

June 1996

Issue 297

BRUM GROUP NEWS

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

Group Chairman & Newsletter Editor - Martin Tudor, Secretary - Anne Woodford,
Treasurer - Sarah Freakley, Publicity Officer - Steve Jones, Ordinary Member - Alan
Woodford, Novacon 26 Chairman - Carol Morton, Novacon 27 Chairman - Martin Tudor.

This month's guest speaker is

Ian Watson

on Friday 21st June, 7.45pm for 8pm, at the Prince Hotel,

(on Station St., behind New St. Station, near the Electric Cinema and Bus Station, in the city centre).
Admittance: Members: £2.50 (concessionary £2.00), Non-Members £3.75. (Concessionary £2.75)
(Concessionary rates are available to under 18s, full-time students and other unwaged,
at the discretion of the Treasurer, on production of appropriate proof.)

IAN WATSON, a master of the short story, has published around 100 stories in such collections as *THE VERY SLOW TIME MACHINE* (1979); *SUNSTROKE* (1982); *SLOW BIRDS* (1985); *THE BOOK OF IAN WATSON* (1985, US); *EVIL WATER* (1987); *SALVAGE RITES* (1989); *STALIN'S TEARDROPS* (1991) and *THE COMING OF VERTUMNUS* (1994). Despite this he is probably best known for his numerous novels: *THE EMBEDDING* (1973) which won the Prix Apollo in 1975 in its French translation *L'ENCHASSEMENT*; *THE JONAH KIT* (1975) which won the British Science Fiction Award for 1978; *THE MARTIAN INCA* (1977); *ALIEN EMBASSY* (1977); *MIRACLE VISITORS* (1978); *GOD'S WORLD* (1979); *THE GARDEN'S OF DELIGHT* (1980); *UNDER HEAVEN'S BRIDGE* (with Michael Bishop, 1981); *DEATHHUNTER* (1981); *CHEKHOV'S JOURNEY* (1983); *CONVERTS* (1984); the "Black Current" Trilogy - *THE BOOK OF THE RIVER* (1984), *THE BOOK OF THE STARS* (1985) and *THE BOOK OF BEING* (1986); *QUEENMAGIC*, *KINGMAGIC* (1986); *THE POWER* (1987); *MEAT* (1988); *THE FIRE WORM* (1988); *WHORES OF BABYLON* (1988); *THE FLIES OF MEMORY* (1990); *NANOWARE TIME* (1991); *LUCKYS HARVEST* (1993); *THE FALLEN MOON* (1995) and *HARD QUESTIONS* (June 1996, Gollancz, £16.99). He has also written several "WARHAMMER 40K" books, which tie-in with the game of the same name: *INQUISITOR*; *SPACE MARINE*; *HARLEQUIN* and *CHAOS CHILD* (all published by Boxtree). Born in North Shields, Northumberland, 20 April 1943. Educated at Tynemouth School, 1948-59; Balliol College, Oxford, 1960-65, BA (hons) in English 1963, B.Litt. 1965, MA 1966. Watson has worked as: Lecturer, University College, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 1965-67; Lecturer, Tokyo University of Education, 1967-70; Lecturer 1970-75 and Senior Lecturer in Complementary Studies, 1975-76 at Birmingham Polytechnic Art and Design Centre, where he taught "Future Studies" - taking one of the first academic courses in sf in the UK. Features Editor and a regular contributor to *FOUNDATION*, 1975-90; *Writer-in-Residence*, Nene College, Northampton, 1984; he has been a full-time writer since 1976 and, since 1983, has been European Editor of the *SCIENCE FICTION WRITERS OF AMERICA BULLETIN* as well as writing reviews for the British national press. [Thanks to the *ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SF and 20th CENTURY SF WRITERS* for much of the above material.]

The BSFG meets at 7.45pm on the 3rd Friday of every month (unless otherwise notified) in the upstairs function room of the Prince Hotel, Station Street in Birmingham city centre (formerly Stephenson's Hotel, between the Electric Cinema and the Bus Station). The annual subscription rates (which include 12 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, Sarah Freakley, c/o 121 Cape Hill, Smethwick, Warley, B66 4SH. (E-mail should go via: bsfg@bortas.demon.co.uk) Book reviews, review copies and other contributions and enquiries regarding the Brum Group News to: Martin Tudor, Newsletter Editor, 24 Ravensbourne Grove, off Clarkes Lane, Willenhall, West Midlands, WV13 1HX.

Colophon

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This issue was printed on the CRITICAL WAVE photocopier. For details of WAVE's competitive prices contact Martin Tudor at the editorial address on the cover.

Many thanks this issue to BERNIE EVANS for producing the address labels and transferring files; STEVE GREEN and ALICE TURNER for their unsolicited (but very welcome) reviews; THE BIRMINGHAM EVENING MAIL; WHAT'S ON; THE BIRMINGHAM VOICE; STEVE GREEN and CRITICAL WAVE for the news in the Jophan Report and the Events listing.

Letters

WENDALL WAGNER, Jr., 9146 Edmonton Road, Apt. 201, Aleenbelt, MD 20770-1532, USA.

