

BRUM GROUP NEWS

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BIRMINGHAM SCIENCE FICTION GROUP

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& **HARRY HARRISON**

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Friday 11th AUGUST SUMMER SOCIAL

Yes, it's Summer Social time again and once more we're going for a meal at the Black Eagle, Hockley. It's ticket only and we have to report that it is **SOLD OUT**. So, if you haven't already got your ticket, then we're afraid you won't be joining us. Intended to buy one but kept putting it off? It's interesting to note that we sold all but two tickets within a few days – and the final two were sold about a week later. Probably the fastest sell-out we've ever had for an event. Provisional bookings now being taken for next year! *RGP*

Committee Resignation

Regretfully, Jinnie has had to resign due to pressure of college work. Jinnie has done an excellent job expanding and updating the Group's website over the last two years. The position of Website Manager will be taken over by William with immediate effect.

September 8th – to be announced.

DAVID GEMMELL 1948-2006

Stan Nicholls

David Gemmell, who has died following heart bypass surgery, produced thirty bestselling novels, and is widely regarded as this country's most accomplished author in the heroic fantasy genre. He grew up in a tough West London neighbourhood where survival depended on being handy with your fists, the ability to run fast, or possessing a tongue glib enough to talk your way out of trouble. Although he employed all three at various times, the latter became the most finely honed weapon in his armoury; and in later years his talent as a raconteur and teller of anecdotes characterised his many personal appearances at signings and literary events.

Expelled from school at sixteen for gambling, Gemmell entered the world of work with little in the way of vocational skills and drifted through a number of casual jobs. These included labourer, lorry driver's mate and nightclub bouncer, a profession well suited to his robust six foot, four inch frame.

His mother, despairing at this waste of potential and recognising an embryonic talent in her son he wasn't aware of himself, arranged for him to be interviewed for a vacancy with a local newspaper. He wasn't keen and went just to please her. The fact that he was one of a hundred applicants, and almost certainly the least qualified, virtually guaranteed he wouldn't be picked. To be absolutely sure, he behaved arrogantly during the interview. This was mistaken for self-confidence and he was hired. He eventually rose to Editor-in-Chief of five South Coast newspapers and became a stringer for several nationals.

In the late '70's Gemmell turned his hand to writing a thriller. But *The Man From Miami*, a novel about an assassin, failed to find a publisher. 'It was so bad it could curdle milk at fifty paces,' he admitted.

The circumstances surrounding the publication of his first novel were extraordinary. He developed an illness that had him passing blood, suffering from exhaustion and losing two stone in weight; symptoms indicating a cancerous growth. His doctor ordered tests and the prognosis looked grim. Convinced he had little time left, Gemmell decided to tackle the novel he had long had at the back of his mind. He turned out *The Siege of Dros Delnoch* in two weeks. No one wanted to publish it. In the event, the growth had been misdiagnosed; he didn't have cancer. The book was forgotten.

A friend visiting his home a couple of years later chanced upon the manuscript and read it. Fortunately this friend had an incisive eye, and pointed out the novel's strengths and weaknesses. Enthusiasm rekindled, Gemmell made one last attempt at getting it right. Retitled *Legend*, it was published in 1984 and has never been out of print.

Considered a classic in the fantasy adventure field, *Legend* is set in the dying days of the mighty Drenai empire. Its rulers, steeped in complacency and incompetence, fail to respond decisively when the warrior tribes of the Nadir

unite against them. In seeking to appease charismatic Nadir leader Ulric, the Drenai succeed only in conveying their weakness and encouraging his ambitions. All that stands between the Nadir hordes and the heart of empire is Delnoch Pass. This is protected by a massive dros, or fortress, but its vastly outnumbered defenders are plagued by hopelessness and shambolic leadership. It's left to a disparate assembly of individuals, not all immediately recognisable as heroic, to hold the pass and deny chaos its triumph.

The novel's central protagonist, Druss the Axeman, is nearing the end of his active life. A legendary figure - the book's title partly refers to him - he bears an awesome martial reputation. Now in his sixties, and subject to the ailments encroaching age brings, he has to put as much effort into mustering his own declining powers as commanding the defence. For him, time is as big an enemy as the Nadir. Druss is considerably more rounded and believable than the average fantasy hero, and there is an audacity in presenting an old man as the hero in this kind of story. But it works perfectly in engaging the reader's empathy.

Gemmell based Druss on his strong, independently minded stepfather, Bill Woodford. Characterisation is acknowledged as one of Gemmell's major skills, and he attributed this to the fact that he frequently drew from real life. 'I grew up with men of violence,' he explained on one occasion. 'I understand men of violence. It means that when I write action scenes and when I have violent characters, I have a very strong feel for it.' But his practice of basing characters on actual people got him into trouble. He used his journalist colleagues as the cast for his third novel, *Waylander*, published in 1986, and lost his job over it. 'The managing director regarded it as a poisonous attack on his integrity,' he recalled. This prompted Gemmell to turn to novel writing full-time, but he always credited the disciplines of journalism as laying the foundations for his pacey, concise prose style.

