

BRUM GROUP NEWS

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BIRMINGHAM SCIENCE FICTION GROUP

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HONORARY PRESIDENTS: BRIAN W ALDISS & HARRY HARRISON

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FRIDAY JUNE 11TH
THE WELCOME RETURN OF
COMIC FANTASY AUTHOR

TOM HOLT

It has been far too long since Tom Holt came and visited the Group, so we are particularly pleased that this bestselling author returns this month to be interviewed by our very own 'Parky', Stan Nicholls. Stan, you may remember, interviewed Tom the last time he visited the Group. This time we're promised a different 'take' on the interview and Stan will be preparing some very penetrating questions...

Hopefully we can be shown the deeper, more serious side to Tom - not just the author of comic fantasy, but the man who wrote POEMS BY TOM HOLT and a biography of Margaret Thatcher....yes, that's right. You have to be there!

Tom has a new comic fantasy book out in June - IN YOUR DREAMS - and it is hoped to have copies on sale at the meeting. RGP

The meeting will take place in the Lichfield room on the second floor of the Britannia Hotel, New Street (entrance in Union Passage almost opposite the

.....
: JULY MEETING - to be announced :
: AUGUST MEETING - Summer Social - a meal out :
:.....

Odeon. At the bottom of the ramp from New Street Station, turn right, cross over the road and you'll find Union Passage about 20-30 yards along). It will commence at 7.45pm so please arrive early, get your drinks from the bar and be seated in plenty of time.

LETTERS FROM OUR PRESIDENTS

A couple of months ago we reported that our two Honorary Presidents, Brian Aldiss and Harry Harrison, had been elected into the Science Fiction Hall of Fame, along with E E 'Doc' Smith and Mary Shelley. To congratulate them, the committee sent greetings cards to both of them.

Harry replied with the following brief message:

- Rog-- and all the Brum gang.

Many, many thanks for the kind card. I feel immensely chuffed. As Rog said, after more than 50 years in the business - About Time!

- Harry.

Brian replied at some length and we reproduce his letter in full...

Dear Rog and all the Brum Group Committee, plus all members -

Wow, guys! Smashing card! Smashing surprise! Thanks so much. Very kind of you.

This Hall of Fame thing is something new. As you know, the museum will be in Seattle - about as far from Birmingham as you can get. The way there leads through Lawrence, Kansas, and Jim Gunn's place. Harry and I will be there in July. I've visited both Seattle and Kansas, and on the whole I prefer Seattle, but what the hell...

Life goes on. If you happen to have a radio tuned to BBC Radio 4 at 8 p.m. on Saturday next, you'll hear me doing the Archive Hour about old radio SF. Fun to do but pretty awful to hear, I imagine! Listen out for Emulsified Nose Drops.

Last week, I went to a Burma Star reception. Can't tell you how strange it was. Not like a Worldcon. I've never been to such a thing before, not being madly warlike. It was a day spent among some brave old chaps. Over one hundred soldiers assembled for a reception at the Imperial War Museum in London, to celebrate the victories over the Japanese Imperial Army, sixty years ago. We all wore medals; many wore medals for bravery. Alison had given my medals a polish.

White hair everywhere, of course, but several folk remarked how fit and sturdy we survivors from the Forgotten Army appeared to be. As you moved through the crowded reception lounge, you pushed against a fair amount of muscle! Doses of dysentery and malaria in our youth - not to mention half-rations and the clap - have not had too deleterious an effect. Everyone very gentle and friendly. There was a powerful fellow-feeling.

almost overwhelming. We had all been involved in that cruel old war.

I often wonder if that war has not distanced us from later generations (a point I tried to make in FORGOTTEN LIFE).

Many familiar place names uttered, almost like an incantation: Yzagio, Imphal, Kohima, Tamu, Schwebo, Mandalay, Kabaw Valley - know as Death Valley - and the rivers, Chindwin, Irrawaddy, Mu... A bit like chanting 'Robert Heinlein, L Sprague de Camp. A E van Vogt...' We shuffled about, talking. A group photo was taken on the steps of the War Museum. Many of the chaps had had gallant wars, on the ground or in the air. Lots of talk but no bullshitting.

We were addressed by Lady Mountbatten and Viscount Slim, and we drank a champagne toast to the Queen, whose birthday it was (78). All very Middle Englishish...

