

BRUM GROUP NEWS

THE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE

BIRMINGHAM SCIENCE FICTION GROUP

JUNE 2011

ISSUE 477

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

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40 YEARS OLD!

AND CELEBRATING WITH TWO SPECIAL EVENTS

June is a very important date in the history of the Birmingham SF Group. It's the month we were born – 40 years ago. To celebrate this milestone we've organised two very special events which we're hoping everyone reading this will support us by buying tickets and joining in the festivities.

Friday July 15th - SF Author and mathematician IAN STEWART will once again be talking to the Group.
PLEASE NOTE THIS IS THE THIRD FRIDAY OF THE MONTH!

The first event is...

AN EVENING WITH IAIN M BANKS

The date is Tuesday June 7th and the time is 6.30 for 7pm. We're organising this event alongside Birmingham Libraries and it will be held in the 250-seater Birmingham Libraries Theatre (next to the Central Library).

Tickets are £4.00 each and you should be able to pay at the door on the night.

The second event is...

40TH ANNIVERSARY PARTY

This event will be held on Friday June 10th at 8pm (please be there in time for a **prompt** start). It will be held at the Old Joint Stock in Temple Street (just off Colmore Row) in their large room up on the top floor. On entering the Old Joint Stock, keep on the right-hand side, go straight to the very back of the main bar, through the door in the corner. There's a lift but if you're feeling fit, you can walk up the stairs.

We were hoping to have both of our Presidents with us for the evening but unfortunately Harry Harrison is now confined to a wheelchair and does not travel. He sends his very best wishes to the Group.

Brian Aldiss has confirmed that he will be joining us and is looking forward to it.

The evening will include the buffet and free raffles plus some surprises.

By the time you receive this newsletter, the cut-off date for booking will have passed (3rd June) BUT, email me – rog [dot] peyton [at] btinternet [dot] com, if you need a ticket – just in case we have any cancellations.

2011 SUMMER SOCIAL – Vernon Brown

The time of the Summer Social is almost upon us – only two months away. With all the organising of events for our 40th Anniversary, it's tended to have gotten pushed down the priorities.

You may have joined us before and already have it in your diary together with the rest of the year's meetings but please read on, there's some new information given.

As usual the Social will take the form of a meal at the Black Eagle in Hockley and will take place on Friday August 12th from about 7.00 to 11.00pm. As usual a £5 deposit will be required when booking and tickets, menus and directions will be issued beforehand. But on the night things will not be quite as usual!

In the past because I booked the table I have paid the bill with everyone reimbursing me. However because people have already paid me deposits and I have paid the restaurant a (different) booking deposit there has always been a certain amount of confusion. So this year I have arranged that everyone pays the waitress directly without involving me. Thus, no confusion.

Please get your tickets from Pat as soon as possible so that you are assured of a place because we usually fill the table.

VB

SCIENCE FICTION IS NO PLACE FOR DABBLERS

by Iain M Banks

(Reprinted from the Guardian – May 13th - with the author's permission)



Consider a publishing bash of some sort, probably in London. A respected but still-young-enough-to-be-promising author of literary fiction (that's the sort who tends to get reviewed in serious newspapers such as the *Guardian*, is generally published in both hardback and then B-format paperback and might even stand an outside chance of nabbing a Man Booker prize) approaches their agent – or editor; either is acceptable – all bright eyed and enthusiastic for

reasons which go beyond a couple of glasses of wine or a recent good review and tells the agent/editor: "I've just had this great idea; I've got to write this!"

The agent/editor immediately assumes a look of fascinated interest, while internally recalibrating his or her wariness threshold to "Caution: Incoming". "Right," the author says, "prepare for something entirely new, fresh and completely different: a novel, written by me . . . which might look like what people call a 'detective story' –" (both sets of index and middle fingers may be needed by the author at this point to indicate the presence of the quotation marks enclosing these words, though the slight but unmistakable accompanying sneer is actually more important), "– but which isn't really, because it's me who's writing it, see? Anyway, it's set in . . . an English country house," the author says, with a dramatic flourish which strongly implies the agent/editor certainly wouldn't have been expecting that detail. Actually the agent/editor may have started to go a little glassy-eyed at this point, but no matter. "And there's a sort of weekend houseparty going on, you see? And there are all sorts of people there, like a retired colonel and a famous lady clairvoyant and an angry young man and a flighty young thing – isn't this just a fascinating cast of characters? – but then there's an unexpected snow storm and they're completely cut off, and then . . . there's a murder! Yes; a murder! But it turns out one of the guests is a famous amateur detective, and . . ." By now, of course, the agent/editor will be staring at the author, possibly open mouthed if they're still relatively inexperienced and so retain any sort of faith in the inherent wisdom and literary acumen of your average – or even exceptional – writer ". . . and then the twist at the end! I almost don't want to tell you because it'll spoil it for you first time you read it, but I've got to tell you, it's so brilliant!" The author pauses momentarily here, to let the agent/editor say something like: "Why, no then, don't! I've heard enough! Let's

