

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.

BRIAN ALDISS**will address the BSFG on****Friday 13th November 1998, *****from 7.45pm, in the Gloucester Room, ninth 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 Gloucester on the ninth 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:****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, Trimpley, Worcs, DY12 1NP (or by e-mail to yvonne@hallsfarm.softnet.co.uk).

Brian W. Aldiss

By Harry Harrison

What a lucky old Brun group you are to have Brian W. Aldiss there to address your special meeting. Brian has spoken to you before and, less you become jaded by hearing him more than once – just don't forget who you are privileged to be able to listen to his golden words. I know you love him as an SF author, laughing at his comic masterpieces, weeping sympathetic tears when you turn the pages of his epic novels. Yes, of course, you know *that* Aldiss.

But think of the multi-faceted Aldiss that the intelligentsia of the world so greatly admire:

The Booker Prize judge who actually got an SF novel smuggled into the list of, mostly unreadable, novels.

The mainstream best-selling novelist who brought *Hand Reared Boy* to the cheering masses.

The international author who spreads glory to British literature by word of mouth in countries around the world courtesy of the British Council.

The man who told Mary Shelley, when she was groping around for plot, that a man-made monster might fill the bill.

The master of the screenplay who has ghost-written all of the scripts for the Woody Allen movies. Even the successful ones.

Laugh with joy at the new Aldiss Royal Shakespeare Company who will be staging Love's Labour Lost in Zagreb in Serbo-Croatian. While fully armed and wearing body armour.

Most importantly, welcome a man of letters, critic, novelist, author of those books and short stories that have given you so much pleasure down through the years. Brian is a witty and entertaining speaker, as we all know. I do envy your presence at this spectacular and important meeting.

Would that I could be with you but, alas, I am booked for that day at the palace. I am proud to say that, by Royal Warrant, I am the honorary supplier of Viagra to the Queen Mother. (Now you know how she gets around so well.)

Brian – leave them laughing as you always do.

Your old mate –

Harry Harrison

At this point I was going to include a bibliography but I forgot to get in touch with the person who compiled the biblio for Novacon 25 and anyway, the list is huge, I mean huge so I'll just mention Non-Stop, Hothouse, Greybeard, The Dark Light Years, Barefoot in the Head, Billion Year Spree, Frankenstein Unbound, The Malacia Tapestry, the

The Newsletter of the Birmingham Science Fiction Group

Helliconia series *and of course, his newly published autobiographical book, The Twinkling of an Eye: My Life as an Englishman.*

A Welcome from the Brum Group Chairman
Tony Morton

Well, I suppose it had to happen eventually - a Brum Group meeting and Novacon on the same Friday (I don't think it has happened before - comments?). So just a brief note to say hello and welcome to all you con goers

Our "regular" BSFG meeting goes on as a special event when we introduce Brian Aldiss as our guest speaker to celebrate the launch of the second volume of his autobiography. This will take place in the Gloucester Room on the ninth floor - the Brum Group members will be glad to welcome you all. A signing session for *In the Twinkling of an Eye: My Life as an Englishman* follows in Harvey's Bar afterwards.

I hope to see lots of Brum Group members there to see one of our honorary presidents and enjoy the rest of the Friday programme of Novacon.

See you there.

Tony Morton.

Signing Sessions

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

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

13th NOVEMBER 1998: a special Brum Group meeting at Novacon where Brian Aldiss will address the BSFG on the launch of his **hardback autobiographical book, IN THE TWINKLING OF AN EYE (£20) published by Little Brown. From 7.45 in the Gloucester Room, 9th floor of the Britannia Hotel, New Street, Birmingham,**

The Newsletter of the Birmingham Science Fiction Group

(entrance in Union Passageway).

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.com3.demon.co.uk/n28n29.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: BSFG BEER & SKITTLES Christmas Meeting at the Samson and Lion, Wordsley including a bar meal and transport. A £5 deposit secures your place. Send a cheque made out to 'Birmingham Science Fiction Group' to 14 Park Street, Lye, Stourbridge, DY9 8SS or see Carol at the next meeting.

