

February 1997

Issue 305

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 - Tony Morton, Secretary - Anne Woodford, Treasurer - Alan Woodford,
Publicity Officer - Steve Jones, Newsletter Editor and Novacon 27 & 28 Chairman - Martin Tudor.

The February Meeting will be an INFORMAL MEETING, 7.30pm onwards, on Friday 14th February in the TOP FLOOR bar of the Tap & Spile, Gas Street, (off Broad Street,) Birmingham.

The manager of the Tap & Spile has kindly agreed that if our members wish to eat he will take orders until 8pm (normally they would stop at 7pm - the menu appeared in the December issue of BRUM GROUP NEWS). As this is an "Informal Meeting" there will be no entrance charge, although there will be a raffle - please buy tickets!

The BSFG meets on the 2nd Friday of every month (unless otherwise notified). The annual subscription rates (which include 12 copies of this newsletter and reduced price entry to meetings) are £15.00 per person, or £18.00 for 2 members at the same address. Cheques etc. should be made payable to 'the Birmingham Science Fiction Group' and sent to: the Treasurer, Alan Woodford, 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 Charles Lane, Willenhall, West Midlands, WV13 1FR.

INSTITUTE OF BIOLOGY
West Midland Branch

"ALIEN INTELLIGENCE"

The Probability of Alien Intelligence in the Galaxy

- *Is there life anywhere else than on Earth?*
- *What is it likely to be?*
- *How far away is it?*
- *What is the probability of other intelligent life in the Galaxy?*

An illustrated talk and discussion by

Jonathan Cowie

on Thursday 13th February 1997

7.30pm Lecture Room N.G.8

Biological Sciences Building

University of Birmingham

Jonathan Cowie is an environmental scientist by qualification and a science publicist by profession. He works for learned societies and mainly for the Institute of Biology.

Further interest has been to promote science to the U.K. science fiction community. As part of this work he is editor of the annual *Science Fact and Fiction Concatenation* which won the 1994 European SF Award for 'Best Fanzine'.

Concatenation has also won the MacIntyre award twice at the U.K. National SF Convention for artist Jim Porter's work.

FOR INFORMATION AND FURTHER DETAILS

Phone & Fax: 01299 402524

B.M.Stephens. Hon. Sec. I.O.B.

Colophon

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All text by Martin Tudor except where stated otherwise. 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; TONY MORTON for his piece; the RADIO TIMES for the Fanthorpe picture and the EXPRESS & STAR for the Faulkner family picture.

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

A Word from the Editor

- Martin Tudor.

Enclosed in this newsletter you should receive an A4 poster and two A5 flyers promoting the BSFG. These are for you to display wherever you can - at work, school, college, local meeting places, community halls, church halls, libraries, book shops wherever - ask permission first though! More flyers are available on request (to meet the insatiable demand from your

colleagues neighbours/friends etc) along with as many A4 *or even* A3 posters as you want - contact me at the editorial address.

I had intended to get this newsletter out in plenty of time to warn people who were not at the AGM of the change of date for the meeting. Unfortunately a bout of 'flu which turned into yet *another* chest infection (I swear, I wish I'd never given up smoking!) and a pulled muscle in my neck (from sneezing/coughing) have slowed me down dramatically.

So, I'm sorry this is arriving at the last minute - but I've paid the additional 6p per copy for first class out of my own pocket!

I'm also sorry that I won't be at the Informal Meeting - I'll be in Great Malvern helping to run the convention, ATTITUDE. Try to join us over the weekend sometime - I'll be the one trying to drink locally brewed Real Ale whilst wearing a neck brace!

Chairman's Bit

by Tony Morton

In presenting the discussion on the future of the Group at the AGM, I "set the scene" for why I thought the discussion necessary. To begin. It was said at Novacon26 that "*we are in a golden age of Science Fiction... there are more Science Fiction books being published and more good Science Fiction about than for years*". On looking around. I find I can only

agree. So how come the Birmingham Science Fiction Group is not also booming? Can we not turn this golden age for Science Fiction into a golden age for the Birmingham Science Fiction Group?

I restated (see January Newsletter) that "*during recent years meetings have not been sufficiently attended to enable the group to retain a working capital*" and it's result that "*the group moving to smaller and what I feel are 'unsuitable' venues.*" However, while times change, the Brum Group MUST find a way of attracting new members - or even at a push, have non-members who attend regularly, to survive.

