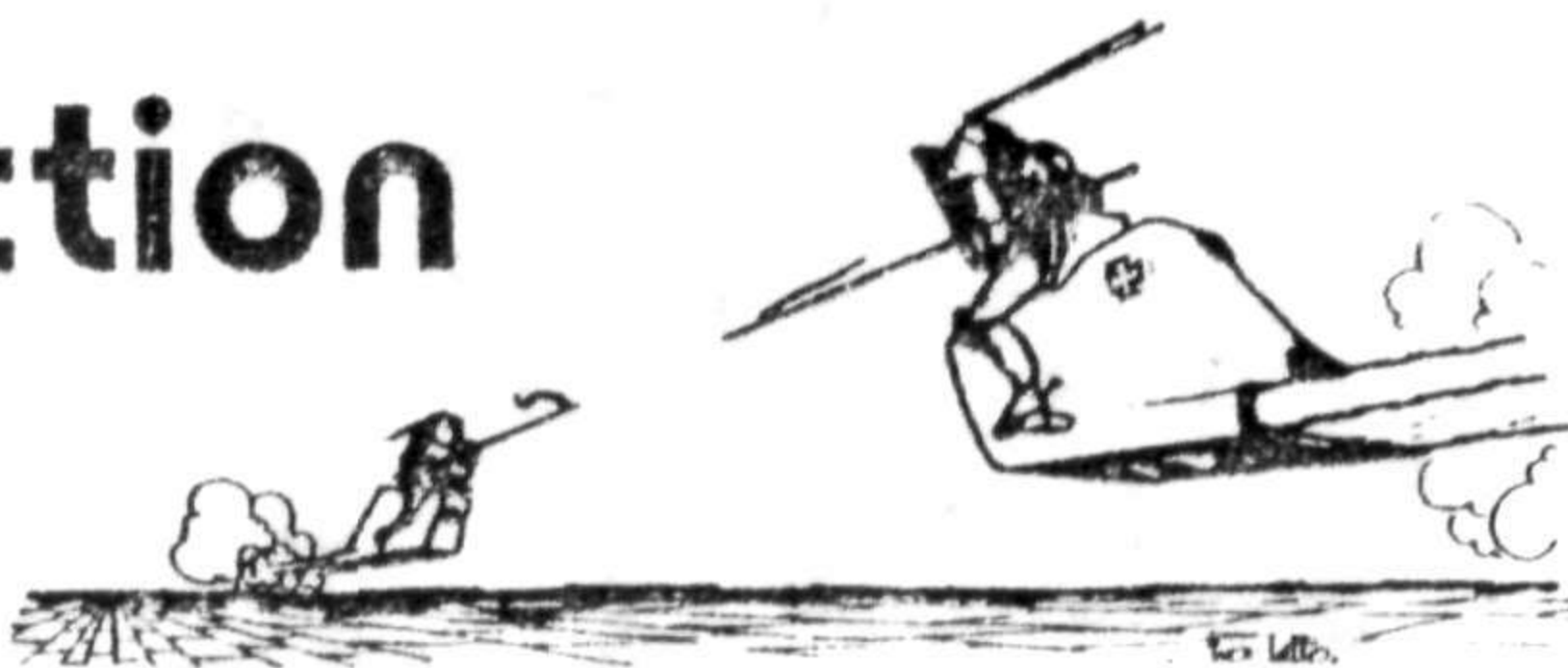


Birmingham Science Fiction Group

(Honorary Presidents: Brian W. Aldiss
and Harry Harrison)



NEWSLETTER 134

OCTOBER 1982

The Birmingham Science Fiction Group has its formal meeting on the third Friday of each month in the upstairs room of THE IVY BUSH pub on the corner of Hagley Road and Monument Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham 16. There is also an informal meeting on the first Tuesday of each month at THE OLD ROYAL pub, on the corner of Church Street and Cornwall Street, Birmingham 3. (Church Street is off Colmore Row.) New members are always welcome. Out treasurer is Margaret Thorpe, 36 Twyford Road, Ward End, Birmingham 8. The 12-months subscription is £3.50.