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.

The Newsletter of the Birmingham Science Fiction Group

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 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.sofinet.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.

Fanzines

By Tony Berry

A fanzine is an amateur magazine produced by fans. There, that just about sums it up, can I go now? No? Oh, alright then.

The term 'fanzine' was coined by Russ Chauvenet in 1941, and has since been borrowed and used by all sorts of fan groups, most recently by football fans. There is some argument (just for a change) about which was the first fanzine: in May 1930 the Science Correspondence Club published *The Comet* (later *Cosmology*) ed. Ray Palmer, but this concerned itself purely with science, not sf. The following month the New York Scienceers published *The Planet*, ed. Allen Glasser, which was again mostly about science, but did include reviews of professional sf magazines, of which there were only four at the time. Some people regard the first 'true' fanzine to be *The Time Traveller* (Jan 1932), ed. Julius Schwartz and Mort Weisinger, which dealt exclusively with sf and amateur science.

As interest in sf grew, individual fans began producing fanzines and exchanging them with other in return for their own effort, a contribution or letter of comment (LoC). The content of fanzines diversified enormously and an informal network of amateur publishers and letterhackers developed. The idea spread to this side of the pond, and in 1936 Maurice Hanson and Dennis Jacques started *Novae Terrae*. Since then, fanzine production has mushroomed, and now there are hundreds of different titles all over the world. A number of professional sf authors began their careers in fanzines, for example Ray Bradbury, James Blish, Harlan Ellison, Michael Moorcock and Robert Silverberg. Many of these 'filthy pros' still contribute articles to fanzines and one or two even produce an occasional issue themselves.

Fanzines can be subdivided into several groups: the 'perzine' (personal fanzine) is written and produced entirely by the editor, while the 'genzine' (general fanzine) takes contributions from others. Content can be 'fannish' (the antics of fans and fandom) or 'sercon' (Serious and Constructive) or indeed anything which the editors wish to inflict upon us (eg a four-page treatise on Ikea bookshelves). Some of them even mention sf.

Back in the early days of fanzines, a lot of effort was put into their production: stencils were typed, handles of duplicators were cranked, bottles of correcting fluid were spilt, fevered brows mopped. Fans were maybe hundreds of miles apart, and met once or twice a year. The fanzine became the practical means of keeping in touch; they could be looked upon as extended letters between friends. They were almost essential. These days fanzines can be word-processed, DTP'd, photocopied or laser printed. Production has become relatively cheap and easy, but at the same time there are a hundred conventions a year, travel is not the obstacle it once was, and we can e-mail someone on the other side of the world for next to nothing. Yet I'm glad to say that the fanzine continues to thrive. Admittedly some of these seem to be produced merely to showcase the numerous functions of the editors new 6-terabyte Cray palmtop and holographic printer, but there are also many good solid, dare I say traditional, fanzines. Maybe that's it - maybe it's our love of real printed paper which keeps it going; something physical which we can sit and read and then put away, and it will still be there in 10 years time to read again.

References: A Pictorial History of SF – David Kyle
The Encyclopaedia of SF – John Clute & Peter Nicholls

ANCIENTS OF DAYS by Paul J McAuley

Reviewed by Martin Tudor

ANCIENTS OF DAYS is the second volume of a trilogy, the first volume CHILD OF THE RIVER was reviewed in Progress Report #3 and the final volume SHRINE OF STARS is scheduled to be published in September next year. The setting is the artificial world of Confluence which orbits an obscure star beyond the edge of the Galaxy. It is home to 10,000 races, shaped and raised to intelligence by the Preservers, god-like descendants of humanity who have abandoned Confluence and retreated from the Universe itself.

The hero of both volumes is Yamamanama, known as Yama, who was found as a baby on the breast of a dead woman in a white boat floating on the Great River. Yama's lineage is unknown - his race seems to have disappeared from Confluence - and so he sets out to find all he can of his forbears and to see if any of his race still survive.

