

**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.

**IAN STEWART****will address the BSFG on****Friday 11th June 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<sup>th</sup> July – Robert Rankin****13<sup>th</sup> August – 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](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, Trimpley, Worcs, DY12 1NP (or by e-mail to [yvonne@hallsfarm.softnet.co.uk](mailto:yvonne@hallsfarm.softnet.co.uk)). A diary of future BSFG events can be accessed at <http://www.bsfg.freesevers.com/index.html>

## Ian Stewart

Born in 1945, educated at Cambridge (BA in Mathematics) and Warwick (PhD), Ian Stewart is now a Professor of Mathematics at Warwick University, in addition to which he is Director of the Mathematics Awareness Centre at Warwick (MAC@W) and has held visiting positions in Germany, New Zealand, and the USA. An active member of SFWA (Science fiction and Fantasy Writers of America) for about 15 years, Ian has published 19 sf short stories in ANALOG, INTERZONE, and OMNI since 1979. A member of the Birmingham Science Fiction Group he has given a number of talks at sf conventions and Group meetings and is Guest of Honour at Novacon 29 this year (see Forthcoming Events for details). Best known for his popular science writing on mathematical themes in 1995 he was awarded the Royal Society's Michael Faraday Medal for furthering the public understanding of science and his book NATURE'S NUMBERS was shortlisted for the 1996 Rhone-Poulenc Prize for Science Books. He delivered the 1997 Royal Institution Christmas Lectures, televised by the BBC in the UK and NHK in Japan.

An active research mathematician with over 120 published papers, Ian has also had over 60 books published including FROM HERE TO INFINITY, NATURE'S NUMBERS; THE COLLAPSE OF CHAOS; DOES GOD PLAY DICE?; GAME, SET & MATH; ANOTHER FINE MATH YOU'VE GOT ME INTO... Earlier books include three mathematical comic books published in French, his most recent books are FIGMENTS OF REALITY, THE MAGICAL MAZE, and LIFE'S OTHER SECRET. Currently he is working on a sf book entitled WHEELERS with Jack Cohen. THE SCIENCE OF DISCWORLD, written with Terry Pratchett and Jack Cohen, is launched this week.

## Signing Sessions

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

**26 June, noon: Storm Constantine** will be signing her new hardcover SEA DRAGON HEIR (Gollancz, £16.99). Also available in trade paperback for £9.99.

**10 July, noon: Robert Rankin** signing SNUFF FICTION (Doubleday hardcover £16.99) and APOCALYPSO (Corgi pbk £5.99). **Simon Green**

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

signs his paperback DEATHSTALKER DESTINY (Millennium £6.99). *Apparently, so Rog tells me proudly, this is the book featuring Rog Peyton's and Dave Langford's grisly deaths - Ed.*

**Jim Burns** signs his large format paperback, TRANSLUMINAL; THE PAINTINGS OF JIM BURNS published by Paper Tiger (£14.99).

### Forthcoming Events

**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.

**9 July: ROBERT RANKIN** will address the BSFG. From 7.45pm in the Lichfield Lounge, 2nd floor of the Britannia Hotel, New Street, Birmingham, (entrance in Union Passageway).

**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.

**3-5 September 99: Festival of Fantastic Films**. Sacha's Hotel, Manchester. Details from 95 Meadowgate Road, Salford, Manchester, M7 3QP.

**10-12 September 99: Masque 7**. Costume Con. University of Wolverhampton. Reg £30 'til 1<sup>st</sup> August, then £35. Contact 130, Hampstead Hall Road, Handsworth Wood, Birmingham, B20 1JB.

