

BRUM GROUP NEWS

The Free Monthly Newsletter of the
Birmingham Science Fiction Group

September 2007

Issue 432

Honorary Presidents

Brian W Aldiss O.B.E. & Harry Harrison

Committee

Vernon Brown (Chairman), Vicky Cook (Secretary)

Pat Brown (Treasurer), Tim Stock (Publicity), William McCabe

Novacon 37 Chairman - Steve Green

Website www.bsfg.freesevers.com Email bhamsfgroup@yahoo.co.uk

Friday 14th September The Write Fantastic

The Write Fantastic is an initiative by authors to introduce fantasy fiction to the reading public. They give readings, talks and lectures, run workshops, and participate in panels and question & answer sessions.

Included in this group are Chaz Brenchley, Juliet E McKenna, Deborah J Miller, Stan Nicholls and Jessica Rydill. Between them, their work covers the gamut of fantasy writing from orcs and dragons, swords and sorcery to reimagined myth and history, and the magics of matter, mind and spirit.

We look forward to welcoming them back on Friday 14th September. They will have plenty to say and will answer questions about the genre, writing, and anything else! See www.thewritefantastic.com for more information.

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, crossover the road and you'll find Union Passage about 20-30 yards along). The meeting will commence at 7.45 pm.

Next meeting : 12th October



NEWS



A french fan has been arrested for posting a complete translation of the new Harry Potter book on the internet two months in advance of the official translation.

Filming is well underway on the second series of "Heroes". Two of the stars were trying desperately to avoid talking about it at a comics convention. "Yeah, we're already about six weeks in, five episodes in. Yeah. Some of us, some of us. ... I mean, maybe not us." said one of the actors whose characters were apparently killed off at the end of series 1.

Local branches of Waterstones now have their own free "sci-fi" newsletter. The August edition includes retrospectives on David Gemmell & Dune and a prize competition for those that can guess what country a "top Russian author" comes from.

Scientists from the University of Minnesota have found a hole in space. They have found a zone of space a billion light years wide that doesn't have any gas, dust, or (so they believe) dark matter.

The literary James Tait Black Memorial Prize goes to Cormac Macarthy's "The Road" described as "a journey across post-apocalypse America" (now where have I heard that before?). New pictures from NASA's Galaxy Evolution Explorer show a star with a tail like a comet. Mira in the constellation Cetus has a tail show a tail that is 13 light-years long.

Coming soon

Film remakes of "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" (with Nicole Kidman), "Fantastic Voyage", "Escape from New York", "The day the earth stood still" (starring Keanu Reeves), "The Jungle Book" more "Conan"...

Various Neil Gaiman stories will appear on film. "Stardust", which he produced, is finished. "Coraline" is to be an animated picture from the director of "Nightmare Before Christmas" and Gaiman will direct "Death : the high cost of living" himself.

Peter Jackson might yet make "The Hobbit". Although he's still arguing about his cut from "Lord of the Rings", he has started talking to the film company again.

If it ever reaches TV an episode of "Masters of Science Fiction" called "The Discarded" will feature Harlan Ellison.

Paris Hilton is to sing in a musical entitled "Repo! The Genetic Opera" a

science-fiction musical thriller set in 2056 as humanity is devastated by an epidemic.

Ridley Scott at a screening of the 5th version of "Blade Runner" claims that "sci-fi" films are dead. "There's nothing original," he said. "We've seen it all before. Been there. Done it." When asked to pick examples, he said: "All of them. Yes, all of them."

Joss Whedon wants Pete Doherty (pop singer well-known for a drug problem) to play a zombie in his new Buffy spin-off.

On the internet

www.computercrownsnest.com/features/arc/2007/nz11521.php has a recent interview with Brian Aldiss on his novel Harm, film adaptations, and politics.

Awards

Next year's Sunburst award (Canadian) will have awards for Adult and "Young Adult" books.

