

April 1999

Issue 331

# 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.

# SIMON INGS

will address the BSFG on

**Friday 9th April 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:*

**14 May – Simon Taylor (publisher)**

**11<sup>th</sup> June – Ian Stewart**

**9<sup>th</sup> July – Robert Rankin**

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](mailto: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, Trimley, Worcs, DY12 1NP (or by e-mail to [yvonne@hallsfarm.softnet.co.uk](mailto:yvonne@hallsfarm.softnet.co.uk)).

## Simon Ings

While testing the patience of many long-suffering employers – from a glass factory in Bradford to *Vogue* – Simon Ings has written three sf novels (including the much praised *Hothead*), two short films and a jazz libretto, all around the theme of sensory gain and loss. He writes regularly for *New Scientist*, and has recently written a glowing review of the colour blue for *The World of Interiors*.

His most recent novel, *Headlong*, was published as a paperback original on February 15<sup>th</sup>. It is reviewed later in the newsletter.

## Forthcoming Events

**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 BSFG following the publication of his book, **HEADLONG** by Voyager (£5.99). From 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 1<sup>st</sup> 1999. Cheques payable to 'Seccon' should be sent with name and contact details to Seccon, c/o 92 Lichfield Road, Cambridge, CB1 3TR.

**11 June 1999: IAN STEWART** will address the BSFG. From 7.45pm in the Lichfield Lounge, 2nd floor of the Britannia Hotel, New Street, Birmingham, (entrance in Union Passageway).

**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

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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.

**17-19 September 1999: FantasyCon XXIII**, at The Britannia Hotel, New Street, Birmingham GoHs: Robert Rankin, Louise Cooper, Graham Masterton, Mike Tucker + others TBA; Art Show; Dealer Room; talks; signings; launches; Banquet; numerous attending professional writers, editors, publishers, artists etc. Contact: SAE to: FantasyCon XXIII, 46 Oxford Road, Acocks Green, Birmingham, B27 6DT  
<http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/6859/fconxx3.htm>

**5-7 NOVEMBER 1999: NOVACON 29**, at the Britannia Hotel, New Street, Birmingham. Guest of Honour Ian Stewart. Attending membership costs £28.00 until Easter, rising to £32.00 on 11<sup>th</sup> April, then £35.00 on the door. 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 [vyvonne@hallsfarm.softnet.co.uk](mailto:vyvonne@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.*

**Jophan Report #120**

**By Martin Tudor**

The hottest news this month has got to be the fact that there was an attempted break-in at the home of ex-BSFG Chairman Tony (and current Novacon Chair Carol) Morton's house the other week. Fortunately the would-be intruder was disturbed before he could gain entry. However, given the fact that Tony is now Cllr Morton on Dudley town council could we be witnessing the beginning of yet another political scandal - Dudleygate? Watch this space!



Local filmmakers, Big Shoe, premiere their debut feature TOLEDO HOOD as part of 2Electropolis” at the mac on Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> April. Set amidst run down backstreets and populated with a variety of oddballs that include a junkie, a prostitute, a mad scientist, mutant gangsters and a pair of female Russian cosmonauts on a secret space mission to save the city, it’s described as a cocktail of Lynch, Kafka and Brothers Grimm! The film shares the night with music from electronic duo Magnetophone, and an acoustic set from Paneeni. Call 0121 440 3838 for further information.

Still in Birmingham the Ikon Gallery is hosting ESP a “mind-broadening” exhibition investigating the notion that there’s more to life than meets the eye. “It explores the ways in which the paranormal is investigated in our culture – taking a look at how children are often seen as receivers of special powers – and how mythologies of the paranormal, such as the fight between good and evil, are created through television, films and storytelling.” The exhibition will feature a Brian Catling/Tony Grisoni work entitled Vanished!, and Susan Hiller’s intriguing installation Wild Talents and photographs by Wendy MCMurdo. The ESP exhibition will run from 15<sup>th</sup> April until 13<sup>th</sup> June, for further details call 0121 248 0708.

