

# BRUM GROUP NEWS

THE *FREE* MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE

## BIRMINGHAM SCIENCE FICTION GROUP

DECEMBER 2005

ISSUE 411

HONORARY PRESIDENTS: **BRIAN W ALDISS, O.B.E.**  
& **HARRY HARRISON**

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**Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> DECEMBER**

## **THE CHRISTMAS SOCIAL**

Christmas? Christmas! Is it really that time again? When did we start having two a year?

Christmas - time to party, folks! Once again we're having our Christmas Party/Social ONE WEEK EARLIER than the usual second Friday of the month. And once again we're skittling. This year's Christmas Social will be held at the **Selly Park Tavern**, 592 Pershore Road, Selly Oak, where we have hired the Skittles Room for our own private use from 7.00 to 11.00pm. To get there take a 45 or 47 bus from Corporation Street. Ask for Selly Park Tavern – it's about 15 minutes ride.

There will be prizes for individual games – you don't have to know how to play skittles because we have our own variants of the game designed to give everyone a chance, none of which would be allowed at Competition or any other level. There will be a free half hourly raffle, crackers and, to judge by the answers to the questionnaire circulated after last year's Social, a good time to be had by all. Hopefully you've purchased your ticket – if not, it's now too late – 15<sup>th</sup> November was the cut-off date. You can always ring me on 477 6901 to see if there are any cancellations/spare tickets but it is unlikely. *RGP*

**JANUARY 2006 MEETING – The Annual General Meeting at which you get to have your say and VOLUNTEER. Followed by a book auction.**

## ***THE SCIENCE OF ALIENS by Vernon Brown***

**Q.** When is science not science?

**A.** When it's an exhibition called 'The Science of Aliens' at the Science Museum London.

Over the half-term Pat and I managed a couple of days in London where we visited the above-titled exhibition expecting something commensurate with the status of the Museum, something science-based and systematic, perhaps with a link to SF. We didn't expect degree level stuff as it's aimed at the public, but certainly something to demonstrate a few basic rules of life and apply them to what is, or is not, likely to be found on other planets, like the relationships that govern the upper size of land and air animals everywhere. But 'twas not to be!

The only guide available was an A4 sheet folded to make an advertisement leaflet that told us that there were four different zones to explore; the ticket collector told us to 'just walk around'. Not a good start.

The first zone consisted of display cabinets full of photos and artefacts from various sci-fi (sic) films from *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* onwards. In one corner was a model of an 'Alien' and in another a screen showing short clips from the films. A little later on was a mask/mirror device to show how one looked with different heads and a few small models of aliens including a set of Clangers. Then there was a display about the bigheaded brown aliens that abduct people and a film of one being dissected. Except for the latter and Alien I have the same or similar stuff myself.

The second zone was several light-up displays and a varied collection of preserved specimens of life here on Earth to show that the aliens are already around us. Not only does this confuse two meanings of the word 'alien' but any decent secondary school could deliver a similar show.

Zone three was worse! A number of scientists have 'constructed' two planets for the exhibition and designed life forms to fit. Unfortunately there appears to have been a breakdown in communication between their concepts and the museums constructions. Photographs of the life forms have descriptive texts that are sometimes misleading, appear to have omissions and are, in places, inaccurate. For example, one 'plant' is described as 'eating' carbon dioxide and using sunlight to convert it to sugar. Making molecules containing carbon, oxygen and hydrogen from molecules containing only carbon and oxygen is quite a feat and I was also under the impression that plants obtain nutrients from what they grow on. The remainder of the zone was occupied by a huge 'press a button and the answer lights up' machine but as every kid in the room was pressing a different button the answers were a little confused.

Last but not least was Zone four. Here wall-screens suggested descriptions of intelligence but gave no answers while a button-pressing machine with a screen that appeared to have no instructions, but did have a lot of kids around it, did something that I couldn't discover (I assume).

And that was it! No systems, no explanations, no science!

You may think by now that I have been too harsh. I haven't. This was a golden opportunity to show people in an interesting way that there is a lot more to life on Earth, as well as elsewhere, than the rubbish that's shown in comic books and on the screen. And if the EAGLE comic can be credited with having stimulated the youthful minds of many of our scientists and technologists, what could this have done? As it is, it's probably had the opposite effect on adults and children alike, as well as reinforcing mundane stereotypes about 'sci-fi'.

