

Birmingham Science Fiction Group

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



Number 156 AUG 1984

The Birmingham Science Fiction Group has its formal meeting on the third Friday of each month in the New Imperial Hotel in Temple Street, Birmingham City Centre. There is also an informal meeting on the first Friday (NOTE CHANGE) of each month at the General Wolfe pub, on the corner of Aston Road and Holt Street (near Aston University). There is also a MiSFITs meeting on the last Friday of each month at the same venue, the General Wolfe.

This issue edited by Graham R. Poole of 86 Berwood Farm Road, Wylde Green, Sutton Coldfield, West Midlands, B72 1AG who wishes to apologise for the brevity of this issue due to overwork, and lack of other contributions! Copyright (c) 1984 Birmingham Science Fiction Group on behalf of the contributors to whom rights revert upon publication. Many thanks to all contributors.

AUGUST MEETING - Friday 17th August from 7.45 pm onwards

Thanks to Rog Peyton who booked Harry Harrison in for a signing session at Andromeda Bookshop on the Saturday Rog has also arranged for Harry to come along to the Brum Group on the Friday. I'm sure everyone knows and loves Harry Harrison, if not in person, at least in print with titles such as BILL, THE GALACTIC HERO, THE TECHNICOLOUR TIME MACHINE, the DEATH/WORLD series and THE STAINLESS STEEL RAT series. Born in Connecticut Harry first appeared in print as an SF writer in 1951. He has edited magazines, edited anthologies, had one of his stories turned into a film (SOYLENT GREEN) and more recently completed WEST OF EDEN. He now lives in Eire.

JULY MEETING

At our July meeting six teams were formed for a quiz chaired by Vernon Brown and then each team in turn had a choice of an easy, medium or hard question on SF. So much interest was generated with virtually everyone in the room joining in that the quiz lasted most of the evening with a short drinks break in the middle. Eventually the superior knowledge and luck of Chris Morgan's team won the day and each of the four team members received a book voucher to spend at Andromeda. About the only complaints I heard were that the answers to the questions were not given if a team got them wrong (in case they were re-used later on) and Jan said some newcomers to SF could be bored (like herself).

Reviews

LYONESSE by Jack Vance, Granada £2.95, 436 pages

Reviewed by Chris Morgan

This latest and largest-by-far of Vance's novels is too big, too much of a good thing. It's vintage Vance, high fantasy similar to **THE DYING EARTH**, yet much vaster in scope and more varied in effect. **LYONESSE** is slightly pre-Arthurian, being set in the "Elder Isles", which includes Lyonesse, occupying much of the Bay of Biscay and extending well out into the Atlantic Ocean. The islands are split into over a dozen warring kingdoms, and are much affected by magic, being populated partly by magicians, fairies and trolls. The setting is only nominally the Dark Ages; in fact it is part mediaeval romance (with noble knights, impregnable castles, beautiful princesses) and part the alien culture of twenty planets, as found in Vance's SF.

There is a plethora of rich detail here, as well as an intricate plot involving dozens of characters over almost twenty years. (Yet the novel is sub-titled **BOOK 1 SULDRUN'S GARDEN**, which suggests one more outsize volume to come.) The most astonishing thing about **LYONESSE** is the way the tone varies, with different parts of its narrative resembling other works of fantasy. For example, the first few chapters, in which Princess Suldrun is growing up in the large and gloomy Castle Haidion, are reminiscent of Mervyn Peake's **GORMENGHAST**, while other chunks resemble Richard Adams' **SHARDIK**, Sylvia Townsend Warner's **KINGDOMS OF ELFIN**, Poul Anderson's **THE BROKEN SWORD**, and the story of Hansel and Gretel. Could this be Vance's homage to his fantasy favourites? In any case, there's something for everyone, and it's certainly good value for money despite being overlong.

THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF HALLEY'S COMET by John Calvin Batchelor
Granada £2.95, 424 pages

Reviewed by William McCabe

A few hundred years ago (well, it seems like it) there was a book called **IVANHOE** by Sir Walter Scott. It was a traditional medieval romance with a knight (the hero) returning home from the Holy Wars just in time to present a beautiful Jewess with the title of "Queen of beauty" at a jousting contest. It has a band of rebel archers who, somehow, are loyal to "His Majesty". There are rich and powerful bad guys whose castle is attacked by the good guys about half way through. It has a trial by combat with the hero defending someone accused of witchcraft. It has "His Majesty" disguised as a pilgrim revealing himself to faithful subjects at convenient moments. This book, however, is not *Ivanhoe* nor is it written by Walter Scott, but there the differences end. Halley's Comet (apparently a great fan of Errol Flynn) takes the role of "His Majesty", the Comet Clubbe (one time workers on various sections of the NASA space program) take the parts of Robin Hood and His Merrie Men (complete with bows and arrows).

This time there is a lot of humour tacked on to the story although, sometimes, in an attempt to stay true to the original, it can fall flat on its face (what, for instance, were the "Holy Wars" in the 1980's). The book is set in the year beginning April 1985 - the only true deciding factor in the date being the appearance of the

comet (apart from that it could be any time after 1970). The style and humour have just enough strength to keep most people reading to the end without giving up a few times but if there was ever a sequel it would have to have something on it's own to get anyone to take notice.

The best I can say about this book is "It's a hell of a lot more fun than Ivanhoe".

