

BRUM GROUP NEWS

THE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE

BIRMINGHAM SCIENCE FICTION GROUP

FEBRUARY 2011

ISSUE 473

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

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Friday 11th February 2011 ??? THE QUIZ ???

It's Quiz time again. Always in February due to the expected bad weather and the risk of speakers being unable to get to Brum – or worse still, the members being unable to get into the city centre. Again, we've invited members of the Birmingham University SF Society. Let's hope they turn up this year – last year they failed to find the meeting place!

It's a Pub Quiz style event with several teams competing for honours and prizes. Questions are set by Vernon with help from the internet on more modern subjects (post World War II) and will cover books, magazines, artwork, films, TV, radio, etc. so everyone has a chance of winning. Unless, like me, you *never* watch SF in movies or TV (Well, it's all rubbish, isn't it? Maybe with a few exceptions).

NOW is the time to start revising. Only you know your weak areas – start reading and start watching! Me? – I've only got about 40 years worth of media stuff to watch! Think I'll pass. *RGP*

The meeting will take place in the conference room on the first floor of The

March 11th - Fantasy author Frances Hardinge will be making her first visit to the Group

Briar Rose Hotel, Bennetts Hill, off New Street.

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. The entrance fee for this meeting is £3 for members, £4 for non-members

THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING & AUCTION

This year's AGM ran without any hitches and your new committee was appointed without any competition for any of the posts. We have a new secretary – welcome to the chaos, Theresa. Vicky is staying on the committee temporarily, handling the Membership Secretary's post until Theresa is able to take on that part of the secretary's job as well. See the header on the front page for the complete committee.

The auction followed and raised £111 for group funds. Thanks to all those who donated material.

BSFA AWARDS – THE NOMINEES

The British Science Fiction Awards nominees have been announced. The awards will be presented at Eastercon in April.

Best Novel

THE WINDUP GIRL by Paolo Bacigalupi

ZOO CITY by Lauren Beukes

THE RESTORATION GAME by Ken Macleod

THE DERVISH HOUSE by Ian McDonald

LIGHTBORN by Tricia Sullivan

Best Short Fiction

“Flying in the Face of God” by Nina Allan

“The Shipmaker” by Aliette de Bodard

“The Things” by Peter Watts

“Arrhythmia” by Neil Williamson

Best Non-Fiction

“Blogging the Hugos: Decline” by Paul Kincaid

Review: “With Both Feet in the Clouds” by Abigail Nussbaum

Review: *Wheel of Time* by Adam Roberts

“Red Plenty” by Francis Spufford

Notes from “Coode Street Podcast” by Jonathan Strahan and Gary K. Wolfe

Best Art

cover for CONFLICTS by Andy Bigwood

cover for FUN WITH RAINBOWS by Charlie Harbour

cover for CAT'S CRADLE by Dominic Harman

cover for ZOO CITY by Joey Hi-Fi

A DEAFENED PLEA FOR PEACE by Ben Greene

cover for FINCH by Adam Tredowski

PHILIP K DICK AWARD NOMINEES

The nominees for the Philip K Dick Award, presented annually for best paperback original book by the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society and the Philip K. Dick Trust, have been announced. The winner will be announced on Friday, April 22 at Norwescon 34 in Seatac, WA.

YARN by Jon Armstrong

CHILL by Elizabeth Bear

THE REAPERS ARE THE ANGELS by Alden Bell

SONG OF SCARABAEUS by Sara Creasy

THE STRANGE AFFAIR OF SPRING HEELED JACK by Mark Hodder

HARMONY BY PROJECT ITOH translated by Alexander O. Smith

STATE OF DECAY by James Knapp

NEWS IN BRIEF . . .

