

# BRUM GROUP NEWS

July 1995

Issue 286

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

GROUP CHAIRMAN - CAROL MORTON, SECRETARY - ANNE WOODFORD, NEWSLETTER EDITOR - MARTIN TUDOR, TREASURER - STEVE JONES, PUBLICITY OFFICER - SARAH FREAKLEY, ORDINARY MEMBER - ALAN WOODFORD, NOVACON 25 CHAIRMAN - TONY MORTON, NOVACON 26 CHAIRMAN - CAROL MORTON.

**This month's  
speaker is  
ANNE GAY**  
who will address the Group  
on Friday 21st July 1995,  
7.45 for 8.00pm

**Admittance: Members £2.50; Visitors £3.75,  
(half-price for 14-18 year olds on  
production of proof of age).**

Born in 1952, ANNE GAY, came originally from Leicester but currently lives with her teenage daughter in Birmingham. She teaches languages full-time at a secondary school as well as writing fiction and the occasional Spanish textbook. Her first published story was "Wishbone" which appeared in GOLLANCZ-SUNDAY TIMES BEST SF STORIES in 1987. MINDSAIL (1990), her first published novel, describes how the passengers of a crashed spaceship adjust to an alien planet, gradually evolving into fragmented warring societies in the process. Her second novel, THE BROOCH OF AZURE MIDNIGHT (1991), explores the reactions of an expanding Terran culture to the challenge and opportunity of worm-hole access to the stars. DANCING ON THE VOLCANO (1992) and its sequel TO BATHE IN LIGHTNING (July 1995, Orbit, £5.99) deal with a far-future Earth ruled by a powerful and oppressive government, the Admin (controlled in its turn by the Matriarch), and the colonists of the distant planet Harith. The colonists believe that they have escaped the clutches of Earth's Matriarch; but by the time of TO BATHE IN LIGHTNING (set 20 years or so after the first book) it has become apparent that the Matriarch's grasp stretches further than they had thought. Anne is a long-time member of the BSFG and was joint Guest of Honour (with Harry Harrison) of the Group's 20th Anniversary convention, Twentycon. *[Many thanks to THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SF for much of the above information.]*



The BSFG 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 £10.00 per person, or £13.50 for 2 members at the same address. Cheques etc. should be made payable to "the Birmingham Science Fiction Group" and sent to the Treasurer, Steve Jones, c/o 121 Cape Hill, Smethwick, Warley, West Mids., B66 4SH. Book reviews, review copies and other contributions and enquiries regarding the Brum Group News to: Martin Tudor, Newsletter Editor, 845 Alum Rock Road, Birmingham, B8 2AG.

## COLOPHON

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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 is usually printed on the CRITICAL WAVE photocopier. For details of WAVE's competitive prices contact:

Martin Tudor, 845 Alum Rock Road, Ward End, Birmingham, B8 2AG.

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## LAST MONTH'S MEETING

Unfortunately due to illness our scheduled speaker, Colin Greenland, had to pull out. Both the BSFG committee and Colin would like to thank Ian Stewart for stepping in at the last moment and Jack Cohen for assisting (or should that be heckling?) him.

Colin Greenland has agreed to speak to the group in August. Get well soon Colin!

## FORTHCOMING EVENTS

UNTIL 25 JANUARY 1996: *THE DEVIL IS AN ASS*, Ben Jonson's tale of devil worship, wife stealing, major business frauds and the strange appearance of a Spanish lady, as Hell is transported to seventeenth century London.

At the Swan Theatre Stratford-upon-Avon. Call 01789-295623 for further details.

21 JULY 1995: ANNE GAY author of *MINDSAIL*, *THE BROOCH OF AZURE MIDNIGHT*, *DANCING ON THE VOLCANO* and *TO BATHE IN LIGHTNING* will speak to the Brum Group in the upstairs room at the Australian Bar, Hurst Street/Bromsgrove Street, Birmingham, 7.45pm for 8.00pm.

21-23 JULY 1995: *THE SHANSHANK REDEMPTION* Frank Darabont's film of the Stephen King story, featuring Tim Robbins, Morgan Freeman and Bob Gunton, will be screening at the Electric Cinema, Station Street, Birmingham city centre. Call 0121-643-7277 for details.

21 JULY 1995: *SPACE ADVENTURE COBRA* directed by Osamu Dexaki, an old-fashioned Manga in a STAR WARS vein, with soundtrack by Yello, will be showing from 11.15pm at Phoenix Arts, 11 Newarke Street, Leicester, tickets £2.00 call 0116 255 4854.