do the deal right here; we'll take your last contract and just add a zero at the end!" but, in the absence of something like this, plunges on with: "It turns out the murderer is . . . the butler!"

Now, even the most gifted literary author will be sufficiently aware of the clichés of the detective story not to let an initial burst of enthusiasm for a new idea involving any of them get beyond the limits of his or her own cranium, and even if they were foolish enough to suggest something on these lines to their agent or editor they'd immediately be informed that *It's Been Done . . .* in fact, *It's Been Done to the Point of Being a Joke . . .* and so all the above never happens.

Or at least, it never happens quite as described; substitute the phrase 'science fiction' for the word 'detective', delete the 1930s murder-mystery novel clichés and insert some 30s science fiction clichés and I get the impression this scenario has indeed played out, and not just once but several times, and the agent/editor has – bizarrely – entirely shared the enthusiasm of their author, so that, a year or two later, yet another science fiction novel which isn't really a science fiction novel – but, like, sort of is at the same time? – hits the shelves, usually to decent and only slightly sniffy reviews (sometimes, to be fair, to quite excitable reviews) while, off-stage, barely heard, howls of laughter and derision issue from the science fiction community.

The point is that science fiction is a dialogue, a process. All writing is, in a sense; a writer will read something – perhaps something quite famous, even a classic – and think "But what if it had been done this way instead . . .?" And, standing on the shoulders of that particular giant, write something initially similar but developmentally different, so that the field evolves and further twists and turns are added to how stories are told as well as to the expectations and the knowledge of pre-existing literary patterns readers bring to those stories. Science fiction has its own history, its own legacy of what's been done, what's been superseded, what's so much part of the furniture it's practically part of the fabric now, what's become no more than a joke . . . and so on. It's just plain foolish, as well as comically arrogant, to ignore all this, to fail to do the most basic research. In a literature so concerned with social as well as technical innovation, with the effects of change – incremental as well as abrupt – on individual humans and humanity as whole, this is a grievous, fundamentally hubristic mistake to commit. Science fiction can never be a closed shop where only those already steeped in its culture are allowed to practise, but, as with most subjects, if you're going to enter the dialogue it does help to know at least a little of what you're talking about, and it also helps, by implication, not to dismiss everything that's gone before as not worth bothering with because, well, it's just Skiffy and the poor benighted wretches have never been exposed to a talent the like of mine before . . .

In the end, writing about what you know – that hoary and potentially limiting, even stultifying piece of advice – might be best seen as applying to the type of story you're thinking of writing rather than to the details of what happens within it and perhaps, with that in mind, a better precept might be to write about

what you love, rather than what you have a degree of contempt for but will deign to lower yourself to, just to show the rest of us how It's done.

However, let's be positive about this. The very fact that entirely respectable writers occasionally feel drawn to write what is perfectly obviously science fiction – regardless of either their own protestations or those of their publishers – shows that a further dialogue between genres is possible, especially if we concede that literary fiction may be legitimately regarded as one as well.

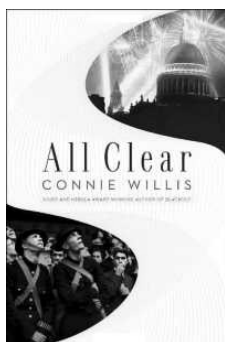
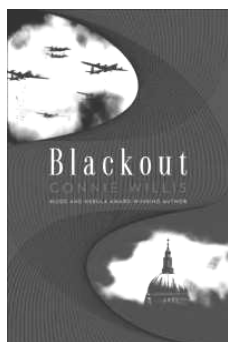
It's certainly desirable.

IMB

WOULD YOU LIKE TO WIN £10,000?

Manchester Metropolitan University is offering a prize of £10,000 for best new short story. Deadline for entries is 12th August 2011.

