

Brum Group News

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

MAY 2003

ISSUE 380

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+ Steve Jones & William McCabe

NOVACON 33 Chairman: Martin Tudor

May Meeting (Friday 9th at 7.45pm)

SF MOVIES ARE THERE ANY GOOD ONES?

Science fiction stories adapted for the screen have not fared well, with more turkeys than there are in a butcher's shop the week before Christmas. The adaptation of Robert Heinlein's *STARSHIP TROOPERS* immediately springs to mind. Some say that it's a good movie but has nothing to do with Heinlein's work. True? What do you think?

A small panel will be discussing the merits (or otherwise) of various movies at this month's meeting. The final panel has yet to be decided. But this is the kind of meeting that welcomes your participation. Do you know of a *GOOD SF* movie that might have been overlooked? We'll be dividing films into two categories - films based on books/stories and films originating from movie scripts. As the whole genre is so vast, we'll be limiting our views to *SF* - not fantasy films (of which there are many excellent examples). If this evening is popular, maybe we'll do fantasy films another time.

Come along - bring your list of good (or bad) movies with you. Have your say (if you want). Arguments anyone?

RGP

June Meeting - still to be finalised but we're getting there!

OUR NEW MEETING PLACE

Currently we meet at The Old Joint Stock, ideally situated in the city centre, a few minutes walk from road, rail and Metro stations, in Temple Row overlooking St Philips Cathedral. It's in the upstairs room - through the pub on right hand side, right to the back corner and up the stairs. Our meeting room is opposite the top of the stairs, slightly to the left. But the doors should be open...

RGP

2002 NEBULA AWARDS

The following awards were presented on April 19th. MC was Harry Harrison.

Best Novel: **AMERICAN GODS** by Neil Gaiman (Morrow, Jul 2001)

Best Novella: **"Bronte's Egg"** by Richard Chwedyk (Fantasy & SF, Aug 2002)

Best Novelette: **"Hell is the Absence of God"** by Ted Chiang (Starlight 3, Tor 2001)

Best Short Story: **"Creature"** by Carol Emshwiller (Fantasy & SF, Nov 2001)

Best Script: **THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING** by Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens and Peter Jackson (New Line Cinema, December 2001)

As previously announced, Ursula K. Le Guin was honored as the 20th SFWA Grand Master.

BSFA AWARDS 2003

Best Novel: **THE SEPARATION** by Christopher Priest (Earthlight, 2002)

Best short fiction: **"Coraline"** by Neil Gaiman

Best artwork: **Dominic Harman**, for his INTERZONE 179 cover

Best Related Publication: **David Langford**, for his introduction to MAPS: THE UNCOLLECTED JOHN SLADEK (Big Engine).

P E T E R D A Y

Peter Day, writer, fan and long-term BSFG member, died on the 23rd February 2003. He was 73 and had been in Birmingham's City Hospital since December, suffering from what was eventually diagnosed as inoperable liver cancer. After a long search by Social Services for relatives, he was cremated at Perry Barr, Birmingham, on 26th March. His brother David and a handful of others attended.

Born and educated in Manchester, Peter did his National Service in the Coldstream Guards. He always had that tall, commanding presence, and an enduring dislike of authority. He was married at one time, and had a son and two

daughters, but lost touch with his family some forty years ago. At one stage he owned a block of flats in Manchester, and at another time he managed a launderette. Rog Peyton remembers meeting Peter at the Easter convention in 1964, and his interest in SF continued but not his active presence in fandom.

In 1978 he was studying Psychology at Birmingham University as a mature student. There he contacted Simon Pitt (who was working in the university library and had recently founded Cannon Hill Writers' Group). Peter joined that group and chaired its weekly meetings humorously and with great efficiency for about twelve years. He wrote (among other pieces) a brilliantly rude parody of Edgar Allan Poe's poem "The Raven", and one published story (for a high-class porn magazine). He was working on a heroic fantasy novel for years. He was also a member of Mensa, and he developed an interest in painting and drawing in his last few years.

After a gap of perhaps fifteen years he began attending conventions again in the early 1980s and was a member of the BSG from that time. Recently he was one of those who looked after the Art Show at Novacon.

