

# BRUM GROUP NEWS

THE 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 11<sup>th</sup> March 2011**

## **FRANCES HARDINGE**



*Taken from the author's website...*

“Frances Hardinge is a writer who wears a black hat. Notoriously unphotographable, she is rumoured to be made entirely out of velvet. Sources close to Frances who prefer not to be named suggest that she has an Evil Twin who wears white and is hatless. This cannot be confirmed.

“Frances grew up in an old house in rural Kent, England where the wind wuthered. She has always liked dark stories - when she was six, she wrote a short story that included an attempted poisoning, a faked death and a villain being thrown off a cliff – all in just one page! Later she read English at Oxford University amid medieval towers and gargoye-strung chapels.

**April 8th - bestselling comic fantasy author ROBERT RANKIN makes a return visit to the Group**

“Frances Hardinge has been writing for years but didn't submit anything for publication until her friend, the author Rhiannon Lassiter, stole her novel and gave it to an editor at Macmillan. She was swiftly contracted to write the novel, FLY BY NIGHT, which was published to rave reviews. She later signed a three book deal which enabled her to write full time.

“Frances was the 2006 winner of the Branford Boase award and was also shortlisted for the Guardian Children's Fiction prize and the William Crawford award among others. In 2007 her second book, VERDIGRIS DEEP / WELL WITCHED, a stand-alone novel with a modern setting, was published to high acclaim, and chosen as one of School Library Journal's Best Children's Books of 2008.

“Her third novel, GULLSTRUCK ISLAND, was released in the UK in January 2009, and has now been published as THE LOST CONSPIRACY in the United States. At present she is working on a sequel to FLY BY NIGHT.”

Frances will be interviewed by Pauline Morgan.

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

## **WORLD BOOK NIGHT**

**Saturday 5th March 2011** - 7.00 to 8.45pm *Celebrate World Book Night with Birmingham Central Library and R J Ellory, Mike Gayle & Catherine O'Flynn.* As the nation prepares to give away one million books, Birmingham will be celebrating World Book Night with 3 of the city's best selling writers. R J Ellory, Mike Gayle and Catherine O'Flynn will be joining readers and Birmingham's book givers to celebrate books, libraries and reading.

9.00 to 10.00pm: *Saturday Night Reader.* Join Birmingham Poet Laureate Roy McFarlane, former Birmingham Young Poet Laureate Matt Windle, storyteller Patrice Horsley and local writer Paul McDonald outside the Central Library for an hour of rambunctious storytelling, poetry, laughs and free books.

Contact Nikki Bi on 0121 303 2895 or email her at [nikki.bi@birmingham.gov.uk](mailto:nikki.bi@birmingham.gov.uk)  
<We didn't get news of this in time for last month's newsletter – we barely got it in time for \*this\* newsletter! But there's just about time for you to get down there and see if there are any SF books being given away....well, you have to think positive, don't you. – RGP>>

## **THE QUIZ - 2011**

Once again, members of the Birmingham University SF Society were invited to come and take part in the annual Quiz but after confirming they would be entering, no-one showed up on the night. A great pity - but the Quiz went well

despite Vernon making it possibly the most difficult quiz we've ever had. Why was it difficult? Well, the book questions were divided between old (and I mean 'old') classics and modern books which hadn't even been published in the UK! Which meant that most members would never have heard of the books, let alone having the chance to see them or read them. Virtually all were about books published by one US publisher – Baen Books. All were action/adventure novels by the Baen 'syndicate' of writers – David Drake, David Weber, Eric Flint, John Ringo, etc., all of which concentrate on action rather than characterisation and quality of writing. But this idiosyncrasy of Vernon's did make it a very hard.

I'm pleased to say I was actually on the winning team along with Nicholas Jackson and Dave Corby. Fortunately they knew their media SF (I think I answered one correctly) and between us we got most of the book questions featuring the classics. None of us knew anything about any of the Baen Books questions – did anyone know these???

But thanks Vernon for setting a **very** difficult quiz – it's always good to have a real challenge, even if we all fail miserably. RGP

## NEWS IN BRIEF . . .



.... UK SF writer Lionel Percy Wright (b 1923) who wrote as 'Lan Wright' (see left) for all his fiction died 1st October 2010. He wrote many short stories for *New Worlds*, *Nebula*, *Authentic*, etc. His novels were WHO SPEAKS OF CONQUEST? (1957), A MAN CALLED DESTINY (1958), ASSIGNMENT LUTHER (1963), EXILE FROM XANADU (1964), THE LAST HOPE OF EARTH (1965 – aka THE CREEPING SHROUD) and THE PICTURES OF PAVANNE (1968 – aka A PLANET CALLED PAVANNE) .... author Brian Jacques (b.1939) (see below) died on