=====

The Sidewise Awards for Alternate History

Long Form: Charles Stross, The Family Trade, The Hidden Family and The Clan Corporate.

Short Form: Gardner Dozois, "Counterfactual"

=====

First Fandom Award

Hall of Fame: Algis Budrys

Posthumous Hall of Fame: Dan Daily

=====

Golden Duck Awards for children's science fiction:

Picture Book: Night of the Homework Zombies by Scott Nickel and illustrated by Steve Harpster

Middle Grades: Apers by Mike Jansen and Barbara Day Zinicola

Young Adult: Rash by Pete Hautman

Special Award: Write Your Own Science Fiction Story by Tish Farrel

=====

World Fantasy Life Achievement Award winners Diana Wynne Jones and Betty Ballantine

World Fantasy Award Nominations

Novel

Lisey's Story, by Stephen King

The Privilege of the Sword, by Ellen Kushner

The Lies of Locke Lamora, by Scott Lynch

The Orphan's Tales: In the Night Garden, by Catherynne M. Valente
Soldier of Sidon, by Gene Wolfe

Novella

"Botch Town," by Jeffrey Ford

"The Man Who Got Off the Ghost Train," by Kim Newman

Dark Harvest, by Norman Partridge
"Map of Dreams," by M. Rickert
"The Lineaments of Gratified
Desire," by Ysabeau S. Wilce

Short Fiction

"The Way He Does It," by Jeffrey
Ford
"Journey Into the Kingdom," by M.
Rickert
"A Siege of Cranes," by Benjamin
Rosenbaum
"Another Word for Map is Faith," by
Christopher Rowe
"Pol Pot's Beautiful Daughter
(Fantasy)," by Geoff Ryman

Anthology

Cross Plains Universe: Texans
Celebrate Robert E. Howard, by
Scott A. Cupp & Joe R. Lansdale,
eds.
Salon Fantastique, by Ellen Datlow
& Terry Windling, eds.
Retro Pulp Tales, by Joe R.
Lansdale, ed.
Twenty Epics, by David Moles &
Susan Marie Groppi, eds.
Firebirds Rising, by Sharyn
November, ed.

Collection

The Ladies of Grace Adieu and
other stories, by Susanna Clarke
The Empire of Ice Cream, by Jeffrey
Ford
American Morons, by Glen
Hirshberg
Red Spikes, by Margo Lanagan
Map of Dreams, by M. Rickert

Artist

Jon Foster, Edward Miller, John
Picacio, Shaun Tan, Jill Thompson

British Fantasy Award Nominations

Novel: The August Derleth Award

Bride of Dreams, by Chaz Brenchley
The Devil You Know, by Mike Carey
Jack of Ravens: Kingdom of the
Serpent Book 1, by Mark Chadbourn
Nova Swing, by M. John Harrison
Dusk, by Tim Lebbon
The Lies of Locke Lamora, by Scott
Lynch

Breeding Ground, by Sarah
Pinborough

The Face of Twilight, by Mark
Samuels

The Unblemished, by Conrad
Williams

Novella

"The Memory of Joy," by Eric Brown
"She Loves Monsters," by Simon
Clark

"Kid," by Paul Finch

"The Djinn's Wife," by Ian McDonald

"Rough Cut," by Gary McMahon

Short Fiction

"The Little Drummer Boy," by Marion
Arnott

"Whisper Lane," by Mark Chadbourn

"Puca Muc," by Steve Lockley &
Paul Lewis

"The Disappeared," by Sarah
Singleton

"31/10," by Stephen Volk
"The Veteran," by Conrad Williams
Collection

Fragile Things, by Neil Gaiman
The Lost District and Other Stories,
by Joel Lane
The Man from The Diogenes Club,
by Kim Newman

Unbecoming and Other Tales of
Horror, by Mike O'Driscoll
The Ephemera, by Neil Williamson

Anthology

Extended Play: The Elastic Book of
Music, edited by Gary Couzens
The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror:
19th Annual Collection, edited by
Ellen Datlow, Kelly Link & Gavin J.
Grant

Shrouded By Darkness: Tales of
Terror, edited by Alison L. R. Davies
The Mammoth Book of Best New
Horror 17, edited by Stephen Jones
Choices, edited by Christopher
Teague

=====

Obituary

Alice Borchardt (b.1939) died on July
24. She was the author of fantasy
trilogy The Silver Wolf, Night of the
Wolf and The Wolf King and the
sister of Ann Rice.

