

April 1997

Issue 307

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.

“Jonathan Wylie” (aka Julia and Mark Smith) authors of the “Servants of the Ark”, “Unbalanced Earth” and “Island and Empire” trilogies will address the Group on Friday 11th April 1997, 7.45 for 8pm, at the Princes Hotel, Station Street, Birmingham.

(behind New Street Station, near the Electric Cinema and Bus Station)

Admittance: Members £2.50 (£2.00 unwaged), Non-Members £3.75 (£2.75 unwaged). (Unwaged discounts are at the discretion of the Committee and will depend on satisfactory proof of status being produced.)

“Jonathan Wylie” is the pseudonym of Mark and Julia Smith, a married couple who live and work in Norfolk. Having met while they were both working for a major London publishing house, they began writing as a team a few months after setting up home together and have been writing full-time for the last five years. ACROSS THE FLAME, their 13th novel and the sequel to the popular OTHER LANDS, was published by Orbit in hardback in March (at £16.99). Their other work includes the novels SHADOW-MAZE and DREAM-WEAVER and the three trilogies: “Servants of the Ark” (THE FIRST NAMED, THE CENTRE OF THE CIRCLE and THE MAGE-BORN CHILD); “the Unbalanced Earth” (DREAMS OF STONE, THE LIGHTLESS KINGDOM and THE AGE OF CHAOS); “Island and Empire” (DARK FIRE, ECHOES OF FLAME and THE LAST AUGURY).

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, 81 Harrold Road, Rowley Regis, Warley, West Midlands, B65 0RL. (e-mail 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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Many thanks to HELENA TUDOR for help collating and mailing the last four issues. Many, many thanks one last time to BERNIE EVANS for producing the address labels.

**Jophan Report #102
by Martin Tudor**

The big news this issue is that, unfortunately for the BSFG, this mailing will be the last time that Bernie Evans will produce the labels. After far more years than I can remember she is passing over the onerous duty of maintaining the BSFG's address list and producing reminder letters to Anne and Alan Woodford.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Bernie on behalf of the Group (and numerous committees) for doing this job so well for so long. Thanks Bernie! (And, of course, many thanks to the Woodfords for taking on the task!)

Here is as good a place as any for me to also thank the hero of many a last moment run - MICK EVANS - who has frequently driven to my abode in the early hours of cold weekend mornings to deliver the labels, envelopes and reminders in the nick of time for the mailing! Guess he'll have more time to watch West Brom lose now, thanks Mick....

Intervention, the 1997 Eastercon, also marked the 40th birthday of Carol Morton. Carol, chair of last year's Novacon, was feted in style at a surprise party in the fan room on the Friday night of the convention. Belated Birthday greetings Carol!

Attentive readers of this newsletter will be aware that I've spent an awful lot of time ill over the last few months and so haven't done as much as I would've liked regarding the Trans-Atlantic Fan Fund.

Fortunately TAFF is a *lot* healthier than I have been - the first bit of good news being that the £200 cheque that Gary Farber passed over to me from the last Administrator Abigail Frost at Novacon last year has cleared. Unfortunately, the bad news is that I haven't heard anything from Abigail regarding the monthly instalments due from January this year. No more money has been received, nor has she replied to the two letters I've sent since Novacon.

However, leaving Abigail aside the current state of European TAFF is pretty good. It has repaid all of its debts and is now in credit to the tune of £188. In addition to this it will have a large amount of money to come from the proceeds of the sale of

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2000 or so books left to TAFF by the late Brian Robinson.

TAFF (in the form of Tony Berry and I) rented a van to collect these from Cas and Paul "Skel" Skelton in Stockport; after which we drove down to meet with Greg Pickersgill and Catherine McAulay who guided us to Andy Richards/Cold Tonnage's difficult to find home cum warehouse south-east of Reading! As Andy was in the middle of preparations for Eastercon and about to suffer extensive rebuilding of his home cum warehouse, it will be a few weeks before he can finish pricing the books - but word is that after a quick glance through them he estimates roughly £800! Which will mean European TAFF will be very healthy! (many thanks to Dave and Hazel Langford for putting us up in Reading that evening.)

Last month's BSFG meeting, featuring Tony Berry's Pub Quiz, saw a hard-fought contest between five teams. The scores being (in reverse order of course):

5th "Keith Walton" (featuring the brave new BSFG member Keith Walton on his own) with 7^{1/2} points.

4th "Long Shots" (featuring Tim Stannard and Michael Jones) with 12^{1/2} points.