I'll miss his strong opinions and his great sense of humour. I'm sorry he never achieved his potential as a writer.

Chris Morgan

NEWS IN BRIEF

.... Congratulations to **Dave Hardy** for winning the ANALOG best cover of the year award - good on yer Dave! director **Chris Nolan** (Memento) will helm THE PRESTIGE, a film adaptation of **Christopher Priest's** novel about the world of magicians **Peter Mayhew** will return as Chewbacca in the third STAR WARS movie **Sir Arthur C Clarke**, who retired several years (and books) ago, has sold novel THE LAST THEOREM to Gollancz. No US sale as yet **Frederik Pohl** has sold a new *Heechee* novel to Del Rey **E C 'Ted' Tubb** has sold a new novel FOOTSTEPS OF ANGELS, resold DEBRACY'S DRUG and sold a new collection MIRROR OF THE NIGHT. The photo of Ted in the April LOCUS is amazing - I swear he looks younger than when I first met him in 1964!!! A coincidence that his new collection mentions a mirror? the April issue of LOCUS runs a major article/interview with **Ramsey Campbell** You've almost certainly now heard the news that **J K Rowling** earns more than the Queen. It certainly puts book sales into perspective (£270 million!!!). And she only get 10% of the total retail sales!!!! All those editors who rejected the first Harry Potter book must be feeling a little sick **John Varley** fans will be astonished to hear of a new novel - RED THUNDER - now out in the US On the fannish side, **Bill Burns** won the Doc Weir Award for popularity/services to fandom the site of the 2005 Eastercon will again be the Hanover at Hinckley - a fine site for a convention! Full details next month

RGP



BOOK REVIEWS



(**REVIEWERS** please note:- the flow of review copies from publishers has restarted and I believe Vernon has already arranged reviews for some of the books already received. 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. RGP

CANTATA-140 by Philip K Dick

Gollancz / 188 pgs / £6.99 / pbk

Reviewed by William McCabe

Star rating * *

I had not seen this title before I picked up this book. Although Gollancz have printed a reasonably complete list of other works in their previous Philip K Dick re-issues, this title isn't on the list. It seems this is either an alternate title for, or an alternate version of THE CRACK IN SPACE which they have listed but not re-issued.

The book is set on a world so overcrowded that people are kept deep-frozen in large warehouses to make enough room for the rest. Despite all this the population is still rising. Jim Briskin, campaigning to become the first black US president wants to do something about this although there don't seem to be any options. Then someone discovers a 'hole' in a defective 'Jiffi-Scuttler' that leads to an alternative, almost unpopulated earth. This seems to be the perfect solution, but it isn't...

I don't know whether this is an incomplete version or not but certain things seem to be missing or not sufficiently explained. For example, despite the 'Jiffi-Scuttler' being central to a large part of the plot there is no description of the thing or explanation of what it does in this book (these can be found in the short story "Prominent Author"). The device seems to have contradictions – it is small enough to be taken in for repair but large enough to have a hole big enough for someone to crawl through yet too small to be noticed without an hours-long examination.

This is the sort of thing I would expect from a book at the middle of a series. There are characters and plot lines that need expansion that can't be found in this book. Although some of this can be found in other stories, there isn't anything here to tell you what else there is or where it is to be found. WAM

EFFENDI: THE SECOND ARABESK

by Jon Courtenay Grimwood

Earthlight / 376pgs / £6.99 / paperback

Reviewed by Steve Mazey

Rating: * * *

In the North African city of El Iskandria, Hamzah Effendi is a man of great influence. Outwardly appearing a legitimate businessman, he manages to conceal his less honest ventures due to the influence a man of his wealth can exert.

However, when the mutilated body of a young woman is found on his private beach, even his influence cannot prevent an investigation. And the man responsible for leading the investigation is the new police chief, Ashraf Bey, the former fiance of Effendi's daughter.

There are also many subplots in this novel. We read of the activities of DJ Avatar and Effendi's daughter, and an (initially) seemingly unconnected plot strand featuring an army-unit comprised of children and commanded by 'Ka' struggling in the desert.