In ANCIENTS OF DAYS many of the questions posed in CHILD OF THE RIVER are answered but, as you might expect, even more interesting questions are raised....

This is a strange, exotic novel - the atmosphere reminiscent, at times, of Joseph Conrad's claustrophobic works set in humid climes amongst strange peoples. But with the introduction of Angel, and the revelations of her incredible past, the novel's viewpoint changes to an incredible mind-bogglingly view of ten million years of human history.

I eagerly await SHRINE OF STARS - not least so that I can settle down and read this whole magnificent work at a sitting.

CHIMERA'S CRADLE, Brian Stableford , pb, 508pp, Orbit, £6.99

****** Reviewed by Yvonne Rowse**

This is the third Book of Genesys, Brian Stableford's science fiction cross dressing as fantasy. It is a well-imagined book peopled with mythical creatures; giants, serpents, salamanders, manticores, sphinxes.

The world described was colonised by humans at some time in the past but unlike most worlds this is one where sexual reproduction is not the norm. Creatures are born from the living ground. Every several thousand years come a "time of emergence" where the living grounds become more active, chaos grips the world and huge changes happen. The Books of Genesys are set in one of these times.

This book follows the continuing efforts of a group of people to reach Chimera's Cradle, which the lore promises will one day give forth incorruptible stone, an incredibly valuable commodity because on this

world, as we discovered in *Serpent's Blood*, corruption and corrosion rule. Nothing lasts. Paper lasts days, stone lasts a few short years. Continuing effort must be made to keep any structure standing, to keep any teaching uncontaminated.

Although I enjoyed the series, the concept was hugely imaginative, I found the style didn't suit me. In an author's note at the end Brian Stableford mentions that the series turned out to be 560,000 words long. Sometimes when I was reading it felt like I was wading through treacle. As an example, in the middle of an action scene, 'Lucrezia had no alternative but to concentrate all her efforts on survival'. Why not 'Lucrezia concentrated on survival'? There are so many extra words that there is no feeling of urgency even in the endless fight scenes and there were a number of occasions where we saw a scene from one point of view then went back and watched it run through from a different direction. There was altogether too much travelling through perilous ground with enemy attacks from all direction. It almost certainly added texture, depth, context and ennui.

All these complaints and still it's a four star book. I would heartily recommend it to anyone with plenty of time although I would start at the beginning of the series. It's a fascinating world that richly repays your attention. The descriptions of the unearthly lands last in your imagination and it is not without humour. For example:

'Do you always talk like that?' Seth asked. 'It's a bit highflown for my taste.'

'I certainly do,' Andris informed him. 'I'm a prince of Ferentina: an educated man invested with a wealth of hereditary arrogance. I may have become a vagabond – and, for that matter, a tree – but some things are ineradicable, even by the most profound of metamorphoses.'

'A simple *yes* would have sufficed.'

Quite.

BARNACLE BILL THE SPACER AND OTHER STORIES by
Lucius Shepard. MillenniumSF, £5.99 paperback, 292 pages.
Reviewed by Tony Morton.

What makes a good story? This appears to be Shepard's first thought in what comes over to me as "formula fiction". I am not saying the stories are not well written, nor that in many cases that they do not entertain. My criticism is each story has similar elements and, for me, this detracts from their plot.

The title story, 'Barnacle Bill the Spacer' opens in similar vein to 'Human History', telling us the background to what is to follow: both setting the scene in a cynical, pseudo-storyteller fashion. The stories

- 'Bill' telling the truth about the legend from someone who was there and 'History' relating the tale of a future after 'the great disaster' and man's survival attempt in a very different ecology; are two totally different areas after the initial quirk. However, the next element also occurs in both - sex. Obviously a "must" for a "good" story. In neither story does this element extend or enhance the tale, rather it seems to be there just because it's "expected". Actually the "sex element" appears in all the stories, though more explicitly in 'All The Perfume of Araby', a strong tale of smugglers-cum-entrepreneurs making their living from selling quote "Diamonds, exotic software, hacksaw blades...whatever".

