

BRUM GROUP NEWS

THE *FREE* MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE
BIRMINGHAM SCIENCE FICTION GROUP

SEPTEMBER 2007 ISSUE 431

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& **HARRY HARRISON**

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FRIDAY 10TH AUGUST SUMMER SOCIAL

Once again, the popular pub meal at the Black Eagle, Hockley. Good Pub food and real ale with a group of some of our less regular members.

All places should be taken by now. Meet up at Snow Hill Station at 7.00 p.m. if you want to go with the rest of the group. Otherwise, take the 74 or 79 bus from Bull St. Get off 2 stops past Hockley Flyover and walk down St Michael's Road.

SEPTEMBER 14th 2007 - The Write Fantastic,

The massive fantasy tour. Regular speaker and local favourite Stan Nicholls, the return of Juliet E McKenna, Jessica Rydill and Chaz Brenchley. The first appearance here for new member Deborah Miller.



Changing times.

Since no-one else has volunteered to take on the job of newsletter editor, I'm going to be doing this for a while. There will be some changes but not so much as most of you would notice. We still need more volunteers to join the committee.

There are now two places spare.

If anyone has any suggestions or contributions to the newsletter. Talk to me at meetings or email wamccabe@tiscali.co.uk

Editorial – The end of an era?

Unless you've been on another planet for the last few weeks, you probably know that the last Harry Potter novel has now been published. Like it or not, the series has been an amazing success in selling to people that would probably not buy another book. It's possible that it has also been the driving force behind the creation and sales of many other fantasy fiction products. But what happens if the boom is over?

Film studios are still looking for the next big thing in the field. Narnia, Eragon, and Bridge to Terabithia all failed to live up to expectations but they still haven't given up. This month they've bought all of Septimus Heap despite half of the books being unwritten.

Our own city council is hoping to cash in on the Tolkien wave sparked by that series of films. This year's annual Sarehole mill event had more of a council presence than ever before. The central library now has two separate displays – one with stand-up photos from the film. Now that the film series is done and the film of "The Hobbit" is being passed around, it looks like interest in Tolkien is in decline.

There is always the danger that the genre sales will fall back to what they used to be before Potter and the publishers and film makers will lose interest or, even worse, give up entirely. Could Fantasy now go the same way as Horror? Could it disappear from the adult book shelves entirely? Will children still keep reading?

William McCabe – acting newsletter editor

Quiz

Although you won't find the answers here (I'll print them next month) the questions are inspired by news and events of the last couple of months.

1. Which TV musical series with regular SF content starred Carl Davis (currently conducting SCI FI Symphony)?
2. Which New Wave SF author briefly appeared in the middle of last month's "100 greatest war movies"
3. Which 60s SF novel begins "SPLIT BOYS, WILL YOU?" – no extra points for guessing whether that was a punctuation error or not.
4. Which other H G Wells SF title begins with the words "The War"

From our last meeting.

Those of you that heard Andy Lound's talk on the various incarnations of War of the Worlds might be interested in the Mercury Theatre website at <http://www.mercurytheatre.info/>. It has downloadable copies of both the famous Orson Welles broadcast of "The War of the Worlds" and the meeting between Orson Welles and H G Wells.



Novelist **Fred Saberhagen** died aged 77 on 29th June having suffered with cancer for 2 years. He was author of 65 novels including the "Berserker" series, 10 Dracula novels, and other works of SF, Fantasy, and historical fiction. He also wrote and edited many articles on science and technology for the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Ridley & Tony Scott are to produce a TV series version of "**The Andromeda Strain**" from the Michael Crichton novel.

Allen Ashley – a previous guest at the BSGF – is taking submissions for a new anthology "Subtle Edens - The Elastic Book of Slipstream". If you wish to submit stories they need to be :- "Slipstream", in English, previously unpublished, and up to 5000 words. Submissions should be double spaced on one side of

paper only. Stamps or email address for reply. No reprints, no multiple submissions. Send manuscript to: Allen Ashley, Editor – Subtle Edens, 110d Marlborough Road, Bounds Green, London N22 8NN. Enquiries by email to editorsubtleedens@hotmail.co.uk. The Heinlein Society www.heinleinsociety.org has announced “The Robert A. Heinlein Centennial Short Story Contest” for original stories less than 15,000 words long. The first prize will be \$5,000. The contest closes next July. More details will appear on their site at a later date.

A new poll by the Radio Times lists the 20 most popular “sci-fi” shows apart from Dr Who. Red Dwarf tops the list, Life on Mars is at 4, there are a couple of Star Treks and all the usual suspects. The only real surprises are the mediocrities that seem to have resurfaced (Quantum Leap, V, Lost in Space) without repeats on network TV.

Li Jianmin, a Chinese SF writer, who claimed that the Hollywood blockbuster “The Day after Tomorrow” had taken 308 separate scenes from something he’d written, has had his case thrown out of court.

The House of Commons science & technology committee has presented a report asking the government to fund a manned space programme.

Ann Jones set a new world record for speed reading by getting through “Harry Potter & the deathly hallows” in 47 minutes. The book has also set records for sales and discounts. Despite the cover price of £17.99 here, you could pay between £5 & £10 per copy at a supermarket depending on how much you are willing to spend in the shop. In the USA, the supermarket CostCo is selling the book for less than the publishers charge many independent book shops. This will not be Rowling’s last Potter book – she’s going to write an encyclopaedia.