Moving on to the points made for discussion:

Firstly "*That group meets less regularly*" - last year the group lost money on almost all meetings, losing an average of about £15 per meeting. If fewer meetings were held then at least this loss, assuming a similar turn out, would be less.

Secondly - if guests of "*sufficient calibre*" (to attract attendees) can be guaranteed, would more members attend? This I feel is debatable, last year only Harry Harrison managed to attract sufficient members to cover costs. Other meetings were only covered by NON-members attendance. And here, please note, I only include the cost of room hire, not speakers expenses (which averaged £23 per meeting). However the crux of these first two suggestions would involve INFORMAL meetings thus saving

room hire fee when guests are not attending.

My third suggestion (that the Group should fold) did, as I hoped, prove unacceptable to members. It always was to me. But without some change it **still** is the most likely outcome. We as a group cannot keep relying on Novacon making sufficient profit to bail us out. I note that without the Novacon 25 proceeds, the group made a **substantial** loss last year. Also, we cannot keep relying on a few people to run the group for us either. Without Martin (Tudor) the group would, in my opinion, have folded by now.

So either the Brum Group change its meeting day to a more 'attractive' day, allowing more people to attend; or alternatively the group meet informally, saving room hire fees, until the committee agree on an available speakers attending to which as many members as possible attend - otherwise it defeats the object. I'm not sure if a fining procedure is either fair or workable, but it may be considered.

The result of the discussion was:

Firstly, the Group will in future meet on the SECOND Friday of the month, on a basis advertised in the Newsletter. Meetings **may** be "informal". Secondly, as I presented the changes and the discussion, it was proposed (as no nominations were received) that I become Chairman for the coming year!

I hope for your support over the coming year, and please turn up to as many meetings (formal or informal) as you can. Any ideas for a meeting -

format, guest or item for discussion - will be gratefully received, either at this month's informal meeting or in writing to me at 14 Park Street, Lye, Stourbridge, West Midlands, DY9 8SS.

Forthcoming Events

13 FEBRUARY 1997: ALIEN INTELLIGENCE an illustrated talk and discussion by Jonathan Cowie at 7.30pm, Lecture Room N.G.8, Biological Sciences Building, University of Birmingham. For further details call: 01299-402524.

14 FEBRUARY 1997: BSFG INFORMAL MEETING, 7.30 onwards in the Top Floor Bar of the Tap & Spile on Gas Street, Birmingham. Entrance free - non-members welcome.

14-17 FEBRUARY 1997: ATTITUDE: THE CONVENTION organised by Michael Abbott, David Cooper, Martin Tudor and Pam Wells, this formal but fun convention emphasises participation. The venue is the Abbey Hotel, Great Malvern. Featuring lots of fun items, Real Ale, good food and good company. . . . Attending £15.00 per day, or £35.00 for all three days. Hotel rooms are still available - contact Pam Wells at the convention or ask at the registration desk.

14 FEB - 2 JUNE 1997: STAR TREK EXHIBITION at the Gas Hall, Chamberlain Square, Birmingham.

Open 10am-5pm daily. Admission £3.95 adults, £3.00 children and concessions. Call: 0121-235-1966 or 0121-236-5622 for information and bookings.

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. Attending £40.00. supporting £30.00. Cheques (payable to "Intervention") should be sent to: 12 Crowsbury Close, Emsworth, Hants., PO10 7TS, (e-mail intervention@pompey.demon.co.uk).

27 MAY 1997: VERY ELEMENTARY PARTICLES a lecture by Dr Goronwy Tudor Jones, Reader in High Energy Physics, University of Birmingham. Tuesday at 1pm at the Birmingham & Midland Institute, Margaret Street, Birmingham. Open to the public, £1 admission. Call 0121-236-3591 for further details

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

14-16 NOVEMBER 1997: NOVACON 27, the annual sf convention of the Brum Group, will be held at the Abbey Hotel, Great Malvern. Guest of Honour Peter F Hamilton. Attending membership £25.00 until 1 April 1997. Supporting £10.50. Progress Report #1 and hotel booking forms now available. Contact: Carol Morton,

14 Park Street, Lye, Stourbridge,
West Midlands, DY9 8SS.

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 (to be announced 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 organisers 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 #101

The genre event of 1997 will probably be the publication of the long-awaited ENCYCLOPEDIA OF FANTASY.