Of the remaining stories, I loved 'A Little Night Music: although the idea disturbs me (read it too see!). 'Sports In America' seems out of place with a hitman story providing a twist (but I'm saying no more) and 'Beast of the Heartland' a boxing story of a fighter going one bout too many, partially blind by this sport but receiving "strange sight" of his opponent. Unusual story.

All in all quite good stories, but individually. As a collection, the formula becomes too evident reducing their impact and to a degree their effect.

DREAMING IN SMOKE, Tricia Sullivan, pb, 290pp, Orion, £9.99

**** **Reviewed by Yvonne Rowse**

Here's another book that you wouldn't recognise as SF at first glance with its 'arty' cover and poetic title.

I love the first line. 'The night Kalypso Deed vowed to stop Dreaming was the same night a four-dimensional snake with a Canadian accent, eleven heads and attitude employed a Diriangen function to rip out all her veins, then swiftly crocheted them into a harp which could only play a medley of Miles Davis tunes transposed (to their detriment) into the key of G.' My computer thinks the sentence is too long and has underlined it with a wiggly green line. I think it's just great.

The novel is set on a world unsuitable for human life. T'neane was colonised on the basis of information sent back from an exploration probe but between the information arriving on Earth and the colonists arriving on T'neane the oxygen level fell dramatically and the seas warmed leaving little solid ground and not enough oxygen. The colony lives in a claustrophobic artificial environment constructed from the ship, an AI called Ganesh and 'luma', living material from the planet. All this is perched precariously on top of a high thermal area that provides power and Ganesh controls it all.

Kalypso rides shotgun for the scientist trying to solve the oxygen problem. The work is done in Dreams where the Dreamer interfaces with

Ganesh and manipulates his/her problem in artificial reality. As the book opens Marcsson, the drab and unimaginative scientist with whom Kalypso is working becomes insane while interfaced with Ganesh.

Discussing the book in detail would ruin the carefully constructed plot where the reality of the planet and the society is revealed bit by bit. I will just say that the hero, Kalypso Deed, was a woman after my own heart. Her school reports probably read just like mine did; could try harder. The writing is elegant without being so showy that it distracts from the story. The book is full of fascinating concepts and the society is wonderfully realised. I particularly liked the drink mixing demons and the furniture of Kalypso's Dreams.

This is a sophisticated and rewarding book and I will certainly be rereading it and recommending it (though not lending it) to my friends.

MOONFALL, Jack McDevitt, hb, 464pp, Harper Collins, £16.99

***** **Reviewed by Yvonne Rowse**

Moonfall is being marketed as 'the ultimate disaster novel' and I'm a sucker for disaster novels. 'A comet is coming. It's going to hit the moon. And the moon is going to fall. On us.' It's not a new plot; Larry Niven's 'Hammer of God' covers much the same territory but this is much better.

The book begins with a total eclipse of the sun followed across the planet. During this an amateur astronomer spots a comet. Charlie Haskell, US VP is on the moon to officially open moonbase when the totality reaches the hometown of former president Culpepper, incidentally, the first African American president. The comet turns out to be an anomalous object headed into our system from interstellar space at a speed ten times the theoretical maximum. Can the moonbase personnel be evacuated before the comet hits? If pieces of the shattered moon impact the Earth will anyone survive?

In order for a disaster novel to work the author has to provide characters that we can care about. McDevitt has a happy knack of creating human beings where some SF authors create cardboard cutouts. I wasn't far into the novel before I was hoping that Charlie Haskell, the US vice-president would not only survive but also win the election and get a nice wife too. Even the minor characters, who can sometimes be confusing and obviously only introduced to die in horrible circumstances, raised intense emotional responses in me.

