

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 29 Chair-Carol Morton.

**The Annual General Meeting:
7.15pm for 7.30pm on Friday 8th
January 1999, * in the Lichfield Lounge,
2nd floor of the Britannia Hotel, New Street,
(entrance in Union Passageway).**

If time allows (and enough material has been donated, hint!) the AGM will be followed by an Auction in aid of Group funds, which will be conducted in his usual inimitable fashion by Rog Peyton. Donations of books and any other material you feel might be of interest will be greatly appreciated - simply bring them along on the night. (Here's your opportunity to get rid of those unwanted Christmas presents.)

*(*VB: the second Friday of the month.)*

Forthcoming Meetings:

12th February 1999 - to be announced

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).

The Chairman's Year

By Tony Morton

It's been a long two year stint as Chairman. The move to the second Friday seems to be working well, as does our 'new home' at the Britannia.

Guest-wise we've had a good year, with talk from across the genre. 'Hard' science from Stephen Baxter, fantasy from Rob Holdstock, the humour of Tom Holt as well as Graham Joyce, Michael Marshall Smith, Pat Cadigan and Peter Hamilton, with 'media' coverage by David Hardy on the art side and Anne Gay and Stan Nicholls presenting the publishing side. An extra special meeting in November brought the Brum Group and Novacon together with a great talk from Brian Aldiss, despite his (obvious) illness – proving (again) his sheer professionalism.

We had some changes mid year with Martin Tudor standing down as Newsletter Editor after many successful years, only to find a new talent as Yvonne Rowse took up this challenge. (She's since gone mad in the fanzine stakes as well, with FOUR Barmaids – all well worth a read). A special thank you to her for taking this on and to the rest of the Committee for doing their bit – and putting up with me!

Seeking re-election for '98 I stated that I hoped to sort out the 'Sarah problem'. I admit to not having done so. Talking with the Courts and others (who have been through the same process) led me to believe I had little hope of getting anywhere in gaining any money. 'Sending in the bailiffs', though appealing, I ruled out after someone passed on that all she had to do was claim all the stuff belonged to her partner, and we couldn't therefore claim! Not a good prospect – and expensive to do! Hence, the judgement against her still stands. Your (members) views are sought...

I've had two interesting – and diverse, years as Chairman; but due to the mounting pressures in my 'public' life I have decided not to stand for the coming year. I wish continuing success to the new incumbent – and good luck. Don't forget to put your name forward for a Committee post to keep the ol' BSGF going.

BSGF: Committee Posts

As we go to press the following posts have candidates.

Treasurer – Alan Woodford stands for re-election unopposed.

Newsletter editor – Yvonne Rowse stands for re-election unopposed.

We are still looking for volunteers for the posts of Group Chairman,

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Secretary, Publicity Officer and two ordinary committee members. To remain viable we need at least one volunteer. If you are interested please contact Alan Woodford at the e-mail address on the cover. We can take nominations from the floor at the AGM.

Whether you want to stand for a committee post or not please make a special effort to attend the AGM. This is your chance to discuss the way the Brum Group is run.

BSFG Committee Posts

By Bernie Evans

This is a brief description of the duties of the committee posts.

CHAIRMAN: Will chair and keep order at all meetings, and will also hold regular committee meetings (at least one committee meeting per quarter). Will contact speakers, arrange accommodation where necessary and ensure they get to the meeting on time.

SECRETARY: Should be able to type, attend all committee meetings and produce Minutes of these to be sent to all Committee Members. Likewise the A.G.M. or other Group meetings. May also be asked to write to prospective speakers, etc.

TREASURER: If you don't know what a treasurer does, don't bother to apply!

NEWSLETTER EDITOR: Has to produce the newsletter every month. Access to a computer and desktop publishing software and/or a word processor is an advantage, but not a necessity, a typewriter and a pair of scissors will suffice. The ability to type AND meet a monthly deadline ARE a necessity, as is the ability to drag contributions out of people, ditto artwork. A knowledge of design/layout is also an advantage.

