

BRUM GROUP NEWS

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& **HARRY HARRISON**

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Friday 8th May

JOHN JARROLD

John Jarrold first attended an SF convention at the age of 19, in 1973 – that year's Eastercon, at the Grand Hotel in Bristol. He started reading novels and writing reports for what was then the UK's only specialist agent (Leslie Flood, of the Carnell Agency) in late 1974, and also for a number of genre and mainstream editors over the following years, before joining publishing full-time in January 1988, where his first job was running Orbit Books

June 12th – BOB BLACKHAM will be giving a visual presentation entitled “Tolkien’s Roots in Birmingham”. Lots of local interest for everyone, not just for fans of THE LORD OF THE RINGS!

(following fifteen years working in public libraries – so books have ruled his professional life for over thirty-five years). As an editor and editorial director specialising in SF and Fantasy with Macdonald Futura (the forerunner to Little Brown UK), Random House and Simon & Schuster between 1988 and 2002, he published novelists including Poul Anderson, Iain M Banks, Greg Bear, David Brin, Ray Bradbury, Lois McMaster Bujold, Orson Scott Card, C J Cherryh, Arthur C Clarke, David Gemmell, Jon Courtenay Grimwood, Harry Harrison, Robert Holdstock, Tom Holt, Robert Jordan, Guy Gavriel Kay, Paul J McAuley, Anne McCaffrey, Ian McDonald, Ian R MacLeod, Ken MacLeod, Elizabeth Moon, Michael Moorcock, Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle, Tim Powers, Christopher Priest, Michael Scott Rohan, Brian Stableford, Joan D Vinge, Freda Warrington, Tad Williams and Walter Jon Williams . . . amongst many others.

He also commissioned THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SCIENCE FICTION by John Clute and Peter Nicholls for Orbit, and the very popular Lucifer Box novels from THE LEAGUE OF GENTLEMEN's Mark Gatiss, published bestselling thrillers by authors including John Sandford, Lorenzo Carcaterra and Stel Pavlou, and THE PREHISTORY OF THE FARSIDE by Gary Larson, Larson's first UK hardback.

Since leaving London publishing in August 2002, he has worked as an editor with new and published writers, as well as with publishers as a freelance. And since 2004, he has also run the John Jarrold Literary Agency, which specialises in SF, Fantasy and Horror. Over a three-year period, he has sold eleven debut novels to major London publishers (all as part of multi-book deals) and many other projects in the UK, US and Europe. He has around forty clients – and has turned down over 5,000 submissions to the agency.

Here is a man who *knows* his SF and the publishing field back-to-front and another perfect chance for you to find out what goes on in the background of a book's journey from the mind of a would-be author through to the finished product.

The meeting will take place in the conference room on the first floor of the Briar Rose Hotel, Bennetts Hill just off New Street. The entrance to the hotel is adjacent to Wetherspoon's on the right.

At the bottom of the ramp from New Street Station, turn left and walk up New Street. Bennetts Hill is the third road on the right.

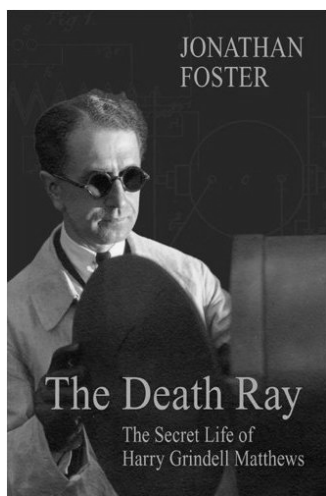
The doors open at 7.30pm and the meeting will commence at 8.00pm so please arrive early, get your drinks from the bar on the ground floor, and be seated in plenty of time. Members' admission is £3.00; non-members' is £4.00.

RAY GUNS AND OTHER INVENTIONS

by Vernon Brown

A staple of SF, from H G Wells's Martians' 'heat ray' in 1898 to the early 60s, was the Ray Gun, whose usual effect was to incinerate or disintegrate its target, although sometimes it was used to stop a spaceship in its tracks. However,

as most readers knew, such a device was impossible to construct because the energy, in whatever form, at the projector's muzzle would have to be at least as great as at the target, with the same unfortunate effect. Then in the 1960s a roomful of equipment produced the first laser beam: successive improvements have reduced the size of the laser's generator to that of a pencil. So far, to my knowledge, only light waves have been manipulated in this way, albeit they can be dangerous enough, but the principle was there and, since the 60s, SF's spaceships and soldiers alike have been equipped with energy projectors based on the same idea.



