

December 2000

Issue 351

# BRUM GROUP NEWS

Price: Free

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The Monthly newsletter of the Birmingham Science Fiction Group

(Honorary Presidents: Brian W. Aldiss and Harry Harrison)

Group Chair-Vernon Brown, Secretary- Dave Hardy, Treasurer-Alan Woodford, Newsletter & Publicity-  
Martin Tudor, Ordinary Members-Anne Woodford & William McCabe, Novacon 30 & 31 Chairman-Tony Berry.

**This month's meeting is  
the BSFG Skittles Evening  
on Friday 8th December 2000**

***NB: Change of Venue!***

**Due to the fact that the Selly Park Tavern is  
still closed for refurbishment the  
Skittles Evening will now be held at the Hare  
& Hounds, Lickey Road, Longbridge,  
Birmingham, (on 62 bus route).**

**Call Alan Woodford for details  
on 0121-532-1110.**

**NEXT MONTH'S MEETING:**

**12<sup>th</sup> January 2001**

**ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING  
at the Britannia Hotel, New Street.**

***Merry Christmas to all our members!***

**BSFG: Committee Posts by Bernie Evans**

With the AGM looming on the 12th January 2001, it's time for all you enthusiastic members to send in your nominations for committee posts. You can, of course, nominate from the floor at the meeting if you wish, but if you KNOW you will be standing, please send in your written nomination (and platform of no more than 250 words) so it can be printed in the January edition of the BRUM GROUP NEWS for everyone to see.

Written nominations must reach Martin Tudor by the 31st of December 2000, by post to 24 Ravensbourne Grove, Willenhall, WV13 1HX or e-mail to empties@breathemail.net

So what positions are there?

**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 AGM 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.

In addition two other ORDINARY MEMBERS may be appointed by the

Committee any time during the year at the discretion of the Committee.

So, that's who we need. Which do YOU want to do?

### **Forthcoming Events by Martin Tudor**

**8 DECEMBER 2000: BSFG SKITTLES EVENING**, at the Hare & Hounds, Lickey Road, Longbridge, Birmingham. (On 62 bus route.) £10 per person call Alan Woodford for details on 0121-532-1110.

**29 DEC 2000-1 JAN 2001: Hogmanaycon**, Central Hotel, Glasgow. GoHs: Spider & Jeanne Robinson, Sydney Jordan, Archie Roy, Vince Docherty, Oscar Schwighlofer. Membership £35.00, contact: c/o 26 Avonbank Road, Rutherglen, Glasgow, G73 2PA; [john@gelsalba.demon.co.uk](mailto:john@gelsalba.demon.co.uk); [www.members.tripod.co.uk/Chris\\_Boyce/conpage.htm](http://www.members.tripod.co.uk/Chris_Boyce/conpage.htm)

**6-11 FEBRUARY 2001: THE HOBBIT** by J R R Tolkien, adapted by Glyn Robbins, directed by Roy Marsden will be staged at the Alexandra Theatre, Birmingham. Call 0870-607-7533 for tickets or 0121 632 5554 for further information.

**13-16 APRIL 2001: Paragon**, the British National SF (Easter)Con at Hanover International Hotel, Hinckley, with guests Michael Scott Rohan, Stephen Baxter, Lisanne Norman, and fan guests Claire Brialey and Mark Plummer. Membership now £35 Attending, £15 Supporting, £17.50 Junior (12-16) and £15 Child (5-11), Infants free. 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) or check the web site at [www.keepsake-web.co.uk/paragon](http://www.keepsake-web.co.uk/paragon)

**29 MARCH-1 APRIL 2002: Helicon 2**, the British National SF (Easter)Con, at Hotel de France, Jersey. Guests tba. Membership £30 Attending, £15 Supporting/Junior. Contact 33 Meyrick Drive, Wash Common, Berks., RG14 6SY.

*Although details are correct to the best of my knowledge, I 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 me at [empties@breathemail.net](mailto:empties@breathemail.net) or address on back cover. 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 - MT.]*

## **The Nova Award Results by Tony Berry**

Here we are then. In a frightening imitation of the US election farce, the Novas caused a stir. No problem with Best Fanzine or Artist, but Best Writer was a different matter: after 2 recounts there was a 3-way tie with Rowse, Plummer and Farey all on 29 points. The Rules were invoked, teams of lawyers appointed, and beer drunk. Yvonne clinched it with 4 first-place votes, while the others had 3 each. It was that close. In fact, if you look at the scores, the whole lot are pretty close! Tough decision this year obviously.

