

# BRUM GROUP NEWS

THE *FREE* MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE

## BIRMINGHAM SCIENCE FICTION GROUP

JULY 2009

ISSUE 454

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

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## Friday 10<sup>th</sup> July **VERNON BROWN vs ROG PEYTON**

As you are aware, Jo Fletcher was regrettably forced to cancel her talk this month. Trying to get an outside speaker has proven extremely difficult due to people being on holiday, going on holiday or just getting back. From holiday. Or organising or going to a barbecue, or wedding. Or whatever.

Rather than fall back on the old standards like quizzes, etc., we've come up with a rather unique item this month. In the red corner is our Chairman Vernon Brown and in the blue corner is yours truly Rog Peyton. It won't be a fight to the death (sorry) but our memories will definitely be put to the test. We're going to be talking, and arguing, about the Brum Group, Novacons, conventions and fandom in general and certain books will definitely come under fire. Are they SF or fantasy? Are they ay good?

There'll be plenty of chances for you to join in and have your say. Or just ask embarrassing questions that will get us arguing.

Hopefully it will be an entertaining evening.

*RGP*

**August 14th – Summer Social. There are a few places left for our Summer Social. It's a meal at the Black Eagle, Handsworth. It'll cost you whatever you want to spend as you have the free choice of their extensive menu. A deposit of £10 is required – tickets available from our Secretary, Mrs Vicky Stock (address at foot of back page). But don't leave it too late.**

*The meeting will take place in 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. Members' admission is £3.00; non-members' is £4.00.*

**Congratulations to our secretary Vicky who has married since the last newsletter. She married ex-committee member Tim Stock on June 20<sup>th</sup>. We wish them every happiness for the future.**

**CHANGE OF EMAIL – in future please contact me on  
rogpeyton@hotmail.co.uk until further notice.**

## ***LAST MONTH'S MEETING by Rog Peyton***

Anyone who knows me well (Ok, and even those who don't know me so well) will be aware that I am not a fan of fantasy and, in particular, I have a strong dislike for Tolkien and THE LORD OF THE RINGS, not to mention an even greater dislike for the hundreds of Tolkien clones that have sprouted up over the past 40 or so years.

Having stated publicly that I consider THE LORD OF THE RINGS the most over-rated book ever, it was no surprise that I was not looking forward to Bob Blackham's talk about this 'load of tosh'.

BUT, I was reliably informed that our speaker's talk would be about the Birmingham associations with Tolkien rather than the dubious contents of the book and as someone who has a strong interest in Birmingham local history I decided that the meeting was probably not going to be as bad as I feared.

Arline and I met up with Dave Corby and Bob Blackham for a meal before the meeting and on being introduced I immediately recognised the face as belonging to someone I had met in the past. During the meal, ANDROMEDA BOOKSHOP was mentioned and Bob suddenly remembered how we'd met. When he was first proposing the Tolkien walks and tours and even attempting to organise Tolkien weekends at hotels, he'd come into the shop and we'd discussed the whole idea, eventually having adverts in Andromeda's catalogues for the event.

Bob's talk proved to be well presented, giving a fascinating look at early scenes in Hall Green and surrounding parts of Birmingham. His collection of photographs of this part of Birmingham must be one of the best. Several of these photos appeared in his latest book, THE ROOTS OF TOLKIEN'S MIDDLE EARTH (as by Robert S Blackham, Tempus Publishing, £10.99 paperback ISBN: 0752438565).

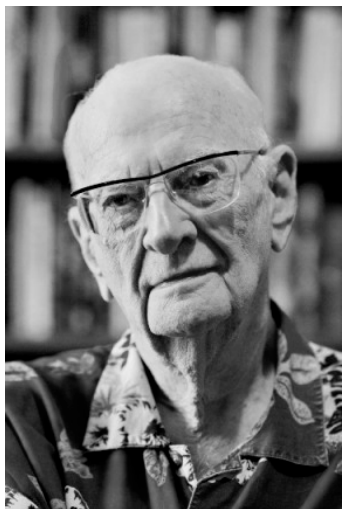
The talk and the book impressed me so much that I actually paid cash for a copy of his book! That's never happened before! (But, no, I won't be buying any Tolkien books should you think I've caught the bug).

Overall an exceptionally good meeting and if you missed it, well...your loss!

*RGP*

## ***LIFE ON HOLD – ON BEING A JUDGE FOR THE ARTHUR C. CLARKE AWARD by Pauline Morgan***

I have been reviewing books of all kinds for a very long time – for about as long as there have been Novacons. To begin with, these reviews were rubbish. It takes time and experience to begin to critically assess a book. It helps to read a lot and widely, and to have good editors who are not only unprepared to put up with crap but also to assist in the improvement of your critical gems. Thus it was an honour, after several years of reviewing for Sfcrowsnest, to be asked to be their representative on the judging panel for the Arthur C. Clarke Award.



For those of you who are not familiar with this award, it was set up by the late Arthur C. Clarke to encourage good, cutting edge science fiction by giving a prize for the best every year. Before the turn of the millennium, this was £2001. Now it increases by £1 each year. Eligible books must be science fiction novels published in English in the UK for the first time in the eligible year.

When Geoff asked me if I was interested in May 2007, I said yes. I was told I would only have to read six books. I was lied to. It wasn't Geoff's fault. He hadn't been given the full information and only passed on what he knew. I joined the panel of five, the others representing the Science Fiction Foundation and the British Science Fiction Association (BSFA). Usually, one of the panellists is a published author. We also had a chairman whose job was to keep order at meetings and get the books for us.

