

BRUM GROUP NEWS

Price: FREE

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The monthly newsletter of the Birmingham Science Fiction Group

(Honorary Presidents: Brian W Aldiss and Harry Harrison)

Group Chairman - Tony Morton, Secretary - Anne Woodford, Treasurer - Alan Woodford,

Publicity Officer - Steve Jones, Newsletter Editor and Novacon 27 & 28 Chairman - Martin Tudor.



will address the Group on Friday 6th June 1997

NB: this is the FIRST Friday of the month!

**7.15pm for 7.30pm in the TOP FLOOR bar of the Tap & Spile,
Gas Street, (off Broad Street) Birmingham.**

Admittance: Members £1.50 (£1.00 unwaged), Non-Members £2.75 (£2.00 unwaged). Unwaged discounts are at the discretion of the Committee and will depend on satisfactory proof of status being produced.)

Please do not smoke until 9pm when the bar is opened to the general public.

TOM HOLT (Thomas Charles Louis Holt) was born in 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 Holt discovered bar billiards: *"When I was at university there was a pool table in the room behind the bar. We found that if we stuffed newspaper in the pockets, we could play all day for free. So we did, when we should have been working. The result of all this indolence was that when we came to take our final exams, the boys and girls who'd avoided the bar and stayed in the library working like hell all passed with flying colours; while the rest of us, who'd done nothing but play pool and have a good time, also passed with flying colours. So let that be a lesson to you."*

At Oxford he switched from poetry to comic fiction, beginning with two sequels to E F Benson's Lucia series, and continuing with his own distinctive brand of comic fantasy. He has also written two historical novels set in the fifth century BC, GOATSON and THE WALLED ORCHARD (due to be republished in November this year) and the (unauthorised) autobiography of Margaret Thatcher, I, MARGARET, with Steve Nallon. His favourite authors are Damon Runyon, Ernest Bramah, and P G Wodehouse (in that particular order).

Thinner and more cheerful than in his youth, Tom Holt is now married to Kim and lives in Somerset "just downwind of the meat-canning factory". His musical interests include "filk", medieval music and classical jazz. His 19th book, OPEN SESAME, was released in hardback this month priced £15.99, as was the paperback of PAINT YOUR DRAGON (£5.99). Holt has recently completed the book WISH YOU WERE HERE, and is currently working on ONLY HUMAN and SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN SAMURAI. [Many thanks to Calle's Tom Holt web page, <http://www.mdstud.chalmers.se/~md4calle/holt/>.]

The BSFG meets on the 2nd Friday of every month (unless otherwise notified). The annual subscription rates (which include 12 copies of this newsletter and reduced price entry to meetings) are £15.00 per person, or £18.00 for 2 members at the same address. Cheques etc. should be made payable to "The Birmingham Science Fiction Group" and sent to: Alan Woodford, the Treasurer, 81 Harrold Road, Rowley Regis, Warley, West Midlands, B65 0RL, (e-mail enquiries via: bsfg@bortas.demon.co.uk)

Book reviews, review copies and other contributions and enquiries regarding the Brum Group News to: Martin Tudor, Newsletter Editor, 24 Ravensbourne Grove, off Clarkes Lane, Willenhall, West Midlands, WV13 1HX (or e-mail to martin@empties.demon.co.uk).

Colophon

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Text by Martin Tudor except where stated otherwise.

This issue was printed on the CRITICAL WAVE photocopier. For details of WAVE's competitive prices contact Martin Tudor at the editorial address on the cover.

Many thanks to ALAN & ANNE WOODFORD for producing the address labels; STEVE GREEN for permission to use his article on the BSFG; RACHEL BAKER for distributing the May newsletter at the Iain Banks talk last month.

**A Word from the Editor
by Martin Tudor**

As you will have noticed from the cover this month's meeting has been brought forward a week. This is because neither the speaker NOR the room was available for the second Friday of the month! I hope this doesn't cause too many problems for you.

As many of you will have already heard/read last month's newsletter was delayed by the life-threatening illness of my newly born daughter. I'm happy to say that her condition has now dramat-

ically improved, her weight was 6lb 13oz on Friday 30th May, and she has been allowed home; but I'm afraid that despite three stays in hospital and innumerable tests we still don't know what is wrong with her. Having eliminated urinary infections, feeding problems and, most recently, any obvious kidney problems and diabetes insipidus, all the consultant could say last week was that she had "the most remarkable blood chemistry" he'd encountered. We see him again on the 3rd of June and can only hope for the best.

