

BRUM GROUP NEWS

November 1993

Issue 266

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

GROUP CHAIRMAN - TONY MORTON, SECRETARY - HELENA BOWLES, NEWSLETTER EDITOR - MARTIN TUDOR,
TREASURER - RICHARD STANDAGE, REVIEWS EDITOR - BERNIE EVANS, PUBLICITY OFFICER - STEVE JONES,
ORDINARY MEMBER - MICK EVANS, NOVACON 23 CHAIRMAN - CAHOL MORTON.

**This month's meeting features
the annual debate between
the Birmingham Science Fiction Group and the
Birmingham University SF and Fantasy Society
This year the motion proposed is**

***"This House Believes That
Science Fiction is a Man's Game."***

Proposing the Motion on behalf of the Birmingham University SF &
Fantasy Society is DAVID WAKE, seconder MISS ELIZABETH J THACKER.

Opposing the Motion on behalf of the Birmingham SF Group is
ROBERT JONES (from Waterstones), seconded by CAROL MORTON.

**Friday 19th November 1993 7.45 for 8.00pm
Admittance: Members £1.25 Visitors £2.50**

***Please turn to the back cover for full details of this year's
Birmingham Science Fiction Group's
Christmas Party!***

The BSGF meets at 7.45pm on the 3rd Friday of every month (unless otherwise notified) in the upstairs Function Room of the Australian Bar, corner of Hurst Street and Bromsgrove Street in Birmingham city centre. The annual subscription rates (which include twelve copies of this newsletter and reduced price entry to meetings) are £9.00 per person, or £12.00 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).

COLOPHON

The contents of this issue are copyright 1993 the BSFG, on behalf of the contributors, to whom all rights revert on publication.

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 CRITICAL WAVE photocopier. Contact the editorial address for details of WAVE's competitive prices.

Many thanks this issue to AL JOHNSTON for his "Phannish Fizzicks", BERNIE EVANS for typing the Book Reviews; TONY BERRY, RICHARD STANDAGE, STEVE GREEN and CRITICAL WAVE for the news in the Jophan Report and Events listing and, of course, TONY BERRY for the use of his spare room.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

11 NOV 1993 - 29 JAN 1994: *PETER PAN* adapted & directed by Anna Farthing at the MAC, Cannon Hill Park, Birmingham. Tickets on sale now £4.95 (£3.95 concessions) call 021 440 3838.

16-17 NOVEMBER 1993: *PROSPERO'S BOOKS* directed by Peter Greenaway will be showing at the MAC cinema. "Prospero, deposed Duke of Milan, sits in his palace on a secluded island improvising on the text of 'The Tempest' and drawing on encyclopedic memories in order to take his magical revenge." For tickets and further details call 021 440 3838.

19 NOVEMBER 1993: DEBATE: "This house believes that science fiction is a man's game." The Birmingham University SF & Fantasy Society represented by David Wake and Miss Elizabeth J Thacker propose the motion, while Robert Jones (from Waterstones) and Carol Morton represent the Birmingham SF

Group in opposing the motion. As usual the meeting will be held at the Australian Bar, Hurst Street/Bromsgrove Street, 7.45pm for 8.00pm.

19-21 NOVEMBER 1993: MIDCON the longest established major games convention in this country, at the Royal Angus hotel, Birmingham (their eleventh year there). It will once again host the finals of the National Diplomacy Championship, sponsored by Gibsons Games. As well as a Subbuteo Tournament, the MidCon Quiz, and lots of games. (Last year's con included such games as 18xx, Civilization, History of the World, Conquest Europa, Britannia, Acquire, Railway Rivals, Republic of Rome, Speed Circuit, Modern Art, Axis & Allies and Quo Vadis?) Attending membership costs £10.00 to "MidCon", Brian Williams, 30 Rydding Lane, Millfields Estate, West Bromwich, B71 2HA.

22-27 NOVEMBER 1993: *THE INVISIBLE MAN* following a hugely successful run in the West End this sinister story of a tormented, twisted and transparent scientist will be retold at the Alexandra Theatre, Suffolk St., Birmingham. Tickets £6.00-£14.50, tel 633 3325.

26-28 NOVEMBER 1993: CON-YAK, annual international Beneluxcon, venue probably Altea Hotel, just outside Amsterdam. Guests of honour to be announced. Contact Richard Vermaas, James Wattstraat 13, 1097 DJ Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

BEER & SKITTLES

Many thanks to everyone who responded to our appeal last issue for suitable venues. Currently Helena is checking out which of the three will be most suitable. If you are interested in joining us (whenever and wherever) please contact HELENA BOWLES on (021) 558 7591.

2 DECEMBER 1993: THE ABYSS: SPECIAL EDITION

"Sam Goldwyn once prayed for a movie which began with a hurricane and built up to a climax. This is that movie. A nuclear sub crashes on the floor of the Atlantic and a motley crew of an underwater station attached to an oil rig investigate. Inevitably, problems mount: a hurricane rages above, a loony marine is on the loose, and cap'n Ed Harris is forced to work with his estranged wife. Moreover, there's something out there." A greatly underrated sf movie showing at the Electric Cinema, Station Street, at 1.30pm, 4.45pm, 8.00pm, £3.50 or call 021 643 7277 for details of reduced rate cards.

4-5 DECEMBER 1993: TRULY, MADLY, DEEPLY

directed by Anthony Minghella. An unusual ghost story in which "extraordinary events appear to be utterly ordinary: the dead pop up from nowhere. No special effects, no dazzling lights". At the Triangle cinema, call 021 359 3979/4192 for details.