11 May 1996.

In the May BRUM GROUP NEWS you say that you weren't going to include ANSIBLE with each month's mailing anymore because nobody cared that much. May I register one vote in favor of continuing to include ANSIBLE with the mailings. For obvious reasons I can't pick it up at the meetings.

CHRIS MORGAN, 321 Sarehole Road, Hall Green, Birmingham B28 0AL.

17 May 1996.

A few comments on the newsletter. On the whole I approve of what you're doing, and (having done it myself for a couple of years) I certainly appreciate the huge amount of work involved each month. So please don't take my remarks as criticism, just a bit of feedback.

I feel strongly that ANSIBLE should be sent out each month with the newsletter, because ANSIBLE is the best part of the mailing and I would hate to miss it if I should miss a meeting. (In fact, we did miss a meeting in April, because we were away on holiday, so please could we have a copy of that ANSIBLE.) Everybody misses the occasional meeting, and we miss fewer than almost anybody.

As for the listing of forthcoming events, yes, I think this was getting rather too long and full, through the inclusion of items outside Birmingham and marginal things. But I do think that certain events, especially signings at Andromeda, should be featured in the newsletter. The Brum Group and Andromeda have got to work closely together, in the interests of both.

The star rating of reviews is probably a mistake. If it was a review column written by a single regular reviewer it would work well, because people would quickly get used to his/her prejudices. But with so many reviewers in the newsletter, and some of them of dubious quality, one person's "*****" book is going to be somebody else's "*" book. Personally, I wouldn't give "*****" to anything less wonderful than the best (let's say DHALGREN or TITUS GROAN or THE WASP FACTORY). But because I want to cooperate and to support your editorship I shall do my best to affix star ratings to my reviews.

[First point, raised by both Wendell and Chris regarding ANSIBLE - it was suggested at the EGM that we should stop mailing ANSIBLE partly to save money and partly to encourage people to attend, not "because nobody cared that much". Having tried this for a few months we have decided that neither is happening. Although we save a bit on copying by producing 20 less copies, we have decided that the saving is negligible compared to the inconvenience to members, so from this month you will find a copy of ANSIBLE enclosed with your newsletter. Copies of previous issues of ANSIBLE are available at the monthly meeting; or if you are unable to attend send a saae,

with a note of which month(s) you want, to the editorial address. (As it is a bit difficult for him to pick up his missing issues, Wendall should find copies of his missing newsletters enclosed.

[Forthcoming Events return this issue - due to popular demand! Look, with a group as apathetic as you lot, half a dozen people mentioning it is the equivalent of a riot!]

Forthcoming Events

21 JUNE 1996: IAN WATSON will address the BSFG, 7.45pm for 8pm, at the Prince Hotel, (on Station St., behind New St. Station, near the Electric Cinema and Bus Station, in the city centre).

22-23 JUNE 1996: BABCOM '96 BABYLON 5 "event" presented by Stargazer Productions International Ltd at Le Palis, Hammersmith, London. For further information contact: Stargazer Productions International Ltd, 4 Aspenwood House, Ipsley Street, Redditch, B98 7AR.

6-7 July 1996: ANDROMEDA BOOKSHOP GRAND RE-OPENING.

At noon on Saturday the new premises at 2-5 Suffolk Street, Birmingham, B1 1LT, will be opened by Iain Banks, David Gemmell and Terry Pratchett. From 11am on Sunday signing sessions on the hour by: Chris Baker, Jim Burns, Ramsey Campbell, Storm Constantine, Chris Evans, Peter F Hamilton, Dave Hardy, Robert Holdstock, Tom Holt, Graham Joyce, Christopher Priest, Mark & Julia Smith, Freda Warrington and Angus Wells. (Plus to be confirmed: Robert Rankin, Simon R Green and many more!) Call: 0121-643-1999 for further details.

12 JULY 1996: HARRY HARRISON will address a SPECIAL meeting of the BSFG, 7.45pm for 8pm, at the Prince Hotel, (on Station St., behind New St.

Station, near the Electric Cinema and Bus Station, in the city centre).

27 JULY 1996: COMIC, CARD & SCI-FI MART at Carrs Lane Church Centre, beside Marks & Spencers in Birmingham city centre. Opens midday. For further information contact: Golden Orbit, 18 Oak Tree Way, Strensall, York, YO3 5TF.

10-11 AUGUST 1996: DELTA QUADRANT STAR TREK convention at the Britannia Hotel, New Street, Birmingham. Confirmed guests are Tim Gaskill of the Official STAR TREK Fan Club of the UK and Robert Hollocks of CIC Video, further guests to be announced. Attending membership £35.00 (6-14 year olds £25.00). Contact: Infinite Frontiers Conventions, PO Box 8966, Great Barr, Birmingham, B43 5ST.

16 AUGUST 1996: MICHAEL J ("SIMO") SIMPSON, staff writer for SFX magazine, will address the BSFG, 7.45pm for 8pm, at the Prince Hotel, (on Station St., behind New St. Station, near the Electric Cinema and Bus Station, in the city centre).