But did the 60s really see the first ray projector? A recently published book, *THE DEATH RAY: THE SECRET LIFE OF HARRY GRINDELL MATTHEWS* by Jonathan Foster, gives an interesting account of an eccentric British scientist and inventor who, among other things, appears to have invented such a weapon in the 1920s. Harry Matthews was born in 1880 of well-to-do farming parents and, having shown an aptitude for science as a rather quiet child, went on to become an electrical engineer before serving in the military in the Boer War. On his return he became consulting engineer to the 8th Earl De La Warr, who had a dilettante's interest in such matters and provided him with a laboratory. During the

next thirty or so years, while working for the Duke and for some time afterwards, HGM invented and demonstrated a whole range of electrical and other devices, although somehow they never took off and were reinvented much later by others. He died from a heart attack in 1941.

Remember the 1990s' mobile phone, the size and weight of a brick? HGM invented one a bit bigger, but still portable, that was ideal for vehicles. An automatic pilot for planes and a submarine detector followed, as did an optical synchronised soundtrack for film - rejected by the industry because 'it had no future' - while some inventions, like his remotely controlled boat, were bought by the government but never taken further. But two of his inventions are remembered in fiction.

While working in America in the film industry HGM experimented with film lighting equipment, combining it with modified projection equipment to produce a high-powered sky projector, capable of projecting images into the sky where they could be seen without the use of a screen. This device is believed to have been the inspiration for the 'bat signal' that summoned Batman whenever his aid was needed.

More important for SF readers was his 'death ray'. No details of how this worked are available although it was demonstrated to the military in 1924. It was

designed to stop vehicle motors by projecting electricity into the coils of the engine's magneto and burning it out, although the demonstration also included turning on a light bulb some distance away and igniting gunpowder. The problem was that, at previous demonstrations of other equipment, HGM had caught the military making surreptitious notes and sketches so when they asked for further demonstrations of the Ray he became suspicious, declined and headed for France, whose military appeared to be more above board. This caused panic in the Government, who were afraid that the Ray might be sold to a foreign power. But the French did not take it up either and the Ray was forgotten, except in SF. The demonstrations had caught the imagination of the public and the authors who seized on it as the weapon of the future, soon forgot the reality and the rest, as they say, is (Future) History, at least until the laser arrived. *VB*

Postscriptum. A few days after I wrote this article a Counter Terrorism Officer stated that it was possible to build an electromagnetic pulse (EMP) generator from commonly used electronic components, which could be used to disable a landing airliner. Perhaps Matthews' Death Ray was a glass valve and copper cable ancestor of this.

MIDDLE EARTH WEEKEND 2009

The annual Middle Earth Weekend at Sarehole will take place on Saturday 16th and Sunday 17th May; from 11.00-17.00 each day. It was first held in 2000, partly to highlight the need for a centre to celebrate the connection of the author J. R. R. Tolkien with Birmingham. It has grown each year since then, and people come from all over the world to join in. It is an unusual event in that it is organised jointly by local groups and volunteers, by Birmingham City Council, and by the Tolkien Society. Admission to the main event is free.

As you may know, Tolkien lived in the Sarehole-Moseley-King's Heath area from 1895 to 1902, before moving to Edgbaston. He returned often to Moseley to visit relatives, even after leaving Birmingham in 1911. During the First World War, until he got married in 1916, his contact address for the Army was the Mittons' house, on Wake Green Road. His diary records that he wrote a poem 'on the bus and walking' between Moseley and Edgbaston in July 1915. He may have been staying with his grandfather, John Suffield, in Cotton Lane; or with the Mittons, an aunt and uncle on the Tolkien side. The bus was the Number 9, travelling from College Road Moseley to Edgbaston and Birmingham; one of Birmingham's first bus-routes. It became the Number 1 route in 1917.

You can recreate much of this journey t the Weekend by taking a trip on the old bus. Not as old as the one Tolkien travelled on; a Birmingham bus from the early 1950s, more comfortable than modern buses. At midday on Saturday and Sunday there is a bus-tour from Sarehole round Tolkien's haunts in Edgbaston. On Saturday afternoon take the bus to visit the Oratory, an

outstandingly beautiful church on the Hagley Road. Tolkien and his brother Hilary watched this church being rebuilt 1903-1906 as a commemoration of the life of Cardinal Newman. Materials came from all over Europe; marble pillars from Italy caused a major traffic-jam when they were brought into the church. On Sunday afternoon the bus goes to King Edward's School – Tolkien was a pupil at King Edward's 1900-1911. Tickets can be booked at 'Information' by the entrance to Sarehole.