6 DEC 1993 - 29 JAN 1994: THE SNOWMAN

the world premiere of a new stage presentation of Raymond Briggs' children's classic, specifically adapted for the Birmingham Repertory Theatre Company by Anthony Clark, featuring the original and extended score by Howard Blake. Call the Birmingham Rep Box Office on 021 236 6771.

17 DECEMBER 1993: BRUM GROUP CHRISTMAS PARTY,

7.45pm for 8.00pm at the Australian Bar, Hurst Street/Bromsgrove Street. Tickets available for the subsidised price of £5.50 per person. Award-winning author **GRAHAM JOYCE** hopes to attend as our guest for the evening.

21 JANUARY 1994: BSFG AGM & AUCTION, 7.45pm

for 8.00pm at the Australian Bar, Hurst Street/Bromsgrove Street.

4-6 MARCH 1994: MASQUE III the third British

costume convention, Shakis Victoria Hotel, Nottingham. Membership until 30 December 1993 is £20.00 attending, £5.00 supporting. Contact: c/o Mike Percival, 4 Ednaston Court, Yeldersley Lane, Ednaston, Ashbourne, Derbyshire, DE6 3BA.

25-27 MARCH 1994: TREK DWARF II combined

STAR TREK/RED DWARF convention at the Holiday Inn, Leicester. Attending £30.00. Contact 47 Marsham, Orton Goldhay, Peterborough, PE2 5RN.

1-4 APRIL 1994: SOU'WESTER. 45th UK national

sf con. Britannia Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool. Guests of honour: Diane Duane, Neil Gaiman,

Barbara Hambly, Peter Morwood. Attending wa-

£25.00 (£23.00 for paid-up pre-supporting) Supporting £12.50, children aged 9-14 (on April 1994) £12.50, £1.00 for "babies and beasts" until November 1993. Contact: 3 Wes Shrubbery, Redland, Bristol, BS6 6SZ.

30 APRIL - 1 MAY 1994: COME-BACK CON. The

first Belgian BeNeLuxcon in a long time at the Rubenianum House, Antwerp, Belgium. Attending 650BF, Supporting 500BF until 31 Dec 1993 then Attending 750BF, Supporting 650BF until 31 March 1994, children up to 6 free, age 6-12 half-price. Contact: Alfons J Maes, Zandkapelweg 18, B-2200 Noorderwijk, Belgium.

27-30 MAY 1994: INCONCEIVABLE. Second 'humour

con from Octarine, Tudor Court Hotel, Draycott near Derby. Attending £20.00 (£18.00 for members of Octarine or ZZ9, contact 12 Crick Avenue, Littleover, Derby, DE23 6ES.

1-5 SEPTEMBER 1994: CONADIAN, 52nd world

science fiction convention, at the Winnipeg Convention Centre. Guests of Honour Anne McCaffrey, George Barr, Barry B Longyear, Far Guest of Honour Robert Runte. The rates were Attending US\$85.00, CAN\$95.00, Supporting US\$25.00, CAN\$30.00 until 6 September 1993. Contact British Agent: Helen McCarthy, 147 Francis Road, London, E10 6NT.

14-17 APRIL 1995: CONFABULATION 46th UK

National sf con at the Britannia International Hotel, London. GoHs Lois McMaster Bujold, Bol Shaw and Roger Robinson. Attending £15.00 Supporting £10.00, children born on or before 13 April 1981 pay the supporting rate and small children (born on or before 18 April 1987) pay nothing. Contact: Confabulation, 3 York Street, Altrincham, Cheshire, WA15 9QH.

24-28 AUGUST 1995: INTERSECTION, 53rd world-

con, Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre Glasgow. Guests of honour Samuel R Delany, Gerry Anderson. Attending £50.00 until 30 September 1993, then £60.00 until 30 September 1994. Supporting and Junior (24.8.80) £15.00, Child (24.8.88) £5.00. Contact: Admail 336, Glasgow, G2 1BR, Scotland.

4-6 NOVEMBER 1994 (?): NOVACON 24 the BSFG's

own convention. GoH Graham Joyce. Venue and date still to be confirmed, but attending membership costs just £20.00 until Easter 1994. Contact: CAROL MORTON, 14 Park Street, Lye, Stourbridge, West Midlands, DY9 8SS.

27 DEC 1999 - 2 JAN 2000: MILLENNIUM. Venue

to be announced, but definitely in Northern

Europe (probably a BeNeLux country or UK), £3.00 (f10.00) per year, to be deducted from eventual membership fee (to be announced before 1997). Contact: Malcolm Reid, 2/R, 9 Airlie Street, Hyndland, Glasgow, G12 9RJ.

□□□□

Although details are correct to the best of my knowledge, I advise readers to contact organizers prior to travelling. Always enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope when writing to any of the above contact addresses. Please mention the BRUM GROUP NEWS when replying to listings or advertisements.

NOVACON 23:

*From the perspective
of an exhausted
newszine editor*

by Martin Tudor

Unfortunately I missed most of the programme at Novacon due to a variety of circumstances. I was either copying CRITICAL WAVE #33 and EMPTIES #12, collating and stapling them, distributing them or working on the WAVE table. The only two items I "saw" were the Silly Game on Saturday night (in which I was a victim) and the Beer Tasting on Sunday night (which I organised).