Situations Vacant

Would anyone wishing to take on
the post of **Chairman of Novacon
38** to be held in **November of 2008**
please contact the committee as
soon as possible. We have no
candidates for the post at the
moment.

Quiz

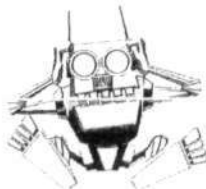
Who wrote the following stories

1. In the days of the comet (1906)
2. The Comet Doom (1928)
3. The Year of the Comet (1955)
4. Tales of the Velvet Comet (1984-86)
5. Heart of the Comet (1986)
6. The Cometeers (1936)

Last month's Quiz Answers

1. "In the looking glass" - an earlier series with the same cast "The end of the pier show" had some sf content.
2. J G Ballard - "Empire of the sun" was no. 44 on the list.
3. Norman Spinrad's "Bug Jack Barron" - either the opening is a punctuation error or it gives away some of the plot
4. "The war in the air". Wells also wrote the non-fiction book "The war that will end war".

Book Reviews



THE DA-DA-DE-DA-DA CODE by Robert Rankin,
Gollancz/Orion; 334 pages, £14.99 h/b. Reviewed by
Dave Hardy ****



When Rog offered me this book he began by saying: "Dave – have you read *The Da Vinci Code*?" When I said that I had, he replied "Here you are then, this is for you!". So I should probably start by saying that the Rankin book has nothing at all to do with the Brown one, apart from the punning title. Actually this conspiracy is much, much bigger than the one in the Brown book, because it affects everyone, and the fate of our whole world. Unless, of course, it's all in the mind of Jonathan 'Jonny' Hooker, the hero of this book, because his is a very strange mind. For one thing, since his childhood he has had an imaginary friend, who prefers to be known as an NCC – a non-corporeal companion – by the name of the Monkey Man, who wears a brightly-coloured waistcoat and a fez, and claims to have escaped from a circus. Jonny receives a Very Special Letter informing him that he has been selected by a Competition Supercomputer to be a WINNER (we've all received those, haven't we?). But in order to claim his prize he has to solve the Da-Da-De-Da-Da Code. Being a musician (he plays lead guitar in Dry Rot, which plays at the Middle Man on Heavy Metal Nights), Jonny knows that all tunes contain 'da-da-de-da-da' somewhere, 'Waltzing Matilda' being perhaps the best-known example. But it becomes more sinister when he realizes that it also has something to do with the Devil's Chord or Devil's Interval, an augmented fourth or diminished fifth, which gives the listener a sense of unease, or restlessness, which needs resolution. It's also used in the title music of The Simpsons, and The Dance of the Sugar-plum Fairy. And not a lot of people know that. It also turns out that Robert Johnson, legendary blues player who sold his soul to the Devil, actually played his thirtieth song at the Middle Man; the barman and owner has a photo behind the bar to prove it. Later, he even produces Robert Johnson's Gibson guitar from a storeroom, and Jonny gets to play it, with remarkable results.

Near the beginning of the story there are several deaths, by beheading, for which Jonny is a prime suspect until he apparently becomes a victim. But he continues regardless, under the disguise of a Gunnersbury Park Ranger. There is so much more, and it's impossible to describe it in any

detail here; such as the involvement of the Air Loom Gang, from the year 1790, who are able to magnetise people and make them do their bidding, via music played on their amazing machine, and the appearance, near the end, of Elvis as one of a group of Rulers who almost plunge the world into a nuclear holocaust, under the influence of the Air Loom.