My alarm went at 5.30 that morning. Rain was pouring down. A car came at 6.30 and took me to the BBC TV Centre. In the Green Room, I met Major-General Julian Thompson, who has written a book called "War in Burma 1942-1945", published by the Museum. He and I got on well and talked quite a good deal. Later, I bought a copy of his book. Very readable - at least for those who were stuck in Burma.

Julian took me on a tour of the central atrium of the Museum. I'd never been there. Sopwith Camels dangled overhead, with French field guns below. Fascinating to see a German V2, with its machinery exposed. It's gigantic! - A small spaceship which landed on - London!

I did two short stints before the TV 'Breakfast' cameras, one at 8.15 and one about an hour later. It was not particularly satisfying; we were not given enough time. No map was shown. Half the audience would have no idea where Burma was (like, it's not even officially called Burma any more...).

For the first turn, I was on with Julian Thompson. He spoke as calmly and sensibly as you might expect. Second turn, I was on with - guess who! - Jack Hawkins' widow... Really weird! She chattered on about the entertainments in which she had played a part, miles behind the lines. I butted in and said, "It was not all entertainment", and then went on about the hardships we endured.

Later, on Sky TV, I wore me old bush hat and was permitted to wave my Samurai sword - a strange antique figure... I heard that viewing figures plummeted.

Lord Chalfont arrived. A delicate old gent with a sensitive face and a quiet manner. I had not expected to like him, since he was previously in Thatcher's cabinet, but I certainly did. We talked for some time, while he addressed me as 'Brian', a fairly bizarre situation. Together we spoke to a reporter from somewhere. I thought I'd be arrested.

I was taken to be introduced to Vera Lynn, who turned up with her daughter: charming, clearly a strong character, enjoying her role as

mascot. I had seen her perform in Burma. I quoted to her Ken Dodd's joke after the Falklands war: "I knew there was going to be a war. As I passed Vera Lynn's house, I heard her gargling". We broke up laughing.

Everyone seemed to have done amazing things in those distant times. We agreed that nowadays, if you're in a rail accident and you happen to injure your little finger, you get counselling. Returning at last to England, after years knocking about not only in Burma but India, Sumatra, Singapore and Hong Kong, you got nothing, and were kicked into Civvy Street to make out as best you could. (Unless, of course, you were Lord Chalfont & owned half of England...)

I was no Army conscript. I volunteered for military service. Things were different in those days. My nineteenth birthday was spent on Bombay docks. In Worsted, Norfolk, I had been given a special dispensation to sail Eastwards on the troopship *SS Otranto* with my mates, although I was officially underage. Because of my youth I was stuck for four years in the East.

The party broke up at about 4 p.m.. I had difficulty in getting a cab. Finally a minicab collected me; I paid the man £70 to drive me all the way back to my front door. It had been a highly charged day!

Generally speaking, the days aren't like that. Or the years.

All the best, friends. Enjoy Novacon

- Brian

ADOLF HITLER: MAN OR MYTH?

Scots SF author Ken MacLeod thinks it's time for the British to blush, as a new survey reveals that large swathes of the UK's population think Conan was real and THE WAR OF THE WORLDS, H G Wells's fictional account of a Martian invasion, actually happened.

Every so often, a survey is released showing that some startling proportion of US citizens believe that aliens have landed on Earth, that men never landed on the Moon, that Saddam attacked New York, that the Copernican conception of the Solar system is 'just a theory' pushed by secular humanists and evil government scientists. US educators grind their teeth; educated Europeans snigger.

It's time for Brits to blush too:

[The following is from the Blenheim Palace press release]

British heroes and their most famous victories are in danger of being completely forgotten by the public, according to new research published by Blenheim Palace.

The research reveals that despite being one of the greatest victories in British military history, nearly three quarters of the population do not know

it even took place. And less than one in eight have heard of John Churchill (1st Duke of Marlborough), who led the historic victory.

But researchers were amazed to discover Blenheim was not alone when it comes to forgotten history. Of the great battles, a quarter of Brits were not sure that the Battle of Trafalgar was a real historic event, and more than half believed that Horatio Nelson led British troops at the Battle of Waterloo.

Brits fared little better with modern history. One in five believed Harold Wilson was the British Prime Minister during World War II and one in ten did not think that Adolf Hitler was a real person.