The Beer Tasting seemed to go well, with help from my brothers Stephen (who went to Germany a few weeks ago) and Keith (who went to Belgium) and Steve Lawson and Dave Cooper (who went to a beer shop in Sheffield) I'd managed to put together a selection of 85 beers from 13 countries. Along with 16 varieties of soft drinks (for those who didn't like beer or who had to drive), plus an assortment of munchies. If we do a Beer Tasting again I'll hopefully have time to put together beer notes and check lists for those who are interested and I could certainly do with organising a few more volunteers who know how to pour bottle conditioned beers. But many thanks are due to all those who helped at short notice on the night: Helena Bowles, Tony Berry, Richard Standage, John Harvey, Mike Siddall et al. Special thanks to Martin Hoare who, with contemptuous ease, opened a recalcitrant bottle of Pierre du Gore after several of us had failed to do so, proclaiming "I never have trouble getting at beer!"

But I'm getting a bit ahead of myself here, back to Friday... Having finally finished photocopying enough copies of my fanzine and WAVE #33 to distribute at the con I arrived at the Angus around 23.20. Eventually I found Tony Berry and stored my stuff in his room and arrived at the bar shortly before midnight. Here I discovered that various "friends" had been laying bets on my arrival time - the favourite seemed to be sometime around midnight on Sunday! I hope they lost a fortune...

Despite quite horrendous hotel room booking foul-ups by the Royal Angus (which reduced even Bernie Evans to tears of frustration and an early bed) the atmosphere at the con was very good. The majority of the victims of the Friday night foul-ups appreciated the herculean efforts Carol Morton, Helena Bowles and, of course, Bernie had made to sort them out.

I did find time to pop in to the Wroxton suite when the band Bad Influence were playing on Saturday night and I was very impressed. Obviously Brum Group chairman Tony Morton, a guitarist with the band, has been hiding his talents behind a pint of 6X for too long now - more please Tony! Next time I hope I won't be suffering from a pounding headache (caused I've no doubt from having my head immersed in cold custard during Clarke and Green's Silly Game) and will be able to listen to more...

Sunday was an interesting day the favourites were beaten in the University Challenge (with Steve Lawson's team beating Julian Headlong's - which left a stunned and distraught Greg Pickersgill wandering around the con in a daze). The Novas were no surprise with the Leeds Group cleaning up yet again. After the initial disappointment I decided it was a fair result with both my fanzine EMPTIES and my cover artist Shep Kirkbride coming third in the Novas, and EMPTIES' contributor Helena Bowles coming second. (See the Jophan Report below for details of the top ten.)

Overall it was a fun convention - congratulations to Carol Morton and her team. There were several programme items I'd have like to see, not least of which was the very poorly attended 3D movie. (Novacon attendees don't seem to like films much - the Tech Crew reported that around half a dozen was the largest audience all weekend!)

Okay, so that's a few brief impressions of my Novacon, what was yours like? Deadline for your response is 1st December 1993 to me at 845 Alum Rock Road, Ward End, Birmingham, B8 2AG. I'll print all the reports I can fit in next month's newsletter.

PHANNISH FIZZICKS

JOPHAN REPORT #68

Transports of Bafflement by Al Johnston

by Martin Tudor

Novacon 23 was quite small as Novacons go with just 258 pre-registered attendees, 33 walk-ins and 22 no-shows, there were only 269 people at the con - which actually made it a much more friendly and intimate convention. The raffle and Turkey Readings managed to raise £147.29 for RNIB.

There was no real surprise in the Nova Awards with the Leeds Group making another clean sweep, Simon Ounsley picked up well-deserved awards for Best Fanzine, for *LAGOON*, and Best Fanwriter. When he'd returned to the stage to pick up his Nova for Fanwriter he announced "It took me 15 years to get my first Nova and 30 seconds to get my second!" Dave Mooring narrowly beat D West for Best Fan Artist and declared "D will be furious!". This year 51 ballots were cast with two being declared ineligible. The results were as follows, the figure in brackets indicates the points scored;

BEST FANZINE; 1, *LAGOON* ed Simon Ounsley (86), 2, *ANSIBLE* ed Dave Langford (49), 3, *EMPTYES* ed Martin Tudor (48), 4, *RASTUS JOHNSON'S CAKEWALK* ed Greg Pickersgill (33), 5=, *BOB?* ed Ian Sorenson and *ORMOU* ed Ann Green (both 26), 7, *BALLOONS OVER BRISTOL* ed Christina Lake (16), 8, *THE LIGHT STUFF* ed Rhodri James (14), 9=, *BLEARY EYES* ed Ken Cheslin and *EYEBALLS IN THE SKY* ed Tony Berry (both 11). The following also received votes, they are listed in no particular order: *OUT OF THE BLUE*, *VILE ANCHORS*, *CON-RUNNER*, *IN PROGRESS*, *READING MATTERS*, *SLUBBERDIGULLION*, *THE DOG FACTORY*, *FTT*, *THINGUMYBOB*, *GAIJIN*, *THEM*, *FANS ACROSS THE WORLD NEWSLETTER*, *THE OLAF ALTERNATIVE*, *ERG*.

BEST FANWRITER; 1, SIMON OUNSLEY (86), 2, HELENA BOWLES (47), 3, DAVE LANGFORD (43), 4, ABIGAIL FROST (26), 5=, GREG PICKERSGILL and JOHN RICHARDS (20 each), 7, ANN GREEN (19), 8, NIGEL E RICHARDSON (18), 9, JOHN BERRY (13), 10=, TONY BERRY and MARTIN TUDOR (12 each). The following also received votes, they are listed in no particular order: DAVE WOOD, HARRY BELL, IAN SORENSON, AL JOHNSTON, JOHN BARK, CHUCK CONNOR, JOSEPH NICHOLAS, CHRISTINA LAKE, LILIAN EDWARDS, D WEST, BERNIE EVANS, JUDITH HANNA, RHODRI JAMES, MIKE STODDALL, SIMON POLLEY, LESLEY WARD, ZANDA NYROND, KEN CHESLIN, ROB HANSEN.

