

# BRUM GROUP NEWS

THE *FREE* MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE

## BIRMINGHAM SCIENCE FICTION GROUP

JULY 2008

ISSUE 442

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

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**Friday 11<sup>th</sup> July**

## CHRISTOPHER PRIEST

Chris Priest should need no introduction to most Brum Group members having visited us and given a talk on several occasions over the years. Newer members who have not had the pleasure of hearing Chris talk however, should already be aware of his work. From his early novels - the award-winning *INVERTED WORLD* and his homage to H G Wells, *THE SPACE MACHINE* through the 'middle-period' novels *A DREAM OF WESSEX* and *THE AFFIRMATION* to his recent classics, *THE PRESTIGE* and *THE SEPARATION*, all his work is of the very highest standard. Whether much of his work should be classed as SF is

**August – SUMMER SOCIAL.** The usual meal at The Black Eagle. Ticket only. Contact a committee member if you need a ticket – there MAY be a cancellation.

debatable. Chris has often said that he does not consider himself to be an SF author. But whether one classes his work as SF or not, there is little argument about the incredibly high quality of his writing.

His latest work is *THE MAGIC*, a non-fiction work about the writing of *THE PRESTIGE* and the making of the movie based on that novel. Chris is publishing this himself under his own imprint Grim Grin Press. It is hoped that the very first copies off the press will be available at his talk.

Chris will be talking about *THE MAGIC* and, of course, *THE PRESTIGE*, both book and film versions. It promises to be a fascinating evening. Don't miss it!

*The meeting will take place in OUR NEW VENUE - the conference room on the first floor of the Briar Rose Hotel, Bennetts Hill just off New Street. The entrance to the hotel is adjacent to Wetherspoon's on the right.*

*At the bottom of the ramp from New Street Station, turn left and walk up New Street. Bennetts Hill is the third road on the right.*

*The doors open at 7.30pm and the meeting will commence at 8.00pm so please arrive early, get your drinks from the bar on the ground floor, and be seated in plenty of time.*

## **LAST MONTH'S MEETING - ERIC BROWN**



For several years I had tried to persuade Eric Brown to talk to the Group - he was (is!) one of my favourite authors and for my money by far away the best writer of classic SF we have (*ENGINEMAN* and *THE FALL OF TARTARUS* are absolute wonders). But he'd always claimed that public speaking scared him and on the odd occasion he'd tried it, he'd been physically ill for the few days before the event. Eventually he gave in and agreed to talk to the Group, having convinced himself that giving

talks was part of an author's job.

OK, so the talk would be a little erratic and nervous but hopefully it would put Eric a little nearer to becoming a good speaker.

But - WOW - Eric surprised us all by giving a first-class, totally professional talk, leaving me for one totally shocked. He was a professional speaker who'd been lying to me for years!!!! I was so shocked and totally enthralled by his talk that I completely forgot to make any notes for this report.

When Vernon stood up to thank Eric at the end of the talk, he virtually said everything I wanted to say – a fascinating, brilliant talk and one of the very best we've had in 38 years of Brum Group meetings. Unbelievable.

If you weren't there, it's impossible to convey just how good this talk was. Make sure you're at the meeting when Eric is invited back to talk to us (and that WILL happen!)  
RGP

## **WHEN WE GO – Vernon Brown**

<< The July Focus magazine (£3.40) contains an excellent factual article by Stephen Baxter about 'Earth Without Man', extrapolating Earth's future if Man wipes himself out or nearly so, a favourite SF scenario. – VB>>

Throughout the history of SF there have been stories of Man's extermination or near-extermination, from Shelley's THE LAST MAN to the latest film version of I AM LEGEND. The cause may be natural or manmade, resulting in the death of all life or just Man, or it may, more commonly, leave a few survivors to build the story round because there's not much to write about once the final death throes are over.

In the decade or so after WWII there was a spate of survivor stories, set either as events unfolded or in the future when the Earth had settled itself to a new equilibrium and the remnants of the human race had formed new, usually small and primitive societies. THE DEATH OF GRASS, THE DAY OF THE TRIFFIDS and A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ spring to mind, as does the current *Protectors/Corvallis* series by S M Stirling.