3rd "Tony (M) aka 'Chairman & Carol'" (featuring Tony and Carol Morton) with 14 points.

2nd "Rog" (featuring Andromeda book shop proprietor Roger Peyton) with 17 points.

1st "Evil Geniuses For A Better Tomorrow" (Steve Jones and William

McCabe), surprise victors with 18^{1/2} points.

Following the "formal" quiz, Tony (by popular demand) continued to ask questions from his enormous supply and a good time was had by all - where were you?

Will "P. Phillips", who joined the Group in May last year, please send his address to: the Treasurer, Alan Woodford, 81 Harrold Road, Rowley Regis, Warley, West Midlands, B65 0RL, (e-mail via: bsfg@bortas.demon.co.uk).

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.

11 APRIL 1997: "JONATHAN WYLIE", aka Julia and Mark Smith, 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."* At the Princes Hotel, station Street, Birmingham city centre - 7.45pm for 8.p.m.

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 £30.00 until 30 September when the price will rise. Supporting £10.50. Progress Report #2 and hotel booking forms now available. Contact: Carol Morton, 14 Park Street, Lye, Stourbridge, W. 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 (e-mail martin@empties.demon.co.uk).

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

BLUE HEART by Alison Sinclair
Millenium/Orion, 348pp, hb, £16.99.

Star rating ****.

Reviewed by Michael Jones.

In the far future, distant planets are being colonised from Earth, using Coldsleep to overcome the problems of distance and time. For the initial stages, colonists are adapted by surgery and implantation to suit them to living in hostile environments; when a sufficiently strong human presence has been established terraforming can begin. Then the adaptives can be returned to normal as primary humans take over. This is the stage which has been reached on Blueheart, a water-covered world where the primaries are confined to floating habitats. In contrast, the adaptives are at home in the sea and would choose not to have their way of life destroyed: they are prepared to take quite drastic steps to prevent terraforming from being carried out. Thus the scene is set for a conflict which has already cost lives and threatens many more. It also has implications for the whole future of humankind if the adapted people are allowed a continuing existence as a separate sub-species - for groups on other worlds will want to follow Blueheart's example, if they can.

This is not really an action story, albeit there is quite a lot of advanced science going on. I found it a little difficult to get into at first, but I persevered and soon found myself engrossed in the web of personal relationships which drives events along. It

is a story not so much about events as about people, about friendship and leadership, about love and loyalty. The people in the story are far from perfect, but in their groping, imperfect way they struggle to mould their own destiny, which is as much as any of us can hope to do.

Alison Sinclair has produced a splendid book. The quality of the writing is beyond reproach: the reader is able to visualise Blueheart and its inhabitants from the first page, yet right up to the end new insights into what the world and its people are really like are continuing to present themselves, so subtly are the descriptions introduced. The characters are completely believable, their world is finely imagined, the predicaments in which they find themselves are all too realistic and, most important of all perhaps, the science is impeccable. I recommend it to any reader who prefers serious, thoughtful sf.

THE RINGWORLD THRONE by
Larry Niven

Orbit, 376pp, hb, £16.99,

Star rating ***.

Reviewed by Michael Jones.

16 years ago in our time RINGWORLD ENGINEERS ended with Louis Wu and his companions stranded on the Ringworld. This new book is a direct continuation, although there has been a hiatus of a year in which nothing much has happened. Nothing much goes on happening during a rather tedious first half: a story is developing, but the author seems to be resting on his laurels and producing a pot-boiler from which the excitement of the original Ringworld novel

is missing. Perhaps one has become blasé over the intervening years.

Interest is scarcely raised by the introduction of a couple of items of spectacular new technology which should have been available all the time but have only now been invented by the author because they are needed for furtherance of the plot. Another technical idea which *has* been carried over from the previous book is the dubious practice of using scraps of semi-conductor material connected almost at random between likely-looking terminals to repair ancient derelict machinery which promptly and obligingly starts working without having to be reset or started up. This is also essential to keep the plot going, but like David Langford writing in *NEW WORLDS* 2) I found it difficult to swallow. However there is worse to come when an aboriginal native of Ringworld uses the same process (without having been shown how) to perform a feat equivalent to a Kalahari bushman finding a broken-down articulated lorry and, despite never before having seen anything with wheels, not only fixing it but teaching himself to drive it. Highly plausible!

