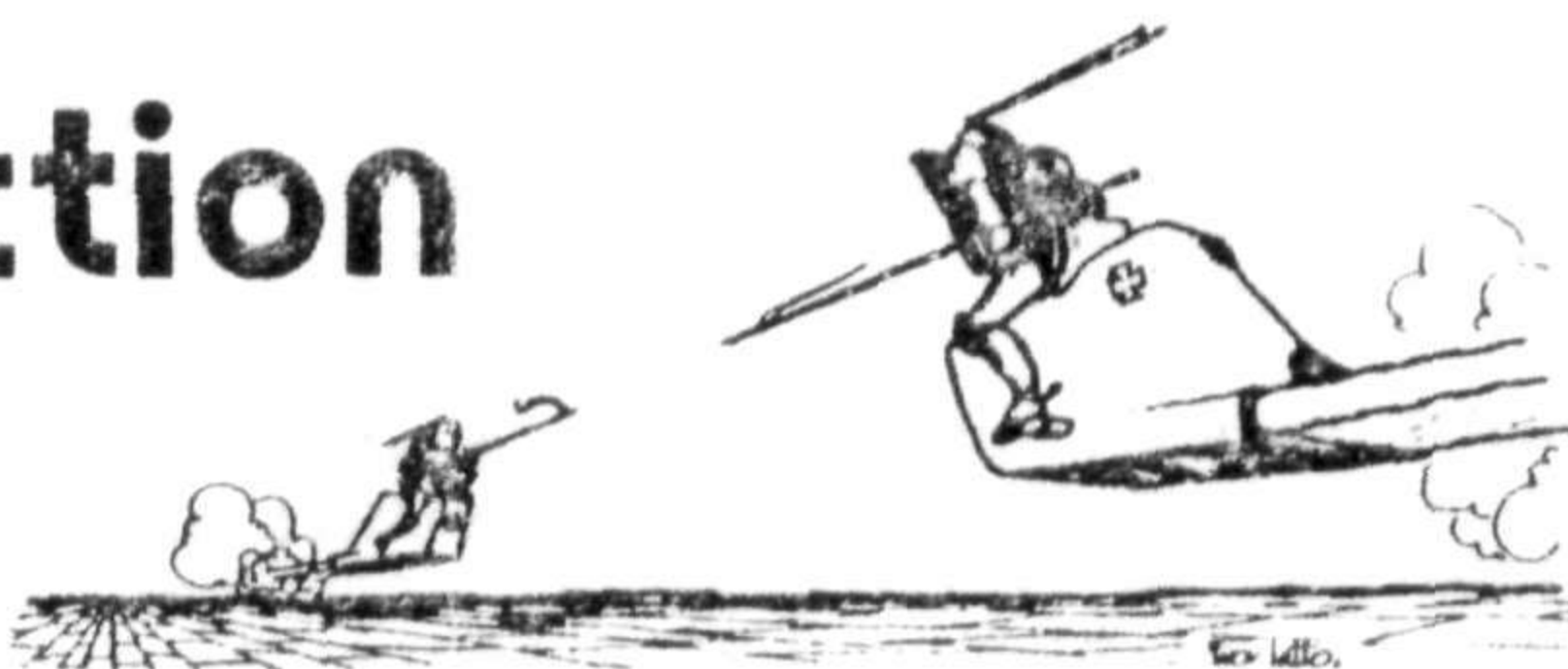


Birmingham Science Fiction Group

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



NEWSLETTER 135

NOVEMBER 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-months subscription is £3.50.

NOVEMBER MEETING - Friday 19th November 1982 at 7.45 pm

The BSFA MASTERMIND regional heat, with contestants Alan Cash (specialist subject Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings), Dave Holmes (Batman), Michael Jones (Larry Niven's "Known Space" stories), Rog Peyton (title changes in SF), and Peter Weston (the fantasy and SF of Jack Vance). The rules are slightly different to the TV version. (We can't afford a black leather arm-chair.) As Alan Cash will have fled the country by this date, his rounds will be pre-recorded. The winner goes forward to a final in London.