Details on www.manchesterwritingcompetition.co.uk/fiction



2011 NEBULA AWARD WINNERS

Novel: BLACKOUT/ALL CLEAR by Connie Willis (Spectra)

(Two books published six months apart, that make one novel)

Novella: “The Lady Who Plucked Red Flowers Beneath the Queen’s Window” by Rachel Swirsky (*Subterranean Summer* '10)

Novellette: “That Leviathan Whom Thou Hast Made” by Eric James Stone

(*Analog* 9/10)

Short Story (tie): “Ponies” by Kij Johnson (*Tor.com* 1/17/10) and “How Interesting: A Tiny Man” by Harlan Ellison (*Realms of Fantasy* 2/10)

Ray Bradbury Award: INCEPTION

Andre Norton Award: I SHALL WEAR MIDNIGHT by Terry Pratchett (Gollancz; Harper)

THEN AND NOW - THE ‘FOUNDING FATHERS’ HAVE THEIR SAY

IS IT A SUCCESS? – Rog Peyton

Peter Weston, Vernon Brown and I (along with Bob Rickard) had been the committee of Eastercon in Worcester in 1971. Returning to Birmingham the three of us realised that we needed more of a ‘fix’ of science fiction activity and decided we’d attempt to revive the old Birmingham SF Group that I’d started in 1961 and that had disbanded in 1967/8. Armed with names and addresses of members from the old group, contacts that Pete had from his fanzine SPECULATION, Vernon’s contacts with the Aston University

SF Group and my contacts from my bookselling activities, we wrote to every SF fan in the area that was possible.

The result was that we had 30 people at our first meeting on Friday, June 25th 1971. We were overjoyed that so many people were enthusiastic over the Group. Annual subscription was set 50p per year and the attendance fee was set at 10p per meeting!



I'm sure that no-one at that meeting ever dreamed that the Group would still be alive after 40 years and that two of the original committee would still be on the committee!!! OK, we've had a few breaks over the years... I was amazed a couple of years back when long time member Stan Eling presented the Group with a complete set of Newsletters, to find that I had produced the very first Newsletter. No! I have not been doing it for the whole 40 years!

Well, we've met every month for 40 years and for a short time we met twice a month – one formal meeting and one informal meeting in a pub. We even started the Birmingham Science Fiction Film Society in the late 70s (or maybe early 80s) but had to disband it when we discovered that the chairman had signed a contract with a hotel in our name with a £500 penalty clause if sufficient people didn't attend.

What did we expect from the Group and has it been a success? I'm sure that Pete wanted to get people more involved in Fandom and to produce fanzines. On the whole it has failed in that respect though a few members over the years have gotten involved but almost without exception, they've got involved in Fandom and dropped out of the Group. The Group did produce one issue of its own fanzine META in 1977 but it never had a second issue.



I've never been too sure of Vernon's ambitions for the Group though I suspect that he wanted the social side coupled with the visiting authors' talks and if I'm correct, then he must be very happy. Maybe his article for this issue will reveal all but I haven't seen it yet.

My own hopes also involved the social side (well, the 12 month gap between Eastercons was too long and Vernon did manage to halve that gap by inventing Novacon) but I also hoped that we could get involved in publishing. I got as far, in 1978, as introducing the *Novacon Specials* which have continued to this day but the full-blown publishing of books has never transpired. Maybe that can change – we now have the finances and the know-how. All we need is to

agree on is **what** to publish – suggestions always welcome.

RGP

MEMORIES – Vernon Brown

I had my triple bypass over a decade ago, and my knees have creaked a bit for several years now, but provided that I don't look too closely in the mirror when I am shaving I don't really feel my age until I have to write an article about some aspect of my early fan life, in this case the genesis of the Brum Group. Forty years ago!! The parents of the students whose exams I am currently invigilating were only just about born then, if they weren't still just a glint in their parent's eyes. Which makes the Group two generations old and born in a completely different era.



In 1971 SF was not as much in the public's eye as it is nowadays. Its films were often supporting features, although 2001 – A SPACE ODYSSEY in 1967 had had a major impact. There were some good, but more often not so good, series on TV and that was about it for most people. In fact for the majority SF was something silly about little green men in flying saucers. Which was both a pity and rather odd because not only was there a lot of good stuff written but the world itself was changing in a rather SFish way. Mankind had reached the Moon and sent rockets around the Solar System while science and technology were taking great strides forward in general. The Cold War was the other side of that particular coin with regular

headlines about orbiting or Lunar based A-bombs, while the Cuban Crisis had happened not too long ago, so the concept of Armageddon was not unknown.