RED DWARF fans will be delighted to hear that Chris Barrie (Rimmer) and Norman Lovett (Holly) will be appearing at the mac on 17<sup>th</sup> May for an evening of comic mayhem. Call 0121 440 3838 for further information.

Further afield there comes news from Las Vegas that Hollywood’s obsession with the small screen continues with producer Todd Moyer and tv creator Glen Larson are putting together a \$40 million independent feature production of the “Battlestar Galactica.”

The feature film is scheduled to start shooting in September in Luxembourg - no studio is attached yet to distribute, but Moyer expects that one will step up. His production of “Wing Commander” was made as an independent and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox ultimately acquired the project. Moyer and Larson, who created the original “Battlestar,” will jointly produce the “Battlestar” feature. Mike Finch, who penned several drafts on the “Wing Commander” script, will write the screenplay. Moyer and Larson are also in discussions with Universal Merchandising to license the feature’s characters.

The film, which starts where the series left off, will explore Commander Cain’s mission to find the lost Battlestar Galactica and the tribe of

humans that he thinks may have reached Earth during pre-historic times aboard the first great Battlestar, the Atlantis.

The tv series saw only a limited run in the US but it developed a cult following on the Sci-Fi Channel and spawned a number of sf novels and comic books. On the Internet, at least 2,800 Web sites are dedicated to the show.

"I'm very excited to be working with Glen Larson, one of the world's most successful producers," Moyer said. " 'Battlestar Galactica' has an illustrious history, a huge fan base and enormous potential to be a successful motion picture." Larson said he had been approached several times to make a feature about the series but chose Moyer as a partner because he was impressed by the visual effects of "Wing Commander." "I have great confidence not only in Todd's abilities as a producer but also in his ability to carry on the unique character of the franchise," Larson said. Moyer plans to create the visual effects with his own shop, No Prisoners 3DFX. His team of f/x experts includes visual effects supervisor Chris Brown, Erik Strauss and several other artists who worked on "Wing Commander."

Moyer, a former producer for Dark Horse Entertainment, has produced or co-produced such films as "Barb Wire" and "Timecop." He is currently in development with "Jason and the Argonauts" for DreamWorks and "A Scanner Darkly" (no, please no! Not Pam Anderson in a PKD film!!) for Jersey Films and Universal.

Larson, one of tv's most prolific producers, has created such shows as "The Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew Mysteries," "Knight Rider," "Quincy," "Magnum, P.I.," "McCloud" and "The Six Million Dollar Man."

Closer to home you should still have a few days left to catch Richard O'Brien's The New Rocky Horror Show at The Rep in Birmingham. Running from Monday 5th to Saturday 10th April and once again featuring Jason Donovan as Frank N Further, tickets are available from the Box Office on 0121 236 4455.

You've also got just a few days left to join Novacon 29, the BSFG's own sf convention, at the low rate of £28.00 - from 11th April it rises to £32.00 (rising again to £35.00 on the door). Novacon 29 will run from 5-7th November at the Britannia Hotel, New Street, Birmingham and features Ian Stewart as Guest of Honour.

## *The Newsletter of the Birmingham Science Fiction Group*

Still in Birmingham the BSFG's latest Publicity Officer, William McCabe, has been pounding the streets of the city centre in an valiant effort to drum up new members, William reports:

"Distributed first copies of poster advertising next two meetings today.

Results as follows:

W H Smith, Union Street - Maggie Carr is apparently a fan. She took one copy and said she'd photocopy it and put them out on the counter.

Waterstones - Mark Phillips is responsible for that department. He took 3 copies and will put them up. Sounded enthusiastic.

Dillons - Tried the till next to the SF section. Apparently Darren Richards is the person to deal with but he wasn't in. The guy at the till said he'd pass the notice on.

