

Brum Group News

The *Free* Monthly Newsletter of the
BIRMINGHAM
SCIENCE FICTION GROUP

NOVEMBER 2001 ISSUE 362

Honorary Presidents:

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HARRY HARRISON

Committee:

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Vicky Cook (Secretary)

Alan Woodford (Treasurer)

Rog Peyton (Newsletter Editor)

+ Steve Jones & William McCabe

NOVACON 31 Chairman: Tony Berry

Friday 16th October

“ASK THE EXPERTS”

At great expense we have persuaded three experts on all aspects of science fiction to come along to the group and answer any questions you might like to throw at them. And not only are they experts on SF, but know a great deal about fantasy and horror too.

Have you ever wondered, for instance, where the term ‘science fiction’ came from? When was the first time it was seen in print? How do you become a science fiction artist? How do you get to sell articles and reviews on SF? What’s the worst SF novel ever written? What, indeed, is considered the best?

What do our experts think of a *Harry Potter* book being awarded a Hugo? Has this award tarnished the Hugo forever? Will it affect other awards?

All these questions - and more - can probably be answered by our guest panel. But your committee is sure that you can come up with really interesting questions - questions that will cause heated debate between our panellists.

Please come along, armed with at least one question. The questions can be read out by the Chairman, if you’re too embarrassed to speak up in public.

The meeting will take place in the Lichfield room on the second floor of the Britannia Hotel, New Street (entrance in Union Passageway opposite the Odeon). It will commence at 7.45pm so please arrive early, get your drinks from the bar and be seated in plenty of time. Non-members always welcome.

DECEMBER 14th MEETING - THE CHRISTMAS SOCIAL. Full details inside.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

December 7-9 SMOFCON 19 (Conrunners Convention) The Monkbar Hotel, York. £25 reg. Contact: Kim Campbell, 69 Lincoln St., Leeman Rd., York YO2 4YP. Email to Smofcon19@hotmail.com

March 8-10 2002 MeCon V, Queen's University of Belfast. £10 reg. Contact: MeCoN V, c/o 30 Bendigo Street, Belfast BT6 8GD Website is www.mecon.org

March 29 - April 1 2002 HELICON 2: Hotel De France, St.Helier, Jersey, Channel Islands. £35 reg. Guests: Harry Turtledove, Brian Stableford, Peter Weston. . Contact: Helicon 2, 33 Meyrick Drive, Wash Common, Newbury, Berkshire, RG14 6SY. Website is www.helicon.org.uk

All details are correct to the best of our knowledge, we advise contacting organisers before travelling. Always enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope when writing to any of the above contact addresses.

Any information about forthcoming SF / Fantasy / Horror events are always welcome - please send to me at rog@rogpeyton.fsnet.co.uk, tell me about it in the shop or phone me at the shop on 0121 643 1999.

JOSH KIRBY

By now, all, or most of you, will have heard of the death of SF and fantasy artist Josh Kirby. He died in his sleep, aged 72, at the end of October.

Josh was famous for his illustrations of Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* books. Many customers we spoke to thought he was a youngster and new to book covers. Far from the truth! In fact, Josh's first cover was for the Panther edition of Dan Morgan's CEE-TEE MAN way, way back in 1954, followed by the Pan edition of Ian Fleming's MOONRAKER - one of the early James Bond novels.

In the early sixties he did a wonderful series of abstract SF covers for Four Square and Corgi. Superb covers for Hitchcock horror novels and Ray Bradbury's books followed. His work appeared on both sides of the Atlantic - in the US he did dozens of covers for Ace and DAW Books - Ron Goulart, Philip Jose Farmer, Alan Burt Akers, Lin Carter, etc.

The collection of his artwork, COSMIC CORNUCOPIA published a list of every cover he'd had published and I have to admit, although I'd seen virtually every book listed, I was amazed at the sheer volume - as much as 25 covers per year during the 70s.

He will be missed but fortunately we still have his wonderful artwork.

ANDROMEDA SIGNING SESSIONS

By the time you read this, it will be too late to get the new Terry Pratchett books signed. The signing was November 10th.

Simon R Green will be signing his new book - DRINKING MIDNIGHT WINE on Saturday, 17th November at 1pm.