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 (Toast-master), 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.

20 SEPTEMBER 1996: CHRISTOPHER PRIEST will address the BSFG, 7.45pm for 8pm, at the Prince Hotel, (on Station St., behind New St. Station, near the Electric Cinema and Bus Station, in the city centre).

18 OCTOBER 1996: KEN MACLEOD, author of THE STAR FRACTION which was the runner-up in the Arthur C Clarke award, will address the BSFG, 7.45pm for 8pm, at the Prince Hotel, (on Station St., behind New St. Station,

near the Electric Cinema and Bus Station, in the city centre).
18-20 OCTOBER 1996: MASQUE 4 "the fourth British Costume Convention for all creative people, fantasy, sf, historical... but above all lots of FUN. Talks, Shows, Competitions." The Moat House, West Bromwich, Junction 1 M5. Attending £30.00, Supporting £10.00, Day attendance £15.00. Contact: Alan Cash, 130 Hamstead Hall Road, Handsworth Wood, Birmingham, B20 1 JB.

8-10 NOVEMBER 1996: NOVACON 26 the Brum Group's own convention, Hotel Ibis, Ladywell Walk (off Hurst Street), Birmingham. Guest of Honour David Gemmell. Attending membership £27.00 until 30 September, £30.00 thereafter and on the door. Supporting £10.50. Progress Report #2 and hotel booking forms now available. Contact: Tony Morton, 14 Park Street, Lye, Stourbridge, West Midlands, DY9 8SS.

14-17 FEBRUARY 1997: ATTITUDE: THE CONVENTION at the Abbey Hotel, Great Malvern. Attending £23.00. Contact: First Floor Flat, 14 Prittlewell Square, Southend-on-Sea, SS1 1DW.

28-31 MARCH 1997: INTERVENTION the 48th UK National SF Convention, Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool. Theme "communication". Guests Brian W Aldiss, David Langford, Jon Berg and Octavia Butler (NOT Robert Silverberg as previously announced). Attending £25.00, supporting £15.00, cheques (payable to "Intervention") should be sent to: 12 Crowsbury Close, Emsworth, Hants., PO10 7TS.

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

27 DECEMBER 1999 - 2 JANUARY 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 (tba before 1997). Contact: Malcolm Reid, 186 Casewick Road, West Norwood, London, SE27 0SZ.

Although details are correct to the best of our knowledge, we 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 about) please feel free to write a report or review and send it to the editorial address.

The Jophan Report #94

I'm sorry to say that the news is pretty depressing this month. First Ethel Lindsay, a regular attendee at Novacons for many years (not to mention TAFF winner, worldcon runner, fanzine publisher and UK agent for SF CHRONICLE) has announced that she has terminal, inoperable and untreatable cancer. She has six months to a year to live.

She would appreciate hearing from any and all old friends. Write her at 1 Park Homes, Charles Street, Carnoustie, Angus, Scotland. She would appreciate this information being passed on.

Richard Evans, editorial director and head of Gollancz's Imaginative Fiction department died on 26 May, he was 46.

The legendary Los Angeles fan writer, Charles Burbee, died at 6.30 am on 27 May.

One-time Dr Who and renowned tv actor, Jon Pertwee, died on 20 May, aged 77.

Redd Boggs, American fanzine editor and FAPA member, died on 10 May, aged 75. He was editor of Skyhook and Bete Noire, considered to be among the best fanzines of the fifties

The New York Science Fiction Society (the Lunarians, Inc.) have announced that they have recently added the name of the late Elsie B. Wollheim, co-founder of DAW Books, to their existing \$2,000 per year Donald A. Wollheim Memorial Scholarship Fund.

The Scholarship Fund, which was established in 1989, with funds first distributed in 1990, was first renamed in 1991 in memory of the late Donald A. Wollheim, science fiction fan, writer, editor and publisher. The purpose of the Fund is to help new science fiction and fantasy writers from the New York Metropolitan area attend either the Clarion or Clarion West science fiction and fantasy writers workshops.

(Contact: Stuart C. Hellinger, 1996 Donald A. Wollheim Scholarship Fund Administrator, Suite 234, 847A Second Avenue, New York, NY 10017-2945, USA for further information.)

The official TAFF results, as reported by Dan Steffan, are as follows:

"Martin Tudor, editor of *Empties* and *Critical Wave* (and *BRUM GROUP NEWS*) has won the 1996 TAFF race and will be attending the 1996 World Science Fiction Convention in Los Angeles this Labor Day weekend.

"Transatlantic vote tabulations were completed by European Administrator Abigail Frost and her American counterpart on Sunday, 5 May 1996, and resulted in an overwhelming victory for Tudor.

"149 people voted in this year's race, including fans from North America, Europe and Australia. The final results, reached after the first round of voting, were as follows:

Martin Tudor: 138 votes
M.J. "Simo" Simpson: 9 votes
No Preference: 2 votes

"This is a significant victory for Tudor and is easily the widest margin between candidates in any recent TAFF race. We congratulate Martin on his win and offer heartfelt appreciation and thanks to "Simo" for making it a horse race.