Enclosed with this newsletter most of you will find your copy of the May newsletter. This was copied and ready to collate and mail on the day Heloise was rushed to hospital. Obviously I didn't have time to collate it then, so the best I could do was run off copies of the cover page and stick them in the already prepared envelopes. In this way I hoped to at least let members know about the meeting.

I had intended to complete the newsletter in time to notify members of the Iain Banks talk at Central Library the following week, but in the end it was produced too late to mail out (there seemed little point in mailing it so late at such expense).

However, the "Iain Banks Special Issue" was not *entirely* wasted effort as Rachel Baker (from Andromeda Book Shop) agreed to take a supply along to the Iain's talk for distribution. (We have had one response from the Iain's talk already - welcome to MORRIS WARD who requested a copy of this newsletter.)

Jophan Report #104
by Martin Tudor

*And at sf conventions they use me
to clear the bars."*

Hopefully you have all been tuning in to Channel 4 on Sundays at 5.25pm for the animated adventures of Terry Pratchett's WYRD SISTERS. This is the first of two stories to be animated, the second SOUL MUSIC will appear on tv later, but is already on sale on video.

Tom Holt fans will no doubt be delighted to discover that BITTER LEMMINGS, an anthology of his filksongs is now available.

Featuring 39 songs the booklet costs £4.75 (inclusive of p%p) from Becon Publications, 75 Rosslyn Avenue, Harold Wood, Essex, RM3 0RG (e-mail becon@dial.pipex.com for further information).

"Filk" for those fortunate enough not to have encountered it consists of, according to Tom Holt on Calle's web site, "(a) songs written about characters, situations etc from science fiction or fantasy literature, set either to original music or already existing tunes, (b) parodies of the above, (c) songs by established sf/fantasy writers about anything in general, (d) songs by established filksong writers about anything in general, (e) songs about cats ... or, to quote from a song by the greatest living British filkwriter:

*I know the words to every song, the
chords to every tune.*

*I sing of girls in cryosleep or
miners on the moon,*

*Of secret pagan rituals and battles
in the stars;*

Forthcoming Events

UNTIL 2 JUNE 1997: STAR TREK EXHIBITION at the Gas Hall, Chamberlain Square, Birmingham. Open 10am-5pm daily. Admission £3.95 adults, £3.00 children and concessions. Call: 0121-235-1966 or 0121-236-5622 for information and bookings.

6 JUNE 1997: TOM HOLT will address the BSFG, 7.15 for 7.30pm, in the top floor bar at the Tap & Spile, Gas Street, Birmingham. (Please note we have exclusive use of this room until 9pm, no smoking is permitted until that time.)

7 JUNE 1997: COMEDY DAY AT ANDROMEDA! Featuring signing sessions at Andromeda Book Shop in Birmingham with Andrew Harman (MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S GENIE), Tom Holt (OPEN SESAME and PAINT YOUR DRAGON) and Robert Rankin (SPROUT MASK REPLICA and NOSTRADAMUS ATE MY HAMSTER). Call Andromeda on 0121-643-1999 or check out their Web site at <http://www.andromedasf.co.uk> for further details.

JULY 1997: DIANE DUANE will be signing copies of her new hardcover - the first in her new adult fantasy series - at Andromeda Book Shop in Birmingham. Date to be confirmed. Call Andromeda on 0121-643-1999 or check out their Web

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site at <http://www.andromedasf.co.uk> for further details.

3-5 SEPTEMBER 1997:

LONESTARCON 55th World SF Convention, San Antonio, Texas, USA.
Contact: PO Box 27277, Austin, TX 78755-2277, USA.

14-16 NOVEMBER 1997: NOVACON 27, the annual sf convention of the Brum Group, will be held at the Abbey Hotel, Great Malvern. Guest of Honour Peter F Hamilton. Attending membership £30.00 until 30 September when the price will rise. Supporting £10.50. Progress Report #2 and hotel booking forms now available. Contact: Carol Morton, 14 Park Street, Lye, Stourbridge, W. Midlands, DY9 8SS.