BEST FANARTIST; 1, DAVE MOORING (73), 2, D WEST (71), 3, SHEP KIRKBRIDE (48), 4, JIM BARKER (41), 5, SUE MASON (29), 6, TIM GROOME (12), 7, ANN GREEN (11), 8, DAVE HICKS (10), 9, LESLEY WARD (7), 10=, IAIN BYERS, KEN CHESLIN, ALAN HUNTER, SIMON POLLEY, TEDDY (all with 5). The following also received votes, listed in no particular order: LEN WARMINGER, FOX, NIGEL E RICHARDSON, ZANDA NYROND, TERRY JEEVES, HARRY BELL.

There are approximately 4×10^{27} atoms in the human body. Assume you need three bytes of information to describe the position of each one and want to save the data on your computer. The resulting pile of floppy disks would be about 2×10^{15} kilometres high; enough to go around the orbit of Pluto 100,000 times. Laid end to end you could walk on them to Alpha Centauri and back.

So who needs transporters anyway? Who could build a spaceship big enough to store the information needed to beam even one person down? The floppy disk pile above contains only the atomic positions at one end of the journey; you would also need files for where the atoms are going and what sort goes where when they get there. This is why we never see the supposed 1,000 plus crew of the *Enterprise*, there is no space for them; the whole ship is stuffed to the gills with isoiner chips to store the transporter information.

At this point some wag will no doubt point out that all the information needed to produce a human being is contained in microscopic amounts of DNA. There are two problems with this:

1. It is not entirely true.

2. Starting from DNA it takes between 16 and 95 years to produce a recognisable human being. Sometimes it never happens. Even a *Blue Peter* shuttle made from a squeeze bottle and some sticky-backed plastic would be far more reliable and somewhat faster.

It is ironic that Gene Roddenberry invented the Transporter because he couldn't afford to make shuttlecraft or landing shots. In reality, the situation may well be the other way around. The idea, however, became an sf classic; copied, more or less successfully, by other shows. The terminology did occasionally leave a bit to be desired: "Put me down, Cally," "Okay, you're fat, that green, fake leather waistcoat is very tacky and your haircut is awful." "Not quite that far down, Cally."

Let us however assume that these trivial problems are overcome. There are still some damn good reasons for not stepping into the infernal machine, except at phaser point. Not least, the way it operates. First off, you step onto the pad. Then molecular imaging

scanners derive a real-time quantum-resolution pattern image. Really! Next some wideband quark manipulation field devices (Wot?) partially decouple your sub-atomic binding energy converting you to a debonded matter stream... Whoa! Time Out! What is happening here? You are being reduced to your constituent quarks that's what. Call me a wimp (or even some other form of Cold Dark Matter) but it sounds rather hazardous to me. Verging on the bloody fatal in fact. How did you say the Romulan disruptor works? A containment field is thoughtfully provided to stop your newly liberated components from wandering off on their own; despite the demonstrations in several episodes that your atoms would be better off left to their own devices. It would have to be a rather strong confinement field as well, since "decoupling sub-atomic binding energy" sounds a lot like what goes on inside H-bombs. Still, it's nice to see that they don't want to get the transporter room all messy. From there you whizz around in the "Pattern buffer" with your co-transportees. Presumably you don't mind swapping atoms with Troi, but who gets Data's? Finally you are transmitted up to forty thousand kilometres through walls, atmospheres, rocks, but not shields, and put back together to resume your thought processes where you left off. Unless, of course, some of your DNA was misplaced, in which case you're eight years old again. I don't know what Heisenberg would make of it, but I'm somewhat uncertain. What if one of your strange quarks is less than charming?

Okay, so we have physical reasons for keeping off the pads, there are also some fairly compelling dramatic ones. Laforge would have us believe that transporting is the safest way of travelling there is (or will be). Either he has never heard of the original, or 24th century shuttles are worse than Skodas. Walking might be safe... unless someone is beamed down on top of you.

Despite the best efforts of Lieutenant Barclay it is the original series that was the heyday of the transporter "accident". For Kirk's crew, stepping into the transporter room was almost as good a way of reducing life expectancy as wearing a red shirt without gold braid. The machine appeared to have a special aversion to Starship Captains. Depending on a whim the transporter could: lose you in a phase shift, split you into good and evil personalities, send you off to some parallel universe or squirt you off to the Planet of the Gladiator Nymphos. Not all bad then, but generally even less reliable than TWA. Eventually Dr McCoy came up with the only sane attitude to the transporter: avoid the bloody thing like the plague.

BOOK REVIEWS

DOG WIZARD by Barbara Hambly
HarperCollins, 369 pp, £4.99, p/b
Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

Here, in a self-contained story, we are re-introduced to some of the characters we met in *THE SILENT TOWER* and *THE SILICON MAGE*. Antryg Windrose is content to try and make a life in exile in our world, knowing that magic does not work here. However, his enemies will not leave him alone. When he is summoned back he refuses to go, until Joanna is snatched. Back in the citadel of wizards he discovers that all kinds of abominations are popping up all over the place. While no-one will admit that his knowledge of the Void is indispensable he discovers that this is one reason why they want him back, but they won't trust him, or listen to him. He is expected to solve their problems with both hands tied behind his back and a knife at his throat. The problem, he quickly discovers, is due to a Gate into the Void being jammed open. No-one knows where it is, no-one will admit to having opened it and, more importantly to Antryg, no-one can find Joanna.