**17-19 September 1999: FantasyCon XXIII**, at The Britannia Hotel, New Street, Birmingham, GoHs: Raymond Feist, 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 or view <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/6859/fconxx3.htm>



*The Newsletter of the Birmingham Science Fiction Group*

5-7 NOVEMBER 1998: NOVACON 29, at the Britannia Hotel, New Street, Birmingham. Guest of Honour Ian Stewart. Attending membership costs £32.00 until 30 October or £35.00 on the door. Contact: Carol Morton, 14 Park Street, Lye, Stourbridge, DY9 8SS or check out the web site at <http://www.cooky.demon.co.uk/n29/n29.html>

13-14 NOVEMBER 1999: MEMORABILIA Europe's largest sf, film, cult tv, pop and comic collectors' fair. Hall 17, NEC. Contact Made in Heaven on 01899 221622 or NEC Box Office on 0121 767 4555 for further details.

13-16 April 2000: Paragon, Eastercon at the Norbreck Hotel in Blackpool with guests Michaels Scott Rohan, Stephen Baxter, Lisanne Norman, and fan guests Claire Brialey and Mark Plummer. Membership currently £25 Attending, £15 Supporting, £12.50 Junior and £5 Child. Contact Steve Lawson, 379 Myrtle Road, Sheffield, S2 3HQ. Tel. 0114 281 1572. e-mail [steve.paragon@keepsake-web.co.uk](mailto:steve.paragon@keepsake-web.co.uk)

*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](mailto: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.*

**Jophan Report #122**  
**by Martin Tudor**

The Birmingham Waterstone's is planning a new look for November this year with a Coffee Shop, Travel Shop and a new area especially designed to hold author events. Meanwhile, their literary dinners continue with the next one, on the 17 June, featuring John Redwood and Bryan Forbes amongst the list of speakers. Call Hannah Cochrane or Chris Harding in the Marketing Department, 0121 633 4353, for further details.

At long last the new age of transport heralded years ago by Gerry Anderson is upon us with the first air test of The Skycar. Developed by

American Paul Moller, the car reputedly looks like something from a Batman movie, instead of wheels it has four large ducted fan thrusters. Running on petrol and with seats for four passengers it can take off and land vertically, jump-jet style, and has a top speed of 400mph. Moller hopes the Skycar will solve the world's traffic problems – instead of sitting nose-to-tail on grid-locked roads, commuters could soar above cities.

However, this solution is dependent on the development of advanced control systems, currently being examined in the USA, which would allow small aircraft to be flown by computer. Skycar travellers would not have to know how to fly themselves, but would place themselves in the hands of a computer from take off to landing (parachutes are provided). Moller, who runs an aviation company in Davis, California, hopes that mass production will bring the price down to around £37,000 – what a bargain!

Fans of the tacky Fan Fun Auctions of yore, will no doubt be delighted to learn that Archie McPhee and Co of Seattle are now on-line. So you can purchase a glowing wind-up, plastic, “Nunzilla, or that long-awaited tiny, gold-plated “Ark of the Covenant” (guaranteed unopenable, for reasons of safety as demonstrated in RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK), or even the pair of pink lawn flamingos (just \$15) you've been after, by connecting to <http://www.mcphee.com> and placing your order!

Dreaming in Smoke by Tricia Sullivan, published by Orion, has won the 1998 Arthur C Clarke Award, given annually by a panel of judges for an sf novel published in the previous year. The result was announced at a reception in the Science Museum, London on the evening of the 19 May. The award, consisting of £1,000 and a set of book-ends, was presented by David Pringle.

The shortlist consisted of: Dreaming in Smoke by Tricia Sullivan; Earth Made of Glass by John Barnes; Time on My Hands by Peter Delacorte; The Cassini Division by Ken MacLeod; The Extremes by Chris Priest; Cavalcade by Alison Sinclair. Tricia Sullivan, Chris Priest, Ken MacLeod and Alison Sinclair were present at the ceremony. The British Science Fiction Association also presented a special award to British sf magazine INTERZONE, which was collected by editor David Pringle.

The Science Museum is now a partner in the administration of the award, with the Science Fiction Foundation and the British Science Fiction Association. The award was established in 1986 by Sir Arthur C Clarke to encourage quality SF writing, and he remains in close touch

with it. The award administrator is Paul Kincaid.

