

# BRUM GROUP NEWS

January 1995

Issue 280

*The monthly newsletter of the Birmingham Science Fiction Group  
(Honorary Presidents: Brian W Aldiss & Harry Harrison)*

GROUP CHAIRMAN - BERNIE EVANS, SECRETARY - RICHARD STANDAGE, NEWSLETTER EDITOR - MARTIN TUDOR,  
TREASURER - HELENA BOWLES, PUBLICITY OFFICER - STEVE JONES, ORDINARY MEMBERS - MICK EVANS &  
DAVID HUNTER, NOVACON 24 CHAIRMAN - RICHARD STANDAGE, NOVACON 25 CHAIRMAN - TONY MORTON.

## Annual General Meeting and Auction

20th January 1995

7.45pm for 8pm

Admittance: **FREE**

If you have any books, magazines,  
games, models, posters or comics you  
no longer need (or never wanted)  
please bring them along for the auction  
- all proceeds towards the Group's funds.

The BSFG meets at 7.45pm on the 3rd Friday of every month (unless otherwise notified) in the upstairs Function Room of the Australian Bar, corner of Hurst Street and Bromsgrove Street in Birmingham city centre. The annual subscription rates (which include twelve copies of this newsletter and reduced price entry to meetings) are £10.00 per person, or £13.50 for 2 members at the same address. Cheques etc. payable to "the Birmingham Science Fiction Group", via the treasurer Helena Bowles at meetings or by post c/o Bernie Evans (address below). Book reviews and review copies should be sent to the reviews editor Bernie Evans, 121 Cape Hill, Smethwick, Warley, West Midlands, B66 4SH (tel: 021 558 0997). All other contributions and enquiries regarding the Brum Group News to: Martin Tudor, 845 Alum Rock Road, Birmingham, B8 2AG (tel: 021 327 3023).

## COLOPHON

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Personal opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the committee or the membership of the Birmingham Science Fiction Group.

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Martin Tudor, 845 Alum Rock Road,  
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(tel: 0121 327 3023.)

Many thanks this issue to BERNIE EVANS for her Chair's Bit and for typing the book reviews, STEVE GREEN, CRITICAL WAVE and WHAT'S ON for the news in the Jophan Report and Events listing and TONY BERRY for the use of his spare room.

## FORTHCOMING EVENTS

11 JANUARY 1995: ARTHUR C CLARKE is featured on THIS IS YOUR LIFE, 7pm on BBC1.

13 JANUARY 1995: TOM HOLT will be addressing the BSFG, 7.45 for 8pm in the upstairs room of the Australian Bar, corner of Hurst Street and Bromsgrove Street, Birmingham city centre.

14 JANUARY 1995: TOM HOLT will be signing copies of ODDS AND GODS (Orbit hardcover, £14.95) and FAUST AMONG EQUALS (Orbit paperback, £4.95) from noon at Andromeda book shop, 84 Suffolk Street, Birmingham. For details of this and other signing sessions call (0121) 643 1999.

17-18 JANUARY 1995: LANCELOT DU LAC a new print of Robert Bresson's 1974 classic will be screened at the MAC Cinema, Cannon Hill Park, Birmingham. Call 0121 440 3838 for details.

20 JANUARY 1995: BSFG AGM & AUCTION, 7.45 for 8pm in the upstairs room of the Australian Bar, corner of Hurst Street and Bromsgrove Street, Birmingham city centre.

5 FEBRUARY 1995: SUNDAYS IN SPACE - "NOW SCIENCE BEGAN TO EXPLAIN THE HEAVENS" illustrated talk from 2pm at the Science Museum, Newhall Street, Birmingham City Centre, call 0121 235 1661 for details.

17 FEBRUARY 1995: DAVID GEMMELL will be addressing the BSFG, 7.45 for 8pm in the upstairs room of the Australian Bar, corner of Hurst Street and Bromsgrove Street, Birmingham city centre.

18 FEBRUARY 1995: DAVID GEMMELL will be signing from noon at Andromeda book shop, 84 Suffolk Street, Birmingham. For details of this and other signing sessions call (0121) 643 1999.

20-25 FEBRUARY 1995: RETURN TO THE FORBIDDEN PLANET at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-Upon-Avon. Call 01789 295 623 for details.

25 FEBRUARY 1995: COMIC AND SCI-FI MART at Coventry University Students Union, from 11am, admission 50p. Call 0908 679845 for details.

2-5 MARCH 1995: TREK DWARF 3 convention at the Holiday Inn, Leicester. Registration £35.00, contact 47 Marsham, Orton Goldhay, Peterborough, PE2 ORB.

27 MARCH - 1 APRIL 1995: RETURN TO THE FORBIDDEN PLANET at the Grand Theatre, Wolverhampton. Call 01902 29212 for details.