.... Bibliographer **Neil Barron** (b.1934) died on September 5, 2010 in Las Vegas. Barron published five editions of his bibliography/reference work ANATOMY OF WONDER. He was also the founder and first editor of *Science Fiction & Fantasy Book Review*. After publishing the final edition of ANATOMY OF WONDER, Barron dropped out of the SF community

Fan **Ruth Kyle** (b.1930, nee Landis) died on January 5, the day after her 81st birthday. Kyle entered fandom in the mid-1950s and served as the Secretary for NyCon II, the 1956 Worldcon. The following year, she attended Loncon, the Worldcon in London, while on her honeymoon with **Dave Kyle**, flying over on a specially chartered flight. Some BSFG members will remember Ruth at



Novacon 6 (1976) when Dave Kyle was our Guest of Honour Actress **Anne Francis** (b.1930) died on January 2. Francis is best known in science fiction circles for her role as Altaira in FORBIDDEN PLANET, a role further immortalized in the theme song to the ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW. She also appeared in episodes of *Fantasy Island*, *The Twilight Zone*, *The New Adventures of Wonder Woman* and the film THE ROCKET MEN **Orson Scott Card** suffered a minor stroke on New Year's Day. He is expected to make a full recovery and is continuing to write, but has cancelled all his scheduled appearances. Card was scheduled for a

book tour in support of his new novel THE LOST GATE Author **Jack Ketchum** (aka Dallas Mayr) has been named Grand Master by the World

Horror Convention, scheduled to take place this year from April 28-May 1 in Austin, Texas **Malcolm Edwards**, former co-founder of the SF semi-prozine Interzone and deputy at Hachette (which owns Orion that in turn has Gollancz as an imprint) has been cited as one of the top 100 most influential people in the British book trade by the Bookseller Association Author **Neil Gaiman** married **Amanda Palmer** on January 3 at the home of author **Michael Chabon**. Gaiman and Palmer got engaged about a year ago. This is the second marriage for Gaiman and the first marriage for Palmer 17 new minutes have been found of **2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY!** 17 minutes of good quality film cut from 2001 shortly after its initial release has been found in Warner's Kansas salt mine archive vault. They are in the form of negatives and are in good condition **James Cameron** has been talking up a return to the world of Pandora for two AVATAR sequels almost since the day the original premiered. Cameron says that, although the two sequels will be filmed together, the release dates aren't until Christmas 2014 and Christmas 2015 The **Len Wiseman**-directed remake of the 1990 film TOTAL RECALL, which is still in preproduction, is going to be a FAR different movie from **Paul Verhoeven's** version. This movie will remain truer to its source material, **Philip K Dick's** novella "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale" **Kathryn Aurora Gray**, a 10-year-old from Fredericton, Canada, discovered a supernova in the constellation Camelopardalis on January 3 in an image she took with her father on New Year's Eve. Supernova 2010lt is a magnitude-17 supernova in galaxy UGC 3378. The supernova is about 240 million light-years away from Earth
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 or queries to me at rog [dot] peyton [at] btinternet [dot] com

Regular contributor Dave Hardy – "I would like to thank the Committee for the unexpected gift at the AGM of a bottle of Bordeaux. Anything I've done for the Group has been quite voluntary and without the expectation of any reward, but it was an even more pleasant surprise when I got home to discover that the wine was 'Chateau David' (though it wasn't Hardy's)!"

<<And while mentioning Dave I should report that a few months ago we had a quite heated discussion in the BGN on a definition for science fiction. Dave was inspired to write a long piece on his own thoughts on the matter; but it was far too long to publish here, so it has now been put up on the Science Fiction Crowsnest website, which I'm told has a rather larger readership, being the second most popular in the world, with readers in the millions! If you'd like to read it you'll find it at <http://www.sfcrowsnest.com/articles/features/2010/What-is-science-fiction--15661.php> .