One necessarily common facet of all these stories is a description of just how Earth reacts to the sudden freedom that she has from the hand of humans. Non-domestic flora and fauna thrive while the domesticated don't, non-living objects like buildings and roads gradually crumble. And while the new balance starts to assert itself nuclear reactors go into meltdown, storage tanks of assorted nasties spill their contents and lowlands flood.

While some stories depict this rebalancing quite well others just don't hold water so it's useful when an article is produced based on facts and logical extrapolation. A TV programme did this recently which I have yet to view and author Stephen Baxter has just written an eight page article in the July edition of *Focus* magazine which makes interesting and informative reading. Taking the premise that Man has just been wiped out by an escaped human-targeted virus he examines the timeline of events that ensue, right up to the moment that the last human artefact disintegrates – and no, it is not a plastic supermarket bag! In fact, I felt quite a frisson when I read what and when it would be!

I'm not sure how long this magazine will be on the newsstands – I only picked it up by chance at New Street Station while waiting for a train but at £3.40 it's worth looking for. It has a number of other interesting articles and snippets of information as well such as one about CFCs which destroy the ozone

layer. It took fifty years for their effects to be realised and five more to ban them. They are based on chlorine but bromine was also considered, which is one hundred times as destructive. Had bromine been used the ozone layer would have collapsed, allowing ultraviolet radiation to blast and damage the Earth's ecosystems, including humankind, before the depletion could be detected. Another nightmare SF scenario. VB

## **2008 LOCUS AWARDS**

**SF Novel:** THE YIDDISH POLICEMEN'S UNION by Michael Chabon

**Fantasy Novel:** MAKING MONEY by Terry Pratchett

**Young Adult Book:** UN LUN DUN by China Miéville

**First Novel:** HEART-SHAPED BOX by Joe Hill

**Novella:** "After the Siege" by Cory Doctorow

**Novellette:** "The Witch's Headstone" by Neil Gaiman

**Short Story:** "A Small Room in Koboldtown" by Michael Swanwick

**Collection:** THE WINDS OF MARBLE ARCH AND OTHER STORIES by Connie Willis

**Anthology:** THE NEW SPACE OPERA edited by Gardner Dozois & Jonathan Strahan

**Non-Fiction:** BREAKFAST IN THE RUINS by Barry N. Malzberg

**Art Book:** THE ARRIVAL by Shaun Tan

**Editor:** Ellen Datlow

**Magazine:** F&SF

**Publisher:** Tor

**Artist:** Charles Vess

## **THE JOHN W CAMPBELL AWARD NOMINEES**

Presented for Novels

HARM by Brian Aldiss

THE YIDDISH POLICEMAN'S UNION by Michael Chabon

IN WAR TIMES by Kathleen Ann Goonan

THE NEW MOON'S ARMS by Nalo Hopkinson

MAINSRING by Jay Lake

THE EXECUTION CHANNEL by Ken MacLeod

BRASYL by Ian McDonald

TIME'S CHILD by Rebecca Ore

BAD MONKEYS by Matt Ruff

ROLLBACK by Robert J. Sawyer

ZIG ZAG by Jose Carlos Somoza

THE MARGARETS by Sheri S. Tepper

DEADSTOCK by Jeffrey Thomas

AXIS by Robert Charles Wilson

## **THE THEODORE STURGEON MEMORIAL AWARD NOMINEES**

Presented for short fiction

"The Forest" by Laird Barron

"Tideline" by Elizabeth Bear

"The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate" by Ted Chiang

"The Dreaming Wind" by Jeffrey Ford

"Always" by Karen Joy Fowler

"The Tomb Wife" by Gwyneth Jones

"The Last American" by John Kessel

"The Master Miller's Wife" by Ian R. MacLeod

"Finistera" by David Moles

"Baby Doll" by Johanna Sinisalo

"Memorare" by Gene Wolfe

## **BEST SF, FANTASY & ANIMATED FILMS OF ALL TIME**

The American Film Institute revealed the 10 greatest movies in 10 classic American film genres—including science fiction, fantasy and animation in a three-hour special television event on CBS June 17. A jury of 1,500 film artists, critics and historians voted.