In the last part of the book, Louis Wu takes charge of events and performs a difficult balancing act between his own human interests and the conflicting requirements of his Puppeteer and Kzin associates, the Ringworld natives and at least two, or maybe three, rival factions of Protectors. So complicated did this become that I found myself quite confused about who was on whose side and who else was doing what to whom. Ongoing conflicts were finally resolved in a manner that satisfied Louis if not the others, but

the story can scarcely be said to have been concluded and the organisation and management of the Ringworld, a structure almost too vast to comprehend, are still scarcely explained. However, the story ended with at least one obvious hook on which to hang a further sequel should the author ever feel like giving us more.

Don't get me wrong - although it may be flawed, *THE RINGWORLD THRONE* does possess considerable merit. Nevertheless, the novelty it should have exhibited has been largely subordinated to expanding details and solving problems introduced in the previous books, so that its qualities derive more from past glories and future promises than present accomplishments. I was disappointed to find it ordinary when I expected it to be great.

* * * * *

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 (or e-mail martin@empties.demon.co.uk), 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.

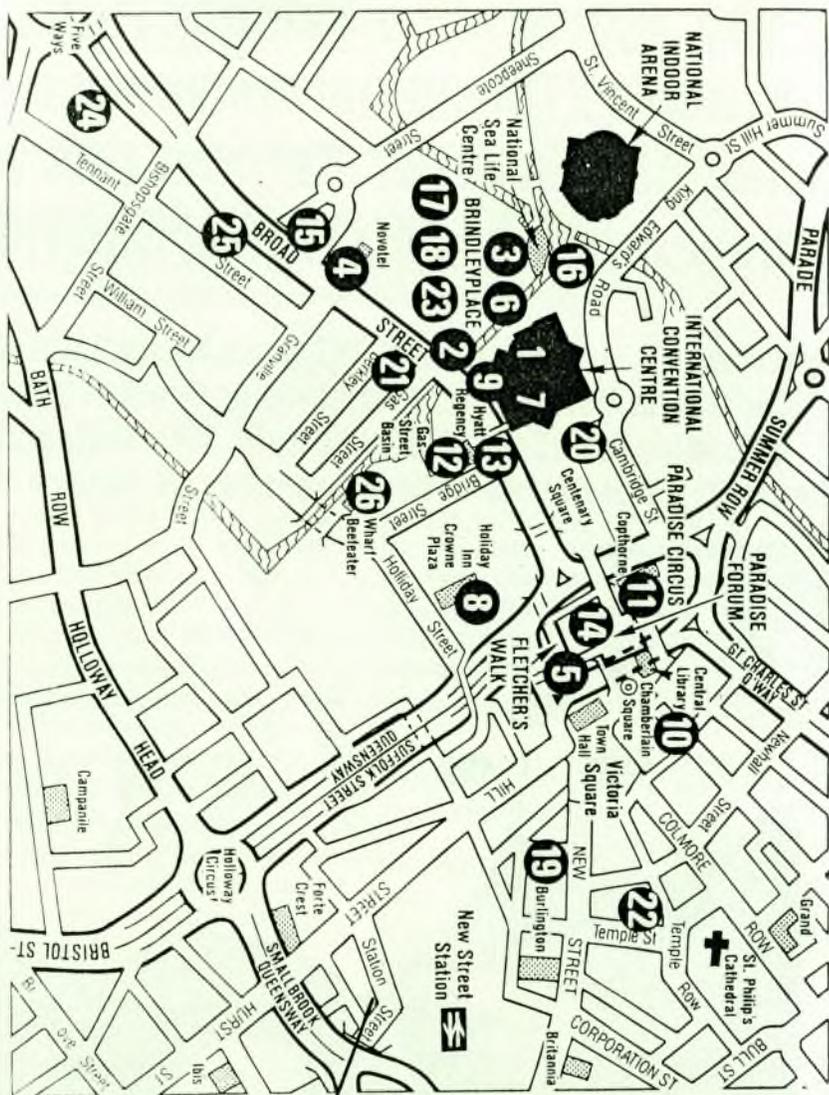
**The *Birmingham* Science Fiction
Group's 27th annual convention is
being held in *Great Malvern* this year
- now *that's* a REALITY DYSFUNCTION!**

**Novacon 27, 14-16 November 1997 at the Abbey Hotel, Great
Malvern, featuring Peter F Hamilton as Guest of Honour.**

Attending membership £30.00 until 30th September.

Contact: Carol Morton, 14 Park Street, Lye, W. Mids., DY9 8SS.





the Princes Hotel