BOOK REVIEWS

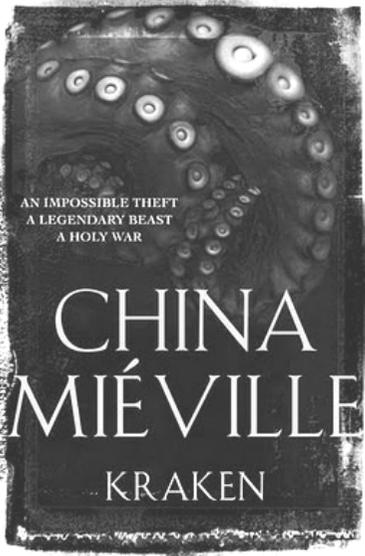


(**REVIEWERS** please note:- all reviews should be emailed direct to me at rog [dot] peyton [at] btinternet [dot] com) **Deadline for each issue is 14 days prior to the date of the monthly meeting.**

***KRAKEN* by China Miéville**

Pan / 481pgs / £7.99 paperback ISBN: 978-0330492324

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan



It is rare to find a writer who does not feel that they have to explain every obscure reference to a reader. China Miéville is an intelligent and knowledgeable author who treats his readers with the same consideration he would expect himself. **KRAKEN** is a complex novel dealing with arcane knowledge. It starts ordinarily enough with a young curator, Billy Harrow, leading a tour at the Natural History Museum in London. When he leads them into the room with the exhibit they have really come to see, they find it has vanished. Since the exhibit in question is an eight-foot long specimen of a giant squid in an even larger tank of preserving fluid, this is apparently impossible.

The London of **KRAKEN** is not quite the same of ours, at least, not if you scratch the surface. There are a lot of religious cults, many of which have predicted Armageddons (most of which don't happen on the prescribed date). Many people have a 'knack', a way of using a supernatural power – hunches are accurate, Londonmancers can read the entrails of the city. One of the criminal masterminds has been reduced to a Tattoo on an innocent man's back, from which he runs his organisation. No-one knows what is going on, but most agree that the world is going to end in a couple of days and it is somehow connected with the disappearance with the squid. One of the cults with an interest is the Krakenists. They regard the Kraken as their god and the missing squid, although dead, is an ambassador. They haven't got it, though everyone thinks they have or that Billy knows where it is. He hooks up with Dane Parnell, a Krakenist to search for it. The hope is that finding the squid will avert the portending apocalypse. They find an unlikely ally in Wati. In ancient Egypt, Wati was a soul

placed into a shabti to serve a rich man after death. Somehow he began to think for himself, wonder what he was getting out of the arrangement and persuaded the other slave-souls to go on strike.

Thousands of years later he is still striving for workers' rights and has, as convener for the Union of Familiars, called all familiars in London out on strike. As a disembodied soul he flits from statue to statue organising the strike and keeping a watch out for who might have stolen the squid.

This urban fantasy novel is an example of some of the best genre writing around today. PM

***THE JAPANESE DEVIL FISH GIRL AND OTHER UNNATURAL ATTRACTIONS* by Robert Rankin**

Gollancz/ 373pgs/ £14.99 hardback ISBN: 978-0575078734

Reviewed by Sam Fennell



Firstly, I would never have picked up this book from Rog's Table Boutique of Fine Review Books if it weren't for the cover. It's fantastic, and for those of you who aren't aware, crafted by Mr Rankin himself. What a refreshing cover to see, and I can't remember when I was last taken by a cover enough to start judging the book by it, but I did, and looked forward to a fine read.

THE JAPANESE DEVIL FISH GIRL is an alternate history steampunk, set after H.G. Wells's WAR OF THE WORLDS. Wrecked Martian ships have been back engineered and Mars is a part of the British Empire. The key character is George Fox, a hapless but loveable young lad frequently fleeced and put-upon by his boss, Professor

Coffin, as they travel around with their Unnatural Attractions show, which exhibits amongst other things, a pickled Martian. George meets Ada Lovelace, who also initially attempts to fleece him, and the three of them make their way through a world full of dirigibles, goggles and top hats on an adventure looking for the best exhibit of all, the Japanese Devil Fish Girl.