Having said all that, if you are in London and sure that you have nothing better to do, entrance costs £8.95 but get a 2-for-1 voucher and go in company. It's on until 26 February 2006. *VB*

PS... Since writing the above I've watched the first of a two-part TV series called 'Alien Worlds' produced in association with the exhibition and expanding on Zone three. It's better but still quite superficial in its approach with no underlying explanations. It does mention life's ecological web but then only considers, at great length, a huge ostrich-type that preys on a lizard-type that feeds on an animal-type plant while a tiny water creature lives on micro-organisms before crawling onto land to devour an ostrich-type and explode in a cloud of eggs. No other life seems to exist.

Again some oddly phrased information is given. What, for example, do you make of the following statement, given against a background of an erupting volcano? 'But for life to survive on (this planet) the planet itself must be geologically active, replenishing its atmosphere and oceans, constantly cycling water and carbon, the essential ingredients for all life as we know it'. Still, perhaps the second episode will be better.

## INTERNATIONAL HORROR GUILD AWARDS

The International Horror Guild Awards were presented at the World Fantasy Convention in Madison, Wisconsin on November 3.

**Best Novel:** THE OVERNIGHT by Ramsey Campbell

**Best First Novel:** THE GHOST WRITER by John Harwood

**Best Long Fiction:** "Viator" by Lucius Shepard

**Best Mid-Length Fiction:** "Flat Diane" by Daniel Abraham

**Best Short Fiction:** "A Pace Of Change" by Don Tumasoni

**Best Collection:** THE WAVERING KNIFE by Brian Evenson

**Best Anthology:** ACQUAINTED WITH THE NIGHT edited by Barbara And Christopher Roden

**Best Non-Fiction:** A SERIOUS LIFE by D.M. Mitchell.

**Best Art:** (Tie) Darrel Anderson and Rick Berry

**Best Film:** SHAUN OF THE DEAD

**Best Television:** LOST

**Best Illustrated Narrative:** THE BUG BOY by Hideshi Hino

**Best Periodical:** THE THIRD ALTERNATIVE

**Living Legend Award:** Gahan Wilson

## WORLD FANTASY AWARDS

The World Fantasy Awards were presented at the World Fantasy Convention in Madison, Wisconsin on November 6. The awards were selected by a panel of judges.

**Best Novel:** JONATHAN STRANGE & MR NORRELL, by Susanna Clarke

**Best Novella:** “The Growlimb” by Michael Shea

**Best Short Fiction:** “Singing My Sister Down” by Margo Lanagan

**Best Anthology:** (Tie): ACQUAINTED WITH THE NIGHT edited by Barbara & Christopher Roden and

DARK MATTER: READING THE BONES edited by Sheree R. Thomas

**Best Collection:** BLACK JUICE by Margo Lanagan

**Best Artist:** John Picacio

**Special Award, Professional:** S.T. Joshi

**Special Award, Non-Professional:** Robert Morgan

**Lifetime Achievement:** Tom Doherty and Carol Emshwiller

## THE NOVA AWARDS

The Nova Awards for British fan activity were presented at Novacon. Voting increased by 50% over last year's awards.

**Best Fanzine:** Banana Wings, edited by Claire Brialey and Mark Plummer

**Best Fan Writer:** Claire Brialey

**Best Fan Artist:** Alison Scott

## Sri Lanka to Honor SF Writer Arthur C. Clarke

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka (AP) – Sri Lanka will bestow the country's highest civilian award on science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke and posthumously to slain Foreign Minister Lankan Kadirgamar.

The ‘Lankabhimanaya’ award – meaning pride of Lanka – will be presented to Clarke for his contributions to science and being a ‘distinguished resident guest in Sri Lanka.’

Clarke predicted space travel before rockets were even test-fired. He foretold computers wreaking havoc with modern life at a time when the words ‘modem’ and ‘PC’ had yet to penetrate everyday vocabulary. And he was a lone voice of dissent when the world feared that the Y2K bug would lead to millennium mayhem.

British-born Clarke, now 88, came to Sri Lanka, a small island country of 19 million people, off India's southern tip, as a diver in 1954. Two years later he made the tropical island his home. He has since set up a science academy in Sri Lanka and used to give lectures and run seminars for the nation's budding astronomers. More recently, post-polio paralysis, however, has kept him in his Colombo home.

## ***METROPOLIS poster***

A few Newsletters ago I mentioned some early SF books that are worth a lot of money. Now it seems that other SF material is worth even more. A poster for Fritz Lang's METROPOLIS has just been sold for almost £400,000, shattering the record for a vintage film poster.

Only four of the 7ft by 3ft Art Deco posters are known to have survived from 1926 so it might be worth your while to investigate that ancient trunk up in the attic that's lined with what you thought was old wallpaper.

*Adapted from The Daily Telegraph 16/11/05*

## ***WAR OF THE WORLDS***

Due to a lack of interest (only half a dozen people contacted Vicky), the planned group visit to the NEC Arena for this event, has been cancelled. No discount could be arranged for such a small number. Those half dozen should now make their own arrangements.