UNTIL 2 APRIL 1995: THE HOLY GRAIL TAPESTRIES designed by Edward Burne-Jones and woven by Morris & Co. are on display at the Museum and Art Gallery, Chamberlain Square, Birmingham City Centre, call 0121 235 2834 for details.

10-11 APRIL 1995: BLADERUNNER - THE DIRECTOR'S CUT showing at the Castle, Wellingborough from 7.30pm, tickets £2.00. Contact: The Castle, Castle Way, Wellingborough, Northants, NN8 1XA or phone the Box Office on 01933 270007.

14-17 APRIL 1995: CONFABULATION 46th UK National sf con at the Britannia International Hotel, London. GoHs Lois McMasters Bufold, Bob Shaw and Roger Robinson. Attending £25.00 until 31 March 1995, supporting £10.00 until

31 March 1995. Contact: Confabulation, 3 York Street, Altrincham, Cheshire, WA15 9QH.

17 APRIL 1995: *ALIEN*, *ALIENS* and *ALIEN 3* showing at the Castle, Wellingborough from 2pm, tickets £2.00 per film or £5.00 for all three. Contact: The Castle, Castle Way, Wellingborough, Northants, NN8 1XA or phone the Box Office on 01933 270007.

24-28 AUGUST 1995: *INTERSECTION*, 53rd world-con, Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre, Glasgow. Guests of honour Samuel R Delany, Gerry Anderson, Vinç Clarke. Attending £80.00. Contact: Admail 336, Glasgow, G2 1BR, Scotland.

3-5 NOVEMBER 1995: *NOVACON 25* the Brum Group's own science fiction convention at a new venue - the Chamberlain Hotel, Alcester Street, Birmingham. Guests of Honour: Brian W Aldiss, Harry Harrison and Bob Shaw, with Special Guest Iain Banks. Attending membership is £25.00 until Easter 1995. Supporting membership costs £8.50. Progress Report #1 and hotel booking forms are available, deadline for hotel bookings is 20th July 1995. Contact CAROL MORTON, 14 Park Street, Lye, Stourbridge, West Midlands, DY9 8SS, cheques should be made payable to "Novacon 25". Room rates are now only £17.50 per person per night in twin/double and £35.00 pppn in a single, prices include full English breakfast.

5-8 APRIL 1996: *EVOLUTION* 47th UK National Convention, the Radisson Edwardian Hotel at Heathrow. Guests of honour: Colin Greenland, Bryan Talbot, Jack Cohen. Attending £20.00, supporting £12.00 until 18th April 1995. Contact: 13 Lindfield Gardens, Hampstead, London, NW3 6PX.

27 DEC 1999 - 2 JAN 2000: *MILLENNIUM*. Venue to be announced, but definitely in Northern Europe (probably a BeNeLux country or UK), £3.00 (f10.00) per year, to be deducted from eventual membership fee (to be announced before 1997). Contact: Malcolm Reid, 186 Casewick Road, West Norwood, London, SE27 0SZ.

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Although details are correct to the best of my knowledge, I advise readers to contact organizers prior to travelling. Always enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope when writing to any of the above contact addresses. Please mention the BRUM GROUP NEWS when replying to listings or advertisements.

If you know of any events which you think may be of interest to members of the BSFG please send details to the Editor.

If you have attended any events or seen any films or videos that you would like to recommend to other members (or warn them of) please feel free to write a report/review and send it to the editorial address.

## COMMITTEE POSTS: UPDATE

So far a few people have come forward CAROL MORTON has expressed an interest in standing for CHAIRMAN, SARAH FREAKLEY for PUBLICITY OFFICER, STEVE JONES for TREASURER and MARTIN TUDOR for NEWSLETTER EDITOR. Which still leaves us with no candidate for the post of SECRETARY.

You are welcome to stand against any of the above.

## THE SOLUTION TO THE VERY EASY CHRISTMAS PUZZLE

There were only two entries received to the Christmas Puzzle this year, from Tony Berry and Mohammed Tariq, neither of whom got all 14 titles. Rog Peyton proclaimed it "too easy" but forget to pass over his entry - shame. Which means that this year's winner is MOHAMMED TARIQ who got 12 out of 14 titles - narrowly beating Tony's 11. Congratulations Mohammed, please pick up your prize from the Treasurer at the AGM.

The 14 titles concealed in the puzzle were:

ENGINE SUMMER  
GREYBEARD  
CAMP CONCENTRATION  
TAU ZERO  
NOVA  
NONSTOP  
SLAN  
SIRIUS  
JEM  
PROTECTOR  
SKYFALL  
RINGWORLD  
ORN  
CHTHON



**CHAIR'S BIT**  
by Bernie Evans

It's customary for the retiring Chairman to write a "thank you and goodbye" piece for the Newsletter. So - thank you and goodbye.