OCTOBER MEETING - Friday 15th October 1982 at 7.45 pm

The speaker this month is EDDIE JONES. He is a prolific artist, having painted covers for many SF books and magazines, including a cover a month over several years for the German magazine Terra Astra. His originals are regularly on display in the art shows at British and US conventions. His subjects are mostly SF, but he has also produced some excellent fantasy pictures. Hopefully he will bring along some slides of his work to illustrate his talk to us.

Admission this month: 60p for members, £1.00 for non-members.

SEPTEMBER MEETING

Despite the late start, due to a technical hitch, Kevin Davies gave an interesting and entertaining talk. He brought along video tapes, slides and drawings showing the making of The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy TV series, and gave us an insight into the problems of designing and filming the programme. In particular, he revealed that the widely praised computer graphics were, in fact, animations.

FORTHCOMING

* Novacon 12 - the BSFG's very own annual convention. November 5th-7th at the Royal Angus Hotel, Birmingham. Guest-of-honour Harry Harrison. If you haven't registered yet you've still got time to send £6.00 (for attending membership) to Phill Probert & Eunice Pearson, Flat 2, no.1 Broughton Road, Handsworth, Birmingham 20.

* November - SF Mastermind regional heat, starring Alan Cash, Dave Holmes, Michael Jones, Rog Peyton and Peter Weston.

* December - Christmas Party at the Ivy Bush. There will be a buffet, crackers and games. Tickets will be on sale just as soon as your committee discovers how much the buffet will cost. Reserve your tickets now!

* January - Annual General Meeting, when all your committee members resign and you have to elect replacements.



MARGARET THORPE

You must know Margaret. She's the one who smiles as she takes your money when you arrive for a Brum Group meeting. This is her third year as the treasurer of the BSFG, and it's the only committee post she's held. Also, she's a regular book reviewer in this newsletter (one of her reviews was recently quoted from by Penguin Books for publicity purposes).

Margaret was born and bred in Birmingham; this month she's 29 for the third year in succession. At school she was poor at Maths (a necessary requirement for treasurers everywhere) but good at Biology and English. She discovered juvenile SF through Superman comics, Dan Dare strips in Eagle annuals and some novels from children's libraries, before moving on to adult SF at about the age of fourteen.

Leaving school with A levels, she did a couple of years of industrial research in microbiology, then survived five years of working for Dr Jack Cohen as a zoology technician at Birmingham University before becoming a senior microbiology technician at Aston University. She married Malcolm about six years ago. (He's also an SF fan, regularly attending BSFG meetings and assisting with the arduous task of collecting your money.) She only left Aston just under two years ago, when she was expecting a baby (Helen, born in December 1980).

She and Malcolm have attended the last six Novacons, Eastercon 77, a couple of Fantasycons and the Brighton Worldcon. Margaret says that she loves meeting SF authors (James White, Anne McCaffrey and Katherine Kurtz in particular) and relishes the friendly atmosphere of conventions.

Although she enjoyed reading SF as a girl, as soon as she discovered fantasy (in her twenties) she moved over to that (well, mostly). Why? She liked the dragons. In fact she has a very soft spot for almost all animals, especially cats (she and Malcolm have three of them) and fantasy creatures such as dragons and unicorns. Not surprisingly, her favourite authors are mainly those who write fantasies involving animals, particularly Anne McCaffrey, Andre Norton, Gordon R. Dickson (in his case it's SF about animals), Ursula Le Guin, Peter Beagle and Marion Zimmer Bradley. She likes to find some humour in the books she reads, and she much prefers happy endings, with the underdog (undercat?) winning.

