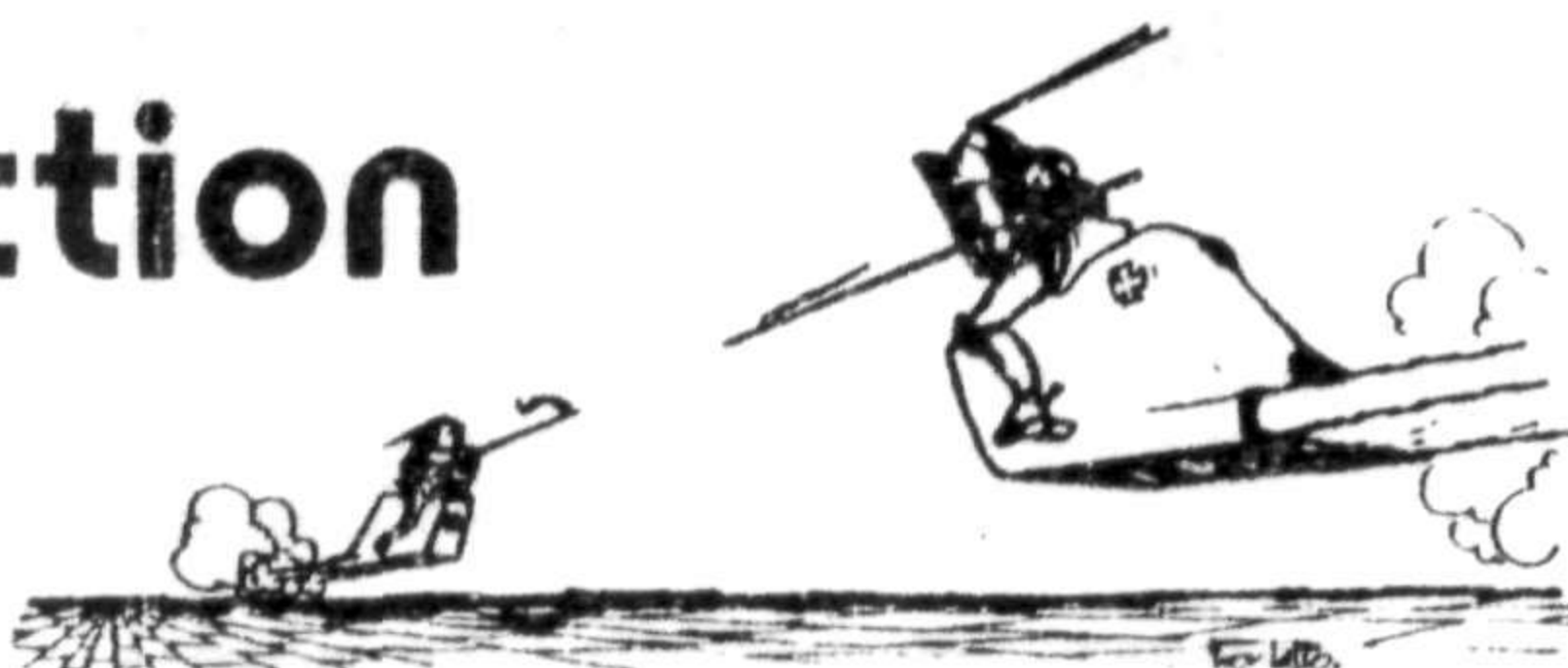


Birmingham Science Fiction Group

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



NEWSLETTER 129

MAY 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. Our treasurer is Margaret Thorpe, 36 Twyford Road, Ward End, Birmingham 8. The 12-month subscription is £3.50.

MAY MEETING - Friday 21st May at 7.45 pm

KEN BULMER

is a very prolific writer, with over 70 SF and fantasy novels to his credit (many of them published under pseudonyms such as Alan Burt Akers and Tully Zetford). That would be enough for one man, you might think, but he has also written many non-speculative novels (mainly historical adventure) under a variety of names. He has been an editor of SF, taking over New Writings in SF series after the death of John Carnell. Above all, Ken has been a great fan of SF since his youth, attending a lot of conventions and passing on his enthusiasm for the genre to hundreds of other fans. He has been guest-of-honour at the 1968 Eastercon and at Novacon 3.

Admission the month: Members 60p, non-members £1.00

APRIL MEETING

Anne Page gave us a promotional talk on Blade Runner, the forthcoming film based on Philip K. Dick's novel Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? She was aided by a video film and slides.

