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Issue 325

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 Chair-Tony Morton, Secretary-Anne Woodford, Treasurer-Alan Woodford, Publicity Officer-Rog Peyton Newsletter Editor-Yvonne Rowse, Novacon 28 Chair-Martin Tudor, Novacon 29 Chair-Carol Morton.

PETER HAMILTON

**will address the BSFG on
Friday 9th October 1998, ***

**from 7.45pm, in the Lichfield Lounge, second floor,
Britannia Hotel, New Street, (entrance in Union
Passageway).**

**Drinks may be purchased from Harvey's Bar on the Mezzanine level
and taken up to the Lichfield on the second floor.**

**Admittance: Members £3.00 (£2.00 Unwaged), Non-Members £4.00
(£3.00 Unwaged). (*Unwaged discounts are at the discretion of the
Committee and will depend on satisfactory proof of status being
produced.*)** (*VB: the second Friday of the month.)

Forthcoming Meetings:

**13 November a SPECIAL MEETING AT NOVAICON 28h, a talk
by BRIAN W ALDISS followed by a signing session;
11 December BEER & SKITTLES at the Samson & Lion.**

The BSFG meets from 7pm in the Britannia Hotel, New Street, Birmingham, (entrance in Union Passageway), on the second Friday of each month (unless otherwise notified). The annual subscription rates (which include 12 copies of this newsletter and reduced price entry to formal meetings) are £15.00 per person, or £20.00 for 2 members at the same address. Cheques etc. should be made payable to "The Birmingham Science Fiction Group" and sent to: Alan Woodford, The Treasurer, 81 Harrold Road, Rowley Regis, Warley, West Mids, B65 0RL, (e-mail enquiries via: bsfg@bortas.demon.co.uk). Book reviews, review copies and other contributions and enquiries regarding the Brum Group News to: Yvonne Rowse, Newsletter Editor, Evergreen, Halls Farm Lane, Trimpeley, Worcs, DY12 1NP (or by e-mail to yvonne@hallsfarm.softnet.co.uk).

Peter F Hamilton

By Graham Joyce

While you are considering the logistics of haulage involved in taking home one of Peter F Hamilton's chunky, weighty epics you might spare a thought for the economy of Rutland. Twelve of Amos Briar's sheep died this year; and old Janet Brewer in the converted thatched post office said she's going to call it a day on bottling chutney next year, all in all representing a twenty per cent productivity drop for the county. How will they manage? Hopefully Peter F Hamilton will come to their aid again. If his books continue to sell in great numbers here and in the USA then he'll be able to spread largesse and geld-coin (they don't have any truck in Rutland with new-fangled concepts like the pound sterling) around the indigent villagers in equal measure.

He's done it before. When Rutland was struggling for independence from the Dark Empire we call Leicestershire, he rolled up his gingham sleeves, tightened the baling twine round the waist of his, stuck a sprig of grass between his teeth with the rest of the Rutland Liberation Army and hijacked a Leicestershire Council milk-float. It was during the long, watchful but admittedly uneventful days and nights as rear-oxwhipper on the modified armed milk-float that his Science Fiction epics began to take shape.

Frankly it's a mystery to everybody where he comes up with all that dizzying nano-technology, brilliant hardware and the foison of ideas-rich brain nutrients all while living in a place so devoid of event that a lamppost shadow falling on a crushed hedgehog is likely to dominate the early evening news. I'm not joking. If ever you're a guest of Pete's - and by the way, he is always a terrific and generous host - the only entertainment likely to be offered is that of standing on the hard shoulder of the A6 pointing hairdryers at oncoming traffic.

On the other hand, if you've actually read any of his books you'll know what I'm talking about. For a combination of breathtaking ideas and action adventure, science fiction does not come any better. Here's an author absolutely committed to storytelling but who somehow manages to squirt such technological wonderment into the narrative drive that... well, forget black and white, you feel like you're reading in gorgeous Technicolor. It's dazzling stuff, and it's a rare gift, but I think I know how he does it. Firstly, the man is a walking ideas-machine, which makes him such an interesting guy to be around. Secondly, the sweet hum you hear beneath the text when reading one of Pete's books is that of superb crafting. No-one I know is more conscientious about the craft of writing, and of narrative structure in particular. He can talk about it with the joy and love of a watch-maker. No reader is ever going to get short-changed in a Peter F Hamilton book by a weak revelation or an unsatisfying

resolution. It's not possible. He's served his time in the workshop: the wheels spin and the engines sing.