Robert Rankin books are rather like Marmite, or Brussels sprouts, which everyone either loves or hates. Personally I love them: to me Robert Rankin is much funnier than Terry Pratchett, and indeed he's the only author who never fails to make me laugh out loud (which can get you funny looks if you do it on a crowded train). It's a tradition, or an old charter, or something. . .

THE SAM GUNN OMNIBUS by Ben Bova; Tor Books; 704 pages, \$29.95 h/c. Reviewed by David A. Hardy



Sam Gunn is a freewheeling space entrepreneur, a little stubby loudmouthed guy with short wiry red hair, a wiseass, a cheating, conniving, womanizing rogue, who was kicked out of NASA as an astronaut.

Sam Gunn is a champion of the small guy, always fighting for justice, always battling with the big boys of powerful interplanetary corporations (like Rockwell – sorry, Rockledge – and Yamagata) and usually winning. For a while, he has made billions, and then lost them. Despite his short stature, moon face, small, shifty eyes which sometimes look blue and sometimes green, and gap-toothed grin, women apparently find him irresistible.

An unlikely hero for a whole series of short stories that date back from 1983 to the present day, you may think. And you'd be right, but it works. Ben Bova has, over the years, woven an alternative (alternate, US) universe, one which should have come into being by now but didn't, but which – just perhaps – one day might.

It's a universe in which we have space stations and even space hotels, where there are extensive bases on the Moon, and humans on Mars, where there are asteroid-miners, and habitats everywhere from the Earth/Moon L-5 points to the moons of Jupiter, Saturn, and expeditions out to Pluto and beyond. It's the same universe in which he set his epic and very readable 'The Grand Tour' series of novels: *Mercury*, *Venus*, *The Silent War*, and all the rest. (Rather oddly, but because these stories span such a long period, we get strange anomalies such as, for instance, the fact that space stations *Freedom* and *Alpha* exist in parallel, whereas in fact they are actually earlier incarnations of what is now the International Space Station, or ISS.)

To link all of these stories Ben has introduced the slim, elfin Jane Avril Inconnu,

who (coincidentally?) also has red hair and green eyes, and likes to be known as Jade, who started life as a foundling at the old original Moonbase, later to grow into the lunar city of Selene. Born with a congenital bone defect, Jade is bound forever to live in space or on the Moon, as her bones would snap in Earth's gravity. She becomes a truck driver, and over the years hears many stories about Sam Gunn. Gradually she realizes that a TV series about Sam Gunn could be very popular, and manages to get a job as an assistant video editor for the Solar News Network, and eventually a reporter and journalist.

The linking sections about Jade become an integral part of this omnibus (which includes all the stories ever written about Sam Gunn, plus a couple of new ones), making it read almost like one long novel. So, as she contrives to meet various people who have become involved with Sam during his lifetime, his story unfolds – not always in chronological fashion. We learn how he sets up the first honeymoon hotel in orbit, ruined by the fact that the newlyweds inevitably spend the first few days throwing up, despite there being a cure for space-sickness which Rockledge vindictively withhold from Sam. There are 50 stories, of various lengths, so I will not attempt to list them all; of his amorous exploits and how he evades marriage numerous times (especially to Senator Jill Meyers, who continues to pursue him to the end), of his encounter with the Porno Twins, who supply virtual sex to asteroid miners, of his (alleged) fall into a black hole and meeting with aliens out in the Kuiper Belt, and his involvement with a matter transmitter – or is it duplicator? And so on.

This is all great fun, and while not holding any great philosophical message (except that we really should be doing a lot more in space because there are huge opportunities out there ...) it's a good solid read which should keep you happy for quite a while. If you're into space stuff, don't miss this one.

THE PREFECT by Alastair Reynolds, Gollancz £17.99, 410 pages

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.