The signing will be at ANDROMEDA, 2-5 Suffolk Street Birmingham B1 1LT. Copies can be ordered by phone - 0121 643 1999, by fax - 0121 643 2001, or by email - mailorder@andromedabook.co.uk

JAMES WHITE AWARD

The 2001 James White Award, established to honour one of Ireland's best loved science fiction writers, was presented on November 3rd in Belfast to David D Levine for his short story "Nucleon".

Levine, a native of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, now resident in Portland, Oregon, receives a cheque for \$150 and a trophy. The story was selected by a panel of

judges from over 100 entries. It will also be published in INTERZONE, Europe's leading magazine of speculative fiction.

Entries for the 2002 Award are now being accepted - details from <http://www.jameswhiteaward.co>

COMMITTEE ANYONE?

It is not too early to think about standing for a committee position at the AGM in January. Even if any of the present committee decide to stand for re-election, you can still stand against them. The posts are Chairman, Secretary, Treasurer, Newsletter Editor and two Ordinary Committee Members. You only have to get someone else in the group to nominate you and write to the current committee telling them of your intentions and naming the person who is nominating you.

NEWS IN BRIEF

...ABORIGINAL SF has ceased publication - Spring 2001 was the final issue ... the hardcover SF Masterworks from Gollancz - 10 titles published in October - were published with a price tag of £14.99 each and not £9.99 as originally announced. The reason was that advance orders from bookshops was nowhere near as good as they'd hoped for. With 10 titles in one month, it was not surprising - one or two a month ... the new David Ambrose novel, COINCIDENCES has been published by Simon & Schuster here in the UK, as general fiction - but it is definitely science fiction. And a damned good one! Check it out. I think it's the best SF novel of the year! And I think I named his previous novel, THE DISCRETE CHARM OF CHARLIE MONK, as best novel of 2000. None of David Ambrose's books have been published as SF, but they are ... THE 2002 Tolkien calendar has gone into reprint - the first to do so. Last year they'd sold out by mid November and didn't have time to reprint. This year they'd sold out by the end

of July! Doubtless this has been a result of all the hype over the forthcoming movie ...

**DON'T FORGET
TO BUY YOUR
TICKETS FOR THE
CHRISTMAS SOCIAL
ON DECEMBER 14**



BOOK REVIEWS



(REVIEWERS please note:- in future all reviews should be emailed direct to me at rog@rogpeyton.fsnet.co.uk) Deadline for each issue is the 1st of the month.

Rating system:-

- 5 star - excellent. A must to read.
- 4 star - very good.
- 3 star - good but flawed.
- 2 star - very average.
- 1 star - read only if there's nowt on telly.
- 0 stars - Turkey! Turkey! Turkey!

THE CITY AND THE STARS

by Arthur C Clarke

Gollancz / £6.99 /paperback

Reviewed by Chris Chivers

Rating * * * * *

Originally written in 1956 and expanded from AGAINST THE FALL OF NIGHT, THE CITY AND THE STARS must rank as one of the all-time great novels in SF. It has been classed as probably Clarke's most perfect work, and it truly deserves this accolade. This classic deserves to be required reading for all new science fiction

fans as it has all the elements of a story from the golden era of SF.

Many millennia in Earth's future, there remains little of the once-proud human race and its remnants have fallen back into the refuge of the city of Diaspar. Little changes in the city as its inhabitants wile away their lives secure in the knowledge that the world around them will remain unchanged as the matrix of their lives will be held forever in the memory of the city's master computer. The original designers of the city put a wild card into the construction of Diaspar in the form of a 'unique' individual who is born with no previous lives and is seeing the city for the very first time. The 'unique' Alvin, the latest person to be born in Diaspar, has a yearning to see beyond the city limits and, unlike his fellow citizens, who are content to live their lives within the city boundary, is frustrated by the claustrophobic environment. In his exploration of the city, Alvin meets up with Khedron the Jester who befriends Alvin just as he has befriended other 'uniques' over the millennia. With Khedron's help, Alvin learns that the past 'uniques' have disappeared from Diaspar in circumstances that his tutor and guardians cannot explain to him.

The story that unfolds on Alvin's journey of discovery, is destined to rewrite the accepted history of the human race and man's attempt to be more than human. Clarke's book is a testament to the enduring power of the SF genre. Even though *THE CITY AND THE STARS* is nearly fifty years old, it still has the power to hold the reader and is a worthwhile addition to the SF Masterworks series. CC

THE SPACE TRILOGY

by Arthur C. Clarke

Gollancz / £7.99 / paperback

Reviewed by Chris Chivers

Rating * * *

This is an omnibus edition of three of Clarke's works from the 50s and contains

new forewords from the great man himself, putting into context the separate stories with the knowledge of fifty years of hindsight.