John Hoy, Chief Executive of Blenheim Palace, said: "We set out to establish where the Battle of Blenheim stood in the nation's consciousness and were amazed to find out that so few people had even heard of the battle.

"We're determined to do all we can to change this.

"By defeating the forces of Louis XIV in the War of the Spanish Succession, John Churchill, later the first Duke of Marlborough, changed the history of Britain and Europe. It was such a momentous event that Queen Anne bestowed Blenheim Palace on Churchill as a gift 'from a grateful nation'."

And he added: "The problem for many people is that they associate history with dry and dusty dates and facts. Once they realise that history is about people, the way we used to live and the way we live now, it becomes more relevant and more exciting. At Blenheim we're very aware of the need to make history relevant to today's visitors, that's why this year we have a packed calendar of events to bring history to life."

Blenheim's anniversary survey asked people to identify which battles or famous figures were real and which were fictional. Confusion ran deep on both counts. Whilst one in seven Brits did not know that the Battle of Hastings really took place, more than one in twenty thought that Orson Welles' SF classic THE WAR OF THE WORLDS did. And some even believed that the Battle of Helm's Deep (from THE LORD OF THE RINGS - THE TWO TOWERS), and the Battle of Endor (from RETURN OF THE JEDI) were fact rather than fiction.

It seems that Hollywood may have a lot to answer for, with cinema causing a huge amount of confusion about Britain's historical heroes.

Almost half of Brits believed that William Wallace (BRAVEHEART) was not a real person, whilst performances from Sean Connery, Kevin Costner and Arnold Schwarzenegger may have helped convince more than half of Brits that King Arthur was real, a quarter that Robin Hood really existed and one in twenty that Conan the Barbarian was a genuine historical figure.

Even the small screen has led to confusion, with some Brits believing Richard Sharpe, Edmond Blackadder and Xena Warrior Princess were real.

Real people that some believe never existed

- Ethelred the Unready King of England 978 to 1016 - 63 per cent
- William Wallace 13th-century Scottish hero - 42 per cent
- Benjamin Disraeli Prime minister and founder of the modern Tory party - 40 per cent
- Genghis Khan, Mongol conqueror - 38 per cent
- Benito Mussolini, Fascist dictator, 33 per cent
- Adolf Hitler - 11 per cent
- Winston Churchill - 9 per cent

Real events some people believe never took place

- Battle of the Bulge 52 per cent
- Battle of Little Big Horn Scene of Custer's last stand - 48 per cent
- Hundred Years' War 44 per cent
- Cold War - 32 per cent
- Battle of Hastings, 15 per cent

Fictional characters who we believe were real

- King Arthur , mythical monarch of the Round Table - 57 per cent
- Robin Hood - 27 per cent
- Conan the Barbarian - 5 per cent
- Richard Sharpe , fictional cad and warrior - 3 per cent
- Edmund Blackadder - 1 per cent
- Xena Warrior Princess - 1 per cent

Fictional events that we believe did take place

- War of the Worlds , Martian invasion - 6 per cent
- Battle of Helms Deep , Rings Trilogy - The Two Towers - 3 per cent
- Battle of Endor , The Return of the Jedi - 2 per cent
- Planet of the Apes , the apes rule Earth - 1 per cent
- Battlestar Galactica , the defeat of humanity by cyborgs - 1 per cent

Blame is being divided between the Left in the education system (downgrading 'kings and battles' history for social history) and Hollywood (making shit up).

This seems fair and balanced.

To be fair, I can think of ways in which the method of the survey could bias the results. If, for instance, people were presented with a list of names of battles, and asked to indicate which were real and which were not, wouldn't Endor and Helm's Deep sound more historical than the Little Big Horn and the Bulge?

Still, I like the idea that some of my compatriots believe Harold Wilson flanked by Xena and Conan led an army of cyborgs to victory over the apes in the Battle of Woking during the Martian invasion ...

Ken MacLeod

AN UPDATE TO AN UPDATE

by Vernon Brown

The 1st May issue of NEW SCIENTIST has an update to the previous piece we ran a couple of months ago....

“Experiments to see what changes make the birdflu virus more contagious in humans, and to partly reconstruct the 1918 flu virus <<*which killed millions of people - VB*>> are being carried out. However, the safety precautions taken to prevent their escape are the same level <<*type - VB*>> as those used with the SARS virus and there have been at least four escapes of that in eight months, one of which spread into Beijing’s population. Perhaps we should all re-read our ‘50s and ‘60s novels to pick up survival tips.”