If you haven't read any of Pete's books yet, then it's time you got with the programme. What's more he's getting better and better. And because he's getting too damned good, I'm going to reveal the secret of the 'F' of his middle name, which I know he'd prefer me to keep quiet about. Fulbert. Yes, that's what I thought. Apparently on Old German name meaning 'bright one'. Well, that's fair enough, but I wouldn't mention it to him if I were you. I mean he's had to carry that particular cross all his life.

I've had the pleasure of collaborating on a couple of stories with Pete, and the richness of his input takes my breath away. We have this unspoken agreement: I encourage him to think my characterisation is better than his, and he lets me go on thinking he's thinking that; meanwhile, for the quid pro quo I'm supposed to admit his technology is superior to mine. Fact is I'm only ever in the slipstream of this collaborative work, because I'm so outpaced by his inventive abilities. Of course, I don't tell him that. I prefer to take the piss out of the place in which he lives.

Peter F Hamilton by Martin Tudor

British sf author Peter F Hamilton was born in Rutland in 1960, and now lives near Rutland Water. He began writing in 1987 and made his first professional sale, to FEAR magazine, in 1988.

MINDSTAR RISING, his first novel, was published by Pan in 1993 and followed by A QUANTUM MURDER in 1994, and then by THE NANO FLOWER in 1995; all three featuring the psi-boosted private detective Greg Mandel.

In addition to his professional sale of short stories to INTERZONE, IN DREAMS and NEW WORLDS, Hamilton's work appeared in a number of small press magazines in the late 1980s. Heralded as the most exciting "sf technician" currently working in Britain, his fourth novel, THE REALITY DYSFUNCTION, marked a new direction to space opera and was published in hardcover by Macmillan in January 1996. It has since been followed by THE NEUTRONIUM ALCHEMIST (Oct 1997) and the novella (and short story collection) A SECOND CHANCE AT EDEN (October 1998). The final volume of the trilogy is scheduled for Autumn 1999 and entitled THE NAKED GOD.

Peter F Hamilton is, for the most part, a mild-mannered man but if you wish to see the other side of his personality - it is always interesting to ask him to compare the star-spanning space opera of Simon R Green with his own work....

Signing Sessions

Forthcoming signing sessions at Andromeda, 2-5 Suffolk Street. For confirmation and/or further details call 0121 643 1999.

9 Oct, 4.30pm: Peter Hamilton signing *A SECOND CHANCE AT EDEN* (Macmillan £17.99) his world first edition hardback set in the same universe as the bestselling "Night's Dawn Trilogy" and the paperback edition of *THE NEUTRONIUM ALCHEMIST* (£7.99).

11 Nov: 12noon. Terry Pratchett will be signing *CARPE JUGULUM* (Doubleday £16.99). This is a UK first World edition hardback.

Signings in December, **Robert Rankin, Mary Gentle**, to be confirmed.

Forthcoming Events

9 OCTOBER 1998: PETER F HAMILTON will address the BSGF on the hardback publication of his short story collection, *A SECOND CHANCE AT EDEN* (£17.99), and the paperback of *THE NEUTRONIUM ALCHEMIST* (£7.99). From 7.45pm in the Lichfield Lounge, 2nd floor of the Britannia Hotel, New Street, Birmingham, (entrance in Union Passageway).

1 November 1998 2pm: Science Fiction Special in the Readers and Writers Festival at the MAC. Pat Cadigan, Colin Greenland & Mike Jefferies read from their books and discuss their approaches to writing.

5 November 6.30pm: Cannon Hill Writers' Group perform in Readers & Writers Festival at the MAC, Cannon Hill Park, Edgbaston, Birmingham.

7-8 November 1998: Memorabilia, "Europe's largest SF, film, cult TV, pop and comic collectors fair". Hall 17, NEC. For further information call Made in Heaven 01899 221622 or tickets from box office on 0121 767 4555.