25-27 JULY 1995: *REPO MAN* the classic sf tale from Alex Cox, featuring Emilio Estevez, Harry Dean Stanton and Olivia Barash, will be screening at the Electric Cinema, Station Street, Birmingham city centre. Call 0121-643-7277 for details.

28 JULY 1995: *WINGS OF HONNEAMISE* directed by Hiroyuki Yamaga, involved 300 animators and a soundtrack by Ryuichi Sakamoto, showing from 11.15pm at Phoenix Arts, 11 Newarke Street, Leicester, tickets £2.00 call 0116 255 4854.

1 AUGUST 1995: *THE BLACK LODGE*, Birmingham's informal gathering of horror and dark fantasy fans meet in the bar of the Australian Bar, Hurst Street, Birmingham, from 8.30pm. Copies of the group's newsletter, *THE REGISTER*, are available for a reply-paid envelope from: 33 Scott Road, Olton, Solihull, West Midlands, B92 7LQ.

3 AUGUST - 7 SEPTEMBER 1995: *LORD OF THE FLIES* the world premiere of Nigel Williams stage adaptation of William Golding's classic tale, directed by Elijah Moshinsky. At The Other Place, Stratford-upon-Avon. Call 01789-295623 for further details.

5 AUGUST 1995: *WOLVES OF FENRIG, DR WHO* group meet at the Australian Bar, Hurst Street, Birmingham, 3pm-10.30pm. Contact: 161 Dangerfield Lane, Darlaston, Wednesbury, Staffs., WS10 7RU for further details.

5 AUGUST 1995: *RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARCHIVES '95* fantastic tv festival at Stourbridge Town Hall, 10.30am-10.30pm. Send a stamped, self-addressed envelope for further details to: Kaleidoscope, 93 Old Park Road, Dudley, West Midlands, DY1 3NE.

5 August 1995: *FIREWORKS AND LASER SYMPHONY CONCERT* at Regley Hall, Alcester, Warwickshire.

A four hour live music performance with an hour of popular classics with fireworks and lasers. Contact: Canal 7, Clarence Mill Bolington, Macclesfield, Cheshire, SK10 5LZ, or call 01625-573477.

**5 AUGUST 1995: COMIC MART** at Carrs Lane Church Centre, Birmingham. Opens noon. Contact: Golden Orbit, 9 Stratford Way, Huntington, York, YO3 9YW.

**18 AUGUST 1995: COLIN GREENLAND**, author of **TAKE BACK PLENTY** and the sequel **SEASONS OF PLENTY** (HarperCollins, £15.99), will speak to the Brum Group in the upstairs room at the Australian Bar, Hurst Street/Bromsgrove Street, Birmingham, 7.45pm for 8.00pm.

**18-20 AUGUST 1995: PRECURSOR** small, informal convention at the Hertfordpark Hotel, Stevenage. Attending £15.00 made payable to "Rob Hansen". Room rates twin/double £20.50, single £23.50 per person per night. Contact: 144 Plashet Grove, East Ham, London, E6 1AB.

**24-28 AUGUST 1995: INTERSECTION**, 53rd world-con, Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre, Glasgow. Guests of honour Samuel R Delany, Gerry Anderson, Vinç Clarke. Attending £90.00 until 22 July after which advance memberships close and it will cost £100.00 on the door). Contact: Admail 336, Glasgow, G2 1BR, Scotland.

**25-28 AUGUST 1995: LIVE WIRES AND RAW DRAWINGS**, the Best of British Animation 2, at the Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry. Featuring **JUKEBOX RUN**, **BRITANNIA**, **HIS COMEDY**, **THE BIG STORY**, **THE SOUND OF MUSIC**, **ABDUCTEES**, **TALES FOR THE VIENNA WOODS**, **SAVE ME**, **JUMPING JOAN**, **BOB'S BIRTHDAY**, **AH POOK IS HERE** and **PIB AND POG**. Call 01203-524524 for details.

**2 SEPTEMBER 1995: WOLVES OF FENRIC**, *DR WHO* group meet at the Australian Bar, Hurst Street, Birmingham, 3pm-10.30pm. Contact: 161 Dangerfield Lane, Darlaston, Wednesbury, Staffs., WS10 7RU for further details.

**2 SEPTEMBER 1995 - 27 JANUARY 1996: FAUST PARTS I AND II**, Swan Theatre Stratford-upon-Avon. Call 01789-295623 for further details.