The Group took £29.80 at the meeting, comprising: Raffle -£5.20, at the door - £24.60. The cost of the meeting was £57.28, comprising: Room hire - £15.00, Speakers expenses - £5.28, Equipment hire - £37.00. This gave an overall loss of £27.48. Video evenings are expensive.

FORTHCOMING

* June - Dave Langford, author and Hugo nominee for fan writing, is going to tell us a fairy story.

* July - Beer and Skittles evening at the White Swan, Harborne.. There will be a buffet and bar extension. Tickets are now available at £3.50 each, from Margaret Thorpe by post (cheques payable to Birmingham Science Fiction Group), at the May meeting or at Andromeda Bookshop after 21st May. Buy your ticket early to be sure of getting one.

* Later - BSFA National Mastermind Quiz, Midlands regional heat. This is based on the BBC version, and we need volunteers to take part in this heat so as to ensure that the Brum Group will have a representative in the final, which will probably be held at next year's Eastercon. If you want to take part contact any committee member, naming your specialised subject (or you can answer two sets of SF general knowledge questions if you prefer).

...NEWS...

THE NEBULA AWARD winners have been announced. They are, Novel: The Claw of the Conciliator - Gene Wolfe, Novelette: "The Quickening" - Michael Bishop, Short Story: "The Bone Flute" - Lisa Tuttle (despite her having withdrawn it at the last moment).

THE BSFA AWARD winners were announced at Channelcon over Easter. They are, Novel: The Shadow of the Torturer - Gene Wolfe, Short Fiction: "Mythago Wood" - Robert Holdstock, Artist: Bruce Pennington, Media: Time Bandits.

THE HUGO NOMINATIONS include the novels, Downbelow Station - C.J.Cherryh, Little, Big - John Crowley, The Many-Colored Land - Julian May, Project Pope - Clifford D.Simak, The Claw of the Conciliator - Gene Wolfe. In other categories the only British nominee is Dave Langford for Fan Writing.

TAFF WINNER was Kev Smith, by the US vote. The majority of British votes went to Rog Peyton but apparently the American fans are not aware of his charm.

BRIAN ALDISS appeared on Roy Plomley's "Desert Island Discs" on 17th April. He chose a wide selection of music and a time machine as his luxury item.

INTERZONE is a new British SF magazine, whose first issue has just been published. Its similarities to the Moorcock New Worlds are unmistakable; included are stories by Angela Carter, Keith Roberts, John Sladek and Michael Moorcock. Priced at £1.25, it's available at Andromeda Bookshop.

EXTRO 2 is now available and contains stories by Bob Shaw, James White, Richard Cowper plus articles, interviews and reviews. At 75p I personally think it is better value for money than Interzone.

QUARTZ 2, an amateur fan fiction magazine, costs 80p. Although an improvement on Quartz 1, it has a long way to go to reach the standards of Interzone or Extro.

BIRMINGHAM BOOK FAIR will be held at the Midland Institute on Friday, 21st May, 12noon - 8pm, and Saturday, 22nd May, 10am - 5pm. Admission 30p.