13-15 NOVEMBER 1998: NOVACON 28, at the Britannia Hotel, New Street, Birmingham. Guest of Honour Paul J McAuley. Attending membership costs £32.00 until 1st November, after which time memberships may be paid for on the door at the rate of £35.00. Until 1 Nov you can join Novacon 28 & 29 for just £55. Contact: Carol Morton, 14 Park Street, Lye, Stourbridge, DY9 8SS. (For further information check out

<http://www.cooky.demon.co.uk/n28/n28.html>).

3 December: Meet the Author with the Cannon Hill Writers' Group. Jim Crace, local author and Booker Prize nominee will be talking about his books at the MAC. The talk will begin at 8.30pm followed by questions.

16, 22, 23 NOVEMBER 1998: A CHRISTMAS CAROL a play by Shaun Sutton from the story by Charles Dickens will be staged at the Library Theatre of the Solihull Arts Complex from 7.30pm (16 & 23) and 2.30pm (22). Tickets £6.00 call Jackie Staite on 01564 775069 or Box Office on 0121 704 6962.

21-28 NOVEMBER 1998: GASPING the slightly sf, very satirical play by Ben Elton will be staged at the Main House of the Crescent Theatre, Sheepcote Street, Brindleyplace, Birmingham, B16 8AE. Tickets £6.00 in advance, £7.00 on the door, call the Box Office on 0121 643 5858.

11 DECEMBER 1998: BSGF BEER & SKITTLES Christmas Meeting at the Samson and Lion, Wordsley. See advert on back.

25 JANUARY- 6 FEBRUARY 1999: MORT adapted for the stage by Stephen Briggs, from the original novel by some guy in a funny hat will be staged at the Main House of the Crescent Theatre, Sheepcote Street, Brindleyplace, Birmingham, B16 8AE. Tickets £6.00 in advance, £7.00 on the door, call the Box Office on 0121 643 5858.

2-5 April 1999: RECONVENE, 50th National British Convention, Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool. GoHs: Peter S Beagle, John Clute, Jeff Noon. Attending £25.00 to Reconvene, 3 West Shrubbery, Redland, Bristol, BS6 6SZ.

13-15 August 1999: WINCON V, Unicon 1999, at King Alfred's College Winchester. GoHs: John Barnes, Diana Wynne Jones, Warren Ellis. Attending £20.00 to Wincon V, 53 Havant Rd, North End, Portsmouth, Hants, PO2 7HH.

27 December 1999 - 2 January 2000: MILLENNIUM. Venue to be announced, but definitely in Northern Europe (probably a BeNeLux country or UK), £3.00 (£10.00) per year, to be deducted from eventual membership fee. 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

The Newsletter of the Birmingham Science Fiction Group

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 yvonne@hallsfarm.softnet.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.

Roscoe Report #6

By Steve Green

The 1998 eastward TAFF race may indeed have begun, with (as reported in last month's *Brum Group News*) Velma "Vijay" Bowen and Sarah "S" Prince jostling for the opportunity to represent North American sf fandom at next year's Eastercon, but rumours grow that this could be the most overtly one-sided ballot since Michael "Simo" Simpson challenged the mighty political machinery of the Brum Group's own Martin "Martin" Tudor.

As the redoubtable Ted White reveals in the sixth issue of the Las Vegas-based newszine *Crifanac*, Sarah only agreed to stand after lengthy assurances that she stood no chance of winning, US administrator Ulrika O'Brien having struck out in her extensive foraging expeditions for more pugilistic candidates attending the Baltimore Worldcon.

"We're running out of suitable North America candidates," Ted concludes. "There are a number of reasons for this, but the best is that making a trip to Britain isn't that big a deal for most fans these days. And for that reason, a lot of potentially worthy candidates – like me, for instance – have already been there too often to qualify for the honor (*sic*)."

