

March 1997

Issue 306

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 March Meeting will feature Tony Berry's Pub Quiz with a CASH PRIZE for the winning team! 7.45 for 8pm, on Friday 14th March in the TOP FLOOR bar of the Tap & Spile, Gas Street, (off Broad Street,) Birmingham.

The manager of the Tap & Spile has again agreed that if our members wish to eat he will take orders until 8pm (normally they would stop at 7pm - the menu appears again in this issue of the BRUM GROUP NEWS).

Admittance £1.50 for Members, £2.00 Non-members.

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 enquires regarding the Brum Group News to Martin Tudor, Newsletter Editor, 24 Ravensbourne Grove, off Clarkes Lane, Willenhall, West Midlands, WV13 1FF.

Colophon

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

Forthcoming Events

UNTIL 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 £50.00 - memberships close 14 March. Cheques (payable to "Intervention") should be sent to: 12 Crowsbury Close, Emsworth, Hants., PO10 7TS, (e-mail intervention@pompey.demon.co.uk).

11 APRIL 1997: "JONATHAN WYLIE" will address the BSFG, on the publication of their latest work **ACROSS THE FLAME** from Orbit: *"A powerful magician trapped for centuries in a portrait, is about to enter the world of Anya Caplan, seeing there his means of escape. But for Anya, his escape will be her destruction."* Venue to be announced.

12 APRIL: DAVID GEMMELL will be signing copies of his latest novel **WINTER WARRIORS** (Bantam, £15.99) and the paperback of **DARK MOON** (Corgi, £5.99) from noon until 1pm at Andromeda Book Shop, 2-5 Suffolk Street, Birmingham. If you are unable to attend, signed copies can be reserved by telephone on 0121-643-1999.

19 APRIL 1997: THREE AUTHOR SIGNING SESSION at Andromeda Book Shop, 2-5 Suffolk Street, Birmingham: **STEPHEN BAXTER** will be signing copies of his collection **VACUUM DIAGRAMS** (Harper Collins, £16.99 approx.), **MICHAEL SCOTT ROHAN** copies of **MAXIE'S DEMON** (Orbit, £6.99) and **FREDA WARRINGTON** copies of **PAGAN MOON** the sequel to **DARK CATHEDRAL** (now available from Signet for £6.99). If you are unable to

attend, signed copies can be reserved by telephone on 0121-643-1999.

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, rising to £30.00 until 30 September when the price will rise again. 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 (fl0.00) 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.

Book Reviews

THE SECRET OF THIS BOOK by Brian Aldiss, HarperCollins, pb, 334pp, £5.99. Star rating ***1/2.
Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Some sparkling stories in this new collection demonstrate that as Brian grows older, so his talents increase. Not only the wit and cleverness that we know so well, but an ever greater diversity of genre and subject matter and now some of his own small drawings to accompany each story. "The God Who Slept With Women" is the longest and probably the best piece, a touching fantasy with sharp

comments on Greeks and girls and the world at large. Yes, some of the stories are difficult, dreamlike, experimental, but one of Brian's great strengths has always been to force readers to think. Several of the stories here are slight but brilliant, like "A Swedish Birthday Present"; others are brief but unforgettable, like "Traveller, Traveller, Seek Your Wife in the Forests of This Life".

Two problems: in "His Seventieth Heaven" there is a satellite which "orbited Earth once every twenty-four hours, three thousand two hundred kilometres above the centre of the Earth", which seems to me to place it somewhere in the Earth's crust. And the review copy in my possession is (I trust) a unique item, lacking 48 pages or four and a half stories.

ISAAC ASIMOV'S UTOPIA by

Roger MacBride Allen

Orion, 320pp, £16.99, h/b,

Star Rating: **.**

Reviewed by Michael Jones.

