

BRUM GROUP NEWS

THE *FREE* MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE

BIRMINGHAM SCIENCE FICTION GROUP

APRIL 2010

ISSUE 463

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

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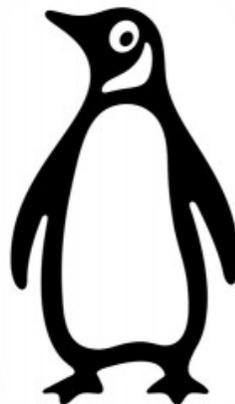
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Friday 9th April CHRIS MORGAN - Penguin Books



PENGUINS AND OTHER EARLY PAPERBACKS is the title of this month's talk. It's a brief illustrated history of the paperback from the 19th century up to about 1960. This is to commemorate the 75th anniversary of Penguin Books in July 2010. Covering (1) Paperbacks before Penguin; (2) Early Penguins; (3) The Competitors of Penguin. Dealing mostly with UK paperbacks and mostly with SF.

A PowerPoint presentation by CHRIS MORGAN, Brum Group member and regular attendee at meetings since 1972. Chris Morgan was Birmingham Poet Laureate 2008-9. He teaches Creative Writing to adults, gives frequent lectures and readings, and is the author/editor of 11 books (one of them co-written with the much more famous but less poetic David Langford)!

Penguin started in 1935 but were there paperbacks before then? Were

May 14th – comic fantasy author JASPER FFORDE returns to entertain us in his own special way!! You MUST buy your ticket by April 9th to guarantee a seat!

there paperbacks 100 years ago? In the 19th century? If you don't know the answers to these questions then this talk will give you the answers. Come along and learn!

RGP

The meeting will take place in the conference room on the first floor of the Briar Rose Hotel – YES, WE'RE BACK TO OUR USUAL VENUE – in Bennett's Hill, off New Street.

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 usually £3.00; non-members' is £4.00 but there is no charge for the AGM/Auction each January.

>>> IMPORTANT NOTICE <<<

In line with many other hotels the Briar Rose has implemented a security system that, among other things, automatically closes and locks, at 8.00pm, the door from the stairwell/lift area to the corridor leading to the Conference Room in which we meet. It can be opened from the corridor or with a key from the stairwell, but cannot be overridden and left open, which presents us with problems on several fronts.

If someone arrives after 8.00pm to the Meeting the door will have locked and they will not be able to enter. Arrangements have been made with the Hotel Management that if this happens, they should go down to Reception and ask the Receptionist to ring the Conference Room; a Committee member will then let them in. But this arrangement must be used with discretion because the phone ring and the movement of people to and from the room will disturb the speaker, the Committee member wants to enjoy the talk as well and if the Receptionist is bothered too often they will not appreciate it and we are on good terms with them at the moment. There is also the problem for the latecomer that they may have to wait while the Receptionist deals with hotel residents. So if you are late would you please wait until 10 past, 20 past or half past the hour before ringing. After half past it's best to wait until the speaker finishes.

Getting drinks etc., is another problem. The Conference Room is open from 7.30pm, usually much earlier, so please arrive early, get your drinks and use the facilities and be seated before 7.50. At this time the Bar gets crowded and you will probably have to wait to get served. If you do misjudge things please ring as outlined above.

The period between the speaker finishing and about 10.30pm should be easier to manage if members takes turns to be 'Corridor doorman' for 10 minutes at a time. The Committee will take the first half hour then a draw will be held for the next six stints. That's 60 stints a year i.e. about 3 per person per year, except for the Committee, who will be doing stints at every meeting. Or people could go to and return from the Bar *en bloc* at prearranged times or similarly *ad hoc*. Essentially, all that's needed is cooperation, a trait of any Fan. Of course, if anyone can think of another solution to the problem your Committee would be most pleased if you would let us know by email or at the April Meeting.

It may all be a bit inconvenient at times but it's more than outweighed by the positive aspects of meeting where we do, including the not inconsiderable financial aspect.