### **Top 10 Science Fiction Films**

- 1 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY (1968)
- 2 STAR WARS: EPISODE IV - A NEW HOPE (1977)
- 3 E.T.: THE EXTRA TERRESTRIAL (1982)
- 4 A CLOCKWORK ORANGE (1971)
- 5 THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL (1951)
- 6 BLADE RUNNER (1982)
- 7 ALIEN (1979)
- 8 TERMINATOR 2: JUDGMENT DAY (1991)
- 9 INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS (1956)
- 10 BACK TO THE FUTURE (1985)

### **Top 10 Animated Films**

- 1 SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN DWARFS (1937)
- 2 PINOCCHIO (1940)
- 3 BAMBI (1942)
- 4 THE LION KING (1994)
- 5 FANTASIA (1940)
- 6 TOY STORY (1995)
- 7 BEAUTY AND THE BEAST (1991)
- 8 SHREK (2001)
- 9 CINDERELLA (1950)
- 10 FINDING NEMO (2003)

### **Top 10 Fantasy Films**

- 1 THE WIZARD OF OZ (1939)
- 2 THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING (2001)
- 3 IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE (1946)
- 4 KING KONG (1933)
- 5 MIRACLE ON 34TH STREET (1947)
- 6 FIELD OF DREAMS (1989)
- 7 HARVEY (1950)
- 8 GROUNDHOG DAY (1993)
- 9 THE THIEF OF BAGDAD (1924)
- 10 BIG (1988)

### **SCI-FI CHANNEL'S IDEA OF GREAT SF...**

The SCI-FI Channel has listed the following as the Top 10 Books to Read

- 1 NINETEEN EIGHTY FOUR by George Orwell
- 2 THE WAR OF THE WORLDS by H.G. Wells
- 3 DUNE by Frank Herbert
- 4 THE TIME MACHINE by H.G. Wells
- 5 I, ROBOT by Isaac Asimov
- 6 THE STAND by Stephen King
- 7 FAHRENHEIT 451 by Ray Bradbury
- 8 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY by Arthur C. Clarke
- 9 BRAVE NEW WORLD by Aldous Huxley
- 10 THE ANDROMEDA STRAIN by Michael Crichton

<<Sorry, but the first nine read like the choice of someone who's been dead for the past 40-odd years. All good books but surely something worthwhile has been written since 1970! As for the 10<sup>th</sup> choice, well... how did that get in there! - RGP>>

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

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

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

From our co-President **HARRY HARRISON** on the piece I copied from *Pravda* last month.... "*Pravda* means 'truth' in Russian. But I'm afraid you won't find much in the issue of May 26th. I did a press conference in Moscow...six TV channels, newspapers, magazine, the lot. I'm just sorry that all the Brum Group knows about this is one biased report from a most prejudiced source. I did not say that the "USA is a fascist state." I said that Bush had consistently violated the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, but America is a constitutional democracy and I had great faith in this document. Bush will not be re-elected. And the inherent checks and balances in the US system would cancel out the violations. I am a great believer in the strength of American democracy. In the long run. Not quite the way *Pravda* quoted me... More in sorrow than in anger

HH

<<My apologies Harry for not contacting you on this when I reprinted, but I found it at the very last minute on Dave Langford's *Ansible* site and there wasn't time to ask you for your comments. - RGP>>

## NEWS IN BRIEF . . .

.... Author and editor **Algis Budrys** (b.1931) died on June 9. Budrys was born in East Prussia, the son of a Lithuanian consul-general. His family moved to the



US in 1936. Known to countless fans and friends as AJ, his writing career began in 1952 with the sale of "The High Purpose" to *Astounding SF*. He went on to publish over 200 short stories and novels, including **WHO?**, **ROGUE MOON**, and **MICHAELMAS**. He used many pseudonyms, among them were David S. Hodgkins, Ivan Janvier, Paul Janvier, Albert Stroud and William Scarff. Budrys worked as an editor for Gnome Press, *Galaxy* and *Tomorrow Speculative Fiction*, first a print magazine, later an early on-line fiction zine. Budrys received seven Hugo nominations, including his novels **WHO?** and **ROGUE MOON**. He received another nomination for **BENCHMARKS:**