There will be a lot of activity on Sarehole Mill Recreation Ground alongside the River Cole – some energetic, some relaxing. For the adventurous there is a climbing wall, or a Costume Parade to watch or take part, or dragons and dragon-stories. There will be Viking battles, and a medieval blacksmith and baker. There are many activities for children; donkey rides, swingboats, willow wand workshops and more. If it rains you can sit in the Performance Tent, listen to poetry and music and watch excerpts from Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. You can get refreshments in the tea tent, from stalls around the field, or from the Farmers' Market. or from going round the Mill. Find out more about Tolkien and his work in the Tolkien Tent and in the Mill. Or just enjoy the natural surroundings by going on a guided walk to Moseley Bog, or along the River Cole.

We hope to see you there.

BSFA AWARD – THE WINNERS

The BSFA Awards for the best works in 2008 were presented at LX2009, the 60th British National Science Fiction Convention, in Bradford, England.

Best Novel: Ken MacLeod for *THE NIGHT SESSIONS*

Best Short Fiction: Ted Chiang for "Exhalation"

Best Non-fiction: Farah Mendlesohn for *RHETORICS OF FANTASY*

Best Artwork: Andy Bigwood for the cover of *SUBTERFUGE*

THE DAVID GEMMELL LEGEND AWARD NOMINEES

The nominations for the first David Gemmell Legend Award have been announced. The award, founded to honour the memory of late fantasy author David Gemmell, is presented for work written in the 'spirit' of David Gemmell.

LAST ARGUMENT OF KINGS by Joe Abercrombie

HEIR TO SEVENWATERS by Juliet Marillier

THE HERO OF AGES by Brandon Sanderson

BLOOD OF ELVES by Andrzej Sapkowski

THE WAY OF SHADOWS by Brent Weeks

THE SHIRLEY JACKSON AWARD NOMINEES

The ballot for the Shirley Jackson Award has been released. The award, which recognizes excellence in psychological suspense, horror, and the dark fantastic in literature, will be presented on July 12 at Readercon in Burlington, MA.

Novel

ALIVE IN NECROPOLIS Doug Dorst

THE MAN ON THE CEILING Steve Rasnic Tem and Melanie Tem

PANDEMONIUM Daryl Gregory
THE RESURRECTIONIST Jack O'Connell
THE SHADOW YEAR Jeffrey Ford
TENDER MORSELS Margo Lanagan

Novella

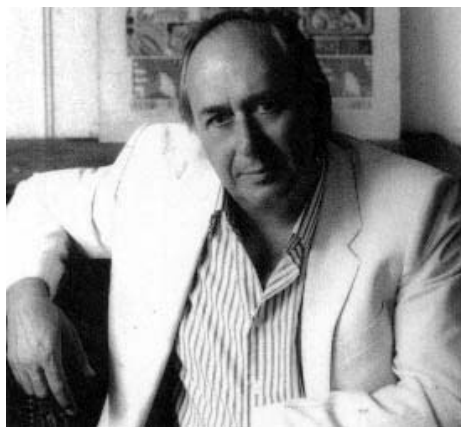
DISQUIET Julia Leigh
"Dormitory" Yoko Ogawa
LIVING WITH THE DEAD Darrell Schweitzer
THE LONG TRIAL OF NOLAN DUGATTI Stephen Graham Jones
"N," Stephen King

Novelette

"Hunger Moon" Deborah Noyes
"The Lagerstatte" Laird Barron
"Penguins of the Apocalypse" William Browning Spencer
"Pride and Prometheus" John Kessel
THE SITUATION Jeff Vandermeer

Short Story

"68° 07' 15"N, 31° 36' 44"W" Conrad Williams
"The Dinner Party" Joshua Ferris
"Evidence of Love in a Case of Abandonment: One Daughter's Personal Account" M. Rickert
"The Inner City" Karen Heuler
"Intertropical Convergence Zone" Nadia Bulkin
"The Pile" Michael Bishop



NEWS IN BRIEF . . .