Afterwards, DAVID HARDY will show slides of some of the pictures in his new book Atlas of the Solar System and tell us of his adventures working on a fantasy film in Germany.

OCTOBER MEETING - a report by W.A. McCabe

The guest speaker was artist Eddie Jones. After a brief introduction he played a tape recording of Jack Gaughan's reminiscences of the lifestyle and apartment of Hannes Bok (another US artist), backed by the soundtrack of an old film played at the wrong speed. Next was question time with Eddie (at the front) and Marsha Jones (in the second row), with interruptions from the far end of the front row. In question time comparisons were made between the works of Bok (True Art), Eddie (illustration for money) and an outfit called Spanish Studios (mass-produced crap).

FORTHCOMING

* December - Christmas Party at the Ivy Bush. There will be a superb buffet, bar extension, competitions, prizes, raffle (of a bottle of whisky) and fun for all. Tickets at the subsidised price of £2.50 (10p off if you buy them at the November meeting). After the November meeting they will be on sale from Andromeda Bookshop, 84 Suffolk Street, Birmingham, and by post from Margaret Thorpe (see address above; please enclose an s.a.e.).

* January - Annual General Meeting. Start thinking of whom you want to have making a mess of running the BSFG next year. Plus an auction.

* March - Toby Roxborough, SF editor at Macdonald Futura, has provisionally agreed to come and speak to us.

...NEWS...

RODNEY MATTHEWS, the fantasy artist, will be signing copies of his new calendar, Mirador, £5.95, at Andromeda Bookshop on Saturday 27th November at 1.00pm.

BRIAN ALDISS has been elected as president of World SF. At the recent World SF meeting in Linz, Austria, five Karel awards were made for translation to Norio Itoh (Japan), Roberto Rambelli (Italy), Peter Kuczka (Hungary), Krsto Mazuranic (Yugoslavia) and Anne-Marie Kindt (Netherlands). The Karel is named after Karel Capek and is in the form of a robot standing on a globe of the world, reading an SF novel. Next year's World SF meeting will be in Zagreb, and the 1984 meeting should be at Brighton.

EUROCON AWARDS, announced at last month's German convention, went to: publishing houses Heyne (West Germany) and Kaw (Poland) for excellence in publishing; to the Strugatski brothers for lifetime achievement; to Jacques Sadoul for fiction and SF history; to John Brunner for fiction and efforts on behalf on European SF; to Shards of Babel for best fanzine.