## ***...AND WHAT DID YOU THINK?***

### **THE LETTER COLUMN OF 'BRUM GROUP NEWS'**

*From a new member who wishes to remain anonymous*

I found the November newsletter totally confusing. The newsletter had the incorrect date AND number. Inexcusable! (Though it did have the correct number on Page 12). The months on the quiz AND the answers also showed the incorrect months. I don't think the editor even knows the time of day! Does the editor even know what the date is? It's time for him to resign. Surely there is someone in the Group who can do a better job than this!

<<Yes! You are right, those errors did occur. My apologies. And you're undoubtedly right that my successor should show his/her face at the AGM. – RGP>>

Anything to say about the Group, meetings or SF in general? Email your opinions to me at [rog@rogpeyton.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:rog@rogpeyton.fsnet.co.uk) >>

## **DECEMBER QUIZ - Steve Green**

- 01 Which town gave its name to the sequence of Robert Rankin novels begun in 1981 with THE ANTIPOPE?
- 02 Name the former Batman cast as the Caped Crusader's next screen nemesis.

- 03 What pseudonym did Stephen King adopt for THE RUNNING MAN (1982)?
- 04 Which British author made her debut with the children's novel THE DRAGON HOARD (1974), producing the adult fantasy THE BIRTHGRAVE four years later?
- 05 Name the forthcoming *Doctor Who* spin-off which will carry on the adventures of "Captain" Jack Harkness.
- 06 Name the earliest known British SF fanzine.
- 07 Who collaborated with E E 'Doc' Smith on the original 1928 version of SKYLARK OF SPACE?
- 08 Which 1950s TV hero held the title 'Sky Marshall of the Universe'?
- 09 Name the artist who collaborated with author Bob Shaw on 1981's GALACTIC TOURS: THOMAS COOK OUT OF THIS WORLD VACATIONS.
- 10 Who in 1990 created the 'Martin Scale', a tongue-in-cheek method of gauging the feminist content of an SF novel or short story?
- 11 Which 1944 short story by Theodore Sturgeon, involving heavy plant equipment possessed by an alien intelligence, was adapted for a TV movie in 1974?
- 12 Aside from writing novels, what links the authors of ROOFWORLD (1989), THE RATS (1974) and THE CLONING OF JOANNA MAY (1989)?

### ***ANSWERS TO NOVEMBER QUIZ***

- 01 HOWL'S MOVING CASTLE.
- 02 The Cybermen; one of their helmets is displayed in the underground museum of alien artefacts. An appearance in their own right is promised next year.
- 03 J R R Tolkien (a report appeared in last month's Brum Group News).
- 04 "The Bicentennial Man", apparently the third most anthologised Hugo/Nebula winning short. A film version followed in 1999.
- 05 "The Lone Gunmen", as featured in The X-Files and their short-lived spin-off.
- 06 Jon Courtenay Grimwood, Novacon guest of honour in 2003.
- 07 Five, an astounding achievement.
- 08 Graboids.
- 09 Marvel Comics' The Fantastic Four.
- 10 Isaac Asimov; it's the original US title of Foundation and Empire.
- 11 They've all been banned, Freaks for an bewildering three decades, although the last is only temporarily exiled from Darwin, Australia, during the trial of alleged backpacker killer Bradley Murdoch (the judge feared it might influence the jury).
- 12 Meta, a name more recently adopted by British fan Geneva Melzack

Winners: Harry Hodson – 9

### ***SCI-FI FESTIVAL!***

The dates for the festival are now 100% confirmed. Our next festival is Wed 26 - Sun 30 April 2006 and this time we are in one venue. No more running like mad from cinema to cinema. The Apollo West End is on Lower Regent Street, a spit from Piccadilly Circus underground station. It is a brand-new luxury cinema and the whole place is fully licensed, so expect some champagne screenings!

We are delighted to welcome the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Literature to the festival line-up. The Arthur C. Clarke Award is the most prestigious award for science fiction in Britain. It is recognised as one of the most prestigious science fiction awards in the world, the equivalent of the Booker Prize. The Award was established in 1986 with a generous grant from Arthur C. Clarke with the intention of encouraging science fiction in Britain. We are obviously very honoured to have been chosen as the new home for the award. See [www.sci-fi-london.com](http://www.sci-fi-london.com) for further details about this event