.... Novelist, essayist and short-story writer **J(ames) G(raham) Ballard** died on April 19, 2009 following several years of illness. He was 78. His early novels and many of his short stories from that period were undoubtedly SF but his work diversified so much that in recent years, particularly since **EMPIRE OF THE SUN**, he was no longer considered by many to be part of the field. That early work though, inspired and influenced a whole

generation of writers and would-be writers and his influence on British SF was huge **Dave Arneson** (b.1947) died on April 7. Arneson was one of the creators of *Dungeons and Dragons*, along with **Gary Gygax**. His Blackmoor campaign formed the basis for the game and was used in official materials for many years Author **Jack Jardine** (b.1931) died on April 14. Jardine published under a variety of pseudonyms, including **Howard L. Cory** and **Larry Maddock**. His novels included the Agent of T.E.R.R.A. series as well as

THE MIND MONSTERS and THE NYMPH AND THE SATYR. Following a stroke in 2005, Jardine published the short story collection UNACCUSTOMED AS I AM TO PUBLIC DYING Essayist **Steven Tompkins** died on March 23. Tompkins wrote numerous essays on high fantasy, focusing on **Karl Edward Wagner, J R R Tolkien,** and **Robert E Howard**. In 2005, he edited THE BLACK STRANGER & OTHER AMERICAN TALES for Bison Books and wrote the introduction to the Del Rey re-issue of KULL: EXILE OF ATLANTIS Congratulations to one-time BSGF member **Steve Green** on winning TAFF (Transatlantic Fan Fund) with an overwhelming majority. 150 votes – and the next was just 15 votes **The Philip K. Dick Award** for best paperback original SF was presented on April 10. This year the judges elected to present the award to two works - EMISSARIES FROM THE DEAD by **Adam-Troy Castro** and TERMINAL MIND by **David Walton** In 2002, the village of Wincanton announced that it was twinning with **Terry Pratchett's** fictional Ankh-Morpork, the first city to enter into such an agreement with a fictional city. Now, Wincanton has announced that it will be naming several streets after roads named in **Terry Pratchett's** fictional world. Pratchett provided a list of fourteen potential names and villagers were able to vote for which ones would be used for a new housing estate PS Publishing has announced that it will cosponsor the British Fantasy Society's Small Press Award. PS has won the award each year for the past ten years, with the exception of 2005. The award comes with a cash prize of £250, which will be donated by PS. Publisher **Peter Crowther** notes, "If our contribution helps in some albeit small way to maintain and promote the valuable work done by independent presses, then it will be money well-spent." Baen Books has announced that following in the footsteps of former Speaker of the House **Newt Gingrich**, former Vice-President **Dick Cheney** has signed to write an alternate history. Cheney's novel, tentatively entitled THE FALL OF AMERICA, is described as an alternate history dystopia about a Gore presidency and the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001. Publication is expected in 2010 The Science Fiction Museum has announced the inductees for the class of 2009. This year's class will be inducted the weekend of June 26 at the Seattle museum. This year's inductees include **Connie Willis, Michael Whelan, Frank R. Paul** and **Edward L. Ferman** **Ted Ball** and **Erik Arthur** have announced the closing of The Fantasy Centre, the London specialty bookstore. The store will close when its current lease expires in June. Initially opened in 1971, the store is a major dealer in used, rare and out-of-print science fiction and fantasy Scientists at the University of California, Berkeley, have released a report stating that **Jupiter's Great Red Spot**, a storm that measures about three earth-diameters across and has been seen since telescopes were first turned on the planet, has shrunk by 15% along its major axis between 1996 and 2006. the scientists note that winds in the storm continue to rage at more than 300 miles per hour and there is no indication that the Red Spot will disappear *RGP*



BOOK REVIEWS



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

HOUSE OF SUNS by Alastair Reynolds

Gollancz / 502 pgs / paperback £7.99

ISBN 978 0575082373

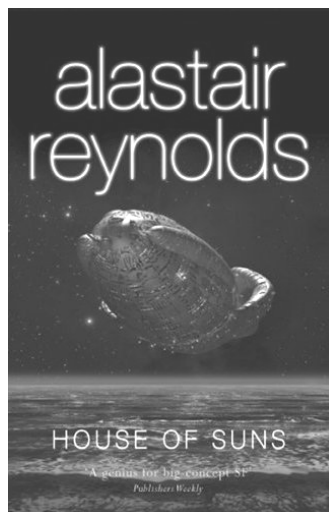
Reviewed by Michael Jones

“Any sufficiently advanced technology,” said Arthur C. Clarke, “is indistinguishable from magic.” Nowhere has this ever been truer than in this story of a family of immortal clones touring the Galaxy in spaceships tens of kilometres long, watching the rise and fall of interstellar civilisations and meeting up every couple of hundred thousand years or so to pool knowledge and share experiences. After millions of years of this they would seem to have unlimited powers at their disposal, but they still display all-too-human weaknesses and frailties.

As they gather for their thirty-second get-together a ruthlessly murderous ambush leaves most of them dead. A handful of survivors must try to find out why this happened and who was responsible, and try to ensure that it will not happen to the rest of them. An elaborate web of plots unfolds and in proper mystery style the suspense continues to the very end.

