

(BRUM GROUP NEWS

THE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE

BIRMINGHAM SCIENCE FICTION GROUP

FEBRUARY 2016

ISSUE 533

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ANNUAL SF QUIZ *Friday 12th February*

It's time for the annual quiz again. This is held in February due to the potential bad weather and the risk of speakers (and members) being unable to get to Birmingham city centre. The members of Birmingham University SF Society have again been

March 11th - SF Author Christopher Priest

invited to hopefully swell the numbers.

As usual, the quiz is a fun pub-quiz style event with several teams competing for honours and prizes.

This year the questions have been set by William McCabe. I understand that questions could cover many aspects of SF and Fantasy not just literature (although that will most definitely be included) so everyone has a chance of winning. The questions should hopefully be a mixture of easy, medium and a few (hopefully only a few!) hard ones to separate out the teams. Teams will be organised on the night (by lots) to encourage mixing and to give everyone a better chance!

So, if you haven't already, start revising - a great excuse for reading and watching more SF (and Fantasy!). CG

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 normally 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 our January AGM is free and the August and December socials are ticket only events. All other meetings the entrance fee is £3.00 for members and £4 for non-members

NEWS IN BRIEF

David Bowie died on January 10th having suffered with cancer for 18



months. His singing and acting included many SF themes. Some of these were his first hit, "Space Oddity" that featured the stranded astronaut, Major Tom (who also featured later in "Ashes to Ashes" and on his last album *Blackstar*), *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* about an alien visitor to Earth and a dystopian future in the *Diamond Dogs* album. He also appeared memorably in SF/Fantasy themed films

such as **THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH**, **THE HUNGER**,

LABYRINTH and a cameo as Nikola Tesla in *THE PRESTIGE* Actor **Alan Rickman** also died from cancer in January. He had many appearances in SF/F films including the *Harry Potter* series, *GALAXY QUEST*, *ALICE IN WONDERLAND* and as the voice of Marvin the Android in *THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY* and *DOGMA* (as the angel, Metatron) Editor **David G Hartwell** died on January 20th from a brain haemorrhage. He was editor at Tor Books. He also published the New York Review of Science Fiction and edited many anthologies. He won three Hugos, two World Fantasy Awards and founded the World Fantasy Con British astronaut **Tim Peake** had a successful launch and is now on the International Space Station. On 15th January he participated in a spacewalk although it had to be cut short when his fellow astronaut had problems with water in his helmet Scientists have added four new elements to the periodic table. There is a campaign on www.change.org to use the name Ocarine for the new element 117 in honour of **Sir Terry Pratchett**. On a related note, Beaconsfield town council is hoping to install a commemorative plaque at the library where he worked as a Saturday boy **Eurocon 2017** will be in Dortmund in Germany and will be known as U-con. More details at www.dortmund-in-2017.com/ The recipient of the 2016 Robert A Heinlein Award for writers who inspire the exploration of space has been announced as **Kim Stanley Robinson** Author **Philip Pullman** (*His Dark Materials series*) has resigned as patron of the Oxford Literary Festival in protest as the festival does not pay appearance fees to authors Fantasy author **Frances Hardinge** won the Costa Book Award for her YA novel, *THE LIE TREE* A group organised by fans is trying to save the home of the late literary agent, **Forrest Ackerman** from being demolished and turned into a parking lot. Ackerman was agent to famous SF writers including Isaac Asimov and Ray Bradbury. Ackerman's house contains a large collection of SF book and film memorabilia and the group are trying to get the house listed as a cultural landmark **Professor Mike Brown** (of California Institute of Technology) has claimed to have found evidence of a large "ninth planet" which has 10 times the mass of Earth. It is travelling on an elongated orbit which takes 10,000 to 20,000 Earth years. In an ironic twist, this is

the same scientist who was largely responsible for Pluto being downgraded to a dwarf planet
CG

FORTHCOMING BOOKS

(NB Prices given are Recommended Retail Price and may be available at cheaper prices)



WHEN THE FLOODS CAME by Clare Morrall / Sceptre / 352 pgs / £17.99 hardback / ISBN 978-1444736472 / February 11th. SF. In a future Britain ravaged by floods and a deadly virus, children are rare and now appear to be being kidnapped.