Edited by John Clute and John Grant and covering literature, cinema, television, opera, art and comics in over 4,000 entries and over one million words, this enormous volume costs a "mere" £45.00 from Little, Brown's Orbit imprint.

March and April 1997 will see the UK releases of the new restored "Special Editions" of the original STAR WARS trilogy; to cash in on the publicity surrounding these HarperCollins launch their series of STAR WARS audio books.

Boasting the "only authorised official continuation of the STAR WARS saga" each double-tape features three hours of listening, while single tapes offer full cast dramatisations - both contain "stand alone" stories.

The series features NIGHTLILY: THE LOVERS TALE and WE DON'T DO WEDDINGS set between STAR WARS and THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK; SHADOWS OF THE EMPIRE set between THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK and RETURN OF THE JEDI; THE TRUCE AT BAKURA set immediately after JEDI; X WING: ROGUE SQUADRON three years after JEDI and THE COURTSHIP OF PRINCESS LEIA four years after JEDI.; the Thrawn Trilogy five years after JEDI; the Jedi Academy trilogy seven years after JEDI; with CHILDREN OF THE JEDI eight years, DARK SABER nine and THE CRYSTAL STAR ten years after JEDI and the Corellian trilogy set 14 years after JEDI!

Book Reviews

MID-FLINX by Alan Dean Foster
Orbit, 346pp, £16.99, h/b
Star Rating * * *

Reviewed by Michael Jones.

The story opens with the orphan prodigy Philip Lynx ("Flinx") having a set-to with a ruthless industrialist who wants to buy (read "steal") the pet minidrag which has always been his constant companion. He flees in a random direction and winds up by chance on an undeveloped planet which was featured in one of Foster's earliest books, the eponymously titled MIDWORLD. This is an amazing place, covered by a riotous jungle reminiscent of Venus in the early pulps, only more so. Fortunately, he falls in with the natives, castaways of Earth origin who were marooned there a few hundred years ago and managed to adapt to the dangerous surroundings in which they found themselves. Needless to say, Flinx, being the goodie, fits in and survives, while the baddies who pursue him are wiped out one by one. It is all a bit contrived, particularly the way in which the author is able to bring on another strange life-form to do the job whenever the good guys need rescuing from a predicament. Nevertheless, the story keeps cracking along and interest never flags.

Flinx was actually the star of Foster's first published novel, in 1972. Since then, his character has been building and developing in an intermittent series of which this is the

eight. What I found particularly interesting about this latest instalment was that Flinx, far from being the casual hero of a fairly disjointed series, actually has a Destiny. I never noticed such a strong indication in any of the previous books that this might be the case, and just what it might be is still very far from clear, but it is definitely there and will probably affect the future of the Galaxy, if not the entire Universe. The impression I was left with was that Foster may only recently have worked out what to do with the character and is now gearing up for what may be one or several climatic novels which will bring Flinx to his destiny and require him to make use of all he has learned in his adventurous young life.

In the meantime, this is an excellent and well-written sf adventure, quite able to stand alone and separate from the other books featuring the same lead character.

RICHTER 10 by Arthur C Clarke
and Mike McQuay
Gollancz, £15.99, 341pp, h/b
Reviewed by Tony Morton.

A Clarke outline expanded into a novel by McQuay on, of course, earthquakes. Clarke's initial 850 word "what if" - included as an appendix, explains the basic scenario of a young boy caught in the 1994 Los Angeles 'quake which kills his parents and of his obsession thereafter about 'quakes. McQuay takes this brief and typically comes up with an unputdownable novel that takes the reader through the crises and joys of life, particularly in this

case the dangers as the "earthquake business" is not your run of the mill lifestyle.

Lewis Crane, the boy who is central character, develops a methodology to predict where and when earthquakes will occur. He builds up an organisation that seeks out the quakes to enable better future predictions by on-site analysis and to gain credence for his work. Ignoring the personal danger of being there when the quakes happen, the results gained outweighing this danger, Crane's single-mindedness only point to how he is thought of by the masses. However, his predictions prove accurate and his 'oddness' only adds to the mystique. Given support from government, Crane suddenly has access to all the scientific know-how he needs to allow refinement of his theories. This sparks problems within his group with the chief assistant, Dr Newcombe, quitting after (unbeknown to the 'Foundation') his conversion to Islam. He then works against the predictions and Crane's final solution to be able to stop earthquakes on the premise it is against 'the will of God'. These two become antagonists, more so as Crane marries Newcombe's ex-fiancée. A final result is sought by both resulting in an unexpected development which I suggest you read, rather than I give it away.