## **NEWS IN BRIEF . . .**

.... Author **Michael Coney** (b.1932 here in Birmingham) died on November 4 after battling asbestos-induced lung cancer. Earlier this year, Coney made several of his unpublished novels available on his website. In 1987, Coney received the Aurora Award Lifetime Achievement Award. In 1977, he won the British Science Fiction Award for his novel BRONTOMEK .... The ashes of **James Doohan**, who played Scotty in STAR TREK, are to be launched into space in a Falcon rocket next year and his widow Wende has invited fans to send tributes to go with him. They can be sent to [www.spaceservicesinc.com](http://www.spaceservicesinc.com). .... SciFi.com has announced their decision to end publishing SciFiction, the award-winning on-line fiction portion of the website. **Ellen Datlow** has been editing SciFiction for the six years it has been on-line, during which time she won a Hugo Award for Best Editor and stories appearing on the site have received Hugos, Nebulas, and World Fantasy Awards. New and classic stories will continue to appear through the end of December .... Baen Books will begin publishing an on-line magazine, edited by **Eric Flint**, entitled Baen's Astounding Stories. "The emphasis will be on adventure stories - either science fiction or fantasy," according to Flint. The magazine will debut in June 2006 and publish on a quarterly schedule. Issues will be available individually or as part of a three issue packages. Individual stories may also be available .... **Orson Scott Card** has launched on-line magazine The Intergalactic Medicine Show with the first issue release in October. Card, who edits the magazine, plans to release new issues quarterly .... **Christopher Priest's** THE SEPARATION won Best Foreign Novel in the Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire awards announced on November 11 in Nantes, France .... Historian **Robert Conquest** received the Presidential Medal of Freedom at the White House on November 9, 2005. In addition to his scholarly work, Conquest is the author of the science fiction novels, A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE, and (with **Kingsley Amis**) THE EGYPTOLOGISTS. His life began in 1917, the year of the Russian Revolution, whose evil consequences he would so thoroughly and faithfully detail in THE GREAT TERROR, and other memorable writings. The truths he told were not always in fashion. But the cautionary lessons he taught about murderous ideologies and the men who served them will always be relevant. His books have been translated into 20 languages, and there have been times and places when those books were carefully hidden .... THE GUINNESS BOOK OF WORLD RECORDS has declared that **L. Ron Hubbard** is the

author translated into the most languages. Hubbard, whose work has been translated into 65 languages, easily surpasses the previous record holder, **Sydney Sheldon**, whose works had been translated into 51 languages. **Anne Frank** and **J.K. Rowling** are reported to be translated into 64 and 63 languages, respectively, but Guinness has confirmed neither number. RGP



## BOOK REVIEWS



**(REVIEWERS** please note:- all reviews should be emailed direct to me at [rog@rogpeyton.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:rog@rogpeyton.fsnet.co.uk)) Deadline for each issue is 14 days prior to the date of the monthly meeting. RGP

### ***CENTURY RAIN by Alastair Reynolds***

**Gollancz / 532pgs / £7.99 / paperback**

**Reviewed by Pauline Morgan**

**Star rating: \* \* \* \* \***

At one time there was a vogue for time travel novels, especially those that introduced paradoxes. When they were done well, they were great fun. There is also a sub-genre of science fiction which deals with alternate histories. Alastair Reynolds appears to do both, and neither. Verity Auger is an archaeologist. She explores a future Paris that is covered in ice. The Earth that we know has suffered a major climatic disaster. The problems that we have created in our own century escalated and to try and put things right, self replicating nano-machines were seeded into the atmosphere. At first, this seemed to work but the technology got out of hand and only people who were off world at the time, survived. These had split into two factions, the Slashers who embrace enhancements and nano-technology, and the Threshers who distrust machines they cannot see. Earth is now a very hostile place with the nano-machines, known as furies, readily attacking any living tissue. When an expedition to Paris goes wrong, Verity faces a choice – facing a charge of murder by negligence or going on a top secret mission. She chooses the latter.

Threading through the universe is a network of alien technology, the hyperweb that offers fast transit between stars. It is, so far, largely unexplored and the places of exit of the transit tunnels is largely unknown. At the end of some of them, though, have been discovered some very large objects that form shell around spaces large enough to hold planet/moon systems. A route has been found into one of these ‘anomalous large structures’ (ALS). Verity is to go there to retrieve some papers. She is the best qualified person for the job as the world inside the ALS is Earth in 1959. The exit is under Paris. On this Earth, the Second World War petered out in 1940.

Wendell Floyd is a native of this alternate world. He is a jazz musician and a private detective. Neither profession is going well. He is asked to investigate the death of a young woman. She fell from her apartment window. The police

have decided it is suicide but her landlord suspects murder. Before her death, Susan White entrusted her landlord with a tin of papers and said her sister Verity would come and collect them. Susan is an agent from outside and has stumbled on some kind of plot. She is the link that throws Floyd and Verity together. They uncover a sinister plot by the Slashers that is world threatening.