No, seriously, I would like to thank you all for your support over the last twelve months, I'd like to, but looking at some of the attendance figures I can't, I *would* like to ask you to give your next chairman your *full* support, in terms of turning up for meetings, behaving yourself at meetings by treating our guests with courtesy and respect, such as arriving on time, closing the door quietly if you must enter or leave the room whilst the speaker is "on stage". You all know the kind of thing I mean, I've written about it often enough.

On a more positive note, I want to thank my committee for their support and extremely hard work. Steve Jones had worked as hard as possible on publicity, getting material into places that previous Publicity Officers failed to reach, and his raffles have been the saviour of many a meeting. Martin Tudor has done an excellent job with the newsletter, often in difficult circumstances, and occasionally in the teeth of very late contributions from the Book Reviews Editor. (As Book Reviews Editor I have done my best but it frequently wasn't good enough!)

Ordinary Member Mick Evans has done a good job of keeping me in line, and of carrying and distributing review copies. David Hunter, the other Ordinary Member, unfortunately did a good job of disappearing part way through the year. Still, you can't win 'em all.

Richard Standage and Helena Bowles, Secretary and Treasurer respectively, have done sterling work keeping the records straight and the finances in order, *and* put in a hefty amount of work on Novacon 24. Congratulations to the Novacon 24 team as a whole, and to Richard as Chairman in particular. Tony Morton has had a good start as Novacon 25 Chairman, keep it up Tony, Richard will be a hard act to follow and I'm sure you're the man to do it.

I'm looking forward to attending future meetings as a Group Member only, and I hope I'll remember to appreciate all the effort that will be going into it behind the scenes. Good Luck to next year's Chairman and Committee. Thank you and goodbye.

**JOPHAN REPORT #82**

Conratulations to ex-BSFG chairman Chris Murphy on starting a new job on 9 January. Commiserations however on it not only being in Manchester, but with the firm of accountants responsible for the survey which resulted in his redundancy from his last job!

If you are intersted in joining the Birmingham University Writer's Circle call Byron on 0121 426 5987.

The THIS IS YOUR LIFE programme featuring Arthur C Clarke which was mentioned a few issues ago will be screened on Wednesday 11 January at 7pm on BBC 1.

The Beer and Skittles Evening at the Samson & Lion in Wordsley on the 16 December was such a resounding success that by popular demand the pub's larger Skittle Alley was booked on the spot for the Group's 1995 Christmas Meeting. Further details should be available shortly.

Amongst the prize winners that night were VERNON BROWN (who seemed to be unbeatable - until Mr Peyton changed the rules - "We keep playing this round until Vernon is losing!"); STAN ELING the first person to lose all of his "lives" twice; TONY MORTON who won game two (Vernon having won it several times already); ALAN WOODFORD for most dangerous bowling style; VERNON BROWN for highest score; STEVE JONES for the most stupid bowling style; VERNON BROWN for winning game three; STEVE JONES for most "single hits"; MARTIN TUDOR for winning game four.

Horror literature has lost two of its leading figures in Robert Bloch, who died on 23 September aged 77, and Karl Edward Wagner, who died on 15 October aged 48. Although Bloch's death was widely expected following his revelation of a terminal illness at the Winnipeg worldcon less than three weeks earlier, Wagner was returning to the US following his appearance at Fantasycon XIX in Birmingham and his loss from liver failure has stunned his many British friends.

Maureen Speller Kincaid and Paul Kincaid have resigned from the committee of Intersection, the 1995 world science fiction convention, for which they were organizing the literary programme, they have been replaced by Colin Harris.

## BOOK REVIEWS

*ODDS AND GODS* by Tom Holt

Orbit, 282 pp, £14.99, h/b

*FAUST AMONG EQUALS* by Tom Holt

Orbit, 292 pp, £4.99, p/b

Reviewed by Martin Tudor

If you haven't bothered to pick up a copy of one of Tom Holt's wonderful comic fantasies by now (despite his previous visits to the BSG and Novacon) I doubt that there is anything I could say here that will convince you to do so. Still I'll give it a go. Holt has been frequently compared to both Douglas Adams and Terry Pratchett - neither of these comparisons are accurate. Where both Pratchett and Adams mine a comparatively recent vein of British humour (that of the Goons and the Pythons), the heart of Holt's comedy harks back to that most English of humourists P G Wodehouse. His is a "softer" style than that of either of his peers. Despite the overtly zant settings and characters Holt's humour is predominantly a comedy of manners, taking a wry look at the bizarre world we live in. To do this he tells his stories through the viewpoint of a whole range of historical, legendary and mytho-

logical characters. His humour is at its best in situations where incredibly powerful beings are thwarted by petty bureaucrats or defeated by Automated Cash Machines. By dropping legendary characters into (to us) everyday situations he pointedly exposes the absurdities of the world we live in. Of his nine fantastic comedies only one has so far failed to delight me. In *HERE COMES THE SUN* Holt tried a different approach and placed a mortal in a fantastic situation, although the novel had some high points over all it failed for me because of this change of viewpoint. Fortunately, however, Holt is back on form with *FAUST AMONG EQUALS* and *ODDS AND GODS*.