PUBLICITY OFFICER: Will produce A4 posters, A5 flyers, and so on for meetings, and arrange for them to be displayed in local shops, libraries, and as many other outlets as possible. Will also produce general publicity for the Group, and contact radio and tv if necessary. Enthusiasm and the ability to produce new IDEAS are an important factor.

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Forthcoming Events

8 JANUARY 1999: BSFG AGM at the Britannia.

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.

12 February 1999: Meeting at the Britannia. Further details to be announced.

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.

28-30 May: SECCON, in Stevenage. GoH Stephen Baxter. Attending £23 until May 1st 1999. Cheques payable to 'Seccon' should be sent with name and contact details to Seccon, c/o 92 Lichfield Road, Cambridge, CB1 3TR.

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

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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.

News

By Yvonne Rowse

Some of you may have heard that Ray Gibberd from Andromeda was seriously ill before Christmas. He was taken into hospital and operated on for a brain tumour. He was released from hospital and will be undergoing radiotherapy after the holiday period. He will be away from work for some time. Anybody wishing to send cards or well-wishes can send them c/o Andromeda.

Vijay Bowen is the US winner of TAFF after one round and will be attending Reconvene, the 1999 Eastercon from 2-5 April at the Adelphi in Liverpool. The results are as follows:

	Bowen	Prince	HoF	no pref
US	47	12	3	10
UK	8	3	2	6
Total	55	15	5	16

Congratulations to Vijay and commiserations to Sarah Prince.

Book Reviews

FACTORING HUMANITY by Robert J. Sawyer, Voyager, £5.99 paperback, 348 pages
Reviewed by Mark Bailey

After the extrapolation of some of the issues of the O. J. Simpson trial to a different level of alienness in *ILLEGAL ALIEN*, Robert Sawyer has turned his attention to a different aspect of alienness - that of what makes someone or something human.

Heather Davies and her husband Kyle are both working on a different aspects of alienness at the University of Toronto in 2017. Heather is a psychologist working on the deciphering of alien data from Alpha

Centauri which has been arriving for ten years and has so far proved to be indecipherable beyond the first 11 pages. Kyle is working on the development of both quantum computers and artificial intelligence. They are alien at the moment from each other as their marriage is under strain from the suicide of one daughter and the accusations of abuse of their other daughter.

The novel then follows Heather's attempts to both decipher the messages and establish what the truth is behind her daughter Rebecca's accusations – two issues that do become convergent by the end of the novel.

As somebody who is interested in Mathematics, I found the aspects of this novel which had to do with the nature of multidimensional space and how it can be perceived quite fascinating and it almost gets into Greg Egan territory with a semi-intelligent AI Cheetah which starts to tell quite decent jokes by half-way through the book. My only substantive problem with the book is with the abuse aspect which is set up quite prominently at the beginning but is resolved rather too neatly by the end.

Overall, I would recommend the book if you like psychologically oriented Science Fiction and a new idea to get your head around every few thousand words. However, I do wish that Voyager would put some different review quotes on the back of Robert Sawyer's books. I agree with the one from F&SF about his combining Golden Age fun and adventure with a modern sensibility but I do think that using the Montreal Gazette calling him "Canada's answer to Michael Crichton" is a bit much.

LEGACIES by **Alison Sinclair**, Millennium, pb, 419pp, £6.99

Reviewed by Yvonne Rowse

Star Rating ***&*/2

I snatched this off the pile at Novacon, despite the uninspiring cover, because it was billed as SF. I struggled with it at first. 'Three star,' I thought. Half way through I'd upped it to four stars. By the end I'd added another half star and am toying with making it five. It's a very good book.

Sixty six (Burdanian) years ago three ships of Explorers left Burdania. The drive of the ships was known to be dangerous but in the scramble to leave before they were stopped the Explorers started the drive of all three ships at once. As they sped from their home system they captured a fleeting image of their planet in flames. The Explorers settle on Taridwyn, the hot, damp planet of a red star already inhabited by the Kinder'el'ein.