The story is told minute by minute, the action spread over a week. It's taut, it's tense and I was completely unable to put it down. Any remark directed at me while I was reading was greeted by an intense and profound sigh. Any attempt to engage me in conversation prompted me to reply, for example, 'I don't think Charlie's going to make it, the comet's

going to impact the moon and you want to know what we're having for tea?!!?

I think McDevitt's singular achievement was that when I finished reading, although I had worked out our elevation above sea level in case of tsunamis I wasn't ready to start getting in extra food just in case. He left me thinking like a member of a co-operative species instead of a survivalist. It's so easy in these types of books to fall into making cosy lists of essentials for survival for the miraculously surviving hero. McDevitt resisted the urge and has produced a SF thriller that I would recommend to anyone. This is an excellent book.

OATH OF GOLD, Elizabeth Moon , pb, 501pp, Orbit, £6.99 * or ****if you like fantasy.** Reviewed by Yvonne Rowse

This is the third book of 'The Deed of Paksenarrion', an epic fantasy tale. Since leaving spotty adolescence behind (although retaining the occasional spot) I have read less and less fantasy, not because there aren't good fantasy books out there but because the volume makes it difficult to find something that doesn't beg to be turned over to Oxfam to make room for SF on my crowded shelves. I only picked it up, in fact, because it was one of the books nominated for discussion on the feminist SF list I subscribe to. And against all my expectations it is a very good book.

I haven't read the first two books but probably because it's such familiar territory and because the recaps were so well handled I didn't feel, as I did with Chimera's Cradle, that I was wading through reams of what happened before this. (In all fairness, Chimera's Cradle is not easy and familiar territory.) Whatever, I slipped into the book and was captured. The elves and orcs are there in their standard roles. In addition there is a religion with warrior saints who actually produce the required miracles and Kuakganni, mystics who talk to trees and animals and are far more interesting than they sound.

The hero of the books, Paksenarrion, is a very believable warrior woman, daughter of a sheepfarmer. As the book begins she is sick with a terror and wounds remaining from an encounter with evil presumably described in detail in the earlier books after she had begun training to be a paladin of Gird, one of the warrior saints. She is healed slowly (and believably, unlike the later healing) by the Kuakgan of Brewersbridge. She begins to realise that although she hasn't completed the training to be a paladin she has some of their powers. She discovers her quest, to find the true king of Lyonya, and sets about it.

What did I like about the book? I liked the thought that had obviously gone into the society. I especially liked the mild bickering between the factions of good guys. I liked the elves (though I think I

prefer Terry Pratchett's take on elves), and the Kuakgan. In fact the characters were all at the least interesting and believable, often memorable. I also liked the fact that a paladin's gear is cleaned and polished magically. I could do with that happening for me.

I didn't like the fight scenes for the simple reason that I find them boring. Still, there wasn't too much intricately described swordwork. I was completely revolted by the torture scenes. At one point I thought we were going to have a minute by minute description of five days of torture and nearly gave up on the book. Fortunately the graphic details were dropped after a while. Another thing I didn't like much was the gods. Gods seem to be used in some fantasy as technobabble is in Star Trek, to solve a problem otherwise insoluble. Deus ex machina is, I think, the technical term. It seems like a cheat to me and I can't empathise very well with any character, no matter how noble, who is cured by the gods because her heart is pure (perhaps because *my* heart is a little grubby), and especially when mere mortals are dying around her. I didn't like the way Paks changed from a real and crippled human being into a martyr saint. And I really didn't like her having her hair restored after it was shaved off. Just a personal prejudice.

Altogether this is a very readable fantasy book. I might even make space on the crowded shelves for books one and two. I won't be getting rid of any SF books to make room for them though.

THE LIST OF SHAME

A review by Adrian Middleton

Of far more interest than the Brum Group's reviews is the notorious list of books owed that has appeared in every issue since the year dot. It gratifies us to know that Steve Jones owes more books under more pseudonyms than any other member, and to see the names of people we know have never attended a meeting (well I did once).