VB

Hitches Happen

Due to a glitch in the printing of last month's *Ansible* it was not ready in time to post with the Newsletter so, to keep you your collection complete, you should find it in this month's mailing together with the current one.



LAST MONTH – Rog Peyton

Once again Jo Fletcher treated us to details of what goes on in a publisher's office. After reading more extracts from very embarrassing manuscripts and even more embarrassing letters from would-be writers who have no chance in hell of ever being published, she shifted the focus of the talk to cover art and design.

With the help of a large pile of books, Jo explained the differences between art covers and design covers, showing examples of books that had been treated to both types of cover and told us which ones had worked and which hadn't.

So fascinating was the talk that no-one noticed the time and Jo finally had to wind up shortly after 10.30!!! Wonderful stuff! More please... *RGP*

HAPPY BIRTHDAY! - Vernon Brown

April 8th sees the fiftieth anniversary of the first official Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence, or SETI for short. Early on that morning in 1960 Frank Drake pointed a radio telescope towards Tau Ceti, a star similar to the Sun, in an attempt to detect radio transmissions which could indicate the presence of intelligent life. This initial search, called Project Ozma, lasted for several months with no result, but started a search that continues to this day.

The following year saw the Green Bank Conference, when a number of eminent scientists met to discuss and decide on SETI, and where Drake first publicised his now famous Equation giving the likelihood of the number of such species that there may be.

$$N = R^* \times F_p \times N_e \times F_l \times F_i \times F_c \times L$$

(Where N = Number of observable civilizations in the Milky Way. R* = Rate of star formation per year. Fp = Fraction of stars with planets. Ne = Fraction of planets suitable for life per system. Fl = Fraction of planets where life evolves. Fi = Fraction of such planets where intelligent life evolves. Fc = Fraction of intelligent species with interstellar radio. L = Average life of such a civilization in years).

Although most of these factors can only be educated guesses Fp, the fraction of stars with planetary systems, has grown over the last few years as improved technology has enabled astronomers to detect more such systems. Which leads us to The Question, the Answer to which is not 42, of why we haven't been contacted yet: there are several possibilities that have been discussed in fact and fiction but, of course, the one that eventually proves correct will be the one that no-one thought of.

For more information Google - Drakes Equation Project Ozma SETI.

VB

FAAN AWARDS RESULTS

Presented at the 27th Corflu, 19th-21st March 2010 at The Winchester Hotel, Winchester

Best Fanzine - Banana Wings

Best Fan Writer - Claire Brialey

Best Fan Artist - Steve Stiles

Best Letterhack - Robert Lichtman

Best Fan Website - eFanzines

Best New Fanzine Fan - Jacqueline Monahan

Lifetime Achievement Award - Ted White

#1 Fan Face - Robert Lichtman

NEWS IN BRIEF . . .