It is hard to realise that well over 50 years have passed since the famous Three Laws of Robotics were first propounded by Isaac Asimov (although he may have owed the initial idea to John Campbell). However, as his career drew to its close he was clearly beginning to recognise that the laws were not as universally ideal as he once thought and it was probably this realisation that led to a collaboration with Roger MacBride Allen on a new robot trilogy set in the same universe as his famous novels *THE CAVES OF STEEL* and *THE NAKED SUN*. Unfortunately, Asimov died before the

first part was completed, but Allen (a superb author in his own right) has risen to the challenge and produced an oeuvre of which I am sure the great man would have approved - he has even managed to capture something of Asimov's own style in his writing.

The scene is the planet Inferno, where the terraforming carried out when the planet was first settled is about to fail. The original inhabitants, the robot-dependent Spacers, are forced to accept outside help to put matters right, but the helpers (Settlers) are the descendants of those left behind on Earth by the original Spacer expansion and are actually very anti-root. The resulting potential for conflict is inflamed by the experimental introduction of robots with a drastically modified version of the Three Laws (not to mention one very special one with no built-in laws at all) in response to the heretical new idea that robots are actually bad for you. It seems that the Three Laws make robots over-protective and by allowing robots to do everything for them the Spacers have surrendered themselves to lives from which all risk has been removed, taking with it any opportunity for change or progress.

The first two instalments of the trilogy were basically detective stories, set within the general theme of how people should (or should not) be using robots to benefit themselves. This third volume takes a different twist when a scheme to solve the terraforming problem by dropping a comet on the planet is put forward. Surprisingly enough, not everyone is in favour and

in the case of the robots the First Law causes them to make every effort to prevent such a dangerous scheme, with its attendant risks for humans, ever taking place. As well as sorting that out successfully, the novel ends on a note of hope for a new way forward for Spacers and Settlers together.

This is a fine sf novel in its own right. Above all, however, the trilogy is a very persuasive analysis of the Three Laws of Robotics which are now seen to be basically flawed. Whether it was ever Asimov's intention to come to this conclusion we may never know, but Allen's accomplishment has been to contribute an important extension to one of the basic principles underlying a great deal of modern science fiction.

ANCIENT ECHOES by Robert Holdstock, HarperCollins/Voyager, £5.99, 403 pp.

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

Some writers tell stories, others create myths. Rob Holdstock is one of the latter. Although different in approach to his classic Mythago Wood and its sequels Ancient Echoes nevertheless explores the origins of myth. This time, instead of a journey into the heart of an external primordial forest he explores the dark depths of the subconscious.

Since an early age, Jack has gone into waking dreams in which he observes a man and a woman running from an unknown danger. Day dreams perhaps that Jack exploits by turning them into stories to entertain his classmates, but they also manifest themselves in the real world as not only

does Jack seem to be surrounded by a shimmering aura, he smells of forests and swabs from his skin contain chemicals not normally found there. Somehow his visions seem to be linked with the ancient city of Glanum, the ruins of which lie under his home town of Exburgh. After a spell of years without seeing the images of the running couple, they return in circumstances that threaten the safety of his daughter. His wife, Angela, believes the images are a product of his deep subconscious and encourages him to take part in an experiment to explore these regions of his mind. Hooked up to a MIDAX machine (which can be used to explore dreams) he finds himself in a strange inner landscape.

Throughout the novel there are echoes and shadows from the past which reach up to touch the lives of the characters. It blends science fiction and fantasy to provide entertainment as well as a thoughtful exploration as to the origin of myth.

LORDS OF THE STORM by David McIntee, Virgin, p/b, 281pp, £4.99, Reviewed by Adrian Middleton.