It was Reynolds’ avowed intention with this book to write something ‘brighter, distinct in tone from the Revelation Space books’ and to some extent he has succeeded. I found at least the first few chapters eerily reminiscent of Iain M. Banks (and that is not necessarily a bad thing) although moments of extreme and savage violence occur later, while themes of friendship, family loyalty and self-sacrifice are not stinted.

What he has displayed here, more than ever before, is the ability to weave complex plots, maintaining that complexity consistently throughout and bringing all the threads neatly together at the end. Behind and beneath that he shows a limitless inventiveness when it comes to ‘magic’ technology as well as conveying an understanding of the majestic vastness of the Galaxy. This has been described in these pages as possibly being Reynolds’ best book to date and I find myself half-inclined to suggest it might be anybody’s best book ever. In fact, however, it is my feeling that the ending, although tying everything up quite completely, is a



touch inconclusive and unsatisfactory. It cries out for a sequel. Nevertheless, nothing less than the highest recommendation will suffice. *MJ*

TAU ZERO by Poul Anderson

Gollancz / 188pgs / paperback £7.99 ISBN: 978 0575082588

Reviewed by Dave Corby

One of the odder (and sometimes amazing) things about being an SF fan who started reading SF in the early eighties is the way you can be aware of a name like Poul Anderson for years, but due to the backlog of excellent SF novels to read, how one might not have ever actually gotten around to reading any of Poul's novels until now. Which seems a shame, because if TAU ZERO is anything to go by, Poul Anderson is really rather special; Poul Anderson has won the Hugo seven times, and the Nebula three. And TAU ZERO is merely one of his Hugo 'best novel' nominees...



I have heard a few different definitions of 'hard' science fiction in the last 20 years; one common view is that hard SF realistically portrays characters as real human beings, with understandable human motives and frailties. This improves the believability of the story, as the reader can relate to the character's actions – it all makes human sense, regardless of the SF situation the characters may be in. A different definition of hard SF might be that the technological fiction described in the story seems plausibly extrapolated from existing scientific knowledge, thus making the story seem more plausible in its own right (of course, this depends on the reader's actual scientific understanding, but a fair proportion of SF readers have at least a passing interest in science as well, so I guess this helps). TAU ZERO satisfies both these definitions very well; I quote author James Blish "The ultimate hard science fiction novel."

The basic premise concerning a crew of 50 carefully selected humans in a spaceship built to survey and, if possible, colonise a nearby star system, is well handled in this novel. The characters know that ultimately they might need to pair off and start families, if the mission is successful, and the interplay between them is handled in colourful yet realistic fashion, giving the reader a great insight into the characters themselves. The spaceship itself, built to utilise interstellar hydrogen in a Bussard engine, constantly accelerating to a significant portion of the speed of light, seems realistically described, to the extent that the reader can easily believe that this might indeed be a way to the stars. The explanations of the relativistic effects of having such a high velocity feel plausible (to one with a basic understanding of Einstein's theories, at any rate), allowing the crew to reach their destination within a reasonable human timescale. If it is all this well worked out one wonders, why haven't we gone to the stars already??

And this novel does not stop giving there, either; in the best 70's tradition, this is also a disaster novel! Without wanting to give too much away (the blurb reveals this at least) an unexpected incident in the voyage damages the engines such that the ship can never stop accelerating. The results are believably fantastic.

Goodness! If a 'lesser' Anderson novel is this good, what must his award winners be like? Or the competition for the Hugo back in 1971, for that matter? Perhaps the best thing about being young enough to have started reading SF in the eighties is that I still have time to catch up on authors like Poul Anderson... and it's going to be a lot of fun!

DC

***THE MARGARETS* by Sheri S. Tepper**

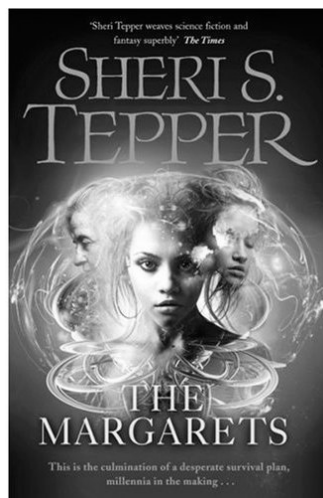
Gollancz / 508 pgs / paperback £7.99

ISBN 978 0575083486

Reviewed by Michael Jones

At the end of this century Margaret Bain is living with her parents in a Research Station on Phobos. The only child there, she entertains herself by inventing imaginary personalities but as the years pass these alter egos become real and spin off to various other worlds where they experience at first hand interaction with various alien races. Some of these are quite inimical and even malevolent, others less so, and it becomes apparent that the Earth, over-populated and depleted, and its people are seen by many as targets for an exploitation which will lead eventually to the destruction of the human race.