In *FAUST* all hell is let loose (literally) when George Faustus (Lucky George to his friends and enemies alike) escapes and tries to sue Hell Holdings plc. It is a delicate time financially for Hell; they are in the middle of a management buy-out, the Auditors are due and plans are underway to turn Hell into a theme park - EuroBosch. Desperate to avoid a scandal the management buy-out team hire Kurt "Mad Dog" Lundqvist to track down George and return him to Hell before the Auditors notice the shortfall.

There follows the usual mad chase across the world and through time during which we see Sitting Bull and Don Juan shooting pool, Helen of Troy riding a bicycle and choosing curtains and soft furnishings (though not at the same time) and the mystery of card-eating, cash-dispensing machines is revealed.

Unfortunately *FAUST* shares the fault common to most of Holt's comic fantasies - it has a weak ending. Although when you destroy the world, encounter God, change the course of history several times and travel to the end of time somewhere during the course of the plot it must be difficult to find an ending which isn't going to be an anti-climax. But somehow Holt manages it in *ODDS AND GODS* which, in my opinion, is the best book he's written since *EXPECTING SOMEONE TALLER*.

The setting of *ODDS AND GODS* is not so much the Twilight of the Gods as the very late evening. Virtually all the Gods that have ever existed have retired to the Sunnyvoide Residential Home - those that haven't simply can't afford it and are forced to eke out a living somehow. Pan, for instance, does voice overs and causes the occasional Stock Market crash.

The owner of the home, Osiris one of the Egyptian pantheon, runs into a few problems when his godson Julian (a lawyer) decides to have him declared insane and invoke power of attorney in order to take over the universe.

I can't say much more about the plot

# TOM HOLT

FAUST AMONG EQUALS



'If you haven't read any Tom Holt,  
go out and buy one now'

Vector



without giving away too much, but take it from me this is Holt at his best, not to mention his most virulent as he lays into all his usual targets - especially lawyers!

**2001: FILMING THE FUTURE** by Piers Bizony  
(Foreword by Arthur C Clarke)  
Aurum Press, 165 pp, £14.95, limpback  
Reviewed by David A Hardy.

This book was not sent to the Group as a review copy, and I have to "declare an interest", being mentioned in the Acknowledgements. The author approached me a couple of years ago and, having narrowly missed working on the film myself, I was able to give him some useful contacts for his research. But since then, the amount of research he has done is painstaking and exhaustive.

Piers Bizony is a genuine fan of this classic movie, and his love of it shows. Included are storyboards, original sketches and designs for the *ORION*, *DISCOVERY* and other vehicles, colour artwork by Bob McCall, stills from the film, and rare shots taken on the sets with Stanley Kubrick and the actors. There is also a brief review of the films which led up to *2001* and followed in its wake, from *CONQUEST OF SPACE*, through *STAR WARS* to *TOTAL RECALL*. Necessarily, these are the author's own subjective opinions, and we may not agree with all of them.

Overall, apart from the use of the term "sci-fi", it is difficult to fault this book, which surely contains all the information that any aficionado could want - and more.

**MORT. A DISCWORLD BIG COMIC** by Terry Pratchett  
Illustrations by Graham Higgins  
Gollancz, 94 pp, Graphics, £12.99 h.b, £7.99 p/b  
Reviewed by Carol Morton.

We all know the story of Mort, the boy who becomes Death's apprentice and takes over the job when Death plays hookey. Whilst in the saddle so to speak he accidentally stops the assassination of the Princess Kell, splits history in two and incidentally falls in love with the Princess, all at the same time. Mort has to find Death and rejoin history together without Kell being killed.

That's the story, now this is the comic book version with illustrations by Graham Higgins. An illustrator with an impressive CV, Higgins' work has been seen in Radio Times, Q Magazine "Luke Carew" from Punch, DC Comics and 2000 AD. This is most definitely

not a comic strip in the style of Fangorn's work on David Gemmill's stories, but *MORT* does not lend itself to that type of artwork. The artwork in this volume is good and fits in well with the storyline. The only quibble I have is that the period when Death takes a holiday is not covered in great enough detail for me, although when Death is drunk it is very amusing.

All in all a book to satisfy, but if you haven't read *MORT* in full, then do so before reading this volume.

**HARLEQUIN** by Ian Watson  
Boxtree, 246 pp, £15.99, h/b  
Reviewed by Michael Jones.

This is a sequel to an earlier volume entitled *INQUISITOR*, but I thought at first it would stand alone quite satisfactorily, as references to what had already happened were few and did not seriously interfere with an understanding of what was going on. Unfortunately, it ends with no particular conclusion having been reached and there is obviously going to be another sequel (or sequels). This being so, it is difficult to recommend it to the casual reader.