Legend instigated themes that remained pivotal to his work - the lone hero, often tortured by loss or doubt; the battle against advancing dotage; the pursuit of seemingly lost causes; complex villains, and the inclusion of elite, usually mystical, groups. A consistent thread in Gemmell's fiction, and one which reflected his Christian beliefs, was the conviction that redemption was possible for even the most corrupt.

The success of *Legend* led to a string of bestselling fantasy novels, some standalone, many in multipart volumes, including the Drenai, Rigante, Sipstrassi and Hawk Queen series. His Macedon sequence, *Lion of Macedon* (1990) and *Dark Prince* (1991), set in the Greece of an alternate world, tells the story of military genius Parmenion and his protégé the young Alexander, future ruler of the ancient world's greatest empire.

Gemmell wrote one book under a pseudonym. Published in 1993 as by "Ross Harding", *White Knight*, *Black Swan* is a gritty crime thriller. It was his only novel not to achieve bestselling status. At the time of his death he was writing the third in a trilogy retelling the legend of the siege of Troy. The first volume, *Lord of the*

Silver Bow, was published in 2005. The second, *Shield of Thunder*, is due to appear this September.

Some critics labelled his novels macho. He always insisted that they were missing the point. 'There is no gratuitous violence in my books,' he stated. 'I tend to concentrate on courage, loyalty, love and redemption. I believe in these things. If there's anything I'd like my books to achieve, it would be to increase the desire of people to do good.'

This sense that moral choices have to be made is at the heart of his work. It gives his stories direction and forms his characters. In knowing that David Gemmell's books are suffused with a basic decency, that his characters strive to act honourably and do the right thing no matter how the odds are stacked, one knows the essence of the man.

He is survived by his second wife, Stella, and two children, Kate and Luke.

David Andrew Gemmell, novelist, was born on August 1st 1948. He died on July 28th 2006, aged 57. SN

<<The above is the complete text of the obituary that appeared in edited form in THE TIMES on August 1st. My thanks go to Stan Nicholls for permission to reprint it here. Many of us knew Dave well; he'd spoken to the Group and been Guest of Honour at NOVACON. He was a regular visitor to Andromeda, where he did a signing session for many of his books, after which it was customary to take him for his favourite food – pizza! Although always classed as a fantasy author, many of his books were SF. And, to my knowledge, he never used 'magic' in any of his novels – RGP>>

RAILROADS, etc

<<It is not known who wrote the following piece but it is currently being passed around the internet and was sent to me by Dave Hardy. Thanks for passing on this fascinating article, Dave. – RGP>>

The US standard railroad gauge (distance between the rails) is 4 feet, 8.5 inches. That's an exceedingly odd number. Why was that gauge used?

Because that's the way they built them in England, and English expatriates built the US Railroads.

Why did the English build them like that?

Because the first rail lines were built by the same people who built the pre-railroad tramways, and that's the gauge they used.

Why did 'they' use that gauge then?

Because the people who built the tramways used the same jigs and tools that they used for building wagons, which used that wheel spacing.

Okay! Why did the wagons have that particular odd wheel spacing?

Well, if they tried to use any other spacing, the wagon wheels would break on some of the old, long distance roads in England, because that's the spacing of the wheel ruts.

So who built those old rutted roads?

Imperial Rome built the first long distance roads in Europe (and England) for their legions. The roads have been used ever since.

And the ruts in the roads?

Roman war chariots formed the initial ruts, which everyone else had to match for fear of destroying their wagon wheels. Since the chariots were made for Imperial Rome, they were all alike in the matter of wheel spacing. The United States standard railroad gauge of 4 feet, 8.5 inches is derived from the original specifications for an Imperial Roman war chariot. And bureaucracies live forever.

So the next time you are handed a specification and wonder what horse's ass came up with it, you may be exactly right, because the Imperial Roman army war chariots were made just wide enough to accommodate the back ends of two war horses.

Now, the twist to the story

When you see a Space Shuttle sitting on its launch pad, there are two big booster rockets attached to the sides of the main fuel tank. These are solid rocket boosters, or SRBs. The SRBs are made by Thiokol at their factory at Utah. The engineers who designed the SRBs would have preferred to make them a bit fatter, but the SRBs had to be shipped by train from the factory to the launch site. The railroad line from the factory happens to run through a tunnel in the mountains. The SRBs had to fit through that tunnel. The tunnel is slightly wider than the railroad track, and the railroad track, as you now know, is about as wide as two horses' behinds.

So, a major Space Shuttle design feature of what is arguably the world's most advanced transportation system was determined over two thousand years ago by the width of a horse's ass.

And you thought being a HORSE'S ASS wasn't important!

NEWS IN BRIEF . . .