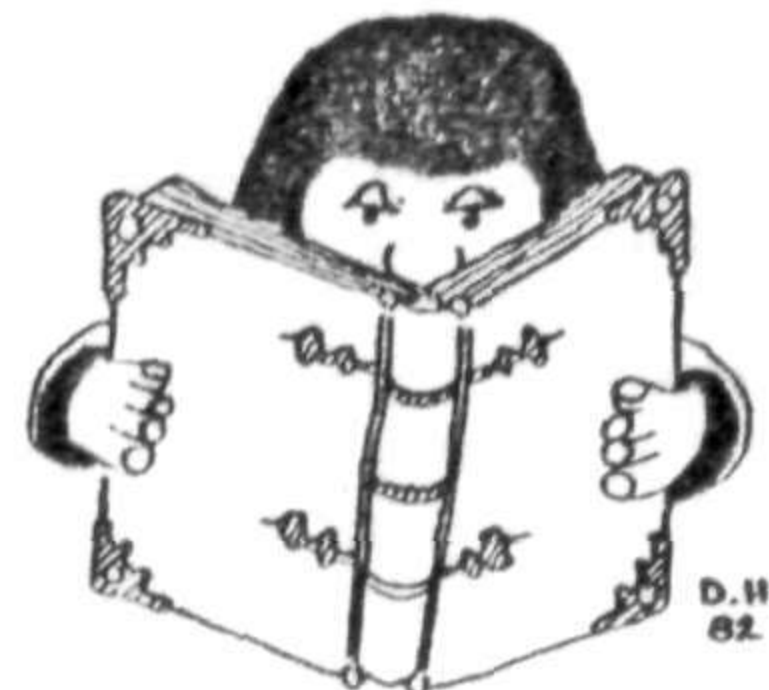
Being a very fast reader and having nothing to do all day except look after Helen, Margaret reads all the fantasy or SF she can get hold of, then goes on to crime novels, westerns and animal books. In between books she does embroidery and similar handicrafts.

One of the accomplishments she's most proud of is having stroked a real live tiger (she has a whisker to prove it). Her ambitions? She'd like to live out in the country (well, somewhere a little more rural than Ward End) and breed cats.

Hopefully she'll continue as treasurer for a long time to come; she does it so well!

BOOK REVIEWS

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ON DUH CAT....



THE MAGIC GOES AWAY by Larry Niven, Futura £1.25, 138 pages

Reviewed by Peter Day.

Once there was magic in the world. But hordes of selfish, short-sighted magicians have used up the mana which powers their spells and even the strongest of these are beginning to fail. The swordsman Orolandes, a survivor of the fall of Atlantis, joins a small band of magicians in their quest to try and restore the supply of mana. This fascinating, wholly enjoyable tale is set in a logically-conceived, consistent world complete with its meticulously worked out rationale---a thing, sadly, all too rare in fantasy, but what one has learned to expect from this author. My chief complaint is with its frustrating shortness. Niven has a talent for coming up with interesting ideas, but I would have liked to have seen the ones here utilised more fully. Highly recommended---what there is of it.

BLIND VOICES by Tom Reamy, Penguin £1.75, 254 pages

Reviewed by Dave Packwood.

This is Tom Reamy's first and only novel, for he died suddenly in 1977. Set in the 1920s in mid-western USA, it has the feeling of Bradbury's Something Wicked This Way Comes. The plot revolves around the small prairie town of Hawley, Kansas. A travelling circus, full of wonders and freaks, arrives there under the control of the malevolent magician, Haverstock. The tour de force of the show is Angel, the Magic Boy, who performs miraculous feats every night under Haverstock's hypnotic spell. With the aid of a girl from the town Angel tries to escape. Competently described with intriguing characters, though in its latter stages it sacrifices originality for mere melodrama. Still a worthwhile read.

THE WAR HOUND AND THE WORLD'S PAIN by Michael Moorcock, NEL £6.95, 198pp

Reviewed by Anne Gay.