The story is set nearly forty thousand years in the future. Humanity is constantly at war with psychic aliens, while at the same time a mysterious conspiracy is aiming to create a psychic doomsday weapon intended to enslave the whole human race. Caught in the middle is Jaq Draco, who ended the previous book as a renegade, but may in fact yet be humanity's one hope of survival. With the reluctant help of a small band of followers he attempts to advance through the complex web of plot and counter-plot, but seems to have made very little progress by the end of the volume - and that little may in fact be mainly due to the intervention of the enigmatic Harlequin of the title.

Inevitably in a story set so far in the future, there is very little relation to reality as we know it. Super-science is mixed uneasily with sorcery and the occult in a setting which does not seem to know whether it wants to be fantasy or hard sf and, in trying to partake of both, fails to do a proper job of being either. Admittedly the story races along, with plenty of violent action and enough futuristic weaponry to satisfy the most bloodthirsty battle-fan, but I found the characterisation weak and the plotting careless and, although I wanted to see how it all turned out, I eventually discovered that I didn't really care. It is

all surface and no substance, and I cannot recommend it to anyone who likes literature as opposed to sci-fi.

GLOBAL HEAD by Bruce Sterling  
Millennium, 301 pp, £4.99, p/b

Reviewed by Robert P Jones.

A few years ago Bruce Sterling coined the term "slipstream" to describe a type of writing combining the styles and concerns of cutting edge sf with those of the avant-garde mainstream. Most of the pieces in this lively, if uneven, collection could be said to come under that heading, being far removed from the genre as it is conventionally perceived and practiced. Indeed, some exasperated readers might go so far as to claim that they were not really sf at all.

But then, Sterling is unlikely to regard this as criticism. For him, sf is a necessarily impure form, and at its most valuable when reflecting the bizarre state of contemporary politics, technology and culture. His world changes so fast and so perplexingly its inhabitants can barely make sense of it, let alone control it. Those who think they can - usually politicians, military, or religious fundamentalists - are cruelly satirised as stupid, dangerous, deluded or insane.

Especial contempt is reserved for Islam with two stories, "The Compassionate, The Digital" and "Gulf Wars" containing material that must be far more openly offensive to believers than anything in *THE SATANIC VERSES*. A third, rather good, story, "We See Things Differently", pits a single-minded Muslim intellectual against a self-indulgent American rock star, with chilling results. The former's spiritual certainty and the latter's cultural arrogance being equally terrifying.

The people Sterling approves of are those living on the margins of society, whether as drifters, maverick artists, or even crooks. Two rather dislikeable stories feature one Leggy Starlitz, a corrupt Soviet fighter-pilot in Afghanistan who goes on to a nomadic criminal career in a near-future USA. Somewhat more endearingly, "Jim and Irene" takes two people with nothing in common but their rootlessness on an aimless tour of the haunted landscapes around Los Alamos.

This last is a fine tale which arguably does not need its final fantasy twist. "Storming the Cosmos", however, a long collaboration with Rudy Rucker, is almost entirely successful in its attempt to marry comic "mainstream" fiction on a scientific theme with the utterly fantastic, sending two

discredited Russian space scientists off on an hilarious mission to investigate the site of the so-called "Tunguska Incident".

As you may have gathered, there is plenty of variety packed within these covers, and not all of it to my taste. "The Shores of Bohemia", for example, is a wild and woolly far-future mystery, typical of the pretentious nonsense Sterling can come out with when he tries too hard. Even at his best he can give the impression of a writer so consumed by a sense of his own importance that he has lost touch with his own very real strengths.

"What he thought and said made some kind of difference, but nowhere near as big a difference as he'd dreamed." Thus the touching final story, "Dori Bangs", sums up the achievement of the rock journalist Lester Bangs, in words that could equally stand as an epitaph for their own author.

CONQUEROR'S PRIDE by Timothy Zahn  
Bantam, 389 pp, £4.99 p/b

Reviewed by Tony Morton.

First novel of an "epic" series (however many that is) from Zahn. This initial tome sets the scene, with a space commonwealth under the auspices of the Peacekeeper force, which acts as space police controlling the aligned planets. The main plot-thrust is that NorCoord, the human alliance, holds the balance of power through the Peacekeeper task force because of an ultimate weapon (CIRCE), used only once to quell an invasion by the now aligned Pawolian. However a new alien presence becomes known and the Peacekeeper task force sent to open communication/make first contact is savagely destroyed. This becomes significant as one Commander, Phylan Cavanagh, is reported as only "missing in action". His father, a wealthy businessman and an ex-parliamentary representative, decides the chances are that the aliens took his son for interrogation and he chooses to break the law to seek him out.

The plot thickens (as they say) as he is aided by Quinn, now a bodyguard but previously a member of the elite Copperheads, who takes command of the rescue bid. The Conquerors, as the aliens are named, do indeed have the Commander and from him try to ascertain mankind's ideologies and plans, to aid their own plans. True to all POW's Cavanagh misdirects them and plans to escape, which lands him in trouble.

