

BRUM GROUP NEWS

THE *FREE* MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE

BIRMINGHAM SCIENCE FICTION GROUP

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ISSUE 429

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

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Friday 8th June

ROBERT HOLDSTOCK

As you all may remember, Rob Holdstock came to talk to the Group in February. Unfortunately, because of the heavy snow, only three members were able to make it to the meeting and so it was cancelled. Rob has kindly offered to travel up to Brum again to give the promised talk. We have made special arrangements to ensure that snow will not stop you attending this time!

Just in case you've either lost or destroyed your February newsletter, here is a repeat of the introduction....

Rob Holdstock was a fan and convention attendee before he started his professional writing career in 1976. His first three novels – *EYE AMONG THE BLIND*, *EARTHWIND* and *WHERE TIME WINDS BLOW* were SF rather than the fantasy he is now famous for. These were followed by horror novel *NECROMANCER* and the *Nighthunter* series (as by 'Robert Faulcon') as well as two sword 'n' sorcery series, the *Berserker* trilogy as by 'Chris Carlsen', and the *Raven* series written with the late Angus Wells under the pseudonym 'Richard Kirk'. Other projects included movie and TV novelisations, artbooks, editing anthologies, etc.

His fantasy novel *MYTHAGO WOOD* (1984) changed and focused his direction. It won the World Fantasy Award. Several novels followed that were set in the same universe.

With a change in publisher, moving to Simon & Schuster in 2001, he started the *Merlin Codex* trilogy with *CELIKA*. This was soon followed by volume two, *THE IRON GRAIL* in 2002. But volume three did not appear until 2007. Why? I'm sure Rob will be talking about this at some point.

July 13th 2007 – to be announced

He has requested that rather than give a formal talk, he would prefer to be prompted by questions from the audience. His output to date is large and varied. So I'm sure there are many questions to be asked.

Rob rarely, if ever, attends conventions these days, so this is a great chance to meet him. Make the most of it.

***** AND *****

Rob will also be taking part in a mass signing session at Waterstones bookshop in High Street from 5 till 6pm on the same day. Other authors signing will be **Juliet McKenna, Chris Dolley, Mark Chadbourn, Ian MacLeod, Steve Savile, Eric Brown, David Devereux** and **Graham McNeill**. Rumour has it that they all intend coming to our meeting to hear Rob talk! RGP

The meeting will take place in the Lichfield room on the second floor of the Britannia Hotel, New Street (entrance in Union Passage almost opposite the Odeon. At the bottom of the ramp from New Street Station, turn right, cross over the road and you'll find Union Passage about 20-30 yards along). It will commence at 7.45pm so please arrive early, get your drinks from the bar and be seated in plenty of time.

AUTUMN MEAL by Vernon Brown

There are only three tickets/seats left for the meal so the first three people to send their £5 deposits to Vicky (address on back page) or give them to Pat at the June Meeting will be guaranteed a place. We should, with luck, be able to reserve a couple more for anyone who gets their deposit to us no later than the June Meeting, but this will depend on how booked up the restaurant is. The booking is 7.30 for 8.0pm, at The Black Eagle, Factory Road.

If you would like to travel with others meet at the entrance to Snow Hill Station, Colmore Row at 7.0pm then we will go on by Metro.

If you want to go by bus catch the 74 or 79 in Bull Street. Get off at the second stop past Hockley Flyover, just before St Michaels Road on the left and Villa Road on the right - there are churches on two corners and a temple on another. Walk down St Michaels Road and keep going until you reach The Black Eagle on your right.

If you wish to get there by Metro get off at Soho Benson Road. Cross the tracks (care!) to the exit. Turn right down Benson Road until you see The Black Eagle on your left. *VB*

NEWS IN BRIEF . . .