VB

INTERVIEW WITH MARK CHADBOURN

by Steve Mazey

SJM: Your early books were predominantly horror, your more recent books are fantasy stories and you have written a science fiction (Doctor Who) novella. Which of these genres do you prefer as a writer?

MC: I’ve now written more fantasy books than horror and see myself as predominantly a fantasy writer, but I’ve also done SF, crime, social realism, magical realism...all sorts. The fact is, like many writers, I just like ‘story’, and I pitch that story where it fits best. Too many so-called literary authors wouldn’t touch genre with a barge-pole, and I think they’re really limiting themselves in the use of their craft to express themselves. It’s also a fact that I get bored easily, and if I stuck to one genre I feel I’d get dull sooner or later. The move from horror wasn’t dictated by market concerns, more that I had a story to tell which would be best described as ‘fantasy’. As a writer, it’s a shame we have any genre limitations, but I suppose the booksellers need some way to organise their shops.

SJM: your current release, THE QUEEN OF SINISTER, is book two in a fantasy series - which is itself a sequel series to the earlier ‘Age of Misrule’ trilogy. What influenced the concept behind this series?

MC: THE QUEEN OF SINISTER, like the other books in ‘The Dark Age’ series, stands alone and can be read out of sequence, but they’re set in the world I developed in ‘The Age of Misrule’, which is basically the world we see around us, but turned on its head by the sudden and mysterious return of the gods of Celtic mythology and associated magic and supernatural beings. One of the reasons I wanted to write these stories was a chance to comment on the society we see around us through fantasy, because the distancing effect of the fantastic allows a new perspective on everyday affairs. SF does this very well; high fantasy less so,

and in many cases, not at all. I believed you could have the escapist elements of fantasy, but stick something reflective deep down inside the stories for those who wanted to mine it. The other reason I chose this story was that the Celtic gods are archetypes, that in the past would have affected the deep subconscious of the people who heard the original myths, and I wanted to see if they had the same effect on a modern audience. That all sounds very heavy, so it's worth mentioning that what came first was an adventure story that gripped me, filled with romance, terror, humour, sex and all the other flavours of life.

SJM: And how did your approach to writing change from standalone novels to a multi-book series?

MC: It's hard enough writing a standalone novel. Writing three linked books requires a degree of concentration and planning that I previously thought was beyond me, along with an inhuman amount of research, a monstrous attention to detail and a rigid discipline that the story has the depth and complexity to stretch over that length without any repetition. Strangely, it's both a nightmarish experience and deeply fulfilling.

SJM: With "The Fairy Feller's Master Stroke" novella, the principal inspiration I presume comes from Richard Dadd's painting which adorns the cover of the book. Is this a painting you have a particular fondness for, and how did you discover it?

MC: I first came across it in a Reader's Digest book of the myths of Britain when I was a kid, a brilliant, detailed, engrossing study that has influenced me in all sorts of ways. But the painting didn't affect me as much as the story of Dadd's life - he went mad, murdered his father and ended up in the infamous Bethlem - or 'Bedlam' - asylum where he continued to paint these hallucinogenic visions of fairyland. The incongruity of this shattered, dark life and these astonishing visions of somewhere magical sparked the novella, which was, I suppose, about why we all need some fantasy in our lives.

SJM: "The Fairy Feller's Master Stroke" won a British Fantasy Award. How did that feel? And have you won any other awards for your writing?

MC: It was great. Just being nominated was good - and I've been nominated several times for Best Novel - but knowing that you've written something that has touched people's lives enough to vote for it is quite humbling. My first award for writing launched my career - Best New Author in the long-gone but not forgotten FEAR magazine, for my first published short story. I got an agent and a publisher on the back of that award.

SJM: You wrote a Doctor Who novella "Wonderland" based in the Haight-Ashbury neighbourhood in San Francisco during the summer of love. What was the reason for placing the story in this so exact location?