Never accept a book for review one week before a relationship ends. Before you know what's happened you'll find your name has appeared in the "reviews outstanding" section for six months! Since I revived LORDS OF THE STORM for review, the BBC has announced that it is withdrawing the licence for Virgin Publishing Ltd to

House Specials

Tapsters Grill £5.95

Generous Portion of Steak,
Gammon, Lamb's Liver, Kidney,
Mushroom & Tomato

Lockkeeper's Feast £3.95

Traditionally made Sausage with
a heap of creamy mashed Potato
and smothered in onion gravy

Rosey & Jim £3.95

Sauted Lamb's Liver
with Bacon & Onions

Tap In The Spile £3.95

Large Yorkshire Pudding filled
with Cumberland Sausage
and lashings of onion gravy

Some Like It Hot £3.95

Haricot, Kidney & Butter Beans
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topped with Scalloped Potatoes,
Vegetarian Cheddar & Mozzarella

All Aboard £3.95

Winter Vegetables in a light
cheese & honey sauce topped with
a savoury crumble & walnuts

All main courses are served with fresh seasonal vegetables or salad,
and a choice of homemade chunky fries or baby boiled potatoes



Old Favourites

Drayman's Pie £4.95

Choice Beefsteak & Mushrooms
in a Rich Ale sauce with pastry crust

Harvest Pie £4.75

Mushrooms, Sweetcorn, & Peppers
in a white wine, orange & ginger sauce
topped with a pastry crust

Poultryman's Pie £4.90

Turkey & Chicken with Leeks
in a creamy wine & garlic sauce

Fisherman's Pie £5.20

White Fish, Mussels, Prawns
& Peppers in a creamy cider, garlic
& herb sauce with a fluffy
potato topping

Stand And Deliver £4.75

Grilled, lean Pork Chops,
Honey-glazed and served with
apple & clove chutney

Kiss Me Hardy £4.50

Breast Of Chicken
topped with a creamy
wild mushroom & herb sauce

All main courses are served with fresh seasonal vegetables or salad,
and a choice of homemade chunky fries or baby boiled potatoes



Light Lunch

Homemade

Soup Of The Day £1.50

served with fresh, crusty bread

Soup & Sandwich £3.50

Homemade Soup with double-
decker club sandwich
choose from:

Ham, Cheese, Egg Mayo,
Chicken, Roast Beef, Tuna Mayo

Tap & Spile

Doorstep or Baguette £2.25

Fresh Crusty White or Wholemeal
Bread with your choice of filling:-

Egg Mayo, Tuna & Sweetcorn,
Cottage Cheese & Pineapple,
Roast Beef, Ham

Mature Cheddar & Branston
(all with salad if required)

Pate £1.95

Traditional Game Pate served with
fresh, crusty bread & salad garnish

Stilton & Crusty Bread £3.15

Wedge of finest English Blue Stilton
with fresh crusty bread & butter

And Ask About Our Desserts!!



produce DOCTOR WHO fiction (sometime around May 1997) in favour of their own imprint, BBC Books.

The author of LORDS OF THE STORM, David McIntee (with whom I must confess to having personal acquaintance, and may therefore seem a little biased), has since had a "Missing Adventure", SHADOW OF WENG-CHIANG, published. The best James Bond story ever to see print in DOCTOR WHO fiction, SHADOW sees Tom Baker's Doctor in a rematch with Mr Sin, the bloodthirsty monster from the classic tv story TALONS OF WENG CHIANG. But I'm not reviewing the latest book....

LORDS OF THE STORM is not, as its author had hoped, a fast-paced book. It is a hard-going, but ultimately satisfying adventure in which so much happens, and yet....

The story focuses upon the Sontarans, a familiar race of tv monsters. Full of carefully drawn-out space battles and fully-rounded characters, the book breaks with Doctor Who's PLANET ENGLAND syndrome, using an Earth colony occupied by an Asian community (for Asian read Indian). The society can still be seen having its roots in Britain culture, but it's a bold step away from the tv format, and gives a great sense of identity to the book. Mind you, it was all achieved by giving things Indian names, rather than by describing the customs, thus leaving us with bog-standard sci-fi colony material.