A good point, but I'm certain I'm not alone in believing TAFF signifies more than an airline ticket, plus free membership and (excepting Intuition) accommodation at the host convention. It should be, as Ted writes, an *honour* to represent our individual branches of the tribe of science fiction fandom, regardless of the handful of candidates (and even the occasional winner) who evidence little support for that view. I do hope newly-installed UK administrator Maureen Speller Kincaid, due back shortly from her own lengthy tour of the US, won't face such indifference and misunderstanding when she begins canvassing candidates for the next westward platform.

[What do our own previous Brum Group TAFF winners, such as Peter Weston and Martin Tudor think? Would any of you take on the heavy haulage, auctions and frantic fundraising for TAFF? - Ed.]

Those disappointed by *The X-Files: Fight the Future* (which I can't say I was, though I didn't harbour the same bonkers expectations as some) would be well-advised to check out Channel Four's new thriller series *Ultraviolet*, which combines a smartass script wrenched from the back pages of a comic book with the best supernatural technobabble this side of *Poltergeist: The Legacy*. Hard-edged, highly enjoyable, and a standard to aim at for those working on Channel Five's impending resurrection of the 1970s sf chiller *Doomwatch*.

Birmingham's regular gathering for horror fans, the Black Lodge, is changing venue: from October 6 onwards, meetings will be held on the first Tuesday of each month at the Old Contemptibles, near the Livery Street entrance to Snow Hill Station.

Star Trek's Walter Koenig has revealed his regular guest role in *Babylon 5* - as the sinister psi-cop Alfred Bester - grew out of an abandoned in-joke cameo. Creator J M Straczynski planned a scene in which Koenig would resurrect his infamous Ruskie accent and reminisce about the "keptin" he used to serve under.

Meanwhile, B5's former first officer, the much lusted-after Claudia Christian, has committed to the new British show *Final Frontier*, her first sf series since quitting the ill-fated space station during the absurd delays in Warner Brothers greenlighting the fifth season.

Chaz Brenchley's novel *Light Errant* won the "best novel" category (the August Derleth Award) of this year's British Fantasy Society Awards, whilst former *Fantasy Tales* colleagues took the anthology vote with *Dark Terrors 3* and Christopher Fowler's "Wageslaves" was named best short story. Jim Burns was named best artist and *Interzone* the best small press title. The prolific short story writer D F Lewis received the Karl Edward Wagner Award and a special convention award was announced as a tribute to the Society's first president, Ken Bulmer.

[Dark Terrors 3 will be available in paperback under the Vista imprint, price £5.99, on 22 October 98. The next in the series, Dark Terrors 4 - featuring stories by Poppy Z Brite, Geoff Nicholson, Lisa Tuttle, Neil Gaiman, Ramsey Campbell, Dennis Etchison, Christopher Fowler, Michael Marshall Smith, Thomas Tessier and many others - will be published in hardback by Gollancz at the same time, price £16.99.]

Book Reviews

CYBER-KILLERS, edited by Ric Alexander, Orion, pb, 540pp, £6.99.

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

The premise behind this collection of stories is good. All the stories, as suggested by the title, involve death of some kind or another and the book is divided into three sections: Network Terrorists involves computers in some way in the crime; Robot Crime links stories with robots and androids and Virtual Murder uses VR for its effects. At least, that is the idea. The problem is that most of the stories were written before 1990 and at least one, "Sam Hall" by Poul Anderson are over forty years old. Reading this volume is like dipping into one of the old magazines – good stories providing nostalgia for the golden age of youth. Fans of forty-plus will enjoy a good wallow, younger readers will notice how much technology has moved on despite the occasional sharp story from such as Kim Newman, Greg Bear and Ian Watson which still holds up well. The editor would have been better advised to open the volume to new, original stories for most of the collection, sprinkling it with only a few, reprinted gems.

WIZARD AND GLASS, Stephen King, pb, 845pp, NEL, £6.99.

Star rating ****, or maybe only *****1/2**

Reviewed by Chris Morgan

I'm sure you've all read the previous three volumes in King's Dark Tower sequence, but just in case you haven't there's a useful 5-page resume at the front of this one – so you *can* start here. This isn't horror. It's a fantasy with some (usually minor) supernatural elements and set on several present-day Earths, one of which may be ours. It's also a love story and a western and a thriller, marketed as general fiction.