MC: It was a Second Doctor story and I was amused by the concept that of all the places in all the times, this is the one where he would never look out of place. I

also chose Haight-Ashbury because it gelled with what seems to be one of the themes in my writing - the quest many people go through for something beyond the real world, whether it is a spiritual quest, or, in this case, a psychedelic quest fuelled by drugs, sex and music. Not exactly Doctor Who material, but then I wasn't asked to write a typical Doctor Who book. The publishers wanted, for want of a better word, 'mainstream' fantasy and SF authors to give a new take on the Doctor. I think it's fair to say that a good proportion of hardcore Doctor Who fans probably hated it because there was too much of me in it and not enough Doctor, but it was well-received among readers, like me, who have had only a peripheral interest in the character since childhood. After the freedom of writing your own universe, dabbling in a shared universe is very constraining and there would have to be a good argument to convince me to do it again. I have written a 'Zothique' story for a US anthology based on Clark Ashton Smith's world, which was fun because there was so much space in the original stories. And I do nurture a secret desire to do a Batman story...

SJM: Given that recently you have written a novel series as well as novella length works, which length of fiction do you prefer as a writer?

MC: I choose the length to fit the story - trilogy, novel, novella, short story - they all have their freedoms and their limitations and problems. Short stories are an electric shock, novellas are a good meal, and novels and trilogies are a holiday.

SJM: How have your experiences as a journalist helped your fiction writing?

MC: Completely. On the writing front, it taught me to be precise and not to waffle on. But the main benefit came through all the experiences I had as a journalist, and any writer needs to keep themselves open to experience as it's the fuel for stories. Journalism took me into places I would never have gone otherwise, interacting with people from all walks of life. It threw me into situations of personal danger - set on fire during NATO manoeuvres in the Arctic circle, attacked by gangsters in Brighton, shot at in the Californian desert - as well as taking me across the world and giving me a good understanding of how society really operates.

SJM: What are you currently working on?

MC: I'm currently writing THE HOUNDS OF AVALON, which is the final book in the current sequence and is steeped in Arthurian lore and Celtic mythology, but still set in the modern world. I also have an SF series in development with the BBC and a horror movie project, but contractually I can't talk about either of those.

SJM: Are you a music fan? If so, what?

MC: Very much a music fan, with pretty eclectic tastes. Currently White Stripes, The Thrills, Basement Jaxx, but also sixties psychedelia, jazz, Frank Sinatra, Thin Lizzy, punk (which was 'my' seminal music), BeBop Deluxe... There's always something on when I'm writing.

SJM: Do you enjoy book signings/conventions?

MC: I love them both, but don't do as many as I should. I really like talking to readers at signings because they're always so passionate, and passion is a great thing to have. Conventions are fantastic, because it's probably the only opportunity you get to kickback with people who know what you're really like and share the same interests and inspirations.

SJM: If you could give one piece of advice to a would-be author, what would it be?

MC: Always finish the book you're writing, even if you know it's rubbish. The simple act of completing a book is the best learning experience there is, as only at the end can you really judge where all the flaws are. Too many would-be writers only have a drawer full of the first three chapters.

SJM: Why do you like science fiction, fantasy and horror?

MC: If you're cursed with an imagination you need to keep giving it its fix and those genres are the only place to go for the drug. The most terrifying moment in my life was when I realised how many people actually didn't have an imagination, and unfortunately most of them are in positions of power. Don't trust anyone who doesn't have an imagination - they'll screw you up.

SJM: Is there anything more that can be done with wizards, elves and dragons? Or with vampires, demons and zombies?

MC: Everything can be done with them, if they're handled by authors who plumb the depths of their inner being and don't look for inspiration to how these tropes are handled in other books. There's a dangerous thought in fantasy that Tolkien has written a new religious text and that his way is the only way. Dragons and elves don't exist, despite what some people think - you can do anything with them.

SJM: What book are you reading at the moment?

MC: LOVE AND ROCKETS Volume V.

SJM: Who or what has been a major influence on your writing and why?

MC: The major influences are always the ones you soak up during childhood and teens seeping into twenties and don't necessarily have to be books. So, in no particular order, the works of Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko and Alan Moore, Alan Garner, Robert Heinlein and Isaac Asimov, the TV shows of Irwin Allen, film noir and Universal Monsters, J.R.R. Tolkien, early Stephen King, Umberto Eco, every record I've ever heard, Lucy Boston, WIND IN THE WILLOWS, Charles Dickens, Robert E. Howard and Ray Bradbury. Why? Because they've all fed that imagination so effectively they've given me an addiction I'll never be able to shake.

SJM: Do you use myths and ancient religions for inspiration?

