

October 1996

Issue 301

BRUM GROUP NEWS

Price: 45p

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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.

KEN MACLEOD

author of

**THE STAR FRACTION
and THE STONE CANAL**

**will address the BSFG on Friday 18 October,
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 (Waged), £2.00 Unwaged), Non-Members £3.75 (Waged), £2.75 (Unwaged). (NB: Unwaged discounts are at the discretion of the Committee and will depend on satisfactory proof of status being produced.)

KEN MACLEOD graduated with a BSc in Zoology from Glasgow University in 1976. Following research in biomechanics at Brunel University he worked in a variety of manual and clerical jobs whilst completing an M.Phil. thesis.

He is now a computer analyst/programmer in Edinburgh, and lives in West Lothian with his wife and children. His first novel, THE STAR FRACTION (LEGEND, £5.99), was runner-up in the Arthur C. Clarke Award last year. His second, THE STONE CANAL, was published in hardcover by Legend last month priced £15.99.

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

Apology

I'm sorry for the ensmallled newsletter this month - I blame the lack of time and energy due to a prolonged chest infection. (Serves me right for giving up smoking - I knew that tar was protecting my lungs!) Normal service will be resumed next month.

Colophon

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Many thanks this issue to BERNIE EVANS for producing the address labels, supplying news from the Net and transferring files.

Will "P. Phillips", who joined the Group in May, please send his address to: Bernie Evans, 121 Cape Hill, Smethwick, West Midlands, B66 4SH.

Forthcoming Events

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 1JB.

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 £30.00 on the door. Supporting £10.50. Progress Report #4 now available. Contact: Tony Morton, 14 Park Street, Lye, Stourbridge, West Midlands, DY9 8SS.

15 NOVEMBER 1996: HARRY HARRISON, one of the Group's Honorary Presidents, creator of the Stainless Steel Rat, etc 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).

16 NOVEMBER 1996: HARRY HARRISON will be signing at Andromeda book shop, 2-5 Suffolk Street, Birmingham, B1 1LT. Call 0121-643-1999 for further details of this and other signings.

23 NOVEMBER 1996: BUZZ ALDRIN will be signing from noon at Andromeda book shop, 2-5 Suffolk Street, Birmingham, B1 1LT. (NB: to be confirmed.) Call 0121-643-1999 for further details of this and other signings.

14-17 FEBRUARY 1997: ATTITUDE: THE CONVENTION at the Abbey Hotel, Great Malvern. Attending £27.00. Contact: First Floor Flat, 14 Prittlewell Square, Southend-on-Sea, SS1 1DW.

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.

Book Reviews

GOLDEN WITCHBREED by Mary Gentle, Vista, £5.99, 476pp, p/b, Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

The premise that there is no good science fiction around is a lie. Golden Witchbred proves it. Lynne de Lisle Christie is an empathic envoy, sent to the newly contacted world of Orthe. Her briefing suggests this is a pre-technological culture and she must recommend how much and what kind of contact outsiders should have. The natives are humanoid and it is too easy for Christie to ascribe human social mores to them. She is constantly being brought up as new things come to light.

Part of this novel is an exploration of the planet. Christie is poisoned and threatened with death. She flees and despite the hardship of her travels she is constantly aware that she needs to learn all she can. Only with knowledge can she hope to survive.

The Orthan world has been carefully constructed and it is truly alien. Many fantasy writers could benefit from reading books like this. It has elements which would be familiar to fantasy readers but with an underlying quality that makes this stand out, not just as science fiction but also as a superb example of it.

THE STAR FRACTION by Ken MacLeod Legend, £5.99, 341pp, p/b, Star Rating: **** Reviewed by Martin Tudor.

This is a stunning first novel by one of the most exciting new sf writers to appear on the scene since Iain M Banks scaled his first hotel wall or crawled under a bar carpet. A friend of the aforesaid Mr Banks and runner-up in this year's Arthur C Clarke award (missing the prize by a small margin) MacLeod is a name to watch.

The story opens with a conversation between Moh Kohn and his gun. Kohn, a mercenary and founder member of the Felix Dzerzhinsky Workers' Defence Collective, has been hired to guard the campus of Brunel University and Science Park plc. Next to be introduced is Januis Taine, a struggling post-doc student researcher, who is working on a project to increase intelligence in animals - financed by mysterious backers. Finally we meet Jordan Brown, a 17-year-old computer whiz and stock exchange trader, who is contacted by "A Black Planner"....

MacLeod has created a strange but believable near-future, Balkanized world "where the peace process is deadlier than the wars and the US/UN's spy satellites and laser weapons have everybody in their sights". But "the Watch-maker" (an enigmatic "Black Planner" - person? computer programme? no one knows) intends to change the world and Moh, Janis and Jordan are instrumental to "his" plans. The three swiftly find themselves drawn into a dangerous and complex web of intrigue, radical and reactionary rhetoric, espionage and counter-espionage - both in the "real" and "cyber" worlds. "Spectres of a betrayed revolution haunt the fight for space and freedom, as the Army of the New Republic prepares its fourth 'final' offensive and the green barbarians close in on the divided cities..."

This is an incredibly exciting novel; tightly plotted, taut, well-written and bursting at the seams with strange and wonderful ideas. The only problem I had with it was that at times I found myself lost in the complexities of the plot - but I recommend it highly nonetheless and eagerly look forward to reading MacLeod's second novel, THE STONE CANAL. (Unfortunately, we did not receive a review copy of this. However, copies of both

books have been generously supplied as raffle prizes for this month's meeting!)

MORTAL REMAINS by Christopher Evans,
Vista, £5.99, 319pp, p/b,
Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

Here is a fascinating future in which hard technology has given way to bio-engineered artifacts. One would imagine that if all the "machines" were alive, people would look after them better. For most, this is probably true but there are always the unscrupulous whose own ambitions are paramount---society might seem alien to us but human nature is unchanged. A space-going mothership crashes on Mars but before dying manages to eject the artificial womb that is on board. Marea rescues womb and becomes the next link in a trail of destruction. Someone wants the womb and is prepared to kill to get it. By following its progress the structure of the society is gradually unfolded. The readers are not the only ones to whom the revelations are important. Nathan's narrative is interwoven. He has no memory. He is told that he has been resurrected from a partly preserved corpse from the past. He is told the womb's story in dreams. Gradually the two strands draw together providing an imaginative glimpse of the future.

There is good SF out there. This is some of it and Christopher Evans is a writer who should read and respected for the quality of his work. There should be more of it.

THE DEATH PRAYER by David Bowker,
Vista/Gollancz, 254pp, £4.99, p/b.
Star Rating ***
Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Detective Superintendent Vernon Laverne is a psychic detective. He's stationed at York and specialises in catching murderers by intuition rather than by investigation or deduction. I

found myself frequently surprised by the plot twists and revelations. Despite this being Bowker's first novel, it is very readable, with a light stylistic touch and excellent character development. Unfortunately, as Laverne comes to acknowledge his supernatural talents and fantasy elements are revealed for what they are, in the second half, so more and more clichés crop up.

It's my belief that Vista/Gollancz have made a major marketing mistake by labelling this "Crime", since its unadvertised supernatural elements will annoy most crime enthusiasts, while readers of supernatural horror won't bother to open it. A promising author, though. I shall look out for more of his work.

* * * * *

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, a full list will appear in the next issue so 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.