

BRUM GROUP NEWS

THE *FREE* MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE

BIRMINGHAM SCIENCE FICTION GROUP

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& **HARRY HARRISON**

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Friday 10th September

JAINE FENN

Our guest this month is Jaine Fenn - a fan turned pro who always meant to become a science fiction writer, but took rather a long time going about it. She became the president of PSiFA (the local student science fiction society) from 1984-1985. She also helped organise Shoestringcons and edited their newsletter/fanzine, *Hypo-Space*, for a period.

After doing a Linguistics and Astronomy degree back when students studied subjects that interested them, not just the ones with jobs at the end, she did stints at various day-jobs ranging from life-modelling to IT consultancy. Her



October 8th - The prolific ADAM ROBERTS - SF author, satirist, parodist, etc., will be making his first visit to the Group.

first published short story was “Raw Steak and Roses” which appeared in DIVAS OF DARKNESS in November 1999. Several more short stories appeared before her first novel, PRINCIPLES OF ANGELS, appeared from Gollancz in 2008. It was followed by CONSORTS OF HEAVEN (2009) and GUARDIANS OF PARADISE (2010), which are the first three stand-alone books in the *Hidden Empire* series. A further two books set in the same universe are contracted for. She really does write in a garret.

Rather than give a talk to the Group, Jaïne has requested that she be interviewed and our resident interviewer, Pauline Morgan, will do the honours.

RGP

*** * * NEW EMAIL ADDRESS: rog [dot] peyton [at] btinternet [dot] com * * ***
Previous ‘fsnet’ and ‘hotmail’ addresses should NOT be used

THE SUMMER SOCIAL

An enjoyable time was had by all attending the Annual Summer Social, held, as usual, at The Black Eagle in Handsworth. However, Vernon Brown, who hitherto has organised these events, is relinquishing the job. Anyone who thinks that they might like to organise next year’s meal should contact Vernon at a Group meeting before Christmas or email him via the BSFG address to obtain an idea of what this would entail. This would be for their information only and would not commit them in any way.

TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF SCIENCE FICTION ***by Michael Jones***

<<<The following article results from the discussion in the letter column recently. As it is considerably longer than usual letters of comment, it is being presented as an article in its own right. – *RGP*>>>

The cognomen ‘Science Fiction’ was coined to describe a specific kind of literature or storytelling and it must therefore be assumed that the meanings of the words are significant – indeed if this is not the case then the name is wrong! It is hardly necessary, of course, to define here the meaning of either ‘science’ or ‘fiction’, but there is the additional significant fact that by virtue of them being used together in this way, each qualifies the other. Now clearly, a love story is about Romance, a detective story is about Crime, a war story is about War and so on, and in the same way a science (fiction) story will be about Science. But in addition, the science in a Science Fiction story will be expected to be fictional science, that is to say outside the realm of scientific knowledge current at the time of writing (or even reading!)

Science at any specific point in time could be described as a kind of ‘closed book’. There are things we know, which are in the book, and things we don’t know, which are not in it now, but may, or will, be included in a ‘future edition’.

Any scientific innovation forming the basis of a Science Fiction story will fall into one or other of two categories. It may be something which will never be scientifically possible, in which case the story is properly described as Fantasy rather than Science Fiction, or it may be something which is scientifically (or technologically) plausible but currently not in ‘the book’. In this latter case the story is Science Fiction – that is to say it contains or is based on fictional science.

Such a story can be set in the present and perform one of the basic functions of SF by showing the effect on the world we know of a scientific development which has not actually happened yet. Alternatively, it may be set in the future and perform another of the basic functions of SF by showing a different world from the present day which has been brought about by the application of science and/or technology. Either way, but more particularly in the latter case, SF is showing the effects of change, and change means the future. (In this connection, it is perhaps worth remembering that Science Fiction came into being as a reflection of an age when scientific discovery and development were beginning to proceed at an ever-accelerating rate.) The result seems to be that all SF has to be set in the future, even if only by a few days or even hours. But is the reverse true – that a story set in the future must be SF? The answer is probably No, as a story could be set in the future without being dependent on a scientific innovation.

Conversely, it is at first difficult to see how a Science Fiction story can be set in the past. Either the supposed scientific innovation on which it is based has become real by the time it is written, in which case it is not science fiction, or it has not and never can become real, in which case the story is fantasy. Arguably, however, a story set in the past might fulfil the basic purpose of SF by illustrating the effect on people, or society at large, of a scientific innovation which, whether or not it may become real at some future time, is fictional at the time the story is set. So, yes, SF can be set in the past. An example which comes to mind is “Mute Inglorious Tam” by Frederik Pohl.