The first novel, *ISLANDS IN THE SKY*, takes the reader into the world of 16-year-old Roy Malcolm as he prepares for the journey of a lifetime into space as the winner of a TV aviation quiz show. The inner orbital space stations of Earth are regarded as part of the planet and under Earth's jurisdiction. To a youngster's view of things the differences between Earth and the colonies on the Moon and Mars are immaterial as he enjoys the experience of being in orbit around his home world.

As a book written in the early 50s for the 'juvenile' market, it is fairly simplistic in its style and content but is worth the read for the nostalgia content alone.

THE SANDS OF MARS moves the reader to the outer colony of mankind and the friction that is growing between Earth and Mars. The famous SF author Martin Gibson is taking his first trip into space to see for himself the difference between the reality of space travel and the fiction that he has been writing about for years. From Earth's orbiting space station he is destined to travel on the inaugural flight of the *Aries*, a new class of ship designed for the tourist industry rather than the utilitarian ships of an earlier generation. As *Aries*' first flight is also being used as a shakedown cruise, Gibson is the sole passenger on board apart from the crew, and part of his being on board is to write about the trip and relay it back to Earth to publicise the tourist potential of the ship.

With the trip over, Gibson's arrival on Mars is somewhat of an anticlimax as the 'famous author' is treated with some indifference by the colonists who are more interested in taking their colony to a liveable standard rather than mere survival on another world. As Gibson adjusts to the colonists and the harsh landscape that surrounds them, he finds that his attitude to Earth gradually shifting, with surprising results.

This story is more like the vintage Clarke that has made him one of the most formidable writers of SF in the second half of the 20th century.

The final story, *EARTHLIGHT*, takes place on the Moon. Bertram Sadler has been sent by Earth to do a cost-analysis on the Plato observatory and he expects that his cover story will hold up, as his real mission is to find out what's going on between the Moon and the federation of colonies on Mars and Venus. The federation is finally getting ready to cede from Earth and its stifling bureaucracy. Sadler settles into his role of cost-analysis while keeping his ears and eyes open for the person or persons who are passing information on to Mars. While he is plugging away at his assignment, events are moving faster than even he could have imagined. When he gets an offer to travel outside the lunar domes and across the barren surface of the Moon, he readily accepts in order to get away from the boredom of his assignment that seems to be going nowhere. The trip is uneventful until the crew of the lunar rover comes across an unknown installation that they are quickly warned away from. Sadler's interest is piqued about the activity around what can only be a weapon, but a weapon against what?

EARTHLIGHT follows the thread of the earlier stories and brings to a conclusion the breakaway of the colonies from Earth. Clarke has given fictional examples of man's spirit to venture into the unknown of space and make a habitable world for himself away from his home planet.

The styles of the narratives have obvious flaws in them, which can only be seen with the hindsight of 40 years of practical space exploration. Even so, Clarke's stories still make enjoyable reading 40 years on. CC

WHEELERS

by Ian Stewart & Jack Cohen

Earthlight / 505 pgs / £10.00 / trade pbk

Reviewed by Dave Hardy

Rating * * * *

Let's get a few 'incidentals' out of the way first. If one didn't know these authors, one might be forgiven for thinking this novel is by Stewart Cohen; on the cover the first names are so small and thin! (Is this intentional?) Then, on the back of the jacket, far too much information is given away – stuff which we should be allowed to discover for ourselves (often as a surprise) when we get to it. (So what's new?)

OK. This is my kind of science fiction. Well thought out, scientifically literate (of course!), introducing new ideas and making good use of old ones, and with a fine attempt at getting under the skin of the main characters. These being Charlie (later Sir Charles) Dunsmore, archeologist, who 'steals' the discovery of an immensely important tablet under the Sphinx at Giza from Prudence Odingo, who goes on to discover wheeled artifacts on Jupiter's volcanic moon Io but is accused of faking them; her twin sister Charity, and Charity's son Moses, who has an extraordinary affinity with animals. The Moon and many asteroids are controlled by Tibetan Zen Buddhists, who also play a vital part in the proceedings, and there are many other players.