As soon as the panel was in place, the call went out for nominations. The chairman wrote to all the publishers of SF in the UK asking them to send all SF books to all of the team published in 2007. That's right \*all\* SF books. Even ones by mainstream authors. By the end of the year, which was the deadline, we had fifty six books to read. Yes, 56 books. We were expected to read them all before the short-list meeting at the end of February.

At first the books arrived in small numbers, but the arrivals began to gather momentum as the year continued. Okay, so you don't have to read every word of every book but they should each be given a chance. Some books I therefore abandoned, some after about 200 pages. A few did not get read by me. There was a very good reason for that. Before the short list meeting, we met a couple of times for lunch, once in London, once in Birmingham, when we would discuss the books we had read so far. If there were three out of the five of us who thought a book had very little chance of making it to the short list, any of us who hadn't read it, set it to one side. This does not mean that they were not good books. This was a year with a lot of very strong contenders and when a book is the middle one of a series it is unlikely to be as strong a contender as a book that is complete within one volume as only the reader who has read previous volumes will appreciate the all nuances of plot and characterisation. Discrete books have a better chance.

Just before the short-list meeting, we were asked to list six books we would like to see on the shortlist, and a second six. This was a very difficult task as 2007 produced a lot of very good books. I found it difficult to cut the list down to twelve before I even considered which of those was my six favourites. The first set was given two points each, the second one point, by the chairman to serve as a starting point for the discussion. Thus a book could get a maximum of ten points. None did. Those with none or one point were fairly quickly eliminated. The discussion to choose the final six was long, but eventually a consensus was reached. The actual deliberations were held in confidence so don't expect to hear tales of dissatisfaction or back stabbing. The blood is always cleaned away before we are let out of the room.

Once the short list was decided, we had to keep it secret until the official announcement date. I didn't even tell my husband although he could have worked it out by the way I rearranged the books on my shelf.

Between late February and the final day of judging, the six short-listed books have to be read again, this time with greater care. It is important to have the arguments ready for and against each book and to be prepared to fight for your favourite. Each of the six will have their own champions and no-one likes to give way, but the threat that the chairman will choose the winner if we fail to agree is a spur to making a decision. As the discussion goes on points are raised that you might not have spotted even after two readings and the choice shifts gradually until all the panellists are able to say that they agree on the winner. It may not be everybody's first choice but will be considered the most deserving of the prize.

What qualities make a winner? It must be well written, have good characterisation and a consistent, probably complex plot structure. It will deal with a number of themes, not all of them overt and will push at the boundaries of science fiction. For 2007, **BLACK MAN** by Richard Morgan did all these things and more. It is a winner I can certainly be enthusiastic about.

Job done it is then a question of getting ready for the ceremony. The last two years, this has been the opening event of the Science Fiction Film Festival, at the Apollo Cinema, in London. The judges have the opportunity to mingle with the authors and other invited guests at the pre-announcement party. Plenty of food and drinks circulated, culminating in tubs of ice cream. The only sour note was the fact that Arthur C. Clarke had died shortly before presentation day.

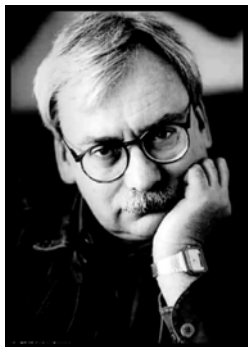
Then I discovered the other fact I had not been told at the beginning. Judges serve two years. Normally either two or three retire each year to be replaced by fresh faces. This particular year four retired. This meant that I was the only one carrying on for a second year. It took a little longer to get all the new judges in place for the 2008 award. This had a knock-on effect of the books beginning to arrive later - August rather than June. Although there were fewer books, only forty eight to read, there was a shorter time to do it in and there seemed to be more very thick books.

The procedure is the same each year, but it does tend to end up with a potential reading rate of two books a week, especially in the later stages.

I have now served my two years as a judge. I thoroughly enjoyed the experience. If I was able to, I would do it again but I am not sure that my husband would want me to. If you are ever asked, it sounds like a great opportunity to get lots of free books, but you do have to read them against a deadline. If asked, consider very carefully. Are you prepared to put your life on hold for two years?

*PM*

## ***THE DAVID GEMMELL LEGEND AWARD FOR FANTASY***



The first annual David Gemmell Legend Award for Fantasy has been won by Andrzej Sapkowski for his novel *BLOOD OF ELVES* (published in the UK by Gollancz). The Award was accepted on Sapkowski's behalf by his UK editor, Jo Fletcher.

Presented before an audience of publishing industry professionals, authors, media and fans at the Magic Circle headquarters in Euston, London on 19th June, the Award has been established in memory of fantasy author David Gemmell, who died in 2006. The trophy, supplied by Raven Armoury, takes the form of a butterfly axe, named Snaga, that featured in Gemmell's fiction.

Born in Poland in 1948, Andrzej Sapkowski worked in business before turning to writing. His cycle of tales set in the world of 'The Witcher' have made him a bestseller in his native Poland and internationally.