At the start of the historical section, the prose felt a bit flat, although it was readily apparent that this was not quite the Europe that formed part of our past. This is partly because down-on-their-luck private eyes are a very familiar character type. However, it quickly picked up, especially once the link with the 'future' characters was hinted at and the strange looking children began to turn up. The depiction of this slightly skewed, late 1950s Paris is well done. It always amazes me how authors are able to create such detailed technological futures and make them sound reasonable. Ultimately, Reynolds has achieved two difficult things; to write convincingly about the past and the future simultaneously and to meld them together into a novel well worth reading. *PM*

### ***CENTURY RAIN by Alastair Reynolds***

**Gollancz / 532pgs / £7.99 / paperback**

**Reviewed by Vicky Cook**

**Star rating: \* \* \* \* \***

This book has really stuck in my memory, which, considering the number of books I have been reading, is quite a feat! The plot in a nutshell, is that nanotechnology has ruined Earth. Verity Auger, an archaeologist, makes a disastrous field trip down to the planet from her space home, and to make amends, has to take part in a dangerous mission - trying out a backdoor worm hole into an unstable alien transit system (all is eventually explained fully!), thus ending up in Paris of the 1950's. But is all as it seems - is this history as we know it or something weirdly different? There is a bit of everything in this book - love story, alternate history, hard SF terminology. It even reads like a kind of space opera at times, especially near the end, where there seem to be lots of spaceships rushing about, and chases, and characters being killed off then not killed off, and everything becomes political - to my mind the plot started to unravel a bit at this point and I had to start concentrating on what was going on!

The characters were very vividly drawn - the Paris-based central character is a bit of a jazz-playing, washed-up detective with no motivation in life, and Reynolds does a good job bringing him and the characters he gets mixed up with, such as Verity, nicely to life. I also liked the way the perspective switched between the two of them - rather than focussing too heavily on one side. Their eventual romance reads like something out of some old-fashioned love film - CASABLANCA maybe. A couple of characters however seemed to vanish rather disappointingly (whatever happened to his business partner, who disappears late on in the book?), but while this may or may not have been deliberate, it added nicely to the theme that the world as we know it may be fragile and unstable, and not what we are expecting.

In fact, Reynolds brings lots of ideas and themes into the book, which is why it is hard to fit it into a genre (though noir SF was mentioned somewhere, and that sounds quite apt), but his strong imagination is evident throughout. He does well to hold it all together and quite tightly too - apart from that bit towards the end there is no visible drifting off or digressions from the two main streams and the tension of the storyline, and my attention was held throughout. It is only my first of his books that I have read, so I cannot compare it to any of his others, but he has said it is a departure of sorts from his usual output (despite the usual themes of nanotechnology and frozen worlds, and the 'all is not as it seems' theme), so I will be interested to try some of his past (and future) work out. At 500+ pages it looks like a bit of a major undertaking, but don't let the thickness of it put you off, it is a wonderful page-turner and an engrossing read. *VC*

***THE CLOCK KING AND THE QUEEN OF THE HOURGLASS* by Vera Nazarian**

**PS Publishing / 124pgs/ £10.00 / paperback**

**Reviewed by Steve Mazey**

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

Far in the future, the Earth is dying and the human race is vastly changed, resembling Roswell greys more than the current race. Liaei has been created in a lab to become the mate of the Clock King, a man trapped inside a stasis device, periodically released from his confinement for a brief period, before he must return to stasis to prevent the passage of time catching up with him and reducing him to dust.

But the book takes its time to get to the meeting of the two humans, with fully the first half of the story concentrating on the childhood and her development into adulthood of Liaei and her associations with the members of the future human race, and her growing understanding of her world.

I have been looking forward to this novella since I first heard of it. The synopsis I read appealed to me particularly. So in some ways I was dreading that it might not live up to my hopes, thankfully though it did. And in one way it lives up to this because of the deliberate build up, for although this is a short book, the author does not feel rushed by this length. Everything here takes place at a steady even pace. And in having this pace it allows you to feel with the lead character, to see the world she lives in as she discovers more of it as she grows.

Our connection with Liaei is made all the easier by her being a genetically re-engineered human - one of us so to speak - in a world where the human race has evolved into a virtually different species, a hairless androgynous long-lived race. This means Liaei has to cope not only with the usually problems of adolescence but she has to do it in an essentially alien environment, how much worse must the feelings of being completely alone and different from everyone around when you are the only human.