13 MINUTES by Sarah Pinborough / Gollancz / 416 pgs / £16.99 hardback / ISBN 978-1473214033 / February 18th. Revived after 13 minutes dead in icy water, a teenage girl tries to find who attempted to kill her.

CALAMITY (Reckoners 3) by Brandon Sanderson / Gollancz / 432 pgs / £16.99 hardback / ISBN 978-0575104662 / February 18th. Fantasy. David has killed Steelheart but what does he do now he has his vengeance?

DOWN STATION by Simon Morden / Gollancz / 352 pgs / £16.99 paperback / ISBN 978-1473211452 / February 18th. SF/Fantasy mix. A group of commuters/tube workers escape fire by stepping into a strange land.



JANI AND THE GREAT PURSUIT (*Jani 2*) by Eric Brown / Solaris / 384 pgs / £5.64 paperback / ISBN 978-1781083789 / February 23rd. Steampunk. Jani has a key to open doors to other worlds but can she keep it as she is chased from India to London.

UNITED STATES OF JAPAN by Peter Tieryas / Angry Robot / 400 pgs / £8.99 paperback / ISBN 978-0857665324 / March 3rd. Alternative History. Decades ago Japan won WWII and the USA is now happy under Japanese rule except for rebel group, the George Washingtons.

THE COLD BETWEEN by Elizabeth Bonesteel / Harper Voyager / 400 pgs / £9.99 paperback / ISBN 978-0008137809 / March 10th. SF. Engineer tries to unravel the reason for the murder of her crewmate.

MONSTROUS LITTLE VOICES: *New Tales from Shakespeare's Fantasy World* edited by David Thomas Moore / Macmillan / 608 pgs / £7.99 paperback / ISBN 978-0230770065 / February 11th. Fantasy. To mark 400 years since Shakespeare died, an anthology of five interlocking stories featuring Shakespearian characters. CG

THERESA DERWIN – CHARITY FUNDRAISING

Theresa Derwin is raising funds for the charity Breast Cancer Now by undertaking a sponsored diet. The aim is to lose 55lb by Fantasycon (23rd to the 25th September). Further details including how to donate can be found at www.justgiving.com/Theresa-Derwin1/

STEVE GREEN – NEW YOUTUBE CHANNEL

Steve Green is launching a new YouTube channel, Ghostwords TV. It will feature exclusive genre interviews and all new short films. Details including how to subscribe for free can be found at tinyurl.com/hmm9ap

COSMONAUTS: BIRTH OF THE SPACE AGE

If any of you are planning a visit to London before the 13th March, you may be interested to know that the Science Museum has an exhibition about Russian space exploration. It features testimonies and memorabilia from important names from space exploration. It also has many unique objects including Vostok 6, Valentina Tereshkova's capsule and a LK-3 Lunar Lander (built to compete with Apollo). The exhibition costs £14 and can be prebooked via www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/ or Tel: 0870 870 4868. CG

BOOK REVIEWS

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

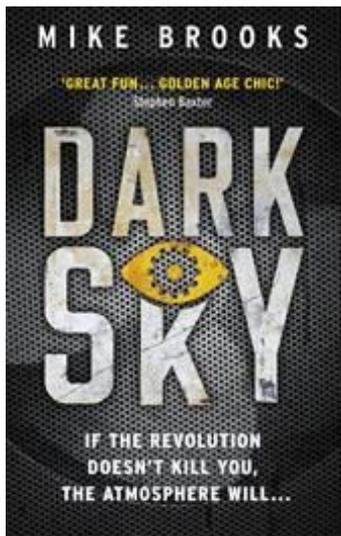
DARK SKY by Mike Brooks

Del Rey / £8.99 paperback / 383pgs / ISBN 978-0091956653

Reviewed by Jim Pearce

DARK SKY is the second book in what promises to be an extensive sequence by this author. I have not read the first one, **DARK RUN**. However, I am pleased to report that not having read it did not diminish my enjoyment of this book one jot. It did not have any effect on the plot whatsoever. Where pertinent to this book and only then was any reference made to what had gone before and this was no more than that which would be expected in any book.