"Further information concerning the results of the 1996 TAFF race will be published on or about 13 May 13. This publication will contain all available voting information and results. A list of North American voters, a financial report, and other TAFF news will be included in this publication. Every North American participant in the 1996 TAFF race will receive a copy of this publication, as will all sf newszines and all the known North American participants from the 1995 race.

"Anyone not included in these groups can easily obtain a copy of this publication by sending a SASE (or international reply coupon) to: Dan Steffan, TAFFboy, 3804 South 9th Street, Arlington, Virginia 22204, USA."

M.J. "Simo" has passed on the following message: "I wish to thank sincerely the nine people who voted for me (Lord knows, I wasn't one of 'em), but even more sincerely I wish to thank the 138 who voted to get Tudor out of the country for a few days. And indeed, the two who showed no preference (do they think that Tudor and I are equally as good, or equally as bad). Many congratulations to Martin who will be a fine ambassador for UK fandom. I shall drink a toast to his health at Dangercon, and think of him, all those miles away, surviving on orange juice and Coke - hohoho!"

TAFF winner, Martin Tudor, passes on his thanks to everyone who voted (especially those who voted for him!) and mentions that he aims to take British fanzines to the USA to auction for TAFF. He would appreciate hearing from anyone who wishes to donate fanzines for auction. He is particularly interested in tracking down copies of the rarer British fanzines, such as: Phil Palmer's *CHOCOLATES OF LUST*; fanzines of the Sandy Brown/Jimmy Robertson/Alan Ferguson period; Pickersgill's *RJC*; Ashley's *SALIROMANIA*; etc. Anyone interested in *DONATING* fanzines should contact him at 24 Ravensbourne Grove, off Clarkes Lane, Willenhall, West Midlands, WV13 1HX.

Book Reviews

HARD QUESTIONS by Ian Watson
Gollancz, 288pp, £16.99, h/b
Star Rating: ****
Reviewed by Martin Tudor.

Way back, when I first became interested in sf, I was a fan of Ian Watson's work. I voraciously read and greatly enjoyed *THE JONAH KIT*, *THE MARTIAN INCA*, *ALIEN EMBASSY* etc; then, for some reason I can no longer remember, I stopped reading his work. Recently I thought I should give Watson another go and tried to read *LUCKY'S HARVEST* (the First Book of Mana) - I just couldn't get into it. So it was with some trepidation that I started reading *HARD QUESTIONS* - my fears were groundless.

HARD QUESTIONS is a fast-paced, eminently readable thriller for its first two-thirds and a stunning, cutting-edge, sf tour-de-force for the final third. But best of all the "join" doesn't show! The transition from a thrilling tale of industrial espionage and gun-toting cults, to a science fictional exploration of the nature of reality is smooth and flawless.

Clare Conway is a researcher at Cambridge, her speciality is the human brain and her work is sponsored by electronics giant Matsushima - who is one of the many companies striving to develop a quantum computer. Jack Fox, a psychologist at Cambridge, and would-be lover of Clare, accompanies her on a trip to the "Hard Question" conference in Arizona; conference to discuss the mysteries of the human mind. But, following a lurid tabloid story about Clare (released to the press by a disgruntled ex-lover), Clare attracts the attention of a coterie of industrial spies; an unbalanced, but charismatic, cult leader; and, as murder and mayhem begin to dog her tracks, several US government agencies.

This is a fascinating novel, Watson's command of the language, style and verve draws the reader swiftly into the pacy plot and, when the direction suddenly changes, the

reader is swept along with it. Highly recommended.

FORTRESS IN THE EYE OF TIME
by C J Cherryh
HarperCollins, £5.99, 773 pp, p/b.
Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

Cherryh is one of the most versatile writers around. Not only does she produce novels and stories in several genres she also does it well. This particular novel is high fantasy. It begins in a crumbling tower, the home of probably the last true wizard. He and the world are under threat from a dead one, so he summons help. Unfortunately, although the summoning is a fully mature man, his mind is as blank as a new-born's. Named Tristen, Mauryl tries to protect and educate his charge, but he has squandered his strength and his enemy breaks through. With his protector dead, Tristen ventures out into the world armed only with his innocence and a Book given him by Mauryl but which he cannot understand.

Cefwyn, Prince of Ylesuin, befriends Tristen more out of curiosity than altruism but as the province begins to fall into war he realises that he has a valuable ally. For Tristen this is a novel of self-discovery, for Cefwyn the events lead to a rapid maturing from playboy to worthy king.

A hallmark of Cherryh's work is her attention to detail - everything has a place in the narrative although some readers might find the detail too precise. She excels at conflict between characters and the book is full of intrigue, betrayal, diplomacy and doubt. All her characters come across as real people with real problems even though they may be totally different from those of her readers. For those who have enjoyed her Hugo winning novels such as *DOWNBELOW STATION* this will give equal pleasure.

ROYAL ASSASSIN: The Farseer Trilogy
Book 2 by Robin Hobb.
HarperCollins/Voyager,
580pp, £15.99, h/b.