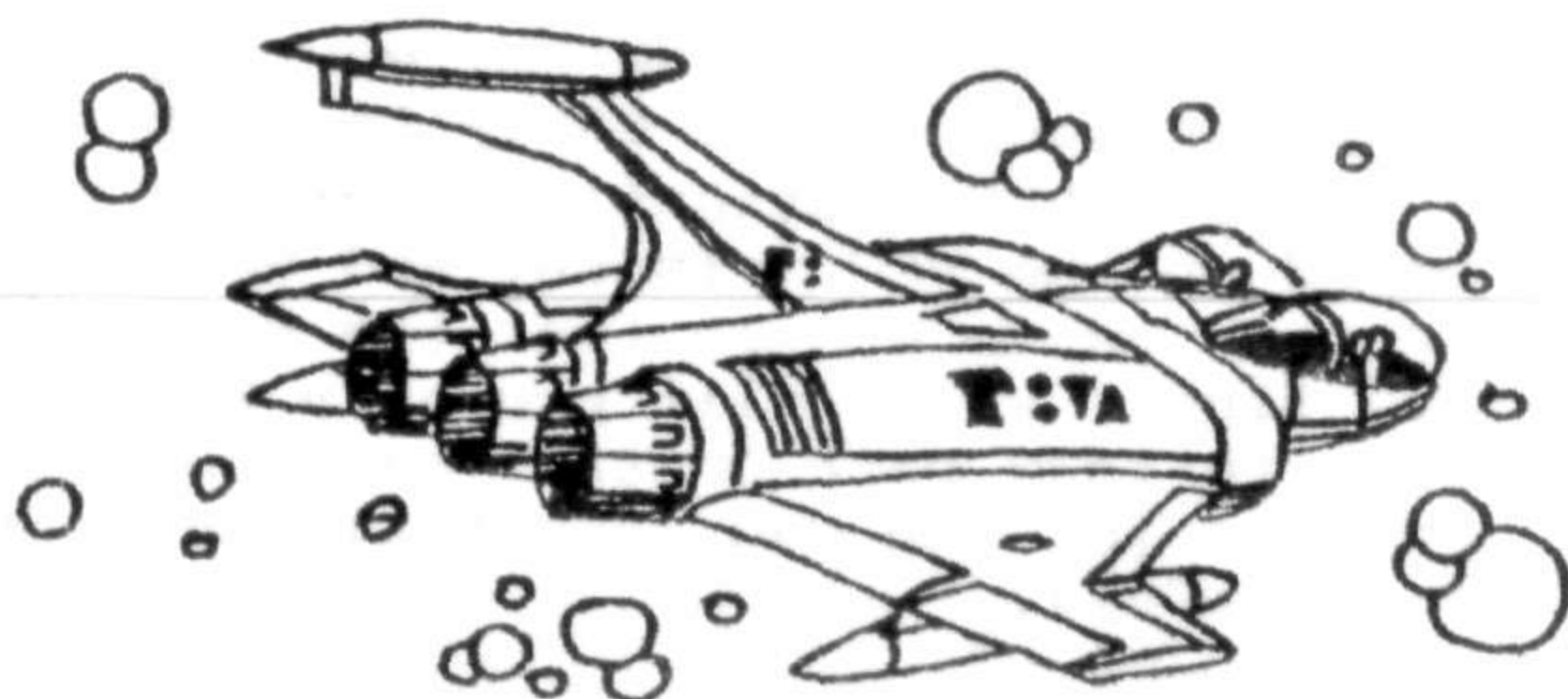
ANDROMEDA BOOKSHOP'S top ten best selling paperbacks for April were: 1.The One Tree - Stephen Donaldson (Fontana), 2.God Emperor of Dune - Frank Herbert (NEL), 3.Dr Who & the Warrior's Gate - John Lydecker (Target), 4.Oath of Fealty - Larry Niven & Jerry Pournelle (Futura), 5.The Claw of the Conciliator - Gene Wolfe (Arrow), 6.Worlds - Joe Haldeman (Futura), 7.The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman - Angela Carter (King Penguin), 8.The Lost Worlds of Cronus - Colin Kapp (NEL), 9.Camber the Heretic - Katherine Kurtz (Futura), 10=Search for the Sun! - Colin Kapp (NEL), 10=Windhaven - George R.R.Martin & Lisa Tuttle (NEL).

[NOTE: The Crystal Singer - Anne McCaffrey (Severn House) outsold the lot!]

THE SUNDAY TIMES best selling paperback list has featured The One Tree - Donaldson, God Emperor of Dune - Herbert, and Midnight's Children - Rushdie in recent weeks. All are reviewed later in this issue.

PATRICK MOORE celebrated 25 years of "The Sky at Night" on BBC1, on 25th April.

SOLIHULL SF GROUP still meets on the fourth Sunday of each month at the Red House, Hermitage Road (off Lode Lane) from 7.00pm onwards.



CHANNELCON

A CONVENTION REPORT by Martin Tudor:

Channelcon, the 1982 Eastercon, took place at the, impressive but expensive Brighton Metropole, one of the few hotels in Britain that can cope with the ever increasing numbers attending national conventions. Though very enjoyable (there were numerous bars) it was not a very heavily programmed convention. The most enjoyable items, after a shaky start with the 'Overseas Fandom Show', took place in the Fanroom. Even without such excellent items as Nick Lowe's "The Black Wine of Thentis" (a learned discourse on the misuse of coffee in SF) the fannish programme could hardly have failed to entertain, as the enthusiasm of the indefatigable Fan Room boss, Jim Barker, proved irresistible. One of the most interesting items was the BNFs vs Neos Quiz Show where, perhaps surprisingly, the BNFs won by a comfortable margin, proving that even the most fannish of tru-fen do occasionally read some SF.