Many of Hambly's novels, beginning with the *DARWATH TRILOGY*, are linked by the Void to our magicless world. Magicians with the knowledge are able to cross the Void to us from their fantasy worlds and even take the chosen few across with them but we normal humans have no access to these worlds except through Hambly's books. They are all enjoyable, well paced and I am ready to make the crossing any time she wishes.

DRABBLE WHO edited by David J Howe, David B Wake
Becon, 123 pp, £8.99, h/b
Reviewed by Martin Tudor.

A "drabble" is a very short story of exactly 100 words, plus a title of no more than 15 words. This, the third Drabble book from Becon Publications, differs from the previous two in that it has a theme: all of the stories are based on or about the BBC tv series *DR WHO*. However, as with the first two books, all of the authors have donated their work free of charge (receiving only a single contributor's copy), with all of the

profits going to the RNIB's "Talking Books" Library; the series has already raised more than £2000.

As with the previous collections, DRABBLE WHO features a fairly mixed bunch of 100 stories, from a wide selection of people; in addition to the usual mixture of sf fans and authors, the selection this time includes a number of DR WHO actors, actresses, script writers, directors and producers.

Some of the stories are amusing, some serious, others range from the banal to the hilarious; all of them are cleverly written, a number being a bit too clever - unless you are very familiar with the tv series. My personal favourite is "Ace's Diary Entry: 23rd November 2062" by Sophie Aldred, formerly the Seventh Doctor's sidekick: *"Dear diary: Well, I don't mind admitting to you that I'm well scared. The atmosphere in the TARDIS has become heavy and unbearable over the last few days. Don't know how much more I can take. The Professor's dead edgy and nervous; I've never seen him so tense, and that worries me, it really does. I know that if he doesn't manage to get hold of a supply from somewhere within the next few days, there'll be big trouble. So. How am I going to tell him it was me who nicked his last packet of jelly babies?"*

Overall, this is as entertaining as the first two collections, well worth reading.

LUCKY'S HARVEST: THE FIRST BOOK OF MAMA by Ian Watson
Gollancz, 537 pp, £15.99, h/b

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Watson is always attempting something new. Here he's taken the plot cliché of a human colony sharing a planet with an alien race and completely rejuvenated it. "Sufficiently advanced future technology will be indistinguishable from magic," said Arthur C Clarke, and this novel seeks to prove it, operating in the area where SF overlaps with fantasy. Watson asks the reader to suspend disbelief and to accept that a strange sentient asteroid is capable of conferring beneficial mutations upon humans. One woman, Lucky Sariola, has become a sort of queen bee, achieving great longevity (perhaps even immortality) and producing a baby girl every three years for the last four centuries. In addition, each of her daughters confers immortality upon her first lover. And a few others possess great mental powers, such as Osmo Maanafors, who is a bespoker: he says that something *is spoken* and it will occur.

The planet itself is very Earthlike,

though with a lush alien flora and fauna, including dozens of different types of tree, all named, and a cuckoo bird which can speak, repeating information. Then there are the snake-like aliens and their strange humanoid servants. This is a very large and complex novel (with another 500-page volume to come). It has many strands, following Jatta, one of Lucky's daughters, and her rapidly-growing mutant son, following Gunther Beck the dream savant, who wants to enter a dreaming hibernation so as to find his lost love, following Juke the young bespoker who wants to oust Osmo. And the whole novel is wrapped in Finnish myth, with Finnish names and the Finnish storytelling tradition permeating every page. The result is a fresh and challenging book, full of surprises, with more characters and wonders than the reader can cope with.

RANDOM ACTS OF SENSELESS VIOLENCE by Jack Womack
HarperCollins, 256 pp, £14.99, h/b

Reviewed by William McCabe.

There are cases for science fiction that call it the literature of the imagination, of "what if?". This book would have been much more powerful stuff if it wasn't sf. The landscape of New York (and the rest of the USA) degenerating into riots, poverty and the rest is merely a backdrop. The real story is that of Lola Hart and her family trying to come to terms with their own situation.

The story of a middle class family being forced into a ghetto situation works well. The worries about drugs, violence, street gangs and the like are common even now. If anything the sf background reduces the threat (this isn't the real world - that sort of thing). The (fake?) street-speak sounds like it owes more to 1984 - 50's beatnik - CLOCKWORK ORANGE than anything spoken on the streets of New York.

That said, the characterisation is good (if a little older than it claims to be in the case of the street kids), as is the story. I just can't help wondering what it would have been if it had been set in the present rather than a near-future that already looks terribly out of date.

DANCING ON THE VOLCANO by Anne Gay
Orbit, 410 pp, £15.99, h/b

Reviewed by Martin Tudor.

By far the best work Gay has yet produced, DANCING ON THE VOLCANO is a fascinating portrayal of two worlds, the chilling city-

scape ruled by the tyrannical Synod and the apparently utopian virgin planet Harith.

The novel opens with Irona, a Warden of the Synod, whose job is to use a sophisticated network of "Eyes" to seek out dissidents and rebels, then to send in the murderous "Arms" to destroy them. Irona, however, has a secret: she has become obsessed with one young dissident, Twiss, and has used the advanced technology at her disposal to "eavesdrop" upon his mind and emotions. When her lapse is discovered, she is forced to flee, taking Twiss with her. The only place they can escape the clutches of the Synod appears to be the colony planet Harith, but soon it becomes apparent that Harith, too, is closely controlled by the Synod.

Gay has created two disturbing worlds here, and her main character, Irona, is well-developed and believable; unfortunately, however, many of her minor characters are mere ciphers and Twiss, who should supply the romantic interest, is totally two-dimensional. But frustrating as this is, the fast-paced plot and the quality of Gay's writing propels the reader through this enjoyable tale at great speed and left me, for one, eagerly anticipating the sequel, which will hopefully tie-up the hanging plot threads.

