

Brum Group News

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

MARCH 2002 ISSUE 366

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**FRIDAY 8TH MARCH
BIRMINGHAM AUTHOR**

JOEL LANE

Whenever a serial killer is apprehended, local residents tend to comment upon how quiet they were, how unassuming and polite. The same is often true of the best authors of horror and dark fantasy - and let me warn you, Joel Lane would make the perfect neighbour.

His short stories inhabit a decaying urban sprawl both reassuringly familiar and terrifyingly unknowable, where the walking dead stagger forth in search of company rather than fresh brains, where the true horror is the grey entropy at the heart of modern society. Nor is his poetry - winner of the Eric Gregory Award in 1993 - any less likely to

quicken the pulse and raise the hair on the back of your neck.

Amongst Joel's most amusing quirks is his sense of location. No sooner had he moved from Handsworth to Acocks Green than Olton and Solihull began to provide the backdrop for his tales of unease and loss. Ah, we thought, he won't be able to repeat the trick as a contributor to *Alchemy's* award-winning fantasy anthology **SWORDS AGAINST THE MILLENNIUM** - only to see the protagonists of "The Hunger of the Leaves" flee the 'violent towns of Ulturn and Acoxgrun'. Smartarse.

Following the release of his

APRILMEETING -

Please note that our meeting room at the Britannia Hotel is only a few yards away from the ramp up to New Street Station.

collection **THE EARTH WIRE** (Egerton, 1994) and his first novel, **FROM BLACK TO BLUE** (Serpent's Tail, 2000), Joel is currently working on a second novel for the latter imprint, **THE BLUE MASK**. From past experience, it should be well worth waiting for. *Steve Green*

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 are welcome but may not vote or voice opinions during the AGM.

Want a copy of the Minutes of this year's AGM? Just ask our Treasurer (see back page) for hard copy or email copy.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

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](http://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](http://www:helicon.org.uk)

EASTERCON MEMBERSHIPS FOR SALE!

Anyone wishing to register for this year's Eastercon at Jersey (see above) can save some money. Both Vernon Brown and Rog Peyton have two registrations each **FOR SALE**. Only £25 each.

April 3 - DAVID GEMMELL will be appearing at Wednesbury Library from 7pm. Price £1.50. Refreshments available.

April 23 - MICHAEL SCOTT ROHAN will be appearing at Wednesbury Library from 7.30pm. Price £1.50. Refreshments available.

Contact Wednesbury Library, Walsall Street, Wednesbury, WV10 9EH, tel: 0121 556 0351 for further details.

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.

Those of you with Sky TV will no doubt have noticed the showing on the Sci-Fi Channel [don't you just LOVE that name? Guaranteed to make you switch off!!!] of a new version of Frank Herbert's mighty epic DUNE. Michael Jones watched the new version and here are his views...

DUNE

THE FILM – THE SERIES BY MICHAEL JONES

I would once have thought DUNE would be impossible to film and in fact several projects to do so foundered before a version directed by David Lynch appeared in 1984.

To begin on a positive note - the sets, the costumes and the special effects in this film were all superb. Kyle MacLachlan, in his first-ever film part, was excellent in the lead role of Paul Atreides (although hardly the slight fifteen-year-old, small for his age, described in the book) and he was supported by a cast which included several world-famous star names and a bevy of other fine performers, all of whom, without exception, played their parts to perfection.

Writing shortly after the film's release, Frank Herbert himself explained that a film represents almost a translation of a book into a different language, so that it is unreasonable to expect an absolutely faithful rendition. He also said that although enough material had been shot to make a film of about five hours, practical considerations meant that it had to be reduced to more like two hours for cinema release so that many scenes,

including some which might have been regarded as of pivotal importance, had to be excised. Within these constraints he was well satisfied.