In **DARK SKY** Captain Ichabod Drift of the star ship *Keiko* and his crew are enjoying some 'R & R' staying at the Grand House casino on the pleasure world, New Samara. Unfortunately, this does not last as the 'crime lord' who owns the casino, and also controls much of the government of New Samara, decides that their



somewhat shady past makes them the perfect crew to carry out a small job for him. Receiving an offer they ‘cannot refuse’ Ichabod accepts, promising his crew that this side trip to the mining planet Uragan would be a quick in and out job and then they would be back at the tables with some welcome extra spending money. Naturally whatever can go wrong does go wrong and they find themselves stuck on the planet by a revolution and a horrendous dust storm. Cue for nonstop action with some interesting twists and turns.

I don’t want to say anything more about this book’s plot as this may diminish any reader’s enjoyment. But I will say that I thoroughly enjoyed it - something that I was not expecting when I first picked up **DARK SKY**, so much so that if I have the opportunity to read **DARK RUN** and any subsequent books in the series I will do so without hesitation. **DARK SKY** is good old-fashioned and thoroughly enjoyable space science fiction with a modern verve and an excellent cast of characters. JTP

(Kindly donated by Ebury Press)

VENDETTA (Deadly Curiosities 2) by Gail Z Martin

Solaris / 327pgs / £5.64 paperback / ISBN 978-1781084038

Reviewed by Theresa Derwin

“Trifles and Folly” isn't your average antique store. Cassidy Kincaide, the current owner of Trifles and Folly has had the store in her family for over three hundred years, in haunted Charleston, South Carolina. In the first book she discovers the store's real purpose, and her destiny. It's her job to keep magical curios and antiques safe from the public. Sometimes a jewellery box is just that, and sometimes it houses a blood-sucking demon. Either way, it's a dangerous job, but someone has to do it, and it appears that someone is Cassidy and her employee, Teag. She also works with

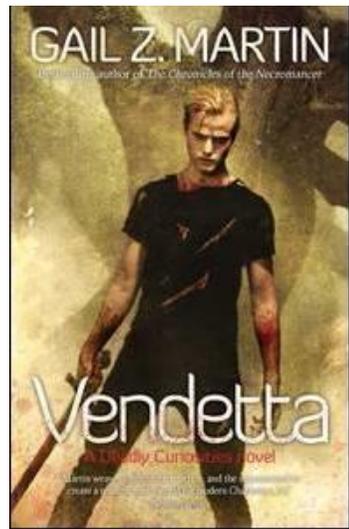
her silent partner, Sorren, a six-hundred-year old vampire with a few powers of his own. Think a quaint, old-fashioned version of the TV series, *Warehouse 13*.

To help her with her job, Cassidy's talent is psychometry, the ability to read objects through touch. When Cassidy touches the latest acquisition, the emotions are rife. Martin is expert at filling in the gaps and creating the mystery to progress the story through Cassidy's visions; sights, sounds, feelings, atmosphere. It's all here. And each artefact is a little glimpse into history, and a case for the Trifles team to solve. Cassidy is literally plunged into the past as the person who owned the object narrates their death and the circumstances surrounding it; moving and engaging stuff.

Emerging, shaking and upset from her vision, Cassidy tells Teag the bad news. There is a ghost attached to the jewellery box. But that's not the bad news. It's the wraith that eats ghosts, now in the most haunted city in North America that's the problem. And something even bigger is on its way.

Cassidy has an interesting cast of characters to assist her in her endeavours. Teag himself is a Weaver, who can weave magic into fabric or find out anything by weaving information on the web. Lucinda is a Voodoo mambo (root worker) who can offer protection through herbs and channel Baron Samedi. Valerie is a medium who runs the local ghost tour, Chuck is a retired Supernatural Black Ops Agent, Bo is the ghost of her dead dog and Father Anne is a tattooed and powerful priest who frees spirits helping them into the next world. Amidst the urban fantasy fare, the adventure, intrigue and humour, there is darkness galore and even a Lovecraftian vein. We also get to know Sorren a little better, and that knowledge is poignant.

Martin doesn't shy away from the darker history of the South, being open and honest about slavery and the like. Her cast of



characters is also wonderfully diverse including sexuality, race and colour. Martin is also adept at handling exposition and back story through conversation with other characters that feels natural.