After being personally scrutinized by my cat, the full and final results are attached.

The Special Committee Nova was also awarded to Vernon Brown as Chairman of Novacon 1, all those years ago. You've got him to blame.

### **Best Fanzine:**

1.	Plokta – ed. The Cabal	66 points
2.	Tortoise – ed. Sue Jones	38 points
3.	This Here – ed. Nic Farey	35 points
4.	Quasiquote – ed. Sandra Bond	33 points
5.	Banana Wings – ed. Claire Brialey and Mark Plummer	32 points
6.	Gloss – ed. Lilian Edwards and Victor Gonzalez	27 points
7.	Steam Engine Time – ed. Maureen Kincaid Speller, Paul Kincaid, Bruce Gillespie	24points
8.	Head – ed. Doug Bell and Christina Lake	23 points
9.	Barmaid – ed. Yvonne Rowse	14 points
10=	Everlasting Lamentables – ed. Elizabeth Billinger	10 points
10=	Pogonophobia – ed. Alison Freebairn	10 points
12	Bob – ed. Sorensen	9 points
13=	Connections – ed. Simon Ounsley	8 points
13=	Parakeet – ed. Brialey, Plummer	8 points
15	Ansible – ed. Dave Langford	6 points
16=	Gerald – ed. Jim de Liscard	5 points
16=	Guffaw – ed. Paul Kincaid	5 points
18	Never Quite Arriving – ed. Lake	4 points
19=	Pleasure – ed. Linda Krawecke	3 points
19=	Squiggledy Hoy – ed. Bridget Bradshaw	3 points
21=	Dramatic Obscurity – ed. Andrew Butler	1 point
21=	Idiosyncrasy – ed. Dave Hicks	
21=	Shipyards Blues – ed. John D. Owen	
21=	And Stuff – ed. Lake and Bell	

*The Newsletter of the Birmingham Science Fiction Group*

**Best Fan Writer:**

1.	Yvonne Rowse	29 points
2=	Mark Plummer	29 points
2=	Nic Farey	29 points
4=	Sandra Bond	27 points
4=	Claire Brialey	27 points
6	Maureen Kincaid Speller	26 points
7.	Christina Lake	25 points
8.	Alison Freebairn	23 points
9.	Simon Ounsley	22 points
10.	Lilian Edwards	21 points
11.	Sue Jones	15 points
12=	Dave Langford	12 points
12=	Elizabeth Billinger	12 points
14	Judith Hanna	11 points
15	Alison Scott	10 points
16	Paul Kincaid	9 points
17	Tanya Brown	7 points
18	Dave Hicks	5 points
19=	Doug Bell	3 points
19=	John D. Owen	3 points
21=	Bridget Bradshaw	1 point
21=	Linda Krawecke	
21=	D. West	
21=	Dave Wood	
21=	Dr. Plokta	
21=	Jim de Liscard	
21=	Giulia de Cesare	
21=	Julian Headlong	

**Best Fan Artist:**

1.	Sue Mason	80 points
2.	Steve Jefferey	74 points
3.	D. West	58 points
4.	Dave Hicks	41 points
5=	Jim Barker	11 points
5=	Alison Scott	11 points
5=	SMS	11 points
8.	Sue Jones	7 points
9=	Peter Crump	5 points
9=	Sue Binfield	5 points
11=	Sophia	3 points
11=	Ken Shinn	3 points

13= Dave Mooring 1 point  
13= Mark Plummer 1 point

## The Roscoe Report by Steve Green

It's panic stations in Hollywood as the year closes, with both the Screen Actors Guild and Writers Guild of America preparing to strike this coming spring. Each union is seeking enhanced payments on residuals, the royalties for tv screenings and video/DVD releases (the SAG is particularly furious at moves to introduce flat fees for members appearing in advertisements).

As a result, numerous movies are being rushed into production, among them Tim Burton's remake of *Planet of the Apes*, which has already raised a few eyebrows with rumours of a sex scene between astronaut Mark Wahlberg and simian princess Helena Bonham-Carter. (Charlton Heston, star of the original, will reportedly have a cameo role - he's certainly old enough by now to play the Lawgiver.)