At first I thought it was all a bit silly. The action alternates confusingly between the various imaginary "Margarets" (and one presumably real one) and the varied situations in which they find themselves. There is no clear understanding of how the imaginary personalities became real and there was altogether too much mysticism and shamanism, not to say outright magic, going on for my taste, the prevalence of alien races and spacefaring technology notwithstanding. However, I persevered and found that about three-quarters of the way through it all started to come together. The reason for the existence of the multiple Margarets becomes apparent and every mysterious detail of what has happened in their lives is found to be significant. They have been created for a purpose and the future of humanity depends on the fulfilling of that purpose. The whole plot has been engineered by a Great Elder Race who has gone on to higher things, the implication being that there may be something special about humanity that is worth saving. So it all reverts to near-religious mysticism in the end.



It is undoubtedly a well-written book, cleverly plotted and meticulously worked out but the structure leads to a degree of over-complication and my personal preference is for a more linear narrative. I repeatedly found myself looking back to rediscover incidents whose significance had only just become apparent, but really the best way would be to re-read it almost immediately on finishing, just to see how everything falls into place. If you can put that sort of effort into it you may find it a rewarding experience, or you may think that life is too short. I feel almost tempted to do so for the sake of being able to appreciate how good it is, but I have to say that its thematic content does not hold enough appeal for me to think that to do so would be sufficiently rewarding. *Mj*

***LAVINIA* by Ursula Le Guin**

Gollancz / 256 pages / hardcover

£14.99 ISBN: 978 0575084582

Reviewed by Chris Morgan

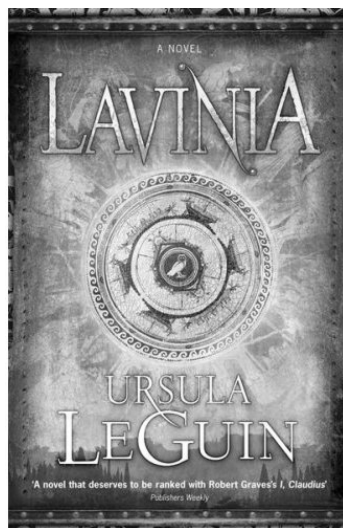
Now in her 80th year, Le Guin has lost none of her power or subtlety or, as is most important in her latest novel, her ability to adopt the enthusiastic persona of a girl and young woman. This is a major work, not SF but mythological fantasy. It is as sharp and thought-provoking as those Hugo-winning novels from 25 and 30 years ago.

The setting is the vicinity of Rome in the Bronze Age, at the end of the Trojan War, when Aeneas of Troy (post Dido) arrived to establish a new colony. But this, perhaps the 13th century BC, five centuries before Rome was founded, is not an historical background. It is the fictional construct of Vergil, writing in the 1st century BC. Le Guin has taken characters from Vergil's *THE AENEID* and has developed, ornamented and re-slanted their stories.

Lavinia herself, a very minor character in Vergil, is the narrator here. In *THE AENEID* she was the daughter of King Latinus, who married Aeneas, a great hero of Troy. Le Guin makes her come to life but allows her to discover from visions of Vergil that she is only a piece of fiction. You see, Lavinia is a Jasper Fforde novel for grown-ups.

There is, of course, much more to this novel. The action flits about, cleverly, between earlier and later parts of Lavinia's life. The fulfilment of prophecy is a major theme, including much killing in the hand-to-hand combat of minor wars. If I mention that there's a feminist theme (no women's rights; power behind the throne; only men kill) you won't be surprised.

I was reminded of the alienness of primitive societies in our world, especially Rome as detailed by Robert Graves. And while the writing of top



quality novels should never be reduced to a contest, it may be that LAVINIA is better than the best mythological fantasy previously written which is C.S.Lewis's 1956 novel TILL WE HAVE FACES, the Cupid and Psyche myth retold against a fictional pre-Roman background. CM

THE STRANGER by Max Frei

Gollancz / 544 pgs / hardback £18.99

ISBN: 978 0 575 08974 7 /

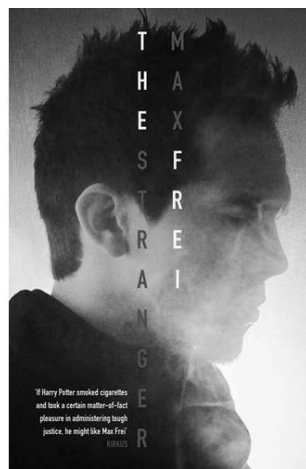
trade paperback £12.99 ISBN: 978 0 575 08976 1