There is a beauty in the prose here, a lyrical quality. The writing is quite sublime. A good deal of the time I like a writing style which allows the story to be

told - one that doesn't get in the way, and feel that flowery text (my description for what is often called literary or lyrical) just obscures the plot unnecessarily.

Here, however, the story is quite different. The prose is exquisite but it is not flowery, not a case of 'why use one word when you can use thirty'. But it is also a truly pleasant little tale - not a half idea shrouded in nice words where the author might hope the good turn of phrase might mask the lack of substance, this is a fine little tale set in a believable well portrayed far distant future.

Every aspect of this novel has a point, every inclusion necessary to the advancement of the tale. The details of the society of the future, inhabited by these long-lived future humans, with the secrets of the technology guiding their lives lost to them, and the machines slowly breaking down; the teachings of the requirements of Liaei's sexual destiny by an essentially asexual nursemaid and a computer; and the ravaged Earth, all contributing to the texture of the tale.

Golly this is good!

SM

### ***THE HOUSE OF STORMS* by Ian R MacLeod**

**Simon & Shuster / 457pgs / £12.99 / hardcover**

**Reviewed by Pauline Morgan**

**Star rating: \* \* \* \***

The basic premise behind this novel makes it an original, alternate world fantasy. The level of technology is very similar to that in our own Victorian era. The difference is that a substance called *aether* holds things together and makes the machines work. It is a kind of elemental magic. MacLeod explored the idea first in his novel *THE LIGHT AGES* and he handles the technological side of his creation very well. The problem is the plot, especially at the beginning. It has the makings of a Victorian melodrama.

Alice Meynell is a woman who has slept her way to the top. She is now married to the greatgrandmaster of the Guild of Telegraphers and still has ambitions. Her son, Ralph, is suffering from TB and she brings him to Invercombe in North Devon to die. Instead he survives and forms a liaison with a shore-girl that Alice has hired as a maid at the house. They plan to elope to the Fortunate isles (West Indies) but Alice finds out and puts a stop to it. Ralph is sent to the academy to learn his trade before being married off to a suitable woman, not knowing that Marion, the maid, has given birth to his child.

The plot becomes more original after this as the East and West of Britain indulge in a bloody civil war. There are actually three stories worth telling here, that of Alice Meynell, especially her use of *aether* to achieve her ambitions, of Marion Price who becomes a rallying cry for the Western forces due to her Florence Nightingale-like activities, and of Klade who is the son of Ralph and Marion and is brought up among people deformed by *aether* poisoning. Each of these characters could easily have been given a book of their own and they could have been developed to a greater depth. The pages of exposition could have been expanded and more immediate. There is a bigger work here that has been

squashed into one volume. I do not often advocate trilogies, but in this case, the story would have benefited from that kind of treatment. PM

## ***ABARAT II: DAYS OF MAGIC, NIGHTS OF WAR***

**by Clive Barker**

**HarperCollins / 491pgs / £20.00 / hardcover**

**Reviewed by Pauline Morgan**

**Star rating: \* \* \* \***

In the first book of the *Abarat Quartet* Candy Quackenbush was swept from her home in Chicken Town to the strange world of Abarat. In this world, time is a place. Imagine a sundial where, instead of numbers around the edge, there are islands. Each island is permanently at a particular time such as noon or two o'clock or midnight. All the people who live here are strange. None of them look human. Candy has made friends with Malingo, an orange-skinned *geshrat* who she freed from the slavery of the wizard Wolfswinkel. Candy has made enemies. She is also being pursued by the minions of Christopher Carrion, Lord of Midnight. In this volume, Candy makes new friends and discovers she has magical powers although she doesn't know how they work. She also discovers that the reason why she has arrived in Abarat and is having problems, is because the soul of a beautiful princess was hidden next to her own soul on the night that she was born.

It is difficult to know who this book is aimed at. It is the kind of fantasy that youngsters would love, with all the weird characters. It is filled with over 125 full colour pictures created by Clive Barker. It would make a wonderful animated film. It is printed on thick, glossy paper so that the volume is heavier than expected. This and the price would probably put it out of range of many children, although it would make a superb present. At the same time, any adult prepared to get in touch with their inner child will also find a lot to delight them.

PM

## ***HOMEWARD BOUND* by Harry Turtledove**

**Hodder / £7.99 / paperback**

**Reviewed by Peter Weston**

**Star rating: \* \* \***

Has anyone else in the group read this one yet? I bought the American hardcover edition from Amazon, but then I'm a fan of Turtledove's various alternate-world series. Oh yes, he pads them out unashamedly and every time he finishes three in a row he changes the title and starts a new – but continuous – trilogy. So this is actually the *eighth* book in the 'Worldwar' sequence, if you've been following it, in which those uppity Earthmen manage to go from V2 to STL interstellar travel in about sixty years, and then spring an even bigger surprise on the poor, dumb alien Lizards – though we see it coming about 100 pages before they do.