Meanwhile, his father's dealings prove his downfall as he and his retinue are arrested for their plot to ignore the law -



but not before Quinn's rescue mission has left to search for Phylan. Matters here take a dramatic turn as the Conquerors invade the outlying planets of the Commonwealth. This first novel ends here, with Cavanagh senior having escaped en-route to rescue his daughter from the war zone, Quinn's expedition returning, and the Conquerors making inroads in the fighting. A twelve page taster for the second book then follows giving broad hints on its direction.

An interesting novel, full of creative ideas. Zahn clearly believes true peace is unworkable, and that mankind's war-like tendencies occur in other species. Possible. The juxtaposition of human superiority through the ultimate weapon with the dangers of the Conquerors creates a tension held throughout. I await part two eagerly.

LUCKY'S HARVEST by Ian Watson

Gollancz, 537 pp, £5.99, p/b

Reviewed by Mick Evans.

This is part one of Ian Watson's foray into the epic in the mould of Herbert's "Dune", Silverberg's "Lord Valentine" and Aldiss' "Helliconia". The planet Kaleva is Earth's only interstellar colony, and Earth owes it all to Lucky Sariala's chance meeting with a mysterious entity known as the Ukko, while on a mining expedition. This meeting resulted in their being transported to Kaleva, a planet that ideally suits the needs of humans, hence the name Lucky. She has been given eternal life by the Ukko, and is 402 years old at the time of this tale. Her daughters, whilst themselves having a normal lifespan, bestow eternal life upon whoever takes their virginity, although occasionally a quite different outcome takes place.

The Ukko seems to be playing God as it populates the planet with the Isi, a serpent race who control the Juttahats, their humanoid alien slaves. Earth, as far as can be ascertained, takes a bit of a back seat, merely observing as life develops on the planet. This complex novel has many plot-threads, far too many to recount here, another being the existence of the Proclaimers, people who have the power to say something out loud and it is done. The champion among them is Osmo, perhaps the main protagonist.

We are promised in the blurb on the cover that the more fantastic elements of the story have a credible scientific rationale. It will be interesting to read part two and discover if this is indeed the case. As with many ventures of this type, I wonder whether

it might have worked better with 30% fewer pages. It is a book of some substance, but I did get a bit bogged down with it at times, although having said that, I am looking forward to the sequel. It is well worth investigating.

RIDING THE UNICORN by Paul Kearney

Gollancz, 254 pp, £15.99, h/b

Reviewed by Carol Morton.

This story concerns one John Willoby who is a prison officer, a stolid, unthinking, uncaring man, not in tune with either his wife or his teenage daughter. He would be the last man anyone would think would hear voices in his head, but that is just what happens to him and at first he thinks he is going mad. His family are certain that he is. When the hallucinations begin they are of a primitive place of wild beauty that John finds more and more attractive than his own mundane world and, as time goes on, he becomes more and more willing to escape to this strange world.

It turns out that he is not going mad and is not hallucinating, but he has been chosen by a vengeful bastard son, Tillimon, to assassinate his father the Courberall, the High King, in order to gain the throne. As Willoby is unknown in this land he will be the perfect assassin, so he is pulled from our universe into that of Kristill and taken by Aimon, Tillimon's tame Mage and Merrin, his mistress, to a secret city he has had built in the mountains where Aimon will instruct him (Willoby) in his duties and Merrin's sexual favours will further bind him to Tillimon's cause.

This is not a particularly inspiring or entertaining story. The characters are two dimensional, with no depth and meriting no sympathy. With a little more in the way of characterisation and more attention to detail in the plot then this may well have been a good novel. But there wasn't, so I shouldn't bother with this if I was you.

DRAWING BLOOD by Poppy Z Brite

Penguin, 373 pp, £5.99, "C" format

Reviewed by Phil Noyes.

This is in many ways a quest novel, with Trevor McGee seeking to understand the events of twenty years before, when his father Robert McGee beat his wife and three-year old son to death with a hammer before hanging himself. Like his father, Trevor has a very strong talent for drawing cartoons and



graphic novels, and is drawn to Robert's "Birdland", looking at the world and timed of Charlie Paeker. He finds his way back to Missing Mile, the town where the tragedy took place, and sets up home in the house, with all its memories.

Zach Bosch is a young computer hacker with the Secret Service on his tail and a childhood scarred differently but as deeply as Trevor's. He deals with the matter by a rigid separation of sex and love, resulting in a lifestyle of casual encounters and platonic friendships. Alerted to impending arrest, he makes his escape, fetching up in Missing Mile.

The two encounter each other, and are both attracted more than they can control. Both also begin to see strange apparitions in the house, with the murder weapon and bloodstains appearing, and Trevor becomes unpredictable and dangerous. The search for meaning occupies the pair, and an ending of sorts is set up.

