

October 1997

Issue 313

BRUM GROUP NEWS

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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.

THE OCTOBER MEETING WILL BE AN INFORMAL MEETING ON FRIDAY 10TH OCTOBER 1997 FROM 7PM IN THE TOP FLOOR BAR OF THE TAP & SPILE, GAS STREET, BIRMINGHAM.

ADMITTANCE: FREE!

THERE WILL BE A RAFFLE AND REVIEW COPIES ARE AVAILABLE AS USUAL. (PLEASE REFRAIN FROM SMOKING UNTIL 8.30PM WHEN THE BAR WILL BE OPENED TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC.)

THIS ISSUE: News; Film & Book Reviews!

The BSFG meets (informally) from 7pm in the Top Floor Bar of the Tap & Spile, Gas Street, Birmingham city centre on the second Friday off each month (unless otherwise notified). The annual subscription rates (which include 12 copies of this newsletter and reduced price entry to formal 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, Willenhall, West Midlands, WV13 1HX (e-mail to martin@empties.demon.co.uk).

Colophon

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Text by Martin Tudor except where stated otherwise.

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Many thanks to ALAN & ANNE WOOD-FORD for producing the address labels; STEVE GREEN, PETER COLEBORN and DAVE HARDY for writing; SFX, WHAT'S ON, LOCUS, the BBC, the Birmingham EVENING MAIL and STEVE GREEN for the news in the Jophan Report and Events Listing.

Letters

David A Hardy,
99 Southam Road, Hall Green,
Birmingham, B28 0AB.
17 September 1997.

I haven't noticed, in your list of Forthcoming Events, any mention of ARMADACON IX, GoH Colin Greenland, Artist GoH David A Hardy. To

the best of my knowledge this is from 21 - 23 November at the Astor Hotel, Plymouth, though it might be best to check this with Marion Pritchard (01752 267873) as I have an idea that either the hotel or dates had been changed but can't find the details.

[Sorry Dave, I hadn't heard about this before. Attendance costs £25.00, contact 4 Gleneagle Avenue, Mannamead, Plymouth, Devon, PL3 5HL.]

BTW, last month I said that I would go and see John Brosnan. I would - but not on October 10, as with any luck I shall be in LA, en route for the Mojave Desert!

[Unfortunately John can't make it either as he will be recovering from his birthday party! We hope to get him for a future meeting.

Members might find it worth their while to check out Dave's WEBSITE at <http://www.hardyart.demon.co.uk>

Peter Coleborn

peter@alchemypress.demon.co.uk

12th September 1997.

Since writing to you about the so-called fading away of the BSFG I thought I ought to start attending Brum Group meetings. Unfortunately, I haven't yet done so, and will not for the next two months at least. The reasons were/will be valid. Tonight I off to the theatre (work's do) and next month I'm in London (immunology meeting). Sorry.

Tony Morton's piece is interesting reading, if a little defensive. I can say this because in all my years of being on the BFS committee, becoming defensive to criticism is natural (ie, been there, done that). My remarks about what guests actually do (talk, readings) was not my main point. I need to think about this some more.

[Letters from members are always welcome; if you wish them to appear in the next newsletter they should reach Martin Tudor, at 24 Ravensbourne Grove, off Clarkes Lane, Willenhall, WV13 1HX or e-mail to martin@empties.demon.co.uk by the FIRST Friday of the month.]

Jophan Report #108 by Martin Tudor

My latest bout of 'flu was somewhat alleviated by the appearance of Michael J "Simo" Simpson (SFX News Editor) and Dave Golder (SFX Editor) on morning tv in, of all things, BBC tv's STYLE CHALLENGE! Yes, the sartorially challenged two-some were the makeover victims on Tuesday 7th October. Watch out for the new-look, suave SFX Eds at future cons!

THE LATE BOOK on Radio 4 from Wednesday 8th October is J G Ballard's THE DROWNED WORLD, abridged in 10 parts by Oliver Reynolds and read by Nicholas Farrell (12.30-12.45am weekday evenings on Radio 4: LW 198 kHz or 1515m; FM 92.4-94.6).