However, there were two deviations from the book that went too far: the introduction of a new weapons system based on sonic projection and the rainstorm (implied as a manifestation of Paul's god-like powers) with which the film ended. These had nothing to do with Herbert's story and personally I felt they were unforgivable.

The appearance a few years later of a version of the film extended by about an hour was a promising development. It transpired that it had been re-cut with the order of some parts changed and some of the deleted material reinstated, including some of those important lost scenes. Unfortunately several irritating voiceovers and a crassly inept prologue had also been added, the general intention being to make it easier for an audience unfamiliar with the book to understand what it was all about. So although this new version has to be regarded as an improvement, on the basis that more is better, somebody seems to have tried really hard to make it a wasted opportunity.

Within the past year a completely NEW treatment, sponsored by the Sci-Fi Channel, has appeared, taking the form of three 90-minute episodes. It follows the book fairly closely, although bits have been rewritten to some extent, developing characters and themes in different ways. Again, sets, costumes and special effects are virtually beyond reproach, but the same cannot be said of the cast. Both Paul

and his mother pale beside their counterparts in the David Lynch film and about the rest of the characters, played by an eclectic mixture of actors and actresses drawn mostly from various European countries, the best that can be said is that their foreignness lends them a degree of exoticism appropriate to their roles. Not a one of them, with the possible exception of William Hurt as Duke Leto, displays the stature and authority exhibited by the earlier cast.

So in conclusion, which is best? What I would really like to see is all the David Lynch material restored and re-cut into a four- or five-hour epic. Frank Herbert suggested in 1985 that this might be done as a mini-series, but it seems unlikely to happen now. Failing that, the Sci-Fi Channel version is the best by far, on account of being closer to the book as well as including more of it. I shall always retain the earlier versions in my DVD collection though.

MJ

2002 TAFF Race

TAFF is happy to announce the 2002 TAFF race from Europe to North America. The winner will attend Con Jose, the 2002 Worldcon, being held in San Jose, California from Thursday 29 August to Monday 2 September.

Candidates should be European fans, and must be nominated by three nominators from Europe and two from North America. Nominations should be provided either in writing (and signed) or by e-mail (from an email address that we can confirm is theirs). Candidates

should also supply a £10 bond as a token of good faith, and a written platform of no more than 100 words. Cheques should be made out to Sue Mason. All these things should be sent to Sue Mason, 3 York Street, Altrincham, Cheshire, WA15 9QH, UK, no later than 28 February 2002.

Providing there are at least two candidates, voting (on the official ballot) will start immediately, and continue until 18th May.

If you have any queries, we urge you to write to Sue at the above address, or email her at Sue@plotka.com

Background note:

WHAT IS TAFF? The Trans-Atlantic Fan Fund was created in 1953 for the purpose of providing funds to bring well-known and popular fans familiar to those on both sides of the ocean across the Atlantic.

Since that time, TAFF has regularly brought North American fans to European conventions and European fans to North American conventions. TAFF exists solely through the support of fandom. The candidates are voted on by interested fans all over the world, and each vote is accompanied by a donation of not less than US \$3 or UK £2. These votes, and the continued generosity of fandom, are what make TAFF possible.

By custom, the administrators of TAFF are generally the two previous delegates, one from Europe and one from North America. Currently the North American administrator is VJ Bowen, P.O. Box 156, Village Station, New York, NY 10014-0156, USA.

email - vjbowen@aol.com

The European administrator is Sue Mason, 3 York Street, Altrincham, Cheshire, WA15 9QH, UK
email - sue@plotka.com

More information about TAFF's history, customs, and practices may be found at the unofficial site maintained by Dave Langford at <http://www.dcs.gla.ac.uk/SF-Archives/Taff/>

NEWS IN BRIEF....