**GALAXY BOOKSHELF**, a collection of his groundbreaking reviews for *Galaxy*

.... **Howard Waldrop** has been admitted to Seton Medical Center in Austin, TX after suffering pulmonary edema brought on by high blood pressure. Waldrop has been diagnosed with multiple blockages and damage from a silent heart attack he had previously suffered. Currently undergoing treatment for a bladder infection and poor blood sugar, once those are under control he will undergo bypass surgery .... **Paul Barnett**, aka **John Grant**, had triple bypass surgery in June .... Brum Group member **Malcolm Thorpe** suffered a heart

attack on June 27<sup>th</sup>. Feeling unwell, he went to hospital and had the attack there. We wish him a speedy recovery .... A fire raged through the lot at **Universal**

**Studios** on Sunday, June 1. The fire destroyed more than two city blocks, including the studio's outdoor 'New York' set, the courthouse square from the *Back to the Future* movies, a **KING KONG** exhibit, and part of the studio's film library. According to studio officials, all the lost films were also stored in another site and, although a catalog of lost films hasn't been completed, nothing was irrevocably lost .... **Harlan Ellison** has resold 32 out-of-print works to E-Reads

which will release the titles in e-book formats and print-on-demand trade paperbacks. No, **LAST DANGEROUS VISIONS** isn't one of them!!! .... A new **Jack Vance** collection, **WILD THYME**, **GREEN MAGIC**, plus a new **Greg Egan** collection have been sold to Subterranean Press .... **IRON MAN** is poised to become the first film of 2008 to reach the \$300 million mark in gross domestic ticket sales ....

RGP

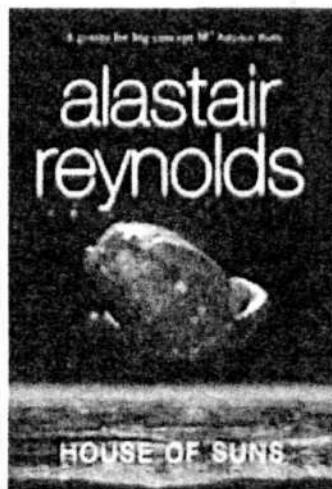
# BOOK REVIEWS

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

## ***HOUSE OF SUNS by Alastair Reynolds***

**Gollancz / 527pgs / £18.99 / hardcover / 978-0575-077171**

**Reviewed by Pauline Morgan**



This novel is a departure for Reynolds in that it explores more complex ideas and reaches greater depths than previously. It encompasses huge periods of time and vast distances in space, all without stepping outside the known parameters of physics – all his spaceships travel at sub-light speeds.

At some point in our distant future, a pioneer, with the expertise for building star-faring ships, decided to explore the galaxy. In order to do so, but without the ability to travel faster than light, she decided to clone herself, each 'shatterling' taking one ship and meeting up in the future to exchange information. Thus the family lines were created. Campion and Purslane are members of the House of Flowers,

the Gentian line. Campion and Purslane, contrary to family tenets, are lovers. They are also late for the latest reunion, having gained one passenger (a member of the only intelligent race of machines) and losing another (an aquatic whose tank malfunctions). When they arrive, however, they discover that most of their fellow shatterlings have been massacred. Retreating to the planet of Neumne the fifty two survivors need to work out why someone wants to eradicate the Gentian line,

The novel starts slowly, as the building blocks of the plot are put in to place, then accelerates. It is told as alternate first person narratives from the points of view of Campion and Purslane with interacts going back to the perspective of their progenitor, Abigail Gentian as a child.

This is perhaps Reynolds' best book to date. It deals with themes of love, friendship and loyalty, interspersed with ideas of revenge, self-sacrifice and subterfuge. When Purslane is abducted aboard her own ship, Campion is prepared to follow however far, and however long it takes to be reunited with his love.

An excellent piece of work.

