

BRUM GROUP NEWS

THE *FREE* MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE

BIRMINGHAM SCIENCE FICTION GROUP

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

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Friday 4th December CHRISTMAS SOCIAL

The Christmas Social is a **TICKET ONLY** event and hopefully you will have purchased your ticket by the time you read this. That ticket is your entrance key to a wonderful evening of fun as those who have attended in previous years will attest to. Yes, there'll be the usual medieval game of skittles (transformed by our American cousins into the modern automated ten pin bowling) which has 9 skittles which have to be reset manually – so volunteers for short sessions please. We have our own rules – many of which are made up on the spot to give everyone a chance of winning prizes. As well as the prizes for your skittling prowess there will be spot prizes given in our free raffle. Lots of non-

January 8th 2010 - THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING and AUCTION. Vote for your new committee and buy lots of cheap books. Why not volunteer to be on next year's committee. It's great fun and hugely satisfying... NEWSLETTER EDITOR WANTED!!!!

alcoholic drinks (well, who wants alcoholic drinks in December anyway? Drive safely!!!). For those sensible ones among us who go by bus or taxi there will be real ale, cider, etc., available! And not forgetting the superb buffet..... even the vegetarian choices got rave reviews last year.

The Social will be held at The Selly Park Tavern, 592 Pershore Road, Selly Oak from 7.00pm until 11.00pm. To get there take a 45 or 47 bus from Corporation Street. Ask for The Selly Park Tavern - its about 15 minutes ride.

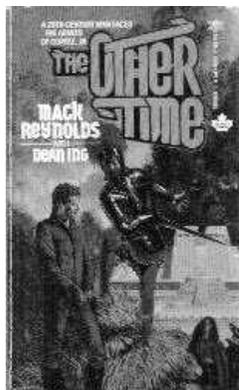
If you haven't yet got your ticket, there *may* be a few left – contact me on 0121 477 6901 before December 1st.
RGP

ALTERNATE AZTECS! by Vernon Brown

In mid-September there were several newspaper reviews of an exhibition at the British Museum about the last Aztec ruler Moctezuma. It sounded interesting but nothing equivalent to the recent *Dan Dare* one so I put it in the mental file “If we happen to be in London”. Then Pat pointed out that there were a couple of other exhibitions taking place and there was also a show that she'd like to see. So we went down for a couple of days, Pat saw her show and I was bowled over by the Aztec exhibition!

They say that a picture is worth a thousand words so I reckon that the item itself is worth a thousand pictures, at least if this exhibition is anything to go by. I was useless at history at school and gladly gave it up in favour of physics when the choice had to be made, so it's a bit odd that I later became enamoured of paracliological SF, the “what if the past had been a little different” stories, and a bit of a bind that I had to amass a small library of reference texts to appreciate their settings. Even so it's difficult to envisage certain eras because the actual material is not available to see and pictures only go so far.

Most museums have some Greek and Roman material and almost as many have a bit of Ancient Egyptian, so with a few pictures and descriptions it's fairly easy to get an overview of what they were like, but when did you last see anything about the Central and South American civilisation? Rarely - which is a pity since the Aztecs or aspects of their culture are the basis for a number of novels that range through time and space. Remember Harry Harrison's generation spaceship that carried a society based on Aztec rules to keep it docile? Or Silverberg's *THE GATE OF WORLDS* where the Black Death had destroyed medieval Europe and prevented the colonisation of South America? There's also Christopher Evans *AZTEC CENTURY* and Thomas Harlan's Aztec space-operatic *WASTELAND OF FLINT*. But my favourite, Mack Reynolds' and Dean Ing's “*THE OTHER TIME*” (Baen USA, 1984), is about an explorer who slips back in time to the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs, where he begins to alter history by making small changes. For example the Aztecs had wheels on toys but no wheeled vehicles – no draught (or pack) animals. But show labourers a wheelbarrow and things snowball. Foreknowledge of events also helps.