I think this is the weakest in the set, mainly because it has moved a long way from all those fascinating juxtapositions of the earlier books. There's little

action, endless talking, and the Lizard's planet isn't a very interesting place. Despite the cover blurb on the paperback I doubt if this is really the "enthraling climax" to the series; the last chapter is left completely open. A tip for new readers - the title "Homeward Bound" is a play on words - the human spaceship is bound for the 'Home' world of the alien Empire! PRW

### **MISSION OF GRAVITY by Hal Clement**

**Gollancz / £6.99 / paperback**

**Reviewer: Peter Weston**

**Star rating: \* \* \* \* \***

Has anyone in the group NOT read this one? MISSION OF GRAVITY is pure, concentrated science fiction as-it-used-to-be, a problem story on a fascinating alien world. The storyline takes us across the face of Mesklin, the 'poached-egg' planet where temperatures are below -100C and a day is only 18 minutes long. Our hero is Barlennan, a sort of giant centipede, who captains the sailing-ship *Bree* from the Rim, where gravity is 'only' 3G, across roiling seas of liquid methane and through many adventures to the remote pole, where gravity approaches a crushing 700G.

The point is to stay faithful to science as-we-know it, using as base-assumptions the astronomical data about the (then-recently discovered) superjovian companion of 61 Cygni, with no tricks, no dodges, and no super gadgets in the last chapter. "Playing the game", Hal Clement called it, as he did the math and tried to make sure his physics and chemistry were scrupulously correct. You can't have an alien environment much stranger than this!

But true 'hard' SF isn't seen very often these days, too difficult when softer options seem more popular, cyberpunk and wide-screen baroque, not to mention telepathy and – dare I say it – all those bloody *dragons*. MISSION OF GRAVITY is over fifty years old now, Hal Clement's action sequences and dialogue were never very dramatic even then, and maybe our field has moved on? It's a classic of course, no doubt about it, but then so are BLEAK HOUSE and THE PICKWICK PAPERS and most of us don't read them for fun any more, do we? So I'd be interested to know what newer readers make of this book. PRW

## **FILM ROUND-UP** **BY VICKY COOK**

Ever since we joined a DVD rental scheme with Screenshot (which means no more painful visits to the local popcorn-ridden, smelly, child-infested cinemas, but instead the DVDs come straight to us in the comfort of our warm, clean homes) I have been watching far more SF films than ever before! For some reason the company have twigged that we like SF movies and the last 5 or so have been from the genre.

## ***MINORITY REPORT***

We started with *MINORITY REPORT*. Basically this is a futuristic film (based on a short story by Philip K. Dick) where criminals get caught before they commit the act ('pre-crime'). Tom Cruise plays an officer accused by such a method, who then has to prove his innocence, before the act is committed. What makes it an interesting and complex film is the blend of issues involving paranoia and personal choice (very reminiscent of the original author), as well as society and its morals. The idea that criminals can be accused before they commit the crime surely cancels out any notion that the person might change their minds about committing the crime at all and have some sort of effect over their destiny. This makes the theme and storyline an interesting one.

Visually the film is excellent - with very detailed, thought-out scenes of the future - all in shades of blue and grey (why is there never any colour in the future?), mass-advertising, futuristic cars, very clean and functional. The idea of a 'Big Brother'-style power that can see all that goes on strikes a chord as we can see this happening more and more in the current world. The action scenes are also excellent and involving. The acting is good too, especially from Samantha Morton as one of the 'pre-cogs', who are the visionaries in a floating pool, spying on the future.

But it left me cold. I did not warm to the characters or to the storyline particularly, although the idea was interesting. In fact it reminded me a lot of *BLADERUNNER* - good ideas, well directed, but ultimately without a real heart to it. I found it surprising that it was a Spielberg movie - for me the essential 'Spielberg magic' was lacking. Overall I would say worth a watch merely because of visuals and the storyline but I just wasn't completely convinced by it, and would hesitate to recommend it to everyone.

## ***DOCTOR WHO***

We then got sent *DOCTOR WHO*, the last volume of the most recent series, starring Christopher Eccleston and Billie Piper. What struck me throughout this series was that there were very few references to the previous series and Doctors. Was this deliberate? There was a good mix of storylines however, from gothic to horror to just plain weird. The special effects were an improvement on the old days of *DOCTOR WHO*, but this is perhaps to be expected in the modern age of strong SFX, and is not always a good thing...