There were fans around, in fact conventions had been held for over three decades, but they did not make their presence known, at least not in the circles in which I moved, although things are very different nowadays, and it was not until the mid 60s that I saw a mention of such people in a paper. It was a short item in the *Birmingham Mail* about a convention to be held locally and mentioned a local fan group. I wrote to them via the paper and received a, to me, most odd letter in reply that only mentioned SF as an afterthought so I took matters no further.



Then in 1967 a poster appeared at Aston University where I worked proposing the formation of a university SF group. I went, found kindred souls for the first time and the AUSFG was born. We met fortnightly, sometimes with a Speaker, and there I met Pete Weston, who probably spoke to us about fannish history. There was only one convention a year in those days, at Easter, so when the Group decided to organise a second one in Birmingham Pete gave us vital help, particularly in choosing a hotel. We decided on the Imperial Centre Hotel in Temple Street for NOVACON in November 1971 and began really organising.

Then in mid 1970 Pete rang me. It seemed that he, Bob Rickard, who had put up the Aston poster, and someone called Rog Peyton were going to organise Eastercon 22 in 1971. Would I like to join their committee? Still being in the first flush of fannish enthusiasm I agreed and now found myself helping organise two conventions. Then a couple of months later it turned out that Pete and Rog were considering forming the “Birmingham Science Fiction Group”, would I like to help? Yet again I fell. Life was becoming rather hectic.

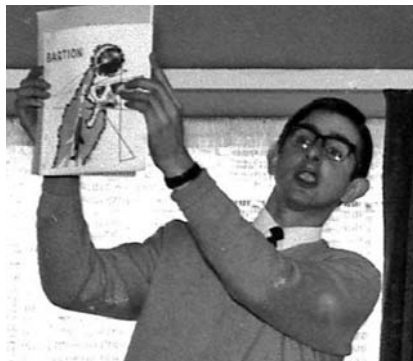
I now discovered that the previous group, to whom I had written, had been a few fans meeting in one another’s houses and had disbanded just after my letter. But the new BSFG was to be much better organised. Pete wrote a Constitution, based on the Young Conservative’s Constitution and we decided to meet at the Imperial Centre. Not only was it central with a suitable room, plus bar, but the manager read SF. Once Eastercon 22 was over the Brum Group could start in June. So it came to pass.

At this distance it’s difficult to remember things exactly but for a number of years the Group met on the third Friday of each month although I have a leaflet advertising fortnightly meetings. Initially membership was around forty or fifty although at times it reached over one hundred. Although communication was not as easy then as now, no emails or mobile phones, on looking back I think that fans socialised more then than nowadays, possibly because they could not talk about SF outside fandom and there were fewer distractions such as computers and commercially organised events of an SFish nature. The Group had more discussions, debates and items of fan history, while there were barge trips, days out and float entries in the Lord Mayor’s Procession. Christmas Parties started in 1979 which had, if I remember correctly, a buffet and film or dancing rather than the current Skittles Evening. And when NOVACON was voted to become an annual event its organisation was handed over to the BSFG to provide continuity.

Except for a bad patch a decade or so ago the Group has, I think, succeeded in its aims. As older members have died or moved away we have had a steady trickle of new ones to maintain a membership of between forty and fifty, including some in the USA and The Netherlands as well as around the country. Our monthly meetings are a little more formal with more invited speakers while the ‘outside the meeting room’ social side has stabilised at the August Meal and the Christmas Skittle Social. As the longest running SF group in Europe and known outside fandom and the genre, I think the Group has much to be proud of.

VB

MY VIEW – Peter R Weston



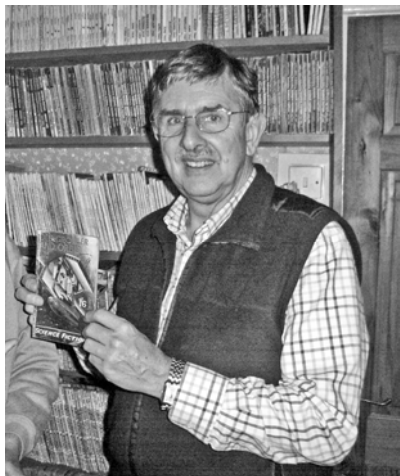
“Forty years,” says Rog. “What’s changed?”

Oddly, I think there’s been less change in the Group than in our subject-matter, our *raison d’être*, if you want to put it like that.