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**15 OCTOBER 1995: GAMES DAY & GOLDEN DEMON '95**. "Thousands of Games Workshop hobbyists will get together for a dazzling day of exciting games and special events whilst Citadel miniature painters and modellers compete for the coveted Golden Demon Slayer Sword" (it sez here). The National Indoor Arena, Birmingham. Call the booking office on 0121-767-4321 or INFOTEL's 24-hour information line on 0839-333-554 (calls charged at 39p per minute cheap rate, 49p per minute all other times) for further details.

**20 OCTOBER 1995: ROBERT RANKIN** author of the humorous Brentford Triangle and Armageddon series will speak to the Brum Group in the upstairs room at the Australian Bar, Hurst Street/Bromsgrove Street, Birmingham, 7.45pm for 8.00pm. (NB: TO BE CONFIRMED.)

**23-28 OCTOBER 1995: RETURN TO THE FORBIDDEN PLANET** winner of the Laurence Olivier Award for Best Musical returns to the Birmingham Hippodrome. Call the box office on 0121-622-7486 for further details.

Wednesday 25th October  
**RETURN TO THE FORBIDDEN PLANET**  
at the Birmingham Hippodrome, Hurst Street.  
ANNE WOODFORD is organising a block-booking for this performance (curtains open 7.30pm). Block-bookings receive a £3.00 reduction per ticket. Anne is taking deposits of £5.00 per person NOW! Either speak to her at this month's meeting or call her on 0121-559-7761 for further details.



28 OCTOBER 1995: COMIC MART at Carrs Lane Church Centre, Birmingham. Opens noon. Contact: Golden Orbit, 9 Stratford Way, Huntington, York, YO3 9YW.

3-5 NOVEMBER 1995: NOVACON 25 the Brum Group's own science fiction convention at a new venue - the Chamberlain Hotel, Alcester Street, Birmingham. Guests of Honour: Brian W Aldiss, Harry Harrison and Bob Shaw, with Special Guest Iain Banks. Attending membership is £25.00 until 1 October 1995. Supporting membership costs £8.50. Progress Report #3 and hotel booking forms are available, deadline for hotel bookings is 20th July 1995. Contact CAROL MORTON, 14 Park Street, Lye, Stourbridge, West Midlands, DY9 8SS, cheques should be made payable to "Novacon 25". Room rates are now only £17.50 per person per night in twin/double and £35.00 pppn in a single, prices include full English breakfast.

3-5 NOVEMBER 1995: ReContaminated 1995, animé convention at the Grand Hotel, Birmingham. Attending £21.00 until 30 September, £26.00 thereafter. Contact: Martin Pay, 29 Langton Avenue, Chelmsford, CM1 2BW.

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17 NOVEMBER 1995: UNIVERSITY CHALLENGE featuring the BSFG versus THE BIRMINGHAM UNIVERSITY FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION SOCIETY. In the upstairs room at the Australian Bar,

Hurst Street/Bromsgrove Street, Birmingham, 7.45pm for 8.00pm. (NB: TO BE CONFIRMED.)

BY POPULAR DEMAND!

THE BRUM GROUP'S  
CHRISTMAS MEETING

will again be a  
BEER & SKITTLES

evening at  
the Samson & Lion,  
Wordsley on

Friday 16 December.

CAROL MORTON is now taking bookings for this popular event. Deposit £5.00 per person. Food, transport, prizes and skittles will be included in the final price. (Last year it was £10.00 per person, we will announce the price for this year as soon as possible.) Book early as places are limited.

16 DECEMBER 1995: COMIC MART at Carrs Lane Church Centre, Birmingham. Opens noon. Contact: Golden Orbit, 9 Stratford Way, Huntington, York, YO3 9YW.

5-8 APRIL 1996: EVOLUTION 47th UK National Convention, the Radisson Edwardian Hotel at Heathrow. Guests of honour: Colin Greenland, Bryan Talbot, Jack Cohen. Attending £24.00, supporting £14.00. Contact: 13 Lindfield Gardens, Hampstead, London, NW3 6PX.

29 AUGUST - 2 SEPTEMBER 1996: LACON III 54th World SF Convention, Anaheim Convention Center, Anaheim Hilton and Towers and Anaheim Marriott, California, USA. Guests: James White, Roger Corman, Elsie Wollheim, Connie Willis (Toastmaster), Takumi and Sachiko Shibano (Fan Guests of Honour). Attending \$110.00, Supporting \$35.00. Contact: c/o SCIFI, PO Box 8442, Van Nuys, CA 91409, USA.