Nor will tv remain unaffected. During the previous WGA shutdown, back in the late 1980s, ancient scripts were dusted off and updated. The results included a somewhat lack-lustre *Mission Impossible* (straight remakes) and several episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (adapting unused scripts from the abandoned 1970s series *Star Trek II*, with Data adopting lines written for Spock substitute Xon). At least the simultaneous acting strike will prevent a re-run of that fiasco.

There's even the possibility that studios, desperate for screen fodder, will be forced to consider more offbeat, indie productions, a natural step after the *Blair Witch* phenomenon.

Heck, they might even take a look at British movies - if we had any worth looking at, that is. After all, just how many *Lock Stock* rip-offs could American audiences stomach?

There is hope. At this year's Festival of Fantastic Films, I caught a wonderfully surreal stop-motion short from Scots director Leo Nicholson, *Run Monkey Run*. Shortly afterwards, erstwhile Brum Group speaker Simo lent me a copy of *The Insidious Fu Manchu*, an hilariously revisionist spoof of the Sax Rohmer saga directed by Andrew Coats. Had we a primetime slot for such material, both would take centre-stage; for now, look out - if we're lucky - for a one-off screening on Channel 4 around the time the sun creeps over the horizon.

The Jophan Report #137 by Martin Tudor

Not much space left this month (as I am *strictly* restricted to 16pp) so I'll just run a quick anecdote by you. Dave Holmes (who many of you will remember as the one-time manager of Andromeda and who is currently owner of Magic Labyrinth in Leicester) and his lovely lady Claire went to a Halloween Quiz at a pub in Leicester:

"We were the only people in the pub to get one particular question wrong when everyone else got it right.

"Q... Who wrote PSYCHO?

"We quite stupidly answered 'Robert Bloch'.

"They were coming up to us in a state of disbelief. They couldn't believe that Claire and I could not know the right answer.

"I told Steph [*Mortimer - Dave's partner in the shop*] this morning. He too was shocked that I didn't know. He told me the correct answer... 'Dave, everybody *knows* its Alfred Hitchcock' ... D'OH!!

"Yes, the question was 'wrote' not directed....

"Since then I've asked five customers – my sanity is leaving me rapidly as, of course, they've all said.. Alfred \*\*\*\*ing Hitchcock! Aaaaaarghh!"

Which seems like a good time to launch into our *own* Quiz. Please send your entries to me, Martin Tudor, at 24 Ravensbourne Grove, Willenhall, WV13 1HX or [empties@breathemail.net](mailto:empties@breathemail.net) by the 31<sup>st</sup> December 2000. All correct entries will go into a "hat" at the AGM and the winner will get a *terrific* prize! Take it away Steve....

The Xmas Inquisition: 25 for the 25th  
...as prepared by Cardinal Steve Green

Section 1: The Stuff at the Movies

1. Which screen star - an avid *Star Trek* fan - narrowly missed out on an appearance in *Star Trek IV*?
2. Name the artist who worked on *Destination Moon*.
3. Which creatures terrorize America in (a) *Night of the Lepus*, (b) *Them!* and (c) *The Hellstrom Chronicle*?
4. Who was Laurie Strode's brother?
5. Name the odd one out: Alex and the Droogs, Heaven 17, Pink Floyd, Moloko.

Section 2: The Stuff on the Shelf

6. Whose latest novel urges us to *Look to Windward*?
7. Name the creator of the comic strip "Barbarella".
8. Which author reportedly earned £25m this year?
9. Name Thomas Harris' sequel to *Silence of the Lambs*.
10. What title did actor Leonard Nimoy give the sequel to his memoir *I Am Not Spock*?

### Section 3: The Stuff on the Telly

11. Name the giant organic spacecraft in *Farscape*.
12. Which actor "replaced" David Duchovny in *The X-Files*?
13. What is the registration code on the current USS Enterprise?
14. Which sf bestseller has just been adapted as a US miniseries?
15. What is the shadowy defence force in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*?