Firstly, if you are not a fan of steampunk, you probably won't like this. If you are a fan of steampunk, you may not like your steampunk flavoured with double measure of Rankin. I've come to realise that steampunk is quite the

fashion these days and for steampunks it is almost a lifestyle choice (if the reader is not aware of this phenomenon, I suggest googling 'steampunk' into your steam-powered computing device for further insight). Consequently, throughout the book there are many references that will make steampunkers happy: goggles, little ladies top hats, funny little machines that puff steam and do miraculous things, bustles and noticeably dastardly fiends and villains.

The story trips along at a wonderful pace, full of Rankin's witty observations, delightful prose, jokes and pure silliness. There are appearances from many historical characters of note, including Mr Churchill, Mr Babbage and Mr Tesla.

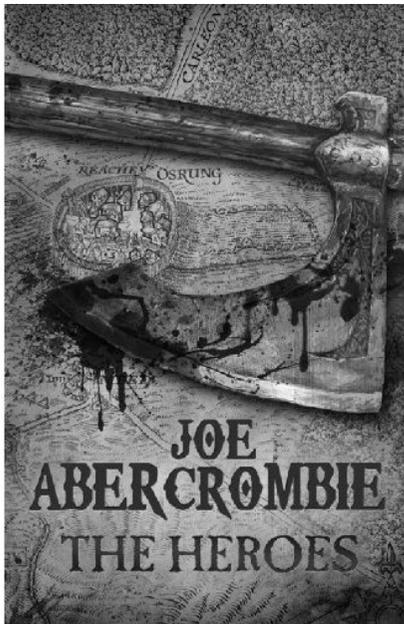
If I have any criticisms at all, it's that sometimes a scene seems to have been built to make a joke – a funny joke, but nevertheless perhaps one that the reader may have seen some distance off. This book is simply fun to read. *SF*

***THE HEROES* by Joe Abercrombie**

Gollancz / 678pgs / £14.99 hardcover ISBN: 978-0575083837 /

£14.99 trade paperback ISBN: 978-0575083844

Reviewed by Jim Pearce



This story describes the few days immediately before and after, as well as the three days of the battle in the valley of Osrung between the Northmen and the Union. In it we meet again a number of the characters depicted in Joe Abercrombie's first three books (*THE BLADE ITSELF*, *BEFORE THEY ARE HANGED* and *THE LAST ARGUMENT OF KINGS*) as well as a host of other characters.

THE HEROES is, as are the books named above, full of well defined characters and dirty, gritty violence all of which are an essential part of the storyline. Amongst these persons is 'Black Dow' the Protector (King) of the North who stole his throne from the 'Bloody Nine' who in turn won it by killing Bethod the first King of the Northmen.

Such is the 'Bloody Nine's' reputation that in spite being dead (or 'returned to the mud' in the parlance of the North) he plays a pivotal role in the battle. Other key characters on the side of the North include Bethgod's younger son, Prince Calder, who isn't interested in honour; all he wants is power, and he'll tell any lie,

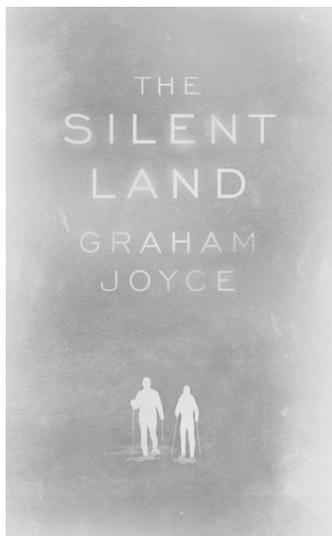
use any trick, and betray any friend to get it, just as long as he doesn't have to fight for it himself. Curnden Craw described as the last honest man in the North, who has gained nothing from a life of warfare but swollen knees and frayed nerves. He hardly even cares who wins any more, he just wants to do the right thing.