28-31 MARCH 1997: INTERVENTION the 48th UK National SF Convention, Adelphi Hotel, Liver-

pool. Theme "communication". Guests Brian W Aldise and David Langford, US Guest to be announced but it WILL NOT be Robert Silverberg as previously announced. Attending £20.00, supporting £10.00, cheques payable to "Wincon" to 12 Crowsbury Close, Emsworth, Hants., PO10 7TS.

3-5 SEPTEMBER 1997: LONESTARCON 55th World SF Convention, San Antonio, Texas, USA. Attending was \$65.00. Contact: PO Box 27277, Austin, TX 78755-2277, USA.

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, 186 Casewick Road, West Norwood, London, SE27 OSZ.

*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. If you know of any events which you think may be of interest to members of the BSFG please send details to the Editor. If you have attended any events or seen any films or videos that you would like to recommend to other members (or warn them of) please feel free to write a report/review and send it to the editorial address.*

## BOOK REVIEWS

**TO BATHE IN LIGHTNING** by Anne Gay  
Orbit, £5.99, 471pp, p/b  
Reviewed by Martin Tudor.

I approached this, the sequel to DANCING ON THE VOLCANO, with some trepidation. DANCING had been a compelling novel set in the chilling future society of the Matriarchy. Based on Earth, a couple of centuries in the future, it described how the Matriarchs controlled the masses, or "Sleepers", through a mixture of drugs and advanced mind-control devices. It was a powerfully written, disturbing and bizarrely plausible dystopia. But DANCING lost much of its emotional and narrative drive when the heroine Irona, along with her lover Twiss and other colonists, escaped Earth to start a new life on the distant planet Harith.

I feared that the sequel was going to deal solely with the colonists and their new life on Harith... Fortunately Gay had realised that much of the impact of the first novel came from the contrast between life on Harith and the oppressive dominance of the Matriarchs on Earth, and has used this to great effect in LIGHTNING.

The novel opens, 20 years or so after the events in DANCING, with a powerful scene as Irona's bodyguard is murdered by two killing machines or "Arms". The Arms are the ultimate weapon of the Matriarchs and are used to control the more rebellious masses on Earth. But how have these Arms come to Harith? Who controls them? And where are they based? Swiftly the already flawed utopia of Harith is in turmoil as the Arms strike again and again.

Irona and her husband "King" Twiss are desperately searching for answers to these questions when Irona receives a message capsule from Earth. The message triggers a powerful response in Irona, sending her body into a coma and her "mind/spirit" back to Earth. She finds Earth in greater turmoil than Harith - the Sleepers have awakened and the other governments of Earth seem to have turned on the Matriarchy.

TO BATHE IN LIGHTNING is an even more compelling read than DANCING ON THE VOLCANO. Gay's greatest weakness until now has been an inability to deal convincingly with a large cast of characters. But LIGHTNING features at least a dozen believable and powerfully portrayed protagonists who battle for the

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Treasurer, Steve Jones,  
for further details.

by word of mouth, its importance reinforced by the ingrained dictum that forgetting is the deadliest sin. Inevitably, after unknown thousands of years this lore has passed largely into the realms of myth and legend and the true nature of the concordance reached with the planet's original intelligent inhabitants, the Serpents and the Salamanders, is no longer understood. In fact, the Serpents and Salamanders are now virtually unknown to the civilised majority of the world. So too are the Dragomites, an ant-like species dwelling in hives shared with a sub-group of humans (also unknown) living in a relationship which may or may not involve a degree of symbiotic interdependence.

This first part of the story is of how an unlikely group of people come together for a variety of reasons, not always from choice, in an expedition to discover the true origin of the human presence in the world. What they have discovered by the end of the volume is that great events are in train which will affect the future of all the races - human and non-human alike. Alliances are forming which none would have expected and few will find easy to accept, but it is obvious that there is a great deal yet to be revealed about what is going on.

The author's mastery of his craft is here revealed on two levels. On the one hand, it is a wonderfully well-written book, easy to read and sustaining interest right from the first page. The characters are diverse and intriguing and the world itself, together with its history, are described indirectly so that it really comes alive without tedious slabs of explanation constantly interrupting the narrative. On the other hand, he has (a bit sneakily, but nonetheless very cleverly) constructed the first episode of a serial which both sets up the scenario and captures the reader's interest without giving too much away about what is yet to come. As a book in its own right *SERPENT'S BLOOD* has considerable merit, but as a taster for the serial it is even better. Definitely recommended.