The British Museum brought my book-born knowledge to life. The beautiful and often massive carvings as well as the gold work have to be seen to be believed as do the paintings, although the latter are Spanish. And as my appreciation of art usually hovers around zero that's saying something. Weapons, ornaments, masks and jewellery are all

there, at least until next January, when much, if not most, of it returns to Mexico whence it came. Admission prices range down from £12, details from the Museum website. If you go by rail you can get two for one – ask at your local station. It's an event never to be repeated, so even if you never read the type of books mentioned above you'll find it well worthwhile. VB

UNCERTAIN TRANSLATION FROM THE MARTIAN **by Chris Morgan**

My husband / wife / second cousin

I greet you / love you / spit on you.

I need to tell you that I am joyful / upset / dead

at seeing you married / pregnant / torn into many small pieces by the jabberwok.

2009 NEBULA AWARDS

The 2009 World Fantasy Awards were presented on November 1 at World Fantasy Convention 2009 in San Jose, California.

Life Achievement: Ellen Asher and Jane Yolen

Novel (tie): THE SHADOW YEAR by Jeffrey Ford and TENDER MORSELS by Margo Lanagan

Novella: “If Angels Fight” by Richard Bowes

Short Story: “26 Monkeys, Also the Abyss” by Kij Johnson

Anthology: PAPER CITIES: AN ANTHOLOGY OF URBAN FANTASY edited by Ekaterina Sedia

Collection: THE DROWNED LIFE by Jeffrey Ford

Artist: Shaun Tan

Special Award—Professional: Kelly Link & Gavin J. Grant (for Small Beer Press and Big Mouth House)

Special Award—Non-professional: Michael J. Walsh (for Howard Waldrop collections from Old Earth Books)

NEWS IN BRIEF . . .

.... Artist **Dean Ellis** (b.1920) has died. Ellis was named one of the USA's most promising artists by *Life* magazine in 1950. He had a successful career when he was asked to create covers for Ray Bradbury novels in the 1960s, a job that led to him working for most of the major science fiction publishers of the period Artist **Don Ivan Punchatz** (b.1936) died on October 22 after suffering cardiac arrest. Punchatz began exhibiting his work in 1962 and in 1963 he began providing cover art for science fiction and fantasy books. Perhaps his most famous work in the field graced the covers of the Avon editions of Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* novels and Philip José Farmer's *Riverworld* books in the 1970s Actor **Edward Woodward** (b.1930) died on November 16. Woodward appeared in numerous films and television shows, including the title role on THE EQUALIZER. Some of his genre work included the TV series 1990 and the television version of GULLIVER'S TRAVELS, the role of Merlin in ARTHUR THE KING, and of course, THE WICKER

MAN Author **Robert Holdstock** has entered hospital and is in intensive care, described by *Ansible* as “gravely ill” – those wanting up-to-date news should visit the *Ansible* website where there is a daily update on his condition The **Nova Awards** were presented at Novacon 39 - Best Fanzine: *Banana Wings* edited by **Claire Brialey** and **Mark Plummer**; Best Fan Writer: **Claire Brialey**; Best Fan Artist: **Sue Mason**. **Steve Green**, the award’s administrator, has announced that he will step down, to be replaced by **Martin Tudor** Following the presentation of the first **David Gemmell Legend Award**, the awards committee has added two new categories, the David Gemmell Morningstar Award will be presented for best newcomer to fantasy fiction, and the David Gemmell Ravenheart Award will honour the best fantasy cover art of the year. All winners will be determined by popular vote. The 2010 David Gemmell Awards ceremony will again be held at [The Magic Circle](#) headquarters in London, on Friday 18th June Tom Holt has delivered his first SF novel, *BLONDE BOMBSHELL*, ‘a comedy of intergalactic proportions’, to Orbit Four hundred years after it locked up **Galileo** for challenging the view that the Earth was the centre of the universe, the Vatican has called in experts to study the possibility of extraterrestrial alien life and its implication for the Catholic Church. “The questions of life’s origins and of whether life exists elsewhere in the universe are very suitable and deserve serious consideration,” said the **Rev. Jose Gabriel Funes**, an astronomer and director of the Vatican Observatory. What’s the betting those bunch of deadheads in the Vatican announce that life elsewhere is impossible