On the other side, key characters include 'The Dogman', an old companion of the Bloody Nine, who is the chief of the Northmen fighting for the Union; Bremer dan Gorst, a disgraced master swordsman and formally the Union's King's First Guard who, obsessed with redemption and addicted to violence, has sworn to reclaim his stolen honour on the battlefield, far past caring how much blood gets spilled in the attempt, even if it's his own; Marshal Kroy who is the Union's commander in chief (when Bayaz, the 'First of the Magi' lets him) and three politically appointed and mainly incompetent divisional commanders.

Despite its title the book does not glory in war but rather shows its futility, demonstrating that it is often used as a political tool to gain a short term advantage which is frequently squandered, as it appears to be in this case. In fact the heroes of the title are not any of those fighting in the battle, although they could be, but are a ring of standing stones crowning a hill around and on which much of the action takes place.

THE HEROES is a dark tale, but strangely compelling, enjoyable and well written, progressing at a fast pace. I look forward to future books from this author.

JTP



THE SILENT LAND by Graham Joyce

**Gollancz / 224pgs / £9.99 hardcover
ISBN: 978-0575083899**

Reviewed by Rog Peyton

The blurb on this describes it as 'A chilling love story, a romantic supernatural tale' and '...a brooding and tender look at love and whether it can survive the greatest challenge we will ever face.', which would have the effect of making you think that this novel is just another soppy romance novel. But you'd be wrong, very wrong. The blurb writer on this got it wrong! While there are two people in the novel who are married and in love, that's as close as it gets.

The two people are Zoe and Jake, a married couple who are holidaying in the French Alps. Whilst out skiing they are caught in a major avalanche. Zoe is buried but soon finds herself being pulled out

by Jake. Returning to their hotel they find it deserted. Where have all the people gone? They search the whole hotel but find no-one. They try to drive away from the hotel but find themselves back where they started.

As the days drag by, they remember their life together and this is where Joyce shows his maturity as a writer. Both characters begin to live as their history is fleshed out.

This is a novel well up to Graham Joyce's usual high standard – in fact, I found it to be one of his most enjoyable. He has won Best Novel category several times in the British Fantasy Awards and I'm sure this will walk away with the prize this year. Superbly written with the outcome well obscured to keep you guessing to the last page. I do not wish to spoil this excellent novel by revealing any more of the plot but recommend it most highly. *RGP*



***WATCH* by Robert J Sawyer**
Gollancz / 354pgs / £12.99 large
paperback ISBN: 978-0575095045
Reviewed by Sam Fennell

WATCH is the second book in Robert J. Sawyer's 'WWW' trilogy. The first novel, WAKE, sets the scene of a blind teenage girl, Caitlin, being implanted with new technology which enables her to see. Inadvertently, this technology also means that she can 'see' the internet and she soon detects an emerging, internet intelligence ('Webmind') and communicates with it, supporting its development. There are two subplots; a chimpanzee that appears to be gaining intelligence, and a bird flu pandemic in China which caused China to close itself to non-Chinese websites.

WATCH continues with the themes of emerging intelligence, although frustratingly, the subplots do not move forward a great deal. The idea of Webmind, and the way in which Sawyer describes its emerging intelligence is credible although remains lacklustre.

The first part of the trilogy, introduced a number of fairly likeable albeit flat characters, however in WATCH they begin to become spectacularly unbelievable, particularly Caitlin and her parents. I don't think many parents would keep their teenagers home from school so that they could stay at home to talk to an emergent, internet intelligence. I didn't find Caitlin's witty and clever

remarks to federal agents credible. Caitlin frequently refers to how much she loves her parents and how she understands when she doesn't get something she wants, it is for her own good. Any readers with experience of teenage children will find Caitlin very odd indeed, as might teenage readers find her mother, ("Mum can you look after Webmind when I go to school?"). All in all, it seems that the authenticity of the characters has been lost at the cost of moving the plot forward.