ALIEN EMBASSY by Ian Watson
Gollancz, 204 pp, £4.99, p/b

Reviewed by Dave Hardy.

In case anyone assumes that this is one of Ian's most recent works, I should first make it clear that this novel is copyright 1977. This probably explains why a lot of the basis for the background concerns body-fields, acupuncture points, "Kirlian photographs" and suchlike. Not that this makes the book any worse to read (as long as you can stand this sort of mumbo-jumbo).

The heroine is Lila Makindi, an African girl living on a post-Collapse Earth where the highest aspiration of any child is to be selected, when old enough, to train to work for Bardo - the Space Communications Administration responsible for interstellar travel. But this story is concerned not with travel in giant starships, but through the mind; a state attainable only when two people make love! Only three alien races have so far been contacted: the Asurans, the Rakshasas and the Yidags - all very different types of being. But Lila and her friend Maimouna, being inquisitive, soon see through this as a masquerade. They are immediately taken to another level, where they are told the true

story. A Star Beast is attacking the Earth, and it is their job to defend it. But is this the true story?

No rollicking adventure, this. Much of the book consists of the author's musings on the nature of human consciousness, self-awareness and other philosophical matters. But it is certainly original, and rewards the use of a few grey cells in order to stick with it.

GERRY ANDERSON'S FAB FACTS by Simon Archer
HarperCollins, 95 pp, £5.99, limpback

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

Gerry Anderson's career as puppet master began in 1957 when *THE ADVENTURES OF TWIZZLE* hit the television screens. It reached its climax with *THUNDERBIRDS*. Now the programmes that delighted children thirty years ago are back, captivating a new generation. This book is a collection of snippets and photographs relating to the TV adventures. There is no particular order to the facts as they jump from series to series at random. In no way can this be regarded as a history, more the kind of thing to flick through in an idle moment. It is also difficult to see who it is aimed at. The original fans will either have given up that aberration or will want a much more comprehensive book. Younger readers will not know all the series mentioned and will therefore not understand the significance of parts of the book.

This book, however, should be regarded as a tribute to its compiler, Simon Archer, who was killed just before publication.

THE ATROCITY EXHIBITION by J G Ballard
Flamingo, 135pp, £6.99, large format p/b

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

I expected this, from its format, to be illustrated, but it's been reissued in this art-book format to allow for Ballard's marginal notes, twenty years after he wrote the original book. I call it a book, cautiously, because I'm not prepared to describe it as a novel (though the blurb does) and it's something more (or perhaps less) than a collection of stories. What it is, as exactly as I can say, is a series of fragmented, fictionalised views of aspects of 1960s events and popular culture, including President Kennedy's assassination, car crashes, h-bomb test sites, Marilyn Monroe, surrealist art, flying, Elizabeth Taylor, the Vietnam war, Che Guevara and various modes of death.

Yes, the book is every bit as profound, powerful and disturbing as its reviews on the back cover claim. But it's also boring and almost unreadable. One gets the feeling of events about to occur, of characters about to do something, yet there is such a lack of coherence in the structure that one is still waiting at the end. An exception is the section (or chapter, as the pretense goes) "The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered as a Downhill Motor Race", which is still experimental but also clever and clear. And Ballard's margin notes are occasionally illuminating. If only there *had* been some pictures, perhaps the book would have been more understandable and thus worth buying.

THE FIRST CHRONICLES OF DRUSS THE LEGEND by David Gemmell
Legend, 477 pp, £14.99, h/b

Reviewed by Martin Tudor.

Gemmell is the only writer I know who is still producing well-written, intelligent heroic fantasy and, the latest of his Drenai books, is no different. DRUSS THE LEGEND takes us from the birth of Druss, Captain of the Axe, to the battle at Skeln Pass when he was 45. After the massacre of his fellow villagers, murder of his father and the abduction of his wife, Druss launches on an epic quest to recover his beloved Rowena. At one point this quest leads him into the Valley of the Dead, in the Void where he must rescue Rowena from death itself, here he encounters the witch known only as the Old Woman: "I am no debator, woman. I only know that I would die for her." "Yes, yes. Typical of the male - always look for the easy solutions, the simple answers"

This is an excellent read, with powerful action scenes and more thoughtful insights into both Drenai society and the rich and colourful world Gemmell has been developing since LEGEND.

(Many thanks to the person who sent in this next review, if you tell me who you are I'll credit you next issue! - Bernie)

RED MARS by Kim Stanley Robinson
HarperCollins, 671 pp, £5.99, p/b

Reviewed by (unknown).

This hefty volume is the first in a trilogy, and takes place over a period of about twenty Earth-years. The book starts with a map, but it turns out that most of the places mentioned aren't actually on it, so you

can ignore the map just for now.

The story starts with 100 colonists in the first city above Martian ground (remember the radiation). The first colonists are all scientists and engineers at the top in their fields, and most are Russian or American, with a few token Europeans and Japanese. Although the European and Japanese characters "do the dirty" on the colony, they help save the day in time for the second volume.

The time-line rather leaps about, no doubt to make the book more digestible. The crux of the story is whether to terraform Mars or to keep it untainted (like Antarctica). Terraforming is started anyway. A nice touch is that the space elevator's counterweight, an asteroid, is named "Clarke"! It is thus a green book, or is that red? Well, it definitely should be read (sorry!), and I'm looking forward to part two.