On Thursday 1 July the Library Theatre, Solihull will be staging the Kingswood School's presentation of James and the Giant Peach. Call 0121 744 7883 for details.

PLOKTA, the Hugo nominated fanzine, report on their website that there is now a PLOKTA team for the SETI@home project. As you may have heard, a venture has been set up to use spare CPU cycles on home computers to analyse radio telescope data for signs of signals of artificial, extra-terrestrial origin. You can download a screensaver from SETI@home which will "do something marginally more useful than displaying flocks of flying toasters". The PLOKTA team felt this was a suitable project for PLOKTA, which is, after all, the Journal of Superfluous Technology, and they've set up Team PLOKTA with SETI@home. If you want to join the SETI@home project, or you're already busy processing, why not join Team PLOKTA and see how many units of data fandom can analyse.

You don't need a permanent Internet connection. The software just needs to connect for a few minutes when you've finished processing a data set, so that you can upload the results and download the next data set. However, the site is very busy (best try between 06.00-12.00) and you will need at least 32mb RAM for the Windows version.

Suzu McKee Charnas had two releases out last month from Tor Books. THE SLAVE AND THE FREE is a trade paperback omnibus of Walk to the End of the World (1974) and Motherlines (1978). THE CONQUEROR'S CHILD is a hardcover follow-up to Walk to the End of the World, Motherlines, and The Furies (1994).

Fifth Column are producing the first ever UK stage adaptation of a Philip K Dick novel in London this June. With eXistenz already out, The Matrix opening and three Dick stories currently in production in Hollywood (including one directed by Stephen Spielberg with Tom Cruise) interest in Dick's work and ideas has never been stronger. The adaptation of 'Flow My Tears, The Policeman Said', one of his mature works similar in theme to Blade Runner, is by Linda Hartinian, a friend of Dick's. It runs at the Oval House Theatre from 10-19 June 1999. Call 0171 582 7680 or check the Flow My Tears site for more info on <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/flowmytears>

Windows 98 may still dominate the software shelves in computer



stores, but it was joined recently by boxed software which could loosen Microsoft's stranglehold on the market. Windows is installed on 95% of the world's PCs, but its new challenger Gnome is being developed and distributed globally by more than 250 programmers supporting a free software movement.

Gnome is free, user-friendly and can look like a Windows or Mac desktop, giving a friendly mouse-driven Graphical User Interface (GUI). It runs from the Linux operating system and should appeal to consumers put off by Linux's requirement for plain text commands.

Both Gnome and Linux are free to download over the Internet, but the boxed versions, with manuals, CDs and tech support by companies such as Red Hat and SuSE have gone on sale at retail outlets for less than £50 - undercutting Windows prices and their licences allowing distribution across more than one machine.

Gnome is the free software movement's most serious challenge yet to Bill Gates' dominance of the desktop. It is led by a 26 year-old Mexican programmer, Miguel De Icaza.

"I'm only the Gnome co-ordinator," he told BBC News Online on a visit to the UK recently for a workshop and conference organised by netproject. At the release of Gnome 1.0 we had 250 people who could put changes back into the source code. This main team of developers has been assembled over the past 20 months and there are now 38 more since the 1.0 release in March."

Gnome stands for Gnu Network Object Model Environment. "It started off as a component model," says Miguel. "So you could write small modules to build bigger applications, but the GUI thing just took off."

There are other friendly front-ends to Linux, including the K Desktop Environment (KDE), but Gnome is quickly becoming the GUI of choice to run on top of Linux.

"I don't think KDE has a future at this point, it's not completely free yet and it's bound to a single programming language in Unix. Gnome from the very beginning has been accessible through any language. We are providing the GUI for all the languages and programmers can choose the language they like the most," says Miguel.

Gnome comes with some fully-featured applications such as a spreadsheet. A word processor is in the works, as is an e-mail program with a radically different approach to the current hierarchical structure for viewing mail.

Gnome and Linux can be installed on a PC alongside Windows as well as replacing it. Would-be users are advised to install it on a separate hard drive partition and configure their computer to have a dual-boot

option so they can choose between operating systems and try Gnome out.