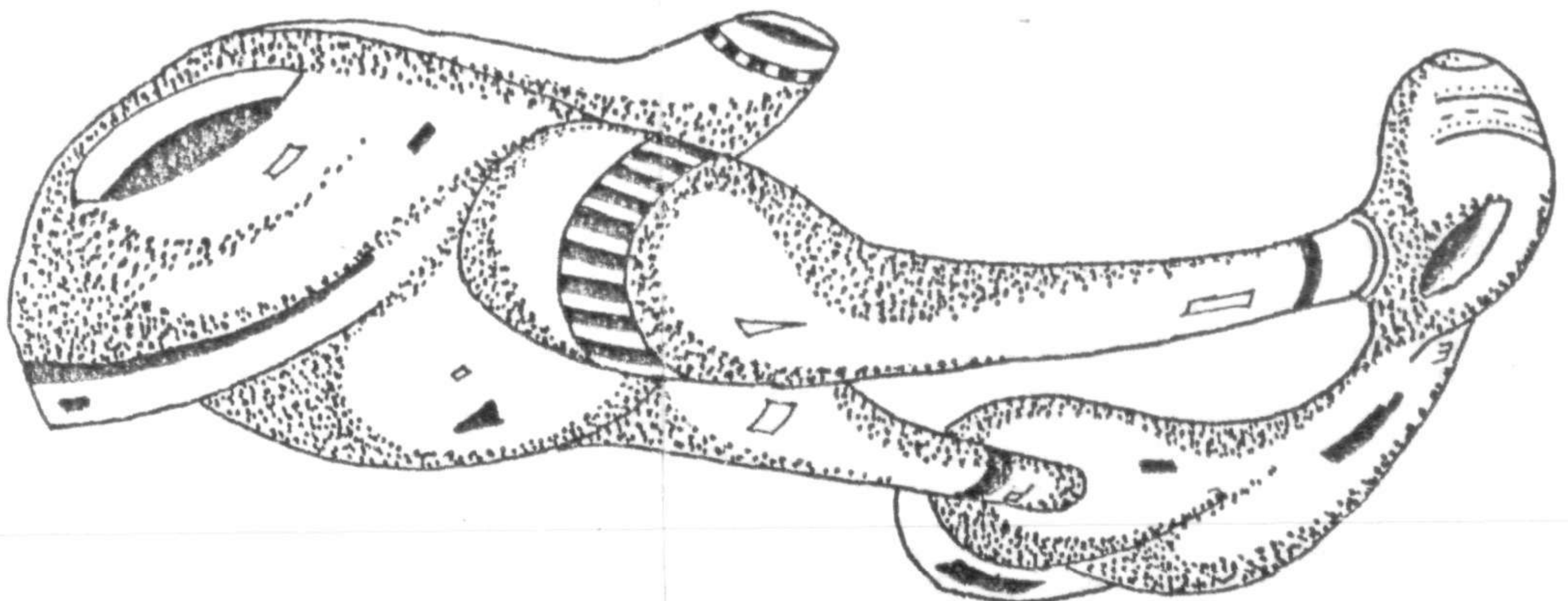
ROBERT A. HEINLEIN has been presented with the first "Tomorrow Starts Here" award by Delta Vee, a space advocacy group, for his encouragement of the US space programme through his writing.

JOHN GARDNER has died in a motor-cycle accident in the US. His novels included The Resurrection, The Sunlight Dialogues, October Light and the well-known fantasy, Grendel.

US AUTHORS Robert Asprin and Lynn Abbey were married in August.

LOST: a hardcover copy of Foundation's Edge by Isaac Asimov. Martin Tudor managed to mislay his raffle prize at our October meeting. If you found it, please phone him on (021) 328-2161.

ANDROMEDA BOOKSHOP's top ten best selling paperbacks for October were: 1. E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial - William Kotzwinkle (Sphere), 2. The Sword of the Lictor - Gene Wolfe (Arrow), 3. Kine - A.R. Lloyd (Hamlyn), 4. In Winter's Shadow - Gillian Bradshaw (Methuen), 5. Life, the Universe and Everything - Douglas Adams (Pan), 6. Tron - Brian Daley (NEL), 7. Byzantium Endures - Michael Moorcock (Fontana), 8. The Shadow of the Torturer - Gene Wolfe (Arrow), 8. Kingdom of Summer - Gillian Bradshaw (Methuen), 10. Blade Runner [Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?] - Philip K. Dick, 10. Jupiter Project - Gregory Benford (Sphere), 10. Eclipse - Margaret Tabor (Hamlyn), 10. Unfinished Tales - J.R.R. Tolkien (Unwin).



FREDERIK POHL

a report by
Pauline Morgan

October 8th saw a special meeting of the BSFG at the Holiday Inn. The occasion was an appearance by Frederik Pohl, who came hot foot from the World SF meeting at Linz. He began by explaining that World SF is an organisation to which anyone professionally connected with SF can belong, including critics, dealers and artists. He went on to talk about his current projects. Starburst is his most recent novel to be available in the UK (just published in hardcover by Gollancz) but there are another five or six books that he is in the process of writing. These include Midas World, an expansion of his 1950s story, "The Midas Plague", a story he never intended to write but which has become one of his most popular. Also, he has compiled a thick anthology of all the stories he has liked best during his years as an SF editor, he is working on a sequel to his novel Beyond the Blue Event Horizon, and he is planning a history of the future of New York---spanning the next two centuries. When his publisher was approached concerning this last idea he asked who would be interested in such a book other than those who lived there, to which Pohl replied that if each of the city's inhabitants (8 million of them) bought a copy he would be reasonably satisfied.