Roland the Gunslinger and his three companions (Eddie, Susannah and Jake) are still on their quest for the Dark Tower. We find them travelling on an intelligent but psychotic train which will kill them unless they can stump it with a riddle, with which it is obsessed. (Why did the dead baby cross the road? Because it was stapled to the chicken.)

In fact this main story occupies little of the book, which is mainly devoted to Roland's account of an episode in his early life. At 14, just qualified as a gunslinger, he was sent away from Gilead with two friends, as a punishment. In the small town of Hambry, which is regressing from a technological highpoint and resembles the American West of about 1850,

Roland falls in love with the beautiful Susan, who is promised to someone else. Disaster follows.

King maintains reader interest via lots of short chapters, using many points of view in different scenes. His characters are believable grotesques. His backgrounds are fascinatingly detailed, with just enough fantasy elements. The best of these is a thimny -- a scary place where you can hear sounds leaking through from the next alternate world. Overall this is a marvellously readable novel, even though some parts are predictable or cliched or longwinded. Its biggest failing is that Roland at 14 is too mature and experienced to be credible. But don't let me put you off; there's much here to enjoy.

A SECOND CHANCE AT EDEN by Peter F Hamilton

Macmillan, hardcover, £17.99

Reviewed by Martin Tudor.

Star Rating: *****

If you, like me, read and enjoyed the first two parts of Hamilton's 'Night's Dawn' trilogy (THE REALITY DYSFUNCTION and THE NEUTRONIUM ALCHEMIST), you will doubtless be eagerly awaiting the final volume, and so you'll be annoyed to discover this isn't it. You will probably be as disgusted as I, to discover that Hamilton has been wasting valuable writing time churning out a collection of short stories, thus postponing the final denouement of 'Night's Dawn' until the autumn of next year!

However, I have to say that I think you'll be as surprised and delighted as I, when you read A SECOND CHANCE AT EDEN, not only because it is an excellent collection of short stories but also because they add to and greatly enhance the 'Night's Dawn' trilogy by filling in the background history.

All of the stories in A SECOND CHANCE AT EDEN are tied into the 'timeline' of the 'Night's Dawn' books, from the earliest "Sonnie's Edge" set on Earth in 2070 and telling of the beginning of 'affinity' bonding; to the latest, "Escape Route", set near Sonora Asteroid in 2586, which features a certain Marcus Calvert....

In addition to these we have "A Second Chance at Eden" set near Jupiter in 2090, which tells of the origin of Eden in the form of a whodunit mystery (no, I didn't work it out); "New Days Old Times", Nyvan 2245; "Candy Buds" on Tropicana in 2393; "Deathday", Jubarra 2405; "The Lives and Loves of Tiarella Rosa", Tropicana again, 2447.

This is a superlative collection of stories, proving once again (in case you had any doubts) that Hamilton is a master storyteller.

Irwin Allen: The Great Showman by Steve Green

The multi-million dollar budget lavished upon the movie version of *Lost in Space* would probably have appalled Irwin Allen, the original show's creator; if ever a name became associated with low-grade telefantasy and formulaic disaster films, it was his. But it's also highly appropriate that one of his first movie projects should have been *The Big Circus*, for Allen was one of cinema's greatest showmen, a producer-director most in his element as a ringmaster orchestrating spectacle rather than closeted in an office with studio accountants.

And Allen, who died aged 75 in 1991, would no doubt have been amused that such critically-excoriated series as *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* and *Land of the Giants* have achieved an immortality in re-runs denied many of their more acclaimed contemporaries.

Hollywood Hustler

Born in New York on 12 June, 1916, Allen was educated at the University of Columbia, majoring in journalism and advertising. He moved to Hollywood in 1938 to work in radio, but soon made a major contribution to the fledgling television industry with *Hollywood Merry-Go-Round*, the first celebrity panel game ever aired in the United States. By the end of its four-year run, more than 1000 movie stars and local Hollywood residents had been featured.

Meanwhile, the energetic Allen was also writing a regular newspaper column and producing a radio show, yet still found time in 1944 to open a literary agency hawking the film rights to works by such leading novelists and playwrights as P G Wodehouse, Fanny Hurst and Ben Hecht.