Imagine, then, what it must be like for a non-member, dragged into the fray to review a book because his mate 'thought it was his kinda thing'. The Brum Group forever receives review copies of the notoriously popular wookiee books, those licensed products that have become the sci-fi crutch upon which real SF now rests. But of course, the Brum Group is a real SF society, not a media group. This means that not only do members not want to read the wookiee books that the rest of the world is interested in, but also that they don't want to read the reviews.

I recently learned I was down on the list of shame to review two books. And I do vaguely remember them being pressed into my palm some months (years?) ago. The first was indeed a wookiee book, the novelisation of Alien Resurrection. Three whole film seasons old now,

my review can't spoil the film for those who wanted to see it, so I could tell you all the ending – but I won't. Best set into the category of 'read the book before you see the film' which is becoming increasingly common as the value of cinematic plot composition has deteriorated in this post-Schwarzenegger era, the novelisation is well-paced and makes more sense than the film. I remember when we Alien fans liked nothing more than to work out how they could get Ripley back without resorting to cloning (we ALL thought that was more of a cop-out than 'she woke up in the shower and Alien 3 had all been a dream'). Nothing could be more patronising for a movie than to know that every fan you'd ever met had come up with a more plausible and interesting plot. Such is Hollywood.

My second book was an almost wookiee book. *Servant of the Bones* was one Ann Rice book behind when I received my paperback for review. Now it is four or five behind! Essentially, reading an Ann Rice book is like reading... another Ann Rice book. They all follow the same formula, written in the same first-person style, following the trans-centennial life story of a central lead character whose supernatural nature is found to be oh-so human when he decides to confess all by narrating his story to some characterless unredeeming mortal from the late twentieth century. By the end of the story the principal has gained freedom of some form and wanders off to enjoy modern times.

Like *Interview*, *Lestat* and *The Mummy* before it, *Servant* is a rollicking romantic read which almost echoes Storm Constantine's Grigori Chronicles in places, but ultimately draws attention to its 'storytelling over historical accuracy' formula. Considering that the lead character was a former Jewish slave turned Persian deity, there was surprisingly little depth to his spiritual beliefs (unsurprisingly for an Ann Rice novel, I suppose). I've never quite worked out how such long-lived supernatural beings are as naive at the end of the books as they were at the beginning. Everyone of significance in the book is wiser than Azrael, its protagonist. Is this book deep or what?

This brings me back to the list of shame. It is not, perhaps, the reviewers who are being shamed for their failure to report back. Rather it is a list of books which, through their subject matter or the insertion of insipid spousal poetry into dull retrodden plotlines, are really not worth reading, let alone reviewing.

{We've stopped printing the List of Shame mainly because I find lists boring and anyway, I can't get my act together enough to know who I should be shaming. If you're one of the people who owes book reviews please send them to me as soon as possible - ed.}

Disaster Novels
Yvonne Rowse

So what is it about disaster novels that make them so popular? Two things I think. One is that a lot of us in the western world live lives that are both boring and stressful. A lot of the stress comes from intangible things, fears and anxieties. To some extent I think the idea of disaster lets us throw off our anxieties and concentrate on surviving real dangers.

The other thing, of course, is that disaster novels are reassuring. We never see ourselves as the poor bastard who stumbles blindly into the path of the triffid or is hit by a chunk of comet. We are each central in our own lives as the hero of the disaster novel is central to the story. Even in the very best disaster novels the hero emerges fairly soon from the mass of characters and you know that whoever else dies horrific violent deaths, the hero will survive supreme danger heroically.

In *our* disaster novel our boss would almost certainly die, we would somehow find the ideal partner or resuscitate our marriages, nobody would collect our mortgage, our car would be wrecked but we would miraculously find a fully fuelled four wheel drive vehicle with the keys in the ignition and the owner conveniently dead. We would suffer hardship but we would, of course, come through stronger, happier (and slimmer). People would recognise our value, as they never had in the mundane pre-disaster world. So what if a quarter, a half, nine tenths of the population is wiped out? We and most, but not all, of our nearest and dearest will just get a bigger slice of a simpler, more noble life.

