

# newsletter



The Bulletin of The Irish Science Fiction Association

November/December 1979

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Once again we have committee changes. Jacob Streuben has left, and has gone to London. We wish him every success and happiness, and assure him of a hearty welcome should he ever visit our shores again. His place on the committee has been taken by Pita Meehan. The committee has also co-opted Sean Moraghan to its ranks.

#### ISFA Calendar

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A special calendar is being prepared for ISFA members this year. I've seen an example of some of the artwork, and it's really spectacular. The group making (and marketing) the calendar will be taking orders at the December meeting. There are only 200 copies, so get your order in quickly. The calendar will be available in January. A special session will be arranged in The Parliament Inn to launch it, where those members who have been lucky enough to get their orders in on time will be able, not alone to collect them, but to have them signed by the artist. The calendar will be an essential part of every ISFA member's Christmas shopping list.

#### ALBACON 80

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The 31st British Easter SciFi convention will be held in Glasgow from the 4th to the 7th of April 1980. Registration details are available from:

Gerry Gillen,  
9 Dunnottar Street,  
Puchazie,  
Glasgow G33,  
Scotland.

We also have some photocopied booking forms for accomodation; should any member want one, they're available from The Sec.

AISLING GHFAL '80  
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The closing date for this competition is 1st February. Once again, a summary of the rules. We will accept

- 1) A Short Story
- 2) In English or Irish
- 3) Written by :     a: a writer born in Ireland  
                  or     b: a writer living in Ireland  
                  or     c: a member of the ISFA.

Entries to be sent to

The Secretary,  
ISFA,  
18 Beech Drive,  
Dundrum,  
Dublin 16,  
Ireland.

MFFTINGS

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The October meeting was held in the usual venue on the last Sunday in October. The Pev. Walter Lee, who was due to give the talk, was unavoidably called out of town. We were fortunate, however, in that James White, our esteemed and respected PATPON, was IN town for the weekend, and agreed, at very short notice, to give the talk.

Not having anything prepared, he spoke off the cuff. James does this better than most - indeed better than most speak ON the cuff. He gave us his impressions of the SCICOM held in Brighton this Summer. Brendan Pyder had already spoken to the Association about the Conference, but this did not in any way take from the extremely entertaining reminiscences of James White.

We were taken through what seemed a most alcoholic holiday in which several members of the ISFA, an ex-chairman who shall be nameless amongst them, disgraced themselves, the Committee, the country and, above all, the Association. These charges were ineffectually if strenuously denied by the offending members, who cliamed it was all a bizarre plot.

The meeting petered out into yarns and reminiscences, including one about a lady who appeared in public wearing only a pair of 20ft. wings, and who seems to have made a certain impact on the more impressionable of our members who saw her.

The tone of the meetings was raised to the level we have come to expect when Walter Lee DID give his talk, in November. His subject was 'The Supernatural in Science Fiction and Fantasy', and, as was explained, the Peverend could be considered an expert in the field.

To summarise a most interesting and instructive lecture, Walter differentiated between the unusual (for us) natural, and the true supernatural. Magic, spells and enchantments are NOT supernatural. Their nature is simply strange to us. The true supernatural can be found in stories such as those by James Blish which postulate a something beyond and outside of the Universe - they postulate an OPEN Universe.

The talk was freely illustrated with examples which Walter drew from a most comprehensive list of Science Fiction works. The man seems to have an eidetic memory.

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The December meeting will be held in the Parliament inn on Sunday, Dec. 16th. The January meeting will be on Sunday, the 26th. of Jan. February's meeting will be on the 24th.

#### Writers' Workshops

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The writers' workshops will recommence in February. It is hoped that attendance will be at a high level. It is after all one of the functions of the ISFA to promote Science Fiction writing.

#### REVIEWS

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#### The Heavenly Host -- Isaac Asimov

First of all this is not a novel. It is at most a novella, and even that is stretching it. It has large print, wide margins and only 55 pages. Normally it would be contained within a collection of short stories, but being geared towards a young audience, the publishers decided to issue it as a book. It is a rip-off for 50p.