PM



## ***FLOOD by Stephen Baxter***

**Gollancz / 504pgs / £18.99 / hardcover / 978-0575-080560**

**& £12.99 / trade paperback / 978-0575-080584**

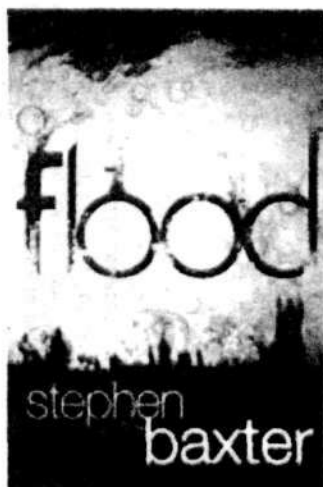
**Reviewed by Michael Jones**

In 2016 four hostages rescued from a group of religious terrorists arrive in London just in time to witness the onset of a flood which overwhelms the city. At first this is attributed to climate change but as the flooding becomes worse all over the world another, better explanation has to be found and it seems that water locked in vast amounts in the deep rock of the Earth's mantle is being released causing the seas to rise at an ever-accelerating rate. (There is a scientific justification for the existence of this 'buried' water, but no explanation is forthcoming as to why it is being released, or why now). Within twenty years Scafell Pike, the highest point of England, is covered and in 2052 a straggly group of raft-dwellers watch as the peak of Everest disappears beneath the waves.

The story of those thirty-six years is told from the various and separate points of view of those four hostage survivors, who find themselves uniquely placed to watch the unfolding events as billions die, civilisation as we know it is destroyed forever and such humanity as survives is forced to adapt to life on a world covered by water. The reader recalls the catastrophe novels that were popular at one time, but the world and SF have both moved on in the last fifty-plus years and this story is far removed from the relative cosiness of, say, John Wyndham's work. It is a bleak and at times horrific tale, with little to offer by way of a future for the human race, Except . . . Baxter seems to like writing in series: this cries out for a sequel and there are several obvious and not-so-obvious hints that there remains more to be told.

Interestingly, this proof copy of the book, contained in a sealed evidence bag to protect it from water damage, is presented as having been recovered from a collapsed tower block in central London under 4000 metres of water during an extra-planetary exploration mission in 2115. (So two hints that there may be more to come, before the book is even opened!)

Stephen Baxter has obviously done his homework. Apart from the origin of the flooding itself, he shows the progress of the waters creeping over the lowest land first, before rising remorselessly higher and higher and writes about how the inundated land will react to the weight of water lying on it, giving rise to earthquakes, tsunamis and the like, and how even more radical climate change will arise from the redistribution of energy in the atmosphere. Plus, of course, the



reaction of both populations and governments to the prospect of losing everything. It may not always make for pleasant reading, but is intriguing, fascinating and perhaps even enjoyable nonetheless. MJ

## **DREAM SONGS: A RRRETROSPECTIVE Book Two**

**by George R R Martin**

**Gollancz / 717pgs / £8.99 / paperback / 978-0752-890098**

**Reviewed by Dave Corby**



I was originally attracted to review this book by the one and only story I have previously read by George R R Martin; "The Hedge Knight", a novella that is set in and preludes *A Song of Fire and Ice*, George Martin's ongoing series of fat fantasy novels. That story was first published as part of the LEGENDS collection put together by Robert Silverberg (Tor/Voyager, 1998). When I read that collection, "The Hedge Knight" stood out from the rest and is the only one I can significantly remember, some 8 years later.

You will note from the title that this is book 2 of a retrospective collection. As such, the collection represents various stories from throughout George Martin's writing career, and

hence does not have a chronological order or linking narrative, and it is not necessary to have read book 1 (which I haven't).

The collection has two *Haviland Tuf* stories: the complete stories can be found in TUF VOYAGING, and these two tales represent un-expanded or alternative versions of tales found in that complete collection. Tuf, a likeable sort of rogue ecological engineer long after that science has died, roams the galaxy in his ancient seed-ship, searching for planets that he can assist in an ecological way, usually giving them more than they bargained for and making himself rich in the process. This was a really pleasant way to open the collection... I think Haviland Tuf is brilliant! Fun, clever, thought provoking and supremely approachable - these stories have persuaded me to track down the full collection.

Next up we have two television scripts George Martin produced, one for one of the latter day (misguided?) attempts to bring back *The Twilight Zone*, and another a pilot for a more intriguing television show about a contemporary doctor who links up with a parallel-world-hoping woman, constantly on the run from her ominous and alien-technology-laden pursuers. Although the concepts seem strong and both would probably make good shows, I always find that reading scripts makes me feel as if I am experiencing the stories in the wrong medium... which of course, I am. A low point in the book, then, for me.