Star Rating: ****

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Nearly all fantasy trilogies are soggy in the middle, with a second volume that is slow, repetitive and boring. Not so Robin Hobb's Farseer Trilogy, which began well with ASSASSIN'S APPRENTICE and has blossomed wonderfully into an entertaining but above all highly credible situation. For the most part this is straightforward early-mediaeval historical, with English names and the familiar problems of jealousy between princes, serious threats from sea-borne raiders, an uncertain network of alliances with vassal dukes, and the complicating factors of various royal bastards, spies and assassins. The fantasy comes from telepathic powers, known as Skilling when it results in communication between humans, and as the Wit (which is strongly disapproved of) when between human and animal.

Our hero, FitzChivalry (bastard son of the late Prince Chivalry and a trained assassin in his late teens) has some powers of Skilling and greater control of the Wit. One of the more contrived and sentimental strands of the novel concerns his relationship with a wolf. His love for Molly, now reduced to the status of a servant-girl, is often embarrassing to read due to its cliché-ridden lack of realism. What are so good here are the political intrigue between princes, the action sequences (often concerning the Outisland raiders), the fascinating characters who populate Buckkeep, and the small, harsh details of life. Despite a few awkward scenes, this is an outstanding novel, with tension and a reasonably fast pace, and with occasional depths of description and perception which elevate it above almost all of its rivals.

MUCHO MOJO by Joe R Lansdale

Indigo, 308pp, £5.99, p/b

THE TWO BEAR MAMBO

by Joe R Lansdale

Gollancz, 273pp, £8.99, 'B' format p/b

Reviewed by William McCabe.

These are two detective novels in what seems to be an ongoing series. The first (cheaper) of the two is currently on Waterstones recommended list; the second they are currently running on the general fiction shelves. The classification of the latter seems strange to me since these two are well within the standard genre of American detective fiction. In such novels the hero is somehow compelled to discover who killed someone or where someone has disappeared to. For some reason he also feels compelled to make sarcastic remarks to anyone who crosses his path and frequently gets beaten senseless or shot as a result. Why they do this I never really understand. Maybe it's just an easy way to get some action into the storyline and distract from the generally minimal plot. Maybe they just think it's the sort of humour that such novels should have.

There are some departures from the norm in these books. To start with the "hero" is a double act. In a possible concession to political correctness, one of them is both black and homosexual and, although there is a "female sex object" in the first novel, there isn't a "lady in distress". This doesn't really change the style a whole lot but there it is.

On with the plot. The two heroes, Leonard and Hap, are poverty-line Texas Americans. In the first book Leonard (black and gay) inherits his uncle's house which includes a trunk containing the partly dismembered/decomposed body of a child along with a load of "kiddie porn". Obviously he has to prove that his uncle was not a paedophile/child-killer because it seems really obvious to the police that he was. In the second novel (white and straight) has to travel to a small town that seems to be the KKK capital of the state to find out what has happened to his ex-girlfriend from the first novel (who just happens to be black).

In each novel there seems to be at least one situation where these two could easily avoid trouble but they go in there saying all the wrong things and get hospitalised.

All told these are fair representations of the better end of the pulp detective fiction. They are far from the best but if you're the kind that wants to be very "PC" they're the best you'll see.

THE ETERNAL by Mark Chadbourn
Gollancz, 381pp, £16.99, h/b
Star Rating: ***
Reviewed by Michael Jones.

The title identifies the dark leading character in the story; a being once a man but now immortal, doomed to wander the earth for all eternity. At the beginning of the book his path is crossed by that of Annie, a young student on her way home to a Leicestershire village for the Christmas holidays: she witnesses him committing murder and is fortunate to escape with own life. From that moment it becomes his intention to seek her out, not just to kill her like thousands of others before her but to destroy her whole way of life and all she holds dear. He nearly succeeds, but Annie has been "chosen" and with the help of allies temporal and spiritual she defeats him. Not that I doubted for a moment that she would - the only reason to finish the book was to discover not whether, but how. What remained lacking was an adequate explanation as to why Annie was chosen, what was so special about her. All that happens is that every so often she receives divine guidance in a dream or vision to help her find the right path.

Another reason to stick it out to the bitter end was to find out how many of her friends and acquaintances would die in various unpleasant ways. As far as that goes there was little enough that was new. The impact of a conventional litany of mutilated corpses, desecrated graves and re-animated dead, accompanied by copious splashes of gore, achieves maximum effect by being concentrated against the prosaic, familiar setting of contemporary Middle England, with an authentic background of village life and modern pop culture. It is all quite professionally and competently done;

nevertheless the impact remains limited because we have seen it all before.

However, the character and identity of the Eternal himself provide an element of novelty. Early on he explains his motivation to Annie - deprived of the ability to die he can find no purpose to his continuing existence and he turns instead to wholesale murder, both as an ongoing act of revenge and in the forlorn hope of learning from the deaths of others what he will never discover for himself. Towards the end of the story his actual historical identity is revealed, not only explaining his obsession with death but also providing the means of his destruction. So far as I am aware, this is the first time this particular idea has been used and it gives some justification to an otherwise routine slash-horror novel.