A thoroughly good read with several sub-plots to enhance a strong central theme. McQuay proves an excellent "expander" of Clarke's brief and it is our loss that such a young and rising talent has been lost. I

recommend the book highly as a cracking good story.

**CHARLOTTE PERKINS
GILMAN: HER PROGRESS
TOWARDS UTOPIA WITH
SELECTED WRITINGS**
by Carol Farley Kessler
Liverpool University Press,
p/b, 316pp, Star Rating: ***
Reviewed by Robert P Jones.

Despite my general enthusiasm for Liverpool University Press' new series of sf studies, I must confess to some perplexity at the rather eccentric range of topics covered by the first dozen or so titles, many of them concerned with works peripheral to the genre. Here, for example, we have a book devoted to the life and writings of a woman to whom the term 'science fiction' would probably have been meaningless, and who certainly would not have wanted to be associated with the pulp authors published by her contemporary, Hugo Gernsback.

Nonetheless, Charlotte Perkins Gilman created work of abiding genre interest and was, moreover, a quite extraordinary person, about whom sf readers (and indeed, people in general) should be more aware. An obscure, outmoded figure by the time of her death in 1935, she had been a leading intellectual celebrity of her day, and a crucial animating force of early American feminism. Almost certainly lesbian by natural inclination, she survived the collapse of an unhappy early marriage and its accompanying mental breakdown to achieve contentment of a sort with a liberal

second husband, and international fame as journalist and lecturer. Her 1898 treatise, *WOMEN AND ECONOMICS*, represented an entirely new way of thinking about the position of women in society, whilst her magazine, "The Forerunner" was a vital forum for feminist and other forms of progressive discussion.

It was in "The Forerunner" that Gilman published most of her mature fiction - all of it nakedly didactic in intent, but including the novel *HERLAND* (not available in book form until 1979) and, on the evidence of the selection given here, a good number of sprightly and still readable pieces. Carol Farley Kessler has usefully arranged the writings so as to provide a chronological sense of Gilman's growth as a Utopian visionary, though her decision to exclude the superb early horror story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (presumably on the grounds that it is not in any sense "Utopian") strikes me as unfortunate. Even though most of the excerpts she selects can hardly be described as sf in any conventional sense, they do all share a strikingly optimistic commitment to social and technological change, anticipating the work of such later non-genre woman writers as Margaret Atwood, Jeanette Winterson and Fay Weldon, who have found sf a congenial medium for the elaboration of their vision.

Sadly, I find the biographical and critical part of Kessler's book less satisfactory. Although her admiration for Gilman is enthusiastically communicated, it is perhaps a little excessive. Gilman's feminism and

Utopianism went hand in hand with some fairly obnoxious snobbery and racism - a fact acknowledged, but not really investigated. Furthermore, Kessler is so intent upon upholding her heroine's example that she can come across as distinctly humourless, constantly praising Gilman for rather Victorian virtues of seriousness, industriousness and single-mindedness, and being led into some errors of interpretation, such as when she suggests that Gilman's commitment to relieving women of their domestic burden in the kitchen has been answered by the contemporary proliferation of fast-food services - not, I suspect, what Gilman had in mind at all.

Still, this is on the whole a cheering book. CPG was a remarkable, if somewhat limited, woman, and CFK has compiled a likeable, if somewhat limited, tribute to her.

* * * *

The "Star 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, please ensure that these, along with reviews of books picked up at the last meeting are mailed to Martin Tudor by this month's meeting.

FORTEAN TV,
Channel 4, Wednesdays 9pm

FATHER FANTHORPE INVESTIGATES

Strange things are happening: straw falling from the sky; fish curing human skin diseases; a vampiric beast killing goats in Puerto Rico; a bun emerging from the baker's oven, shaped like Mother Teresa's head... In the past few weeks, these things have been investigated on *Fortean TV* (Wednesdays C4) by its 62-year-old presenter, part-time vicar Father Lionel Fanthorpe, who also has a thing about motorbikes. And judo.