The closure of ANDROMEDA BOOKSHOP leaves a gaping hole in the SF scene in Brum. But you may be able to own a share of a new SF shop - shares are £5000 each - if interested contact **Rog Peyton** on 0121 643 1999 (daytime) or 0121 477 6901 (evenings and Sunday). Or email to rog@rogpeyton.fsnet.co.uk

Christopher Priest won the 2001 Prix Utopia (the European Grand Master Award). It is reported that he gave his acceptance speech in French The 'Riverworld' series by **Philip Jose Farmer** has begun filming in New Zealand and will air on the Sci-Fi Channel (USA) in mid-2002. It may become a TV series So what happened to HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER'S STONE at the BAFTA Awards? THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING walked away with several BAFTAs including Best Movie and Best Director **Ian R MacLeod** has sold THE LIGHT AGES (a mixture of **Charles Dickens** and **China Mieville**) and a second as-yet untitled novel to **John Jarrold** at Earthlight. As Ian lives in Sutton Coldfield, isn't it about time we invited him to the

Group? A tie-in with the release of THE LIGHT AGES would seem to be a Good Idea ...



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!

DEEP FUTURE

by Stephen Baxter

Gollancz / 215pgs / £6.99 / paperback

Reviewed by Michael Jones

Star rating * * * * *

In this book Stephen Baxter analyses the future of the human race and its place in the universe according to the most up-to-date scientific theories. He begins with our future development on this planet and then goes on to look at the development of the Moon and the possibilities of terraforming the other planets before we expand out of the Solar System altogether. Along the way he discusses the likelihood of other intelligences having got there before us and discusses the question "if they exist, why can't

we see them?" (the Fermi Paradox). Eventually, countless billions of years into the future, all the stars will have burned out and our unimaginably remote descendants will live by mining black holes for gravitational energy. From that remote future our brief existence will be indistinguishable from the Big Bang with which the cosmos began.

In one sense, of course, this is all highly speculative, but it is the sort of informed speculation that we have learned to call 'science fact' and to regard as the basis for the SF we like to enjoy. There are a hundred SF stories hidden in this book and in fact Baxter himself has used many of them in his recent *Manifold* series, having employed the same research ideas as a basis for both fictional and factual writing.

However much SF one reads, one should always be able to find time to read a book like this in order to preserve a sense of perspective. *MJ*

***CHASM CITY* by Alastair Reynolds**

Gollancz / 616pgs / £6.99 / paperback

Reviewed by Michael Jones

Star rating * * * * *

Alastair Reynolds' first novel **REVELATION SPACE** was an incredible five-star blockbuster and now he has followed it up with a kind of prequel involving a lead character and a setting which both appeared peripherally in the earlier book, although this story is completely unconnected with it.

It begins as the story of Tanner Mirabel, a former soldier now employed as a security specialist on the planet Sky's Edge. Following the killing of his employer and the employer's wife, he follows the person responsible to another planet called Yellowstone with the intention of exacting retribution, but finds that the principal settlement there, the titular Chasm City, has fallen victim to a plague. All the nano-machinery which should maintain the city and its inhabitants has been corrupted, rendering the place a gothic nightmare through which Mirabel must navigate himself to his goal, depending on his wits and such allies as he can find or buy. Meanwhile he is plagued by apocalyptic visions of the original colonisation effort which founded his native planet Sky's Edge.

To be honest I felt that the construction of the book was somewhat too elaborately contrived. The contemporary action would continue at a relentless pace did it not keep being interrupted by two sets of flashbacks – the visions to which I have just referred and the recounting by Mirabel of the events which actually began the story but took place before the beginning of the book. Consequently the overall pacing of the novel suffers although the recounting of both stories in this way turns out to be essential to the eventual working-out of the plot and it is only as matters come to a head that one realises how everything dovetails together. Along the way a consistently high level of invention and a meticulous attention to detail are maintained to keep the

reader interested and to help him forget that this is a very long book.