.... Astronaut **Wally Schirra** (b.1923) died on May 3. Schirra was the fifth American in space and the third American to orbit the Earth. After the Mercury mission ended, Schirra went on the fly both the Gemini mission and Apollo mission, the only astronaut to fly on all three missions Fantasy writer, **Lloyd Chudley Alexander** died on Thursday, May 17, 2007. This followed just two weeks after the death of his wife of 61 years, Janine Denni. He was in hospice care. Alexander was best known for the Chronicles of *Prydain* series of novels. He published at least forty books. His final work THE GOLDEN DREAM OF CARLO CHUCHIO, is due out from Holt in August. He was honored with both the National Book Award and the Newbery Medal The Science Fiction Research Association has announced that **Algis Budrys** is the recipient of this year's Pilgrim Award, given to honour lifetime achievement in SF and Fantasy scholarship. **Michael Levy** is the recipient of the Thomas D Clareson Award for Distinguished Service. The

awards' presentations will be made at the SFRA Conference in Kansas City in July The Arthur C. Clarke Award for best science fiction novel published in the UK has been presented to **M. John Harrison** for his novel NOVA SWING. This year's award was announced at the opening ceremonies of the Sci-Fi London Film Festival **Gina Holden** (FANTASTIC FOUR) has been cast as Dale Arden, the female lead in SCI FI Channel's upcoming original series FLASH GORDON. She will co-star opposite **Eric Johnson** (SMALLVILLE), who plays the title character. In other casting, **Jody Racicot** (NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM) will play Dr. Hans Zarkov, and **John Ralston** (EARTHSTORM) will play the villainous Ming <<ain't it wunnerful how Hollywood always comes up with totally new ideas!!!>>. SCI FI has ordered 22 episodes of FLASH GORDON, which began shooting this week in Vancouver, Canada, and will debut in August Amazon.com said it has booked more than 1 million advance orders for HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS, the upcoming seventh and final book in **J.K. Rowling's** franchise. More than 620,000 copies have been ordered in advance in the USA, with more than 250,000 in the UK, Amazon.com said. Advance orders for this book have surpassed those in 2005 for Rowling's sixth release, HARRY POTTER AND THE HALF-BLOOD PRINCE. In April, Barnes & Noble said that advance orders for the book had topped 500,000 copies, breaking the bookseller chain's record for the most advance requests in its history. The book, which is published in the United States by Scholastic Corp. and in Britain by Bloomsbury, officially goes on sale on July 21 **Waterstone's** is celebrating 25 Years in books and as well having a vote for the best book of the last 25 years, they've also tried to predict who will be the biggest authors of the next 25 years. The best book of the last 25 years was voted for by the public from a list of 100 nominations chosen by Waterstone's booksellers. The winner was HARRY POTTER AND THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE. <<Now OUR competition – how many books can you think of that are better than Waterstone's choice? Answers in not more than 100 pages>>. From their choice of the biggest authors of the next 25 years, the names that will be known to you are **Susanna Clarke, Jasper Fforde** and **Richard Morgan** RGP

    **BOOK REVIEWS**    

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

MERLIN CODEX 1: CELTIKA by Robert Holdstock

Gollancz / 325pgs / £7.99 / paperback

+ MERLIN CODEX 2: THE IRON GRAIL

Gollancz / 309pgs / £7.99 / paperback

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. To understand

fully what he is doing in these novels it is important for the reader to have a good grounding in mythology, especially Greek, but also that of Britain and other regions.

The narrator, Merlin, is a 'wandering Jew' figure, continually walking the Earth. He is nearly immortal, but not god-like. He has 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.

Medea, who is one of Merlin's kind was understandably upset when Jason's affections turned to another woman. The legend tells us that she killed their two sons. Jason believed this but Merlin tells us that Medea staged that scene and actually spirited the boys away, hiding them in the future. Now, seven centuries have passed and Jason is told the truth.

In *CELTIKA*, the first of these two novels, Jason goes in search of the first of his sons. The boy, however, now grown to manhood, hates his father and nearly kills him. *THE IRON GRAIL* is Jason's quest for his younger son. Aboard Argo, he sails into the heartland of Alba – ancient Britain. On one side of the river Nantosuelta is the territory held by Urtha, a Celtic king, on the other is the Ghostland, the home of the Dead and the Unborn. For some reason, they have banded together and invaded Urtha's land, driving his people from their fortress. Trying to find the answers to many questions, including, Where has Medea hidden Jason's son, Merlin, Argo and her crew have to travel deep into the Shadow lands.