The other shortlisted authors were:

Joe Abercrombie: *LAST ARGUMENT OF KINGS* (Gollancz & Pyr)

Juliet Marillier: *HEIR TO SEVENWATERS* (Tor)

Brandon Sanderson: *THE HERO OF AGES* (Tor)

Brent Weeks: *THE WAY OF SHADOWS* (Orbit)

Each of the runners-up were presented with a miniature version of Snaga. The Award was decided by an open ballot, and attracted over 10,000 votes from 75 countries.

## ***2009 LOCUS AWARDS***

Winners of the 2009 Locus Awards were announced at a ceremony and banquet June 27, 2009 in Seattle WA during the Science Fiction Awards Weekend.

**Science Fiction Novel:** *ANATHEM*, Neal Stephenson (Atlantic UK, Morrow)

**Fantasy Novel:** *LAVINIA*, Ursula K. Le Guin (Harcourt)

**First Novel:** *SINGULARITY'S RING*, Paul Melko (Tor)

**Young-Adult Book:** *THE GRAVEYARD BOOK*, Neil Gaiman (HarperCollins, Bloomsbury)

**Novella:** "Pretty Monsters", Kelly Link (Pretty Monsters)

**Novelette:** "Pump Six", Paolo Bacigalupi (Pump Six and Other Stories)

**Short Story:** "Exhalation", Ted Chiang (Eclipse Two)

**Anthology:** *THE YEAR'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION: TWENTY-FIFTH ANNUAL COLLECTION*, Gardner Dozois, ed. (St. Martin's)

**Collection:** *PUMP SIX & OTHER STORIES*, Paolo Bacigalupi (Night Shade Books)

**Non-Fiction/Art Book:** *CORALINE: THE GRAPHIC NOVEL*, Neil Gaiman, adapted and illustrated by P. Craig Russell (HarperCollins)

**Editor:** Ellen Datlow

**Artist:** Michael Whelan

**Magazine:** F&SF

**Publisher:** Tor

## ***THE BRAM STOKER AWARD***

The Bram Stoker Awards for superior achievement in horror writing were presented by the Horror Writers of America on June 13 at the Stoker Awards Weekend in Burbank, California.

**Superior Novel:** DUMA KEY by Stephen King  
**Superior First Novel:** THE GENTLING BOX by Lisa Manetti.  
**Superior Long Fiction Award:** “Miranda” by John R. Little  
**Superior Short Fiction:** “The Lost” by Sarah Langan  
**Superior Fiction Collection Award:** JUST AFTER SUNSET by Stephen King  
**Superior Anthology Award:** UNSPEAKABLE HORROR edited by Vince Liaguno and Chad Helder  
**Richard Laymon President’s Award:** John Little  
**Superior Non-Fiction:** A HALLOWE’EN ANTHOLOGY by Lisa Morton  
**Superior Poetry Award:** THE NIGHTMARE COLLECTION by Bruce Boston  
**Silver Hammer Award:** Sephera Giron for her service to the organization.

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

The nominees for the John W. Campbell Award, presented for best SF novel of the year. The Campbell Award is selected by a jury which currently consists of Gregory Benford, Paul A. Carter, James Gunn, Elizabeth Anne Hull, Paul Kincaid, Christopher McKitterick, Pamela Sargent, and T.A. Shippey.  
 ANATHEM by Neal Stephenson  
 CITY AT THE END OF TIME by Greg Bear  
 LITTLE BROTHER by Cory Doctorow  
 THE PHILOSOPHER’S APPRENTICE by James Morrow  
 SONG OF TIME by Ian MacLeod  
 VALLEY OF DAY-GLO by Nick Di Chario

## ***BRITISH FANTASY AWARD NOMINEES***

The British Fantasy Awards nominees have been announced. All members of the British Fantasy Society may vote and the winners will be announced at FantasyCon in Nottingham, the weekend of September 18.

### ***Best Novel (The August Derleth Fantasy Award)***

THE GRAVEYARD BOOK by Neil Gaiman  
 MEMOIRS OF A MASTER FORGER by William Heaney/Graham Joyce  
 MIDNIGHT MAN by Simon Clark  
 RAIN DOGS by Gary McMahon  
 THIEVING FEAR by Ramsey Campbell  
 THE VICTORIA VANISHES by Christopher Fowler

### ***Best Novella***

“Cold Stone Calling” by Simon Clark  
 “Gunpowder” by Joe Hill  
 “Heads” by Gary McMahon  
 “The Narrows” by Simon Bestwick  
 “The Reach of Children” by Tim Lebbon

### ***Best Short Fiction***

“All Mouth” by Paul Meloy  
 “The Caul Bearer” by Allyson Bird  
 “Do You See” by Sarah Pinborough  
 “N” by Stephen King  
 “Pinholes in Black Muslin” by Simon Strantzas  
 “The Tobacconist’s Concession” by John Travis

“The Vague” by Paul Meloy  
“Winter Journey” by Joel Lane

### **Best Collection**

BULL RUNNING FOR GIRLS by Allyson Bird  
GLYPHOTECH by Mark Samuels  
HOW TO MAKE MONSTERS by Gary McMahon  
ISLINGTON CROCODILES by Paul Meloy  
JUST AFTER SUNSET by Stephen King

### **Best Anthology**

CONE ZERO edited by DF Lewis  
THE MAMMOTH BOOK OF BEST NEW HORROR 19 edited by Stephen Jones  
MYTH-UNDERSTANDINGS edited by Ian Whates  
THE SECOND HUMDRUMMING BOOK OF HORROR edited by Ian Alexander  
Martin  
SUBTLE EDENS edited by Allen Ashley  
WE FADE TO GREY edited by Gary McMahon

## **...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 [rogpeyton@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:rogpeyton@hotmail.co.uk) >>

**A query from Dave Hardy:** I bought a copy of Walter M Miller’s *A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ* at Eastercon, because mine was getting so decrepit that it threatened to fall apart. Having now re-read it after many years, I find that it isn't quite the story I thought it was! I remember a book, which I \*thought\* was ACFL, set in a post-nuclear holocaust world, in which some of the main characters appear to do miracles or magic, but it turns out they're actually using technology - either rediscovered or reinvented. So we have 'spears' that emit killing beams - actually lasers - etc. Since this obviously isn't ACFL, what the heck IS it?