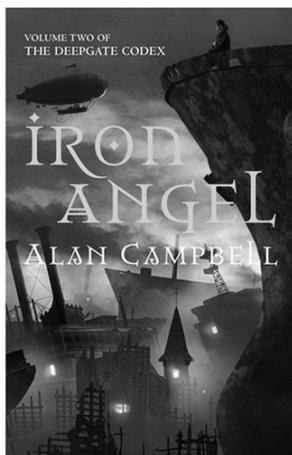
RGP



BOOK REVIEWS



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



***IRON ANGEL* by Alan Campbell**

Tor / 449pgs / £7.99 paperback ISBN: 978-0330444774

Reviewed by Dave Corby

IRON ANGEL (also known as PENNY DEVIL) is Alan Campbell’s second book, being the second volume in *The Deepgate Codex* series. IRON ANGEL follows SCAR NIGHT, reviewed by myself in the Oct 2009 *Brum Group News* (issue 457). The recently published GOD OF CLOCKS completes the trilogy.

SCAR NIGHT described a gothic horror setting which played host to a fantasy tale. It was quite inventive, but seemed somehow limited in the scope it was willing to portray. With the second volume Campbell opens up the vistas on his world, and this

volume is all the better for it. Giving the reader a view of a much wider world lends the book a more credible feel, although it does dilute the focussed Gothicism in the first volume.

My criticisms of the earlier book's writing seem to hold true for this sequel, but reading more of Campbell's text has given me a deeper insight into the same. In summary I felt the first book showed some promise, especially if the reader is after fantasy with gothic horror trappings, but that somehow not enough content seemed to fill up the 550 pages and I could not see where all the words went! Well, now I have figured it out – Campbell spends some time re-iterating his descriptions, presumably to hammer home the effect, but I started to find myself wishing I didn't have to read the fourth or fifth description of a thing just to get on with the action.

At the beginning of the book the characters from SCAR NIGHT seem to be simply trying to survive, seeming to have little to do, and as such the story seems to meander without decisively going anywhere. However, in amongst all this I did find that Campbell has introduced an interesting selection of new characters, expanding on and deepening some of the ideas in the series. This aspect of the book showcased the author's ability to craft interesting concept-characters who are almost thought-experiments in their divorcement from humanity.

After about the half-way mark the story seems to come together, and the book gains a measure of urgency, and even became quite exciting at points – and I did find myself getting that old 'can't put it down' feeling, if only for a few chapters. This gives me hope – I am sure Campbell can, at least, be a dynamic writer, if he tightens the description up a bit.

IRON ANGEL is a worthy sequel to Scar Night, as far as that goes; and if you enjoyed the first you will probably enjoy Iron Angel more so; I feel Campbell has improved with the second volume, but only incrementally. Unfortunately the good stuff is rather swamped by the over-emphasised description, and therefore I cannot recommend IRON ANGEL unreservedly.

DC



***STEALING LIGHT* by Gary Gibson**

Gollancz / 441 pgs £16.99 hardback ISBN 978-0230700406

***NOVA WAR* by Gary Gibson**

Gollancz / 407 pgs £17.99 hardback ISBN 978-0230706804

The first and second books of *The Shoal Sequence*

Reviewed by Michael Jones

The original intention was that I would deal only with the second of these - something I would normally try to avoid doing. In fact, by the time I had got through eighty pages or so I had come to realise two things: that events had already happened that I wanted to know about, and that the first book would be well worth reading. So I took steps to get hold of it and started from the beginning.

The “Shoal” is an aquatic race, seemingly the only one in this arm of the Milky Way in possession of fil technology which enables them to control the activities of humans and various other so-called client races. However, a predecessor race, the Magi, have left derelict starships scattered about and two humans come into possession of one of these and learn that the Shoal did not actually invent their advanced technology for themselves - they have in fact been engaged in a millenia-long war with another fil-capable alien race calling themselves The Emissaries of God. Both are aware that their fil technology can be used to destroy any star in a nova explosion and in the second book hostilities escalate with both sides demonstrating this capability. It is left to our two humans to initiate the setting-up of a peacekeeping force which will use the technology left behind by the Magi to bring things under control and prevent the eradication of life in the Milky Way.



The foregoing few words can scarcely begin to convey the intricacies of a story, complex and full of incident, spread through eight hundred-plus pages. Unfortunately, the first book begins in a very piecemeal fashion with successive chapters dodging about in both place and time, leaving the reader (me, anyway) quite confused as to what actually happened when and to whom. It does not always add up and at least twice I had to turn back to try to find how it was that some character was actually not dead after all. About halfway through, the story takes on a more linear narrative, although the author still cannot resist the occasional flashback. The inventiveness and excitement never let up as the elaborations of the plot continue to unfold.