His reputation as a movie "packager" grew rapidly, drawing Allen on to RKO's production team for the 1951 crime comedy *Double Dynamite*; as well as the busty Jane Russell, whose infamous cleavage is signalled in the title, the film starred Frank Sinatra and Allen's friend Groucho Marx. Sadly for Marx, neither this nor their 1952 reunion *A Girl in Every Port*, managed to revive his flagging solo career.

Perhaps realising his talents needed a wider panorama, Allen chose a documentary for his third RKO project, *The Sea Around Us*. Its astonishing opening recreation of Earth's creation and closing sequence outlining the dangers of global warming and polar meltdowns, a warning even more topical today, helped earn Allen his first Academy Award.

Devils and Dinosaurs

After another nature-related documentary, *The Animal World*, Allen decided to combine both the fantastical elements of his directorial debut and the contacts built up during his tv quiz days. Billed as “Two billion years in the making!”, *The Story of Mankind* (1957) re-enacted assorted historical events as part of a celestial courtroom battle. “Telling history on the screen can be like a bad joke told twice”, he later confessed, “you first have to find a handle, a gimmick.”

In this case, the angle was the parade of 56 stars cast (and often mis-cast) as “giants of history”, among them Peter Lorre (Nero), Harpo Marx (Sir Isaac Newton) and Hedy Lamarr (Joan of Arc). Only Vincent Price seemed at home, playing the Devil.

With each cameo performance setting him back \$2500, Allen demonstrated his soon-to-be-legendary flair for trimming budgets by inserting stock footage from other movies, but it still crashed and burned at the box office. The Los Angeles Examiner dubbed the film an “historical dud” and it eventually achieved its own place in cinema history as one of the Medved Brothers’ *Fifty Worst Movies of All Time*.

Undeterred, Allen returned to the producer’s chair for 1959’s *The Big Circus*, a vehicle for the muscle-bound pin-up Victor Mature; fortunately for his career prospects, it proved a huge success for Allied Artists. Armed with this, Allen approached Twentieth Century-Fox with the first of his science fiction projects, even if actual science was never all that high on the agenda.

Released in 1960, *The Lost World* was loosely adapted from Arthur Conan Doyle’s novel (so neat a template for *Jurassic Park* that the sequel lifted its title) and featured Claude Rains as Professor Challenger, leading an intrepid expedition to a long-isolated South American plateau in search of dinosaurs. Despite the pitiful special effects - a tragic swansong for *King Kong* director Willis O’Brien, who had himself helmed a far superior version 35 years earlier - *The Lost World* carried on Allen’s winning streak. Now, having looked to the heavens and into the past, he and regular co-writer Charles Bennett decided to gaze towards the future and into the ocean’s depths.

Action Stations

“If I can’t blow up the world within the first 10 minutes,” Allen would say of his subsequent television work, “then the show is a flop.” This all-or-nothing approach is certainly apparent in the plot of 1961’s *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*, in which special effects expert Bill Abbott was brought on board to set the Van Allen radiation belt alight.

This time, the star was the vessel itself. Three versions of the Seaview

were constructed, the largest 18 feet long, at a total cost of \$200,000; a further \$200,000 was spent on the submarine's control room. Walter Pidgeon tried to add a little class as retired admiral Harriman Nelson, going head-to-head with the United Nations to save mankind from a global barbecue, but stood little real chance against Abbott's visual wizardry.

The following year saw another stint as director, on the travel yarn *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, but Allen returned to television in 1964 for the first of four seasons of the *Voyage* spin-off. Shakespearean actor Richard Basehart took over as Nelson, trying to add a dash of integrity, whilst David Hedison (formerly *The Fly*) played Riker to his Picard as Captain Lee Crane; the latter casting also allowed Allen to recycle *Lost World* footage featuring Hedison whenever the Seaview encountered massive reptiles with an alarming resemblance to common lizards with plastic spines stuck on their back.

Despite the often ludicrous plots and even more bizarre monsters – or maybe because of them – *Voyage* proved a ratings hit and set Allen up for his first extraterrestrial adventure. It would also be Allen's only head-on clash with his chief rival for the title of 1960s tvsf maestro: *Star Trek's* "great bird", Gene Roddenberry.