Back in 1971 I think we felt pretty much on top of science fiction; we knew what was being written, the good stuff and where to find it. It was our ‘Specialist Subject’ – why, I even used to enter ‘SF Mastermind’ contests at Novacon with a fair chance of getting a good score.

Now – well, I recently saw a review column on science fiction books in the *Guardian*, and didn't recognise a single name (and I didn't like the sound of any of them, either, but let that pass for the moment). The 2011 Hugo nominees have been announced in the latest *Ansible*, and not only haven't I read any of them, I haven't even **heard** of any of them. And most of the 'sources' are bewildering; are **you** familiar with *Subterranean*, *Clarkesworld*, and *Lightspeed*?

Well, it might be me, I suppose.



But another thing; back in 1971 we pretty much knew what was SF and what wasn't. By and large we took a dim view of fantasy, except in its proper place as a light diversion. Does Vernon still frown and enquire, "but is this really science fiction"? Because if he doesn't, he should! Most of the stuff being passed-off these days as 'SF' just isn't. In the old days we were always aware of the very definite distinction between fantasy and science fiction, the latter being a form of literature that stresses the supremely rational nature of events and encourages us to believe that all so-called 'mysteries' can be solved through the application of physical laws, even if we haven't discovered them yet.

That distinction has been deliberately blurred by the publishers and joyfully ignored by the authors (fantasy is so much easier, you see; there might be 'ether' mines in Yorkshire, or the Earth's rotation can suddenly slow down, and no-one will quibble).

Should we care? Well, we're a science fiction group, aren't we? Or is it time for the Group to change its name? PRW

NEWS IN BRIEF . . .



.... Artist **Jeffrey Jones** (b.1944) died on May 19. Jones provided cover art for authors including **Jack Williamson**, **Robert E. Howard** and numerous others. Jones's art appeared on the poster for *DRAGONSLAYER* and he published several collections of his own work Author **Mark Shepherd** died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound on May 24. Shepherd began publishing with the novel *WHEELS OF FIRE*, co-written with **Mercedes Lackey**, for whom he had worked as a personal secretary. He went on to write several solo novels in both the *Serrated Edge* series and the *Bard's Tale* series Author **Joanna Russ** (b.1937) died on April 29 following a series of strokes. Russ was the author of the groundbreaking novel *THE FEMALE MAN* and



Joanna Russ

PICNIC ON PARADISE. In addition to writing fiction, Russ wrote numerous non-fiction works, including the feminist study **WHAT ARE WE FIGHTING FOR?** Russ won a Hugo Award for her novella “Souls” and a Nebula and retro-Tiptree for her short story “When It Changed.” **THE FEMALE MAN** was also awarded a retro-Tiptree and a Gaylactic Spectrum Hall of Fame Award Writer **Larry Tritten**, 72, died April 6 after a long illness. He published well over a thousand articles and stories, many of them SF, beginning with “The Star Sneak” in *F&SF* (1974) The winner of the **Arthur C. Clarke Award** was announced during the opening ceremonies

of Sci-Fi-London 8: The Eighth Annual International Festival of Science Fiction and Fantastic Film. This year, the award included a prize of £2011. The winner is **Lauren Beukes** for the novel **ZOO CITY** **Mark Hodder**’s novel **THE STRANGE AFFAIR OF SPRING HEELED JACK** won this year’s Philip K Dick Award, presented at Norwescon. The Philip K Dick Award honours books published originally in paperback **James Knapp** won this year’s Compton Crook Award for best first novel for his book **STATE OF DECAY**. The award comes with a prize of \$1,000 and the winner will be treated as a guest of honour for two consecutive Balticons I never thought I’d see the day – agent **Phil Harbottle** has sold not one, not two but eight **John Russell Fearn** books to Borgo Books. He also sold them several books each by **E C Tubb**, **Sydney J Bounds**, **Brian Ball** and **John Glasby**. For the younger ones among you, all these authors, with the exception of **E C Tubb** were considered ‘old hat’ in the early 70s. On a more positive note he has also delivered British SF history **VULTURES OF THE VOID: THE LEGACY** to Prime/Cosmos Haffner Press in the US have published **TERROR IN THE HOUSE**, the first volume of the early **Henry Kuttner**, presenting his first 40 stories in chronological order Baen Books are republishing **Robert Heinlein**’s **STARMAN JONES** in October Tor are publishing **FUZZY NATION** by **John Scalzi** – a sequel to **H Beam Piper**’s *Fuzzy* series that started with the classic **LITTLE FUZZY** **Sir Terry Pratchett**’s *Discworld* series will be adapted as an ongoing fantasy police procedural TV series focused on the City Watch characters. This is the first time that Terry has allowed new stories to be created based on his characters