### Section 4: The Stuff in the Post

16. Name this year's Nova-winning fanwriter.
17. Which well known fanzine artist worked as a stills photographer on adult film sets?
18. What do Malcolm Edwards, Roger Peyton and Alan Dorey have in common?
19. Who wrote the fan fund reports (a) *New Routes in America*, (b) *A Brighton Belle Meets Skippy*, (c) *Colonial Excursion* and (d) *The TransAtlantic Hearing Aid*?
20. Which lifelong fan gained the loathing of Harlan Ellison (to name but one) for coining the phrase "sci-fi"?

## Book Reviews

**GREETING CARBON-BASED BIPEDS** by Arthur C. Clarke

**Voyager; £7.99; 539pp; p/b**

**Reviewed by Chris Chivers**

**Star Rating \***

In the six decades that Arthur C. Clarke has been involved in Science Fiction the growth of the modern world has evolved beyond all recognition. Some of the changes have been down to Arthur C. Clarke himself.

This book is a collection of essays and short stories concerning the way that technology has evolved with an ever faster pace and the way that Science Fiction writers have tried to predict the future, not always correctly, in their writings. As one of the Grand Old Men of S.F. Arthur C. Clarke has been involved with both the fiction and the Science fact that at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century invades more and more of our daily lives. His reminiscences of the way



that Science treated S.F. in the 40's and the early 50's are a reminder of the ostrich head in the sand syndrome. Some of the essays on the early years are quite humorous as well as very revealing about the perceived wisdom of what the future would hold for the world. As technology changed the world so the way that ordinary people viewed Science Fiction changed, from an attitude of scorn and derision to one of wary respect. Some of the essays in the chapters dealing with the 60's and 70's show how the start of space exploration showed the ordinary public that the imagination of the Science Fiction writers in the 20's and 30's was now becoming an every day reality. Not all of the essays deal solely with technology but they encompass the attitudes of ordinary people and the politics that shape peoples lives. The concerns of rising religious fundamentalism and the damage that it can cause by keeping people ignorant and in fear and poverty when their lives can be helped by technology is also touched upon.

Interspersed through the book are stories of Arthur C. Clarke's love of Sri Lanka and his adventures of skin diving in the seas around the island. The range of topics discussed are wide ranging and varied from his work on screen adaptations of his novels and television programs to his work with NASA and his drive to promote outer space. Arthur C. Clarke has been called the Prophet of the Space Age and is classed as the most visionary and versatile thinker of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It makes one wonder that if a person with such talents was in charge of the world were would the human race be today?

Greetings Carbon-Based Bipeds is a unique insight into the thinking behind a rare imagination and well worth a read.

**DARK UNIVERSE by Daniel F Galouye**

**Gollancz; 154pp; £9.99; p/b**

**Reviewed by William McCabe**

The problem with classic science fiction is that it so often dates so very badly. The greatest vision of the future can go desperately wrong when history takes a different turn. Nightmares of science become jokes when science decides that isn't how things are. What good is it to have a great futuristic novel when you need to look on it with nostalgia? This suffers from all of this and loses so much in the process. We have here a future where the 3rd world war between the great nuclear powers actually happened. A science that still believes evolution is accelerated by irradiation. Even more than this we have plot lines that have since become clichés.

This is the story. WW3 happened. People retreated to the deep bunkers

(remember the coal mines of Dr Strangelove). In one of them something went wrong. The lights went out and people adapted to the dark. Some started to see in the infra-red, others lost any understanding of light. As "what if?" stories go, this is a good one but it carries too much baggage and one plot device that should be a surprise (the "monsters" that are taking people) is something I (at least) saw through much too soon

Not really for the under-30's.

**WAY STATION** by Clifford D. Simak

Gollancz; £9.99; 189pp; t/pb

Reviewed by Chris Chivers

Star Rating \*\*\*\*

On re-reading this reprint of Clifford D Simak's 1963 classic it is interesting to realise how far Science Fiction has come since early sixties. It also gives the reader a chance to revisit an old friend and go back to the style of writing that got people interested in S. F. in the first place. Even though this story is nearly forty years old it's theme still holds up well against contemporary styles of modern S. F. authors.