The smoothest passages in the book are those involving the Sontarans,

who are brilliantly portrayed with exactly the right mix of zeal, stubbornness and stupidity - and at last the bumpy headed Sontarans who appeared in the recent Shakedown video are explained (shades of STAR TREK and John M ford's THE ROMULAN WAY). Everything about the Sontarans and their enemies, the shapeshifting Rutans, is in keeping with what is already known, yet their interaction and the involvement of McIntee's own alien race, the Tzun (who originally appeared as gene-manipulating Greys as seen more recently in THE X-FILES) add a greater dimension to the big picture of the DOCTOR WHO universe.

Easily the nearest of McIntee's DOCTOR WHO books to a full-blown tv script.

DARKER by Simon Clark,
NEL, pb, 410pp, £5.99.
Star rating **1/2.

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

A third horror novel by a youngish and promising English writer. Here he writes effectively and with considerable pace about the possession of absolute power. A man called Michael has this gift; it came to him in Turkey and he has made millions out of it, because this is essentially the power to charm people and make them willing to do your bidding, to die for you. But now the power has gone off in a huff and is hunting Michael, is dangerous to anybody who helps him. Think of it as an invisible cloud which can coalesce to stamp on people or places with the force of many tons. He is trying to

recapture it by using children as bait. And the plot consists of car chases up and down England, trying to outrun the power, with occasional demonstrations of it squashing cars and trees and even York Minster full of tourists. Lots of blood. Lots of tension. Sounds wonderful?

Well, no. The story is told in a way that is too calculated and mechanical, in short, breathless chapters, with an attempt to hook the reader with a cliff-hanger at the end of almost every one. This is writing by numbers. And the artificiality of the style infects the plot and characters. There were times when the mixture worked and I was glad to be reading it, but there were twice as many times when it grated and I wasn't.

STAR WARS: THE LOST JEDI

by Paul Cockburn, Boxtree, p/b, 512pp, £5.99.

Reviewed by Adrian Middleton.

Jumping onto the STAR WARS bandwagon Boxtree books have reprinted two earlier "fighting fantasy"-style books JEDI DAWN and THE BOUNTY HUNTER, merging them to provide something more useful as a doorstop or to throw through jewellers' windows than to read.

Paul Cockburn (as in the port) is one of the original Games Workshop team who drifted away into the realm of Adventure Game books to earn a decent living. Written with no reference to the later "West End Games" interpretation of the STAR WARS universe, these books seem

curiously out of touch with the entire milieu.

Both books star a character called Havet Storm, who is a cross between Luke Skywalker and Han Solo (surprise, surprise). Havet only has one cute robotic companion, but to be quite frank, I got the impression that Cockburn was taking the pee. This robot dog turns out to be "Arf", a K-9 series droid (one wonders if the good Doctor will turn up and claim ownership).

In the first book, the villains of the piece are the Imperial Research Service, constantly called the IRS (doesn't Mr Cockburn like paying tax?), while the surprise villain turns out to be Boba Fett, who gets sufficiently vexed to turn up in the starring role of the second book.

I won't touch upon the plots - I wasn't sufficiently drawn into either scenario to be bothered to "play to win". The system is quite good - as these things go - but only the completist should bother with this one.

A FISHERMAN OF THE INLAND

SEA by Ursula K Le Guin, Gollancz, hb, 191pp, £15.99.

Star rating *****.

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Just when I thought she was past her best, here's a staggeringly wonderful collection aimed particularly at the reader who is prepared to stop and think, who doesn't just demand fast-moving action along well-worn grooves. Admittedly, some of the contents are make-weights, fluffy bits of fun like "The First Contact With the

Gorgonids" (though I, too, have met some Australians of such oddness that they might have been aliens). But most of the book consists of Le Guin's three churten stories. Many authors have written about instantaneous travel across the galaxy (a standard plot convenience, ennit?) yet only Le Guin has thought to consider how it might subtly disorient those travellers. "The Shobies' Story", "Dancing to Ganam" and "Another Story" or "A Fisherman of the Inland Sea" are three allied meta-fictions (or stories about stories) which discuss the early experiments with churten technology in subjective terms, saying so much about relationships and communication and storytelling. And she manages to fit in some totally fascinating examples of peculiar social anthropology, too. "The Shobies' Story", in particular, is very demanding, is the most perfect example of post-modern fiction that I've ever read, and is still an entertaining tale. I would try to analyse it for you, but I'd need several pages of this newsletter to do so. You'll just have to read it for yourself.