.... Australian author **Patricia Wrightson** (b.1921) died on March 15. Wrightson was the recipient of the Hans Christian Andersen Award in 1986 and often used native Australian mythology in her writing. Although Wrightson was best known as a children's author, she also wrote non-juvenile works such as *THE ICE IS COMING*, *JOURNEY BEHIND THE WIND* and *THE DARK BRIGHT WATER* Artist **Robert McCall** (b.1919) died on February 26. McCall learned he was colourblind when trying to become a pilot in World War II. Following the war, he worked as an illustrator for Bielefelt Studios and Charles Cooper Studios. Long an avid fan of aviation, in the 1960s, he worked for NASA to help create illustrations for NASA and in 1967 he began working on the promotional art for Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY*. Other science fiction film posters he created include *STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE*, *METEOR* and *THE BLACK HOLE* **Chicago in 2012** was the only Worldcon bid to file the necessary paperwork by the deadline for this year's Worldcon site selection. Voting will be conducted at Aussiecon 4 in Melbourne, Australia The winners of the **James Tiptree, Jr. Award**, given annually for gender-bending speculative fiction, have been announced - *CLOUD AND ASHES: THREE WINTER'S TALES* by **Greer Gilman Ooku** and *THE INNER CHAMBERS* (volumes 1 & 2) by **Fumi Yoshinaga**. The jury also indicated a special honour to L. Timmel Duchamp for her five volume *Mary'ssan Cycle* series Two recipients for this year's **Service to SFWA Awards** have been announced. **Vonda N McIntyre** will receive a service award for her years maintaining various SFWA member websites. **Keith Stokes** will be honoured for his service on multiple committees and management of SFWA news alerts **Eric S Rabkin** has been named the winner of the **2009 Pilgrim Award**, presented by the Science Fiction Research Association. The Pilgrim Award is a lifetime achievement award given for contributions to SF and fantasy scholarship. Rabkin, who teaches at the University of Michigan, has published more than 30 volumes on SF The four inductees into the **Science Fiction Hall of Fame** have been announced. The induction ceremony will take place in Seattle, Washington on June 26 as part of the Science Fiction Awards Weekend. This year's inductees are **Octavia E. Butler**, **Richard Matheson**, **Douglas Trumbull** and **Roger Zelazny** The



nominees for the **Compton Crook Award**, presented to a new author for the best novel, have been announced. The winner will be announced at Balticon 44 the weekend of May 28-31. The Compton Crook Award is presented annually by the Baltimore Science Fiction Society. They are **THE WINDUP GIRL** by **Paolo Bacigalupi**; **DYING BITES** by **D.D. Barant**, **SOULESS** by **Gail Carriger** and **JOHANNES CABEL**, **THE NECROMANCER** by **Jonathan L. Howard** (see review elsewhere in this issue) **BATTLEFIELD EARTH**, the blockbuster bomb based on the novel by Scientology founder **L. Ron Hubbard**, won the Razzie for "Worst Movie of the Decade" Only three days after a copy of **Action Comics #1** sold for \$1,000,000, a copy of **Detective Comics #27** from 1939 was sold for

\$1,075,500. This issue, one of fewer than 200 in existence and possibly the only one in 'very fine' condition, is the comic that introduced the character Batman

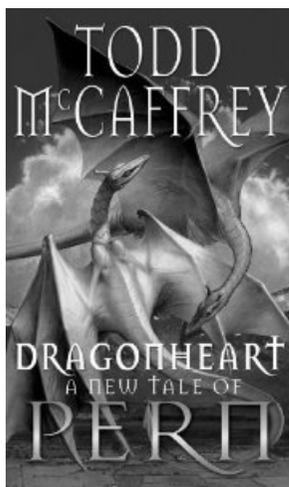
RGP



BOOK REVIEWS



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



DRAGONHEART by **Todd McCaffrey**
Corgi / 761pgs / £7.99 paperback ISBN:
978-0552155762

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan

Some concepts seem to endure. The Dragonriders of Pern and their adventures have that quality. Created originally by Anne McCaffrey in 1968, the telepathic dragons have gained a huge following. After several collaborations with his mother, Todd McCaffrey has taken on the mantle. **DRAGONHEART** is set five hundred and seven years after the landing of the first colonists on Pern and is the middle book of a related trilogy. Thread, the deadly organism that falls from the Red Star onto Pern when the cometary body crosses the orbit of the planet, is due to start falling very shortly. The population of Pern has been greatly reduced by a plague and the dragons are falling sick. Fiona, the only

surviving daughter of the Lord Holder of Fort Hold, has just impressed a gold dragon.

With dragons dying and numbers diminished due to natural wastage in the safe Interval, and due to injury and inexperience when the Thread does come, there will soon be insufficient dragons to keep the planet clear. It is decided to send some of the injured and all the young dragons back ten years in time (dragons are able to travel between instantly in time and space) so that the injured can recover and the young can grow up and be trained. Fiona with her gold dragon is taken as Weyrwoman to an abandoned Weyr. Although she is only thirteen turns old, she has to take on the responsibility of organising the Weyr and making sure there is food and other supplies for both dragons and men.