Set in sixties America in the poor rural area of the southwestern corner of Wisconsin it shows a lifestyle that has hardly changed since it was first settled by the white man. With the local people clannish and distrustful of outsiders Enoch Wallace is peculiar to say the least. For a man who fought in the American Civil War he still looks as though he is only middle aged. What few provisions he requires for his simple needs are brought out from the town by the local postman Winslowe Grant. His father built the farm that he lives in and it looks like any other poor rural dwelling in that neck of the woods. But Enoch is being watched by a person from the Federal Government who has unearthed some surprising facts about him. Not only is Enoch unusual, as is the farmhouse that he lives in. But what the watcher finds in the Wallace family graveyard is even more intriguing. Into this scenario comes a local deaf mute girl Lucy Fisher who seems to have extraordinary powers and rapport with the local wild animals. When Enoch Wallace helps the girl to hide from her abusive father things start to come apart at the seams and local attention is focused on Enoch, something he had been trying hard to avoid.

Way Station is one of the jewels in Gollancz's collector's edition and ranks highly in the top 100 best novels of Science Fiction. This is definitely worth a re-read for older fans and well worth reading for the first time for younger members of the S.F. fraternity.

**DARK TERRORS 5** edited by Stephen Jones and David Sutton  
Gollancz; £12.99  
Reviewed by Peter Coleborn

This is a bumper-sized book – 500 pages and 31 new stories. There aren't many horror anthologies in the UK (heck, there aren't many anthologies), especially ones that present such a wealth of previously unpublished tales. For the horror fan, this series is invaluable. For someone on the outside, this volume is an ideal introduction to the horror field – to the literate horror field. I mean, this is feel the width and feel the quality territory. Meet the authors: Chaz Brenchley, Eric Brown, Ramsey Campbell, Graham Masterton, Kim Newman, Lisa Tuttle, Michael Marshall Smith, Brian Stableford, Peter Straub ... and the others.

Campbell's story is a bitter-sweet piece, about an author aspiring to past success in a world where publishers leave a sour emptiness, and where the final outcome is street poetry – of a type. Newman writes scathingly of "victim" television, as I've heard it called: Big Brother. Big bollocks. Birmingham's Joel Lane's story remembers the carefree days of the university student – only they weren't quite so happy in all cases, where one can be dry in an ocean of emotion and romance. In Nicholas Royle's tale, we spy a ghost, miserable from its previous life, imbued with sadness and tragedy. And perhaps the longest story, more a novella by David Case, is a wonderful yarn of mad scientists and cannibalistic zombies, melded into a refreshing 50s-style science fiction. C'mon, you don't expect me to comment on all 31 stories, do you?

The book also sports a classy illustration. The last thing the book looks like is a traditional slash 'n' dice horror fest. And of course it isn't. It is a marvellous taste of top-notch horror fiction, an appetiser and main course in one volume (although I wouldn't say "no" to Dark Terrors 6). This is a very large-format paperback and is cursed by cracking-spine syndrome, no matter how carefully you read it. If you can afford the seventeen pounds, buy the hardcover – you won't be disappointed.

**ATOM** by Steve Aylett  
Phoenix House; 137pp; £9.99; h/b  
Reviewed by William McCabe

This is probably the latest trend. The next big thing after cyberpunk. Think of a more genre - oriented Jeff Noon and you're on the right track. OK so the genre is the gangster novel (think of a futuristic Damon Runyon) but definitely genre. This thing positively reeks with style and flair. Pity it doesn't care much for plot and character.

The plot (such as it is): - Taffy Atom is a PI (probably stands for Private Investigator but could just be Private I). He has a goldfish that could scare off sharks (no matter what kind of heavy artillery they might be holding) and an outer office that could put the fear of God into a hardened criminal. He has been employed to find Kafka's brain by a local gang boss. Or is that a local gang boss's brain by Franz Kafka? Another gangster wants to find this brain simply because his rival wants it. There are more complications.

A bizarre comedy. Look out for the strange weaponry that look more like plot devices than mechanical ones ("Rather than actually stripping the subtext from the blast site it converted the wave range into a living Updike novel").

**NO ENEMY BUT TIME** by Michael Bishop

Gollancz; £10.99; 397pp; t/pb

Reviewed by Chris Chivers

Star Rating \*\*\*

Gollancz's famous yellow book jackets were an automatic draw to Science Fiction readers in the 50's and 60's, so the inclusion of Michael Bishop's 1982 story No Enemy But Time into Gollancz's Collectors' Editions comes as somewhat of a surprise.