<<Anybody recognise this book? It’s beaten me... - RGP>>



## **NEWS IN BRIEF . . .**

.... Author **David Eddings** (b.1931) died on June 2. Eddings began publishing fantasy in 1982 with the *PAWN OF PROPHECY*, first in his *Belgariad* series. He followed up with numerous novels examining the same world, often from points of view of different characters who had been previously introduced. In the mid-90s, his books began to acknowledge his wife, **Leigh Eddings**, as an active collaborator .... Author **Paul O. Williams** (b.1935) died on June 2. Williams was the author of the *Pelbar Cycle*, a series of seven novels set in a post-apocalyptic Illinois. In 1983, Williams won the John Campbell Award for Best New Author. In addition to the *Pelbar* series, Williams published two other science fiction novels, the most recent in 2004. He was also a poet, having

served as president of the Haiku Society of America, and was a professor emeritus of English at Principia College .... Actress **Farrah Fawcett** (b.1947) died on June 25 following a long battle with cancer. She was best known for her role as Jill Munroe on *Charlie's Angels*. Prior to that, she had appeared in two episodes of *I Dream of Jeannie* and in a recurring role on *The Six Million Dollar Man*, which starred her then-husband, Lee Majors. Perhaps her most well-known genre roles were in the film LOGAN'S RUN and SATURN 3. She also did voice work in the animated film THE BRAVE LITTLE TOASTER GOES TO MARS in the role of 'faucet' .... Producer **Mort Abrahams** (b.1916) died on May 28. In the 1950s, Abrahams was the producer of *Tom Corbett, Space Cadet*. He went on to work on the anthology series *Tales of Tomorrow*. Abrahams served as associate producer on the first two *Planet of the Apes* films and received a story credit for BENEATH THE PLANET OF THE APES .... Actor **David Carradine** (b.1936) was found dead in Bangkok on June 4. According to police sources, Carradine hanged himself. Carradine portrayed Frankenstein in the film DEATH RACE 2000 and provided the character's voice in the recent remake .... **Margot Lanagan's** TENDER MOSELS is the winner of the Australian Ditmar Award for best novel .... SF's rising star **Alastair Reynolds** has just signed a £1m contract to deliver 10 books over 10 years .... Congratulations to **Dave Hardy** whose June 2008 cover for F&SF is on the final 5 nominations for Best Magazine Cover Art in this year's Chesley Awards .... **Steampunk Publishing** has announced the release of the first original pulp magazine created specifically for the iPhone and iPod .... To coincide with the **40th anniversary of the first moon landing** on 20th July 1969, BFI Southbank in London is collaborating with the Science Museum in hosting a season of documentaries, feature films, television and artworks focusing on the dream and reality of space travel, the Cold War space race, and the American space programme of the 1960s and 1970s .... The IAU has officially named an 84-kilometer wide crater located in Noachis Terra on Mars after **Isaac Asimov**. Asimov Crater can be found at 47.0°S, 355.1°W ..... On June 18, NASA launched the **Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter** (LRO), the first US mission to the moon in a decade. The LRO is scheduled to orbit the moon and map it while looking for safe landing sites, locating potential resources, characterizing the radiation environment, and demonstrating new technology. ... RGP

## BOOK REVIEWS

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

***SWIFTLY by Adam Roberts***

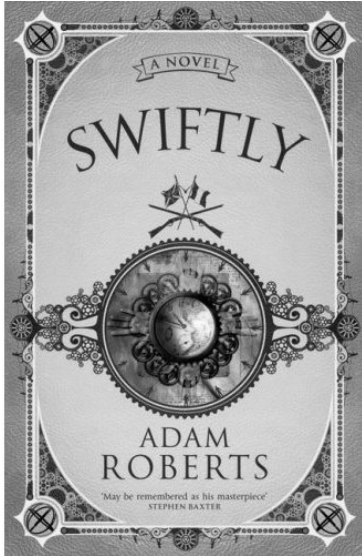
**Gollancz / 359 pgs / £7.99 paperback ISBN: 978-0575082342**

**Reviewed by Dave Hardy**

This novel is a kind of sequel to Jonathan Swift's GULLIVER'S TRAVELS, published in 1726, though Lemuel Gulliver and his adventures, are not even mentioned in this book, and whereas Swift's novel was intended as satire, and Roberts has a definite satirical edge, the original scenario is used more as a background for the story of two lovers (though again, this term is open to interpretation).