Gibson is not quite a new writer, these being respectively his third and fourth published books. On this evidence he is more than able to stand comparison with the leading names in contemporary British SF writing. There may be the odd occasion when he has followed other people’s ideas, but his sources are always the very best and he brings more than enough of his own originality to make up for it.

I shall look forward to the next book in this series, which I hope will bring it to a triumphant conclusion. In the meantime, these are highly recommended. *Mj*

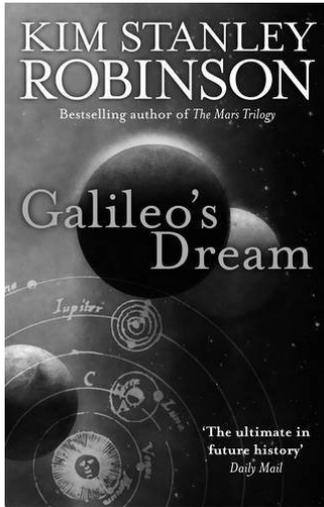
***GALILEO’S DREAM* by Kim Stanley Robinson**

HarperVoyager / 578pgs / £18.99 hardcover ISBN: 978-0007260317

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan

Kim Stanley Robinson has a reputation for scientific probability in his novels. His previous trilogy, (FORTY SIGNS OF RAIN, FIFTY DEGREES BELOW and SIXTY DAYS AND COUNTING) is a near-the-knuckle climate change narrative that every sceptic should be forced to read.

GALILEO’S DREAM is very much a divergence from the usual format. Most of the book is a biography of Galileo who, rightly, was considered the father of science. It was his scientific investigations that opened the way for advances in physics and mathematics, despite the opposition of the Catholic Church. This part of the narrative is excellent, giving a sure picture of the time and the constraints under which Galileo was working and a dynamic portrait of the man himself. Galileo was subject to a lot of ill health, especially



later in life and prone to a condition known as syncope. Technically, this was fainting, but in his case this could last some hours. Robinson uses this condition to add on an SF element to the novel. During these episodes, Galileo is taken to the Jovian moons by people from the thirty-first century. The moons have been colonised and an entity has been found beneath the ice of Europa which seems to have sentience. The reasons for taking Galileo there seem rather flimsy except to give the reader the idea of multiple futures – an idea explored by other writers and in many cases with more conviction. Of the characters on Europa, Hera wants to guide Galileo into surviving the ordeals he has to come in face of the Inquisition, while Ganymede wants to see him burnt at the stake as a martyr to science.

The two parts of the narrative do not quite gel together leaving the overall effect of the novel as unsatisfactory. Readers wanting to find out more

about the life and tribulations of Galileo from the time when he started experimenting with lenses will find this contains an excellent, well researched history. PM

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 rogpeyton@hotmail.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:-

Future dates - Dec 17th MEMOIRS OF A MASTER FORGER by William Heaney (Graham Joyce)

Jan 21ST INCANDESCENCE by Greg Egan

Future books to be discussed will probably include

3001: FINAL ODYSSEY by Arthur C. Clarke

PAVANE by Keith Roberts

LET THE RIGHT ONE IN by Jon Avide Lindquist

THE CITY AND THE CITY by China Mieville

SOMNAMBULIST by Jonathon Barnes

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 18th December.

More details from Martin Tudor (empties084@btinternet.com).

FUTURE MEETINGS OF THE BSFG

January 8th 2010 – ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING and AUCTION

February 12th – QUIZ versus the B’ham University SF Group

March 12th – Gollancz editor JO FLETCHER returns with more amusing and interesting anecdotes of life in publishing

April 9th – tba

May 14th – comic fantasy author JASPER FFORDE

June 11th – SF author NEAL ASHER

July 9th – SF/fantasy author STEVE FEASEY

August – SUMMER SOCIAL – meal at The Black Eagle

September – tba

October – tba

November – SF author CHARLES STROSS

BRUM GROUP NEWS #459 copyright 2009 for Birmingham SF Group. Designed by Rog Peyton (19 Eves Croft, Bartley Green, Birmingham, B32 3QL – phone 0121 477 6901 or email rogpeyton@hotmail.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.

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