CHUNG KUO BOOK FOUR: THE STONE WITHIN by David Wingrove
NEL, 617 pp, £5.99p/b

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

Trying to review a book like this, half-way through a lengthy series, is a bit like tuning into part three of a radio serial and being asked to explain the story so far. Basically, Wingrove has postulated a future Earth where the Chinese dynasties have regained power. The vast population is confined to cities which cover whole continents and are stacked up, three hundred levels high. The higher you live, the greater your status. At the bottom, fumbling in the dark beneath the cities are the Clayborn - degenerate human beings - while at the top are the seven T'ang, each with governance over their own continental city. There is a huge cast of characters and some of their stories are continued in this volume.

Li Yuan is the T'ang of Europe. With the other T'ang, his job is to ensure stability, even if this means killing, and resist change which might bring the system down. Not only does he have to contend with insurrection from below, he also suspects treachery from Wang Sau-leyan, T'ang of Africa.

Stefan Lehmann, a former lieutenant of the T'ang's principle opponent, begins to work his way back up from the bottom of the levels, mostly over a large number of dead bodies. In America, the sons of wealthy businessmen begin to strike out against their parents and seek seats as Representatives in the freshly opened Council of Weimar - a kind of peoples' parliament. They are led by Joseph Kennedy. One of the businessmen, Charles Lever, is

attempting to persuade Kim Ward, the Clayborn genius, to work for him as he is obsessed with finding a cure for old age.

The problems of this volume are inherent in the kind of thing the project is. It is difficult to remember all that has gone before and in particular, to know what are the pertinent facts that need to be carried over from volume to volume. Also, having such a large canvas, and hence so many characters to keep tabs on, there are a lot of short scenes which jump here and there. As a result, continuity suffers. The book also lacks some of the tension of the political intrigue present in earlier volumes. There are also very few strong female characters in the series. Admittedly, this is a very male orientated society, but here one of the main female leads, Jelka Tolonen, gets shipped off to the colonies, and the other, Emily Ascher, gets sidelined after she marries Michael Lever. I hope the balance will be redressed considerably in the future volumes.

DARK VOICES 5 ed. David Sutton & Stephen Jones
Pan, 381pp, £4.99 p/b

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

This year's volume is well balanced between subtlety and nastiness, between originality and cliché, between British contributors and American. The best story was read out by its author at Fantasycon last month: "The Dog Park" by Dennis Etchison, a wonderfully atmospheric and unsettling piece about a park for dogs to roam in, near Hollywood. Equally good and original, but extraordinarily gross, is Robert Lannes' "Precious", where a gynaecologist falls in love with his patient's perfect vulva, and... Then there's a very entertaining Ramsey Campbell-type story from Kim Newman, and a subtle piece from Nicholas Royle. Graham Joyce contributes a story, "The Ventriloquial Art", which is clever but slightly frustrating to read; all you need to work out is, which is the ventriloquist and which is the dummy? Do you want me to tell you all about the cannibalism and necrophilia tales? I thought not. All in all, this is a very readable anthology, with something for almost everyone.

BEAUTY by Sheri S Tepper
Grafton, 476 pp, £4.99, p/b

Reviewed by Alison Weston.

This is a strange book. It is classed as a fantasy novel, but contains a good dose

of near future science fiction. It basically sets out to treat the *SLEEPING BEAUTY* legend as "a metaphor for what is happening to the world at large: perfect Beauty born, Beauty cursed with death, Beauty dying - but with the magical hope of being reawakened, maybe by love", according to the note by the author.

In this vein we have Beauty travelling through time, seeing the hopelessness and lack of beauty of the future, the disappearance of magic, and eventually the end of the world. Tied in with this are the Sidhe, wild elemental faeries, who weaken as the world loses its beauty.

The loss of beauty is linked to a loss of innocence and joy, and examines the place of horror, violence and pornography in our society. All these things are attacked for increasing our tolerance for terrible things, for encouraging us to see things which are terrible as the norm.

I am not a horror fan, and this view struck enough of a chord to make me switch off films with little point except violence or horror. For me, this aspect of the book had the most effect. It has made me think about what I consider acceptable, about what I wish to tolerate on my television screen, about when to switch off. The book is complex but easy to follow. Don't expect it to be like either *GRASS* or *THE GATE TO WOMEN'S COUNTRY*, because it isn't. It is strange but, on balance, worth reading.

CRY TO HEAVEN by Anne Rice
Penguin, 582 pp, £5.99, p/b

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

This is actually an historical novel but will be of interest to all of those who have enjoyed reading Anne Rice's vampire books. It is set in eighteenth century Italy and explores the world of the castrati. Guido was born to a poor family but was sold to the conservatoire in Naples and castrated at the age of five. Although talented he lost his voice at what would normally have been puberty. He turns his attentions to teaching and composing. Tonio was brought up as a prince in Venice but when his father died, his exiled brother had him castrated in revenge for what their father had done. So Tonio, too, finds himself in Naples. On the edge of manhood he has suddenly had his future snatched away from him. All that is left is his magnificent voice.

Before reading this book I, like most other people, believed that eunuchs were impotent. In this book, they seem to be able

to manage a wide range of sexual relationships. As Anne Rice has consulted experts there must be no doubt that at least some of them were able to live fuller lives than we would normally expect. Perhaps the eunuchs who guarded the harems had much more fun than the Sultans suspected. During his career, Tonio manages regular carnal relationships with, among others Guido, a Cardinal and a young widow, all of whom play powerful roles in shaping what he is to become.

The main criticism that can be levelled at this book is its length. Although superbly written it would have been just as good with some judicious editing. Longer does not necessarily mean better.

THE LITTLE COUNTRY by Charles De Lint
Pan, 636 pp, 8.99, "C" format

Reviewed by Mick Evans.