Pohl is rather vain about the quality of the science in his SF. He is proud to have been elected a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science on the strength of his SF, but he says that he finds this fact difficult to work into conversations. Even so, his novel collaborations tend to be with people who have what he calls "scientific savvy". He and Jack Williamson visited solar plants during research for their novel Wall Around the Star, to be published in the US in February. He goes to a lot of trouble to keep up with science, yet is aware of how quickly the science in his novels becomes obsolete: what was true when he wrote Gateway was untrue when he came to write its sequel Beyond the Blue Event Horizon. He subscribes to over a dozen publications in order to keep up with modern developments (of which New Scientist is his favourite). He gets a lot of fun out of science.

On being questioned about the reasons for the great improvement in the quality of his writing over the past few years, Pohl explained that in the early days it was easy to get a novel published, so there was no incentive to make it a good one. He claims to have begun to learn how to write a novel only about ten years ago, after thirty years' practice. He likened writing to childbirth: he enjoys having written but does not find the process of writing pleasant. Even so, he forces himself to write at least a page every day, even when he is travelling abroad. The fact that he knows he can now get any new book of his published easily because of his name, makes him try harder than ever to write well. He now does more rewriting than ever before. At one stage of his writing career he forced himself to write his first drafts on the back of envelopes, thus ensuring that he would have to retype and rewrite them, achieving a better result in the end.

One book of his which he doesn't much like is Preferred Risk, written in collaboration with Lester del Rey under the pseudonym Edson McCann. The process of collaboration was very painful in that instance, and he and del Rey agreed never to do it again, in order to remain friends. The first ever British edition of the book is due out as a Methuen paperback early in 1983.

Talking about his book-editing days with Bantam, Pohl said that he published Samuel R. Delany's massive novel, Dhalgren, out of a sense of obligation to Delany. He knew it was a masterpiece and decided to ignore the fact that it is extremely difficult to read. (He claimed it was the first book since The Story of O to tell him anything he didn't already know about sex.) Dhalgren sold much better than expected, though another controversial novel he published at about the same time, The Female Man by Joanna Russ, did worse than expected.

Pohl is optimistic about the future of the human race if we can get past the present crises of terrorist organisations and nuclear warheads. In his novel Jem he depicted the future he expected to see and did not intend to write a down-beat book. He sees no way for existing human society to reform itself, but no way forward if it does not.

DEATH'S MASTER by Tanith Lee, Hamlyn £1.50, 320 pages

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

High fantasy with demons as heroes. Simmu, born of the desperate union between Queen Narasen and a corpse, spends his early years in the company of lesser demons. It is through them that he later takes service with Azhrarn, one of the most powerful demons. Simmu declares war on Death and becomes the world's first immortal. His one-time friend Zhirem becomes his deadliest enemy. This is a well-crafted novel full of beautiful imagery. It contains the trappings of other fantasy novels---magic, love, immortality, revenge--- but they are treated in an original manner that provides realism. Tanith Lee breathes life into nightmares. Well worth reading.

FIRES OF AZEROTH by C.J.Cherryh, Methuen £1.50, 236 pages

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

From the author of the 1982 hugo-winning novel, Downbelow Station, comes the third of the Morgaine chronicles. A woman of mystery, Morgaine is the sole survivor of a group of travellers whose purpose was to close the Gates. These gateways, leading between different worlds and different times, had been the means by which the qual had spread and seeded various worlds with other races. Morgaine and her oath-bound companion, Vanye, have pursued their adversary, Rho, through the Gate of Ivriel and across the drowning world of Shuian. Now emerging onto the plains of Azeroth they are followed by desperate hordes of refugees through the Well of Shiuan. Although there are not the plot complexities of Downbelow Station this novel has excitement and tension, as C.J.Cherryh cares about her characters. It is a pity the cover has nothing whatsoever to do with the plot.

KING KOBOLD by Christopher Stasheff, Granada £1.50, 266 pages

Reviewed by Bernie Morton.