Following this are two excerpts from the long-running *Wildcards* series. As the introduction interestingly notes, the *Wildcards* idea sprang from an extensive set of super-heroic role-playing that George Martin, Roger Zelazny and friends partook of back in the '80s. Knowing this, I approached with caution. Having done my share of role-playing, I am aware of how frequently role-players think their characters will transfer to great written stories, and how infrequently that actually turns out to be. Nonetheless, I found the *Wildcards* stories to be well written and quite enjoyable, but the general concept seemed at odds with the mature treatment given to it; somehow superheroes just seem a little too marvelous. I enjoy the comics and the movies; George Martin's stories just don't reflect the right ambience, I guess.

The collection finishes off with.... well, various. Several SF (some far future, some just round the corner), a couple of horror, and a fantasy (the aforementioned "The Hedge Knight") make up a highly varied set of stories. I was struck by the strength of the concepts and the way George Martin's characters react in such natural seeming ways to the situation they are in, giving each story a compelling sense of reality.

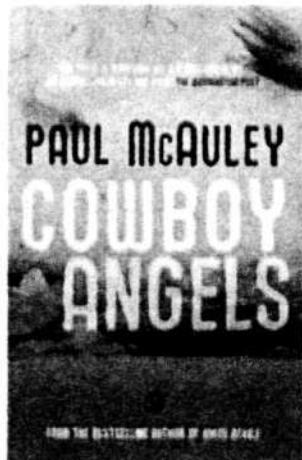
Overall, I got a lot more enjoyment from this book than disappointment. I might have been tempted to hand out top marks, but the presence of the scripts and the slightly off feeling I got from the *Wildcards* drop it from first class. To be honest, the 700+ pages disappeared alarmingly quickly, and left me wanting for more. Time to track down that copy of TUF VOYAGING, then. DC

### ***COWBOY ANGELS* by Paul J McAuley**

**Gollancz / 408 pages / £7.99 / paperback / 978-0575-082236**

**Reviewed by Michael Jones**

In a parallel-world America, the discovery of pan-dimensional gateways enables travel to alternate realities where history has taken a different course. An American Government organisation based on the CIA sends its operatives, the Cowboy Angels, through the gates with the object of unifying and uniting all versions of the Good 'Ol US of A. In time, political changes dilute this objective, and a breakaway clandestine group is set up to continue the original work by any means necessary. Having discovered how to use the gates to travel through time as well, they are not above going back and starting nuclear wars in other realities if they feel that this will best serve their ends, but fortunately a renegade agent discovers the plot. He contrives to get a former friend and colleague brought out of retirement so that together they can thwart this scheme.



It is all rather derivative. The basic concept is similar to H. Beam Piper's *Paratime* stories, the transport system of the gateways is borrowed from Peter F. Hamilton's *Commonwealth Saga* and the general atmosphere with its weaponry and talk of "The Company" and "Black Ops" echoes every spy thriller from Bond to Bourne, while the gratuitous violence, torture and casual killing reflect the way things are today in our world. Interestingly, although this is where a lot of the action takes place, it is not the same as the 'real' in which the story is rooted.

Having said all that, it must be agreed that the author has mixed these ingredients into something fresh and exciting - definitely exciting. There is enough running and shooting for anybody and the complexities of alternate histories/time-travel/paradoxes sustain interest, provided the reader can keep track of who is who and when is when. Tension is unrelenting and it is never certain who will live and who will die. Even the ending remains open - it reminded me of something else, although I cannot remember exactly what.

COWBOY ANGELS is an interesting blend of SF with espionage thriller. McAuley has become one of our leading SF writers and it is well up to his usual standard. MJ

## **THE KINGDOM BEYOND THE WAVES**

**by Stephen Hunt**

**Voyager / 556pgs / £17.99 / hardcover / 978-000-7232208**

**Reviewed by Pauline Morgan**



It is very difficult to know whether this book should be regarded as science fiction or fantasy. Certainly it would fit with the Wellsian idea of a scientific romance. It contains elements that have distinct Victorian flavour and ideas that could respectably grace Swiftian chronicles or be included in the Adventures of Baron Munchausen. THE KINGDOM BEYOND THE WAVES is set in the same world as the author's previous work, THE COURT OF THE AIR, but takes place a few years later - there is a very slight overlap of characters. The world is one in which electricity never came to prominence but there is a great reliance on steam power. In fact one race of sentient beings are the steammen who are metallic rather than organic.