Not the stock Moorcock. Satan is having the Devil's own job to get back into Heaven. He enlists a mercenary---the War Hound---to find a cure for the World's Pain. But if Satan leaves for Paradise, who will look after the legions of the damned? So there is a rebellion in Hell. Poor War Hound, besieged on all sides, loved only by another damned soul. Can he find the Holy Grail, save the world, Lucifer, himself and his love? Can the War Hound save the Universe as we know it? Moorcock displays his great facility as a storyteller, creating unforgettable scenes and characters. He's concentrated on the writing rather more than is his wont, and has created more Sympathy for the Devil than Mick Jagger. Maybe the historical background is real; if so it's an unlovely setting for a thought-provoking allegory. But it leaves a nasty taste in the mouth.

THE SWORD AND THE SORCERER by Norman Winski, Sphere £1.50, 246 pages

Reviewed by Allan Cash.

This is the familiar hackneyed plot of the child of a horribly-slaughtered good king growing up into a mighty-thewed barbarian, intent on revenging his father's murder. Responsible for the latter was an unbelievably evil conqueror called Cromwell, who won his victory by enlisting the assistance of a sorcerer (whom he then attempts to destroy). Most of this tale concerns the son's and the back-from-the-undead sorcerer's independent attempts to kill Cromwell. The plot rears to an excruciating climax of treachery piled on like sodden cardboard on a bonfire. This is writing "from the original [!] screenplay" of the most dire calibre, containing every known cliché---"faster, you dogs..." Even for a genre novel it beggars incredulity. Anyone seen the film?

FANTASY LITERATURE by Marshall B. Tymn, Kenneth J. Zahorski & Robert H. Boyer, Bowker Publishing Co., £8.50, 273 pages Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

While SF has suffered an excess of critical attention over the last five years, in the shape of bibliographies, guides, surveys and author studies, much less attention has been paid to fantasy. This quality paperback helps redress the balance by providing long plot summaries/ contents lists of a "core collection" of 240 important fantasy novels, collections and anthologies, plus an excellent introductory article and useful information on critical works, awards, societies, etc. The period covered is up to the end of 1978. As with all the Bowker titles, this is aimed mostly at libraries and contains an admirably high standard of accuracy and scholarship. Its only real shortcoming is self-imposed: it covers only works of high fantasy (defined as those set upon fantasy worlds rather than our own Earth), which means the exclusion of many lesser-known borderline fantasies. All libraries and fantasy collectors should buy copies.

OMNI'S CONTINUUM edited by Dick Teresi, Sidgwick & Jackson £5.95, 248pp
Reviewed by Bob Vernon.

What a silly book this is! An idiot source of conversational non-starters, gobbets of pseudo-scientific gossip presented in a way the Sun would be proud of: condescending and often sexist. This collection of snippets from Omni's monthly section of "discoveries in science" gives no guide to their sources, dates, development or veracity, lacking cross-references and index (there is a list of contents at the back pretending to be an index, unconvincingly). Like a wine-tasting serving inferior plonk in unlabelled bottles, I would not advise you to swallow any of it. It is also outrageously priced for a paperback.

DOOMSDAY 1999 by Charles Berlitz, Granada £1.50, 224 pages
Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

In the same doubtful and contentious tradition as The Bermuda Triangle, Berlitz has turned his attentions to future and past catastrophes. He has cobbled together biblical quotations, chunks of mythology, some crazy theories which have already been comprehensively debunked (such as the Jupiter Effect), the prophecies of Nostradamus, a few half-truths and a lot of bad science to back up his claim that Something Nasty is bound to happen to the world in 1982, or in 1999, or, well, sometime. He deserves a prize for one particularly silly chapter title: "Has the World Ended Before?". Do the sensible thing and leave this book on the shelf, as it so richly deserves.

THE HOMING PIGEONS [Schrodinger's Cat III] by Robert Abton Wilson, Sphere £1.95, 207 pages
Reviewed by Anne Gay.

Monty Python in print---for the first dozen pages. Lots of ideas, some of them very good, wander around bumping into characters who are totally thrown by them. Someone who thinks he is Frank Dashwood of Orgasm Research, Inc., wakes up to find he is (or isn't) somebody else. Alien agents and technical pranksters wreck the CIA's plan to find out what the hell is really going on. Several parallel Universes later, Frank discovers he is somebody else and the Earth's human seed climaxes through a black hole. Confused? You will be after reading this. But it's worth it for the one-liners. And a change is as good as

STAR TREK LOG 2 by Alan Dean Foster, Severn House £6.95, 176 pages
Reviewed by Alan Cash.