It is now 1848, and the British Empire has thrived by exploiting the intricate and delicate mechanical expertise of the tiny Lilliputians (and Blefuscutans), who are treated as slaves. The French army has invaded Britain, reinforced by regiments of Brobdingnagians. These giants have sunk Royal Navy ships and then swum the Channel, towing a French invasion fleet behind them. As the book starts the French have laid waste to London and are pushing north towards York.



We first meet our 'hero', Abraham Bates, in the office of an industrialist who depends upon the enslaved Lilliputians, Jonathan Burton. Ostensibly, Bates is there to negotiate a contract for work, but Burton all but throws him out, having suspected him (correctly) of being an agitator against the slavery of the little people. The young, penniless but beautiful Eleanor is destined, thanks to her domineering mother, to marry Burton, and thus to become rich and keep her mother in the manner to which she wishes to become accustomed. Eleanor detests and is repelled by Burton, and she also opposes the slavery of Lilliputians. Notwithstanding, in due course she does marry him, but the marriage is not consummated for quite some time, both people being clumsy, embarrassed and inexperienced.

Bates, now working with the French as an Ami de la France and travelling up to York with the Dean of York, briefly meets Eleanor Burton on the road. The convoy of carriages also contains a Calculation Machine, actually controlled by Lilliputians, which is needed by the French Army in York. The Dean, who is addicted to his white 'snuff' (presumably cocaine) has agreed to lead the French to a giant, mile-long cannon, set into a hillside and built with the help of Brobdingnagians and apparently aimed at Afghanistan (which sounds a good idea, perhaps) but, with the aid of the Computational Device, the French want to use it against the English. Secretly, the Dean intends to have himself propelled, inside a padded shell (rather like Verne's *Columbiad*) to another country in order to escape the war, and it seems that Bates is destined to be his companion. During the journey Bates is struck down by some disease.

When he recovers he discovers that Eleanor has been picked up during an attempted ambush by British yahoos, and is travelling with them. She too succumbs to the disease.

Meanwhile a comet has appeared in the sky, and night by night grows in size, becoming a disc that outshines the Moon. Here Roberts' originality also shines through, because he extrapolates on Swift's original idea and turns it into SF by encompassing both microcosm and macrocosm: the plague has been caused by 'animalcules' which are as much smaller than the Lilliputians as the latter are than humans; and the comet (presumably inspired by the floating island of Laputa) turns out to be in effect a spaceship whose crew are giants even to the Brobdingnagians; all by a factor of twelve.

The war continues, the giant electromagnetic cannon is used against the 'comet', and at last this comes to rest upon the Earth and is invaded by the French, under an Italian captain. But for most of the rest of the book we are immersed in the stench of death

and putrefying flesh, which does not make for comfortable reading. Usually the odours of Victorian times are downplayed, but I can't help feeling that Roberts has gone too far in the other direction. Too many times throughout the novel Roberts goes into detailed descriptions of sex and bodily functions that is quite unnecessary - the expression 'More than we need to know' comes to mind! That apart, it is a clever, well-written, and quite original book, which captures quite closely, in its writing, the Swift original. *DAH*

### ***THE SNOW by Adam Roberts***

**Gollancz / 288pgs / £6.99 paperback ISBN: 978-0575076518**

### ***LAND OF THE HEADLESS by Adam Roberts***

**Gollancz / 288pgs / £7.99 paperback ISBN: 978-0575082175**

**Reviewed by Peter Weston**

I rather like Adam Roberts. He's a relatively new British writer who first appeared in 2000 with *SALT*, a novel I enjoyed for its novelty and freshness of style. Since then he's produced a whole slew of others with absolutely nothing in common except for those same two virtues; every time he comes up with a new and intriguing situation, something that hasn't been done before – and in genre science fiction, that's increasingly difficult to do. And he writes effectively in the first-person mode with a very distinctive 'voice'.

Roberts has followed-up with titles like *STONE* and *GRADISIL* which have equally-unusual settings. Having said that, he doesn't always succeed. Sometimes he has a good idea but just doesn't seem to know what to do with it – I'd put his second novel, *ON*, firmly into that category; terrific concept (which I won't spoil for you if you haven't read it) but the story goes nowhere. To an extent the same applies with *POLYSTOM*, and now with *SNOW*.

It starts well; one day in London it begins to snow, and just keeps on snowing, day after day, until all normal life becomes impossible. So it's a catastrophe story, but one in which the disaster is oddly muted and off-stage. The protagonist gets snowed-in and is holed-up for forty pages while almost everyone else quietly dies, off-stage. Then there's a sudden discontinuity; she is 'rescued', brought up to the top of the snow which is now three miles deep over the entire surface of the Earth, and then not-very-much happens for the rest of the book. Where did the snow come from? Early on, the author advances an explanation in a between-chapters aside, but later on he junks this and blames ETs. But by this time I didn't much care.



*LAND OF THE HEADLESS* is much better. It gets off to a cracking start in the first paragraph when our protagonist is beheaded – and while this seems a very odd idea at first, we rapidly get used to the idea that yes, perhaps the body could survive if the brain was transferred into a 'black box' implanted at the bottom of the spine, with artificial 'eyes' and 'ears' to match. Though it wouldn't be much of a life – and that's the

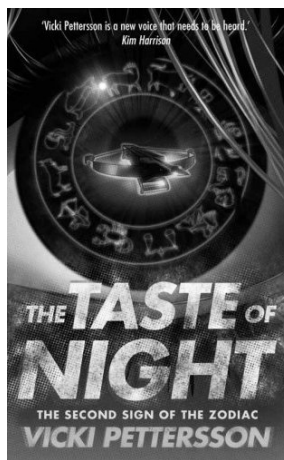
point of this story, the way the headless have to survive as a discriminated-against (and very visible) minority!