These are well written, thoughtful books which blend myth as we remember it with a complex system of ideas from various sources. Both are very satisfying books to read. *PM*

ILARIO: THE LION'S EYE by Mary Gentle

Gollancz / 663pgs / £14.99 / hardcover

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan

Star rating: * * * *

Mary Gentle has a fondness for very long books. In the cases of *ASH* and *1610: A SUNDIAL IN A GRAVE* there was enough substance to sustain the length. *ILARIO: THE LION'S EYE* doesn't.

This book is set in the same skewed universe as *ASH*. In this fifteenth century, Carthage is still a considerable power though it lies under the Penitence. The city is permanently dark. No-one knows why except that it is a curse in more ways than one. The city of Rome is referred to as The Empty Chair because there is currently no Pope. That is also believed cursed, as anyone unlucky enough to be elected to the papacy dies shortly afterwards. The cardinals gave up trying to elect a new Pope several centuries earlier as they do not want to be victim of the curse. The Egyptian Pharaohonic dynasty continues but in exile based in Constantinople. In Iberia, modern Spain, Taraconensis is a seat of power.

Ilario is a true hermaphrodite having fully functional male and female parts. Abandoned at birth, Ilario was raised by foster parents then sold to the king as the court freak. Ilario's ambition is to be a painter and after being given his freedom, flees to Carthage after his true mother tries to kill him. There he falls prey to an opportunist who sells him as a slave. Fortunately, Ilario is sold to an Egyptian eunuch collecting books for his Pharaoh-Queen and needs a scribe. The relationship that develops between Rekhmire' and Ilario is more that of friendship than master and slave. Due to the interference of

Ilario's mother, Rosamunde, they have to leave Carthage and go to Rome where Ilario is apprenticed to a master painter to learn the skills of New Art. After the painter's death, Ilario and Rekhmire' go on to Venice. Ilario is now being hunted by both the Carthaginians and his mother's husband. Ilario's true father is a successful Iberian general, Honorius who is very happy to discover the existence of a son-daughter. Ilario, however, has just discovered that he is pregnant.

During the rest of the novel, Ilario escapes various assassination attempts, marries twice – once as groom, once as bride, visits the Egyptian court in exile and meets some lost Chinese seamen. Ilario doesn't come across as a hermaphrodite. The ambiguity of dual sexuality is not convincing, yet the depiction of Ilario as a painter is. He is constantly sketching and has the same itchy fingers that a writer has when the ideas are flowing.

The entire story takes place over a year and although there is a lot crammed into this as a time period, the overall effect of the narrative is lassitude with bursts of action. There is too much of the day to day existence such as the problems of giving Ilario's daughter her feeds.

Overall, while this is a well written book, internally consistent and well researched, it is far too long and could have been improved by judicial pruning. PM

HUMAN IS? by Philip K Dick

Gollancz / 438 pages / £7.99 / paperback

Reviewed by Ian Watson

Star rating: * *

This collection of 20 stories is subtitled "A Philip K. Dick Reader", which suggest to me a selection of the most important essential texts plus some kind of commentary. But comment is wholly absent, and one pulp story, "The Variable Man," is tediously long at 66 pages, so "Reader" is a somewhat pretentious description. Mind you, one has to pretend a bit! Re-reading remembered gems (and entire novels) of PKD after the passage of several decades can, alas, be a disenchanting experience. One problem with HUMAN IS? is that most of the short stories are early and hasty even if they showcase interesting idiosyncratic obsessions, and even way back then writing about, say, sunlight blazing down on Callisto highlights a minimal understanding of the universe characteristic of, ahem, the mainstream writer Dick yearned, though lacked the skill, to be. No wonder he has now become the darling of the mainstream, his message being that you can write anything you please as SF so long as you throw in a moon or a galaxy or a robot, and then this can be finessed into cult-fiction. As such, one might say that Dick is unimaginatively hyper-imaginative. And it's a great shame that the climatic mature story "The Pre-Persons" is deeply reactionary, basically pro-firebombing abortion clinics, such as only an American God-nut could be.