February 5 of an heart attack. Jacques is the author of the novel REDWALL and the subsequent series of books. A television series and various ancillary products about the series were also produced. In addition to the *Redwall* series, Jacques published three volumes in the *Castaways of the Flying Dutchman* series and various short stories .... Composer John Barry (b.1933) died on January 30 after suffering a heart attack. Barry composed music for genre films including THE BLACK HOLE, MOONRAKER, the 1976 remake of KING KONG, SOMEWHERE IN TIME, PEGGY SUE GOT MARRIED and many more. Barry won four Oscars (for BORN FREE, THE LION IN



WINTER, OUT OF AFRICA and DANCES and DANCES WITH WOLVES) and a Saturn Award for SOMEWHERE IN TIME .... George R. R. Martin and Parris McBride got married on February 15 at their home. The two have been together since 1981 .... At Boskone 48, the weekend of February 18-20, this year's recipients of the Skylark award was announced. Skylark Award: Lois McMaster Bujold; Fellow of NESFA: Peter Weston. Congratulations Peter! .... A new *Stainless Steel Rat* novel, THE STAINLESS STEEL RAT RETURNS by Harry Harrison, was published in secret (!) last August in the USA. Not mentioned in LOCUS according to Harry. A UK hardcover and trade paperback will be available in November from Jo Fletcher Books .... The Liverpool Central Library in the UK will be incorporating a walkway listing book, movie, and album titles, a literary panel listing authors, and a series of quotations in its £50 million redevelopment plan. A panel of experts have released a potential listing of the inclusions and welcomes comments. Authors on the panel primarily of genre interest include Clive Barker, Ramsey Campbell, and Olaf Stapledon .... Karen Lord's debut novel REDEMPTION IN INDIGO has been announced as the winner of the William L. Crawford Award. The Crawford Award is presented annually for a new fantasy author whose first book appeared during the previous year .... Paramount Pictures has bought the rights to John Scalzi's Old Man's War, the first in a four-book series by Scalzi, and has attached Wolfgang Petersen as the director .... Borders Group Inc., the second- biggest U.S. bookstore chain, filed for bankruptcy in New York on February 16th after management changes, job cuts and debt restructuring failed to make up for sagging book sales in the face of competition from Amazon.com Inc. and Wal-Mart Stores Inc. Borders plans to keep operating and restructure with \$505 million in so-called debtor-in-possession financing from lenders led by GE Capital, according to a statement. The 40-year-old chain listed debt of \$1.29 billion and assets of \$1.28 billion as of Dec. 25. The reorganization is only possible if Borders immediately closes 200 of its 642 stores ....

*RGP*

### **RECOMMENDED SF BOOKS**

When I had the shop I was always recommending books that I considered to be the best books at the time. Many customers liked those recommendations and often asked for more. Since the shop closed, I'm still asked for recommendations. So I thought it would be a good idea to list these books I often recommend in the form of my 100 Best.

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.

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. I'll be listing 10 books per month – 5 books that are currently in print (and therefore obtainable from Waterstones) and 5 books that are currently

unavailable except as second-hand items (far too many great books are currently unavailable!). I recommend you look on [www.bookfinder.com](http://www.bookfinder.com) which lists all copies on sale anywhere on the net or on ebay for copies for sale by auction.

Please not that these 10 books are NOT my favourite ten – I've just picked books from the 100 at random. Another 10 next month.

Those in print are....

**Poul Anderson - TAU ZERO** (1970) Arguably Anderson's finest SF novel – a fascinating novel that features a spaceship that accelerates uncontrollably with awesome results. (Gollancz SF Masterworks 978-0575077324 - £7.99)

**Walter M Miller A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ** (1960) Winner of the 1961 Hugo Award. A beautiful novel formed from three novelettes that appeared in F&SF during the 50s. After an atomic war, the Church is the only guardian of science and technology. (Orbit 978-1857230147 - £8.99)

**Ward Moore BRING THE JUBILEE** (1953) I'm not a fan of alternate world stories but this one from 1953 about a world after the South won the Civil War was the first I ever read and it is a classic – it's remained in print for most of the time since. (Gollancz SF Masterworks 978-1857987645 - £7.99)

**Frederik Pohl – GATEWAY** (1977) Winner of the Nebula Award and Hugo Award. Real sense of wonder here! Abandoned alien spaceships are discovered that still operate. But who can understand the controls. Many try and are never heard from again – but for the few who return there is untold wealth. (Gollancz SF Masterworks 978-0575094239 - £7.99)

**H G Wells - THE TIME MACHINE** (1895) The short novel that started it all for me. Given to us at school in 1958, I read it in one evening, it started my love of SF and I haven't looked back since. It's nearly 120 years old but incredibly still reads well. Everyone out there **should** have read it already but I couldn't omit it from the list. (Signet classics 978-0451530707 - £2.50)

And five out-of-print titles

**Octavia Butler – KINDRED** (1979) – I couldn't believe this one was out of print! Dana is a well-educated Afro-American woman who finds herself transported back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to the days of hard slavery. She has to survive **and** hide the fact of her education. Wonderful writing and great characterisation.