Coming soon to Radio 4 is a two-part serial of CHILDHOOD'S END, Arthur C Clarke's classic novel, starring Steven Pacey from tv's BLAKE'S 7.

Steve Green reports from the Eighth Festival of Fantastic Films (which were held in Manchester over the weekend of 5-7 September) that the 1997 Delta Awards were awarded as follows:

Best independent feature film:
DARKLANDS (UK; dir. Julian Richards)
Commended: THE ASSASSIN (Japan; dir. Masatoshi Takeuchi)

Best independent short film:
ZUYUVA (UK; dir. Jonathan Randall)
Commended: CAT'S CRADLE (Australia; dir. Liz Hughes)
Commended: CASE (UK; dir. Ken Horn)

Best amateur film: LEGEND OF ROY (UK; dir. Rob Richardson, Keith Wright)

Steve added that he watched "15 films, 11 hours of 'in competition' films as one of this year's judges, and some bastard nicked my bag when I was on stage announcing the winners, including the Norman J Warren interview I'd just taped for SFX, my credit cards and - the real kicker - the camera containing those shots of me and Heloise after the Christening. Such is life, I guess." Could Manchester be the new Liverpool? Next year's Eastercon organisers please note!

Andromeda hope to arrange for WARREN JAMES PALMER to sign copies of THE STARWEB when it is published later this year. The July signing had to be cancelled due to postponement of publication. They also hope to arrange for TERRY

PRATCHETT to sign copies of his latest Discworld hardback novel JINGO in November. (Call Andromeda on 0121-643-1999 for details.)

Forthcoming Events

9 OCTOBER 1997: It is hoped that DAVID GEMMELL will be calling in at Andromeda Bookshop to sign copies of his new fantasy ECHOES OF THE GREAT SONG (Bantam Press £15.99). (Call Andromeda on 0121-643-1999 for details.)

18 OCTOBER 1997: From 1pm multiple signing at Andromeda Bookshop featuring: PETER HAMILTON with THE NEUTRONIUM ALCHEMIST (Macmillan £17.99), volume 2 of the Night's Dawn trilogy begun in THE REALITY DISFUNCTION (Pan £7.99); FREDA WARRINGTON with DRACULA THE UNDEAD - a sequel to Bram Stoker's DRACULA (Signet £5.99). They also hope to have signed copies available of TOM BAKER's new autobiography! (Call Andromeda on 0121-643-1999 for details.)

30 OCTOBER 1997: PATRICK MOORE INTO SPACE! Television astronomer "Patrick Moore presents the happenings of the last 40 years in this fascinating space lecture" in Birmingham Symphony Hall. (From 7.30pm, £10.00, call 0121-212-3333 for details.)

10-15 NOVEMBER 1997: Terry Pratchett's WYRD SISTERS adapted

for the stage by Stephen Briggs. "This hilarious stage version of the phenomenally successful novel pits the three witches, Granny Weatherwax, Nanny Ogg and Magrat Garlick, against the wicked duke and duchess. Any similarity to Shakespeare's MACBETH is purely intentional!" The Crescent Theatre, Brindley Place, Broad Street, Birmingham. Tickets are £5.00 in advance and concessions, or £7.00 on the door. Call 0121-643-5858 (Monday- Friday 11am-4pm).

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. Special features include SF BLUES by Brian W Aldiss and The Comedy Revue by Dave Hicks and Mike D Siddall. Attending membership £35.00 - postal registrations should be sent before the end of October. Progress Report #3 and details of overflow hotels now available. Contact: Carol Morton, 14 Park Street, Lye, Stourbridge, DY9 8SS.

21-23 November 1997: ARMADACON IX at the Astor Hotel, Plymouth. GoH Colin Greenland, Artist GoH David A Hardy. Attendance costs £25.00, contact: 4 Gleneagle Avenue, Mannamead, Plymouth, Devon, PL3 5HL, tel: 01752 267873.