The novel starts in 2194 and ends around 2231, during which time a comet is discovered heading towards Earth (that's one of the old ideas I mentioned). But this time it is casually directed there by the blimp-like creatures living in Jupiter's atmosphere, whose metabolism is so alien that they cannot even conceive of intelligent beings living on the third planet with its poisonous oxygen atmosphere... The scenes on Jupiter, in which Jack's hand is of course very evident, are particularly original and well-written, and the authors succeed in creating

an original alien civilisation - with some odd and amusing undertones of our human bureaucracy and opposition to change!

One of this book's few weaknesses is that there are almost as many coincidences as in a Hardy novel (Thomas, that is). Isn't it a bit suspicious that Moses, a four-year-old black boy who gets separated from his frantic mother when Charity is arrested for assisting her sister with fraud, is kidnapped by a hunter of endangered species and taken to 'Free China' and from there, after many adventures, to 'The Village', finally to be reunited with his mother, turns out to be the *only* human able to communicate with the Jovian aliens?

Occasionally, the authors are tempted to display their erudition, but being Ian and Jack I suppose most of us will forgive them. I have often been impressed by their grasp of sciences far beyond their own specialties; however, I did feel that on pages 36-37 they may have allowed their desire to write some spectacular prose to override astronomical accuracy. They refer to a comet approaching the inner Solar System: "Its water-ice will start to liquefy, then turn to steam..." and later: "boiling and exploding in a percussion of superheated steam, spitting droplets of molten rock." Sorry, guys! A comet's ices *sublime* into the near-vacuum of space, and never become liquid; and its rocks (if there are any) never become molten. Still, that's a minor transgression, and I strongly recommend this book to all our members.

DAH

HAVE YOU GOT YOUR
TICKET FOR OUR
CHRISTMAS SOCIAL? IF
NOT, SEE THE TREASURER
AT THE NOVEMBER
MEETING, OR WRITE TO
HIM AT THE ADDRESS AT
THE BACK OF THIS
NEWSLETTER.

WARRIORS OF THE TEMPEST

by Stan Nicholls

Gollancz /280pgs / £5.99 / paperback

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan

Rating * * * * *

Whether you will enjoy this book, depends on what you look for in fantasy - and what you put down before you started this one. WARRIORS OF THE TEMPEST concludes the trilogy which began with BODYGUARD OF LIGHTNING and continued with LEGION OF THUNDER.

The heroes are orcs, those nasties that got such a bad press in Tolkein's THE LORD OF THE RINGS. The pace is fast and furious with the orcs doing what they are best at - killing - a lot of the time.

The setting is Maras-Dantia, a world populated with a host of mythical creatures, including centaurs, nyadds, goblins, brownies, kobolds and harpies, from a mixture of mythologies (bells should start ringing that this is not what it seems). The ice is encroaching from the north and puritanical humans from the south. Magic is disappearing. In volume one, Jennesta sent her crack orc division to acquire an artefact called an instrumentality. Due to a number of unfortunate circumstances, these orcs, lead by Stryke, found themselves under her death sentence and a quest to find the other four. They haven't thought as far as to what they will do once they have them.

The biggest problem is that it is often difficult to remember that Stryke and company are actually nasty viscous orcs. It is too easy to compare these unfavourably with those in Mary Gentle's GRUNTS where the orcs were over-the-top nasty but you ended up rooting for them. Here, your sympathies are with the orcs from the beginning.

PM

NEXT OF KIN

by Eric Frank Russell

Gollancz / 181pgs / £9.99 / trade pbk

Reviewed by William McCabe

Rating * *

If there is one thing that dates worse than up-to-the-minute cutting-edge science it is contemporary humour. This was probably a very funny book in its day but that day was forty years ago and it has dated badly. The fifties was the heyday of the catch-phrase. Comedians would come onto the stage, utter some signature phrase and have the audience in stitches. The phrase would have some vague cultural significance at the time and perhaps the echo of something known to all but it would also tie itself to one person. While I would not be surprised to find that the phrase "Baloney Baffles Brains" occurs less than a dozen times within this novel, it definitely seems like more. Add to that the almost juvenile gags (the alien race that are "nuts" and have "the willies") and you have something that belongs so much to its time that it's surprising that it survived at all.