Although the writing and the understanding of the culture of Pern are immaculate, this particular book does not sparkle. The emphasis is on the day to day problems of running a Weyr. There is no sense of a danger where the main characters may not survive, so tension is lacking and the emotional charge is neutral. As it skims across a number of turns (Pern's years) the characterisation also seem a little skimpy. Even the sickness the dragons suffer from, disappears once they go back in time. What this book is doing is filling in gaps, explaining how situations in other volumes happened. It is a light, pleasant read but there are stronger ones within the series. PM

JOHANNES CABAL THE NECROMANCER

by Jonathan L Howard

Headline / 337 pgs / £7.99 paperback ISBN: 978-0755347858

Reviewed by Sam Fennell



Jonathan L Howard's debut novel is the first of what promises to be a successful series of black comedy fantasy novels.

The protagonist, necromancer and brilliant scientist Johannes Cabal, has made a Faustian pact with the devil but wishes his soul returned. His lack of soul has been impeding further progress in his scientific work and research. The Devil, delighted at the prospect of a new deal with Cabal that might provide him with sufficient amusement to alleviate his eternal boredom, agrees to a new deal; the return of Cabal's soul in exchange for 100 others within a year. Gleeefully the Devil throws an infernal travelling carnival and a ration of

black magic into the pact to 'help' Cabal in meeting his end of the bargain. Cabal uses this black magic to create some unnatural and peculiar characters as

The Middle-earth Weekend

Celebrating the life and work of
J.R.R. Tolkien
in the childhood haunts that inspired him

15th and 16th May 2010

The Shire County Park
Birmingham City Council, The Tolkien Society and
local community groups invite you to join us:

11:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. each day

Sarehole Mill, Cole Bank Road, Hall Green,
Birmingham (On the number 11 bus route)

Attractions include:-

a working watermill, Guided Tours, Craft Marquee,
Children's Activities, The Tolkien Society, Climbing
Wall, Traditional Crafts,
Farmers' Market, Viking Re-enactment, Music,
Drama and Poetry

FREE ADMISSION

There may be a charge for some activities within the event

the carnival's attractions. Cabal also enlists his charismatic and crowd-charming vampire brother to assist in the promotion of the carnival to entice unsuspecting carnival-goers from which Cabal endeavours to recruit his quota of souls.

Cabal is not a hero. He is driven to obsession for necromancy, lacks morality and is an exceptional snob. There are one or two moments in the book where the reader begins to think that Cabal may be empathizing with another character, but these end in chillingly nefarious deeds and conduct. This not only reinforces the reader's perception of Cabal, but rather satisfyingly ensures that any 'he'll-turn-good-by-the-end' clichés are avoided. However, although occasionally alternating between liking and loathing him, the reader somehow ends up rooting for Cabal by the end of the book.

Howard makes clear that his inspiration for this novel is Ray Bradbury's *SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES*, the early sixties fantasy horror set in a town visited by an evil carnival. Lovers of this cross-genre classic would no doubt find Howard's comic response to the question 'where would an evil carnival come from, anyway?' a fun tale.

This is not laugh-out-loud comic fantasy akin to Pratchett's *Discworld* series or Butcher's *Dresden Files*. More fittingly it is witty, dry and somewhat clever. If there is a criticism it is that sometimes the comedy is too clever, or that the occasional scene seems to have been constructed purely to place a clever gag into the book.

Another criticism is that there is a large gap after the first third of the book. The carnival goes from having gained 3 souls in one chapter, to only having two more to collect in the next chapter with just a paragraph to summarise the best part of a year. This was a little disappointing, and when coupled with an ending that came a little too quickly, the reader could be easily forgiven for wishing that there had been another 100 pages or so to this book.