11-13 SEPTEMBER 1998: FANTASY-CON 22, the convention of the British Fantasy Society. At the Albany Hotel, Birmingham, Guest of Honour Freda Warrington, with more guests to be announced. Contact: c/o BFS, 2

Harwood Street, Stockport, SK4 1JJ.
(This is a temporary contact address pending the organiser's house move.)

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. 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.

Film Review

EVENT HORIZON

Reviewed by Steve Green

Although both its sets and cinematography are reminiscent of ALIEN and its first sequel, EVENT HORIZON director Paul Anderson prefers to identify THE HAUNTING and THE SHINING as his celluloid inspirations, the eponymous craft acting as a deep space hybrid of Hill House and the Overlook Hotel. It's an even greater pity, then, that Anderson apparently failed to grasp that both Robert Wise and Stanley Kubrick imbued their projects with a tangible tension; moreover, the characters were well defined (even if Jack Nicholson's performance stretched his to breaking point) and ensured the audience actively cared about their fate.

Anderson is correct, though, in stating that the sf elements in Philip Eisner's screenplay are scarcely crucial: the casual regularity with which Laurence Fishburne and his crew are dispatched during their attempt to salvage Earth's first faster-than-light probe has much in common with the stalk-'n'-slash thriller epitomised by the FRIDAY THE 13TH series. Perhaps the worst victim is Sam Neill, as the f1l drive's designer, who switches from mystified scientist to raving lunatic with bizarre suddenness.

It could be that the missing heart of EVENT HORIZON lies beating upon the cutting floor, in the 45 minutes of footage reportedly excised prior to its release. If so, we could all do ourselves a service by skipping this lamentable first draft and awaiting the "special edition" director's cut.

Book Reviews

THE HOWLING STONES

by Alan Dean Foster,

Orbit, 330pp, hb, £16.99,

Star Rating: **

Reviewed by Michael Jones.

This book is set on a newly-discovered planet in the universe of the Humanx Commonwealth, scene of many of Foster's novels. On this world, agreements with the aboriginal natives over mineral rights etc are being worked out, but one particularly important group is proving very difficult to deal with as there is nothing resembling a central government - not even so much as a tribal council - with which to negotiate. So specialist and trouble-shooter Pulickel Tomochelor is sent to sort matters out. He discovers that the natives in question order their lives around the use of a collection of strange green stones, the "howling stones" of the title. Kept separated, these remain inactive but when brought together in pairs or larger groupings they inexplicably fuse together and can be used to do wonderful things like control the weather, heal the sick and make the crops grow. It becomes clear that the stones are relics of a lost technology, but the natives know nothing of this and have learned to use them on a purely ad hoc basis. When Tomochelor tries to find out how they work he is soon in trouble and he learns that there is little chance of connecting to their origin.

This is a straightforward, workmanlike piece of sf, well-written and readable, if not entirely original (Cf for example the

Thing in Terry Pratchett's TRUCKERS.) I would have preferred to see more made of the connection to an ancient technological civilisation, although this is maybe being saved for works as yet unwritten: there is even a tantalising hint of a connection to Flinx and his future destiny which I mentioned in a review in the February issue.

I would have liked to award this book three stars, but I feel I have to deduct one because of what I see as the failure properly to exploit the possibilities inherent in the central idea and the generally inconclusive ending.

THE UNAUTHORISED TREKKERS' GUIDE TO THE NEXT GENERATION AND DEEP SPACE NINE by James van Hise
HarperCollins, 311pp, pb, £5.99
Reviewed by "Adrian's Friend".

This potted companion actually manages to cram a tribute to STAR TREK, a synopsis of every episode of TNG and commentaries on both TNG and DS9 crews, into 264 pages - which naturally leaves it light on detail.

The last 100 pages are set aside for a numerical listing of all TNG episodes with credits and a two line story summary (a bit of a waste as pages 86-157 already review the storylines) and Seasons one and Two of DS9. A longer article on Brent Spiner and a further tribute to Gene Roddenberry complete the book.

This all makes for an overall "cut & paste" appearance, especially as some of the "articles" are written by (and credited to) other people. If I wanted a TREK scrapbook, I could make my own, not pay £5.99 for it.