**EVERVILLE** by Clive Barker  
HarperCollins, £5.99, 640pp, p/b  
Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

This sequel to *THE GREAT AND SECRET SHOW* contains too many wonders, too many sets of characters. One can admire Barker for fitting them all together yet at the same time curse him for moving on to a fresh group of people just when one has become interested

in one group. The diversity of it all is too great for a single book (19th century settlers struggling through a winter on the Oregon Trail; the small city of Everville preparing for its 1994 summer festival; various demon-hunters spread out across the US; the fantasy world of Quiddity, just a few steps away through a crack in space, where everything is different; various unstoppable evil entities; a romantic sub-plot). There's plenty to admire and enjoy; unfortunately, though, the novel highlights Barker's flaws by substituting a lot of killing for true horror, and it repeats itself by resurrecting far too many characters from the dead.

**THE WESTERN WIZARD**, book 2 of "The Last of the Renshai" by Mickey Zucker Reichert  
Millennium, £5.99, 502pp, p/b  
Reviewed by Lynn M Edwards.

The Western Wizard, one of four holding the balance of magic, is dead. A new one is needed to maintain the balance. This, of course, is at a time of crisis. What follows in *THE WESTERN WIZARD* is an interesting sword and sorcery tale but obviously a middle section of something longer. Initially, there are too many characters for new readers to feel comfortable starting here. Then sufficient clues are given in the first hundred or so pages for the identity of the probable new Western Wizard to be worked out. It takes most of the rest of the book for the main characters to come to the same conclusion. Interesting in its own right, it would be better read as part of the series.

**NORTH WIND** by Gwyneth Jones  
Gollancz, £5.99, 281pp, p/b  
Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

This is another of the books nominated for this year's Arthur C Clarke award (it was beaten by the equally excellent *FOOLS* by Pat Cadigan). *NORTH WIND* is a sequel to *WHITE QUEEN* but set about a century later. The Aleutians, the aliens that arrived in the first book, seem set to stay, trading with the locals (their term for Earth's native inhabitants) and have proposed a long term project for lowering the Himalayas and changing the climate. This triggers a backlash and colonies are attacked and wiped out. Two who escape one of the purges are the halfcaste, Sidney Carton, and the Aleutian, Bella. Most people think the aliens are telepathic but much of their communication is



sympathy of the reader and even the minor characters leap from the page. At times I found myself sympathising with the arch-villainess of these novels, the ruthless and ambitious Bernadina, Irona's mother and supreme Matriarch. This is a brilliant tour de force - but I recommend that you read **DANCING ON THE VOLCANO** first.

**NEW LEGENDS** by Greg Bear  
Legend, £15.99, 419pp, h/b  
Reviewed by Robert P Jones.

In 1967 Harlan Ellison's **DANGEROUS VISIONS** anthology raised both the morale and the profile of sf at a time when it was passing through a period of transition. Even then, many fans (and writers) felt that the genre was going to the dogs; that increased stylishness and greater verisimilitude were poor compensation for smaller excitements.

Now, over a quarter of a century on, Greg Bear has produced an anthology that similarly mixes new and established writers in an attempt to prove the field's continuing health, relevance, and vitality. The literary standard of **NEW LEGENDS** is arguably somewhat higher than that of Ellison's volume, but it is unlikely to have anything like the same impact. In fact, reading it from cover to cover makes for a rather depressing experience.

Of the senior talents represented, only Bear's father-in-law, Poul Anderson, scores a qualified hit, with an enjoyably old-fashioned tale of confrontation between humans and religious robots. Gregory Benford re-writes Asimov's "Nightfall", with better science but diminished sense of wonder. Robert Silverberg's piece is fine as far as it goes, but stops just as it gets interesting, whilst Ursula Le Guin's "Coming of Age in Karhide" is pleasant enough, though more like a footnote to **THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS** than a story in its own right. Robert Sheckley is merely silly.

Predictably, most of the newer writers envisage a near future of quite excruciating misery. In Sterling Blake's "A Desperate Calculus", a half-crazed couple release a plague of infertility upon the over-populated Third World; in Carter Scholz's intricate, hollow, novella "Radiance" a confused weapons scientist ends up alienated both at work and from the three women in his life. Geoffrey Landis vividly depicts a plausible computerised war scenario; and the heroine of James Stevens-Arce's memorably bleak "Scenes from a Future Marriage" wants to slit her wrists.

Even Greg Abraham's "Gnotha" - a touching, if slightly overambitious, fable of redemptive love - takes place against a grim background of European disunity.

I was disappointed by Greg Egan's "Wang's Carpets", with its bizarre cast of post-human characters. It has nice touches of surrealism, but never becomes dramatic, and the central concept is so extreme as to be virtually indescribable. Still, unlike the stories by Mary Rosenblum and Sonia Lyris, it does make some sort of impression beyond that of dreary competence.