Grimwood creates a wonderful backdrop for his story. El Iskandria is a splendid multi-layered city, from the heights of the upper classes down to the reality of a crumbling decaying city.

The alternate history is remarkably rich and detailed, the characters inhabiting it complex, each pursuing of his/her own agendas, agendas that only slowly become apparent through the course of the novel. But it's this rich detailed background that can be seen as a downside to this book, albeit only a minor one. It takes a great deal of reading. It's a book that you need to concentrate on throughout, and it's not an easy read. However it is one that will reward your effort. I would advise anyone starting this book to give it a serious read to begin with, it is at first a little on the intense side with its need to set the scene relatively quickly, but it evolves into a more fluid and eloquent novel.

One more thing to note about this book. It is the second in a series, and I have not read the first. This, however, is not something that caused me any problems - the book is entirely self contained and can be read as a standalone novel.

I am a particular fan of alternate histories and have read many of them. The society in many alternate histories is one that differs in only small ways from the one I see every day. This one however is completely unfamiliar to me, but despite this lack of an easy reference point, the author has detailed his world sufficiently to make visualising it a relatively easy task.

Jon Courtenay Grimwood is a highly talented author, and one I must try to read again soon. SM

***THE BUTLERIAN JIHAD* by Brian Herbert & Kevin J Anderson**
NEL / 616 pgs / £6.99 / paperback.

Reviewed by Michael Jones.

Star rating * *

Having completed the 'Prelude to Dune' trilogy these two writers now embark on a 'Legends of Dune' trilogy of which this is Volume 1. Set ten thousand years earlier it begins the story of the overthrow of the sentient and self-aware

Artificial Intelligence which sought to dominate the known universe, enslaving or destroying all humanity in the process. Clearly Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics had been forgotten.

Although, once started, the story rattles along at a reasonable pace and just about manages to hold the interest, it is not really all that good and the book suffers from an inconclusive ending obviously intended to induce us to buy the succeeding volumes - the story is not finished and various issues remain unresolved. Meanwhile armadas of spaceships have done battle, huge fighting machines have wrought vast swathes of destruction and millions of people have come to a painful and messy end as whole planets (including Earth) are destroyed. In fact, as I read the first few chapters I almost thought 'Doc' Smith had come to life again.

I find it hard to escape the impression that Herbert and Anderson, not to mention their publishers, are riding the gravy train, trading on the 'Dune' name and getting words on paper as quickly as possible before it hits the buffers.

The very first sentence in the book says that history has no beginning and there are always earlier heroes. But are these histories, these heroes, Frank Herbert's own? I could never really feel that they are and it does not seem right for someone else to attempt to create them, particularly when that someone else is unable to reproduce the depth and power of his original work.

The main trouble with this book is that it lacks depth, it is all surface and no substance. To paraphrase what I have said before about these efforts - if you really want to read every word you can find about the 'Dune' saga you may enjoy this, but if you need someone to decide for you whether to read it or not my advice is: don't bother. MJ

***DARK HEAVENS* by Roger Levy**

Gollancz / 389 pgs / £17.99 hardback / £10.99 trade paperback

Reviewed by Michael Jones

Star rating * * *

For his second book, Levy returns to the devastated London (presumably standing for the whole of Earth) of his previous RECKLESS SLEEP. Law and order are on the verge of collapse and available resources are barely sufficient for the dwindling population, many of whom seek an escape in virtual-reality gaming. The Government is promoting a further attempt to colonise the planet Dirangesept, the only known habitable extra-terrestrial planet, where two previous colonisation attempts have been catastrophic failures. At the same time, Consensual Mass Suicide is made available as a means of escape from the rigours of a failing Earth. It falls to Cy Auger, a government employee, to discover a conspiracy at the heart of the government ministries controlling these various activities, a con trick promoting mass suicide ostensibly as a means of participating in the colonisation of

Dirangesept whilst in reality being no more than a cynical ploy to solve the looming population crisis.