This is the follow-up to The Warlock in Spite of Himself, and has the same main characters. It also has the same bad writing, counter-balanced by the same ridiculously bad puns. In addition to the witches and werewolves of the first book we now have beast-men (genetically-engineered Neanderthals), and men from the future out to destroy democracy. Democracy is, of course, saved by our hero, and the author indulges himself in about fifteen pages of Agatha Christie-type explanation at the end, to tie up the loose ends. A reasonably entertaining book, but I found the mediaeval language used by several of the characters a little wearisome.

PROJECT POPE by Clifford D. Simak, NEL £1.75, 287 pages

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan.

One of this year's Hugo nominees, Project Pope is set on a planet at the edge of the galaxy. Here, robots that have been denied access to religion on other worlds have set up their own monastic community, with a Pope that is a computer. They seek faith through knowledge. Sensitive humans called Listeners send out their minds in search of that knowledge. The crisis comes when one of the Listeners believes she has found, and been thrown out of, Heaven. The philosophy of religion is explored without its intruding into the plot. The robots are sympathetically portrayed but become too human in places. Although a good novel it has not the quality required these days to win a Hugo.

THE LAST DAY OF CREATION by Wolfgang Jeschke, Century Books £3.95, 219 pp

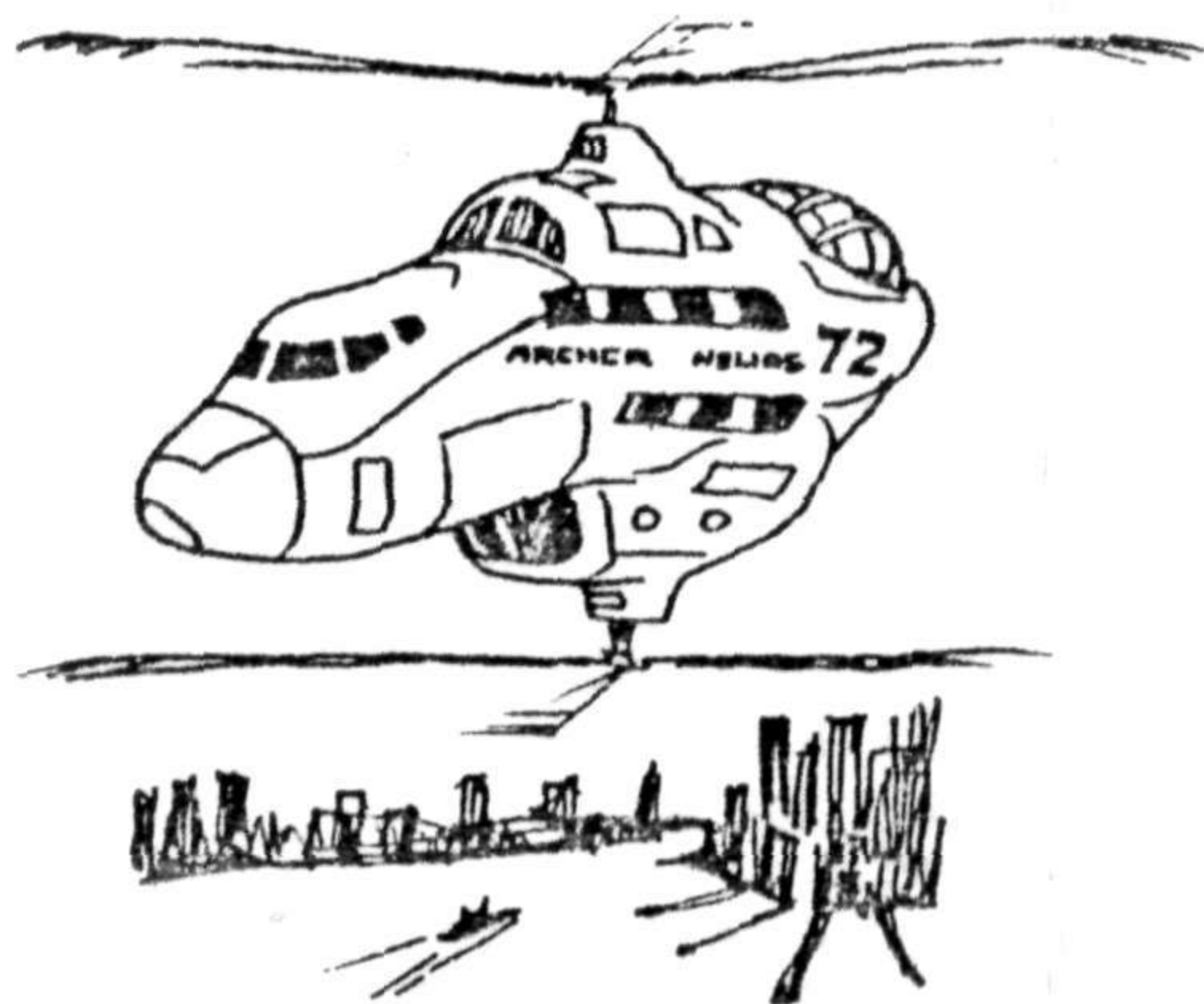
Reviewed by Dave Packwood.