Reviewed by William McCabe

This book contains a series of Fantasy/Detective novellas set in a world where magic is widely practiced yet banned beyond a certain level. The ban was put in place several hundred years before the events of this book because the world was a chaotic and dangerous place. The setting seems similar to the beginning of the 20th century but the things that run on electricity or petrol here, run on magic there. The central character, Max, has come from our world after having visited this other world several times in dreams. He has been chosen before arrival for a job with the 'Minor Secret Investigative Force of the city of Echo, Capital of the Unified Kingdom' by Sir Juffin Hully, its Most Venerable Head. We follow him and the other members of the MSIF through investigations into a murder in a locked room where the only witnesses are inanimate objects - it's difficult trying to get a statement from a traumatised wooden box; the discovery of a cook who is found in his bed turned into a mound of pate; and an investigation into a city that may or may not still exist (although it still does well in the tourist trade).

The plots are effective. The Fantasy/Detective field is so small that it's possible that most of this hasn't been done before. The great failing is in the writing. I can't tell whether this is due to things that don't translate well from the original Russian or an attempt to translate the idiosyncrasies of the original writer or just that the translator's English isn't that good. Things do feel odd, as they should in a world of this sort, but there is also the sense of jokes that aren't funny or situations that would probably feel more natural if we were Russian. It's possible that the translator gets better as things go on but that could just be that the style of this takes a lot of getting used to. I can't help feeling that if they'd only let an English writer at it they'd have something much better.

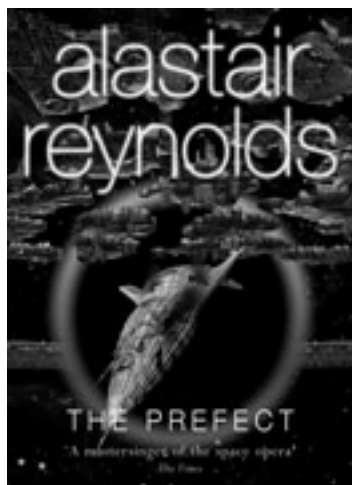
This is billed as the first in a series and Russia's answer to Harry Potter. I would have said it was the first 7 in a series and the only similarity with Harry Potter is in the Russian sales which apparently are phenomenal. WAM



THE PREFECT by Alastair Reynolds

Gollancz / 502pgs / paperback £7.99 ISBN: 978 0575082182

Reviewed by Steve Jones



Fans of Alastair Reynolds will remember CHASM CITY set on the planet Yellowstone, which was surrounded by the Rust Belt, the wreckage of thousands of space habitats. This novel is set at the height of the orbital civilisation when it was still called the Glitter Band. Each habitat is independently governed and to keep their freedom the only overall authority are the undermanned and underequipped Prefects of the habitat Panoply.

One of the habitats is treacherously destroyed, and Prefect Tom Dreyfus is sent to investigate. He discovers a plot to destroy the entire Glitter Band, but is the origin of this threat human, runaway AI or even alien?

The details of the future society are well thought out. The Prefects are not allowed to carry guns, so they use 'whiphounds', robot monofilament swords that can capture or kill at close range. And they come with a little bonus feature: 'interrogation mode'...

One of the more bizarre characters is the Clockmaker, an apparently insane alien AI which builds ordinary objects (such as clocks) which conceal devious and lethal traps. Unlocking the secrets of the Clockmaker is central to Prefect Dreyfus's attempts to unravel the mystery.

Overall this is a fast-paced and exciting tale of life and death in a high-tech utopia, which may have produced its own downfall.

SJ

TWISTED METAL by Tony Ballantyne

Tor / 402pgs / Hardcover £14.99 ISBN: 978 0230738607

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan

Tony Ballantyne is a nice man. It is a pity about this book. If you are a naïve twelve-year-old who likes robots, then fine; if not, this is a book to be avoided. The premise of having robots fighting wars over resources, especially metal, is fine, but in this book, every single robot is humanoid and they have sex. Now this is not an impossible scenario as the robots in Charles Stross's novel, SATURN'S CHILDREN, do that, but they were designed that way by humans (which have since disappeared). The android form robot is the least sensible, especially for fighting wars, especially when all the senses are concentrated in the head making them particularly vulnerable. To compound this, these metal-clad

robots have emotions, form stable family relationships, produce children, feel and can smile. Even an AI would not do this. One of the most ludicrous suggestions is that a new robot can be created by the ‘female’ twisting together into a pattern special blue wire produced by the ‘male’. That then becomes the active ‘brain’ of the child – no mention of silicon chips, capacitors or resistors and certainly no motherboard.