27 DECEMBER 1999 - 2 JANUARY 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.

Although details are correct to the best of our knowledge, we advise readers to contact organisers 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 (e-mail martin@empties.demon.co.uk).

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

SURGICAL STRIKE by Steve Green

All good things, it's said, come to an end; what the aphorism doesn't add, of course, is that some of the worse things hang around long after they're of use, like farts after a heavy curry. And let's be frank, you'd have to go a long way to find a bigger bunch of Old Farts than the Birmingham SF Group.

I was fortunate enough to first encounter the Brum Group during its heyday: guests in the opening months of 1977 included Brian Aldiss, Christopher Priest and Bob Shaw, all authors I respected and who proved excellent speakers. By that autumn, I was helping produce the BSFG's one-off fanzine; by the following spring, I was assisting Rog Peyton edit the monthly newsletter, and succeeded him during the first half of 1979. Although a difference of opinion over the future direction of the newsletter prompted my resignation, I still turned up at the actual meetings and even stood for the chair in 1983, though I was pleased to bow out in favour of surprise candidate Pete Weston; the group was suffering a mid-life crisis and the two of us had

largely identical views on the best way back to its fannish roots.

We hosted a notorious room party at the 1983 Eastercon in Glasgow, launched an amateur press association (still running, though long since disconnected from the BSFG), promoted a series of social events, ran informal pub meetings... and got precisely nowhere. Pete finally resigned the chair in September 1994, passing the poisoned chalice to Rog, and I hung around only long enough to chair Novacon 14 two months later. Our joint sense of disappointment was well summed up in the generation ship metaphor Pete utilised in 1986 for the Fifteencon programme book: "Maybe we arrived at the target planet in 1983 and some of us got off. The rest are on the return trip, and if you will look now at Brian Aldiss' epic NON-STOP, you'll see the fate of those degenerative crew-members who long ago forgot who they were and where they were going."

Their voyage continued, and our curiosity eventually won us over, not to mention the fact that by last year Martin Tudor was combining Brum Group chair with newsletter editor and needed a little moral support. It was a disheartening experience: despite Martin's sterling work on publications (for many members, their only link with the BSFG), turnout had continued to slump from its 1970s high of 60+ to barely double figures, with virtually only the anti-fannish hardcore surviving the haemorrhage. The lunatics had quit the asylum, and left the guards in grey behind.

Fast forward to Intervention. Pete wanders over to update me on a chat he's just had with Rog and former treasurer

Dave Holmes, the general consensus being that the group has outlived its original aims and deserves a quiet mercy killing before its death throes become too painful to watch. Rog, however, apparently sees this merely as stage one; after a few months have passed and the less socially attuned have shuffled off, Rog could come on like Birmingham's Obi Wan Kenobi, recruiting a new generation of fans into the ways of the Fannish Force via the Andromeda Bookshop. Neither Pete nor I can quite visualize Rog wandering the city streets in a brown bathrobe, and I can't help thinking newcomers to fandom would look upon anyone over the age of thirty-five with some suspicion. No, the answer, we decide, is to kill it off now, then leave it to someone else to recreate the fannish wheel, just as Pete, Rog and Vernon Brown stood upon the ashes of the 1960s BSFG when they set theirs up in 1971. So it goes, so it goes.

Our conversation drifts from prognosis into diagnosis; after all, Birmingham's isn't the only local sf society to have hit the rocks in the past year or three. My own theory is that sf's very commercial success - in terms of videos, role-playing games, comics - is at least partially the smoking gun. When I joined the Brum Group in 1977, it was an oasis in a largely sf-free world; now, it's on tap in the comfort of your own home, and those who do make the monthly journey do so out of habit, or duty or maybe lack of imagination.

Whilst working on RAILINGS, my membership reminder arrived in the post. It even includes a space for explaining why I'm not renewing. I think I'll send them a copy of this instead.

[The above originally appeared in RAILINGS #1, published April 1997 by Steve Green.

[Comments from members are invited and I will run a selection of these, along with my own response, in the July newsletter. Letters should reach me, Martin Tudor, at 24 Ravensbourne Grove, off Clarkes Lane, Willenhall, WV13 1HX or e-mail to martin@empties.demon.co.uk by the 28th June 1997.]

Book Reviews

PAINT YOUR DRAGON

by Tom Holt, Orbit, 311pp, pb, £5.99

Star Rating: *****.