.... Actor **Peter Hawkins** (b.1924) died on July 8. Hawkins was aboard the HMS Limbourne when it sank in 1943, but survived. In the 1960s, he created the voice of the Daleks in DOCTOR WHO most noted for the phrase "Exterminate" as well as providing the voice for the Cybermen Author **Mickey Spillane** (b.1918) died on July 17 at his home in South Carolina. Spillane, who wrote mysteries, was best known for his character Mike Hammer, who began as a comic character named Mike Danger. Hammer's first outing, and Spillane's first novel, was I, THE JURY, published in 1947. In 1963, Spillane portrayed Hammer in the film THE GIRL HUNTERS Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis' School of Liberal Arts will launch a

center for the study of **Ray Bradbury** in the fall of 2006. The new Center for Ray Bradbury Studies is integrated into the Institute for American Thought research center, where Bradbury scholars Professor Jonathan R. Eller and Professor William F. Touponce already work, and where a library of 3,000 volumes of Bradbury related materials are already housed **Brian Aldiss** has sold world English rights to SF novel, HARM 'set in a near future in which terrorist threats have resulted in the loss of human rights...' **Larry Niven** and **Edward M Lerner** sold FLEET OF WORLDS, set 200 years before RINGWORLD, to Tor The July issue of LOCUS is a Horror Special **Harry Turtledove** is finally revealed as also being the NEW YORK TIMES bestselling epic fantasy author, **Dan Chernenko** **Stephen Baxter** has become a Vice President of the H G Wells Society The winner of the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award for best short science fiction story of 2005 was **Paolo Bacigalupi** for "The Calorie Man." The winner of the John W. Campbell Memorial Award for the best science-fiction novel of 2005 was **Robert J. Sawyer** for MINDSCAN Congratulations to our own **David A Hardy** on his nomination for a Chesley Award, in the 'Artistic Achievement' award category. Good luck! The Heinlein Society has announced that **Greg Bear** and **Jack Williamson** will receive the 2006 Robert A. Heinlein Award The Southeastern Science Fiction Awards were presented at DeepSouthCon on July 22. The winners were - Short Fiction: "The Bears Discover Smut" by **Michael Bishop**; Novel: SEEKER by **Jack McDevitt**; Lifetime Achievement: **Jack McDevitt** Dorchester Publishing Co. Inc. and Wildside Press, LLC have signed an agreement to launch a new mass- market paperback line, publishing both science fiction and fantasy under the Cosmos Books name. Scheduled to premiere in June of 2007 with two titles a month, the program will showcase works by best selling classic and award winning contemporary authors under the editorship of **Sean Wallace**, Executive Editor, and **John Betancourt**, President and Publisher of Wildside Press THE BOOK MAGAZINE's recent poll to find the greatest living British author resulted in **J K Rowling** winning and receiving three times as many votes as the runner-up, **Terry Pratchett** *RGP*

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

The Central Library SF and Fantasy Reading Group meets on Thursdays at 5.45pm 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:-

August 17th-Greg Bear's DARWIN'S RADIO
28th September, 19th October

Fantasycon 2006 - Date: 22nd - 24th September 2006. Place: The Britannia Hotel, St James Street, Nottingham. GoHs: **Neil Gaiman, Juliet E. McKenna, Ramsey Campbell, Raymond E. Feist & Clive Barker;** with MC: **David J. Howe** For more information check out www.fantasycon.org.uk. For those of you who would prefer to make your booking via credit card, please email Debbie Bennett at fcon-admin@britishfantasysociety.org.uk ... this facility is by request only and will not be available on the main website. For any other queries email fcon@britishfantasysociety.org.uk
Further information can be found at our new website, www.fantasycon.org.uk or email Vicky on fcon@britishfantasysociety.org.uk

Raymond E Feist will be in Birmingham the 25th September at Forbidden Planet at 12.30pm for signing.copies of INTO A DARK REALM

Juliet E McKenna will be tutoring a residential creative writing course focusing on SF&F at the Castle of Park in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, from 1st to 7th October 2006. This week will cover key elements of writing strategy, and practical approaches. Group work will develop skills for exploring ideas on plot, character and world building while individual exercises will enable participants to relate the sessions to personal projects.
For more details, visit www.castleofpark.net or www.julietemckenna.com

Terry Pratchett will be at Ottakar's in Bromsgrove on October 2nd 2006 to sign copies of WINTERSMITH. The signing will start at 5.30pm. Address: Ottakars, 66-68 high St, Bromsgrove, Worcs, B61 8EX For further information call Stuart on 01527 833339

NOVACON 36 – the BSGF's own convention will again be held at the Quality Hotel, Walsall, Nr Birmingham. Guest of Honour will be **Ken MacLeod**. Registrations are currently £33. Cheques to 'Novacon 36', Steve Lawson, 379 Myrtle Road, Sheffield, S2 3HQ Email: x15@zoom.co.uk
Website: www.novacon.org

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 OF THE BSFG

September 8th – tba.

October – award-winning SF artist **JIM BURNS**

November 3rd – tba

December 1st – **CHRISTMAS SOCIAL** – details to be announced.

January 2007 – Annual General Meeting

February – tba

March – SF author **JUSTINA ROBSON**

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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.



QUIZ – Ok, so who’s observant among you? What error has been in every newsletter this year, being corrected this month, for the first time?

Website article you must read – Pete Weston’s piece “A Rover A Rocket” – see <http://efanzines.com/EK/eI27/> Could be the basis for Pete’s next book!

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