This is one that does hang together, the story is convincingly-told and develops well, and there is a clever resolution. Very enjoyable! PRW

### ***THE TASTE OF NIGHT by Vicki Pettersson***

**Voyager / 440 pgs/ £6.99 paperback ISBN: 978-0007270224**

**Reviewed by Graham Thorpe**



This is the second novel of the *Zodiac* trilogy, about the battle between the light and shadow factions of the zodiac which takes place all over the world. This book, like the first, is set in Las Vegas. Both warring factions have 12 warriors, one for each sign of the western zodiac, each imbued with superhuman strength, speed and senses as well as an increased healing factor. This book continues the story of Joanna Archer, the latest supernatural warrior of the light. The story starts a couple of months after the events of book 1. Shadow activity has been lacking, allowing the light to rest and recuperate. That, however, ends at the release of a new deadly virus threatening the humans of Las Vegas. Now Joanna must battle the shadows, find a cure for the virus without putting her friends and identity in danger and without disaffecting her allies. Having read the first book I was looking forward with anticipation to reading this one. However, sadly, it

did not live up to its predecessor.

The first part has a rather clumsy resume of the previous book, so theoretically it can be read as a stand alone novel. More so than the previous novel, it seemed to be tailored to a female readership, and I lost interest (and the will to live) when given a guided tour of a beauty salon. It also lacks the vivid imagery and pace of the first and is quite graphic with its sexual content which was considerable. This book provides extra details and background to some of the existing characters although I continued to be indifferent to their suffering. Their attributes and the writer's treatment made them unsympathetic characters.

In my opinion the only saving grace was the action which increased the pace of the book if only briefly towards the end. I was disappointed and hope the final part restores my interest. Overall a disappointing read. GMT

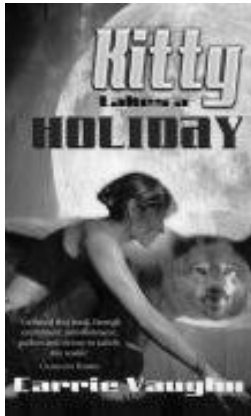
### ***KITTY TAKES A HOLIDAY by Carrie Vaughn***

**Gollancz / 336pgs / £6.99 paperback ISBN: 978-0575082663**

**Reviewed by Margaret Thorpe**

This is the third in the *Kitty Norwell* series by Carrie Vaughn, and carries on where KITTY GOES TO WASHINGTON left off. Kitty is in much need of some rest and recuperation and decides to take a holiday in a remote hunting lodge to write her autobiography. Her 'secret' life as a werewolf is no longer a secret, thanks to being shown on TV during the change. Most of her neighbours in Colorado treat her with suspicion

and downright hostility, so Kitty isn't too surprised when things start to turn hostile. First, someone leaves grotesque animal sacrifices on her front porch to curse her, then werewolf hunter Cormac shows up with an injured Ben O'Farrell, Kitty's lawyer, slung over his shoulder. Ben has been injured by a new and different type of shape shifter. All three of them have to face a new and complex situation, where not everyone is what they seem.



This book after a slower start, is fast paced and character driven; Carrie Vaughn has created a very real and complex character, with vulnerabilities which make her very human, despite the 'were' complications. The first person viewpoint jolts the reader directly into the story, and the narrative is fast paced, witty and entertaining. New character development of Cormac and Ben, and revelations about their back story, makes this book an even more satisfying reading experience, and adds another layer to the already rich character development.

Even if you have not read the previous two novels, it is not too difficult to engage with the plot in this third volume, as Carrie Vaughn is a very accomplished writer. The book can be read as a stand alone, because, Carrie cleverly drops in enough information about previous events without labouring the point, and without giving too much away. I am certainly looking forward to seeing how Kitty copes with the new complications in her life.

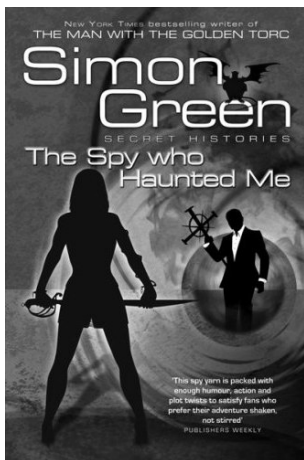
MT

### ***THE SPY WHO HAUNTED ME by Simon Green***

**Gollancz / 328pgs / £18.99 hardcover ISBN: 978-0575079465 /**

**£12.99 trade paperback ISBN: 978-0575079472**

**Reviewed by Dave Corby**



Simon Green has been publishing science fiction and fantasy since the late 1970s, and has produced several series (*Hawk and Fisher*, *Deathstalker*, *Nightside*) as well as several stand alone novels from then to date. Despite this, *THE SPY WHO HAUNTED ME* is the first of his books I have ever read. It is actually the third book in the *Secret Histories* series (following *THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN TORC* and *DAEMONS ARE FOREVER*). It does not take the astute reader long to notice a distinctly 'James Bond' theme in the titles, along with an obvious fantasy/horror slant. The blurb plays up the Bond 'n' Ghoulies approach, while stressing the action and humour of the story. Alas, this, along with starting reading the series at the end lead me to expect not to enjoy it, and I did not approach the volume with great enthusiasm.