THE MENACE FROM EARTH by Robert A. Heinlein, Corgi reissue '83, £1.75
Reviewed by Bob Vernon

It really was over twenty years ago when I first read the Signet edition of this collection, and its inventiveness, imagination and wit impressed me then. Potiphar Bree; charting everything that could be charted and preparing for the worst when the meta-curves coincide during THE YEAR OF THE JACKPOT. Bob Wilson: hauling himself into the future BY HIS BOOTSTRAPS and Holly Jones growing up to face the MENACE FROM EARTH

But was I justifiably impressed or merely at an impressionable age? Second reading suggests that both Heinlein and I were guilty. He of being, even then, jingoistic, opinionated, insular aggressive and shallow. Myself of being too callow to notice or care.

Take nice little Potiphar for example. An apparently clever, unassuming, resourceful and decent man. Maybe I shouldn't expect my younger self to have winced as he shot Russian soldiers in the back, but shouldn't I have balked over 'Aside from mathematics, just two things worth doing - kill a man and love a woman. He had done both; he was rich.' Later in the collection Doc Reynolds saves the USA from Soviet-planted A-bombs by using the telekinetic skills of a team of psychics, and then goes on - with implicit authorial approval - to trigger warheads in the USSR. O.K. so it was 1953 when he wrote it, but EARTHMAN; COME HOME and FAHRENHEIT 451 came out at the same time free from McCarthisms. Politics aside, what about the writing? Surely BOOTSTRAPS is one of the all time greats? Well....the hero, Bob Wilson, is presented as having the mind of a philosopher, but insists on talking and acting like a thick thug. Indeed Heinlein uses his heroes' inability to think through the paradoxes of time travel to avoid facing them himself. 'He knew he had about as much chance of understanding such problems as a collie has of understanding how dog food gets into cans.' Neat, but hollow. Bob Shaw did much better. Few other stories in this collection merit attention, apart from the title story. This is psychologically perceptive and humane, convincing about the vagaries of man-powered flight and the problems of the post-adolescent heart. Hardly suprisingly this story is dated 1957, the year of THE DOOR INTO SUMMER and vintage Heinlein. So, apart from these two stories, the collection only merits a place on your shelf if you are interested in the development of Heinlein before he became anarcho-fascist. Otherwise it is a dated and slightly sour collection.

ACROSS THE SEA OF SUNS by Gregory Benford, Macdonald & Co., £8.95
Reviewed by Dave Hardy.

There is no indication inside IN THE OCEAN OF NIGHT, which was published here in 1978, that it was to be the first volume in a trilogy - but it seems that this is the second. (It is not really necessary to read the first, though it does help to fill in the background.) As one has come to expect from Greg Benford, this is a novel for the real science fiction fans: it probably helps if you were weaned on Clarke and have come up through Niven and Pournelle.

If you like SF that you can get your teeth into, though, this is for you. There are really two separate stories, one taking place on the Lancer, the first starship (which looks nothing like the one on the garish cover) and the other on Earth, which is being attacked by aquatic aliens. At first there seems no connection, but...

Benford is experimenting here with some literary gimmicks; for instance to try to convey the layers of conversation at a party, or the comments and arguments as data comes in from a space probe. These make rather difficult reading at first, but are worth sticking with. They are almost certainly based on personal experience at JPL from Viking or Voyager, and one can become quite involved. More annoying is his insistence on writing colloquial American dialect phonetically on occasion ('...your calc stipped a bound'ry layer an' thahs what makes the calc work out.'). Fortunately this does not happen too often, as one has to translate into English first.

The science is of course excellent, and thought-provoking. The author makes a good stab at characterisation too, though it does have a slightly cold, psycho-analytical feel at times. He even throws in some kinky futuristic sex for good measure! I look forward to book three.

MACHINES THAT THINK edited by Isaac Asimov, Patricia S. Warrick and Martin H. Greenberg, Allen Lane £10.95, 623 pages.

Reviewed by Pauline Morgan

One may be excused for thinking that this volume is merely an excuse to get five of Asimov's robot stories reprinted again (all the stories here have been anthologised before, MOXON'S MASTER by Bierce at least 8 times). The aim of the book, we are told in the introduction, is to trace the history of computers and robots in SF and to "probe the scientific and moral questions raised by Man's godlike creation of the technological pseudo-human being."

Not all the stories have been chosen because they are "the best" but sometimes because they are "the first". The master in MOXON'S MASTER by Ambrose Bierce is an automaton designed to play chess. First published in 1894 we have a thinking machine before electric diodes were dreamt of. Murray Leinster in A LOGIC NAMED JOE (1946) predicted a computer in every home.

Some authors have used the fear of technological advance to write nightmarish stories, perhaps as warnings against too heavy a reliance on computers and robots. This "Frankenstein complex" is very evident in such stories as I HAVE NO MOUTH AND I MUST SCREAM by Harlan Ellison, where the last five humans are kept alive inside and at the whim of a giant computer, and Arthur Clarke's DIAL F FOR FRANKENSTEIN, in which the launching of a communications satellite gives birth to a monster.

In contrast are such as THE BICENTENNIAL MAN by Isaac Asimov, where the reader's sympathies are with the robot whose one desire is to be human. Others are just fun, like SAM HALL by Poul Anderson and IF THERE WERE NO BENNY CEMOLI by Philip K. Dick. In both a computer is used to feed spurious or false information into areas that matter.

Probably the most interesting parts of this volume are the introductions to each of the stories, which give biographical details of the authors. A good book for relative newcomers to SF, but serious readers will probably already have most of these stories in their collections.