The plot follows several robots as the metal poor state of Artemis tramples over all the other states without let or much hindrance, melting down all metal, including conquered robots, to expand the state.

Other aspects of this book are also suspect such as the chemistry and geology. I doubt that revelations in subsequent volumes of this proposed trilogy can rescue it.

PM

H P LOVECRAFT: AGAINST THE WORLD, AGAINST LIFE **by Michel Houellebecq**

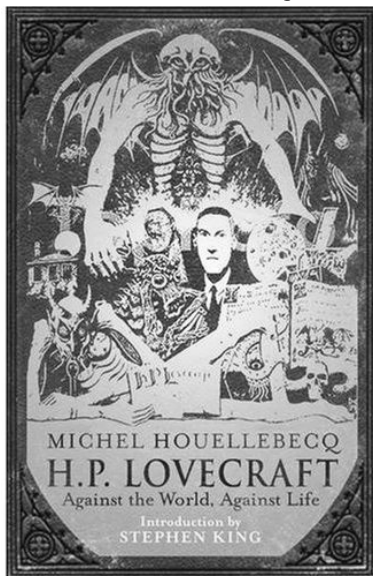
Orion / 256 pgs / paperback £8.99 ISBN: 978 0575084018

Reviewed by Joel Lane

Michel Houellebecq is a controversial French novelist. This book presents an essay of his, together with two Lovecraft stories (“The Call of Cthulhu” and “The Whisperer in Darkness”). The essay is not an overview of Lovecraft’s work: it’s an interpretation of what his stories mean.

Houellebecq calls Lovecraft’s work ‘a supreme antidote against all kinds of realism’. But, he argues, it is not escapism either: each story is ‘an open slice of howling fear’. There is no psychological ambiguity: the horrors that Lovecraft describes are absolutely physical. But at the same time, they are unknowable: there is no way of assimilating them into our cognitive or moral framework.

The essay describes Lovecraft’s short-lived marriage and his stay in New York, where he underwent a nervous breakdown. Houellebecq, like China Mieville, rejects the



idea that Lovecraft's racism was merely 'of its time'. He states: "It was in New York that [Lovecraft's] racist opinions turned into a full-fledged racist neurosis." The violent emotions born of that crisis, he argues, fuelled Lovecraft's intense creativity in his immediate post-New York years: his major stories were the means by which he worked out a reverse existentialism, a war against life.

This forceful essay is a valuable addition to the secondary literature on Lovecraft – and in particular, on the pivotal story "The Call of Cthulhu". However, it has little to say about the more reflective Lovecraft of later stories such as "The Shadow out of Time". This book is worthwhile, but it's not the whole story. JL

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@rogpeyton.fsnet.co.uk

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.

Books to be discussed:-

14th May 2009 - **THE FADE by Chris Wooding**

Future dates - 18th June, 16th July, 20th August

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, great company. Next meeting is on 21st May. More details from Martin Tudor (empties084@btinternet.com).

FANTASYCON 2009 will take place on the weekend of September 18-20, at the Britannia Hotel, 1 St James Street, Nottingham. Ian Watson will be the Master of Ceremonies. The confirmed GoHs are: **Jasper Fforde, Brian Clemens and Gail Z Martin**. Details from British Fantasy Society website <http://s256537080.websitehome.co.uk/>

DO YOU KNOW OF AN EVENT YOU THINK SHOULD BE LISTED HERE? LET US KNOW!

NOVACON 39 – the Birmingham SF Group’s own convention - will be held at the Park Inn, Nottingham over the weekend of 13-15 November 2009. Guest of Honour is JUSTINA ROBSON. Full details from 379 Myrtle Road, Sheffield, S2 3HQ or email alice@altair-4.co.uk

FUTURE MEETINGS OF THE BSFG

June 12th – “Tolkien’s Roots in Birmingham” – a visual presentation by BOB BLACKHAM.

July 10th - to be announced. Regrettably Jo Fletcher has had to cancel due to one of her authors getting married on this day.

August 14th – SUMMER SOCIAL

September 11th – Novacon 39 Guest of Honour JUSTINA ROBSON

October 9th – to be announced

November 6th – JASPER FFORDE returns to entertain us

December 4th – Christmas Social

BRUM GROUP NEWS #452 copyright 2009 for Birmingham SF Group. Designed by Rog Peyton (19 Eves Croft, Bartley Green, Birmingham, B32 3QL – phone 0121 477 6901 or email rgp@rogpeyton.fsnet.co.uk). 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