Forbidden Planet & Nostalgia took one copy each - said they'd put it up (regularly you'd just hand this to the person on the till).

Only one shop wouldn't take the notice. They said that the person to see (Rog Peyton) wasn't in this week - doing the catalogue - and I'd have to see him about it."

### **Book Reviews**

**COSM** by Gregory Benford; Orbit, pb, 372 pages, £6.99

Star Rating \*\*\*\*\*

Reviewed by Michael Jones

Benford is a University professor and a physicist of some repute: he is therefore well qualified to write science fiction with the emphasis on the science. In my experience the more science and the less fiction he puts in the better his work becomes. This book is the kind of thing he does best, real scientists dealing with a phenomenon which is a cutting-edge extrapolation of the boundaries of known science.

The story begins with an experiment in high-energy particle physics intended to reproduce the conditions which existed a millionth of a second after the Big Bang with which the universe is supposed to have begun. Unexpectedly, this experiment results in the creation of a new universe linked to this one by a wormhole, our end of which takes the form of a football-sized globe of exotic matter - the 'Cosm' of the title. The remainder of the book tells of the researchers involved trying to understand what they have got hold of and using it as a window through which to study cosmic evolution.



This audacious idea has a firm basis in the reality of current thinking in the field of cosmology, and Benford describes in an afterword how he has taken this as his starting point. For me, however, the strength of the book lies not merely in the scientific invention, but also in his description (which is obviously one hundred percent authentic) of the lifestyle and activities of research scientists. It would be possible to ignore the *Cosm* and still have a well-written and absorbing book about the real world of scientists at work. I recommend it highly.

**THE NAVIGATOR KINGS BOOK 1: THE ROOF OF VOYAGING**

Orbit, pb, £6.99, 389pp,

Star Rating: \*\*\*

**THE NAVIGATOR KINGS BOOK 2: THE PRINCELY FLOWER**

Orbit, pb, £6.99, 365pp, Star Rating: \*\*

**THE NAVIGATOR KINGS BOOK 3: LAND-OF-MISTS**

Orbit, pb, £6.99, 380pp, Star Rating: \*\*\*

by Garry Kilworth

Reviewed by Martin Tudor.

I'm afraid these three books seriously disappointed me - not that they weren't enjoyable reading - they were. But there was something about them I couldn't get to grips with... To be fair, Kilworth anticipates this and in his Author's Note he mentions that "this particular set of tales, within these pages, alters a piece of known geography" - yeah suddenly the British Isles (and its climate!) have switched places with New Zealand! Sorry, I had trouble with that. (Especially as New Zealand appears under another name anyway!)

But leaving that aside these are good stories dealing, for the most part, with the pantheon, myths, legends and deeds of the incredible Polynesian peoples.

Briefly, Seumas is a pre-medieval Celtic/Scottish warrior who finds himself castaway on a Polynesian island, along with the woman he's been chasing, Dorcha, and the story in some ways concerns the conflict between the world views of the Polynesians and the Europeans - with the Polynesians being the more advanced here.

I don't know. The more I try to explain this the dafter it sounds. I think it is a tribute to the story-telling skills of Kilworth that these books work at

all. I think they are overly-ambitious and at times pretentious, but they tell a number of interesting stories about a fascinating people.

What I don't understand is why we had to have the Celtic connection? Without it, Kilworth could've told an equally interesting tale and it wouldn't have jarred as much. Why couldn't the Polynesians have simply invaded New Zealand with the help of a castaway Mario?

These books are *too* interesting and well-written to dismiss out of hand, but I cannot recommend them without the above reservations.