I suspect the reason albeit perhaps not consciously acknowledged, for reading this kind of thing is that by inspiring a vicarious fear it makes some people feel safer in their everyday worlds, more content with their own humdrum, comparatively uneventful lives. Personally, I very rarely find this kind of thing frightening and this was no exception. I prefer a more serious rationale behind my reading and this could have been provided by the new idea to which I have referred, but unfortunately not enough is made of that to enable it to carry the book on its own. It could have been used to better effect in a completely different way, but then it would have been a completely different book. A better one perhaps, from the viewpoint of a serious sf/fantasy reader, but not better for the market at which the author was presumably aiming. A market of which, I suppose I must admit, I find it hard to be part.

LADY OF THE TRILLIUM
by Marion Zimmer Bradley
£5.99, 315 pp, p/b
Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

Nowhere does this book declare its true identity, that it is a book for teenagers. But that is precisely what it

is. Promoted as a sequel to Black Trillium and Blood Trillium this novel is set several centuries later. Haramis, Archimage of Ruwenda is getting old and decides that it is about time she trained the girl who is to be her successor (chosen by the Land so there no element of choice for the girl in question. She virtually kidnaps Mikayla, who is the descendant of one of Haramis' sisters. Mikayla, however, would rather be off having adventures especially in the company of Fiolon, a cousin who up until now she has expected to marry. Since Haramis and Mikayla are both headstrong people there is an inevitable clash of wills. The two young people are also too clever for their own good. They discover some old technology and their messing with it leads Mikayla into danger.

It may be of interest to some that there really is a Black Trillium plant. I saw it last weekend in a greenhouse in Moseley.

THE BLOOD OF THE COVENANT

by Brent Monahan

New English Library, 311pp, £5.99, p/b

Star Rating: **

Reviewed by Michael Jones.

I hate reading sequels to novels I have never seen. Either the reader is provided with nothing more than veiled hints about the important and significant events which took place in the previous book or, as here, the author works in the basic details at the expense of clogging up the narrative with contrived explanations. Whichever, it can never be as satisfying as a stand-alone book.

This is (another) vampire story. There are two ways to write about vampires; by accepting the rules laid down in Bram Stoker's definitive version, or by seeking to build upon his work by adding something new, whether it be a scientific explanation or an extension of the supernatural. Monahan has chosen the latter course, hypothesizing that vampires are a creation of Satan, no less, intended by Him to take over the world and destroy mankind. This is foretold in ancient

scrolls and it would appear that in the previous book, THE BOOK OF COMMON DREAD, Simon Penn and Frederika Vanderven managed to thwart the attempt of one Satan's vampire servants to destroy these scrolls and prevent mankind being warned of the fate in store. In this continuation of the story a further vampiric emissary is sent, but fortuitously the Vatican has got wind of what is happening and a papal representative arrives on the scene to assist. With his help the scrolls are saved and the authorities are partially convinced of the danger, but the satanic plan may be too far advanced to be stopped. Perhaps there will be a further sequel, although this is not made clear. My impression was that the story of Simon Penn versus the Vampire per se was now concluded, but who am I to say?

There is some merit in the new treatment this book brings to an old idea but there remains too much left unexplained, particularly concerning the golden powder which in daily doses imbues vampires with both their strengths and weaknesses. It is not particularly well-written and does not constitute a major or worthwhile addition to the corpus of literature on the subject.

RONAN THE BARBARIAN

by James Bibby

Orion, 260pp, £4.99, p/b

Star Rating: ***

Reviewed by Michael Jones.

I was puzzled by the cover endorsements from Chris Tarrant and Lenny Henry until I discovered that the writer, whose first novel this is, has contributed to "countless" tv comedy shows. In choosing comic fantasy as the medium for his first foray into authorship he is attempting to follow in some very illustrious footsteps.

The simple plot is a basic rehash of every fantasy novel you have ever read and the result is, frankly, a mishmash of derivations, clichés and exaggerations, in which one has little difficulty in discerning which well-

known books (and film!) have been major influences. Fortunately, the comic element is sufficient to transcend such faults and to rescue the book from sinking without trace. Perhaps it was because of the tv connection that I was reminded of RED DWARF which, as we all know, is quite funny television but pretty poor sf in which scientific accuracy and logical plot development are never allowed to get in the way of the jokes. In the same way, RONAN is quite a funny book but pretty poor fantasy in which logical plot development is never allowed to get in the way of - indeed is often subordinated to - the jokes and some quite excruciating puns.

I found it quite an enjoyable read, but I shall not be falling over myself to get to anything else Bibby may write in the future.

TRIPOINT by C J Cherryh
New English Library,
377pp, £5.99, 'C' format p/b
Star Rating: ***1/2
Reviewed by Robert P Jones.

Confession time; this is the first novel by the prolific C J Cherryh that I have read and, though perfectly enjoyable and comprehensible in its own right, it probably takes on a quite different resonance in the context of her massive "Union/Alliance" series, of which it forms a part.