However, to the story itself. Being aimed at a very young audience, the writing is not complex, telling the story simply and clearly. The main theme is that of a boy and his mother; she is a planetary inspector, examining planets for any intelligent life which could prohibit the settling of humans there. This "non-interference" directive has been used a lot in SciFi, most prominently in Star Trek. The life on the planet is in the form of vegetation and wheel-like beings. It is the latter which are considered as a possible intelligent species, and the boy wanders off and meets them. He discovers that they are in fact intelligent, but that he can only communicate with them by a form of telepathy, and even then only with the youngest of the "wheels". He decides to prove to his mother that they are intelligent, and this he eventually succeeds in doing.

This then is a precis of the story, but another point of interest is the way that the wheels feed. If you have read 'The Gods Themselves' by the same author, you may notice a similarity in method. The aliens in both books absorb the radiation of the sun and convert it into body-energy - a zoological answer to photosynthesis. Overall a very childish book, but with points of interest to SciFi fans.  
Brendan Pyder.

Anticipations - Edited by Christopher Priest.

Faber + Faber - 4.60 + vat + .

surcharge + any other taxes the Minister for Finance decides in his infinite wisdom to impose on literacy.

There are eight stories in this book - all new, although one is an excerpt from a novel, other parts of which have appeared in other anthologies. The stories are by Ian Watson, Robert Sheckly, Bob Shaw, Christopher Priest, Harry Harrison, Thomas M. Disch, J.G. Ballard and Brian W. Aldiss and all are of a high standard. As you can see, the list is composed of British and American authors in about equal proportions, yet I found that the book had what I can only describe as a "whimsicality" about it which I found very British. I won't bore readers with descriptions of each and every story, but I will recommend the book, if only on the basis of two very interesting stories. 'The Greening of the Green' by Harry Harrison is essential reading for every Irish Science Fiction reader, and in his story 'One Afternoon at Utah Beach' J.G. Ballard has once again turned out one of those gems of stories for which he is justly renowned. These two alone make the book worth reading.

I don't know if it is intended to bring this book out in paperback. If you do buy hardbacks it is one you should consider. If you don't - the ISFA library has a copy ..... borrow it.

Foin C. Bairread

Wolfbane \ all by Frederik Pohl 75p. + vat etc  
Search the Sky > & C. M. Kornbluth 80p. +  
The space Merchants/ and published by Penguin 75p. +

Penguin have decided to reissue the novels of this famous duo. At least I think they have; I haven't yet seen 'Gladiator at Law', but I suppose that's around somewhere too.

It's hard to believe that these stories were written up to 28 years ago. And the first tossing about of ideas which must be an intrinsic part of writing in partnership would have been earlier still. Yet these stories are in no way dated, old fashioned or passe.

I would advise reading the stories in the order in which they were written. The way in which the partnership developed is most interesting to follow. The first book was 'The Space Merchants', published initially in 1952. It is a gentle, optimistic tale with goodies and baddies, yet with sufficient blurring of the differences between the two to make it hold the attention.

The next, 'Search the Sky' is much more biting. The view of human- (and alien-) ity is, to say the least, unsavoury. The hero is out to save mankind from itself, even though it doesn't know that it wants saving, and even though the authors don't seem to care too much whether it's saved or not anyway.

The third book is 'Wolfbane'. This is the book I read first. I should have kept it until last. It's a fine book. Unlike the others, the ending is not the work of a confirmed optimist. The conclusion of the events described leaves no joy to those who succeeded, and those who failed are happy only in their ignorance. It may seem a bit bleak, but it's the finest book I've read by the authors, working either seperately or as individuals.

In case you are thinking of reading only 'Wolfbane', let me try to persuade you differently. Not alone are the other two good books in their own 'write', they provide a most interesting lead up to the last story written by a fascinating partnership. It is most unfortunate that C. M. Kornbluth did not live to see it published. He died, of a heart attack, in 1958, a year before it was issued.

Foin C. Bairead.

Buck Pogers in the 25th Century.  
Addison F. Steele Sphere - 1.10 + taxes.