Linux has made great strides among Internet and network professionals. It developed into a robust operating system to challenge Windows on main servers.

This is the result of the efforts of programmers around the world working, often in their spare time, to improve on the code first developed by the Finn, Linus Torvalds.

Miguel leans more towards the Free Software Foundation's views on this collaborative programming rather than that of the Open Source Initiative, whose chief spokesman Eric Raymond is virulently anti-Microsoft and campaigns for businesses to adopt open-source software as a cheaper and more reliable option than Microsoft's products.

The Free Software Foundation of Richard Stallman set out to develop an operating system, Gnu, whose source code would be open and which would be distributed so that it could be changed and improved on by anyone else.

Stallman explained this "copyleft", an addition to the copyright principle, at a packed lecture in London recently as part of a global tour of speaking engagements. The terms of the copyleft agreement or GNU General Public Licence mean those using the code cannot turn it into restricted proprietary software. "Every time a copy of the software is passed on these freedoms go with it. With copyleft we actually defend the freedom for every user," he said.

"We are doing this for the freedom issues, not for fighting a specific company," says Miguel of the Gnome project.

One business model for making money from free software is to provide support services for running the software. Tim O'Reilly runs a successful business selling computer manuals seen as the bibles of programmers using Open Source software.

Speaking to BBC News Online at the London International Book Fair, Tim O'Reilly said programs like Gnome could make the vital breakthrough in winning acceptance for Open Source from consumers. But really this had already been done, he said, with consumers now buying computers in some cases just to buy books from the Amazon Website, which runs on Open Source software.

"If you look at companies like Amazon and Yahoo, Yahoo uses the FreeBSD operating system, the Apache Web server and they do most of their programming using the free Perl language," he said.

"I like to remind people that the entire Internet infrastructure was developed by the Open Source community," he added, quoting the basic TCP/IP protocols, BIND which enables domain naming and SendMail, responsible for e-mail transports.



"People have focused so much on the commercial players, like Microsoft and Netscape, that they have overlooked this enormous change that has been driven at a grass roots level by individuals who are able to collaborate at a whole new level because of the power of the Internet."

O'Reilly sees Microsoft adapting to survive in the new climate: "Open Source will change the way Microsoft does business, it already has. But Microsoft is not going to go away. Open Source will create new players but Microsoft is big enough to be around for a long time to come."

(Many thanks to the PLOKTA News Network, BBC Online, WHAT'S ON, EXPRESS & STAR and the BFS news update for much of the above information.)

### Book Reviews

**GATE OF IVORY** By Robert Holdstock, Voyager (Harper Collins), £6.99 paperback, 348 pages. Rating \*\*\*\*  
Reviewed by Tony Morton

The latest in Holdstock's Mythago series. More a prequel investigating the role of son Christian Huxley in the "early years" of George Huxley's pursuit. Again a transfixing story of legend and myth within Ryhope Wood into which Chris(tian) is drawn.

An unexpected encounter leaves a young Chris astonished and confused. He later experiences another meeting, this to have consequences in his future. Immediately, his life changes as one stranger bewitches his mother, who in her despair kills herself. Chris witnesses this and blames himself.

Years pass and a grown Chris begins to understand his earlier encounters. Deeply concerned with events and their hold on him, he embarks on his own "quest" to find answers. As chance would have it, he is drawn into a tale of adventure involving Kylluk and his tasks. He also meets up with Guiwenneth, a figure from his earlier encounters.

Once again, Holdstock provides a vehicle for the reader to travel through his mythical landscape of Ryhope Wood. This time using elder son Christian to reveal a mixture of legends as he encounters many characters on his journey. Many varied and different characters. All well integrated

into the overall story as well as having their own tale to tell. This makes the overall (as usual) greater than the sum of its (many) parts as only Holdstock can do. His eye for detail, his humour and above all his research provide an insight into history and legend as only great writers can achieve. Chris's adventure proves ambitious and strange; with him most of the time appearing as a "side" character within the "greater" story of Kylhuk and involved in that struggle.