For me, the best items were Paul McAuley's "Recording Angel" and George Alec Effinger's "One". The former is exotic, apocalyptic, and genuinely scary. The latter follows husband and wife on a sad quest for life in a vast, meaningless, universe. Both linger disturbingly in the mind.

In one of his mercifully brief introductions, Bear claims that "One" "questions...the most deeply held wishes and beliefs of science fiction". Included here, it seems almost to sum up a collection that has its moments but, for all its classiness, left me more concerned about the current state of sf than confident.

**SERPENT'S BLOOD: THE FIRST BOOK OF GENESYS** by  
Brian Stableford  
Legend, £15.99, 485pp, h/b  
Reviewed by Michael Jones.

Although the quality of some of his earlier work may have been a touch uneven I have always had a lot of time for Brian Stableford, a versatile and accomplished writer who has tried his hand (or should I say his pen) at various categories within the sf/fantasy genre. A lot of time is what has been needed recently as he has started to produce some very long books and this is no exception - the substantial first volume in a projected trilogy.

It is set on a (presumably) remote planet colonised long ago by humans from a starship, no contact with the rest of humanity having been maintained since. One of the native characteristics of the planet is the presence of a whole range of bacterial infections which do not affect living things but quickly bring decay and rot to anything manufactured, whether from stone, metal, wood or whatever. A consequence of this is that there is no recorded history and those who initiated human occupation of the world attempted to provide in its stead a tradition of "lore" passed from generation to generation

the result of body language and exchange of wanderers - parts of their living tissue which detach themselves and perambulate over their skin surface. Bella is a rare Aleutian who does not produce wanderers so is regarded as a cripple but, despite her odd appearance, this enables "her" to pass as a halfcaste. These are humans who try to emulate the aliens, some of whom go to the lengths of gene-alteration and surgery.

One strand of the plot is the relationship between Sid and Bella, another is the relationship between the two races as well as the background tensions between the sexes and the fragmentation of human society. At the forefront is the search for the instantaneous travel device invented by Peenemunde Buonarotti. In *WHITE QUEEN* this device had been used to transport two humans to the Aleutian mothership in an attempt to sabotage it. Some think it does not exist, others that it is better left lost. Those that want to find it either think it should belong to the humans as it was one that invented it, others that it can be used for the aliens to return to their homeworld.

In many ways this book mirrors real life, on the surface things seem relatively but just below the surface is hostility, deceit and betrayal; lurking in the depths are scarcely hinted at secrets and prejudices waiting their turn to rise. The book is well written and full of sharp observation.

***THE CHEATER*** by R L Stine  
Archway, £3.50, 152pp, p/b  
Reviewed by Robert P Jones.

Not so nor, strictly speaking, horror. Instead, a suspenser in the popular "Fear Street" series for teenagers. According to the blurb, R L Stine has written some three dozen of these things, "all of them bestsellers", and this sample has a practised, professional feel to commend it, if little else.

Actually, for its first two-thirds, the book (which can be read attentively in well under two hours) tells a pretty good story. Carter Phillips, daughter of a high court judge, allows a classmate - Adam Mesner - to sit an important maths exam under her name in exchange for a single date. He, however, blackmails her, first into further assignments, later into buying his silence.

Despite very plain writing and minimal characterisation, all of this comes across quite plausibly. The social contrast between the country-club set of the privileged,

slightly spoiled Carter, and the shady, dangerous, wrong-side-of-the-track world of the sexy, intelligent Adam adds a certain frisson. Suspense builds nicely as Carter is drawn into an increasingly desperate series of deceptions, and there is a single beautifully judged moment of pure shock.

Alas, in the home stretch Stine throws quality to the winds, in a delirious rush to the finish. Verisimilitude, promising strands of plot, and any sense of cumulative tension, all go out of the window in a limp flurry of final twists (every one of which I had predicted) leading to a coy and morally evasive ending.

But am I being unfair? Isn't it wrong to expect the same standards from juvenile as from adult fiction?

I don't think so. Kids capable of reading *THE CHEATER* are capable of reading better books, and I don't just mean adult "classics". Think of how excellent the "juveniles" of Robert Heinlein are, for example, or the early novels of Alan Garner. Many of us retain vivid adolescent memories of books such as these precisely, I would suggest, because they did not patronise their young readers, nor sell them short. There is, on the other hand, something unpleasantly cynical about R L's assumption that all he has to deliver is the same obvious formula over and over again, and that his readers couldn't care less how thin, hurried and improbable his stuff becomes, so long as it continues to scare them.