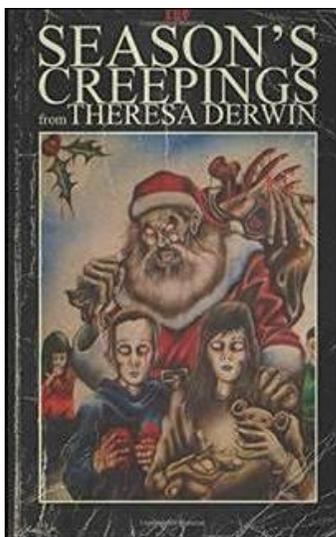
There are a lot of battles and blood in this novel and a few losses along the way, which makes the final showdown with the 'big bad' all the more dramatic and fraught with tension. Cassidy, Sorren, Teag and the rest of the team fight well together, but their adversary is strong. Will they survive intact? That's not for me to tell. What I will say though, is it's one helluva finale and this book had me gripped from start to finish.

Great characters, brilliant back story, emotional resonance, big bad monsters and a multitude of magic. This blockbuster of a book has it all. Highly recommended. TD
(Kindly donated by Solaris)

SEASON'S CREEPINGS by Theresa Derwin

KnightWatch Press / £4.99 small paperback / 59 pages / ISBN 978-1517510718

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.



These days, when people talk about pocket books, they mean note books that tuck into a pocket or bag, or in the case of Americans, the publishing imprint that has given us popular series such as *Buffy* or *Star Trek*. They were made the right size for the pockets of coats, before fashion banished them. This is a pocket sized book, but you probably wouldn't want to be seen reading it on a bus.

This slim volume was actually published before Christmas and would have made a good stocking filler for the horror fan in your family. It contains six pieces all with a creepy slant.

The first offering, "Fifty Hades of Grey", is a short story with a topical slant. Most people will have heard of the *Fifty Shades...*

books and film even if they have not admitted to reading or watching any of them. Many phenomena have corporations cashing in with merchandising. Four women, friends for nearly forty years, meet up to exchange Christmas presents. Ange presents the others with a small, naked male doll labelled, "Grow Your Own Mr Grey". They giggle over it, as the instructions urge them to leave the object in water overnight. Once her friends have left, Jo submerges hers in the bath, just to see what will happen. Later that night, she wakes to find a six-foot, gorgeous naked man in her bathroom. Although she initially accepts the unexpected gift, the demon she has grown has underestimated the modern woman. The story itself is nicely told but its topical nature and some of the references in it might date it quickly and, even in five years' time, the reader might not appreciate all the subtleties.

"Twas the Night" is a parody on the original verse but extremely topical. It was obviously written with passion and anger so it is possible to forgive its short-comings. It is the kind of thing that would appear in a newspaper at the time of the events. The shame is that it will date even more quickly than "Fifty Hades of Grey".

In contrast, "The Red Queen" has an historical setting. Elizabeth Barton is enamoured with the stories of Charles Dickens. For some reason she determines to make his acquaintance and assist him in his writing. What he doesn't know is that this is the vampire story in the book. The main problem is that this story is far too short. It lacks the space to exploit the richness of the setting. Dickens was a writer who had a talent for story-telling. This story should at least try to capture that. It would also have more impact if the final curtain had come at the time Dickens had embarked on his unfinished opus, EDWIN DROOD.

With this author, it would be unsurprising to have a collection without a zombie story. "Night of the Living Dead Turkey: Death From Beyond the Gravy" fulfils this role. The biggest pun is the title and gives an idea of the kind of story that follows. Basically, a mutation of avian flu causes a turkey, plucked and oven ready, to resurrect (one assumes it still had a head). The spread of the plague is fast and is told in emails and newspaper reports. It is a good attempt to be different but again suffers from its brevity.

“Last Christmas” uses another of the familiar horror tropes but to tell you which one would spoil the punch line. The male narrator is the one who usually cooks Christmas dinner and he and his wife, Alice, invite unattached friends. One of them, Dave, runs off with Alice, leaving her husband to plot revenge. This story works well at this length.

The final piece, “A Contemporary Christmas Carol” returns to the Dickens’ theme and is a short rant by Scrooge against his creator in modern idiom.

This little book is probably best read with a glass of Christmas cheer and an inclination to be amused. As with most humour it will not appeal to everyone. And if you are sensitive about the language children in your household read, keep it out of their reach.