If this sounds complicated, it is, and it is no more than a simplified summary of a fairly difficult book. Nevertheless, it is a book good enough to leave the reader feeling that any failure to understand what is going on arises from his own shortcomings as a reader rather than from any failure on the part of the writer. Although deriving from the cyberpunk genre started (?) by William Gibson it is full of originality and will repay careful reading and re-reading. It is a follow-up of sorts to its predecessor but it is not necessary to have read that and one can foresee further sequels; one wonders however if Levy should consider turning his obviously considerable talents to another theme. MJ

***THE SHRINKING MAN* by Richard Matheson**

Gollancz SF Masterworks / 200 pgs / £6.99 / pbk

Reviewed by Dave Hardy.

Star rating * * * *

I saw the movie, THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING MAN in 1957, and indeed it is one of my favourites, being quite intelligent and the special effects are excellent, for the time. So I was interested to see how the film and book versions compare. It was worth the trouble, because it proved an excellent example of how these two media vary, especially since the screenplay was also written by Richard Matheson. I re-watched the film on video to be sure my memory of it was correct (it was, more or less!).

The film is linear, following our hero, Scott Carey, from the time he encounters a cloud of strange sparkling droplets while out on the ocean in his brother's boat with his wife. In the book he is with his brother Marty, with whom he also works. In the film, for some reason, his brother is called Charlie. In the book Scott has a young daughter, Beth, absent from the film (perhaps because it would have been too difficult when he shrank to her size and below?) The novel is written in a series of flashbacks, alternating between 'now', when Scott is living in the cellar of his house, about half an inch tall and shrinking by exactly one-seventh of an inch each day, and the story of how it all came about and developed. The film does have occasional voice-overs by the hero, so that we know something of his feelings and thoughts. But this is where the novel scores, because the writer is able to express the despair and loneliness, the occasional moments of elation at some small triumph, like securing a morsel of food, and also the physical effort and sheer pain of, say, trying to climb onto a chair, or the fear of being stalked by a Black Widow spider of about his own size. In the novel, sex also rears its head (think of the problems: size doesn't matter?), whereas of course it isn't even touched upon in the movie.

The film contains a number of action scenes which are either not in the book or are passed over quite quickly, such as the chase by his cat (whom in the

film his wife thinks has eaten him), and trying to obtain a piece of cheese from a mousetrap in the cellar. But of course the culmination is the inevitable fight with the spider, which is much more drawn-out in the book. Now personally I doubt that he could dig a pit big enough for the spider to fall into, or that if it did, it would fall with sufficient force to impale itself on a needle (or that the needle would be sharp enough, relatively); especially as shortly afterwards the author explains why Scott does not hurt himself very much when he falls from a table – he is too small and light for gravity to have much effect. A minor quibble. This 1956 novel is still well worth a read. DH

THE TAIN by China Mieville

PS Publishing / 89 pgs / £8.00 / ltd edn paperback

reviewed by Steve Mazey

Star rating * * * *

Set in a devastated London, the story follows Scholl, a man who lives alone in an abandoned London bus. The world has been brought to ruin by the escape of Imagos. Thousands of years earlier these beings had been imprisoned in the Tain and compelled to form reflections in mirror, windows, puddles, etc.

Over the centuries odd members of this race have escaped to this world, and as they don't have reflections form part of the reason for the vampire myth. But now the barrier has broken and Imagos have invaded our world.

The London of this book is one which is mostly empty and decaying. There are bands of humans here and there, some organised by surviving members of the armed forces, some just scavenging. These bands fight periodically with the Imagos, or with each other, or roam the streets attacking anyone they find, and looting for what they can get.

Scholl however decides to confront the Imagos, and overcoming his fear ventures into the lair of the Imagos, that is Victoria Station.

This is a wonderful if somewhat harrowing read. In many ways it reminds me of some of the post-apocalyptic works of Edmund Cooper (and as he's a favourite author of mine it's a good comparison). It definitely evokes the best of the New Wave authors, and strong parallels can also easily be drawn to J G Ballard. But whereas both Cooper and Ballard had tried and trusted SF devices to engineer their situations there is a magical reason behind this London. Here, like in his other works, the author blurs the edges between the genres.