Well, here he is again. Buck Pogers - he could never die. Not while there's a Universe to be conquered, scantily clad princesses to be rescued, big bad aliens to be destroyed and Farths to be saved single-handed.

Not content with adventuring in comics and film serials, Buck had to switch to the Cinema. And once you make a film you C-A-P-I-T-A-L-I-Z-E on it. So you write a book about the film about Buck Rogers. It's very easy. You just copy the script. Only in this case you can see the scene changes between the lines.

The Film:

Buck, after taking off from Cape Caneveral in a spaceship that is to take him on a tour of the Solar System, is showered with meteorites and unavoidably frozen. While still in suspended animation he is taken to an Farth NOT OF HIS TIME!!!! Adventure follows adventure as Buck explains his predicament to unbelieving human beings. And so on ....

Item: If the space program is so highly organised as it is in the book, how is it that meteorites were not foreseen as a danger ?

Item: Buck carries on perfect conversations with people in the 25th Century. surely after 300 years language has changed a little? New idioms and slang have surely come into use. No hint of this is given in the book.

Ft cetera

This book is space opera, but it is not even good space opera. This book has me puzzled as well. I'm still trying to decide if it's intended to be a juvenile book or not. Come back Harry Buster Crabbe - all is forgiven.

Sean Moraghan

#### Roadside Picnic.

Arkady & Boris Strugatsky

Penguin

80p. + taxes

If you like J. G. Ballard, you'll love this. After years of reading him (J. G.), I've finally found something similar. In fact I'm surprised that nobody has seen fit to mention it before now. Ballard writes like a Pussian - these two APF Pussian, and the similarity shows. The statement about 'writing like a Pussian' could do with a little explanation. Put at it's most simple, Ballard's stories are concerned not with adventure, or with romance or even with the hero's discovery of him(her)self. The stories are about an individual coming to grips with his own conscience - which is not the same thing at all. The plot is non-existent, the atmosphere all-important. And so it is with this book.

The story concerns a site on Earth which has been visited by aliens. The title refers to the comment by one of the characters who likens the place to one left to Nature after a human 'roadside picnic'. The animals and plants who must rediscover the picnic site are now the humans trying to understand an action by beings who are quite incomprehensible. Within the zone in which the 'visit' took place the normal rules of Physics do not apply. The structure of Space itself is hazy.

We are in a Universe very like the bizarre ones of Ballard, especially in his early works. This universe is at best unconcerned, at worst malign. The locals either go - illegially - into the strange area, or try to stop others from doing so. Their lives are influenced in a subtle and insidious fashion, so that they too, like the Universe, end up at best indifferent, at worst evil. Like all good books this work can be read at a number of levels. As a story it is gripping. As a commentary on life in a modern, gadget-ridden society it has a validity which transcends frontiers.

Reviewing a collection of Soviet short stories earlier in the year, I questioned whether the Pussian approach to novel-writing could adequately handle Science Fiction. The answer was half-provided by Isaac Asimov's excellent anthology, reviewed here earlier this year. It is finally and completely provided by this most incredibly good novel. I intend buying myself a copy. I can't say more than that.

Foin C. Balread.

Night of Masks  
Andre Norton      Ace Books 40c.

Unfortunately, Andre Norton has recently (say since 1968) fallen into the trap that sometimes ensnares successful authors --- she went from writing marketable books to writing ones she WANTED to write, and these had none of her former quality. This book, however, just sneaked in under the line in 1964. It is a juvenile, I admit --- but it is still entertaining. Some of it is a bit hard to swallow, particularly the completely unforeshadowed resolution of difficulties. But the skill with which she creates the world of Dis is admirable, and well worth study.

The plot concerns the impersonation of a daydream hero by a down-and-out young man. The daydream was the creation of a younger boy who has been a hostage for the good behaviour of his noble father. Before the action in the story begins, certain elements have arranged to kidnap the boy; they are unable to control him without the aid of the daydream hero, who is in fact the hero of the book. The hero realises what the game is, and decides to escape from the isolated base on the otherwise uninhabited (by humans) world of Dis. This is an unusual world, for the only light it receives from its primary is too far into the infra-red for humans to detect it without special equipment. A series of adventures ensue, and things happen. It is entertaining, fast moving action, though not perfect, of course, as I hinted above.