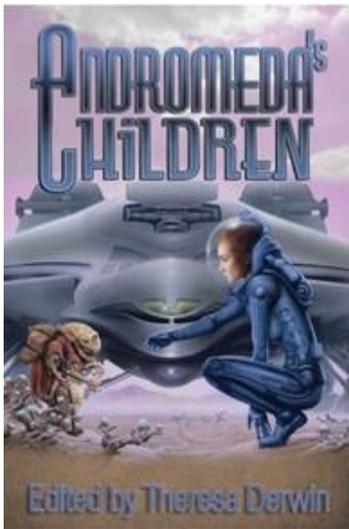
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(Kindly donated by KnightWatch Press)

ANDROMEDA’S CHILDREN edited by Theresa Derwin

Fringeworks Press / 220 pgs / £? paperback / ISBN 978-1909573079

Reviewed by Carol Goodwin



ANDROMEDA’S CHILDREN is an anthology of SF stories with the theme of strong female protagonists who “challenge the tropes of female characters in the majority of science fiction”. Some of you may remember that a book launch for this book was also held at the October 2015 meeting of the Brum Group.

Perhaps the most glaring issue with this book lies not within its stories but in the many errors that are common throughout. It feels that the text has been put through a spell-checker but not proof read before final printing. This does the authors a grave dis-service as it is very distracting and pulls the reader out of the flow of the story. These numerous errors include missing words, missed or inappropriate

punctuation (including apostrophes) and the wrong homophones (ie words which sound similar but have a different spelling and meaning) of which the most noticeable example is the first story “Desert Storm” which is listed as “Dessert Storm” in the header of each page.

The anthology contains thirteen stories, of which only five are by female authors. That is not to say that male writers cannot write good female protagonists - for example, the story “Golden Age” by James S Dorr in this anthology is a nice character study of an older woman looking back on her long life. Nevertheless, with this theme in particular, I would like to have seen a bit more of an equal ratio given that there are many excellent female writers out there.

Whilst some of the stories do feature interesting female protagonists, others do not feel like they live up to the remit of “challenging the tropes”. The stories that I liked included the following; “Desert Storm” by Pauline Dungate, in which we find that some things are universal, especially pompous individuals who need taking down a peg or two. “Being Ready” by Lynn M Cochrane, where the protagonist negotiates cleverly with her alien captors, and “To the Altar” where two women from opposing sides agonise over the ethics of whether to bomb a country into submission. What the four stories mentioned above understand, in my estimation is that strong should not just mean aggressive.

Unfortunately, some of the other stories in this collection miss this point, and feel that the definition of “strong” female character merely involves someone who beats somebody up (“Cut and Run” by David Perlmutter) or callously kills people (“Enlightened Soldier” by Matthew Sylvester and “Shelved Desires” by Damon Cavalchini). My least favourite story in the whole collection, “Electric You” by Damon Cavalchini, also suffers from this trope but in addition also dwells too much on a princess who distracts the “bad guys” with her attractive body and reads like bad E E ‘Doc’ Smith - not exactly “challenging the trope”.

The remaining stories in the collection all have some merit but I feel that they could have been more polished - some need a little more emotional depth whereas others are good ideas but would have benefitted from a little more attention to plot logic or research.

(Kindly donated by Fringeworks Press)

CG

NEW CINEMA FILM RELEASES

Listings should not be necessarily taken as recommendations. Release dates are subject to change. View at your own peril!

GODS OF EGYPT - Release date February 26th. A common thief joins a mythical god on a quest in ancient Egypt

THE FOREST - Release date February 26th. Horror. Supernatural terrors face a woman searching for her sister in Japan's Suicide Forest.

DIVERGENT: ALLEGIANT - Release date March 10th. YA SF. Third in series with young rebel, Tris leaving the dystopian city of Chicago.

THE WITCH - Release date March 11th. Horror. A family in 1630's New England is threatened by dark forces.

10 CLOVERFIELD LANE - Release date March 11th. After a car accident, a young woman wakes in the basement of a man who claims the outside is now uninhabitable. *CG*

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

All details are correct to the best of our knowledge, we advise contacting organizers 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 is always welcome - please send to Carol at goodwincd@yahoo.com

CLARE MORRALL BOOK LAUNCH, 9th February, Birmingham. Booker shortlisted author launches her new SF book **WHEN THE FLOODS CAME** at Waterstones High Street from 7pm. Tel: 0121 631 4353, instore or tweet to @waterstonesbham to reserve a seat.