When are dreams just imagination or when are they reality, these are the questions that a young Joshua Kampa has no answer for. But they finally lead him to a meeting with an eminent palaeontologist and the questioning of known facts and wisdom by Joshua. This meeting has far reaching consequences as Joshua is asked to join a secret project, which sends him back in time to the early Pleistocene period in Earth's past. On the East African Savannah Joshua is to keep under surveillance and report back his findings of a group of hominids. Slowly the involvement of Joshua with this group of prehumans, Homo Habilis, goes beyond the bounds of his original remit. The consequences of his interaction with this band of prehumans is to have surprising results. The nitty gritty realities of a day to day existence and the long term survival of the group bring into focus Joshua's troubled past. Through a series of flashbacks the troubles of Joshua's early life as an adopted child with the constant movement of his adopted family from military posting to military posting are brought into focus. The bigotry and racial abuse suffered by the child of a black father and Spanish mother start to fade and bring the harsh realities of the modern world into focus.

The Collectors' Editions have some great titles in their list and *No Enemy But Time* is a worthy addition. A story that does not fall into the usual Science Fiction mould, it is a thought provoking book that shows that modern man and his ancient ancestors have more in common than most people think.

**THE ARCADIAN CIPHER** by Peter Blake & Paul S. Blezard  
Sidgwick & Jackson; 286 pages; £18.99; h/b  
Reviewed by Michael Jones

I still remember the first film I ever saw based on the ideas of Erich von Daniken: I was amazed and completely convinced. Since then I have learned to adopt a more sceptical outlook – just as well in view of the proliferation in recent years of books about Ancient Mysteries, of which this is just one more example. Like others it is based on the mystery surrounding the village of Rennes-le-Chateau in southern France. The authors now claim to have unravelled a coded message contained in several seventeenth-century paintings to discover an ancient tomb which is nothing less than the last resting-place of Christ.

Their conclusion centres round the message incorporated in the paintings, which are by several different artists, and depends on the application of that message to modern maps, which must be better and more accurate than anything available then. If this is true, it represents a combination of draughtsmanship and cartography which would be a remarkable accomplishment for three hundred-plus years ago. Even so, it could be argued that the results are too good to be attributable to mere coincidence. Leaving that aside, however, one cannot help wondering why a message was compiled at all if the secret it contained was of such enormous importance that it should never be revealed. It became a futile exercise anyway, since the message was concealed so thoroughly that it has been lost until now.

The authors present a convincing argument and to be sure there is some hard evidence, including what is known of the Rennes-le-Chateau mystery, which defies any less controversial explanation. Something strange and inexplicable may have been going on in that area for two thousand years. Nevertheless, their case depends on their interpretation of that and other less definable evidence and some of that interpretation is speculative to say the least. The best way to deal with it is to regard it as entertainment and accept that it MAY be true, but only until a better theory comes along.

Viewed in that way the book is an interesting, even intriguing piece of work, and quite educational. It is full of fascinating history, although the presentation

suffers from a tendency for each chapter, like the whole thing, to start with a big bang and then to proceed somewhat anti-climactically. If anything, however, it is too crammed with detail and would perhaps have been better at the length of a Sunday supplement article.

I have not attempted to give it a star rating. You will like it if it is the sort of thing you like, but otherwise you may well think it unmitigated rubbish.

**A STORM OF SWORDS by George R.R. Martin**

Voyager; £17.99; 924pp; h/b

Reviewed by Chris Chivers

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

In book three of this fantasy series, George R.R. Martin grabs you by the throat and doesn't let go. After the first two books 'A Game Of Thrones' and 'A Clash Of Kings' the plot line still twist and turns with the freshness that so few writers can sustain for such a length of time. As the Guardian reviewer stated 'Its ambition to construct the Twelve Caesar's of fantasy fiction, with characters so venomous they could eat the Borgias'. All I can say is move over Hannibal (The cannibal) Lector you're a non-starter by comparison.

