

Brum Group News

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

APRIL 2002

ISSUE 367

Honorary Presidents:

BRIAN W ALDISS

HARRY HARRISON

Committee:

Vernon Brown (Chairman)

Vicky Cook (Secretary)

Alan Woodford (Treasurer)

Rog Peyton (Newsletter Editor)

+ Steve Jones & William McCabe

NOVACON 32 Chairman: Martin Tudor

Friday 12th April

ANNE GAY

&

STAN NICHOLLS

A couple of years ago, Anne and Stan visited the Group to talk about a new website devoted to SF and fantasy that they were working on. This was at a time when I wasn't on the net and so couldn't visit and see what wonderful things they were saying about science fiction and fantasy.

When I eventually got connected, I couldn't find the site, and then recently found it by accident. There, in all its embarrassing glory, was the interview I'd done with them for the launch of

their site 2-3 years ago. If I'd known they were going to be using it for all that time, I'd have asked for royalties! Well, their site is now under a new name but still using the old interview. In view of recent events regarding ANDROMEDA, it might be a good idea to remove that interview.

Anne Gay is, of course, a local SF writer with several books written and a couple of them still in print, while her husband Stan Nicholls has written SF and fantasy as well as editing several

MAY Meeting - co-founder of the BSFG and one-time member, **Peter Weston** will be talking to the Group, almost certainly accompanied by a slide show.

non-fiction books, notably the volume of collected interviews with SF and fantasy authors. Hopefully Stan will bring copies to the meeting for resale.

RGP

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.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

April 3 to April 20 - **TERRY PRATCHETT's TRUCKERS** adapted for the stage by Bob Eaton and directed by Rob Swain. Where? The Belgrade Theatre, Coventry. Tickets are £5 - £12 and the box office phone is 02476 553055.

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.

NEWS IN BRIEF....

. . . Hot news from Helicon in Jersey is that CHASM CITY by Alastair Reynolds won the British SF Award for best novel . . . and Eastercon 2004 will be in Blackpool! Memories flood back of the last time we were in Blackpool and those fantastic meals - in one weekend we had a fabulous Indian meal, a great Chinese meal and the best Italian meal I've ever had (I normally avoid Italian as I find it too bland). Another time we had a wonderful Thai meal in a Thai Hotel! Sadly that restaurant has gone, or so I believe, but it's nice thinking about what new wonders we'll find...

Apologies for the lack of news this month - the truth is that with ANDROMEDA closed, no news is coming through to me - all my usual avenues for sources of news have effectively stopped dead. No issues of LOCUS have been seen since January. I'll have to make alternative arrangements so that I can once again fill these pages with wonderfully exciting news for your edification and delight.

YOUR BRANCH NEEDS **YOU!**

by **VERNON BROWN**

I was reading the journal of a professional Institute to which I belong when an article caught my eye. It started like this:

YOUR BRANCH NEEDS YOU...

Do you attend the meetings organised by your local Branch of the Institute? Do you have views of the types of activities that your Branch should be organising? Do you have particular skills or contacts that would help your Branch? Would you like to organise, or help organise, a Branch event? Would you be prepared to give some of your time to help your Branch in other ways?

Substitute 'Group' for 'Branch of the Institute', I thought, and it would make a good introduction to a Newsletter article that I was about to write. In fact, it also showed that other organisations face the same difficulties that we do.

All organisations require two things - members and something to give them. Some, such as professional Institutes, have a 'captive membership', others like the BSG need to advertise and compete, but all need to provide something; in our case it's a monthly programme item and newsletter

Since the Group was founded some thirty years ago we've had a lot of programme items, mainly speakers, and it's becoming difficult to come up with something new every month. OK, we can invite some speakers back and repeat an occasional quiz or panel, but we don't want to do this too often. Which is where, I hope, YOU come in.

Your committee is compiling a master list of possible speakers for the Group, after when we will contact each one and ask if they would be willing to speak to us sometime in the future; from the replies we receive we will put together our programme for some time ahead. We are also putting together a list of general speaker sources such as universities, libraries, etc., to which we can address a general request for speakers.

But there's only half a dozen of us on the committee and we need YOUR assistance! If you would like to help would you please list any speakers, or

sources (with addresses if possible) and send the list to Alan Woodford (address at end of this Newsletter) or bring it to the next meeting. It doesn't matter how improbable they may appear, their mere mention might remind someone else of something or someone useful. To help you there is a list of possible types/topics of talks with this newsletter. Any and all suggestions will be gratefully received.