STAR WARS: THE REBEL ALLIANCE - SHIPS OF THE FLEET and **STAR WARS: THE GALACTIC EMPIRE - SHIPS OF THE FLEET** both by Bill Smith, Boxtree, £11.99 each.

Reviewed by Adrian Middleton.

There's no way I would fork out £11.99 each for two very glossy hardback full-colour pop-up books with a handful of pop-ups in each. Just as well I got them for review.

The first book is best, opening the page to have an X-Wing fighter jump out and away from a wide-screen image of the battle for the Death Star. This surprising but effective opening, accompanied by the "long time ago in a galaxy far, far away" spiel, is never topped. The second pop-up, a schematic of a Y-Wing, is tame and mildly pornographic as its underside thrusts upwards in a faintly sickening manner. Quickly turning the page the X-Wing in Death Star tunnels proves completely ineffective, with card-cutting technology proving to be quite incapable of putting the rear wing behind the front wing. After several attempts at opening and closing the book to try and make this one work, I opted for the next page - the Medical Frigate - which was more up than pop, bringing me to the final and most ambitious piece - the Mon Calamari shipyard.

The second book similarly has one impressive pop up - the TIE fighter which rotates up and away from the Death Star at you. While not as impressive as its X-Wing equivalent, it does help give the Empire book a better overall feel, although there are only four pop-ups in this one, two of which (the Star Destroyers at opposing ends of the book) barely qualify, while the last one - kneeling AT-ATs - is certainly food for thought (although I still can't work out how they can possibly stand up again). The panoramic views are good in this one - especially the scale comparison between a Star Destroyer and the

Executor (which folds out to about two and a half feet in length).

In both cases, the technical specs were interesting, but there are plenty of more informative and less pricey books providing the same service, so this pair get the thumbs down, I'm afraid.

**MINOR ARCANA by Diana Wynne Jones, Gollancz, h/b, 287pp.
Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.**

Diana Wynne Jones is known for novels for young adults which are characterised by excellent writing that neither patronises the young or excludes older readers from appreciating the gems she produces. This collection of shorter pieces shows the same quality and they are all very different from each other. "The Sage of Theare" is a fantasy in which the demise of the Gods is prophesied and they attempt to prevent it happening, learning in the process the foolishness of trying to go against fate. "The Master" is a different kind of fantasy, this time set in the present. A vet is called out at night and finds she has to deal with three starving walls but no sign of the person who called her. "The Girl Who Loved the Sun" is an origin story, describing how a particular tree came to be, while "Dragon Reserve, Home Eight" is science fiction. In the latter the government which ruthlessly destroys anyone who has telepathic powers suddenly finds it needs these people to counter an invasion. "What the Cat Told Me" is a cat's version of events in a wicked sorcerer's house, and the part the cat played in trying to make a happy

ending. "nad and Dan adn Quaffy" starts with a writer fighting against modern technology but as it develops the author and the machine begin to develop a symbiosis.