Still, some stories are aces, such as "The Father Thing" which brilliantly expresses Dick's great hang-up about parental abandonment, or "The Electric Ant," the ultimate unreliable reality story, a genuine philosophical masterpiece worthy of Greg Egan. And I was amazed to rediscover, in "Second Variety", the original little robot boy David and his robot teddy bear, which Brian Aldiss either homaged or had forgotten about (as had I) in "Supertoys."

Meanwhile, inconsistencies and nonsense trip up the tales, radiation pools drift about, hydrogen missiles start hydrogen fires, giant bullfrogs come from Jupiter, and other bollocks. Sometimes it's as if Dick isn't even thinking as he writes. Of course, once he starts really thinking we'll enter the world of Valis revelations.

If I sound a bit negative maybe that's because I just re-read on the trot three PKD 'classics' which I once adored, and only one of them, THE THREE STIGMATA OF PALMER ELDRITCH, still stood up; MAZE OF DEATH and UBIK seemed so crudely written and drab rather than visionary. IW

JACK OF RAVENS by Mark Chadbourn

Gollancz / 374pgs / £12.99 / trade paperback

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan

Star rating: * *

This odd mixture of present day and Celtic mythology has worked well for Chadbourn in his previous two trilogies. In JACK OF RAVENS he revisits some of the characters and ideas. Fans of the previous books are going to enjoy this volume, but there are too many elements from them that the reader needs to know about to understand what is happening. Therefore, do not read this book if you have not read at least the first trilogy. And do not continue reading this review as it might give away too much.

Jack Churchill (Church), the hero of the first trilogy, has been thrown back in time to 100 BC. He knows he is out of time but cannot remember how he got there. He knows that Ruth, the woman he loves, is many centuries in the future.

In order to keep the balance between Existence and the Void, lines of power criss-cross the Earth. When there is a need, five people, the Brothers and Sisters of Dragons, come together to combat the crisis and are able to draw on this power. After initiating the first of the five, Church falls in with Niamh, a queen of the Otherworld and is not there when the others of this five are murdered. He finds that he has been pursued from the future by Ryan Veitch. Once a Brother of Dragons, Veitch now wants revenge on Church who killed him in the first trilogy. Church has to travel through time to get back to where he belongs and save Ruth.

There are a series of short adventures in intervening time periods such as Roman Britain and Elizabethan London. It is suggested that the actions of Church and Veitch change recorded history. We are not shown what effects they actually have and the stops are too brief to fully appreciate what Chadbourn is trying to achieve. Each of these episodes probably deserves a short novel of their own so that there would be the opportunity to develop characters and explore the settings and effects of their supernatural interference. There are good set piece scenes but they are not enough to hold the book together as a coherent whole. PM

NEBULA AWARDS

This year's Nebula Awards were announced at the Nebula Banquet on May 12.

Novel: SEEKER by Jack McDevitt

Novella: "Burn" by James Patrick Kelly

Novellette: "Two Hearts" by Peter Beagle

Short Story: "Echo" by Elizabeth Hand

Script: "Howl's Moving Castle" by Hayao Miyazaki, Cindy Davis Hewitt, and Donald H. Hewitt

Andre Norton Award: MAGIC OR MADNESS by Justine Larbelestier

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:-

June 14th - **THE MIDWICH CUCKOOS - John Wyndham**

July 19th - **THE STARS MY DESTINATION - Alfred Bester**

THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA (1925) - OK so its not SF but its widely considered to be one of the greatest films of all time, certainly of the early 20th century. Its one of the last silent films and will be shown with an organ accompaniment by Nigel Ogden - Pat and I saw Metropolis at the same place a couple of years ago with Ogden as organist and it was an experience never to be forgotten. It's being shown on Friday 15th June at 7.30pm at The Symphony Hall, Birmingham - incidentally if you like jazz there will, I think, be an hour or so of free jazz in the same building starting at about five oclock - at least its there on most Fridays. Tickets range from £5 to £18.50 with a range of concessions for students etc, book on 0121 780 3333 or go to www.thsh.co.uk (postage etc charged online).
VB

