

March 1999

Issue 330

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-Yvonne Rowse, Secretary-Martin Tudor, Treasurer-Alan Woodford, Publicity Officer-, William McCabe, Ordinary Member-Anne Woodford, Newsletter Editor-Yvonne Rowse, Novacon 29 Chair-Carol Morton, Novacon 30 Chair-Tony Berry.

DAVID SUTTON

(co-editor of the Dark Terrors anthologies), Chris Morgan, and Rog Peyton in discussion on

Friday 12th March 1999, *

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:

9 April – Simon Ings.

14 May – Simon Taylor (publisher)

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).

David Sutton

David Sutton has been writing and editing in the fantasy and horror genre for nearly a generation. In recognition of this devotion and achievement in the field, he was honoured with his tenth British Fantasy Award in 1994. As well as editing his own small press publications and extensive work for the British Fantasy Society during the 1970s, he has been involved in numerous other publications, including the World Fantasy Award-winning *Fantasy Tales*. More recently, he has edited and produced *Voices from Shadow*, a non-fiction anthology celebrating the 20th anniversary of his literary review magazine *Shadow*. He has written four novels and with Stephen Jones has edited *Dark Terrors 1, 2, 3 & 4*, the Gollancz Books of Horror.

Signing Sessions

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

20th March, at noon **Tom Holt** will be signing *Only Human* (hbk) and *Wish You Were Here* (pbk). **Eric Brown** will be signing *Penumbra* (pbk).

Forthcoming Events

12 MARCH 1999: DAVID SUTTON, Chris Morgan and Rog Peyton in a panel discussion of fantasy, horror, anthologies, editing, publishing and anything else people want to ask about. From 7.45pm in the Lichfield Lounge, 2nd floor of the Britannia Hotel, New Street, Birmingham, (entrance in Union Passageway).

27-28 March 1999: MEMORABILIA. Europe's largest sf, film, cult tv, pop & comic collector's fair. The NEC, Birmingham. Organised by Made In Heaven, contact the NEC Box Office for details on 0121-767-4525.

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.

9 APRIL 1999: SIMON INGS will address the BSG following the publication of his book, *HEADLONG* by Voyager (£5.99). From

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7.45pm in the Lichfield Lounge, 2nd floor of the Britannia Hotel, New Street, Birmingham, (entrance in Union Passageway).

14 May: SIMON TAYLOR (publisher) will address the BSFG. From 7.45pm in the Lichfield Lounge, 2nd floor of the Britannia Hotel, New Street, Birmingham, (entrance in Union Passageway).

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.

25-27 June: Poets and Small Press con, Barlow Theatre, Langley, Birmingham. With Steve Sneyd talking on sf poetry. £4 advance reg to Geoff Stevens, 25 Griffiths Road, West Bromwich, B71 2EH.

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.

5-7 NOVEMBER 1998: NOVA CON 29, at the Britannia Hotel, New Street, Birmingham. Guest of Honour Ian Stewart. Attending membership costs £28.00 until Easter. Contact: Carol Morton, 14 Park Street, Lye, Stourbridge, DY9 8SS.

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.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.

Book Reviews

THE FORGE OF GOD by Greg Bear; Vista Books, pb, 474 pages, £6.99, Star rating ****
Reviewed by Tony Berry.

This novel was originally published in 1987, is set in 1996, and deals with the end of the world. Glad to see it didn't happen. Maybe next year... Anyway, it starts with the moon of Europa disappearing, then some geologists in Death Valley discover a buried spacecraft with a dying alien creature beside it. The creature has some bad news for humanity: a fleet of machine intelligences intends to destroy the Earth and use its raw materials to build more of themselves. The president of the US promptly flips his lid, declares the approaching menace is sent by God to judge us, and waits for the end. Meanwhile in Australia, another ship is found, with some alien robots who tell us that they are here to give us knowledge, and everything is going to be peace and plenty. So what's going on? A team of experts is assembled to try to find out the truth, and find out they do, much to the depression of all concerned.

The book is relentlessly downbeat, but no less enjoyable for that. The story is told from the points of view of a number of characters, all equally important, and all well drawn. The momentum builds nicely as diverse pieces of the puzzle begin to fall into place, further revelations occur, and the scientists working on the case come to realise that it's all over for Humanity. You might think I've given away the plot here, but the outcome is made pretty clear early in the novel, and most of the story concerns how people deal with it. There's a lot going on (in fact at least one sub-plot looks like padding) but Bear knows what he's talking about and writes very descriptively. Besides, it's not *all* doom and gloom, just most of it. Indeed, it would have ruined the whole thing if the Earth had been miraculously saved at the last minute, in the best tradition of Star Trek. The cavalry, in the shape of another alien race, does arrive, but what they have to say is cold comfort. I wasn't entirely happy with the ending, but this is a minor criticism of a good book. It even leaves room for a sequel.