RGP

RECOMMENDED SF BOOKS – Rog Peyton

...And here’s the next ten – the fourth. (Making 40. 40? Where have I heard that number recently????!! Oh! How’s that for coincidence?) Please note that these 10 books are NOT my favourite ten, or whatever – I’ve just picked books from the 100 at random. Another 10 next month. Please remember that I may be able to supply most of these titles – just email me and I can bring orders to the Group meetings.

Isaac Asimov - The FOUNDATION Trilogy (1951,52 & 53) These three original parts of the series are generally in most SF Fans' favourite books. The stunning story of the Galactic Empire, crumbling after twelve thousand years of rule. And it is the particular story of psycho-historian Hari Seldon, the only man who can see the horrors the future has in store. Now available in one hardcover volume. (Everyman 978-1841593326 £13.99)

Stephen Baxter - THE TIME SHIPS (1995) The authorised sequel to H G Wells's THE TIME MACHINE. (Voyager 978-0007375622 £11.99)

Lloyd Biggle Jr - MONUMENT (1974) A marooned spacer on an idyllic planet, illegal prospectors, tourists...and The Plan. The biggest selling SF novel in Australia – ever! An excellent novel that deserves to be republished here in the UK. (Wildside Press 978-1587150517 £8.99)

Robert Heinlein - STARSHIP TROOPERS (1959). You may have seen the movie of the same name but it has very little to do with this excellent novel. It is about a future war against bug-like aliens but the similarities end there. (Hodder 978-0340837931 £8.99)

Christopher Priest - THE PRESTIGE (1995) Two 19th century stage illusionists engage in a bitter and deadly feud; the effects are still being felt by their respective families a hundred years later. Both have something more to hide than the mere workings of a trick. (Gollancz SF Masterworks 978-0575099418 £7.99)

Robert Silverberg - DYING INSIDE (1972) The brilliant story of a lone telepath who suddenly loses that power. How does he live? How does he cope? (Gollancz SF Masterworks 978-0575075252 £7.99)

Theodore Sturgeon - MORE THAN HUMAN (1953) All alone: an idiot boy, a runaway girl, a severely retarded baby, and twin girls with a vocabulary of two words between them. Yet once they are mysteriously drawn together this collection of misfits becomes something very, very different from the rest of humanity. This intensely written and moving novel is an extraordinary vision of humanity's next step. (Gollancz SF Masterworks 978-1857988529 £7.99)

And three that are currently out of print...

Edmund Cooper - THE CLOUD WALKER (1973) The Civilizations of the First and Second Man have been destroyed by the products of their own technology. Now the world is emerging from a new dark age into the dawn of a second Middle Ages. Britain is dominated by the Luddite Church and by the doctrine that all machines are evil.

Bob Shaw - OTHER DAYS, OTHER EYES (1972) A fix-up of the short stories featuring 'Slow Glass'.

Clifford D Simak - WAY STATION (1963) Enoch Wallace is a 124-year-old Civil War veteran who has been recruited by aliens to be a stationmaster on one of their minor branch lines of matter transmitters carrying passengers between the stars.

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.**

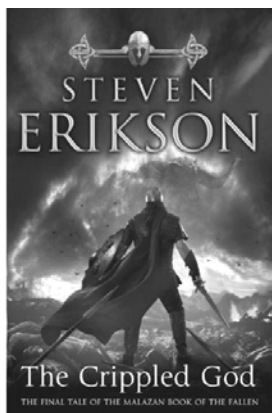
THE CRIPPLED GOD by Steven Erikson

The Final Tale of the Malazan Book of the Fallen

Bantam / 913pgs / £20.00 hardcover ISBN: 978-0593046357 /

£12.99 trade paperback ISBN: 978-0593046364

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan



Steven Erikson is a very fine writer. However, before embarking on this massive tome it would be an excellent strategy to refresh the memory about the characters and events in previous nine books in this epic. Without this it is very difficult to get a picture of who is on which side in this clash of armies, where they fit into the overall scheme of things and what the purpose of the war is.