Danger, Will Robinson! Danger!

Although Roddenberry would frequently disparage Allen's *Lost in Space* – telling one reviewer the shows were as different as the western drama series *Gunsmoke* and the children's adventure *Lassie* – there is now denying he was hurt when Allen scooped his planned slot at CBS (ironically, former CBS programming head Oscar Katz, enlisted to back up Roddenberry's pitch to the network, later worked as Allen's agent). On the other hand, NBC, *Star Trek's* eventual home, did greenlight the colour photography denied Allen's series for its first season.

Like *Trek*, *Lost in Space* had an unsuccessful first pilot. Produced under the show's original title, *Space Family Robinson*, it was never screened and those viewing it now may miss two of the vital elements in its successor's popularity: the duplicitous Dr Zachary Smith (Jonathan Harris, initially hired as a guest star and proving so popular he was hired for all three seasons) and the ever-protective robot (voiced by Bob May).

In spite of ropy scripts, cornball dialogue and a skewed sexual dynamic once one considered that outside the Jupiter 2, the universe was mainly populated with robots, humanoid insects and sentient vegetables, viewers could at least savour the make-up creations of Oscar-winner Ben Nye and the sfx work of Bill Abbott and Howard Lyedecker.

Meanwhile, although denied many of his standard cost-cutting techniques, Allen still maintained an iron grip upon the purse strings. Informed that it would \$10,000 to build a spacecraft for one alien to land at the Robinson campsite, it's said he went scarlet and screamed "Let him walk!"

Tunnel Vision

1966's *The Time Tunnel* proved the first flop in Allen's television career, despite Bill Abbott's photographic effects (the series earned Abbott his third Emmy Award) and the endless opportunities to re-use stock footage. But even by Allen's standards, the scripts were unimaginative and the characterisation wooden, offering little scope for stars James Darren and Robert Colbert. Its failure after just 30 episodes may explain the streamlining of Allen's tv operations during 1968, which saw the both the *Seaview* and the *Jupiter 2* off on their final missions (the latter at the losing end of a ratings war with NBC's *Batman*).

In their place, he launched *Land of the Giants*, at that time the most expensive series on television: the elaborate props (two-foot paperclips, six-foot pencils) and trick photography rocketed the budget to more than \$250,000 per episode (by comparison, first-season episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, produced 18 years later, were less than four times as costly). Former *Teenage Frankenstein* Gary Conway led the marooned crew and passengers of the stratoliner *Spindrift*, who spent two seasons struggling for survival in an oppressive society 12 times larger than our own; although the last episode aired in 1970, rumours persist of a movie spin-off, though hopes of that are no doubt riding upon the success of the new *Lost in Space*.

The 1970 tv film *City Beneath the Sea* would be Allen's final television project for six years. Intended as the pilot for a new underwater series (the *Seaview*'s "flying sub" makes several re-appearances), it sank without trace, taking stars Robert Wagner and Stuart Whitman with it. British cinema audiences later caught it as *One Hour to Doomsday*.

Disaster Natural

Sensing that the time was right for the resurrection of the old-fashioned big-budget blockbuster, Allen returned to movie production in 1972 with *The Poseidon Adventure*, one of the first and best of the "disaster" cycle which dominated mid-1970s cinema. Directed by Ronald Neame and with Gene Hackman and Ernest Borgnine heading a cast almost as striking as on *The Story of Mankind*, it proved a major hit (even the generally snide *Time Out* dubbed it "a terrific piece of junk") and eventually spawned a similarly star-heavy sequel, *Beyond the Poseidon*

Adventure (1979), this time directed by Allen himself.

1974's *The Towering Inferno* won three Academy Awards – editing, cinematography and song – but nearly burned out on the launchpad. Both Twentieth Century-Fox and Warner Brothers had optioned novels dealing with blazing skyscrapers, but Allen persuaded the studios to collaborate rather than engage in a fruitless box office battle (it's a lesson which the producers of *Dante's Peak* and *Volcano* would have been wise to note). This unique partnership enabled him to hire both major stars of the period, Steve McQueen and Paul Newman, each receiving a straight \$1,000,000 fee and a 20% slice of the gross profits. Allen later compared the task to “staging World War Three”, but the gamble paid off: receipts for *The Towering Inferno* were as spectacular as the pyrotechnics.