Energetic, confident, and knowing, TRIPOINT wastes no time before plunging into a headlong chase scenario. As the merchant ships "Sprite" and "Corinthian" dock by chance at the same space station Marie Hawkins, Cargo Chief of the former ship, illegally boards the latter ship in a half-crazed attempt to revenge herself on its Captain, Austin Bowe, who raped her during a similar docking some 24 years before. In the ensuing confusion, her son Tom finds himself stranded on board "Corinthian" under the command of his unknown father and at the mercy of his envious half-brother, Christian; "Sprite" in hot pursuit.

Initially I felt irritation at the sheer old-fashionedness of both Cherryh's

future and her storytelling. As the names might have suggested, almost all the characters appear to be white Anglo-Saxons, with the few coloureds performing such menial functions as cooking and cleaning. The core of the social organization still appears to be the standard nuclear family, moral and cultural attitudes towards issues of sex, work and money having evidently changed little since our own time. Scientific and technological detail is so sparse as to be almost non-existent.

Yet, just as I was about to dismiss TRIPOINT as little more than a reactionary bundle of ancient sf cliches, it started to exert an undeniable grip and fascination to the point where for days I couldn't stop thinking about it.

The reasons for my change of heart concern the sheer intensity of Cherryh's vision and the ruthless, muscular style with which she communicates it. Put simply, the absence of scientific detail is part of a general authorial reluctance to describe or elaborate upon anything. The story is driven along towards its powerful (though not, as one might expect, violent) climax pretty well entirely through forceful action and tough dialogue, with a few moments of exhausted reflexion thrown in for relief. The effect is a bit like that of watching a verite film shot in relentless close-up with a hand-held camera - the background may be a blur, but the foreground is overwhelmingly vivid. The roughness, claustrophobia, and strenuousness of the characters' lives is conveyed all the more persuasively for taking place during the final stages of an interstellar war whose particulars are never explained, in a universe populated by an alien species we hear about but never meet.

An exciting novel, then; if for me a puzzling one. My Star Rating reflects this puzzlement and, if you already know and love Cherryh's work, you may well want to upgrade it.

NAKED IN DEATH by J D Robb
Hodder and Stoughton, £16.99.
Reviewed by Alice Turner.

22nd Century New York: young, cocky female cop Eve Dallas investigates a series of murders; prostitutes become statistics and the cop's character develops into another cliché (sorry, but most of this book has been done before, in one way or another). There's one major red herring, but no real surprises in the plot; in fact, the lack of originality led me to wonder why Robb (according to the biography, "the pseudonym for one of America's most successful and award-winning novelists") bothered to set this in the future. To try her hand at a few futuristic gimmicks, perhaps? (It was very gimmicky, far too much so for the first quarter or so; then the gimmicks fade into the background, where they belong.) Just for the sake of a little variety in the old portfolio? Who knows? Even the front cover seems to agree with me, declaring "In the 22nd Century, murder is still the same", across a BLADE RUNNER-style backdrop.

Indeed, this caption sums up one of the themes. The murderer is an old-fashioned chauvinist, killing (female) prostitutes like many chauvinists before him, and each weapon used is a 20th Century gun, collectors' items in this future period. I wonder if the author will stop playing safe with her familiar ground in time for the second and third in this series.

Another major theme is the power of sex and the diversity of means by which it is used for gain or influence. Each of the prostitutes have different motivations, which are explored thoroughly; diaries and logs of sexual "appointments" are used for security and blackmail (the same thing, sometimes); incest and abuse have the power to affect lives and deaths; sexual indiscretion can even determine who becomes President of the United States! And the power of lust can change personality.

Despite the importance of sex to the story, there is none actually portrayed until almost halfway through the book - and it surprised me by being brilliantly written, tenderly observant and strikingly relevant to one participant's character. Unfortunately, it

is this which causes Lieutenant Dallas to become the cliché I referred to. It's appeared in countless books, films and tv shows: tough but brittle woman, whom no one can get close to, meets the perfect man with the perfect body and is softened by love. The initial sex scene was relevant to her character, but it didn't have to change her character. I'll read the next two books only if she dumps the boyfriend.

NO BLOOD SPILLED by Les Daniels
Raven, £4.99.
Reviewed by Kirk S King.

Don Sebastian de Villanueva has changed his name to the more reader-friendly Sebastian Newcastle and set out for late 19th Century India to find the Hindu goddess Kali. Following close behind, having escaped from an English nuthouse, is Reginald Callender, a one-off murderer who knows Sebastian can do more impressive tricks than mere name-changing - like growing wings, turning into shadow and fog, even returning from the dead each night. Callender's mortal character is interesting, amusing and one worth rooting for; Sebastian is a vampire and.. well, that's it, really.

NO BLOOD SPILLED is the fifth outing in Daniels' "Don Sebastian Vampire Chronicles", and it shows. The story reads like an overlong chapter in the series, with too many questions left unanswered and many happenings left unexplained. The latter has all been gone through in the earlier books - THE BLACK CASTLE, THE SILVER SKULL, CITIZEN VAMPIRE, YELLOW FOG - and the former is probably addressed in the next "chapter", WHITE DEMON.