I imagine that the comparative paucity of the main programme was meant to be balanced by the Fan, Video and Alternative programmes. The video room proved almost as popular as the Fan Room. Although frequently films were very late by even the most lax fannish standards, most video fans appeared to be reasonably satisfied with the selection presented. The alternative programme, however, failed to appear, due to an apparent lack of interest on the part of prospective speakers. This left the con with little in the way of sercon material when compared with the abundance of films and fannish activities.

Naturally the most popular place at the con proved, as usual, to be the bar, where despite distractions such as paper plane battles, it proved considerably easier to buy a pint than at Novacon. This probably had more to do with the combination of awful beer and extortionate prices than with superior service. One of the worst features of the con was the fact that ALL the bars closed from 4pm to 6pm. Although warned in advance of this deficiency even the most seasoned con-goers seemed to get caught out--- just before the "Question Time" item in which he was to appear, John Brunner was heard to exclaim, "The bar's closed but I haven't got a drink. I cannot possibly speak without a drink."

There were also the usual highlights of Eastercons around, an Anne Page extravaganza Fancy Dress Parade; a Serious Scientific Talk from the real Bob Shaw (which succeeded in being hilarious despite an abortive 'This is Your Life' piece perpetrated on Bob by Eve Harvey). Surprisingly enough another highlight proved to be the Eastercon bidding session with the ~~Bob Shaw~~ Albacon bid narrowly defeating the Metrocon bid despite Dave Langford's skiffy slide presentation "Sex Pirates of the Blood Astrocon". So if you haven't tried Eastercon yet, and want to, you've got to get all the way to Glasgow next year---it might be worth it.

...AND ANOTHER ONE by Chris Morgan.

Just in case you thought there weren't any, the guests-of-honour were Angela Carter and John Sladek, neither of whom seemed quite as sparklingly original live as in print. Not only was there a lack of good programme items, but there was a lack of control over them by the committee. The fancy dress was competently handled by Anne Page (as usual). The disco, run by Jeff Suter, was the best I've experienced at any con. Apart from excellent breakfasts I can think of little that was good about the Metropole Hotel; their bedrooms were poor value. The horrendously high bar prices were compensated for to some extent by free-booze parties thrown by Interzone and by the Metrocon and Albacon bidding committees. (I boycotted that last one on principle, just as I shall boycott their convention; you don't have to be mad to attend a con in Glasgow, but probably it helps.) I was pleased to see so many Brum Group members attending Channelcon---at least two dozen. There were good numbers of authors there, too, including Brian Aldiss, John Brunner, Josephine Saxton, Bob Shaw, James White, Ken Bulmer, Chris Priest and Brian Stableford. Despite it all, for me the best thing about the weekend was the street of good foreign food restaurants close to the Metropole.

Lord Mayor's procession

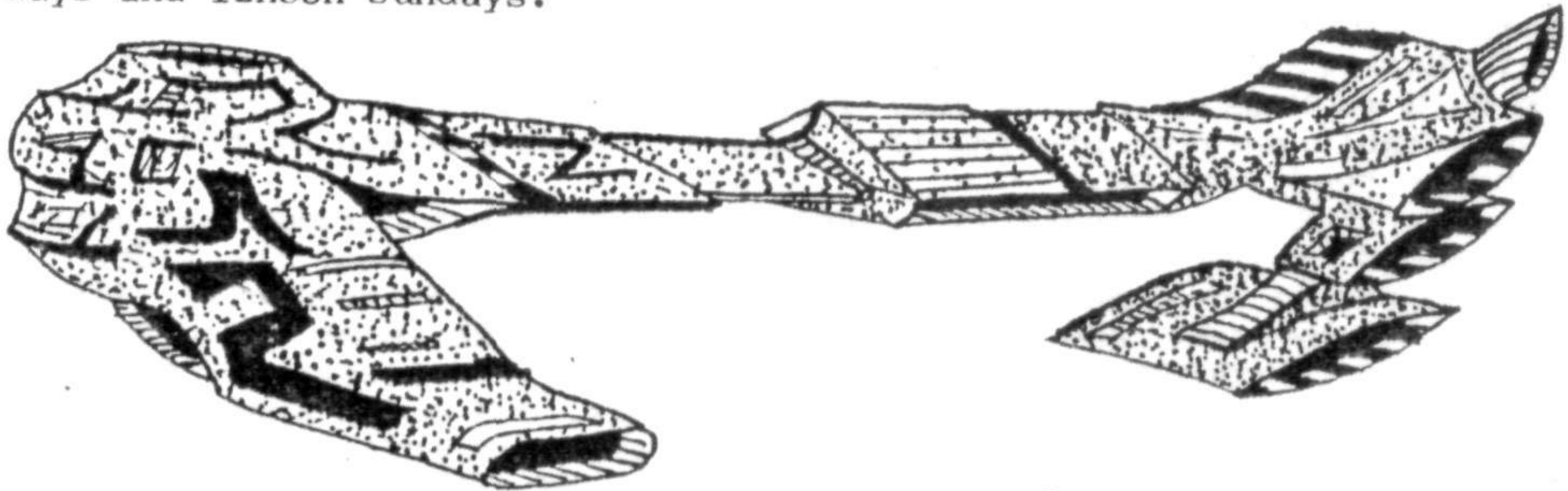
The great switch. Due to the absence of the boys in blue on the 29th May, as they will be protecting the Pope, the date has been changed to Saturday 5th June. This gives us one extra weekend to float the float. So where are you? We still need decent large pieces of cardboard and willing hands to help in the construction.