Various old TV shows will return in a variety of formats. There will be a second **X Files** movie. The next **Babylon 5** movie “The Lost Tales” will go straight to DVD. **Farscape** will turn up as “webisodes” on scifi.com although there’s been nothing said about the cast. **Jericho** will return to TV but the series that was planned as 22 episodes will be rewritten as 7 episodes. There will be another **Star Trek** movie – it’s the “Young Kirk & Spock” story, Nimoy will be in it and they’ll probably have Shatner back too. They’re putting out a 5 DVD box set version of **Blade Runner** including 4 complete versions of the movie – can you tell the difference?

The UK web site of the Sci Fi channel is running an audio only version of **Blake's 7**. There's an entirely new cast and the stories are an alternative view rather than a sequel to the original. So far they have over 30 5 minute episodes available at <http://www.scifi.co.uk/blakes7/>

NASA has been revealing some of its less appealing secrets:- Astronauts have been flying while drunk although they won't say whether these were passengers on training flights or piloting the space shuttle. They also say that a contractor has sabotaged one of the computers due for installation on the space station.

The Heinlein Trust and University of California Santa Cruz have announced the creation of the Heinlein Archives, a digital collection of the entire Robert A. and Virginia Heinlein collection for academic and research purposes.

Awards

Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award - Robert Charles Wilson for "The Cartesian Theater"

John W. Campbell Memorial Award - Ben Bova for "Titan"

Robert A. Heinlein Award - Elizabeth Moon & Anne McCaffrey

The USTV "Emmy" awards nominations include Heroes (Best Drama, Best Supporting actor – Masi Oka), Medium (Best actress – Patricia Arquette), Lost (Best Supporting actor – Michael Emerson & Terry O'Quinn) and the generally awful "Nightmares & Dreamscapes" (Best actor – William H Macy). There are also technical awards and cartoons mentioned.



The Modern World by Steph Swainston

Orion , 325 pages, £14.99, hardback

rating ****

The series of which this is the third part has managed to present a pseudo-historical world of the kind you'd usually find in fantasy novels without any of the usual trappings. There's no magic here, no elves or fairies and everything is presented as if there might be some kind of science behind it. There are giant insects (size of carhorses) but they generally behave like insects. There's a multi-verse that you can get to through hidden passages, with alien

beings or, in spirit, through taking the right kind of mind altering drug. The books are all well-written and, apparently, researched. Each one stands up as a story on its own without the others. The only thing that's wrong is that once you've read one, so much of the rest is predictable soap opera.

This time there is another great plan to defeat the insect horde that almost goes terribly wrong. This time it's an idea from the great architect. There's another visit to "the Shift" to see a world destroyed by the insects and another group of strange creatures. There's also the story of the 1,000 year old "Immortal" learning to cope with his first daughter approaching her teenage years and having to rely on his "young" friend who still has dreams of a terrible battle he almost died in a century ago. There are also things going on somewhere in the background that imply that there will be some great revelation about the Emperor, the war, and the nature of "Immortality" before the series is over.

The author has recently been giving interviews that say book four will be the last in this series.



Heroes

BBC2 from 25th July

The superhero is a big thing in the USA. They've been trying to sell them to the rest of the world for the last half century with only occasional success.

The latest idea is to strip away most of the iconography. This follows in the wake of "Smallville" in which characters were given a whole range of "super-powers" and without a single spandex costume or silly name.

"Heroes" does take the odd backward step here and there. There is one hero in costume and one takes a name that refers to his "ability" and there's also the repressive government where the superheroes are hunted down. All of this manages to be understated to the point of obscurity. It does manage one extremely clichéd moment right at the end that is almost glaring. Here we have a series of characters that are slowly discovering and developing their abilities so that they can save the world (or, at least, prevent a nuclear explosion in New York) in the nick of time. In the process we see government conspiracies, secret organisations, the odd super-villain and frequent visits to the future. All of this is background. Most of the focus is on the characters. Surprisingly, the characters are a little thin. The scary serial killer spends so much time being scary and slicing heads

open that we never really see a character. The man who can bend time is realising how much he can't do more often than anything else yet he's the one that comes closest to any kind of life outside the plot – probably why the actor is up for an award. There is also a series of plot lines that are never developed like the “tracking system” that has something to do with a two-line tattoo, or the connection between the politician's mother and the man who runs the conspiracy. There are things thrown in at the last moment to get people to watch the next series.

This could be the next US phenomenon. They've nominated it for TV awards other than technical. It could disappear without trace in this country. Sky has bought the next series.

Events

The Central Library SF and Fantasy Reading Group meets on Thursdays at 5.45pm to 7pm monthly, in GP5 on the fifth 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 16th – John Wyndham, Trouble with Lichen

Future dates September 20th , October 18th , November 15th , December 13th

Sci-Fi Symphony II – Friday 31st August, 7:30pm at Symphony Hall. Carl Davis and the CBSO with theme tunes from ET to Spiderman.

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 include Terry Brooks and Michael Marshall Smith. There are 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. For further information please see www.fantasycon.org.uk or email fcon@hrilishfantasysodety.org.uk

Novacon 37 – the Brum Group’s own convention – will again be at the Quality Hotel, Bentley Nr Walsall. It’s the weekend of 2-4 November and the Guest of Honour is Charles Stross. Registrations are £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 – 7th December, NEC, £39.50
The return of the Jeff Wayne production with new “GGI” effects.

Future Meetings of the BSFG

14th September – The Write Fantastic
12th October
9th November
7th December – Christmas Party at the Selly Tavern

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Thanks to Vicky Cook & Steve Green for their contributions to the news 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