There are plenty of things that will be appreciated by Erikson's followers and the connoisseurs of the fantasy war genre. Many of the named characters are grunts, doing as they are told, fighting and dying wherever the army ends up. Women and men stand side by side as equals. It is a shame that all, officer and soldier alike, philosophise with coherent thoughts.

The living heart of the crippled god of the title is held in a well defended Spire on the coast. The purpose of the main army of this conflict is to capture it. To this end, the forces are split, one part heading north into the impassable Glass Desert, the other to skirt this area and come up to the Spire from the south west.

The book has all the hallmarks of a fine fantasy - intricate plot, magic, dragons, the undying dead, implacable foes – but is difficult to keep track of all the characters and their fates. The deprivations of the soldiers are outlined impeccably and they are still able to fight as well as a fresh soldier at the end. A book this size is a tremendous investment in time for any reader. Unfortunately I did not care enough about the characters or feel satisfied by the outcome.

PM

THE INHERITANCE by Robin Hobb & Megan Lindholm

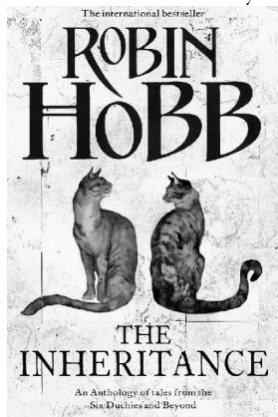
HarperCollins / 416pgs / £20.00 hardcover ISBN: 978-0007273775 /

£12.99 trade paperback ISBN: 978-0007273799

Reviewed by Jim Pearce

THE INHERITANCE is a collection of short fantasy stories and novellas by Robin Hobb (RH) and Megan Lindholm (ML) who are, for those of us who were unaware, one and the same person. The stories have been written in two very different

styles both in length and content. Those from ML are much shorter and set within widely different backgrounds, while those from RH are of novella length and take place in her *Six Duchies* world in which she has set three trilogies plus the *Rain Wild Chronicles* of which only two volumes are currently available.



Of ML's stories I particularly like "Silver Lady and the Fortyish Man" in which an aspiring but failing writer reduced to working in a Sears department store meets a pleasant looking, somewhat tubby, balding, fortyish man who introduces himself as Merlin and changes her life. "Finis" is a vampire story but with an interesting difference; while "Strays" is the tale of how a neglected and put-upon warrior princess metamorphoses into a queen and hopefully a much better life.

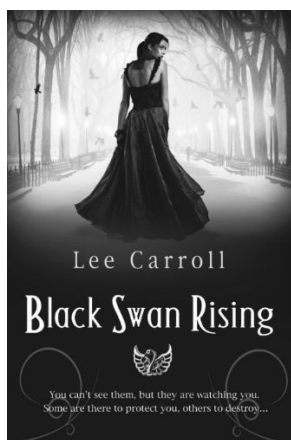
The RL novellas include the "Inheritance" from which the volume is named and relates the manner in which a 'wizardwood' pendant contrives to enable a young woman to gain revenge for her grandmother on the man who destroyed her life and fortune; but not in the way she expected: wizardwood being the cocoon in which sea serpents change into dragons. Over a long period of time, because of the magic of the dragons, this wood becomes sentient. See the *Liveship Traders* trilogy and the *Rain Wild Chronicles*. Also by RH is my favorite story, which is "Homecoming" and describes the desperate trials and tribulations of the first settlers in the Rain Wild Valley which tear apart many relationships while building some unlikely ones.

While I am not a great fan of short stories, *THE INHERITANCE* is a collection I greatly enjoyed as I have all of Robin Hobb's work that I have read. JTP

***BLACK SWAN RISING* by Lee Carroll**

Bantam Books / 427pgs / £7.99 paperback ISBN: 978-0553825572

Reviewer: Theresa Derwin



In post-Buffy days, urban fantasy has been as common as, well, the common cold. And it is not always easy when choosing an urban fantasy to differentiate between the good, the average or the just plain poor. Luckily for readers, we Reviewers (poor souls) encounter all sorts of examples from the genre to test our patience. And luckily for this Reviewer, *BLACK SWAN RISING* is actually really rather good.

The surface plot is quite straight forward. Twenty-something single girl Gareth becomes embroiled in an investigation into a mysterious burglary at her father's art gallery, aided by obligatory nice vampire Will Hughes. She is on a mission to clear her father's name; he is accused of organising the burglary to commit insurance fraud. Gareth is also left holding a puzzling silver box bearing the swan emblem as its lock. The silver box opens

a doorway to The Summer Country, home of the fey and Gareth is the 'Watchtower', guardian to this doorway. And that really is just the surface plot.