Other characters in the novel have not really developed, in particular Shoshanna, the painting chimpanzee's carer. Sawyer seems to treat her character as an opportunity to make a couple of points, firstly that 'girls can do things that boys can' (which has been done too often and badly enough to be a cliché in itself) and that gay relationships are okay, even inter-racial ones! His depiction of the relationship is poor, and I was offended at being needlessly lectured on gay and black rights for four pages! Most people who will pick up this book would probably consider these debates well past their sell-by date.

Webmind itself, having now been identified by WATCH, the secret government agency ('Web Activity Threat Containment Headquarters'), seems to be making one too many 'oops, I'm a robot so I don't understand humans' moments.

I groaned frequently as I read this book. One particularly groan-worthy moment was where Sawyer refers to another of his books via Caitlin making a comment on FLASHFORWARD.

The overall concept of this trilogy is not a bad one. One redeeming feature of this book is a scene relating to teenage on-line suicide, which was handled quite well, but I think most readers would find this a frustrating read. The book does have good pace and occasional humour. However, it lacks in too many areas. Due to the large number of positive reviews on-line about this book, I've come to the conclusion that Robert J. Sawyer must be the Dan Brown of SF... personally I can't recommend it at all. *SF*

MY PERSONAL TOP 100 BEST SF (& FANTASY?) BOOKS

I announced with a teaser last month that I would be starting to list recommended books from my own personal favourites. I'm often asked for recommendations and I thought it would be a good way to get all the recommendations out in the open so that anyone who wants to take advantage can look at them, see which ones they've already read and enjoyed and hopefully try others in the hope of finding books they would otherwise have missed.

Unfortunately I'm unable to start this month. I've made an arrangement with Helena at Waterstones in Birmingham High Street whereby they guarantee to keep in stock the titles I list each month. BUT, because of some poor internal systems, it takes them three weeks to obtain titles for stock. Unbelievable but true.

The titles I've chosen now would not be in stock until the end of February.

So I'll be sending them the list so they can obtain the stock to coincide with the March newsletter when hopefully the first batch of books will be listed. I'll probably be listing 10 books per month – 5 books that are currently in print and 5 books that are currently unavailable except as second-hand items. Yes, I made a list of about 110/120 books to be whittled down to 100 and discovered to my horror that approximately half were out of print – in the UK and the USA!

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] btinternet [dot] com

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 to be announced

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] btinternet [dot] 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/>



NOVACON 41 will be held over the weekend of **November 11th to the 13th** at **The Park Inn, 296 Mansfield Road, Nottingham. NG5 2BT.** The **Guest of Honour** will be **SF author JOHN MEANEY.** Further details can be found on the website <http://novacon.org.uk/>

FUTURE MEETINGS OF THE BSFG

Mar 11th – Fantasy author FRANCES HARDINGE

April 8th – comic SF/Fantasy author ROBERT RANKIN

May 13th - SF author JOHN MEANEY (who will also be Guest of Honour at Novacon 41 this year)

June 10th - Happy Birthday BSFG! 40th Anniversary Special Meeting
(to be held at the Old Joint Stock)

July 15th – SF author and mathematician IAN STEWART

***** PLEASE NOTE CHANGE OF DATE TO FRIDAY 15TH *****

Aug 12th - SUMMER SOCIAL at the Black Eagle

Sep 9th – SF/Fantasy author LIZ WILLIAMS (to be confirmed)

Oct 14th – SF author DAVID WINGROVE author of the *Chung Kuo* sequence.

Nov 4th – tba

BRUM GROUP NEWS #473 (February 2011) copyright 2011 for Birmingham SF Group. Designed by Rog Peyton (19 Eves Croft, Bartley Green, Birmingham, B32 3QL – phone 0121 477 6901 or email [rog \[dot\] peyton \[at\] binternet \[dot\] com](mailto:rog@peyton.binternet.com)). 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