The book alternates chapters set on Taridwyn where the descendants of the Explorers endlessly debate returning to Burdania to assuage their guilt and chapters set on Burdania after the return of five colonists.

This book has it all; there's a technologically advanced society, a post holocaust society, fascinating empathic aliens and characters. Yes, real fleshed-out characters with understandable motivations which lead inevitably to their complex reactions. There's Lian who, as a curious child, climbed onto the roof of the debating chamber, fell through and suffered extensive brain damage. Lian is the central character, his abilities and worth caused directly by his disabilities. Thovalt, his cousin, is brilliant, erratic, as fluent with words as Lian is stumbling, Daisainia, the young leader of the Burdanians attempting to understand the technology scattered through the ruins, is strong, vulnerable, self-willed, suffering under a heavy burden of guilt and responsibility. Alystra, the co-ordinator of the concensus for the small party of explorers is judgmental, arrogant, able to lose the thread of right-doing in the theory of what is right. On a number of occasions I itched to slap Thovalt, shake Alystra, soothe Daisainia, give Lian his eloquence back.

The non-human aliens are a quiet presence in the book. I found they captured my imagination. Again, I felt that they weren't the simplistic cartoons often found masquerading as aliens. They bond as groups of three, one male, one female and one neuter (genetically either male or female) empath. The bond forms without conscious decision and is absolute. Without the bond there is no fertility. The aliens' empathy with all living things and with their ancestors keep them largely unchanging. They are a calm, though not emotionless, backdrop to the human turmoil.

Because the author does not lob infodumps at the reader, but weaves the strands of information and story together in a coherent fabric, the beginning of the book *is* a bit of a struggle but it is well worth the effort. The writing is lucid, fluent, in places beautiful. There is complexity in the book without needless convolution, for example, half way through the book the author slips in the information that Taridwyn, the name of the planet of settlement, means exile, outcast in the language of Burdania. The outlook of a whole society is revealed lightly with a couple of phrases.

The events in this book began in conflict and end in hope. There is no neat wrapping up. This feels like real life, full of hard decisions with no right answers, full of pain and dirt and death and illuminating moments of human courage.

FAMILY TREE by Sheri S Tepper, Voyager, pb, 480pp, £6.99

Reviewed by Yvonne Rowse

Star rating: *** & */2

This is a weird and wonderful book. I really enjoyed it.

This is a dissatisfying book. It could have been so much better.

Hmm. I'm in two minds about this book. I like Tepper for all the reasons that most people find her difficult. I like her feminism, I like her passion for ecological causes, and I even have an odd twisted affection for her occasional stridency. This isn't a particularly strident book. There are dangerous, emotionally crippled men in it but most of the main male characters are new men. Abilene McCord, in particular, is definitely the sort of guy you'd want around in a crisis.

This is another book with alternating chapters; in this case the chapters are divided between the immediate future and the far future. In the immediate future Dora Henry is investigating the murders of geneticists working to develop intelligence in other species, struggling to disentangle herself from her strange and unpleasant husband, and experiencing with wonder the emerging of a seemingly intelligent forest. In the far future a band of travellers set out on a quest to save their world.

It is a marvellously easy book to read. It is a book full of wonder, a cross between SF and fairy story. So what is my problem with it? Perhaps the neatness of it all. If Legacies ended in incoherent hope and the feeling that the story was continuing off page, this ends neatly wrapped and tied with green satin ribbon, nowhere further to go. As I read it I felt completely absorbed but at the end I had a real 'is that it then?' feeling. Someone suggested it was a book that had been sent to the publishers before it had been properly edited. I think that may be right, that there is a great book here hiding under the irritations and inconsistencies of a second draft. Despite this, Family Tree is a good book, well worth reading.

Colophon

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