Amelia Harsh is a professor of archaeology with an obsession - to find the city of Camlantis. This semi-mythical place was supposed to be one of peace and vanished thousands of years before in a 'floatquake'. A 'floatquake' is a seismic event that results in part of the earth becoming an aerial floating island. Abraham Quest is a wealthy industrialist and self made man. He, too, wants to

find Camlantis. He also wants to see the world living in peace and harmony but his future has a rather different slant to Amelia's. However, Quest bank-rolls an expedition into the dangerous Liongeli jungle to find artefacts left behind when the city left. Amelia leads the expedition, to find the lake deep in the jungle, aboard a submarine filled with ex-slavers as crew, Cartosian warrior women as security and a handful of renegades who are hoping that the trip will pay them enough to retire. Many obstacles will be placed across their path.

The quest itself is much of the same order as Alan Quatermain in that each time progress is made, another appears. The main protagonists, Amelia Harsh and Abraham Quest are, in themselves, archetypes – the obsessive adventurer and the evil genius. What is interesting about the novel are the subordinate characters, the misfits like Billy Snow, the blind sonar operator who is revealed to have hidden talents. Underused and fascinating are Cornelius Fortune, a face changer who does daring deeds as Furnace=breath Nick and his sidekick, Septimoth, a lashlite (basically a flying repule). These two, plus their mysterious housekeeper, make the foundation of an interesting story in their own right.

Whether you enjoy this book will depend on the kind of fiction you prefer. PM

### **HEART-SHAPED BOX by Joe Hill**

**Gollancz / 406 pgs / £6.99 / paperback / 978-0575-081864**

**Reviewed by Michael Jones**

It is an open secret that Joe Hill is the son of acclaimed horror writer Stephen King. Here he sets out in his father's footsteps with the story of Jude Coyne, an aging and largely retired rock star who has survived the deaths of fellow band members and now lives quietly with a young Goth girlfriend, two big dogs and a collection of macabre relics. When the opportunity presents itself to buy an actual ghost to add to his collection of the weird and occult he does not hesitate and soon finds himself the owner of a dead man's Sunday suit, to which his spirit is supposedly attached, delivered in the heart-shaped box of the title.

As it turns out, this is a set-up, deliberately contrived by the owner of the suit before he died. He was the step-father of a previous girlfriend who killed herself after being parted from Jude, and the sale of the suit and attached ghost has been arranged by the girl's older sister. The object is to wreak vengeance on Jude by destroying him and anyone close to him. The book therefore relates the story of how nearly this plot succeeds and how



desperately Jude and his girl have to fight back, eventually discovering the final unexpected perversion which will stand the whole situation on its head and ensure their survival. The escalating tension has built so well that at times it has been genuinely hard to believe that the main protagonists really will survive and even knowing (or assuming) that they must, the reader is still concerned how much they will be damaged by the end - quite a lot as it turns out.

The difficulty with this kind of story is defining how the paranormal world is to be able to interact with the real world without transgressing the limits of the plausible and that is where I felt this book fell down at times. A reader has to be able to accept that everything that happens is logical and consistent or it all begins to unravel, and there are several things which to me just did not make believable sense (although this may be a curious claim from an enthusiastic reader of books about a flat world supported on the backs of four giant elephants - well, you get the idea). The impression is that Hill invented scenes with more concern for appearance and effect than for progressing the plot.

That aside, there is no doubt this is an excellently constructed story, with well-drawn characters and well-developed situations, and the rock music background gives an impression of authenticity. If one can accept it on its own terms it is very good, although I felt it was longer than it needed to be. *MJ*

### ***THE SCENT OF SHADOWS by Vicki Pettersson***

**Harper Voyager / 455pgs/ £6.99 /paperback / 978-000-7270217**

**Reviewed by Graham Thorpe**



Vicki Pettersson, an ex-Vegas showgirl, has done well with her first foray into fantasy writing. The first instalment of her zodiac trilogy is set in modern day Las Vegas, where a supernatural battle between the light and the shadow rages, each side having 12 members. These zodiac warriors all possess superior senses, speed and strength, in addition to accelerated healing, and each is affiliated to one star sign.