Somewhere beneath all this is the story of a soldier that can't abide authority sent on a scouting mission far into enemy territory who somehow manages to pull off an intelligence coup that could change the whole face of an intergalactic war. Even then, there is still something unfinished about the plot.

WAM

HOUSE CORRINO

by Brian Herbert &

Kevin J. Anderson

Hodder / 590 pgs / £17.99 / hardcover

Reviewed by Michael Jones

Rating * *

This is the final volume in the "prequel trilogy" to DUNE, the first two volumes of which I have already reviewed in these pages. What can I add to what I have said

before - that it is written well enough but not as well as the late Frank Herbert would have written it, and probably different from what he would have written anyway.

As it is, what we have is a tediously long (about 1800 pages in all) account of how several people got to where we already knew they were going to be anyway. There is, of course, a lot of new material, but whether any of it is necessary or worthwhile remains open to argument. Personally, I have found it fairly interesting, but I doubt that I shall attempt to remember it all, or to reread these books, next time I feel like reading DUNE again.

I have also managed to put my finger on one fault that has made me uneasy throughout: that the books are divided into chapters of, on average, about six or so pages, each successive chapter dealing with a different character or narrative thread. Since there are about ten of these running concurrently it makes for an irritatingly choppy style and one is tempted to dodge back and forth in search of a decent degree of continuity. One does in fact feel a distinct lack of a coherent narrative thread or a significant underlying message.

To sum up: if you really want to read this you may not be too disappointed, but if you need someone else to decide for you - don't bother.

MJ

FUTURE MEETINGS

December 14 - the Christmas Social. See panel.

January 11 - the Annual General Meeting. This is where your committee reports on the past year, you have a chance to ask questions, this year's committee stands down and you get to choose a committee for next year. This will be followed by an auction conducted by yours truly.

February 8 - SF artist Fred Gambino will be talking about SF art and showing slides of the many wonderful covers he has done.

MARCH 2002 - there's a VERY good possibility we've got US author KIM STANLEY ROBINSON (RED MARS, GREEN MARS, BLUE MARS, ANTARCTICA, THE WILD SHORE, ICEHENGE, etc.) to come and talk to the Group. Stan will be over in the UK to promote his new alternate history book - THE YEARS OF SALT AND RICE and we've started negotiations with his publisher to get him to Brum. He'll be signing at ANDROMEDA.

Newsletter 362 copyright 2001 for the Birmingham Science Fiction Group. Designed by Rog Peyton. Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the committee or the general membership or, for that matter, the person giving their opinion. Some people like being controversial and may actually believe the opposite to what they say - I think I've been accused of that at various times in the past .

Thanks to Martin Tudor, Steve Green, all reviewers for their contributions.

Apologies for the credit omission in last month's newsletter. The review by Ron Miller of David Hardy's new artbook HARDYWARE was commissioned for and has appeared in InfinityPlus (www.infinityplus.co.uk). Thanks go to them for permission to reuse this review.

The BRUM GROUP Website address is www.bsfg.freesevers.com/ Contributions, ideas, etc. always welcome.

The CHRISTMAS SOCIAL

DECEMBER 14

at the Selly Park Tavern (10 minutes bus ride from city centre). Enjoy an evening of good old-fashioned skittles - we play it the correct way (and the silly ways!). Price will be about £10 which includes hot food during the evening's festivities. The menu consists of:

Roast Chicken Breast & Chips

Lasagne & Chips

Fish & Chips

Scampi & Chips

Vegetable Lasagne & Chip

All served with a choice of salad or peas (jacket potato if preferred)

PLEASE GIVE FIRST CHOICE AND SECOND CHOICE. (This is just in case only 1 or 2 people pick one particular dish and it becomes uneconomical to do it. Unlikely, but you never know.)

NOTE that this will be TICKET ONLY - there will NOT be any tickets on the door.

Tickets available from Alan Woodford at address below.

The Birmingham Science Fiction Group meets on the second Friday of each month at the Britannia Hotel, New Street. Membership is £16 per year per person (or £21 for two members living at the same address). This includes the 12 free issues of the Newsletter plus reduced entrance fee at each meeting. Cheques should be made payable to "The Birmingham Science Fiction Group" and sent to our Treasurer, Alan Woodford, 2 Old Port Close, Tipton, West Midlands, DY4 7XN (e-mail enquiries bsfg@bortas.demon.co.uk)