Another excellent story, well thought out and all the strands coming together to present a complete entity. Many unusual side-sub-plots attract as the story canters along; each dealt with before we go onto bigger things: Which is to Christians destiny – the Gate of Ivory or of Horn, of Truth or Lies. A must.

**BEFORE AND AFTER** By Matthew Thomas. Voyager (Harper Collins), £5.99 paperback. 425 pages. Rating \*  
Reviewed by Tony Morton

Ludicrous "End of the world" novel cashing in on the current humour clique. Thomas takes a dash of Holt, a smattering of Pratchett, stirs in Adams and produces an unconvincing parody of each.

Starting with an assumption that Nostradamus is immortal, alive today and teaching history, still possessing his ability to predict the future – and hence the end of it; Thomas through numerous metaphor takes the reader on a crash course to Armageddon and beyond. For, like all good personages, Thomas knows there **MUST** be an after.

Obviously aimed at the American market (where, thanks to the Disney theory, happy endings are "a must"/demanded), this British placed novel will possibly not do too well there. Us Brits, you see, are more pragmatic; seeing the world for the nasty thing it is, so many over here won't go for this story either.

Lacking the imagination of Pratchett, the knack of Holt and the downright wry wit of Adams leaves Thomas with the weak puns and throw away lines most likely thrown away from the former writers. A basically reasonable idea is submerged in more metaphors than you can shake a...well, you get the idea. It goes to show "an idea" in itself is not enough. To turn them into a (convincing) novel takes that magic "something". No, I don't know what it is, but wish I had it! Ideas isn't a

problem. I suspect Thomas has the same problem but overcame it this once. To his credit, the idea and its development, the way the story carries through do work well. It's the tedious metaphor and limp wit that causes its downfall. Nor does the "After" scenario as portrayed convince me. Probably my British pragmatism showing.

**THE RIVAN CODEX** by David & Leigh Eddings, illustrated by Geoff Taylor Voyager/HarperCollins, pb, 394pp, £6.99.

Star Rating: \* (or even worse than utter dross!)

Reviewed by Martin Tudor

Okay, confession time - I've read and enjoyed all of the Belgariad and the Malloreon books. I've always found them to be light-hearted and entertaining fantasy - pure escapism. A nice, undemanding read. Because of this I *bought* the above book when I saw it advertised in my book club magazine. Yes, I paid real money for it - as I have for all of the Eddings books I've read and until now I hadn't regretted a penny of it.

Now, however, I'm strongly tempted to contact Mr and Mrs Eddings and demand my money back.

THE RIVAN CODEX is nothing more than a rip-off. All the Eddings duo have done is thrown together the rough notes that formed the background of the two fantasy series, add a sketches from Geoff Taylor and sit back to rake in more cash.

This whole mish-mash cries out for the hand of a strong editor - someone who would point out that it would be nice to smooth, at least a few of, the rough edges from the contents of your notebooks before trying to flog them to your unsuspecting public.

In short, don't bother with this unless you're a really devoted fan, and even then - why bother?

**LUMINOUS** by Greg Egan Millennium, tpb, £9.99, 295pp

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

Reviewed by Martin Tudor

This collection of short stories was my first experience of the work of Egan, who Gardner Dozois said was "in the running for the title of



'Hottest New Writer' of the '90s", guess what? Dozois is right. This is a stunning collection.

Seven of these stories appeared previously in INTERZONE, so if you're an IZ subscriber you'll be paying out for the other three – "The Planck Drive", "Luminous" and "Cocoon" (all of which appeared in ASIMOV'S) – but believe me those three stories are worth the price on their own!

From the brutal emotional force of "Silver Fire" and "Reasons to be Cheerful", to the chilling "Mitochondrial Eve" and the complexity of "Mister Volition, the pace and power of these stories never lets up.

It is all too rare that one is able to honestly say there isn't a weak story in a collection – but there isn't here. This is well worth a tenner of anyone's money. Buy it. Read it.