Brite is a fascinating writer, with a larger than life reputation, who writes with consummate skill - so much so that the slow pace of the book didn't show. The plot is subdued, and Brite throws in several interesting elements and features, but then abandons them, Trevor's graphics work for example. Nonetheless an enjoyable read. (For followers of hardcore horror, I understand that in America, some volumes are being marketed as "smelling of real burnt human flesh" following a self immolation in a mailroom)

THE COMPLETE STORIES VOLUME ONE by Isaac Asimov

HarperCollins, 429 pp, £5.99, "C" format p/b

Reviewed by Robert P Jones.

"At last", screams the blurb, "the definitive Asimov collection is underway".

Alas, I think not, if this abysmal first volume of stories is anything to go by. At the risk of sounding too much like John Clute, it might be worth pointing out that a "definitive edition" should present a writer's work either in chronological order or some other order which makes sense (for instance, groups of stories sharing the same characters) and which is clearly explained in the introduction. This collection has no introduction - indeed, no credited editor - and its criteria for story selection and arrangement are, to say the least, obscure.

Despite being Volume One, it does not include Asimov's first published story "Marooned off Vesta" (1939), nor any of his work from the 1940s, when he produced such memorable pieces as "Nightfall", "C Chute" and "Breeds

There a Man?". The stuff here all appears to date from the early- to mid-50s, though since the appalling copyright page gives only current copyright holders, not place and date of first publication, it is impossible to be certain.

Needless to say, this absence of documentation is doubly irritating in presenting the work of a writer whose stories often reflected contemporary political anxieties, and it matters all the more because Asimov, though no great artist, was a writer of real importance. A distinguished scientific practitioner and populariser with wide-ranging enthusiasm for the arts, he was arguably ahead of his time in seeking a bridge between the two cultures. His fiction, if often drab and thinly characterised, presents interesting dilemmas clearly, sympathetically and in ways that were widely influential on the development of the genre.

It would be nice to end by saying that the contents of this book were so enjoyable they made the sloppiness of their presentation quite irrelevant, but sadly, I can't. Few of these tales seem to me to show the Good Doctor at anything like his best. Some are little more than extended jokes and many are fearfully dated. Even old favourites like "The Dead Past" and "The Last Question" cover ground that has been gone over more stylishly by later writers.

On the bright side, "Profession" is a solid, characteristically sober piece of social speculation, and "The Dying Night" a tolerable mystery. "The Gentle Vultures" is a fairly chilling piece of Cold War paranoia, and "I'm in Marsport Without Hilda" is good, fast moving, mildly sexist fun. There are some interesting early attempts to apply scientific rationalisation to fantasy material, and a couple of neat Gilbert and Sullivan parodies.

Still, it shouldn't have been allowed. This is a disgraceful piece of publishing and, somewhere at HarperCollins, heads must roll!

BODIES: BODIES VALLEJO. HIS PHOTOGRAPHIC ART

Paper Tiger, pp not numbered, £20.00, h/b

Reviewed by Dave Hardy.

This can hardly be called a science fiction book, though it could have a lot to do with fantasies! Because it is a book full of naked bodies, mainly those of beautiful women, but with a few muscular men thrown in. Its appeal, therefore, could well be outside our own field.

Boris was born in Lima, Peru, and having visited there recently I can see why he would want to escape into fantasy ... Most of his fans know that he has always used photography

as a basis for his paintings (originally of his wife and himself). In this book he uses models, especially, in the case of the men, body builders, though about a third are of his wife, Julie. He takes (with a Hasselblad) and prints all his photographs, sometimes using filters and special effects in the darkroom. Most are in black-and-white, with a few in colour. I actually prefer the monochrome ones.

Sexist remarks aside, this is an excellent showcase of figure photography, and a useful reference work for other artists. And it's all done in the best possible taste.

**HARVEST OF STARS** by Poul Anderson  
Tor, 531 pp, £4.99, p/b

Reviewed by Tony Morton.

It is the people with drive who will help mankind finally make that leap into space - as a permanent resident not the half cocked present game. Anderson's story is about such a man, though more about his influence than about the man himself. Anson Guthrie, the co-founder and jefe of Fireball Enterprises, long dead but reincarnated through science as a download is that man.

The story deals with associates of Fireball and how they come into conflict with the North American government, a radical group called the Avantists, who control all aspects of life through the Sepo, the Secret Police, comparable to Nazi Germany. Fireball is a powerful international company, an independent body, whose main assets are space travel and space industries. They therefore appear above the law and (unofficially) harass the government for better facilities, more freedom for people and the like.

To help their cause the Avantists try to kidnap Guthrie's download and replace it with a duplicate programmed with their aims. This is the crux of the early part of the novel, how Guthrie escapes capture, the relationships between Fireball's consorts, the independence of the spacebound humans (especially those on the Moon) and the deviousness of the Avantists as they try to hold on to power. All well written and delivered with verve, Anderson creates such a believable world you feel you live there.