Considering the multiplicity of life forms in the universe, to have two not dissimilar aliens inhabiting two out of three slim short stories can mean only that someone's creativity is under par. Kirk meets a shape-changing alien, a dying alien race allying itself to a eugenically produced giant, and a race of giantesses and, of course, he wins them over/ vanquishes them within what seems like the time-slot allowed for on "The Box". This is hardly surprising, as all three are culled from TV scripts, which must be an unrewarding task for an author stuck with someone else's format. Light with unintentional humour.

BYZANTIUM ENDURES by Michael Moorcock, Fontana £2.95, 404 pages

Reviewed by Bob Vernon.

After Gloriana's stylised mock-heroic labyrinth Moorcock has turned his attention to the anarchic farce of the Russian Civil War in this, the first part of the fictional autobiography of Colonel Pyat. This Ukrainian scientist/engineer, toad, lecher, paranoiac survivor has appeared in some of the Jerry Cornelius books, and here a young and beautiful Mrs Cornelius is Troski's mistress. Pyat is a loveless man; utterly unable to see himself clearly or, therefore, to understand others' reactions to him, yet he observes his surroundings with the dreadful deranged clarity of the true bigot. This irony is at first amusing, then tedious, but finally approaches tragic heights, for this is not simply a Flashman in Dr Zhivago's clothing, but a bold attempt to follow Pushkin, Gogol and Nabakov, paradoxically through a narrator who is the antithesis of their humanity and sensitivity. Massively researched, dense, picaresque and sharp, this ranks with The Condition of Muzak.

MAYNARD'S HOUSE by Herman Raucher, Hamlyn £1.50, 252 pages

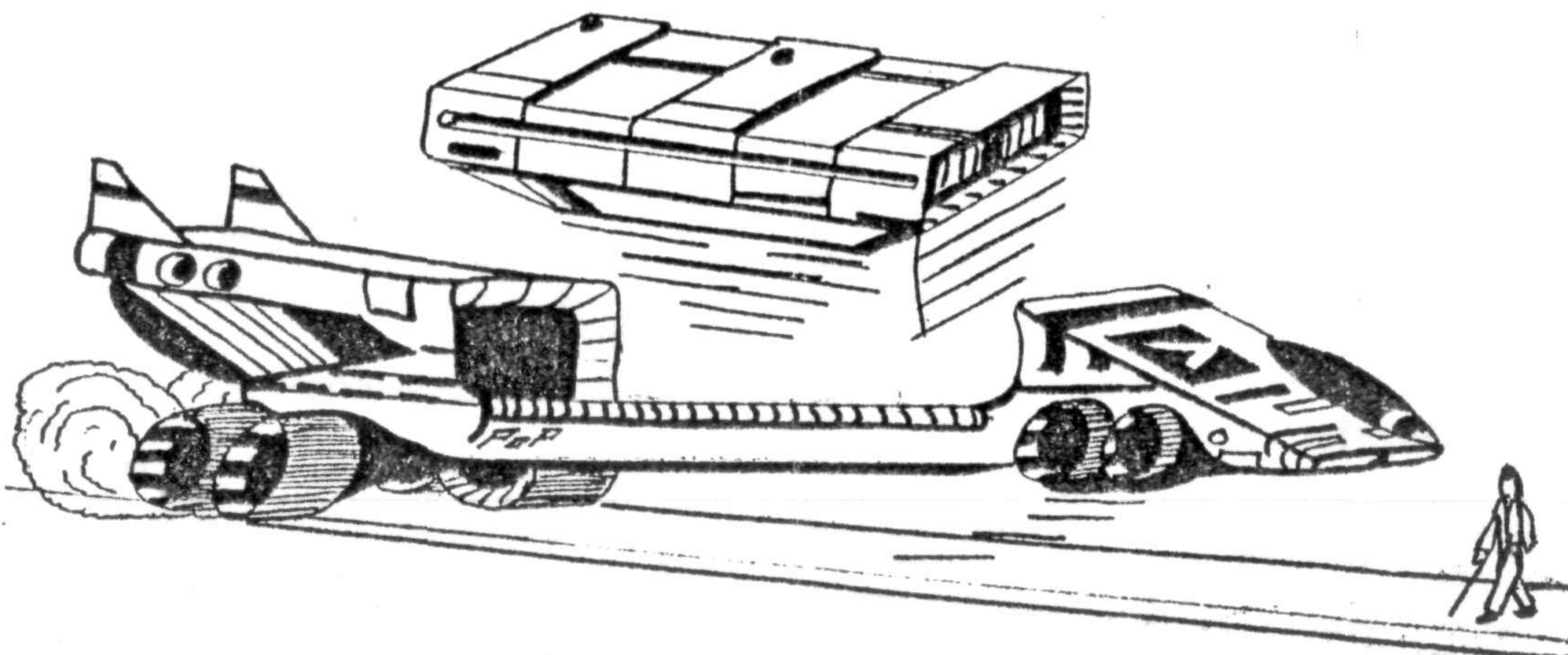
Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Here we have a haunted house novel with a difference: it's totally unconvincing. Oh, the descriptions of winter in and around a small, isolated and extremely primitive house in present-day Maine are quite believable, down to the last squirrel. It's just that every time Raucher introduces a supernatural element he signals it in advance and then drops it into the action (well, inaction, generally), where it stands out incongruously; clearly he doesn't believe in the supernatural and doesn't care whether or not his audience does. If you enjoy good contemporary horror novels you'll do better to stick to Stephen King and Peter Straub. Give this one a miss.