### **GUENEVERE: THE QUEEN OF THE SUMMER COUNTRY**

by Rosalind Miles, Simon & Schuster, tpb/hb, £9.99/£16.99, 502pp

Star Rating: \*\*\*

Reviewed by Martin Tudor

As I'm a great reader of all things Arthurian I had very high hopes for this novel – the idea of the story being told entirely from the perspective of the Queen, sounded fascinating. Especially so, as it was being written by Dr Miles an acclaimed historian (author of THE WOMEN'S HISTORY OF THE WORLD and founder of the Centre for Women's Studies at Coventry). I'm afraid I was disappointed.

In many ways it *is* an excellent novel meticulously researched and with some interesting twists. Mills's strong-minded, powerful and self-possessed Guenevere is wonderfully portrayed and the Celtic lifestyle is described in graphic detail. But...

Unfortunately Mills is a fan of romance – in the Cartland tradition - and cannot resist florid passages such as when Guenevere gets to know, in the Biblical sense, Lancelot:

*"Naked, he was white and golden like a god. A silver dewdrop glistened on the top of his sex. Gilded by the old and silver dusk, he was a being from the Otherworld. He leaned over, and peeled away the last remnant*

*of her modesty, drawing the green gown down over her hips. Then he slipped down beside her on the bed, and dropped a rainfall of sweet kisses on her quivering flesh."*

Well, okay, perhaps not *quite* Barbara Cartland – but certainly OTT. I'm sorry, but I can only take so much of that and there is too much of it here – sometimes a page or more at a time. I can only hope that Mills (any relation to Boon?) tones it down for the second and third parts of the trilogy – but I don't suppose she will.

However if you don't mind bits of purple prose this is an interesting treatment of a well-known story.

**THE BONES OF TIME** by Kathleen Ann Goonan,  
Voyager/HarperCollins, pb, 382pp, £6.99.  
Star Rating: \*\*\*\*  
Reviewed by Martin Tudor

The back cover blurb outlines an interesting tale:

*"In Hawaii, a conflict erupts between the nationalist Homeland Movement and the Interspace corporation which rules the island like a colony, resorting to murder to maintain control. A plan is hatched by the Movement's leaders to hijack a giant spaceship being built on the island by the corporation."*

*"Lynn Oshima is heir to the powerful head of Interspace. While pursuing her hobby of collecting rare genetic information – in this case the DNA of Chairman Mao – Lynn crosses paths with 13-year-old Akamu, the clone of Hawaii's legendary nineteenth-century King Kamehameha. Thanks to Lynn, Kamehameha will return to Hawaii... to lead the Homeland Movement."*

Sounds good? I thought so, but that doesn't cover even *half* of what this exciting novel is about! No mention of Victoria Kaiulani, Hawaii's last princess who died young in the early 1900s; no mention of her lover, the mysterious but brilliant mathematician, Cen Kalakaua, who's career was cut short in his twenties when he disappeared in 2017; no mention of the female Dalai Lama, Sattva, and her team of mathematicians working secretly on the Unified Field Theory hidden in the mountains of Tibet; no mention of wormholes, time travel, nor intertemporal relationships...

Goonan is ace! She tells an incredibly complex tale with stunning clarity and pace, like Sterling at his best, absolutely breathtaking! I'll have to pick up a copy of her earlier QUEEN CITY JAZZ.

**WAR IN HEAVEN** by David Zindell, Voyager, pbk, 791pp £6.99

Star rating \*\*\*\*

Reviewed by Yvonne Rowse

I think that a 'cataclysmic finale' really should have fewer words. Ah, but never mind.

This is the third of a series and (as usual) I haven't read the first two books. I admit that if I hadn't had to review this I would have given up after the first fifty pages. It's been some time since I bothered to persevere with a book that didn't grip me almost immediately, my 'to be read' pile being what it is but I'm glad I ploughed on with this.