On 5th June the entrants assemble in Edmund Street, in the City Centre at 8.30am to put on the finishing touches and for judging at 9.30am. The procession moves off at 11.00am.

If you've avoided helping to build the float, publicise the Brum Group by dressing up and handing leaflets to the crowd.

For further information ring Alan Cash 554-1175

Construction dates are May 15th, 16th, 23rd, 29th, 30th, from 11am Saturdays and 12noon Sundays.



Reference Works

The ever increasing glut of non-fiction books about SF (or fantasy, or horror) results in the potential buyer (that's you) being spoilt for choice. The few really good items get hidden behind the more common mediocre or bad ones (which tend to be inaccurate, shallow, incomplete, unnecessary or, in the worst cases, all four of those). Let me draw your attention to a couple of titles which are good, but which you could easily miss among the plethora of larger-format books with more garish covers.

Anatomy of Wonder (second edition) edited by Neil Barron is published by Bowker. It has 724 pages and is £15.00 for the paperback edition and £21.50 for the hardcover. Its subtitle "a critical guide to science fiction" only hints at the tremendous range of its contents. The second book is a companion volume: Horror Literature edited by Marshall B. Tymn, also published by Bowker. With 559 pages, it is £13.00 for the paperback and £19.50 for the hardcover. Before I tell you about the books, a few words are necessary about the publisher. Bowker are far from being well known to the general public because they specialise in reference works for libraries, and in library circles their reputation is very high. They publish the standard bibliographical works on many subjects.

Both Anatomy of Wonder and Horror Literature are bibliographical works, concerned more with the books of SF and horror than with their authors. Both have the same approach and arrangement: the literature is divided into several periods by date of first publication (three for SF, five for horror); each period has an analytical introduction of several thousand words followed by a long, heavily annotated list of recommended books. For example, the "Modern Period" of SF (1938-1980) has a list of over 900 titles. All important works (and some less so) of SF and Horror are commented on in this manner---almost 2000 books in Anatomy of Wonder and over 1200 in Horror Literature. The brief comments on earlier works amount to quite detailed histories of these genres, and the entire listings tell you which titles you should have in your collection. Additionally, Anatomy of Wonder has sections on children's and foreign language SF, and much information on reference works and large library collections, while Horror Literature includes sections on poetry, reference works, awards, societies, periodicals etc.

Your local library should have copies of both these invaluable books. If you consider yourself a serious collector of SF or horror you ought to buy your own copies. You'll wonder how you ever managed without them.

Chris Morgan

BOOK REVIEWS

THE CRYSTAL SINGER by Anne McCaffrey, Severn House £6.95, 302 pages

Reviewed by John Farr.

Being told she'll never reach the top as a solo singer makes Killashandra Ree look for other uses for her talents of perfect pitch and an eidetic memory. Despite warnings she picks the dangerous profession of crystal singing, and most of this novel deals with her selection, training and initial success---covering just a few weeks of her life. Crystal singing involves tuning and cutting the living crystal which only occurs on the planet Ballybran and which has great value in communications and control systems. The strange features of that planet and the triumphs and disadvantages connected with crystal singing are all well described. In case you think you've read about this before, four stories about Killashandra appeared in Roger Elwood's Continuum anthologies, and two have been enlarged and added to for this volume. Apart from occasional boring passages (which should have been left out) this is a very good read---one of Anne McCaffrey's best novels so far.