Maybe the Sebastian of the early novels was a frightening, evil piece of work, but now, in India, he seems to have mellowed, a fact the blood drinker admits himself; maybe he should read Stoker's DRACULA to find his way again. It is therefore up to his human counterparts to do the nasty on fellow man, especially in the shape of Lieutenant Hawke of the 5th Fusiliers, who takes his mind off the unbearable heat by beating up his slaves, using

whores, throwing his own friends in dirty prisons, breaking the foot of a young captive and, oh, blowing up a prisoner point blank with a huge cannon. Vampires, who needs them? Another saving grace in the book is its detailed history of the dark cult of the Thugs, the group of professional robbers and murderers who strangled their victims because Kali will only accept the sacrifice if no blood is spilled.

At 218pp, this is a quick read and another chance to catch up with the travels of de Villanueva, but like any journey, it's best to start the beginning, with THE BLACK CASTLE; more likely than not, you'll enjoy the ride.

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The sharp-eyed amongst you will have noted a new innovation in the book reviews recently - yes, we would like every reviewer to give a "Star Rating" in future. The ratings are:

- * = Crap, beyond belief.
- ** = Crap, but readable.
- *** = Not too bad, really.
- **** = Pretty good actually.
- ***** = BUY IT!

Please remember that reviews of books should reach Martin Tudor at 24 Ravensbourne Grove, off Clarkes Lane, Willenhall, WV13 1HX, within ONE MONTH of your taking the book.

A number of people still owe reviews, their names are followed by the books they have yet to review (and the month in which they received them). Please ensure that these, along with reviews of books picked up at the last meeting are passed/mailed to Martin Tudor at/by this month's meeting:

Dave Cox: HOT SKY AT MIDNIGHT by Robert Silverberg (5/95).

Bernie Evans: THE DEUS MACHINE by Pierre Ouellette (2/95); NIMBUS by Alexander Jablokov (3/95).

Simon R Green: MEMORY SEED by Stephen Palmer (4/96).

John Howes: THE WAR OF THE LORD'S VEIL by Adam Nichols (8/95).

Robert Jones: JERUSALEM COMMANDS by Michael Moorcock (1/96); RING by Stephen Baxter (2/96);

THE UPLIFT WAR by David Brin (3/96); DEAD THINGS by Richard Calder (4/96); STAR BEAST by Will Baker (4/96).

Steve Jones/B'ham Uni:

DRAGONCHARM by Graham Edwards (1/95); TALISMAN by Sam Lewis (1/95); WARHAMMER: WOLF RIDERS ed David Pringle (3/95); BRIGHTNESS REEF by David Brin (1/96).

Adrian Middleton: DR WHO THE MISSING ADVENTURES: LORDS OF THE STORM by David A McIntee (2/96); DOCTOR WHO: TIME AND THE RANI by Pip & Jane Baker (2/96); DR WHO: PARADISE TOWERS by Stephen Wyatt (2/96); STAR WARS: THE LOST JEDI ADVENTURE GAME BOOK by Paul Cockburn (2/96); STARTIDE RISING by David Brin (2/96).

Carol Morton: WITCHES BREW by Terry Brooks (5/95); RONAN THE BARBARIAN by James Bibby (5/95); THE FEY: SACRIFICE by Kristine Katherine Rusch (8/95); SACRED GROUND by Mercedes Lackey (9/95); STORM WARNING by Mercedes Lackey (9/95).

Tony Morton: RICHTER 10 by Arthur C Clarke & Mike McQuay (2/96).

Chris Ridd: SUNDIVER by David Brin (1/96).

James Robertson: BEGGARS IN SPAIN by Nancy Kress (9/95); AXIOMATIC by Greg Egan (4/96); THE BAKER'S BOY by J V Jones (4/96).

Peter Weston: THE STARS ARE ALSO FIRE by Poul Anderson (1/96).

Would the person who took a copy of LIFE FORM by Alan Dean Foster in January this year, please either send in their review or identify themselves - they had signed with a squiggle. Will EVERYONE please note that you should PRINT your name in the box provided as well as signing for the review book(s) you pick up.

Would "P. Phillips" and "Chris Brimson", who joined the Group last month, please send their addresses to: Bernie Evans, 121 Cape Hill, Smethwick, Warley, West Midlands, B66 4SH.

STOP PRESS

I am very sorry to have to report that Ethel Lindsay died at 7am on Sunday 16 June.

Further tragic news, this weekend, Dee Anne Farey, wife of Novacon tech ops manager Nic Farey, died on 14 June.

Dee Anne, who underwent chemotherapy last year and a masectomy earlier this year, suffered a sudden and devastating deterioration last week and died peacefully in her sleep on Friday night.

I'm sure everyone will join me in sending deepest sympathies to her husband and two sons. Condolences can be sent to Nic at PO Box 178, St Leonard, MD 20685, USA.