With the House Lannister in control of the south, the King of the North Robb Stark is holding his own against his enemies, but seemingly making little progress in wresting the crown from Joffrey Baratheon the first, son of King Robert I Baratheon but born of an incestuous relationship between Queen Cersei and her twin brother Jaime Lannister. To the far north beyond 'The Wall' ancient enemies are stirring which could spell the end for all the warring Houses. The defenders of The Wall and thereby the defenders of the peoples to the south are not the force that they used to be, with the numbers in their ranks dwindling and made up from the dregs and prisoners that have managed to escape the hangman's noose. Into this rich brew are thrown the Houses that have their own agenda in backing other claimants to the Iron Throne. If things could not get worse to the East the last survivor of Aerys II Targaryen, King of the Iron Throne killed by Robert I Bartheon is raising an army to retake the Iron Throne. With the political intrigue and marriages of convenience to cement alliances between the major Houses the minor Houses are seizing their chances to fill the power vacuum left by the warring factions.

George R.R. Martin has received high praise from many reviewers for this series and I can only add my congratulations for an epic fantasy series that I can't wait to read book four. A Song Of Ice And Fire I'm sure will go down as one of the all-time great series of Fantasy fiction this has, to quote one reviewer,

superbly developed characters, accomplished prose and sheer bloody-mindedness. Also the vicious sting in the tail of *A Storm Of Swords* is one that comes as a total surprise to the reader. A must have series for all readers of Fantasy or Science Fiction!!

**THE DREAMING JEWELS by Theodore Sturgeon**

**Gollancz; 156 pages; £9.99; t/pb**

**Reviewed by Michael Jones**

**Star Rating \*\***

Theodore Sturgeon was one of the star authors of the so-called "Golden Age" of the forties and fifties, although he often wrote on controversial themes, such as homosexuality for example, and this tended to prevent his work from being as widely accepted at the time as it deserved. Nevertheless, some of it bears comparison with the greatest. Unfortunately, the selection of *The Dreaming Jewels* from among his handful of novels for inclusion in Gollancz's "Sf Collector's" Series was not a good choice. I had never read it before, although I was familiar with a fair amount of his other work. I was now disappointed, to say the least.

The story is that of a boy, Horty, who has been affected as a child by the eponymous jewels, an alien lifeform apparently common on Earth but generally unrecognised. He runs away from his adoptive home and joins a travelling freak show where he unknowingly comes into contact with an adult who has discovered the jewels and would use their powers, and Horty, for his own wicked ends. Horty escapes, learns about himself and the jewels and with some help from his former freak friends kills the bad guy and exacts revenge for his cruel upbringing.

So far, so good – this has the potential to be a nice little coming-of-age story with an sf element in the form of contact with aliens. Unfortunately, there is no explanation of the Dreaming Jewels - neither their origin, their nature nor even their purpose - they are merely a device introduced to allow the construction of a story about psi powers. Moreover, it is carelessly plotted and casually written, with lame characters and ill-described scenes and events. Sturgeon did much better than this with similar basic themes and I cannot recommend this as an example of what he was capable of.

## Brum Group Dates for your Diary

8 DECEMBER 2000: SKITTLES EVENING at the Hare & Hounds.  
12 JANUARY 2000: ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

## Brum Group Meeting Information

The Brum Group meets from 7.45pm for 8pm in the Britannia Hotel, New Street, Birmingham, (entrance in Union Passageway), on the second Friday of each month (unless otherwise notified). We usually have a Speaker 8-9pm followed by an informal meeting until 10.30pm. Drinks may be purchased from Harvey's Bar on the Mezzanine and taken to our meeting room, usually the Lichfield on the second floor. Admission discounts are at the discretion of the committee and will depend on satisfactory proof of status being produced.

## Committee and Contacts

**Group Chairman**, Vernon Brown, 106 Green Lanes, Wylde Green, Sutton Coldfield, West Midlands, B73 5JH. **Membership** (which includes 12 copies of this newsletter and reduced price entry to formal meetings) is £16.00 per person, or £21.00 for two at the same address. Cheques to "The Birmingham Science Fiction Group" and sent to: The Treasurer, Alan Woodford, 2 Old Port Close, Tipton, West Midlands, DY4 7XN (e-mail enquiries bsfg@bortas.demon.co.uk). **Newsletter** Martin Tudor, 24 Ravensbourne Grove, Willenhall, WV13 1HX (e-mail to empties@breathemail.net). **Web**: [www.bsfg.freesevers.com/](http://www.bsfg.freesevers.com/)

## Colophon

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