TED: DREAM OPENING NIGHT, 16th October at Electric Cinema, Birmingham. Screening of opening night of talks featuring

world-renowned speakers speculating about the future. 7pm. £11.20.
www.theelectric.co.uk or 0121 643 7879

SOUTHCART VALENTINE'S DAY MASSACRE, 13th February, Walsall. Local author readings with a theme of love, fear and blood from 10:30. Southcart Books, 20 Lower Hall Lane, Walsall. WS1 1RL.

CINEMATIC TIME MACHINE FILM SERIES, 20th - 21st February at Electric Cinema, Birmingham. Screening of 1930's films DRACULA (10:45 pm 20th Feb) and KING KONG (12pm 21st Feb). £8.70. www.theelectric.co.uk or 0121 643 7879

AN EVENING WITH PIERCE BROWN, 25th February, Birmingham. Talk and launch of his new SF book MORNING STAR at Waterstones High Street from 7pm. Tel: 0121 631 4353, instore or tweet to @waterstonesbham to reserve a seat (£3).

STAR WARS & Beyond, 26th February, Birmingham. A selection of SF-themed music with lasers and fireworks. Symphony Hall. 7:30 pm. £16.50 - £44.50 plus transaction fee. Limited availability. Book at Town Hall/Symphony Hall Box Office (0121 780 4949) or www.thsh.co.uk

ASTRONAUT VISIT: DON THOMAS, 27th February at National Space Centre, Leicester. A whole day of events (some with extra charge) with former NASA astronaut, Don Thomas. Tel: 0116 261 0261 or www.spacecentre.co.uk/special-events/astronaut-visit-don-thomas

BIRMINGHAM HORROR GROUP, 5th March, Birmingham. Monthly meeting held at 7pm at The Spread Eagle, Warwick Road, Acocks Green, B27 6BL. Details at www.birmingham-horror.co.uk/

CONVENTIONS

PICOCON, 20th February, London. Guest of Honour Paul Cornell. Imperial College Union. Cost £12. Details at www.union.ic.ac.uk/scc/icsf/picocon/

MANCUNICON (EASTERCON), 25th - 28th March, Manchester. Guests of Honour are Alette de Bodard, David L Clements, Ian McDonald and Sarah Pinborough. To be held at the Hilton, Deansgate, Manchester. Attending £75 (from December 1st). Details at www.mancunicon.org.uk/

SCI-FI WEEKENDER 7, 17th - 20th March, Hafan Y Mor, North Wales. Commercial multi-media convention. Literature guests include Adam Nevill, Stan and Anne Nicholls, Sam Stone, Emma Newman etc. Various prices depending on level of access/accommodation. See www.scifiweekender.com

SATELLITE 5, 28th - 29th May, Glasgow. Guests of Honour Jaine Fenn & Ed Buckley. At the Marriott Hotel, Glasgow. Attending £55. Details at www.satellite5.org.uk/

FANTASYCON BY THE SEA, 23rd - 25th September, Scarborough. Guest of Honour Adam Nevill. At the Grand and Royal Hotels. Tickets £50 + £35 Awards Banquet. <http://fantasyconbythesea.com>

BRISTOLCON, 29th October, Bristol. Guests of Honour Ken MacLeod, Sarah Pinborough and Fangorn. Doubletree Hotel. £20. Details at www.bristolcon.org

NOVACON 46, 11th - 13th November, Nottingham. Guest of Honour is Juliet McKenna. The Park Inn, Nottingham. Tickets £46. Details at www.novacon.org.uk

FUTURE MEETINGS OF THE BSFG

March 11th - SF author **Christopher Priest**
April 8th - SF/Fantasy author **Jacey Bedford**
May 13th - **tbc**
June 10th - author, editor and publisher **Ian Whates**
July 8th - SF fan and convention organizer **Dave Lally**
August 12th - **Summer Social Meal** - venue tbc
September 9th - **tbc**
October 14th - astronomer and lecturer **Andy Lound**
November 4th - **tbc**
December 2nd - **Christmas Social**

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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