Fanthorpe has been into strange phenomena since childhood and has reported on them since the fifties, on television, in newspapers and in books.

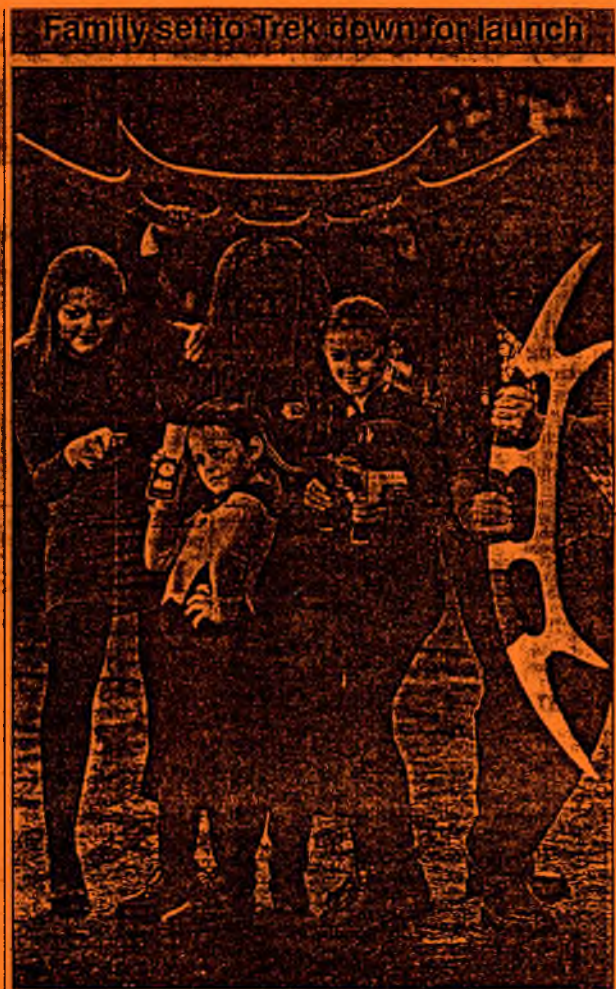
This week's *Fortean TV* includes his favourite story, of the Holy Grail. "If we believe the legends, Joseph of Arimathea brought the Grail to Glastonbury," he says. "When Henry VIII destroyed the town, seven gallant monks brought the Grail to Wales." It was trusted to the Powells of Nanteos until the 1950s, and the Nanteos Cup, as it is known, was traced by *Fortean TV* to the home of its current, secret owner. "I have held the cup in my hands," says Fanthorpe. "It's a very old piece of olive wood. Was it the Holy Grail? I couldn't say, but it is the cup that many people believe to be the Grail."

Yet Fanthorpe's ambition has nothing to do



Reving up: Father Fanthorpe goes in search of the Grail with religion. "Three of my heroes are Sylvester Stallone, Chuck Norris and Arnold Schwarzenegger - I'm a martial arts man myself. I'd like to appear in a film as their father and have a scene where they're in trouble, look at each other, grin, and say, 'We need some help. Go and get Dad.' Then I would have reached Nirvana." **NICK GRIFFITHS**

STAR TREK: THE EXHIBITION
The Gas Hall, Chamberlain Square,
Birmingham, 14 Feb - 2 June 1997.



The Faulkner family step into the space age.

A Willenhall family is to boldly go where no one has gone before — in full Star Trek costume.

The Faulkners are getting ready to beam down to Birmingham to get the first glimpse of a blockbuster exhibition on the cult TV show.

Parents Mike and Diane will be barking at guests at the launch party in their native tongue Klingon.

Laura, aged 13, and Emma, seven will be

going as Trill — beings who volunteer to spend their lives as hosts for strange worm-like creatures.

Amy, 10, has chosen to appear as a Bajoran from Star Trek Deep Space Nine.

Organisers of Star Trek: The Exhibition are recruiting all life forms for the show which starts at the Gass Hall on February 14. Auditions in costume take place at 10.30 tomorrow in Birmingham's Repertory Theatre.

The Tap & Spile Gas Street, Birmingham



Birmingham Marketing Partnership
Birmingham City Council 1996

The Tap & Spile Gas Street, Birmingham