in 1961, and studied at Westminster School, Wadham College, Oxford and the College of Law. He produced his first book, *POEMS BY TOM HOLT*, at the age of thirteen, and was immediately hailed as an infant prodigy, to his horror. At Oxford, Holt discovered bar billiards and at once changed from poetry to comic fiction, beginning with two sequels to E.F. Benson's *LUCIA* series, and continuing with his own distinctive brand of comic fantasy in *EXPECTING SOMEONE TALLER*, *WHO'S AFRAID OF BEOWULF?* and *FLYING DUTCH* (Orbit, £4.50 each). This month sees the paperback publication of *YE GODS!* ("Being a Hero bothers Jason Derry. It's easy to get maladjusted when your mum's a suburban housewife and your dad's the Supreme Being. It can be a real drag, slaying fabulous monsters and retrieving golden fleeces from fire-spitting dragons... and then having to tidy your room before your mum'll let you watch Star Trek." Orbit, £4.99), and the release of the hardback edition of *OVERTIME* ("Guy Goodlet is a pilot in World War II. He is somewhat surprised when his dead co-pilot starts speaking to him as they are flying over Northern France. Before you can say 'Bomber Harris' Guy finds himself caught up in time travel, a search for Richard the LionHeart and a beautiful damsel..." Orbit, £14.99), as well as the acclaimed comic fantasies *EXPECTING SOMEONE TALLER*, *WHO'S AFRAID OF BEOWULF?* and *FLYING DUTCH* (Orbit, £4.50 each). (Orbit, £4.99) and *OVERTIME* (Orbit, £14.99).

He has also written two historical novels set in the fifth century BC, the well-received *GOATSONG* and *THE WALLED ORCHARD*, and has collaborated with Steve Nallon on *I, MARGARET*, the (unauthorised) autobiography of Margaret Thatcher.

"Thinner and more cheerful than in his youth, Tom Holt is now married, and lives in Somerset." (Much of the above information was cribbed from the flyleaf of the Orbit hardback edition of *FLYING DUTCH*, £12.95. For further details of Tom Holt's work see the Book Reviews in this newsletter.)