The story follows Joanna Archer, a casino heiress who was brutally raped as a teenager; now 24, she prowls the night as a vigilante. She is also coming into her power as the latest Zodiac warrior, and both sides are fighting to make her their own. The question is on which side will her allegiance lie?

I found that the story progressed quite slowly at first but after a few chapters began to flow freely, and near the end I couldn't put it down. Her ideas are original and the book has vivid imagery. I found that the characters were interesting but I did not have an emotional connection, in that if one of them died I was unaffected yet in other books I have mourned the



passing of some characters. Despite this, I would recommend the books and personally, I can't wait to see how the rest of the series progresses. GMT

## **FORTHCOMING EVENTS**

*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 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)*

**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:-**

**July 24th — MATTER by Iain M Banks**

Future dates - 21st August, 18th September

**DAN DARE AND THE BIRTH OF HI-TECH BRITAIN** is an exhibition about Britain in the years following World War II. It runs until September 2008 at the Science Museum, South Kensington, London. For more details see [http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/visitmuseum/galleries/dan\\_dare\\_and\\_the\\_birth\\_of\\_high-tech\\_britain.aspx](http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/visitmuseum/galleries/dan_dare_and_the_birth_of_high-tech_britain.aspx)

**DISCWORLD CONVENTION 2008**, Hilton Metropole Hotel, (NEC) Birmingham. 22nd-25th August 2008. Registration £55 (£36 concessions). Guests Terry Pratchett, Stephen Briggs, Diane Duane, Peter Morwood, Lionel Fanthorpe, Ian Stewart, Jack Cohen & others. [www.dwcon.org](http://www.dwcon.org)

**ZOMBIECON!** The creators of AliensStoleMyHandbag, DamnFineCon & TheyCameAndShavedUs, bring you the fourth part in the Weird-Assed-Weekend-Trilogy - ZOMBIECON !! 5th-7th September 2008 at the Quality Hotel, Walsall. ZombieCon promises to be two and half days and two long nights of all the Zombie related fun, frolics and sickness you can handle; consisting of demonstrations, workshops, talks, games, masquerade, and two discos. It offers the discerning connoisseur of all things undead and gory. Please send postal enquiries to ZombieCon, c/o Stefan Lancaster, 54 Bridge Road, Uxbridge, Middlesex, UB82QP.

**FANTASYCON 2008**, Britannia Hotel, 1 St James St. Nottingham. 19th-21st September 2008. Registration is £60 (£50 for BFS members). Day rate is £25 Fri/Sun and £40 Sat. Contact 5 Greenbank, Barnt Green, Birmingham. B45 8DH or email [membership@fantasycon.org.uk](mailto:membership@fantasycon.org.uk)



Novacon 38 will be held at the Quality Hotel, Walsall, over the weekend of 14-16 November 2008; the guests are science fiction author Ian R MacLeod and the Brum Group's own Vernon Brown, who chaired the first Novacon back in 1971. Membership costs £38.00, payable to "Novacon 38" at 379 Myrtle Road, Sheffield, S2 3HQ; registration forms can be downloaded from the convention website, [www.novacon38.org.uk](http://www.novacon38.org.uk), along

with the first progress report.

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

**12th September** – fantasy author **JAMES BARCLAY**

**10th October** – to be announced

**7th November** – fantasy author and Brum Group favourite **GRAHAM JOYCE** returns... (NOTE: One week earlier than usual)

**6th December** – **Christmas Social** – Skittles and buffet at the Selly Park Tavern. Tickets will be on sale in September.

**January 2009** – **Annual General Meeting and Auction**

**February** – **Quiz** against Birmingham University SF Group

**March** - tbc

**BRUM GROUP NEWS #442** copyright 2008 for Birmingham SF Group. Designed by Rog Peyton. Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the committee or the general membership or, for that matter, the person giving the 'opinion'.

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.

## **LATE NEWS**

**Just heard that Malcolm Thorpe is out of hospital, back home and feeling fine...Best wishes from all of us Malcolm (Keep off that bloody bike – exercise is not good for you!!!)**

**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