Yes, there may well be a large teen readership for "Fear Street" novels; but most teenagers, surely, will quickly recognise their limitations and be wanting to move on to something more satisfying.

***THE FARSEER 1: THE ASSASSIN'S APPRENTICE***  
by Robin Hobb  
HarperCollins, £9.99, 375pp, trade p/b  
Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

This is an above-average novel, historically-based with relatively small amounts of fantasy. It follows the early life of Fitz, the bastard son of a prince, who is brought up at the castle of Buckkeep. Although he does possess some great mental powers, he is an embarrassment to the royals and is at first treated like a servant. Eventually he is apprenticed to Chade, the King's assassin.

After a slow and cliché-ridden start, the clever interweavings of plot become fascinating. Even so, it is the characters and settings which make this worth reading.



Chade and several other characters are very peculiar (a couple of them are too manic to be credible). The setting of Buckkeep with its political rivalries is beautifully developed, and later in the book the Mountain Kingdom provides a believable contrast. Despite some unevenness in the writing and in the quality of the set-piece scenes, there are enough surprising elements here to make it worth reading. It's only the first volume of a trilogy, but the author has skilfully laid the foundations for two potentially better volumes to come.

**AT THE CALIGULA HOTEL** by Brian Aldiss  
Sinclair-Stevenson, £6.99, 99pp, p/b  
Reviewed by Robert P Jones.

Brian Aldiss is a man of many parts. Arguably the most distinguished living sf writer, he is also a much underrated mainstream novelist, an incisive critic and, as this often delightful book shows, no mean poet.

In fact, his fluency in the medium should come as no surprise. Poetry features in several of his novels - notably *BAREFOOT IN THE HEAD* and *THE MALACCIA TAPESTRY* - and he has published one previous collection, together with the long poem *PILE* and a book of humorous verse about cats. One gets the impression that most of the poetry here was written as relaxation; rarely profound and often jokey, it is nonetheless presented with considerable technical flair in an astonishing variety of verse forms and rhyme schemes.

The variety of subject matter is also considerable. There are poems of domestic life, satiric poems, delicate evocations of the natural world, clever homages to other writers, and - yes - poems on scientific and science-fictional themes.

Some of these last are strikingly original. "Greenhouse Sex", "Lunar Anatomy" and "Flight 063" are tartly ironic. "What Did the Policeman Say?" is a fine sombre tribute to Philip K Dick, and Aldiss' admiration for Mary Shelley's *FRANKENSTEIN* finds expression in a handful of carefully written pieces. I particularly liked "Thomas Hardy Considers the Newly-Published Special Theory of Relativity", which is not only an ingenious parody but tellingly pinpoints a key moment of change in the way humanity perceives itself in the cosmos.

Yet, good though the obviously sf related poems are, it would be churlish to overlook the volume's other riches. Art - another Aldiss enthusiasm - features prom-

inantly, with meditations on Gauguin and Breughel, and the novelist's quirky sense of place is evident in a series of landscape impressions, ranging from Kuala Lumpur to the Aegean, to Boar's Hill.

Perhaps the most notable poems - certainly those that touch the deepest vein of feeling - are the most personal ones. "Moonglow: for Margaret" is an exquisitely affectionate, un sentimental love lyric, whilst "The Path" is a rather splendid atheist's prayer for dignity in his declining years. The obsession with time and its passing that has always haunted Aldiss' fiction shows no sign of deserting him as he moves into his eighth decade and confronts the growing solitude of an ageing writer's life.

This may sound grim, but Aldiss' fun-loving and convivial side is never far away, especially in such surreal japes as the six "Precarious Passions" in which, amongst other unlikely scenarios, a woman marries the Southern Ocean and a refrigerator proposes to a musk ox.

All in all then, a minor addition to the Aldiss canon, but a thoroughly characteristic one in which all his fans should find something to enjoy.

**THE FU MANCHU OMNIBUS** by Sax Rohmer  
Allison & Busby, £8.99, 647pp, p/b  
Reviewed by Adrian Middleton.

When I first read Sax Rohmer's fiction in my childhood, I saw these as exotic escapism - a curious mix between Sherlock Holmes and the first Bond film, *DR NO*. Entranced by the insidious evil of Doctor Fu Manchu, my main interest was to try to learn all about the strange eastern cults in his employ. Over the years I tried, again and again, to collect the complete series of books but, again and again, my hopes were dashed as publisher after publisher gave the series up as a lost cause, and not a one ever seemed to succeed. Now, with their first omnibus, Allison and Busby have taken a bold step - they're so sure there's an audience out there that they really do intend to release all of the Fu Manchu books.