Despite any criticisms, the book is a swift, peculiar and entertaining read which is well resolved at the end. The reader is left with enough of an interest in the characters and the hint of a plot that will arc over subsequent novels to leave them looking forward to reading the next one. *JOHANNES CABAL THE DETECTIVE* will be released in July this year and I for one shall look forward to the next installment of this most quirky and macabre of comedies. *SF*

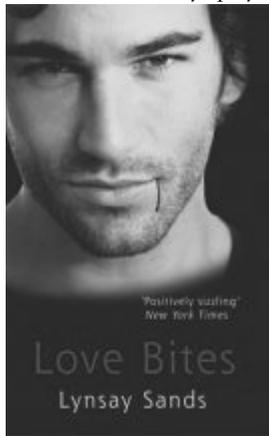
***LOVE BITES* by Lynsay Sands**

Gollancz / 373pgs / £6.99 paperback ISBN: 978-0575093812

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan

With so many books having been written about vampires it seems difficult to come up with a new idea. This one has. *LOVE BITES* is the first in a new series about the Argeneau family. The whole family are vampires. This is explained to the female lead, Rachel Garrett, as being due to nano-technology developed by the Atlantean people thousands of years ago. The nanos repair all

the body's damaged tissues, rejuvenating, preventing aging, producing longevity and increasing sexual performance. Unfortunately they use blood to do their work. Nice theory, pity it is seriously flawed. These vampires can have children.



The nanos as described would not allow that, and why would they produce hollow fangs in a 'turned' human?

The plot is simple. A man called Pudge is trying to kill Etienne. We are not exactly sure why he has a vendetta against the vampire, but twice within a week Etienne's apparently lifeless body turns up in Rachel's morgue. The second time, Pudge also arrives swinging an axe, intending to decapitate Etienne. Rachel gets in the way. Etienne saves her life by giving her his blood, starting the change of human to vampire. When his family comes to rescue him, they take Rachel away as well. Much of the rest of the book is about Rachel coming to terms with being a vampire, falling in love with Etienne and sex romps – until Pudge shows up

again near the end.

Many of the aspects of the plot that would bring the novel up a level from just being an erotic fantasy are sidelined for the developing relationship between Etienne and Rachel. Even the family politics could have easily been strengthened without too much trouble. Although there are a lot of readers who like this kind of material, this author does not yet have the flair of Charlaine Harris or Laurell K. Hamilton which makes their work exciting to read. PM

***THE DRAGON KEEPER* by Robin Hobb**

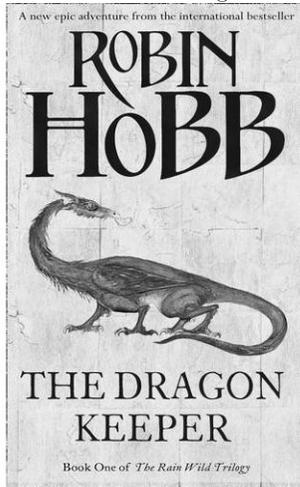
Harper/Voyager / 560pgs / £7.99 paperback ISBN: 978-0007342594

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan

After an excursion, Robin Hobb has returned to the world in which she set the *Farseer*, *Live Ships* and *Tawny Man* series. Although there are familiar elements, such as the live ships (which are constructed from wizardwood and have sentience) and the dragon Tintaglia (who found a mate at the end of the *Tawny Man* trilogy) **THE DRAGON KEEPER** is the start of a separate trilogy, making it unnecessary to read the other books first.

As part of her payment for defending the town against Chalcedian raiders, Tintaglia struck a bargain with the Traders of Bingtown. What had not previously been known was that dragon eggs hatched into sea serpents. These, when fully grown, should have made their way up the Rain Wild River to the cocooning grounds. Inside the cocoons, the serpents changed into dragons. The cocoons were the wizardwood that the liveships were constructed from. In making the ships, thousands of dragons were unknowingly destroyed. With Tintaglia's help, the last sea serpents are rounded up and led to the cocooning

grounds by Cassarick. However, they do not have enough time to develop properly and when they emerge they all have some degree of deformity. They need constant feeding.