For those who have read other books set in Reynolds' far future universe, this fast-paced space opera will be a must. Newcomers to his work may experience periods of bewilderment.

Around the inhospitable planet of Yellowstone mankind has build ten thousand habitats. Each habitat is different. Some citizens have opted to live in a Permanent Vegetative State in their habitat. Others have chosen a tyranny, a democracy or a theocracy. If enough people want a particular life-style, they can have it. All however have the right to vote. Overseeing it all and policing the habitats of the Glitter Band is Panoply and its prefects. Tom Dreyfus is a field prefect. We meet him first when his team is enforcing a lock-down in

one of the habitats for polling fraud. They are being removed from the Band-wide communication network. The loop-hole the case has thrown up can be plugged and Thalia Ng volunteers to install the new software in four habitats. As she sets off, another crisis arises when a habitat is destroyed by the engines of an Ultra ship. Then Thalia's upgrade triggers a take-over by Aurora, an alpha-level simulation. The whole of the Glitter band is now under threat, its citizens facing death. Dreyfus's investigations bring him close to Aurora but at a critical time he is arrested on suspicion of murder.

The threads of the plot lead back to a number of past incidents the consequences of which come together at this junction in time to exacerbate the crisis. To complicate matters, Dreyfus has to face the results of his own past actions, and there is a traitor within Panoply determined to thwart him. This is a good addition to tales set in Reynolds's created future.

HEART-SHAPED BOX by Joe Hill, Gollancz £ 12.99. 368 pages

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

The novel is supernatural horror but the themes running through it are music, guilt and redemption. The main character, Jude Coyne is an ageing rock musician who has had a string of young girlfriends, all of which he names after the state they come from. His current one is Georgia who was a performer in a sleazy nightclub. His band spit up after the deaths of two of the members though he still writes music. He feels guilty that they die and not him.



Jude is a known collector of occult ephemera. When he is offered a ghost via an internet auction site he cannot resist, even though he thinks it is probably a scam. In exchange for his money, he is sent a suit of clothes purported to be haunted by the ghost of the previous owner. It arrives in a heart-shaped box reminiscent of the ones containing chocolates his father used to buy his mother and in which she kept her sewing stuff. When it arrives, Georgia pricks her thumb on a pin hidden in it. Later, strange things start to happen. Danny, Jude's personal assistant, discovers that the woman who sold the haunted suit is the sister of Jude's previous girlfriend. A depressive, Florida killed herself after Jude had sent her back to her sister because he felt it was the best thing for her and he couldn't cope with her mood swings any longer. The ghost is Craddock, Florida's step-father, who is determined to kill Jude and anyone who offers him help. He proves it by persuading Danny to hang himself. Florida's sister, Jessica, claims that Craddock's motive is retribution, saying that it was Jude's treatment of her sister that caused her suicide. This gives Jude another reason to feel guilty and at the same time increases his vulnerability to Craddock's influence.

Driven from their home, Jude and Georgia embark on a wild drive to try and survive and find a way of laying the malevolent spirit.

Music pervades the whole novel. It is not just that Jude is a musician; he also finds that the best way to banish the influence of the ghost from his mind is to fill the space with music. Florida had once told him that Craddock never allowed music to be played in the car when they travelled. Music was obviously a significant factor in Hill's approach to writing this book. It is of note that the 'Heart-Shaped Box' is a track from Nirvana. Kurt Cobain was an influence in Jude's early career. He also played with Led Zeppelin and AC/DC. The titles of the first two sections in the novel, 'Black Dog' and 'Ride On' are tracks from these two bands. One wonders what Hill had on his turntable when he was writing the book.

This is an excellent debut novel. The characters are well developed, with believable backgrounds which influence their actions. From the start, the tempo is fast, the plot consistent and the tension builds to a crescendo in the third section. If he continues to write this well, Hill has a high-profile future ahead of him.