**PORTS OF CALL** by Jack Vance, Voyager, 300pages, pb, £6.99

Star Rating \*\*\*

Reviewed by Michael Jones

For this book Vance returns us once more to the Gaeen Reach, a far-flung region of the galaxy where countless disparate human civilisations have come into being as human exploration has impinged on native cultures. The basic story is the familiar Vance theme of a young man thrown on his own resources to succeed or fail as best he may: in this case Myron Tany whose dreams of space first lead him to take a degree in space studies. Having graduated, he sets out on a voyage of exploration as captain of his wealthy great-aunt's yacht, but falls out with her and finds himself marooned on a distant world where he is fortunate to find a berth on the Glicca, a cargo tramp. The rest of the book is devoted to the travels of the Glicca from planet to planet (hence the title) and the various adventure which befall Myron and the other crew members.

This all takes place against the kind of exotic background Vance does so well – strange people, strange flora and fauna, strange foods – all presented in a matter-of-fact way whereby a mere phrase or two conjures a better picture than lesser writers can convey in half a page of description. It is hard to believe that Vance is now over eighty years old, for his talent seems undiminished and his imagination as fertile as ever. I had a problem with this book at first in that it finishes very abruptly and rather pointlessly. Then I realised that it is almost certainly going to become one of those series which so typify Vance's previous work. Myron hopes for eventual revenge on the person responsible for his stranding and has met, and been parted from, a girl and these are two conspicuous plot elements which are left unfinished, to be resolved in



later volumes. Because of this I can only give it three stars as a stand-alone book, although in the context of a series it may well deserve better.

**DRAGON'S WINTER** by Elizabeth A. Lynn, Pan, pb, 442pp, £6.99.

Star Rating: \*\*\*

Reviewed by Martin Tudor.

This is an intelligent and well-written fantasy, as you should expect from two-time winner of the World Fantasy Award. The twin sons of Kojiro Atani, the Dragon Lord of Ippa, are very different. Karadur has inherited his father's power of changing from human to dragon form, while the younger son, Tenjiro, becomes a sorcerer.

Tenjiro is bitterly resentful that he hasn't inherited his father's power and devises a cunning way to prevent his brother using his magic and then flees into the ice - the vast, nameless territory lying north of Dragon's Keep. There he builds the Black Citadel and from its safety sends out his malignant creatures to harass the people of his brother's realm.

As I've said this is an adult, well-written and intelligent fantasy and I've only one complaint - it features a number of shape-changers all of them retaining their clothes when they revert to human form - how? No explanation is given.

**FRENZETTA** by Richard Calder, Orbit, £5.99, pbk, 268 pages

Star rating \*\*

Reviewed by Yvonne Rowse

I've been struggling with this novel for months. I've tried. I've really tried. I've plodded through its turgid wordiness whenever I felt both strong and bored enough.

So what's wrong with the book? The blurb sounds relatively interesting.

'Technology from a past age litters the decaying streets, (sound familiar?) and the old world fragments (very familiar?). But only one thing matters to Duane Duarte: His love for Frenzetta. Yet theirs is a love that is doomed. For Duane is a reanimated corpse and for Frenzetta love means instant death. Their only choice is to set out on a journey to the one place where they can be together. And so begins a frenzied, bizarre and violent quest to find peace.'

The characters are unpleasant. Half way through the book I still didn't care if Duane and Frenzetta lived, died or got to have sex. Duane putrifies unless he gets to eat the brains of freshly murdered people. Yum yum. Unnecessarily icky I thought.

My main problem wasn't my dislike of the characters. Having recently read three Dark Terrors books I've come across plenty of distasteful characters who have been central to good stories. No. There are just too many words for not enough story.

Incidentally, in the end Duane's 'monstrous lead-filled hose pipe... sallie(s) forth from the folds of (his) coat' and, thank the lord, they got to do it and close the book. Ik!

**HEADLONG** by Simon Ings, Voyager, £5.99, 325 pages, pbk  
Star Rating \*\*\*\*\*  
Reviewed by Yvonne Rowse

I liked this book a lot (I'm glad to say!) It's a detective novel, an SF novel set in near future England. What happens to the privileged few of the future when they're made redundant? They don't just lose their company cars, mobile phones and fat pay-cheques. They lose the hardware and software plugged into their heads and suffer recurring bouts of Epistemic Appetite Imbalance, EAI.