The format was stand-alone episodes with a hint to an ongoing plot, which only became clear in the final episodes, the ones we watched this time. I think it will always be a personal thing, how one feels about the latest incarnation of Doctor Who, but for me he was a little too over-the-top. All his emotional outpourings in front of a captive Dalek, his slightly creepy romantic inclinations towards Rose, his face-pulling antics all made it hard for me to warm to him. He has suddenly turned from a gentleman into a brash northern lad in trendy clothes! And Rose was, as well as very annoying (surely an essential characteristic of assistants?) even more so as the series seemed convinced she was the saviour of

the world. Everyone adored her, and there was far too much heavy emphasis on some sort of relationship between her and the Doctor - even with a kiss at the end - which just looked and felt wrong! However both did put in good performances, and put their all into a series which has now been revived in the public imagination. It will be interesting to see how David Tennant interprets the role - after all, there aren't many regenerations left so he'd better be a good one!

## ***THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL***

## ***THE DAY THE EARTH CAUGHT FIRE***

Next on our list was THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL (DESS) (from a short story by Harry Bates, as I should have known at Novacon 35). We actually received the DAY THE EARTH CAUGHT FIRE (DECF) shortly afterwards and it was interesting to compare the two films.

DESS does appear more dated - I really thought DECF was a better film overall - only a few years later and filters were starting to be used, which impressively conveyed the extreme heat as the Earth gradually approached the Sun. In both it was very noticeable that a good film could be made without resorting to big battles and even bigger special effects.

Even though DESS looks dated (even with the obligatory damsel in distress who faints away on occasion), it does carry important contemporary messages, which still ring a bell with modern audiences. For those who don't know the plot, an alien visits Earth and warns that we will be destroyed unless we stop nuclear development and all the wars. The alien, Klaatu, does seem at times a little bit of a Saviour-style figure, and it did seem a bit odd that he comes to preach peace then threatens to blow up the Earth if they do not obey. The science seems rather dated too now - for instance he says at one point that he has travelled 250 million miles, which does not seem enough. Klaatu (Michael Rennie) is however quiet and graceful, and suitably otherworldly, and there are several other characters who light up the screen and add substance to the film.

DECF does what it says in the title - lots of H-bombs are set off, which tilt the Earth thus causing it to move towards the Sun. Suspend belief and, like DESS, what works is that it is simply made and with warm characters. Peter Stenning is a flawed character - a depressed journalist with alcohol problems and divorced with kids, but like Klaatu he has a certain dignity, and you can really feel for him as the film goes on. Again the background characters help make the film believable (despite the rather odd plotline). VC

## ***FORTHCOMING EVENTS***

**The Central Library SF and Fantasy Reading Group** meets on Thursdays at 5.30pm to 7pm monthly, in GP5 on the 5th Floor 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 3398.

### **Books to be discussed:-**

15th Dec – Ben Bova's MERCURY

**The Discworld Beer Festival 2005** - In conjunction with the Hogswatch event in Wincanton, organized by the Cunning Artificer, we are delighted to announce the first Discworld Beer Festival. BursarVixen Enterprises and the Heart of Wessex branch of CAMRA are holding the festival in the Wincanton Sports Pavilion and, as well as the Discworld Beers, there will be a selection of Real Ales from selected local breweries. We are also hoping to launch two new Discworld Beers. The beers are spectacular - we have tasted samples smuggled from both countries and their flavour is almost enough to make you want to join up. Festival Details: Tickets are £5.00 each, available from [www.BursarVixen.com](http://www.BursarVixen.com). The ticket cost gets you admission to both days of the Festival and a free souvenir glass featuring the Festival's logo. Venue: The Maddocks Pavilion, Wincanton Sports Ground, Moor Lane, Wincanton, Somerset, BA9 9EJ. Time: 11.00am – 11.00pm Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 11.00am – 10.30pm Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> December. Details from Paul Kruzycki, BursarVixen Enterprises, <http://www.BursarVixen.com/>

*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](mailto:rog@rogpeyton.fsnet.co.uk)*

## ***FUTURE MEETINGS OF THE BSFG***

January 13<sup>th</sup> 2006 – Annual General Meeting / Auction of Books  
February 10<sup>th</sup> – SF/Fantasy author **Ian R MacLeod**  
March 10<sup>th</sup> – SF author and SF historian **Brian Stableford**  
April 7<sup>th</sup> – Horror/Fantasy artist **Les Edwards**  
May 12<sup>th</sup> – Fantasy author **Storm Constantine**  
June 9<sup>th</sup> – SF/Fantasy artist **Jim Burns**

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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 which I sift through for the best/most entertaining items.

***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 Secretary, 5 Greenbank, Barnt Green, Birmingham, B45 8DH