THE ALUMINUM MAN by G.C. Edmondson, Hale £6.75, 172 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Alien gadgets which revolutionise life on Earth are a hackneyed theme. No matter, because the treatment here is so fresh and fast-moving that the book is an enjoyable one. The gadget is a bacteria-powered refiner of aluminum (which is American for aluminium), given to a young, well-educated Amerindian and an Irish scientist in present-day USA. Although there's a bit of ecological propaganda, everything is played for laughs. There are some very witty lines, quite a few ridiculous situations and plenty of plot twists. Lightweight but good of its kind.

THE WARLOCK IN SPITE OF HIMSELF by Christopher Stasheff, Granada £1.25, 284 pages

Reviewed by Alan Cash.

Sent to a backward planet by the galactic government to coax it into the political union, Rodney D'Armand discovers a pseudo-mediaeval society with real witches, elves and werewolves. The witches are espers, inbred descendents of the first colonists. Mistaken for a real warlock through his use of technology Rod discovers that Aliens from another time are about to take control of the espers in order to rule the galaxy. Bad puns counteract poor writing to produce a passably entertaining read, though near the end every character seemed to be expressing emotion by compressing their lips into a thin line.

MASKS OF THE ILLUMINATI by Robert Anton Wilson, Sphere £1.75, 294 pages

Reviewed by Anne Gay.

There was this Englishman, an Irishman, and a Jew, a.k.a. Sir John Babcock (related to Tarzan), James Joyce and Einstein. Add an obsessed priest from Loch Ness and the sinister figure of Aleister Crowley, then Cabalistic Magick (sick) as the cause of the French Revolution and the First World War; the result is a joke on Sir John Babcock and the reader, not necessarily in that order. An amusing, thought-provoking book which recommends the reader to look behind the surface of any situation. The different interpretations of reality dependent on one's viewpoint are intriguingly explored both thematically and linguistically. Worth a try if you're not afraid of the dark.

PETER DAVISON'S BOOK OF ALIEN MONSTERS, Sparrow 95p, 126 pages

Reviewed by Pauline E. Morgan.

Not for children of a nervous disposition. The protagonists in these nine stories sometimes come to a sticky end. With the exception of "Beyond Lies the Wub" by Philip K. Dick, all are freshly written for this volume by young British writers, three of whom---Holdstock, Langford and Kilworth---have spoken to the Group. Set on a variety of planets not all the aliens are monstrous in behaviour. My favourite is the talking caterpillar in the last story "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" by Allan Scott, which is very hungry.

GOD EMPEROR OF DUNE by Frank Herbert, NEL £2.50, 454 pages

Reviewed by Bob Vernon.

This is advertised as the last part of the Dune quartet; but fear not, a new series is on the way. Leto (Child of Dune Messiah) has undergone a symbiotic transformation to become Leto II, God and ruler of a multi-galactic Empire. He is worshipped for his virtual omniscience and apparent immortality and controls his empire by the absolute monopoly of the spice melange---which enables FTL navigation and extends longevity and awareness. Leto II is dedicated to the Golden Path of human survival, whatever it costs him or his subjects, and Herbert uses Leto's manipulation of history and individuals to sketch some of the radical theology and Marxist dialectical critique of religion worked out more rigorously in The Jesus Incident. Marred by some sloppy writing, self-indulgence, predictability and turgidity, this is not as stimulating or acute as The Jesus Incident, but is, after all in another genre. Dune fans will not be disappointed.

NEBULA WINNERS FOURTEEN edited by Frederik Pohl, Star £1.75, 259 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Each year the Science Fiction Writers of America vote on the best work produced by their colleagues---novels and three length-categories of short fiction. Their choice for novels is not dependable; often fashion or long service seem to outweigh merit. But the winners and runners-up for the short fiction are normally very good indeed. Here, from 1978, are winning stories from John Varley ("The Persistence of Vision", an excellent novel-la), Edward Bryant and Charles L. Grant, and runners-up by C.J. Cherryh (a superbly hard-hitting nightmare of tomorrow) and Gene Wolfe. The general flavour is of the near future, without a lot of hard science, and with the accent on character and situation. Also included are a helping of mush from Vonda McIntyre (part of her novel, Dreamsnake) and articles by Isaac Asimov, Norman Spinrad and L. Sprague de Camp. An entertaining compilation.