Here is a time travel novel with a strikingly original idea. By using a device, the chronotrone, NASA plans to send a task force of scientists and engineers five and a half million years into the past before the area between the Iberian peninsula and Africa became flooded with the waters of the Atlantic. By amending a few geophysical faults here and there, the greedy military hope to construct giant pipe-lines in order to pump oil from deposits in North Africa to the future via chronotrones disguised as oil rigs. An ingenious solution to the oil crisis on the face of it, but alas you've guessed it, the trip is one way and the Arabs have the invention too, details NASA neglects to tell its tempunauts. At this juncture the novel degenerates into the banal. Groups of "Australopithecus africanus" brandish clubs at MIG 25s. Flying saucers drop from the sky to disgorge silver-suited saints of the Papal Fleet. Sadly a flawed novel in the final analysis. Jeschke eschews the potentialities of an original idea for mere banality.

THE SWORD OF THE LICTOR by Gene Wolfe, Arrow £1.75, 301 pages

Reviewed by John Farr.

Hard on the heels of the UK hardcover comes this paperback edition of the third volume in an excellent series. Having reached the city of Thrax and taken up his appointment as its executioner, Severian is forced, by his own failing, to flee. He wanders the hills, with and without companions, as a little more of Urth's true situation is revealed. Some familiar characters are met with again. This volume is very much the same in style and quality as its predecessors; if you were clever enough to have appreciated their finer points you'll enjoy this one. If you haven't yet tried the series you'd best begin with The Shadow of the Torturer.



BEYOND THE GALACTIC RIM by A. Bertram Chandler, Sphere £1.50, 120 pages

Reviewed by Vernon Brown.

Four not particularly good short stories which are best left unread. One is about a highly volcanic planet that becomes a tourist resort; a second has at its centre a cave painting that draws people through space and time, while the third concerns a trans-dimensional spaceship that ends up inside a W.C. The best of a poor lot deals quite logically with the problem of finding crewmen for a ship designed to travel to the next galaxy---a trip that will take centuries of objective time.

THE BOATS OF THE GLEN CARRIG by William Hope Hodgson, Sphere £1.50, 176 pp

Reviewed by Peter Day.

Definitely a period piece, though exactly which period is rather a moot point. First published in 1907, its author was at pains to write in a style and format more suitable to the 1750s, approximately the period of the bizarre adventures related. A group of seamen, shipwrecked in uncharted seas, contend with the weird denizens of desolate islands and a most unpleasant Sargasso-like region. This is easy to read and to appreciate mildly, though somewhat devoid of reader-involvement, possibly due to the tendency of the characters to be hardly more than lay-figures in the action. A book for the connoisseur of this type of thing, I would say.

THE PATCHWORK GIRL by Larry Niven, Futura £1.25, 144 pages

Reviewed by Margaret Thorpe.