**Hal Clement – MISSION OF GRAVITY** (1953) Mesklin is a planet with a gravity at its poles 700 times that of Earth but only three times at the equator. A hard SF novel where the alien mesklinite is more 'human' than the humans.

**Christopher Evans – AZTEC CENTURY** (1993) World history changed when the Aztecs set out on world domination. It is the 20<sup>th</sup> century and Britain is about to succumb to their rule... Chris Evans at his best.

**Vonda McIntyre – DREAMSNAKE** (1978) Set in a far-future, post-apocalypse Earth, Snake is a Healer, one of a highly regarded elite who use snake venom to

cure various ills including cancer. She uses two terrestrial snakes and one extraterrestrial Dreamsnake.

**Robert Silverberg – TOWER OF GLASS** (1970) Simeon Krug wishes to communicate with the stars, to answer signals from deep space. The colossal glass tower that he is building for the purpose soars high above the Arctic tundra, a sparkling monument to his determination and obsession.

## BOOK REVIEWS

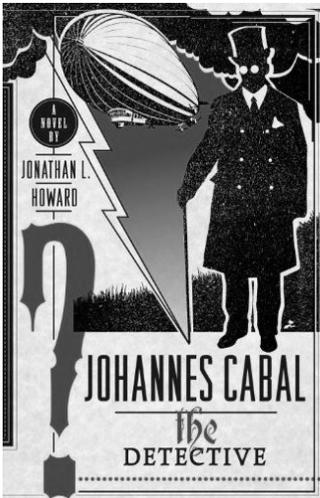
(**REVIEWERS** please note:- all reviews should be emailed direct to me at rog [dot] peyton [at] btinternet [dot] com) **Deadline for each issue is 14 days prior to the date of the monthly meeting.**

### ***JOHANNES CABAL THE DETECTIVE***

*by Jonathan L. Howard*

**Headline / 398pgs / £7.99 paperback ISBN: 978-0755347971**

**Reviewed by Pauline Morgan**



This is a book that cannot make up its mind what it is. It appears to be set in a late Victorian version of Eastern Europe populated with a variety of small fictitious Balkan-type states. The three involved here are Mirkarvia, Senza and Katamenia, though Ruritania (the setting for Anthony Hope's *THE PRISONER OF ZENDA*) gets a mention in passing. These places, though antagonistic towards each other seem to have hybrid cultural roots as both Spanish and German honorifics are used randomly and names include Russian patronymics. No-one has difficulty communicating, even the English members of the cast.

There is an element of the steampunk tradition (but without the steam) as aerial transport is provided by four-winged insectile entomopters and a levitating aership resembling a flying aircraft carrier. (It would have been a good idea for the cover artist to consult the book before drawing a gas-filled airship). Although distinctly an adventure of the Englishman Abroad type, the style of writing fits with chronicles of the turn of the 19th century, it is spoilt by too many modern colloquialisms. This is clearly envisioned as an alternative history. It could also have done with intelligent editing as there are factual mistakes and undisciplined changes of viewpoint.

While the presence of the machines indicates retro-fantasy, the main character, Johannes Cabal, pushes it towards horror as he is a necromancer. He claims to be searching for a cure for death, hence his grotesque experiments and ability to bring the dead back to life if only for a short while. It is his hunt for a particular book, the *Principia Necromantica*, that sees him beginning this adventure in a Mirkarvian dungeon awaiting execution for the theft of it. After Count Marechel offers him a reprieve in order to further his own nefarious plans, Cabal manages to escape, disguised as a minor civil servant, aboard the aership, *The Princess Hortense*. There he meets an old adversary and becomes embroiled in a murder mystery before the real mayhem recommences. So from a 'boy's adventure story' it changes to an 'Agatha Christie' and evolves into a 'James Bond' adventure (there are spies all over the place). There is an added short story at the end which parodies *Indiana Jones*.

This novel is billed as 'comic'; unfortunately, although it is witty in places and contains a degree of farce this is not particularly humorous. The previous book featuring Johannes Cabal had a much more original plot. This one is tired.

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 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 - (empties59 [at] rocketmail [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***

**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! 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Special Meeting** to be held at the Old Joint Stock with special guests (health permitting) **BRIAN ALDISS** and **HARRY HARRISON.**

**July 15th – SF author and mathematician IAN STEWART**

**\*\*\* PLEASE NOTE CHANGE OF DATE TO FRIDAY 15<sup>TH</sup> \*\*\***

**Aug 12th - SUMMER SOCIAL at the Black Eagle**

**Sep 9th – tba**

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

**Nov 4th – tba**

**BRUM GROUP NEWS #474** (March 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