It is sometimes found that a new author puts his all into his first novel and it may take him some time to recover the level of performance with which he began. That is obviously not the case with Reynolds who possesses two gifts – the ability to plot a complex story and the power to describe scenes so clearly that the mind's eye has no trouble in seeing his vision. Both are here exhibited in a fine second book which I have no hesitation in recommending. MJ

ICEBONES

by Stephen Baxter

Gollancz / 278pgs / £6.99 / paperback

Reviewed by Dave Hardy

Star Rating * * * * *

This is Book Three of the *Mammoth* series, and the final volume. This series has apparently been compared with *WATERSHIP DOWN*, but the only similarity really is that it is anthropomorphic – the animals talk to each other as if they are humans. But the culture of the woolly mammoth (for these are the animals in question) is quite different from that of humans, or 'the Lost' as they are known here, and Baxter has clearly done a great deal of research into the habits of their species, which must mainly be elephants, since mammoths became extinct some 11,000 years ago. Didn't they? So why, in the first book, do we start coming across artifacts which are obviously not only human, but belong to advanced, technological humans? All is revealed as the books progress, and in this volume we

reach the ultimate phase: the Sky Steppe. It is obviously best if readers have read the previous two, though if you happen to pick up this one in an auction, it is still a very fine read. But it would be interesting to know, if it were possible for him/her not to read the blurb on the back cover, how long it would take a new reader to realise that these mammoths are not on Earth but on *Mars* in the year 3000AD! (Of course, the front cover is a bit of a giveaway too – not by Fangorn this time, who was probably busy in Hollywood, but by Peter Barrett, whom I must admit I hadn't heard of – but one might not notice the reddish landscape. And those rocks are more marshmallow-like than anything I ever painted. . .)

According to the Cycle – the mammoths' handed-down story, which amounts to their Bible – the Sky Steppe is paradise. However, this world is very far from paradise. It is cold, the air is thin, there is dust everywhere and often little to eat, and the rest of the mammoths are starving because they are used to being fed by the Lost, who have deserted them and left them to fend for themselves.

Enter Icebones, the heroine of the title, who, although she often finds it hard to believe, is destined to become the saviour of all mammoths on Mars. Why there are mammoths on Mars in the first place and how Icebones got there I'll leave you to find out for yourself, because I strongly recommend that you do read this trilogy. It is quite different from anything else that Baxter has written and if you think of him just

in terms of 'hard SF' you're in for a pleasant surprise. *DH*

REBEL'S CAGE: FOURTH BOOK OF ELITA

by Kate Jacoby

Gollancz / 392 pages / £10.99 / Tr pbk

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan

One problem with a fantasy series such as this is that the volumes are published at intervals so great that the nuances of the relationship between characters is forgotten. Another is the fact that the books form a continuous narrative and it is never easy to pick up the threads part way through. Despite a synopsis, character development and subtle clues that keep the reader one step ahead, are lost. Fortunately, there is not a density of characters or depth of political intrigue such as George R. R. Martin develops in his fantasy novels. There is, however, enough here to keep the momentum. *REBEL'S CAGE* is the penultimate book and is a good read as it pushes the story along. Robert Douglas, Duke of Dunlorn is a sorcerer in a country where sorcery is outlawed, yet he was advisor to the current king's father. Under Kenrick, the country of Lusara is being ravaged to serve the needs of a megalomaniac. Only Douglas's raids give the people any

hope. Douglas, though, is haunted by a demon, a fear seeded by a prophecy that he will destroy the thing he loves most. At first, he believed this to be a person, now he suspects that it is Lusara itself. In *REBEL'S CAGE*, he will finally find out what it is. The final volume, *TRIAL OF FIRE*, will detail how he copes with this knowledge.

I would never recommend anyone to begin in the middle of a series, but for a fast, enjoyable read, seek out the earlier volumes and start there. *PM*

Newsletter 366 copyright 2002 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 Steve Green and Martin Tudor for news and info this month. A Special 'Thank You' to Dave Hardy for stepping into the breach and producing last month's newsletter.

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

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)