The Final Curtain

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this would prove the zenith of Allen's career. The 1976 tv pilot *The Time Travellers*, co-scripted from an unpublished story by *Twilight Zone* creator Rod Serling, was competently directed by Alexander Singer but failed to spark sufficient interest for a regular series. The juvenile yarn *The Return of Captain Nemo* ran for just three episodes in 1978, with Alex Marsh in the director's chair and a dismal Jose Ferrer as the eponymous seafarer; it was edited for UK theatrical release as *The Amazing Captain Nemo*, but has since resurfaced as school holiday fodder on ITV.

That same year saw *The Swarm*, one of the last and worst of the very cycle Allen had initiated with *The Poseidon Adventure*, a \$12 million bomb which earned him a Golden Turkey award for “The Most Badly Bumbled Bee Movie of All Time”. And if he still needed proof that the bubble had burst, Allen had only to wait for the public indifference which met his final project, 1980's volcano drama *When Time Ran Out* (aka *Earth's Final Fury*). Directed by James Goldstone and starring Paul Newman (who reportedly earned a flat \$2,000,000 fee), it served as overwhelming proof that the genre's appeal had fizzled out, sadly ensuring its producer's 42-year canon ended not with a bang but a whimper.

A Finger on the Pulse

It cannot be denied that Irwin Allen's work includes some of the dumbest dialogue and leaden characterisation captured on celluloid, nor that it is series such as *Lost in Space* which spring to mind whenever science fiction fans use the derogatory phrase “sci-fi”. On the other hand, Allen usually managed to keep his shows on the air, a feat regrettably often beyond contemporaries Roddenberry and Serling. In addition, his

sense of the spectacular produced the exact escapist fare demanded by audiences overshadowed by the Vietnam War and the ever-escalating nuclear arms race.

In essence, at the height of his career, Allen evidenced a remarkable instinct for public tastes. Wanting to destroy the Earth in the opening 10 minutes might have displayed a simplistic view of the medium's potential, but – for the most part – it worked, and both television and cinema are less colourful landscapes for his absence.

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Colophon

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Great SF Stories

At the February meeting Tony Morton invited guest speaker Stephen Baxter and all members of the Group to submit their lists of Great SF Stories. As a starter here is an approximation of mine. It's only an approximation because I can't find most of my books for reference.

Ursula K LeGuin, 'The Day Before the Revolution'

Ann Walsh, 'Getting Away From It All' (strictly horror I s'pose)

Lisa Tuttle, 'No Regrets'

Joan D Vinge, 'Tin Soldier'

Ursula K LeGuin, 'A Man of the People'

Henry Kuttner, 'Masquerade'

Theodore Sturgeon, 'The (widget), the (wadjet) and Boff'

Lois McMaster Bujold, 'The Mountains of Mourning'

Vonda N McIntyre, 'Aztecs'

Ursula K LeGuin, 'Fisherman of the Inland Sea'

[You think it's an unbalanced list? Send your own and put me right.]

Once again we proudly present the event of the year!!

CHRISTMAS MEETING

Friday 11 December

BEER & SKITTLES

at the

SAMSON and LION

Wordsley

Please let Carol Morton know as soon as possible how many tickets you want to attend the Christmas event. It is our usual second Friday and as in previous years includes a bar meal and transport.

Once the Committee have an idea of numbers - and who, we hope to book a coach to allow DROP OF people (reasonably) near home on the way home. Pick up points in the past were City Centre, Bearwood and Lye. A pick up time for this year will be decided later. Total cost is undecided as the pub are currently rewriting their menus due to the arrival of a new cook (don't worry Rog, the Balti's are still on!).

To secure a place a £5 deposit is required. This can either be given to Carol at any meeting, or a cheque, made out to "Birmingham Science Fiction Group" posted to 14 Park Street, Lye, Stourbridge, DY9 8SS.

If confirmation is required please let Carol know. Further details will be available once we finalise the event.