Gil Hamilton again, in a classic SF sleuth novel, The Patchwork Girl. Gil is one of the delegates appointed to review the Lunar law which permits the use of condemned criminals to supply the limbs and organs in advanced spare part surgery. His interest in the matter becomes more than academic when an old flame of his is accused of attempted murder. Gil's psychic talent is unable to find evidence in her favour---a neat touch this, for Niven avoids facile solutions using E.S.P. talent. He relies instead on classic deduction in the style of the Asimov novels The Caves of Steel and The Naked Sun. A complex plot, neat twists and a talented author make this a highly entertaining traditional SF novel.

THE DREAMERS by James Gunn, Methuen £1.50, 166 pages

Reviewed by John Farr.

It's boring to live in a fully-automated society which has become locked in stasis, without progress of any kind; people look inward too much, wasting their long lives consuming each other's dreams until they cannot bear to live any longer. When James Gunn tries to write about such a society he conveys its lack of incident and pointlessness. He does this very convincingly and---guess what?---very boringly. There's no substitute for plot, and the three linked stories here fail for lack of one.

DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF ELECTRIC SHEEP [BLADE RUNNER] by Philip K. Dick,
Granada £1.50, 183 pages

BLADE RUNNER directed by Ridley Scott, a Deeley/Scott production starring
Harrison Ford & Rutger Hauer, released by Warner Bros.

Reviewed by Bob Vernon.

Philip K. Dick wrote Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep before the problems of artificial intelligence and genetic engineering had become clearly focused, or even found an accepted vocabulary. His "androids" were not, in fact, automata resembling human beings; rather they were flesh and blood creations clinically distinguishable from "real" humans only by bone marrow analysis. None-the-less his bounty hunting hero was able to "retire" renegade androids with moral as well as legal impunity. His only real problems were emotional, as these simulcra looked and behaved like humans, eliciting but not returning his natural empathy. The plot is flawed and punctured, the characterisation shallow and the style often pedestrian, but Dick spotted that the real problem would be emotional, the real question is how to relate, and the novel's impact and influence must not be underestimated.

Now, fourteen years of genetic manipulation later, comes the film Blade Runner, drastically reworking the book and improving on it. The plot has been cut to the bone and given a new resolution, clearing the ground for the simple, profound questions to stand out, and moving us towards answers that would seem banal if reduced to simple words. Indeed the film has been praised for its noctiluceous photography and vivid, dense, witty design exploited by deft direction, but accused of being let down by a weak script. Literary cobblers! In the cinema the image is the script, speaking the language of emotive depiction and telling symbols, of visual irony and puns; a multi-layered, complex vernacular that argues for this film's conclusions in human rather than purely logical terms---and validates them. It is not, after all, about computation or machinery, but humanity. Blade Runner demands and rewards attention, honouring Dick by radically rethinking his original concern rather than slavishly repeating his conclusions.

THE COMPLETE ROBOT by Isaac Asimov, Granada £9.95, 557 pages

Reviewed by John Farr.

What Anne McCaffrey has done for dragons and Larry Niven for black holes, Isaac Asimov did some years earlier for robots: he made the subject his. He wrote about robots so much and so entertainingly that his creations eclipsed those of Karel Capek, Lester Del Rey and the rest. Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics have been one of the institutions of SF since the early 1940s. Now, for the first time, all of Asimov's robot stories have been collected in a single volume---thirty-one of them. (His robot novels, The Caves of Steel and The Naked Sun, are not included.) Some of the stories are fairly new and haven't previously appeared in an Asimov collection. They are short and funny, long and tragic, and they include the two final stories, "...That thou Art Mindful of Him" and "The Bicentennial Man", which show up all the holes in the Three Laws. It's a very good collection.

THE SHAPE OF WARS TO COME by David Baker, Hamlyn £3.95, 179 pages

Reviewed by Bob Vernon.