After these events come to a peak the story moves on to take in the consequences. To survive, as human, Guthrie and several others realise, mankind must push toward the stars. Only one world has been found that could be adapted for human life. The decision to go is taken and with Fireball's wealth ships of exploration (and hibernation) are built.

The world of Demeter proves hard to conquer, with life a continual struggle against the natural environment. Life on Earth, they learn, has become more stratified as AI begins to move development along purely intellectual lines. However, an idea emerges on Demeter which allows for better control of their environment, and develops into the possibility of further expansion into the cosmos. All of this is superbly handled and argued.

An exceptional novel that explores mankind's intent and potential - and comes up with an alternative outcome! An excellent read, presenting good arguments for space exploration and better communication links, with the added bonus of making the reader think.

**THE JULIE BELL PORTFOLIO**

Paper Tiger, 28pp and introduction, £12.95, p/b  
Reviewed by Michael Jones.

According to the fulsome introduction by Boris Vallejo, the period from 1992 to 1994 represented by this collection of work covers the whole of Julie Bell's professional career. This being so, she has obviously come a long way in a short time. These pictures show a mature professionalism which any artist, however long established, might envy. In particular she has mastered the technique of combining the textures of metal and flesh to make it her own distinctive characteristic, one which our own Dave Hardy assures me is exceptionally difficult to achieve.

One might be critical by calling her work somewhat derivative, pointing to the obvious influences of Boris and others such as Frank Frazetta. (In that context it is interesting to note that in a collection of paintings by a female artist, scantily-clad and erotically-depicted females outnumber the muscular males by about three to one.) There is also a tendency towards sameness which could either represent the strength of a personal style or could indicate a dearth of imagination. However, I would think that any such comments are too easily made in the case of a career which has, after all, only just got started, and I am sure that time will dispel any such grounds for criticism.

This is a large book, 40 cm x 28 cm, beautifully produced on thick, high-quality paper. It is a fitting setting for what are, by any definition and despite any critical element in what I have already said, truly superb fantasy paintings. It is a book which would enhance any collection of sf/fantasy art at the same time as serving as an introduction to a major new talent.



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# BRUM GROUP NEWS

January 1995

Issue 280

*The monthly newsletter of the Birmingham Science Fiction Group  
(Honorary Presidents: Brian W Aldiss & Harry Harrison)*

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## SPECIAL MEETING TOM HOLT

will be speaking to the Group

on Friday 13th January 1995, 7.45 for 8.00pm

Admittance: Members £2.50 Visitors £3.75  
(half-price for 14-18 year olds on production of proof of age).

Tom Holt was born on Friday the 13th September 1961, a sullen, podgy child, much given to brooding on the Infinite. He studied at Westminster School, Wadham College, Oxford and the College of Law. He produced his first book, *POEMS BY TOM HOLT*, at the age of 13, and was immediately hailed as an infant prodigy, to his horror. At Oxford, he discovered bar billiards and at once changed from poetry to comic fiction, beginning with two sequels to E F Benson's "Lucia" series, *LUCIA TRIUMPHANT* and *LUCIA IN WARTIME*, and continuing with his own distinctive brand of comic fantasy which now tallies nine acclaimed novels: *EXPECTING SOMEONE TALLER, WHO'S AFRAID OF BEOWULF, FLYING DUTCH, YE GODS, OVERTIME, HERE COMES THE SUN, GRAILBLAZERS, FAUST AMONG EQUALS* (Orbit, £4.99) and *ODDS AND GODS* (Orbit, £14.99). He has also written two historical novels set in the fifth century BC, the well-received *GOATSONG* and *THE WALLED ORCHARD*, and has collaborated with Steve Nallon on *I, MARGARET*, the "unauthorised autobiography" of Margaret Thatcher. Somewhat thinner and more cheerful than in his youth, Tom Holt is now married, and lives in Somerset, where he worked as a solicitor until October 1994 at which time he finally burned his suits and gave up the "day job" to become a full-time writer.

The BSFG meets at 7.45pm on the 3rd Friday of every month (unless otherwise notified) in the upstairs Function Room of the Australian Bar, corner of Hurst Street and Bromsgrove Street in Birmingham city centre. The annual subscription rates (which include twelve copies of this newsletter and reduced price entry to meetings) are £10.00 per person, or £13.50 for 2 members at the same address. Cheques etc. payable to "the Birmingham Science Fiction Group", via the treasurer Helena Bowles at meetings or by post c/o Bernie Evans (address below). Book reviews and review copies should be sent to the reviews editor Bernie Evans, 121 Cape Hill, Smethwick, Warley, West Midlands, B66 4SH (tel: 021 558 0997). All other contributions and enquiries regarding the Brum Group News to: Martin Tudor, 845 Alum Rock Road, Birmingham, B8 2AG (tel: 021 327 3023).