The novel follows Christopher Yale as he emerges from the confusion of sensory deprivation of EAI. As Christopher makes sense of the world so do we. There are no huge info-dumps, just a slow subtle understanding of what the world is like.

He is picked up by the police to help with enquiries into his wife's death, finds some mysterious hypodermic syringes containing JEWEL in her flat and becomes embroiled in the confusion of the ethically compromised investigation.

The central story is well told, tightly plotted but what made the book for me were the glimpses of the world. I've had a soft spot for ruined Londons since reading *The Day of the Triffids*, I was amused by Leeds as capital city, loved the virtual office, and the vision of the enclave in Toronto where Christopher was raised horrified me. If you raise children

surrounded by heavily enforced safety but aware of the gathering poor what sort of world will you end up with? The world of *Headlong*, presumably, dangerous, opaque, isolating, where everyone is compromised and the good guys are still pretty grubby.

The imagery is wonderful. Unlike Frenzetta, the imagery here doesn't drown the story but illuminates it. Writing about the Toronto enclave with its climb-resistant trees and the frequent red signs nailed to the trees 'WARNING: Pebbles Can Choke Small Children':

'In Autumn, swarms of dead leaves blew by the houses bordering the wood, triggering porch lights. They flooded the wood with a cruel glare like the searchlights of an advancing army.' Sinister paranoia in two sentences.

Go out and buy this book. It's worth it.

*The 'Star Ratings' are:*

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

#### Colophon

*The contents of this issue are copyright 1999 the BSFG, on behalf of the contributors, to whom all rights revert on publication. Personal opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the committee or the membership of the BSFG. Text by Yvonne Rowse except where stated otherwise.*

*Many thanks to: MICHAEL JONES and MARTIN TUDOR for their book reviews; MARTIN for Jophan #120 and ANNE and ALAN WOODFORD for the labels and envelopes. The information about Simon Ings came from the Harper Collins press release. Particular thanks to MARTIN for copying, collating, stapling, stuffing envelopes and posting. These thanks are back dated over the last several issues because I forgot before. Mea culpa.*

*Photocopied on the Critical Wave photocopier. For information on Wave's competitive prices contact Martin Tudor at 24 Ravenshourne Grove, (off Clarkes Lane), Willenhall, West Midlands, WV13 1HX or e-mail on [empties@breathemail.net](mailto:empties@breathemail.net)*



# NOVACON 29 Membership Form

Date: 5th to 7th November 1999.

Venue: The Britannia Hotel, New Street, Birmingham.

Guest of Honour: Ian Stewart.

Attending membership costs £28.00, rising to £32.00 from 11th April 1999 and will cost £35.00 on the door. Postal registrations should be received by 30th October 1999, after this time please join on the door. Supporting membership costs £15.00 throughout. Cheques/Postal Orders should be made payable to "Novacon 29" and sent with your completed form(s) to:  
Carol Morton, 14 Park Street, Lye, Stourbridge, West Midlands, DY9 8SS.

## Membership

I enclose £ ..... for ..... membership(s) of Novacon 29

Name(s): ..... Phone No: .....

Address: .....

.....

.....

..... E-mail: .....

## Badge Name(s)

Please complete this section if you want a fannish name on your badge. We would prefer to use your real name for sending items through the post.

Name: ..... Badge Name: .....

Name: ..... Badge Name: .....

## Gophers

I am willing to volunteer as a gopher YES/NO  
(please delete as applicable)

I will arrive at the con (specify time and day) .....

I have experience in/with (please specify) .....

.....

## Book Room

Please reserve me ..... tables @ £15.00 each

## Art Show

Please reserve me ..... Art Board space in the Art Show

## Queries, Suggestions, Ideas, Requests etc.

We can only act on your ideas/problems if you tell us about them, so this is, what this section is for.  
(Please continue on a separate sheet of paper if needed.)