The general setting and background of Simon's *Secret Histories* does indeed feel humorous in a Terry Pratchett/Neil Gaiman kind of way. Those who have enjoyed *GOOD OMENS* by the aforementioned authors may

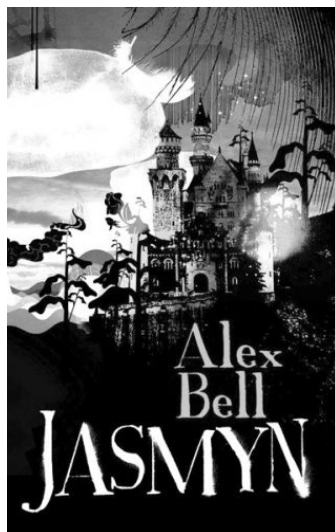
find much to enjoy in this book. However, despite my early misgivings, I found that Simon treats his characters and setting with a great deal more respect than you would perhaps expect from the preamble. And I very quickly realised that Simon Green has some seriously fresh ideas. In my time reading fantasy I have come across quite a few takes on the supernatural, so it is to Simon's credit that I find his creations to be really quite original.

Simon imbues his characters with both this exciting freshness and a kind of comfortable familiarity at the same time, and so I found the text both comfortable to read and oddly compelling. Looks like I might be building up to enjoying this after all...

After an entertaining 'pre-credits' first chapter, which may seem unconnected with the main part of the book in best Bond-movie style (at least until the end, anyway) the story proper starts up. Essentially setting up a kind of super-game of supernatural spy craft for which the prize is a legendary hoard of secrets, our hero Shamen Bond (real name Eddie Drood) is pitched against a colourful group of super-agents in solving a series of increasingly dangerous and fantastic mysteries. As the spies progress through the increasingly impressive mysteries it gradually emerges that not all is as it should be. The story is pleasingly paced and plotted; Simon seems to effortlessly build the tension, giving the book real momentum and eventually feeling really quite evocative of its cinematic inspiration.

So in conclusion I can heartily recommend this to anyone who enjoys contemporary horror in the *Sandman*/ *Buffy* mould, or anyone who likes the idea of a Bond style adventure with fantasy, or just anyone who wants a nice, fun, exciting story to read. Oh darn, there I go. I really meant not to like this at the start, but despite my best efforts I ended up enjoying it immensely... Oh well, off I go to find the first two books in the series.

DC



### ***JASMYN* by Alex Bell**

**Gollancz / 303 pgs / £18.99 hardcover**

**ISBN 978-0575080287 / £12.99 trade**

**paperback ISBN 978-0575080294 /**

**Reviewed by William McCabe**

There's a story idea that's been doing the rounds lately that starts with a central character whose history is either unknown or falsified even to the character itself. Most of it comes in spy thrillers from *THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE* to *THE BOURNE IDENTITY* but there have been a spate of TV SF shows in the last few years (*DOLLOUSE* has just arrived on cable here). This was a theme of Alex Bell's first novel in which his hero has no memory of his former life, has hints strewn through the first half of the book and the truth finally revealed in the last quarter. Here it is again in a slightly different variation.

Jasmy'n's husband, Liam, has just died. Although they had only been married for a few months, they had known each since they were children. Strange things start happening at the funeral. A group of swans fall - dead - out of the sky just over the coffin.

Her face in their wedding album is somehow distorted in all the pictures. A friend of Liam comes looking for something and tells just enough to imply that Liam wasn't the man Jasmyn remembers. Liam's brother Ben turns up and Jasmyn is off around the world finding out about her husband, the Swan Knights of Bavaria, and why her life isn't the one she thinks she remembers.

It's difficult to explain the fantasy element of this novel without giving too much away. Once again, it explains the central character's situation around half to three quarters of the way through the book. This time it involves legends (*Lohengrin*) and fairies and ends with a scene in which an ice castle is sucked into fairyland. Surprisingly, there aren't any fairies in the book unless you count the one Jasmyn thinks she saw as a child. All of the fantastic characters are only briefly glimpsed, heard about through others or books, or just seem to be ordinary people. Most of the fantastic occurrences in the story consist of no more than appearing and disappearing swans and roses.

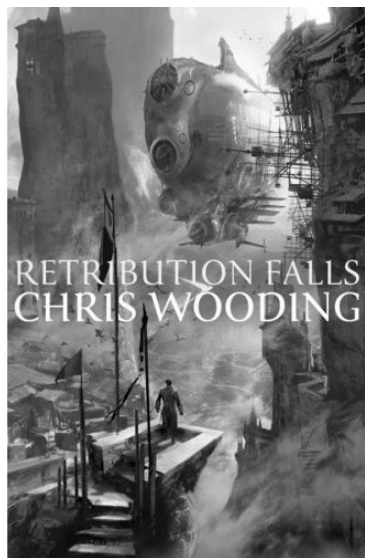
Once again, my only complaint with Alex Bell is with the timing. He has one major plot element that is hinted at for the first half of the book but is finally properly explained after I, for one, stopped caring. I find that irritating. Other than that, this is a good solid read. WAM

## ***RETRIBUTION FALLS* by Chris Wooding**

**Gollancz / 415 pgs / £18.99 hardcover ISBN: 978-0575085145 /**

**£12.99 trade paperback ISBN: 978-0575085152**

**Reviewed by Michael Jones**



There used to be a form of SF loosely defined as Science Fantasy in which there was a strong technological element but almost anything the plot required - even magic and the supernatural - was possible provided it was given a veneer of scientific plausibility. Maybe we just didn't understand the science yet. So it is on the unknown, un-named world where this is set. The semi-feudal, semi-medieval civilisation uses electricity and petrol and has airships fitted with machine guns but there are also elements of the supernatural. In particular, some individuals practice the art of harnessing unearthly beings to their will, although this daemonism is generally frowned upon if not actually illegal; nevertheless use of this art is a very necessary plot device.