Why did I decide to review this book? Well, Andre Norton has come to have a reputation in the U.K. distribution world as a fantasy writer. Certainly her books are only seldom encountered here on this side of the Atlantic, and these are usually her newer stuff. Those who are familiar with my tastes well know how I prefer hard-science SF; they would be most likely to expect me to shun Norton as too peripheral. This is certainly true of her newer stuff, but anyone who has as opportunity to read her juveniles dating from, say, 1948 to 1968, should not pass them up unexamined. Some titles recommended are this book, 'Night of Masks', 'Star Panger' (published here as 'The Last Planet', 'Star Gate'!!!!, 'Star Guard', 'Quest Crosstime', 'The Crossroads of Time', 'Star Born', 'The Stars are Ours', 'Galactic Derelict', 'Storm Over Warlock', 'The Time Traders', and about a dozen and a half others.

John McCarthy.

The Evangelist    The Cabal: vol. 3.  
Saul Dunn    Corgi.

I'll start by saying that this is the first book I've read by Saul Dunn, so I approached the task without bias. However, when I found my mind wandering from Mr. Dunn's prose towards more interesting reading matter - like the list of ingredients on a ketchup bottle - I began to realise that his powers as a writer are very suspect. In short this book is completely hopeless from start to finish.

Not wishing to be completely negative, I will say that at least he IS consistent. He doesn't ruin a good plot with bad writing technique, because the former is also unbelievably poor.

We meet the hero of the book, Pinball, living in a state of slovenly apathy from which he is rescued by an Intergalactic Space Agency, who train him as a space pilot. He and an old buddy of his become part of an escort to a self-styled deity, the Evangelist. The Evangelist travels around the galaxy with a complex organisation behind him, converting the gullible masses with displays of rather hackneyed religious gimmickry. He is only in it for the money/power/glory etc. and his final demonstration of omnipotence, designed to convert the whole Universe to his following, backfires. This seems as good an excuse as any to end the book, and Saul does so rather abruptly.

This leaves a lot of sloppy loose ends around the place, giving one the impression that Mr. Dunn hadn't the imagination or the ability to develop them any further. Several allusions are made to Pinball's past, which are presumably only intelligible to those who have had the misfortune to read volumes 1 + 2 of the Cabal.

Apart from the failings of the plot and style, the characters in the book are weak, lacking both definition and motivation. In fact they don't even coincide with their descriptions in the blurb. It was news to me that Pinball was a brilliant tactician; he disguised his prowess admirably. To conclude this review on a more positive note I will say that with a more complex plot and more interesting characters this book might have been actually worth writing. In fact with a different writer at the keyboard, and completely new material, it might have atoned for the sacrifice of the trees necessary to produce this present useless tome. In other words - this book is not worth the paper it's printed on.  
Pita Meehan.

Underkill -- James White  
COPGI 95p. + etc.

This is James's latest book, and although it's a medical story, after a fashion, it has nothing to do with The Hospital Station. It is a story about a plot by two groups to takeover Farth, and to eliminate the problems of Farth. This unfortunately involves eliminating a certain number of Farth people, but there you go - you can't make an omlette etc.

The story is written with the expertise and attention to detail which are a hallmark of James White's writing. As always, the characterisation is first class, especially in the case of the principals in the story, Malcolm and his wife Ann - or should it be Ann and her husband Malcolm. It's funny, but their surname(s) is(are) never given - they are always addressed either by their first names, or as 'Doctor'. I must admit that I found the story itself unsatisfactory. I concede that I had high expectations, given the author, and I may have been counting on too much, but don't let that dissuade anyone else from reading the book. It has been acquired by the ISFA library, so a copy is available for all.  
Foin C. Baird.

p.s. Corgi have finally announced that the next in the Space Hospital series - 'Ambulance Ship' will appear in September.