NEBULA WINNERS FIFTEEN edited by Frank Herbert, W.H. Allen £8.50, 223 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

The year in question here is 1979, and the contributors are almost all younger US authors, little known in Britain. The accent is on horror: the winning novelette, "Sandkings" by George R.R. Martin, is a nicely unemotional piece of nastiness concerning semi-intelligent alien pets, a story of which Stephen King might have been proud. An awfully horrific "utopian" future is depicted in Orson Scott Card's "Unaccompanied Sonata", while Jack Dann's "Camps" returns to the horrors of the past---German concentration camps. Barry B. Longyear's winning novella, "Enemy Mine", is an over-emotional treatment of racial prejudice. Completing the package are articles by Ben Bova and Vonda McIntyre. 1979 wasn't a great year, but it's given rise to a good anthology.

ICEWORLD by Hal Clement, Ballantine distributed by Futura £1.25, 203 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Clement's normal approach is to describe an alien planet from a human point of view. In this novel from 1953 he inverted the procedure, portraying Earth from the viewpoint of aliens who breathe gaseous sulphur and regard 500°C as a normal living temperature. Such a temperature difference makes trading tricky, especially when cigarettes become a major trading commodity. As usual, Clement introduces and solves some fascinating scientific problems. Also as usual, the characterisation is awful.

THE STARDROPPERS by John Brunner, Hamlyn £1.10, 144 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

It may seem like static to you, me or Special Agent Dan Cross, but the enigmatic jumble of sounds coming from expensive little electronic gadgets called stardroppers may be information emanating directly from alien minds, light years away. Whatever the explanation, these sounds are causing some people to disappear, instantaneously and without trace. This is an undercover investigation in slightly futuristic London until its last 25 pages, when it slips into fantasy---not a credible transition. Despite having been rewritten ten years ago, this is basically a twenty-year-old Brunner novel of little merit.

THE ONE TREE by Stephen Donaldson, Sidgwick & Jackson £8.95, 475 pages,
and Fontana £1.95, 479 pages

Reviewed by Pauline E. Morgan.

Dark, gloomy and depressing are the tales of Thomas Covenant. With his body slowly dying of a knife wound on Earth, the warped mentality of the leper roams the Land. Accompanying him is Linden Avery who suffers from moods of depression, self-pity and inadequacy. The focus is on her, and as we learn more about her the reader gains in understanding but loses sympathy for her plight. As with Covenant, most of her problems are self-inflicted. Although Donaldson's word usage is extravagant and the vistas splendid, the tone is continually dragged down and the reader is submerged in his preoccupation with the characters' shortcomings. The quest for the One Tree itself is relatively standard with the party (Covenant, Linden, a ship-load of Giants and a few others) sidetracked several times in their journey. As a sequel to The Wounded Land this is less fulfilling and if you are suicidal this could push you over the top.