In the middle of this scenario we find Darian Frey, captain and owner of the airship the *Ketty Jay*. With a crew of malcontents and misfits, each with a hidden secret of some kind, he makes

a precarious living any way he can, trading, smuggling and even dabbling in outright piracy. Offered a job which will pay him enough to retire he jumps at it. What he does not know is that there is a plot to overthrow the Archduke, the nearest there is to a planetary ruler, and the commencement of the plan is to assassinate the Archduke's heir and make Frey the fall guy. With everyone's hand against him he must stay alive long enough to

discover what is going on and how to demonstrate his innocence by laying the blame where it belongs. He does so, of course, but (also of course) it is a close thing at times and there is a satisfying amount of suspense involved.

By the end of the story Frey and the members of his motley crew have each achieved some sort of apotheosis, if that is not too strong a word, having discovered mutual understanding of their own and each other's problems and become a loyal and supportive band rather than a bunch of individuals interested only in themselves. It is possible however to see that as the icing on the cake so to speak and read the book as a (fairly) cheerful adventure. It is very inventively written, the main characters are real, rounded personalities, and it holds one's interest from beginning to end, although it can be hard at times to escape the feeling that things happen the way they do more to help the author out of a difficulty than to further the story in a reasonably plausible manner. (It also helps that most of the opposition are, like the Imperial Stormtroopers in the *Star Wars* films, so useless with a gun that they couldn't hit a building if they were standing inside it.) It makes for an entertaining read: all good knockabout stuff as the crew of the *Ketty Jay* lurch along from one predicament to another before coming to what I felt was a rather anti-climactic conclusion.

FINAL NOTE: RETRIBUTION FALLS is subtitled "A Tale of the *Ketty Jay*" and is the first volume in an open-ended series - not a serial or trilogy. I won't be holding my breath.

MJ

## ***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:-

16th July - **FROM THE DUST RETURNED** by Ray Bradbury

**THE MiSFiTs** are an informal group of local SF fans who meet regularly at 7pm at the Wagon & Horses, Oldbury on the third Friday of each month. Real ale, good food, great company. Next meeting is on 17th July.

More details from Martin Tudor ([empties084@btinternet.com](mailto:empties084@btinternet.com)).

**ANTICIPATION, the 67<sup>th</sup> Annual Worldcon** is to be held in Montreal, Canada over the weekend of 6th to the 10th August. Guest of Honour is Neil Gaiman. Further info at <http://www.anticipationsf.ca/English/Home>

**FANTASYCON 2009** will take place on the weekend of September 18-20, at the Britannia Hotel, 1 St James Street, Nottingham. Ian Watson will be the Master of Ceremonies. The confirmed GoHs are: **Jasper Fforde, Brian Clemens and Gail Z Martin**. Details from British Fantasy Society website <http://s256537080.websitehome.co.uk/>

**The British International Comics Show** will be held 3rd and 4th of October at the Thinktank, Millennium Point, Curzon Street, Birmingham B4 7XG. For more details go to the website <http://www.thecomicsshow.co.uk/>

**OCTOCON, the annual Irish SF Convention** will be held 10th and 11th of October 2009 at The Camden Court Hotel, Camden Street, Dublin 2. See <http://2009.octocon.com/> for further details

**NOVACON 39 – the Birmingham SF Group’s own convention - will be held at the Park Inn, Nottingham over the weekend of 13-15 November 2009. Guest of Honour is JUSTINA ROBSON. Full details from 379 Myrtle Road, Sheffield, S2 3HQ or email [alice@altair-4.co.uk](mailto:alice@altair-4.co.uk)**

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

**August 14th – SUMMER SOCIAL at the Black Eagle, Handsworth**

**September 11th – Novacon 39 Guest of Honour JUSTINA ROBSON**

**October 9th – SF author ALASTAIR REYNOLDS (provisional)**

**November 6th – to be announced**

**December 4th – CHRISTMAS SOCIAL – skittles, buffet, prizes, fun!!!**

**January 2010 – ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING and AUCTION**

**February – QUIZ versus the B’ham University SF Group**

**March – Gollancz editor JO FLETCHER returns with more amusing and interesting anecdotes of life in publishing**

**April – Author and satirist ADAM ROBERTS**

**BRUM GROUP NEWS #454** copyright 2009 for Birmingham SF Group. Designed by Rog Peyton (19 Eves Croft, Bartley Green, Birmingham, B32 3QL – phone 0121 477 6901 or email [rgp@rogpeyton.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:rgp@rogpeyton.fsnet.co.uk)). 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.

**Apologies to some reviewers – I have even more reviews – a further 4 pages (too many for 1 newsletter!). They will be in next month’s issue.**

**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, 10 Sylvan Avenue, Northfield, Birmingham, B31 2PG