I was pleasantly surprised at this easy read that had lots to offer in the way of character dimension (our heroine does not just swoon or have sex), plot development and a clear indication of the dual writers thorough research into its artistic and jewellery embedded background. There are plenty of cultural references for genre fans, including a scene in an antique store particularly reminiscent of a certain Peter Cushing film. There is also a post 9/11 atmosphere than embodies this novel, handled with both tact and poignant emotion. Better still, the sex that normally accompanies this sub-genre is for plot development and is suitably low key.

All in all, this novel was an enjoyable read, and I was actually pleased to learn it is part one of a trilogy.

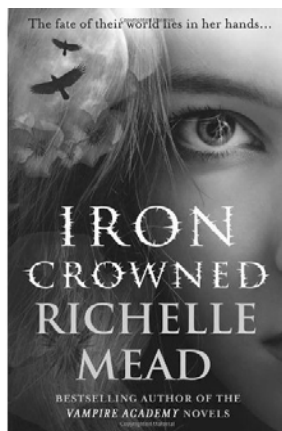
Watch out for THE WATCHTOWER coming in August 2011.

TD

***IRON CROWNED* by Richelle Mead**

Bantam Books / 378pgs / £7.99 paperback ISBN: 978-0553826104

Reviewed by Jim Pearce



IRON CROWNED is the third part of the *Dark Swan* urban fantasy series which is the continuing story of Eugenie Markham, a Sharman-for-hire. However, to best appreciate this book, it is virtually essential to first read the STORM BORN in which she is first introduced, and THORN QUEEN its sequel.

Eugenie is a Gentry – a human half breed who, when she is not banishing entities trespassing in the human world, is trying to learn how to be Queen of one of the Gentry kingdoms, the one known as the Thorn Land. To complicate matters her biological father was the feared 'Storm King' and there is a prophesy that the first born son of the Storm King's daughter will conquer the human world, so naturally many Gentry want to father that child, by force if necessary. Eugenie however, is not the only daughter of the Storm King; she has a young teen half

sister Jasmine who wants to be the one who fulfils this prophesy. Unknown to each other before the events of the first book, they have a hate relationship that gradually turns to respect and possibly fraternal love.

Romantic interest and support in the Otherworld is provided by Kiyo who is a half breed Japanese Fox Spirit, who can shape-shift into any kind of fox, and Dorian the Gentry Oak Land King whose magic gives him mastery over earth and stone. To further complicate things while Dorian is in favour of the prophesy coming true Kiyo is not. Is Kiyo truly on her side as he spends much time supporting his ex-partner Maiwenn, the Willow Queen who is strongly in opposition to the prophecy, and is about to have their child? Can she fully trust Dorian, as he too has his own agenda and tends not to fully explain things to her.

In IRON CROWNED Katrice, Queen of the Rowan Land, is pursuing a war against both Eugenie and Dorian, the origins of the conflict being described in THORN QUEEN. Horrified by the level of casualties, Eugenie is persuaded to try to find and win

the fabled Iron Crown which is so powerful a magic object that it is believed that possessing it will scare Katrice into surrendering. What are its powers? Will the cost of using them be greater than the benefit?

Richelle Mead writes a well constructed, fast moving novel set in an interesting world with well fleshed out characters. I thoroughly enjoyed all three of the books in this series and look forward to the next one. *JTP*

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

FUTURE MEETINGS OF THE BSFG

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

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

Aug 12th - SUMMER SOCIAL at the Black Eagle, Handsworth. BOOK NOW!

Sep 9th – Brum Group members **STAN NICHOLLS** (author of the *Orc* fantasy series) and **PETER WESTON** (author of *WITH STARS IN MY EYES*) will discuss the history of SF fandom in London and Birmingham.

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

Nov 4th – tba

Dec 2nd – **The Christmas Social**

Jan 13th 2012 – **Annual General Meeting and Auction**



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/>

BRUM GROUP NEWS #477 (Jun 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] btinternet [dot] 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.

The ‘Then’ photos of ‘The Founding Fathers’ plus the ‘Now’ photo of Peter Weston courtesy of Peter Weston.

The ‘Now’ photos of Vernon and myself courtesy of Pat Brown.

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 Membership Secretary, 10 Sylvan Avenue, Northfield, Birmingham, B31 2PG