It's a wonderfully written piece, Mieville has a fine writing style and the tale is well paced. The only downside I could mention is that it is dark in mood, but this is only a downside if you like black & white, good versus evil, happy ending stories. This is richer for not having clear sides and for not conforming to the Hollywood style hero story pattern.

On reading this book you will quickly realise that China Mieville is worth

his reputation. This is good stuff! Had I read this before compiling my choices of 2002, the list would have had an extra member. SM

😊😊😊😊 **FILM ROUND-UP** 😞😞😞😞 BY VICKY COOK

This month has not seen a lot of releases from the SF genre. SF film fans are still eagerly awaiting the imminent release of X2, the heavily hyped sequel to the slightly disappointing X-MEN. With reports that it exceeds its rival in terms of storyline, character-development and filmmaking, it is certainly one to watch out for. Unfortunately it comes out too late for me to review this issue, but watch out for it next week, as it is released on the Thursday 1st May.

New recent releases in the world of SF include BULLETPROOF MONK and DREAMCATCHER. My boyfriend and I duly headed off to the cinema to see whether these two are worth a look. I landed the short straw and went to see the intriguingly titled BULLETPROOF MONK, a film version of the comic book. The blurb said it was an interesting fusion of styles. 'Interesting' it certainly was. It involves a Tibetan monk (Yun Fat Chow) who has inherited the task of protecting a powerful scroll, being forced to flee his homeland after nasty enemies destroy his peaceful monastery in search of the scroll. He then ends up finding and training a young street-wise kid (Seann William Scott) to take over his task.

Before the movie Tim and I had been discussing whether martial arts experts such as Jackie Chan are actually any good at acting, and whether we liked East-meets-West buddy movies. We had watched SHANGHAI KNIGHTS and RUSH HOUR and felt that maybe Mr Chan would be better off kicking and punching and keeping his mouth shut! This unfortunately seems to go for this movie too – Yun-Fat Chow certainly does the kung-fu stuff well enough, and has a nice knack for using his body language and facial expressions very well for comic timing, but as soon as he starts to speak everything seems very stilted as if he is reading an auto-cue. At least in CROUCHING TIGER he was speaking his own language and it flowed so much better! Seann William Scott has a harder job as he is more famous for his slapstick turns in teen comedies, rather than being an action hero, as this role demands. He does do reasonably well, though his habit of gurning while speaking does not complement him well, and he sometimes looks a little awkward during the action scenes.

Basically this movie seems to be a teen kung fu with a SF element (Matrix-style fighting and the powers of the scroll) thrown in to add interest. The background characters have no real development, and serve as punch bags and scenery more than anything. Up and coming actress Jaime King plays the girlfriend of the baddie ringleader but she is rather wasted here.

There is certainly a feast for the eyes for the martial arts fan, but even they, I feel, may find it a bit of a stretch to call this a good movie. Clichés abound,

from the typical Tibetan monastery at the start, to the seen-before action settings. Maybe I am being a bit harsh but I found the acting dire, and the script clunky.

Another film I saw which is worth a mention is *INTACTO*, the latest in a fascinating run of films from Latin America. Max Von Sydow is an enigmatic concentration camp survivor who appears to be blessed with the gift of giving, or taking away, good luck. He influences four people, and the film shows how their lives change. I did not actually get to see this, but it is still going at Broad Street and has had some good reviews. If anything near as good as the others in this series of films, it is definitely the pick of the bunch.

Tim had rather a better time with *DREAMCATCHER*, and he has written a review for you as follows:

***DREAMCATCHER* - directed by Lawrence Kasdan. Novel by Stephen King; screenplay by William Goldman and Lawrence Kasdan.
Reviewed by Tim Stock**

DREAMCATCHER is based on the Stephen King novel of the same name in which a group of four old friends; Henry, Beaver, Jonsey and Pete have the same kind of telepathic ability that they have shared since childhood. An ability that was obtained when the four plucky lads stuck up for a poor handicapped kid called 'Duddits' who was being bullied. This ability both helps and hinders them in their everyday lives, but it is not until they all go away to a cabin retreat holiday that they realise the importance and reason for their mutual gift.