OUT OF THIS WORLD - The Art of Josh Kirby will be at The Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool - 15 June to 30 September 2007. Explore a colourful world teeming with other-worldly characters, creatures, fantasy cities and landscapes. Spans Kirby's artistic career from his early days as a freelance artist to his famous cover illustrations for Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* fantasy series. For more details go to <http://www.artinliverpool.com>

THE DOCTOR WHO UP-CLOSE EXHIBITION at the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester is the largest Doctor Who exhibition in the UK. It is now open and will run till November 5th. Visitors will be able to get Up-Close to actual props, costumes and monsters from the hit BBC programme, including the Empress of Racnoss from the Christmas Special, The Runaway Bride. The exhibition coincides with the start of the new, third series starring David Tennant and Freema Agyeman and will feature exciting new items from the latest programmes once they have been seen on TV. Season Passes to Doctor Who Up-Close are only available from the Museum Information Desk. Prices are as follows: Adults £15.00, Concessions £10.00 and Family Season Ticket (4 people - max 2 adults) £35.00. More info at <http://www.msimg.org.uk/index.asp?menuid=723>.

SCI-FI SYMPHONY II: THE FINAL FRONTIER - Friday 31 August, 7,30pm at Symphony Hall, Broad Street. Back by popular demand, Carl Davis conducts the CBSO and takes us on a fantastic journey through the greatest music ever inspired by space, science-fiction and fantasy. From John Williams' unforgettable themes for ET and Star Wars to highlights from Holst's spectacular odyssey through The Planets (and Pluto!), and whether by Thunderbird or Tardis, it's an out-of-this-world programme. Begin the countdown, engage warp-drive, and beam on board as Carl and the CBSO boldly go where no orchestra has gone before! Friday Night Classics prices apply: £8, £14.50, £20.50, £26.50, £31, £34.50, £38

FANTASYCON 2007 The British Fantasy Society will be holding their annual Convention, FantasyCon, on 21st-23rd September 2007 at the Britannia Hotel, Nottingham. Confirmed guests to date are **Terry Brooks, Michael Marshall Smith** and **Stephen Jones**. We have over 100 guests already registered, including many genre authors and fans. This is an event where writers, media people, editors, agents and fans can get together to celebrate fantasy in all its different formats - including SF and horror.

The convention is open to everybody, although BFS members do get a preferential membership rate. At FantasyCon, you can meet your favourite authors, attend book launches and listen to panels. Or, if you prefer, you can sit in the bar with friends old and new and perhaps win a prize in the acclaimed FantasyCon Raffle! One of the highlights of the event is the presentation of the British Fantasy Awards. Membership of the BFS entitles you to vote for the annual British Fantasy Awards, which are well respected throughout the genre. For further information please see www.fantasycon.org.uk or email fcon@britishfantasysociety.org.uk

NOVACON 37 – the Brum Group’s own convention – will again be at the Quality Hotel, Bentley, Nr Walsall, W Mids. It’s the weekend of 2-4 November and the Guest of Honour is Charles Stross. Registrations are currently £35. Cheques to ‘Novacon 37’, Steve Lawson, 379 Myrtle Road, Sheffield, S2 3HQ Email: x15@zoom.co.uk Website: www.novacon.org

WAR OF THE WORLDS Returns - Following a hugely successful and critically acclaimed sell-out UK tour in 2006, the award-winning Jeff Wayne’s Musical Version of THE WAR OF THE WORLDS is set to head back to The NEC Arena in December 2007. For 2007, the production will be boasting a raft of exciting new features, including new innovative technology by Californian company EON Reality who will create a new Richard Burton ‘head’. With 3D GGI photo-real holographic imagery it aims to take the replication even further than last year’s tour and to set the bar for all theatrical technology in the future. Tickets now on sale priced at £39.50 plus booking and transaction fees.

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

Jul 13th - tba

Aug 10th – **Summer Social** – a meal at the Black Eagle

Sep 14th – the group of fantasy writers, **The Write Fantastic**, now numbering seven – **DEBORAH MILLER** has joined since their last appearance - will be visiting us.

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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, Barnet Green, Birmingham, B45 8DH