In conclusion, therefore, a definition of Science Fiction must be close to that variously put forward by Isaac Asimov, Kingsley Amis and Robert Day – a narrative dealing with an innovation in science or technology (whether past, present or future) and describing its effect on the persons taking part in the narrative.

It is unfortunate that so many people outside the genre allow themselves to be exposed only to the most populist of Sci-Fi. Having seen something like Star Trek or Star Wars they see only the Spaceships, Ray-guns and Robots, and assume that that is all there is. Short of tying them to a chair and forcing them to read something good there seems little that can be done. The trouble is that they

would probably not understand it (although they would be ashamed to admit it) and might even be frightened of it (and would be ashamed to admit that as well).

Mf

ROCKS THAT ROLL?

A section of California's Death Valley is home to a strange phenomenon: Rocks that litter the landscape seem to move on their own, leaving long trails behind them in the cracked, bone-dry clay.

These wanderings have baffled scientists for more than five decades. Nobody has ever caught a glimpse of the stones actually moving, yet move they must, because the rocks' locations, and the trails they leave behind them, change over time.

A group of young scientists is taking a crack at solving the puzzle of this odd desert area known as Racetrack Playa. Most of the wandering stones are about the size of a one-liter soda bottle and far heavier, according to Brian Jackson, a NASA scientist who has been studying the area for more than four years.

"You don't expect 20-pound (9-kilogram) rocks to go sliding across the ground very easily, but they seem to do that on occasion," Jackson said.

NEWS IN BRIEF . . .



.... Oscar winning actress **Patricia Neal** (b. 1924) died on August 8. Neal starred in the science fiction classic **THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL** and also **IMMEDIATE DANGER** and **GHOST STORY**. She won her Academy Award for her non-genre role in **HUD** **THE LAST COLONY** by **John Scalzi** won the Japanese Seiun Award for best translated novel while "Dark Integers" by **Greg**

Egan won best short story The Sidewise Awards for Alternate History recognize excellence in alternate history. This year's winners are 1942 by **Robert Conroy** (long form) and "The Fixation" by **Alastair Reynolds** (short form) The winners of the 2009 Prometheus Awards have been announced by the Libertarian Futurist Society. The Prometheus Awards are given to honour excellence in libertarian science fiction. Best Novel was **THE UNINCORPORATED MAN** by **Dani & Eytan Kollin** and the Hall of Fame Award went to "No Truce with Kings" by **Poul Anderson** **THE BEST OF KIM STANLEY ROBINSON** appeared from Nightshade Books in August. 22 stories in 388pgs including the Nebula Award-winning "The Blind Geometer", the World Fantasy Award winner "Black Air", "Lucky Strike" and its sequel "A Sensitive Dependence on Initial Condition" and the brand new "The Timpanist

of the Berlin Philharmonic, 1942” Nightshade also published (in May) **FRITZ LEIBER: SELECTED STORIES** – 17 of the very best of his short fiction **SIR DOMINIC FLANDRY** by **Poul Anderson** collects all the *Technic Civilization* stories in one 432pg trade paperback – it’s due from Baen in December at \$13 What is it with **Ray Bradbury’s** **FAHRENHEIT 451?** Nearly 60 years old and currently number one bestselling SF/Fantasy paperback at B&N/B Dalton, number three in trade paperback sales while over at Borders/Walton it’s number two paperback and number four trade paperback. What am I missing? **THE WINDS OF DUNE** by **Brian Herbert** and **Kevin J Anderson** is now out in paperback in the US and adverts for it are forecasting **HELLHOLE**, the start of an all-new epic SF series. Have they, like the general SF buying public, finally tired of writing about Dune??? *RGP*

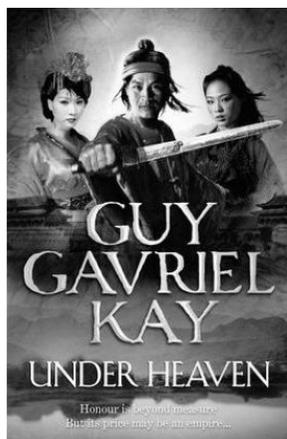
📖📖📖📖 **BOOK REVIEWS** 📖📖📖📖

(**REVIEWERS** please note:- all reviews should be emailed direct to me at rog [dot] peyton [at] btinternet [dot] com) **Deadline for each issue is 14 days prior to the date of the monthly meeting.**

***UNDER HEAVEN* by Guy Gavriel Kay**

Gollancz / 570pgs / hardcover £18.99 ISBN: 978-0007542013

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan



Guy Gavriel Kay is a man who likes to play with history. His novel **SAILING TO SARANTIUM** was an alternative world narrative based on the Late Roman Empire; **UNDER HEAVEN** travels east down the Silk Road to the China of the Tang Dynasty.