Small wonder that survivalists have already taken to the hills in parts of the US, stocked up and waiting, hoping, for disaster. Luckily, somehow or other, at the end of the disaster novel running water and electricity is restored. Phew!

{So what do you guys think? You could write to me and let me know. Or how about this to start a discussion. I was reading Shards of Honor the other day and I came across this:

Cordelia:- Is he a good guy or a bad guy?

Aral:- What an absurd question!

It occurred to me that in most fantasy novels that is not an absurd question. A lot (all?) fantasy novels have absolute good and absolute evil. Good SF deals in shades of grey. I like this. What do you think?}

News from Martin Tudor

According to Mike Glycer's newszine FILE 770, Bob Shaw's widow Nancy Tucker Shaw suffered a massive stroke on 20 September. The news comes from Misti Anslin Tucker, Nancy's daughter-in-law. Nancy was in an Ann Arbor, Michigan hospital's intensive care unit at the time Misti wrote online "She is completely paralyzed on the left side of her body and is suffering 'dissociation'. She's also very confused and disorientated."

According to CRIFANAC number 8, 12 October (from Arnie Katz, 330 S.Decatur, Suite 152, Las Vegas, NV 89107, USA or Ken Forman, 7215 Nordic Lights Dr., Las Vegas, NV 89119, USA - for "the usual"):

Nancy Tucker Shaw is "currently in the Intensive Care Unit of Saint Joseph Mercy Hospital of Ann Arbor, MI. She can't receive flowers in the ICU but e-mail messages (via her daughter-in-law Misti Tucker at misti@msjhs.com), cards and letters are fine." They add that "While Nancy is still suffering the paralysis on her left side, she's beginning to get a little better response than she's had and she's pretty much always lucid and the nurses are commenting on her sense of humour to anyone who'll listen...". They quote Misti as saying "It looks like she's in for a long haul of physical therapy, but her prognosis is much, much better. The condition that predisposed her to a stroke in the first place (atrial fibrillation) is still a factor, so she's not completely out of the woods yet - but her doctors are much more optimistic."

The same issue of CRIFANAC reports that British fanzine fan, Chuch Harris, had "what doctors describe as a mild stroke" they add that "According to the medicos, the stroke has not caused any appreciable damage that they can detect, and Chuch is expected to make a fine recovery".

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. Here's Tony Berry's list.

The Other Celia – Theodore Sturgeon
New Rose Hotel – William Gibson
Roog – Philip K Dick
Remembering Siri – Dan Simmons
Vintage Season – C L Moore
Schrodinger's Plague – Greg Bear
The Signaller – Keith Roberts
The Lady Who Sailed *The Soul* – Cordwainer Smith
The Ugly Chickens – Howard Waldrop
The Star – Arthur C Clarke

Here's Wendell Wagner's list:

Isaac Asimov "The Last Question"
J. G. Ballard "The Subliminal Man"
Alfred Bester "The Men Who Murdered Mohammed"
F. M. Busby "If This is Winnetka, You Must Be Judy"
A. J. Deutsch "A Subway Named Mobius"
Philip K. Dick "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale"
George Alec Effinger "The Aliens Who Knew, I Mean, Everything"
Harlan Ellison "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream"
Philip Jose Farmer "Towards the Beloved City"
Charles Harness "The New Reality"
Robert Heinlein "All You Zombies"
Norman Kagan "The Mathenauts"
Daniel Keyes "Flowers for Algernon"
C. M. Kornbluth "The Little Black Bag"
David I. Masson "Traveler's Rest"
Lewis Padgett "Mimsy Were the Borogoves"
Robert Sheckley "Street of Dreams, Feet of Clay"
T. L. Sherred "E for Effort"
Howard Waldrop "The Ugly Chickens"
Roger Zelazny "A Rose for Ecclesiastes"