The film itself is really an alien movie along the same lines as *SIGNS* or *INDEPENDENCE DAY*. The difference in this movie to those is that the government already know about these aliens and have tackled them before, which is where Colonel Abraham Curtis played by Morgan Freeman comes into it. He has been tackling these aliens known as 'Ripley' for several years and is coming to the end of his military career and starting to go a little crazy in the process.

This time though, the aliens have a plan to infect the water system to start off a chain of infections that will eventually rid the world of humans, and the only people that can save the world are the four guys with this special gift; with the help of the now older 'Duddits' played by Donnie Wahlberg. Using their special gifts, the depleted band of friends manage to find the alien who has now taken over one of their band, Jonsey, and have a final confrontation, leading to the climatic conclusion to the film.

Many of the Stephen King novels that are converted to the big screen (or straight to the little one!) often fail to deliver the tension and anxiety that are present in the books. However, I thoroughly enjoyed this film and despite some poor reviews, I found it quite adequate and particularly enjoyed the ending. In my opinion, it is a better film than both *SIGNS* and *INDEPENDENCE DAY* and although perhaps not quite as compelling as the novel, it can be said that this film does have a good plot.

VC/TS

THE RAFFLE

Raffle tickets are available as soon as you get to the meeting. You do NOT have to wait until the break when someone twists your arm - do it voluntarily.

The Group needs your cash to pay visiting authors' expenses, the salubrious surroundings of our regular meeting room, etc. It's just a quid - not even the price of half a pint! And you could WIN this month's prize...

SELLING YOUR WARES...

And don't forget that YOU can bring along your unwanted books, magazines, videos, etc., and sell them to other members - NO CHARGE, NO COMMISSION. Start rummaging through your collections - you KNOW you'll never read some of that stuff again. It was very welcome to see several people selling and buying at the last 2 meetings. BRING YOUR GOODIES!

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

The Central Library SF and Fantasy Reading Group meets on Thursdays at 6pm to 7pm monthly, at the Central Library, Chamberlain Square, B3 3HQ. It's a small friendly group meeting to discuss SF & fantasy books. Contact person is Pam Gaffney on (0121) 303 3634. Future meetings and subjects are:-

May meeting - no details

May 13-24 - George Orwell's ANIMAL FARM will be performed by the Northern Stage Ensemble. Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Broad Street, Birmingham (Box Office 0121 236 4455).

May 31 - Terry Pratchett will be at the Midlands Art Centre for "Young Readers UK". He will be doing a reading and also be interviewed on stage. Time is 3pm - Price is £4.00 (£2.50 concessions) or £10.00 for a family of four including 1 or 2 adults.

November 7-11 2003 - NOVACON 33 - the Birmingham SF Group's very own convention will be held at the Quality Hotel, Bentley, Walsall, UK. Guest of Honour -Jon Courtenay Grimwood, author of REDROBE, PASHAZADE, etc.

Cost of registration is £35 - send to NOVACON 33, 379 Myrtle Road, Sheffield, S2 3HQ. email: xl5@zoom.co.uk **BOOK NOW!**

November 15-16 2003 - The British Costume Convention (SF, Media and Historical) will be held in Leamington Spa. Registration is £35 until 6th October. Contact Alan Cash, 130 Hamstead Hill Road, Handsworth Wood, Birmingham B20 1JB

Website: www.britishcostumeconvention.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

FUTURE MEETINGS

As at the time of writing, your 'new' committee are still negotiating with several speakers - nothing has actually been finalised yet but I assure you that we're closer to sealing the deal than we were last month. Hopefully, several meetings will have been finalised by next month.

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Thanks to all the named contributors in this issue and to William McCabe who sends me reams of news items every month from which I sift through for the best/most entertaining items.

The **BRUM GROUP Website** address is www.bsfg.freesevers.com

NEW! ----The email address is bhamsfgroup@yahoo.co.uk ----- **NEW!**

Contributions, ideas, etc. always welcome.

ABOUT US...

The Birmingham Science Fiction Group meets on the second Friday of each month. 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, Pat Brown, 106 Green Lanes, Wyld Green, Sutton Coldfield, West Midlands, B73 5JH