THE LAST UNICORN by Peter Beagle, Unwin £1.95, 169 pages

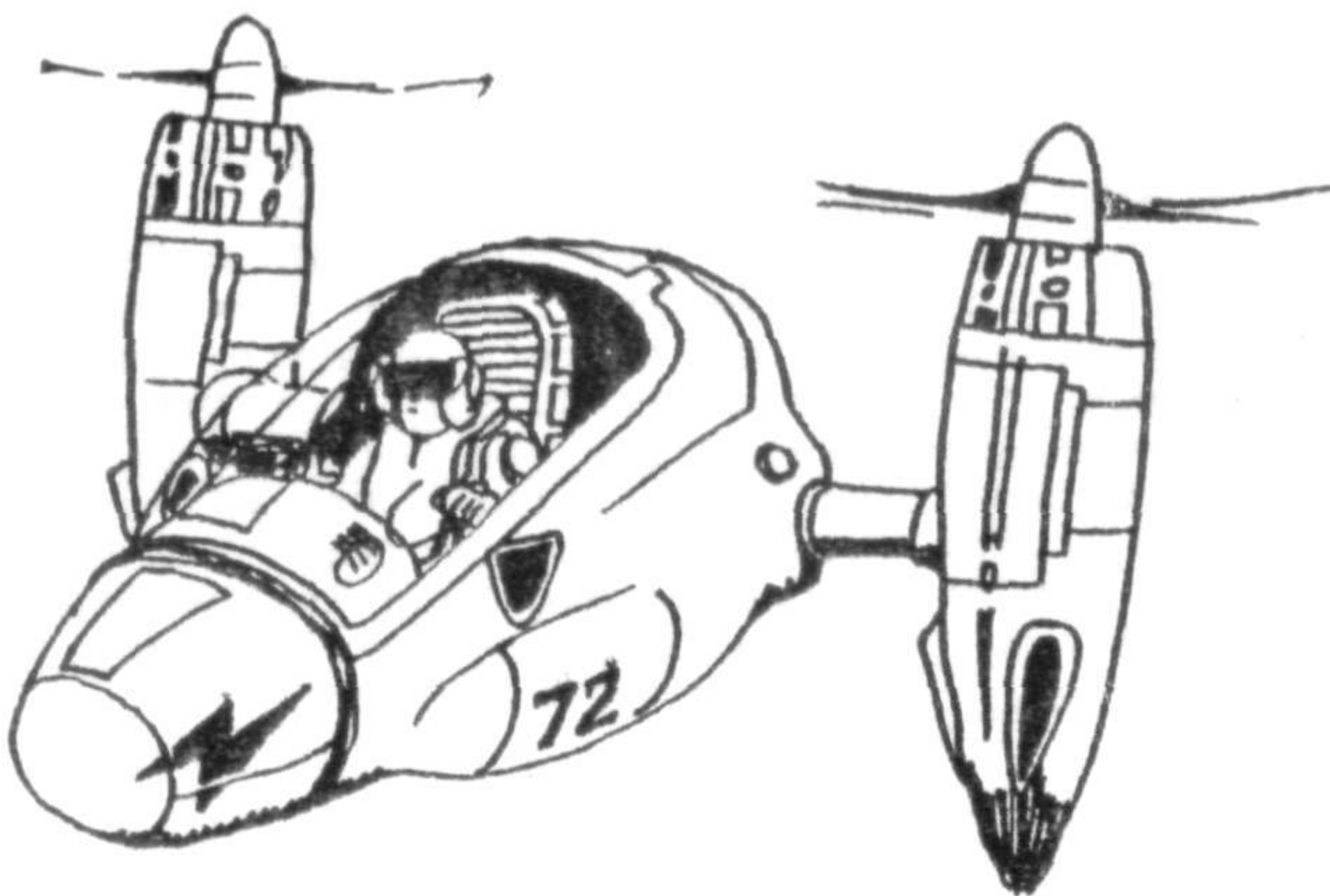
Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

Peter Beagle writes little but excellently. On the surface The Last Unicorn (here in its first British paperback edition) tells the story of a unicorn who searches for others of her kind and, finding them, has to free them from imprisonment. Involved in the plot are Schmendrick (the worst magician in the world who, just occasionally, has the talent to perform miracles), Prince Lir (a young man who kills things in order to prove his heroism), the aged, parsimonious King Haggard, and a variety of talking animals. Underneath it all, Beagle is making important points about facing up to one's greatest fears and about the search for success. The whole thing is so beautifully written as to take your breath away. Highly recommended.

COSMIC ENGINEERS by Clifford D. Simak, Magnum £1.50, 159 pages

Reviewed by Margaret Thorpe.

As expected, this is full of cliches but, as frequently happens with Simak's books, there are flashes of ingenuity which lift it from the mundane to an interesting level. In this case it is important to remember that the novel first appeared in 1939, yet one of the main characters is a woman scientist, intelligent and well-characterised---not just a token female presence as so often happened in novels of that period. Basically it is space opera in the vein of E.E. "Doc" Smith, but slightly more readable. A



small group of humans receive a message from Outer Space which involves them in a voyage Beyond the Known Universe to face (gasp!) The Hellhounds. These aliens are (as usual) intent on destroying our universe. Interesting as a period piece.

LUNAR ATTRACTIONS by Clark Blaise, Melbourne House £6.95, 305 pages

Reviewed by John Farr.

Growing up is the theme of this impressively written novel. The narrator describes his boyhood spent in rural Florida and his teens in a more northerly US city. The writing is episodic but very perceptive; there's no artificially imposed plot. In fact this narrator's experiences are nothing special---probably typical for an overweight intellectual---yet the detailed descriptions are always entertaining. There are elements of fantasy and horror, though these are neither strong nor persistent.