NOIR by K. W. Jeter, Millennium, £6.99 paperback, 388 pages
Reviewed by Mark Bailey

K. W. Jeter has had an odd circular career from being an acolyte of Philip K. Dick through producing Science Fiction novels such as *Farewell Horizontal* (a nice coming-of-age novel) and *Dr. Adder* then a shift to Horror and then media tie-ins for such series as *Alien Nation* and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* onto (most recently) Philip K. Dick follow-ons/homages. *Noir* doesn't exactly fit into the latter category although some of the themes examined seem very Dickian. Instead it is a thriller set in Los Angeles in a near-future world where the dead aren't dead until they pay their debts off.

The main protagonists are Harrisch (the "bad" guy who is a senior executive for a company called DynaZauber) and McNihil (the "good" guy who is hired by Harrisch and is a sort of private investigator who had worked for the Collection Agency which exists to enforce intellectual property rights by executing IPR pirates - am I the only person who has images of *Do Androids Dream* and *Bladerunner* flashing at them here) who are both seemingly looking into the death of Travelt, a corporate flunky at DynaZauber who was a regular visitor to a red-light district called "The Wedge". The death of Travelt isn't their primary concern which instead is one of the outcomes of it which is their search for his prowler which Harrisch believes to have copies of the memories of Travelt and hence DynaZauber corporate secrets; what exactly a prowler is never made entirely clear but it seems to be a personality attachment/alter-ego with some physical form.

On the way through this search, religion becomes a main theme in the story via two main forms; there are stigmata which are passed on by fungal viruses a la sexually transmitted diseases and there is communication with the dead who live outside Los Angeles. This idea of communicating with the dead or having characters who are dead seems to be very popular at the moment which I suspect is a millennialist thing.

Ultimately *NOIR* is more science fiction than a detective story because the denouement come out of nowhere. Overall, I would say that it is a fair read but it is heavy going and quite slow in places with style sometimes totally outweighing substance on a scale of 1 to 10, I would probably give it 4.5.

BLUEHEART by Alison Sinclair, Millennium, 348pp, hbk, £6.99

Reviewed by Michael Jones

Star Rating ****

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.

[What about the cover though. So far Sinclair's books have had wishy washy blue (this one), lilac (Legacies) and green (Cavalcade). Perhaps wishywashy pink for the next one? It seems a shame to me that such spectacularly good books don't get more imaginative covers. – Ed.]

THE FOREVER WAR by Joe Haldeman, Millennium, pbk, 254pp,
£6.99, Star Rating *** */2.
Reviewed by Yvonne Rowse

This is the first of Millennium's SF Masterworks series. The books to be published, billed as 'the greatest SF ever written' have been chosen with the help of today's leading SF writers and editors. It's always fascinating to see which books are picked. I would definitely have picked *The Stars My Destination* (*Tiger! Tiger!* in the UK) and *Babel 17*, but I'm not sure I would have chosen *I am Legend*, good though it is. I'd guess that *The Forever War* was Peter Hamilton's choice. 'A novel that's damn near perfect,' he writes. It is good.

The Forever War is *Starship Troopers* for the Vietnam generation. The soldiers are conscripted, trained under appalling and (it turns out) inappropriate conditions and sent in against the Taurans. The book sympathetically exposes the personalities and emotions of the soldiers and officers whilst at the same time detailing the army's, and indeed the world's, callous disregard for them. More soldiers are killed in training than in their first attack on the aliens and once released from the army there is really nowhere for the soldiers to go. The world has changed and finally, for all they hate it, the army is the only place that feels like home. The cosiness of *Starship Troopers* is not apparent in this novel although the same fascination with weaponry is. Relativity means that although the tour of duty may only be a few years centuries pass on Earth. The book starts in 1997 and finishes in 3143 with William Mandella there from beginning to end. Mandella is the point of view character. He begins in training, becomes a sergeant, a lieutenant and finally a major. As time progresses he becomes more and more of an anachronism, fighting for a world that has no place for him because he really has nowhere else to go.

I had never read this book before and was pleased to have the chance. I would recommend it but if someone wanted a recommendation for a sfinal antiwar book I think I'd suggest *Ender's Game* first.

Oh, and another iffy cover. Not nearly as bad as the cover to *I am Legend* but still, a pretty unimaginative space battle set in what looks to be pretty crowded space.

The 'Star Ratings' are:

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- * *Utter dross*
- ** *Not totally unbearable*
- *** *Worth risking it*
- **** *Pretty damn good*
- ***** *BUY IT!!*

Ramblings

The last meeting with Jack Cohen was well attended. Jack, as always, was very entertaining. We particularly liked the slide of Cohen the Barbarian (in his younger days). The new Chairorganism (Jack thinks if we're going to give up sexism we should stop being speciesist as well) dithered rather but vigorous arm waving from the back eventually drove her to declare a beer break, questions and finally to close the meeting. She promises to try harder next time.

No-one has responded to Dave Hardy's letter about overdue reviews. Any thoughts anyone?

Ned Brooks e-mailed me that Buck Coulson has died. I know no more than that at the moment.

Colophon

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