It is definitely one man's opinion but pays a nice tribute to the evergreen nature of STAR TREK that flies in the face of 1970s' sneering criticisms by networks now long gone. Points to the need people had and still have for a future dream that was hopeful for mankind where morals and people were valued.

Van Hise presents Roddenberry - warts and all, along with the conflicts behind the scenes, especially those concerning writers on Season One of TNG. The selection of the actors for both TNG and DS9 provide interesting insights to the background of the characters and the actors.

He is very critical of the first season, and some episodes which I quite liked, so it's very much a personal view here. However, he brings out well the fact that despite its popularity the quality of TREK acting and production is overlooked by an industry that lauds and salutes lesser performances elsewhere.

Already out of date as it only goes up to DS9 Season Two, an obviously well meant little book and great fun for someone who had no previous information on STAR TREK - the book provides an excellent overview and guide to the best episodes. If you know of any such deprived individual, do them a favour and

buy them a copy. But there's not much new here for an established Trekker.

MAGIC by Isaac Asimov
HarperCollins/Voyager, 300pp,
pb, £5.99, Star Rating: **
Reviewed by Michael Jones.

The first half of this book is devoted to Asimov's last few uncollected fantasy stories. No less than eight of them concern Azazel, the little imp from another universe, a couple more are fairy stories pure and simple and there is also another tale of the Black Widowers which hardly even qualifies as fantasy. Written in his usual chatty style, these stories are without exception neat and tidy, unoriginal, uncontroversial and totally unmemorable. In fact, if this collection represents Asimov's fantasy writing, one can only conclude that he wasn't very good at it.

The remainder of the volume is made up of non-fiction essays and columns, some on fantasy writing and the rest on more general subjects. This is much better. Speaking personally. I find myself totally in accord with him on many subjects and he expresses exactly the sort of opinions I would wish to put forward myself had I but the time (and literary skill) to work them out as well as he does. Indeed, a couple of these essays would almost be worth the price of the book on their own.

Nevertheless, I cannot recommend the book as a whole. As Chris Morgan said of the companion volume GOLD a few months ago, it is just a marketing ploy aimed at extracting a bit of extra profit out

of such fans as may feel their collections are incomplete unless they have every word Asimov ever wrote. Not me, thanks.

GLASS by Stephen Palmer,
Orbit, 341pp, pb, £5.99,
Reviewed by Tony Morton.
Star Rating: **

Oddly mixed story borrowing from Palmer's first novel MEMORY SEED, with such names as Kray and here Cray. Also similar, the city scenario and the doom prophecies. Not gripping enough to hold my attention, I found Palmer's characters too complex and the plot having too many strands that didn't tie together at the end. As for the end, for me it lacked cohesion so as not to draw the reader towards any recognisable climax; rather fizzling out.

Basically the story is of the city of Cray, which is ruled by the Triad, heads of Archives. These three most powerful of the Archives become one, a sub plot being the "take over" by the Archive of Noct. The plague of glass (hence the title) is over-running the city causing great damage as it spreads. The "Reeve", Umia, as self-appointed "leader" proposes a purge of part of the city's population to stop the plague - unsuccessfully, as there is no connection. We discover that a virtual reality type existence has effects on the city and is causing the plague and that one person, Subadwan, can change what is happening. Subadwan becomes Lord Archivist for Gaya, further aiding the "electronic beings" who created Cray as an experiment. One of these beings,

Zelenaiid, caused a flaw in the creation of Cray that resolves itself as the glass plague. Her colleagues, through Subadwan are trying to find Zelenaiid and destroy her to allow their "perfect environment" to become complete. Of course it all fails leaving the humans on a bleak collapsing Cray unable to save themselves.

Not a happy scenario, but probably reminiscent of real life in that the humans don't "win out" in the end. So not escapism as such, more a morbid tale of failure. For me therefore, it doesn't entertain, rather it depressed, leaving this reader uncaring as to the outcome. To score, I give ** for inventiveness.

* * * * *

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.