Alise Kincarron once resigned herself to spinsterhood but when she is courted by Hest Finbok, a rich eligible bachelor, she agrees to marry him. All her dreams of a romantic marriage die as he spends very little time with her. Instead, she devotes her time to studying dragons and the Elderlings that used to share their cities with the intelligent beasts. Finally, in despair over her neglect by her husband, she invokes a clause in the marriage contract to go upriver to see and talk to the dragons. She arrives just as they are being moved out, up-river in search of the mythical city of Kelsingra, a place of which the dragons have vague ancestral memories.

This novel is an excellent beginning for a trilogy that has the makings of a worthy companion set to the other novels set in this world. Already there are tensions and misunderstandings. The dragons are arrogant and their keepers hard pressed to keep up with them. Alise and Thymara, a Rain Wilds girl and one of the dragon keepers, are both beginning to shake off the shackles of their respective upbringings and develop the characters that have hitherto been suppressed. All the characters find themselves in a situation that brings out the best and the worst in each of them. The only downside is the obvious reason why Hest only wanted a show wife. Nevertheless, I look forward to reading volume two.

PM

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 rogpeyton@hotmail.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:-

April 22nd - **THE CITY & THE CITY** by China Mieville.

Future books to be discussed will provisionally be...

TRANSITION by Iain Banks
FLASHFORWARD by Robert Sawyer
COALESCENT by Stephen Baxter
DIVERGENCE by Tony Ballantyne
LET THE RIGHT ONE IN by Jon Avide Lindquist
HUNTER'S RUN by Martin, Dozois & Abrahams.

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. More details from Martin Tudor - (empties084@btinternet.com).

SCI-FI LONDON 9: THE LONDON INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASTIC FILM will be held 28th April to May 3rd Full details from www.sci-fi-london.com/

THE WRITE FANTASTIC is celebrating its 5th Anniversary on May 8th with a special one day event at the Jacqueline Du Pré Building, St Hilda's College, Oxford. Guests confirmed so far are Stephen Deas, Ben Jeapes, Geoff Ryman, Mike Shevdon and Ian Watson. New members will be Kari Sperring, Ian Whates, Freda Warrington and Liz Williams. More details at www.thewritefantastic.com/anniversary.html

FANTASYCON 2010 will be held over the weekend of September 17–19 at the Britannia Hotel, 1 St James Street, Nottingham. Guest of Honour will be Lisa Tuttle. Master of Ceremonies will be James Barclay. Website is.... <http://sites.google.com/site/fantasycon2010/>

HAVE YOU GOT YOUR TICKET FOR THE MAY MEETING?

Because of the huge popularity of our May speaker JASPER FFORDE we are already receiving requests for tickets from non-members. There will be a limit to the number of people allowed in the room. Ticket holders will have preference over members without tickets!!!! So please ensure that you have purchased your ticket by April 9th at the latest!



NOVACON 40 – the Brum Group’s own convention and the longest-running regional convention in the UK, will be once again held at The Park Inn, 296 Mansfield Road, Nottingham, NG5 2BT. Dates are November 12th to 14th November. Guest of Honour is **Iain M Banks** and Special Guests are our Presidents **Brian Aldiss, O.B.E.** and **Harry Harrison**. Full details at <http://novacon.org.uk/>

FUTURE MEETINGS OF THE BSFG

June 11th – SF author PAT CADIGAN

July 9th – SF/fantasy author STEVE FEASEY

August 13th – Summer Social – meal at The Black Eagle

September 10th – tba

October 8th – SF, fantasy author and satirist ADAM ROBERTS

November 5th – SF author CHARLES STROSS

December 3rd – Christmas Social

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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