The Group must also advertise if it is to keep its membership up, the more members we have, the more we can do. Times have changed since the halcyon days of the early '70s; there is now a lot more competition from videos, computers, comics and commercial influences in general, all of which means that the traditional word-of-mouth methods of recruitment no longer suffice. We must advertise as widely as possible. Your committee is doing its best but with your aid it can do more.

Many supermarkets, libraries, etc., allow free advertising on notice boards provided near main entrances. With this newsletter you should find advertising material that can be used in this way. The small poster is intended for larger notice-boards while the small cards can be folded to fit card slots on the boards. Would you please place these in suitable places in your area so that we cover as large an area as possible - if you need more slips or posters, contact Alan or any committee member at a Meeting.

And finally, please remember that your committee welcomes ideas or comments - preferably constructive - that will benefit the Group because, don't forget, YOU are the Group. VB

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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 FRESCO

by Sheri S Tepper

Gollancz / £6.99 / 406 pgs / pbk

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan

Star rating * * * * *

Everything Sheri Tepper writes is different and there seems to be no end to the variety of science fiction forms

that she explores. They can be read as enjoyable stories, or delve beneath for the subtler influences. *THE FRESCO* takes a look at belief in its various forms.

For Benita Alvarez Shipton, it is self-belief. Her meeting with a pair of aliens who wish her to deliver a message to the American government, gives her the opportunity to escape the belief that she is worthless and find a way out of a violent marriage.

For some, belief is shaken - Benita's husband's belief, for example, that she will always bail him out is proved wrong, and on a larger scale, the belief by politicians and large corporations that they are always right, comes unstuck.

The aliens have a belief in the story of their Fresco, the painting that dominates their lives. They study the images recorded from times past as the Fresco itself is now invisible behind layers of smoke from votive candles. Superstitiously, it must not be cleaned, though Chiddy, Benita's alien friend once accidentally saw a fragment of the original. It is the visit of Benita and other human's to Chiddy's planet that challenges their beliefs. Thus all the main characters are forced to reassess their beliefs and the majority gain from the process. Read and enjoy.

PM

CELIKA: Book One of the MERLIN CODEX

by Robert Holdstock

Earthlight / £6.99 / 434 pgs / pbk

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan

Star rating * * * *

What Holdstock is very good at is taking the familiar and twisting it, putting a slant all of his own on it. He did this to very effectively in the *Mythago Wood* series. He also has a great feeling for the misty periods in time when legends were being formed.

The narrator, Merlin, is a 'wandering Jew' figure, continually walking the Earth, unageing. He is nearly immortal, but not god-like. He is magic, but each time he uses his powers, he ages a little. This Merlin is very mean with his skills - he wants to stay young. He also has a strong streak of loyalty.

Merlin arrives at an ice-bound lake towards the end of the long Arctic night. From its depths, he calls the fabulous ship, *Argo*, and resurrects her captain, Jason. Most people are familiar with the tale of Jason's quest for the Golden fleece, though not everyone knows how his wife, Medea, killed their sons as retribution for Jason's adultery. Merlin has discovered that not only did Medea trick Jason into thinking the boys were dead but that she had hidden them well by sending them seven hundred years into their future. Grown to manhood, they are alive now. With the *Argo* rebuilt, and with a new crew, Jason is prepared anew to search for them.

This novel not only adds a new dimension to the classic Greek Myth, but it offers a new slant to the Merlin story. Well paced and enjoyable.

PM

THE ANNUNCIATION OF THE STARBORN

by *Bernadette Danaher*

Bastard Books / 229 pgs / £6.75 / pbk

Reviewed by William McCabe

Star Rating * * *

The cover of this book proclaims its publisher's name along with the slogan 'Daring New Literature' with more prominence than the title of the book. The mission statement on the first page follows this up with words like 'fresh', 'innovative' and 'radical'. If I were to follow this with suggestions of Burroughs, you'd probably expect something that most would find unreadable. This would be misleading. Most of the company's adjectives do not belong here - although this is a new author - and the writer this calls to mind is Edgar Rice Burroughs (not William).

What we have here is good old-fashioned sword and sorcery with the emphasis on the latter. Our 'hero' is magically transported to another world where he is the only one who can stop the evil (?) from destroying everything. How he is expected to do this is not explained - it seems to have more to do with being in the right place at the right time - and most of the time he seems to be just a viewpoint for the reader rather than taking any active part in the story.