At the April meeting Simon Ings argued that some books don't require a cast of fully fleshed characters, that sometimes character gets in the way of the story. We (particularly Chris Morgan) disputed that view vigorously, and yet, here is a book with a cast of hundreds of cardboard cut-outs and, you know, it works pretty well.

The central character is Danlo wi Soli Ringess, son of Mallory Ringess, the god. Danlo attempts to avert war and undo the evil being done in the name of his father. At the beginning of the book Danlo appears near perfect. As the book progresses he has to deal with the reality of starvation and loss and grows more human in my view.

I found after a while I was becoming irritated with hearing about the blue light of Danlo's eyes and other similar cliches (if they weren't at the beginning they became overworked by the end). The style didn't entirely suit me but the story was wonderful and the central part of the book, set on the frozen streets of Neverness was tremendous.

I'm not sure that I will ever get round to reading the whole series but I expect to remember Danlo and Jonathon (his son) and the icy world of Neverness for a long time.

*And finally, an open letter and book review from Adrian Middleton:*

Dear Brum Group,

In response to editorial provocation and as the 'friend of Steve Jones' who originally commented on the demise of the list of shame, I suppose it needs to fall to me, a non-member by the way, to respond to Dave Hardy's recent letter.



Unbiased as I am I must begin by saying that Steve has, from what I have seen, been one of the unwashed...er, unsung heroes of the Brum Group. One of the group's longest and most committed members, Steve served until recently as 'Mr Publicity' and in this role took it upon himself to attend the meetings of every SF and media related group in the West Midlands, staying as a member of the Wolves of Fenric, Alpha Quadrant and Birmingham University SF Society. Through these groups Steve continues to promote the BSFG, regardless of his success rate, any which way he can. It is as part of his publicity role, I believe, that Steve took it upon himself to use 'books for review' as a hook for new members.

Attendance at BSFG meetings has (though not by Dave Hardy, one of the only stalwarts to be able to cast the first stone) been in steady decline since late 1996, and a regular feature of meetings was the growing pile of books not selected for review notably Wookie Books). As a fairly reliable reviewer who edited his own fanzine, Steve asked me to help him write reviews, ensuring that I got credit for anything I wrote. With each passing month the number of unwanted books he passed on to me for review grew, and he attempted to use other SF fans in other groups to review such books in an attempt to coax them into joining the BSFG. This tactic has occasionally worked (in my own case I'd have joined if my busy schedule had allowed me to attend meetings), and if applied by other members it could prove to be a (more) successful marketing tool.

The nub of this is not Steve's failure, along with his 'friends' to review books, but with the sheer apathy involved with the members, who don't attend enough meetings and therefore aren't there to select books for review. Follow Steve's example everybody: turn up to a meeting, and get your perk of a book to review, and REVIEW IT!

I suppose I'll put my own philosophy into practice now by reviewing a book Steve passed to me:

**IT CAME FROM ON HIGH** by Andrew Harman (£5.99, Orbit) is a situational comedy actually categorised as 'Fantasy Comedy' not SF not Horror. Star rating: \*\*\*\*

While I am busy writing a fantasy comedy in which two aliens kidnap the Pope, here is a fantasy comedy in which the Pope kidnaps two aliens. The book is hilarious – different and in my view superior to Terry Pratchett. It has a strong plot reminiscent of Tom Holt, but with a stronger ending than is usual in his books. Spies. Aliens. Father Ted. Craggy Island. And a Versace-infested Vatican make this an un-put-downable gem whose only failing is the speed with which it will date.

## The Newsletter of the Birmingham Science Fiction Group

Andrew Harman may argue that X-files and Star Trek: Voyager references are cultural icons but they still make a book set in an indeterminate near future likely to pass its sell-by date very quickly indeed.

Take my advice, read Harman and burn the Pratchett books once and for all. You can do it.

Yours faithfully,

Adrian Middleton

*So folks. What do you think? I wasn't around when Steve was publicity officer. My view is that members should get first choice of review books but I don't at all mind non-members taking books if they then review them - Ed*

*The 'Star Ratings' are:*

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

### Colophon

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