The first book, *THE MYSTERY OF DOCTOR FU MANCHU*, reminds me that the entire series started with a pulp novel - a poor man's herlock Holmes tale whose detective, Nayland Smith, combined his vast Holmesian expertise in things oriental with his equally Clouseauian bumbling - all plot advances are achieved by blunders, rather than by discovery. This first book is also the most politically

incorrect - although later books don't make many concessions either. Nayland Smith is the champion of White Society, while Fu Manchu is the Yellow Peril (note Yellow is in capitals - as it is throughout Rohmer's stories) personified, heading a government-backed conspiracy of all non-white races in an attempt to overthrow the Western World. You can tell it was written in 1913! The only good thing about the orient seems to be its hypnotically beautiful women!

The second book, **THE DEVIL DOCTOR**, manages to expand upon the formula set out in its predecessor, and rather than London, it takes the action all over the Eastern world, mixing every culture Rohmer ever bothered to study. Rather than spoil it, here are some choice words taken from the chapter titles: "Rangoon", "Buddha", "Mulatto", "Samurai", "The Mummy". All in one book?

**THE SI-FAN MYSTERIES**, third and final tale of this volume, tries to hide the existence of Fu Manchu for the first few chapters, but we know Rohmer's kidding no one. By this book the formula is well and truly set in stone (or jade perhaps?).

Overall, the Fu Manchu stories have that dated, **BOY'S OWN**, feel. Let's not forget that this was hack fiction on a par with Robeson's Doc Savage, and that every chapter is written like an episode of an old Republic serial. The exotic backgrounds are compelling, though pitifully inaccurate - due largely to the ignorance of the time, although Rohmer was said to have been an expert in matters Oriental (one of the Golden Dawn crowd, I seem to remember), so maybe his stories were more political than his readers may have believed, creating a stereotype which could well explain American attitudes to orientals (ie the Japanese) at the height of Rohmer's career. Is it propaganda?

I for one will purchase future volumes, just to be a completist, but unless you really do love Sherlock Holmes and James Bond, warts and all, this series is likely to satisfy little more than idle curiosity.

**DIAMOND MASK** by Julian May  
Pan, £5.99, 460pp, p/b  
Reviewed by Lynn M Edwards.

So you started with **THE MANY COLOURED LAND** and you've read on from there? Then **DIAMOND MASK** is a must! Rogatien Remillard recounts the part of his long tale which tells how Jack the Bodiless and Diamond Mask came together and how she got her name. However, there are problems. This is the thirdbook of

the second series but provision has been made for new readers by detailed sections of facts which start off reminding the reader of what has gone before and end up getting in the way of the story. These passages are too long for anyone who knows the previous two books of this series and too short to give new readers enough information. A shorter, tighter book which referred back to the previous two instead of précising bits of them would have been a better read. The tale itself is still an enjoyable yarn, however, although mainly one for the collectors.

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reviews of books  
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The following reviews from the following people are overdue, please ensure that these (along with reviews of books picked up at the June meeting) are passed to **MARTIN TUDOR** at this month's meeting on Friday:

Dave Cox: **HOT SKY AT MIDNIGHT** by Robert Silverberg (May).

Bernie Evans: **THE DEUS MACHINE** by Pierre Ouellette (February); **NIMBUS** by Alexander Jablovkov (March); **TO BUILD JERUSALEM** by John Whitbourn (March).

Steve Jones/B'ham Uni: **DRAGONCHARM** by Graham Edwards (January); **TALISMAN** by Sam Lewis (January); **WARHAMMER: WOLF RIDERS** ed. David Pringle (March).

Carol Morton: **THE DRAGONS OF HEOROT** by Niven, Pournelle & Barnes (April); **WITCHES' BREW** by Terry Brooks (May); **THE TANGLE BOX** by Terry Brooks (May); **RONAN THE BARBARIAN** by James Bibby (May).

Chris Ridd: **THE WILD SHORE** by Kim Stanley Robinson (January); **ARE WE ALONE?** by Paul Davies (March).

Many apologies to Chris Morgan for saying in last issue that I was waiting for two reviews from him; I had received and promptly misplaced them! Mea Culpa.

# EVOLUTION IN PRACTICE:

1926 = The First Science Fiction Magazine

1930 = The First Science Fiction Fanzine

1937 = The First Science Fiction Convention

1939 = The First World Science Fiction Convention

1957 = The First European Worldcon

1987 = The First Issue of CRITICAL WAVE

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