The setting is a world with three sentient species. The first is all-female part-human part-lioness (in a centaur-like arrangement) religious / magical caste. The female lead is one of these and therefore, despite politicking and the odd treachery, these are the good guys. The second race is effectively people with bird's heads. Their new leader has been taken over by something nasty in a meteor so they pretty much get to be the bad guys (except for the odd heroic resistance type). Race number three is generally butchered (out of shot) by the bad guys and seem to serve no other purpose.

This is a solid and unremarkable story, reasonably well written.

In accordance with its 'Daring New' philosophy the publisher sells its books on-line at bastardbooks.com.

WAM

[ed. - three stars!!!??? It sounds pretty awful, William. Are you sure you meant 'solid' in your summing up? Or did you mean 'stolid'. And where does the annunciation come into it...? Sounds like bad Lin Carter with a pretentious title - RGP]

THE OBSIDIAN TOWER:

Book 3 of the Jewelfire Trilogy

by *Freda Warrington*

Earthlight / £6.99 / 708 pgs / pbk

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan

Star Rating * * *

Freda Warrington writes two kinds of books; adventure fantasy set in magical worlds and modern world

supernatural (in which I include her vampire novels and the sequel to DRACULA). This series falls into the former category. It is difficult picking up the threads of a trilogy at the start of the final volume, especially when there is no synopsis. It is easier if only the middle volume is missing. There are new characters, whose introduction has been missed, but on the whole, the most important facts can be picked up by an intelligent reader.

The series began with THE AMBER CITADEL. When the king garners a title of workers from all corners of Aventuria to build his new tower, Tanthe's sister, Ysomir, is chosen. So she, Ysomir's lover Lynden and his brother, Rufryd, decide to fetch her back. At this point, and for much of the first volume, this could be regarded as a standard, adventure fantasy. Once Ysomir reaches the capital, Parione, however, more interesting complications are added.

Sometime during the second volume, THE SAPPHIRE THRONE, Aventuria is overrun by Bhahtadomen, a race who suck the life out of the land. The final volume, THE OBSIDIAN TOWER, becomes the story of how these creatures are defeated.

Unless it plays a major part in the middle volume, the concept of Jewelfire, the series title, seems greatly under-used. Fantasy trilogies need a lot of the unusual to stand out from the morass. This, unfortunately, hasn't quite got it, though it will be enjoyed by many. PM

SCHILD'S LADDER

by Greg Egan

Gollancz / 250pgs / £10.99 / tr pbk
(also published in hardcover at £16.99)

Reviewed by Michael Jones

Star rating * *

Set in the far future, the story opens with an experiment to test laws of physics which have held good for twenty thousand years. The aim is the observable creation of a new kind of spacetime expected to last for six-trillionths of a second; what actually happens is that the resulting novo-vacuum is stable and begins to expand at half the speed of light, swallowing everything in its path. Investigators come together from all over inhabited space to study the phenomenon and try to understand it well enough to solve the dilemma between the views of opposing factions - whether to destroy it (if possible) or to surrender to it.

Humans in this remote future are as highly advanced as one might expect. Near-immortal and super-intelligent, they travel between worlds by sending their mentalities by radio to be impressed upon blank bodies which are then remodelled to suit. They leave their previous bodies behind as back-ups and make further back-up copies of themselves before going into danger. In-built microprocessors broaden their powers of communication and provide perfect memory and total recall.

To be absolutely frank I found this book hard to read and difficult to understand. The advanced mathematical

theories are on that tantalising edge of comprehension where I was unsure whether my failure to understand was due to my own lack of mathematical ability or simply because it was made-up nonsense. Technical references quoted at the end of the book suggest that the former is more likely, but I cannot help feeling that the author has been a bit too clever and has produced a work which will be fully accessible to only a limited readership clever enough to follow it. Such might find it really enjoyable, but for the average reader like myself it is too much like hard work to be truly entertaining.

MJ

Newsletter 367 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 Dave Langford for news and info this month.

Thanks also to our illustrious chairman, the ever-youthful and overly-polite Vernon Brown, for the article in which he takes a long time to say "Get off your fat backsides, pull your fingers out and start doing something!" To which your committee, in one voice, said "Hear! Hear!"

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

And one last piece of interesting SF news provided by Vernon:-

"Scientists have taken chunks of fish muscle (meat) and grown it in a more or less artificial solution, opening the way for the mass production of meat that does not involve killing animals."

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(Except for getting the original chunks, that is....)

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)