This was a highly civilised and mannered society. Everyone knew their place and to rise in society it was necessary to pass examinations. Not only was it necessary for even the humblest to be able to read and write but it was also important to know history and to write poetry

One young man, Shen Tai, is prevented from taking his exams by the death of his father, General Shen Gao. According to custom, the family is expected to withdraw from society for a period of two and a half years. The only exceptions are for those with military rank. Tai decides to spend his period of mourning on the plains of Kuala Nor, the site of fierce battles between his people, the Kitai, and the Tagur. He spends two years alone, burying the bones of the dead.

Lives can change on a whim. When the Kitan princess, who was sent to Tagur as a peace bride, hears of Tai's efforts, she gifts him with two hundred and fifty Sardinian horses. These are the most sought after horses in the whole of Kitai making Tai immediately the target for assassins. Unfortunately, an assassin is already on the way, sent by Wen Zhou, the new first minister, but for an entirely different reason. Tai has to negotiate through the minefield of manners and political intrigue. A casual gift has already changed his life; it could change the fate of his nation as well.

This is a book that starts with a strong image and unfolds in a mannered way. It is never short of interest, the life in ancient China being painted with deft strokes and the beauty of fine poetry. *PM*

<<<a shortage of reviews this month due to the Summer Social and not being able to deal out the review copies. I have two large piles of books at present to be given out at the September meeting, so hopefully things will soon be back to normal. – RGP>>>

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 [dot] peyton [at] binternet [dot] com

**Birmingham Libraries
are delighted to present a special event with
bestselling science fiction writer,
PETER F. HAMILTON
Tuesday 14th September 2010
6.30pm (for 7.00pm start)
@ Birmingham Library Theatre,
Central Library, Birmingham
Free tickets available from the
Box Office on (0121) 303 2323
Book tickets online via www.birminghamboxoffice.com
or in person at Central Library reception.
www.birmingham.gov.uk/libraries**

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.

Future books to be discussed will provisionally be...

Forthcoming:- COALESCENT by Stephen Baxter; DIVERGENCE by Tony Ballantyne; LET THE RIGHT ONE IN by Jon Avide Lindquist; HUNTER'S RUN by Martin, Dozois & Abrahams.

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 and great company. More details from Martin Tudor - (empties084 [at] binternet [dot] com).

FANTASYCON 2010 will be held over the weekend of September 17-19 at the Britannia Hotel, 1 St James Street, Nottingham. Guest of Honour will be Lisa Tuttle. Master of Ceremonies will be James Barclay. Website is...
<http://sites.google.com/site/fantasycon2010/>

PROFESSOR IAN STEWART speculates on the possibilities of extra-terrestrial life and how different it might be to our own, while Professor Andy Fabian and Dr Carolin Crawford reveal the secret sounds of the solar system, including the big bang itself. Gaze into the vastness of space in the company of some of the biggest scientific brains on the planet. Thursday 7th October 7:00pm at Symphony Hall, Broad Street, Birmingham. £7.50, £5 students and under 16s

DOCTOR WHO LIVE! BBC Worldwide has announced a series of arena dates for the very first production of DOCTOR WHO LIVE which is coming to The NIA, Birmingham, 18 - 20 October 2010. Tickets range from £25 to £38.50 each. The new stage show, based upon the BBC's smash-hit, award-winning series *Doctor Who*, promises to deliver a spectacular audio/visual experience featuring live music, special effects and appearances from the show's most popular monsters. Full details from The Ticket Factory – phone 0844 338 0388 or see their website www.theticketfactory.com

ILLUSTRIOUS is the 2011 Eastercon to be held at the Hilton Metropole Hotel, the NEC, Birmingham over the Easter weekend 22-25 April. Guests of Honour are US author David Weber and UK author Peter F Hamilton. Artist GoH is none other than our own David A Hardy! Fan GoH is Vince Doherty. More info: <http://www.illustrious.org.uk/>



NOVA CON 40 – the Brum Group’s own convention and the longest-running regional convention in the UK, will be once again held at The Park Inn, 296 Mansfield Road, Nottingham, NG5 2BT. Dates are November 12th to 14th November. Guests of Honour are **Iain M Banks** and our Co-President **Brian Aldiss, O.B.E.** Full details at <http://novacon.org.uk/>

FUTURE MEETINGS OF THE BSFG

October 8th – SF, fantasy author and satirist ADAM ROBERTS

November 5th – SF author CHARLES STROSS

December 3rd – Christmas Social

Jan 2011 – Annual General Meeting and Auction

Feb – QUIZ with University SF Society

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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