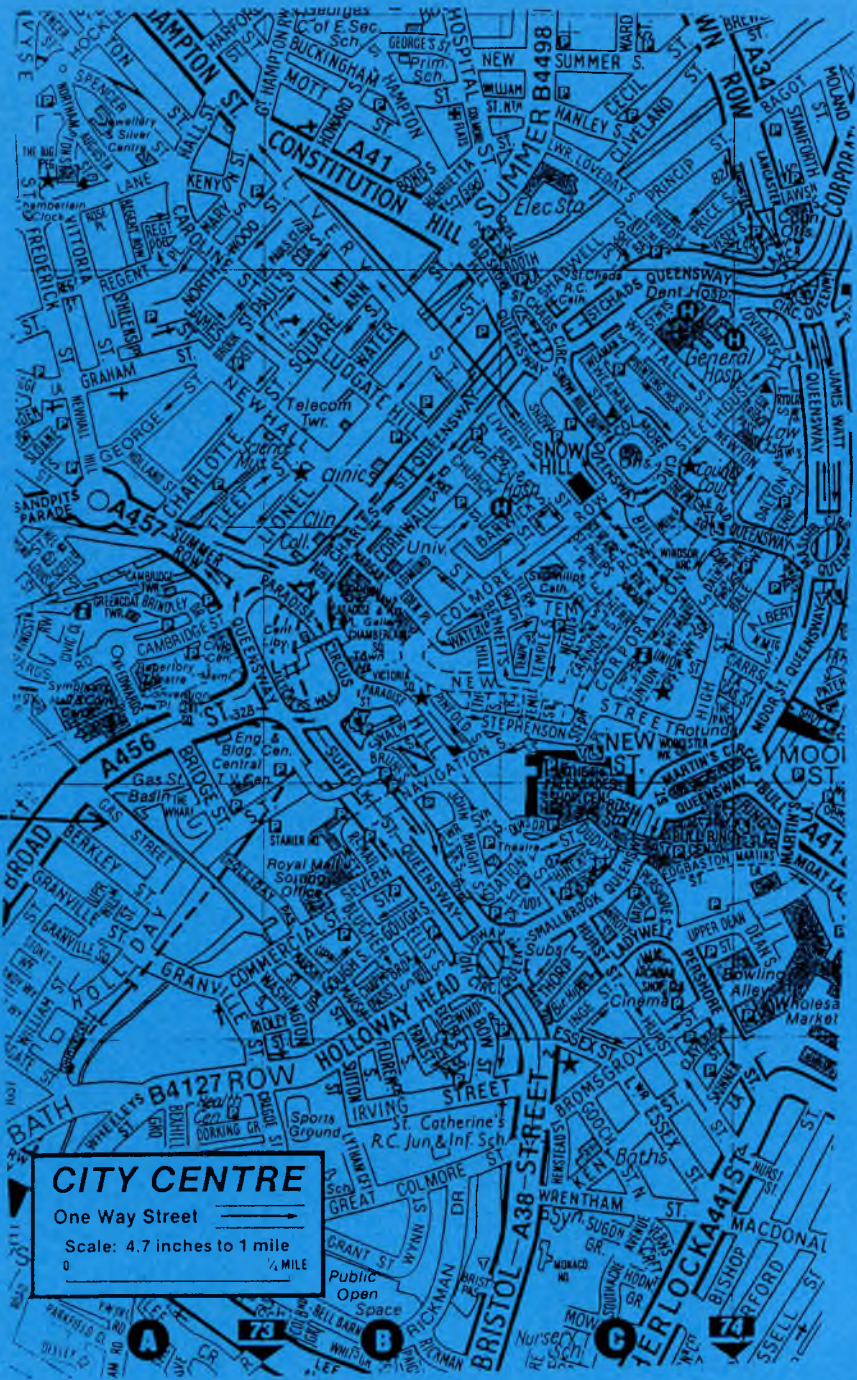
The final piece in the volume is the novella, "The True State of Affairs", a quiet fantasy. The narrator is a stranger and is flung into prison when she is mistaken for another. She is treated as an important captive and develops a relationship with another prisoner. He is the leader of one of the warring factions in the country and the narrator is a practical person and does not expect a fairy-tale ending. None of these stories are fairy-tales and are all logically consistent. Read and enjoy.

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.



TAP
+
SALE

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