This was written "because of the author's deep concern for the stability of international relations and the expanding commitment of the Soviet Union to achieve by military pressure, and perhaps force, what it is increasingly unable to obtain by persuasion" (author's Introduction). Beyond the nuclear threat lies the danger of satellite war, involving battle-sats, killer-sats, ferret-sats, laser gun-ships and particle-beam weapons in space, and here we have a dense history of their development and scenarios for their future. Unfortunately it is written from an almost hysterical fear of Soviet capability and intentions, uncritically acclaiming those of the USA. This can lead to misleading statements (e.g. "for more than ten years the Soviets flaunted their killer-sats before the West"; this plays down the fact that the US launched nine killer-sats in 1967, before the first Soviet launching). None-the-less a valuable mine of information and a timely warning that nuclear disarmament does not mean an end to weapons of mass destruction.

LIFE IN THE WEST by Brian Aldiss, Corgi £1.95, 303 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

In British paperback for the first time is our Honorary President's non-SF novel about contemporary culture and the arts in general. Aldiss takes a sharp look at the system of international academic conferences (of which he has had much experience), pointing an accusatory finger at the organisers, the attendees and the papers presented merely by showing them as they really are. Interspersed is the biography of an English cultural expert not wholly unlike Brian Aldiss. This is a witty novel, well worth your time and money.

E.T. THE EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL by William Kotzwinkle, Sphere £1.50 246 pages

Reviewed by Jane Tietjen.

As the title suggests, this is a CE3K book. The three children of the family concerned are not sure at first quite what he is but take him in and hide him from their divorced mother and from grown-ups in general. Everyone around is affected by his telepathy, especially Elliot, who develops a particularly strong bond with him. The style of the book is often flowery but well expresses the enormous age and accrued knowledge that E.T. possesses, and when his attempts at communicating with his ship seem to be failing his despair is acute and almost fatal. At this point a secretly prepared government team swoop on the household and almost kill him through well-intentioned medical ignorance. Throughout the book, small everyday incidents are treated with great humour and make for a very enjoyable read.

THE HUMANOIDS £1.50, 189 pages; THE HUMANOID TOUCH £1.75, 210 pages, both by Jack Williamson, Sphere

Reviewed by Anne Gay.

The Humanoids, a re-release of a 1940s favourite, is not your average post-war guilt complex. A group of renegades come to a galactic backwater and enlist the grudging help of a dedicated researcher in the fight against the Humanoids. The Humanoids are robots designed to prevent war, poverty, unhappiness, etc. So they're the goodies. But the renegades are the goodies, too... The sequel isn't. A sequel, that is. On the same theme, but with different personnel and locations. Both are fast-moving and exciting. There are lots of characters to identify with, original motivations and social pressures. These books are well-written, but with a touch of blinding-by-science. Very good company for winter's evenings with a psychological question-mark that keeps you wondering which side you're on long after the books are back on the shelf.

THE SCIENCE FICTION COLLECTOR'S CATALOG by Jeff Rovin, The Tantivy Press £8.95, 181 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan.

I find it hard to think of another SF reference book as ill-conceived and useless as this. Its scope---books, magazines, comics, records, films, film stills and props, toys, wargames, etc---is far too wide for it to be anything but pitifully shallow. If you already collect any of these you'll know more than Rovin imparts; if you want to begin collecting, the volume may or may not help you. Let's concentrate on books (which are dealt with far too briefly, even in context, considering that they are more numerous, and collected by more individuals, than any other sphere of SF). To the few first editions Rovin mentions he ascribes no publishers and several wrong dates; nor does he mention any of the reference works which will help a collector sort out first editions; nor does he give the name or address of the USA's leading dealer in secondhand first edition SF, Lloyd Currie. The most important dealers in all these collectables outside the US are also ignored, making this volume all the more useless in Britain. The greatest omission is a section on collecting original SF artwork. The book's outrageous price could have been reduced if the 8 pages of colour art (all reproduced in black & white elsewhere in the volume!) had been left out.

Editorial Notes

Many thanks to Fred Pohl, Locus and Andromeda Bookshop for news items. Next month's issue will not only be festive but also, most probably, late, because your editor hopes to move house early in December. Art credits: Ivor Latto (p.1), Phill Probert (p.2) and John Dell (p.6). This November 1982 issue has been edited and produced for the BSFG by Pauline E. Morgan, 39 Hollybrow, Selly Oak, Birmingham B29 4LX.