DARK COMPANIONS by Ramsey Campbell, Fontana £1.75, 255 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

There can be little doubt that Ramsey Campbell is Britain's foremost writer of horror fiction. Most of his work is set in his home city of Liverpool, particularly among the terraced houses and derelict sites of poorer areas, where horrors are more easily imagined. Campbell concentrates on setting and mood; both are dark and unsettling from the very first line. Operating in that no-man's-land between supernatural and psychological horror, he persists in turning over stones to show the nastiest, most terrifying, aspects of society lurking beneath. This collection of twenty-one stories is not pleasant reading, not for the squeamish. It is believably, impressively nightmarish.



Scintillating is the word for this new and varied collection of ten stories. The two longest, the title story and "News From the Sun", return to Ballard's longest-running theme---that of an individual slowly dying/achieving apotheosis in a depopulated USA. Recurring images in both include flying (actually or spiritually) and the US space programme. Most other pieces in this collection are very short. Most memorable is "Having a Wonderful Time", an extremely witty solution to Britain's current economic problems. There are several other slightly futuristic satires here---a British civil war, a time when personal contact is forbidden, and a new-style zodiac---but these are all sharp and full of unpleasant truths. Ballard shows no evidence here of changing direction or breaking new ground, yet his inimitable style and apocalyptic subjects are as compelling as ever.

Reviewed by Pauline E.Morgan.

UNDER HEAVEN'S BRIDGE by Ian Watson & Michael Bishop, Corgi £1.50, 160pp

Both Watson and Bishop have previously, separately, produced novels showing human expeditions confronting enigmatic aliens. Now they have collaborated on such a novel, though a surprisingly brief and unsatisfying one for authors of their calibre. Multinational starship crews have become a stock element (since Star Trek, at least), and the one featured here is little more than a congregation of strange names except for the viewpoint character, Keiko Takahashi, who is constrained by her Japanese heritage. The aliens (called Kybers, the most exquisitely wrong choice of alien name since Jack Vance's Servants of the Wankh) are fascinating. The big question is, are they living creatures or machines? Don't hold your breath hoping to find out. A competent novel but, like almost all collaborations, uninspired.

Reviewed by Peter Day.

Editorial Notes