OPEN SESAME by Tom Holt

Orbit, 312pp, hb, £15.99.

Star Rating: ***.

Reviewed by Martin Tudor.

To those BSGF members who attended the May meeting last year where Tom Holt read excerpts from his work in progress parts of PAINT YOUR DRAGON may seem familiar - but believe me they are no less funny the second time around!

Holt takes no prisoners in his hilarious and withering attacks on Birmingham City Council and its city planners (hello Chairman Tony!) and his sensitive portrayal of the lethal, but misunderstood, dragon and "Saintly", but down-right viscious, George must go down in comic history! PAINT YOUR DRAGON is Holt at his best and they don't come much better.

Unfortunately OPEN SESAME proves that it is difficult (if not impossible) to score with every shot. There *are* some wonderfully funny scenes in this novel, and there *are* some beautifully drawn and hilariously funny characters (Fang the tooth fairy and the Fairy GodFather spring to mind) but on the whole the book flounders.

Somehow the entire Ali Baba routine seemed incredibly contrived and by the end of the book I must admit I really didn't care what happened to any of the characters - major or minor. *But* it is worth reading - if only for the birth control clinic in story land where "family planning means a Remington pump-action, a steady hand, a good eye and ten or twelve accurately placed stork decoys".

[Copies of both of the above will be raffled at this month's meeting.]

FOUNDATION'S FEAR by Gregory Benford, Orbit, 425pp, hb, £16.99.

Star Rating: ***.

Reviewed by Michael Jones.

The stories making up the Foundation trilogy were first published in the 1940s and remained untouched as one of the twin cornerstones of Isaac Asimov's growing reputation for the next thirty-some years until he started expanding the series, a project cut short by his untimely death in 1992. Now that his widow and the executors of his estate have enlisted Benford to write a new addition to the saga which together with further projected volumes from David Brin and Greg Bear

will constitute the Second Foundation trilogy. This will fill in the gap still remaining between PRELUDE TO FOUNDATION and FORWARD THE FOUNDATION. Oh boy.

It is an odd situation, really: wondering what else happened in between the books already written, one forgets that the answer is actually "nothing". The Empire, Hari Sheldon, Trantor and all the rest of it did not exist until imagined and put down on paper by Asimov and there was nothing in the gap between the end of one book and the beginning of the next because he had not yet got around to thinking of it. So Benford is not taking over from Asimov to continue chronicling events having any kind of real existence. He is but recording the product of his own imagination, and it probably bears no resemblance whatsoever to what Asimov would have thought up himself, given time.

In fact, the book starts well enough, seeming to capture the atmosphere of Asimov's own work and making satisfactory progress at first. Where it seems to go wrong is in introducing two electronic personalities saved from the past - actually from Old Earth, although nobody realises it - which escape into the Trantorian World Wide Web. There they discover other, alien, electronic beings which (or who) have been in hiding since before mankind took over the Galaxy. Maybe I'm a bit thick, but I couldn't see the relevance of this, or how it was supposed to fit in with the history of mankind. Considering the virtual absence of computers from the first Foundation

stories, it represents too radical a departure from the original concept, notwithstanding the obvious fact that something new has got to come from somewhere to give something for the new book(s) to be about. Meanwhile Hari Seldon continues to work on his mathematical theories, making some progress but leaving plenty of scope for future stories.

All in all, I was disappointed in this book, which to my mind is long, disjointed and over-complicated. It is not a bad book on its own, but it fails to fit in satisfactorily with Asimov's original work and contributes little to the Foundation saga as he left it.

* * * * *

The "Star Ratings" are:

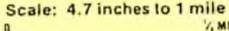
- * = *Crap, beyond belief.*
- ** = *Crap, but readable.*
- *** = *Not too bad, really.*
- **** = *Pretty good actually.*
- ***** = *BUY IT!*

Please remember that reviews of books should reach Martin Tudor at 24 Ravensbourne Grove, off Clarkes Lane, Willenhall, WV13 1HX (or e-mail martin@empties.demon.co.uk), within ONE MONTH of your taking the book.

A number of people still owe reviews, please ensure that these, along with reviews of books picked up at the last meeting are mailed to Martin Tudor by this month's meeting.



TAP
+
SPILE

CITY CENTRE
 One Way Street 
 Scale: 4.7 inches to 1 mile


A

73

B

G

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