This epic by Charles De Lint is a mixture of thriller and fantasy. The plot revolves around a hitherto unknown manuscript by Billy Dunthorn, which seems to possess the power of magic. The book is in the possession of Janey Little and her grandfather, the Gaffer, who live in Cornwall. The strange power of the book attracts a secret society led by John Madden, an ego-maniac who himself possesses alarming powers similar to those of Aleister Crowley.

The thriller aspect of the book is fascinating, making the book un-put-downable. De Lint is an excellent storyteller, which makes for a clearer way as the fantasy aspect of the novel unfolds.

The book is steeped in the atmosphere of Cornwall and of Celtic folk music. De Lint's premise seems to be that music is the healing force of the universe, an idea I'm susceptible to myself. I don't want to expand on the plot too much as to do so would spoil the lovely twist at the end. So I'll simply recommend you read it, and discover for yourself. This really is an excellent read.

GRUNTS! by Mary Gentle
Corgi, 480 pp, £4.99, p/b

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

Once upon a time there was a dragon. But he doesn't figure much in this story. Let's start again. There were these two halfling thieves and the Dark Lord sent them out to steal weapons from this dragon so that his orc troops could, for once, stand a chance of beating the forces of light in the forth-

coming Last Battle. Okay, these weapons were magical. They were also Kalashnikovs, Uzi sub-machine guns, M79 grenade launchers - not to mention the helicopters and armoured personnel carriers. With these in their hands the orc rabble becomes a crack fighting force, the Marines. And their leader, Ashnak, works his way up to Supreme Commander.

In the beginning I found the text a little too blood splattered - there being a very high body count. (If this were ever filmed, Arnold Schwarzenegger would make an ideal Ashnak.) There is too much emphasis on the unsavoury habits of orcs. However, as the mayhem continues it begins to be fun, and a send up of militaristic American society. In the beginning the orcs are very definitely the dregs of society and obvious villains but by the end of the book you are rooting for them.

DOOMSDAY BOOK by Connie Willis
New English Library, 650 pp, £5.99, p/b

Reviewed by Martin Tudor.

Joint winner of the Hugo award for best novel, this almost renews my faith in the Hugos; *DOOMSDAY BOOK* is an excellent time travel tale which manages to inject a few neat twists into a tired old formula. Kivrin is a very determined history student, specializing in the middle ages, who desperately wants to experience the brutal reality of 14th Century England for herself. As time travel facilities are available, what's the problem?

Well, for one, these facilities are very limited, and for another, her period is classified "high risk"; naturally, this doesn't dissuade her and Kivrin gets her wish. But something goes wrong; instead of arriving safely after the plague has swept through England, she lands right in the path of the Black Death. To make matters worse, the technician who sent her collapses, the first casualty of a modern-day plague; the university town in her own time is placed in quarantine which means that Kivrin is stranded in the plague-ridden middle ages.

This is a wonderfully rich novel, well-researched and movingly told. For once, the Hugo went to a deserving work.

The FINAL deadline for the next issue of the newsletter is 1st December 1993, but BOOK REVIEWS should reach Bernie no later than 25th November 1993.

BRUM GROUP CHRISTMAS PARTY

at the Australian Bar

Friday 17th December 1993,

7.45pm for 8.00pm

Tickets £5.50

This year the Birmingham Science Fiction Group's Christmas Party will be in the upstairs function room of the Australian Bar,

corner of Hurst Street and Bromsgrove Street

in Birmingham city centre. Featuring:

An Amazing *ENORMOUS* Finger Buffet!

With such delicacies as: Plated Turkey with crusty bread and butter,

Pork and stuffing finger rolls, Pork Pie, Quiche, Sausage Rolls,

Prawn vol-au-vents, Pickles, Savouries (crisps, nuts etc),

Mince pies and Gateaux or Trifle.

Along with: Competitions! Prizes! Raffle! More Prizes!

Party Games! Silly Prizes! Tombola! Even More Prizes!

TICKETS ONLY ON SALE UNTIL 11th DECEMBER

Tickets are available from the treasurer Richard Standage,
116 Shireland Road, Smethwick, Warley, West Midlands, B66 4QJ (tel: 021- 558-7591).
Cheques etc. should be made payable to "the Birmingham Science Fiction Group".

Please complete the coupon enclosed in this newsletter.

BRUM GROUP CHRISTMAS PARTY

at the Australian Bar

Friday 17th December 1993,

7.45pm for 8.00pm

Tickets £5.50

This year the Birmingham Science Fiction Group's Christmas Party will be in the upstairs function room of the Australian Bar,

corner of Hurst Street and Bromsgrove Street

in Birmingham city centre. Featuring:

An Amazing *ENORMOUS* Finger Buffet!

With such delicacies as: Plated Turkey with crusty bread and butter,

Pork and stuffing finger rolls, Pork Pie, Quiche, Sausage Rolls,

Prawn vol-au-vents, Pickles, Savouries (crisps, nuts etc),

Mince pies and Gateaux or Trifle.

**Along with: Competitions! Prizes! Raffle! More Prizes!
Party Games! Silly Prizes! Tombola! Even More Prizes!**

TICKETS *ONLY* ON SALE UNTIL 11th DECEMBER

Tickets are available from the treasurer Richard Standage,
116 Shireland Road, Smethwick, Warley, West Midlands, B66 4QJ (tel: 021- 558-7591).

Cheques etc. should be made payable to "the Birmingham Science Fiction Group".

Please complete the coupon below.

I wish to purchase tickets at £5.50 each and enclose £

Name:

Address:

.....

.....