BRASYL by Ian McDonald Gollancz; 403 pages; £18.99 h/b £12.99 t p/b

Reviewed by Michael Jones Star rating ****

As in his previous book *River of Gods*, which I reviewed here a couple of years ago, McDonald has chosen a setting unusual (although perhaps not totally unique) in contemporary Sf – the country better known to us as Brasil in case you hadn't guessed – for the stories of several seemingly unconnected people.

ed
3-
3-
3-
3-
3-
3-
3-

In the Rio of 2006 Marcelina, an ambitious TV producer, finds her world invaded by an exact duplicate of herself whilst in Sao Paulo in 2032. Edson, an equally ambitious young entrepreneur meets and falls in love with Fia, a young hacker through whom he learns of the world of quantum computing. When she is mysteriously killed an exact duplicate of her turns up as well, and

it becomes apparent that the both these duplicates have crossed over from alternate worlds in the Quantum Multiverse. Meanwhile, interleaved with their two stories is that of Father Quinn, an eighteenth-century Jesuit priest who has been sent for to act as an Admonitory and bring into line a renegade fellow-priest. He is captured by natives and given a drug which opens his mind to the many worlds of the multiverse, with the result that he becomes involved with a mysterious "Order" which exists to police transitions between the worlds. Marcelina together with Edson and Fia have become aware of both the multiverse and this Order; pursued by the latter they are rescued by Father Quinn and recruited by him to the other side.

These three stories are intricately braided together, the frenetic, almost

hallucinatory style of the contemporary sections contrasting with a somewhat more prosaic and down-to-earth telling of that which is set three centuries earlier. It is all meticulously researched, particularly as regards the history of the Portuguese conquest of Brasil, although to my taste the historical sections tended to drag and should have been tighter and briefer. By contrast the modern stories really rock and the vivid descriptive passages truly take the reader to strange and unknown worlds.

Unfortunately a couple of things remain unclear. It is fairly explicitly stated that there is a "war" going on across the multiverse but there is no explanation as to how the sides are divided up. Also it seems that the possibility of travel between worlds includes travel between times – or does it?

These comments notwithstanding, this is an excellent and fascinating piece of up-to-the-minute Science Fiction with a basis in the most extreme ideas of modern theoretical physics.

FUTURE 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:-September 20th - Adam Roberts - Polystorm
Future dates , October 18th , November 15th , December 13th

The Write Fantastic will also be appearing at the Cornerhouse on Newhall Street, Birmingham, from 6.30pm on the 15th September at a British Fantasy Society hosted Open Night. This will be informal and all are welcome. Email Vicky for further details - cook.vicky@yahoo.co.uk

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**. There will be many more lesser known writers and artists and maybe the odd surprise guest. Among other attractions are the British Fantasy awards and the epic Fantasycon Raffle! For further information please see www.fantasycon.org.uk or email fcon@britishfantasysociety.org.uk

Birmingham Book Festival 11th - 21st October at various venues across the city closes with local author **Jim Crace** on his new novel "The Pesthouse" described as "a journey across post-apocalypse America"

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 £38. Cheques to "Novacon 37", Steve Lawson, 379 Myrtle Road, Sheffield, S2 3HQ. Email: x15@zoom.co.uk Website www.novacon.org or www.novacon37.org.uk

Tolkien's Birmingham - A weekend event organised by the "Birmingham Tolkien Group" includes a guided tour of all relevant local locations, a welcome reception attended by the Lord Mayor and a party on Saturday night. Prices from £150 per person including accomodation. For Further details see www.shireproductions.co.uk.

Future meetings of the BSFG

12th October

9th November - Quiz with a team from Birmingham University (to be confirmed)

7th December – Christmas Party at the Selly Tavern

BRUM GROUP NEWS 432 copyright 2007 for Birmingham SF Group. Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the committee or the general membership. Acting Editor William McCabe (email wamccabe@tiscali.co.uk)

Thank you to all the named contributors.

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