MC: The current fantasy books are filled with elements of Celtic mythology, but they're not replicated from the original stories. I've tried to look at them all from a

new perspective. One reviewer said, "Celtic mythology on acid", which I suppose is as good a way as any to describe a slightly warped view designed to get to the heart of what they're about. These stories meant so much to ancient cultures and there's real truth buried within them that is still relevant today. They're the dreams of our society, and that's why they remain so important.

SJM: Thank you, Mark.

Steve Mazy

NEWS IN BRIEF

.... **Neal Stephenson's** QUICKSILVER has been named the winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award **Andrew Fox** won the Lord Ruthven Assembly Award for his debut novel, FAT WHITE VAMPIRE BLUES Just published in the States by Subterranean Press is PARTIAL ECLIPSE AND OTHER STORIES by **Graham Joyce** RINGWORLD'S CHILDREN by **Larry Niven** - the first new Ringworld book in ten years will be published in June (Tor USA).... Also published in June is HEAVEN, a new novel by our old friends **Ian Stewart** and **Jack Cohen** (Warner Aspect USA) August will see the publication of THE WIZARD OF KARRES by **Mercedes Lackey, Eric Flint** and **Dave Freer**. A sequel to the classic **James H Schmitz** novel THE WITCHES OF KARRES **Wildside Press** has announced the addition of two new magazines to its stable. ADVENTURE TALES will reprint stories from the pulp magazines of the twentieth century. The magazine will appear twice a year and the premiere issue will include stories by Hugh B. Cave, H. Bedford Jones, and Captain A.E. Dingle. The second magazine, UNDERWORLDS, will be edited by **Sean Wallace** and **William P. Simmons**. The magazine will be published quarterly and will feature new noir-influenced stories of suspense, crime and supernatural fiction. Wildside currently publishes H.P. Lovecraft's MAGAZINE OF HORROR A new British science fiction magazine, **ORBITAL**, is scheduled to launch in June of this year. The magazine will contain articles and interviews covering a variety of science fictional and science topics. More information can be found by writing to Orbital Magazine 1 Firshill Mews, Pitsmoor Road, Sheffield, S3 9AU, South Yorkshire, UK The long-awaited final **STAR WARS** blockbuster will be called BIRTH OF THE EMPIRE, movie insiders have revealed The full series of the 60s cult TV show **THE PRISONER** will be screened on BBC4, beginning on Friday June 11th, at around 11pm. For the full story, visit:
<http://unmutualupdate.tripod.com/news>

RGP

RETRO HUGOS

Last month I asked for your votes on the retro Hugo Awards, saying that as the short list consisted of five absolute classics of the field, it was nigh on impossible to differentiate between them. Apart from my own list, only ONE response was received. So, thank you Dave Hardy and here's your vote...

- 1 CHILDHOOD'S END by Arthur C Clarke
- 2 MORE THAN HUMAN by Theodore Sturgeon
- 3 MISSION OF GRAVITY by Hal Clement
- 4 FAHRENHEIT 451 by Ray Bradbury
- 5 CAVES OF STEEL by Isaac Asimov

And you did state that the last three were pretty much interchangeable.

My own preferences would be...

- 1 MORE THAN HUMAN by Theodore Sturgeon
- 2 CAVES OF STEEL by Isaac Asimov
- 3 MISSION OF GRAVITY by Hal Clement
- 4 CHILDHOOD'S END by Arthur C Clarke
- 5 FAHRENHEIT 451 by Ray Bradbury

I'm still interested in receiving YOUR choices...

RGP



BOOK REVIEWS



(REVIEWERS please note:- all reviews should be emailed direct to me at rog@rogpeyton.fsnet.co.uk) Deadline for each issue is 14 days prior to the date of the monthly meeting.

RGP

***RIVER OF GODS* by Ian McDonald**

Simon & Schuster / 583pgs / £17.99 / Hardcover

Reviewed by Steve Mazey

Rating: * * * * *

I always feel a certain amount of trepidation when approaching a book this size. I've probably made it no secret by now that my preferred length for fiction is the novella, and lengthy novels are not my ideal read, and I infrequently choose to read works this long.

In the usual contradictory way my favourite book of all time clocks in at over 600 pages (Frank Herbert's DUNE) so I do break the rule from time to time.

With this book I am rather glad I did break the rule, especially as this story needs all of its pages to be told. This imagining of a future India is rich, and simultaneously familiar when compared to the India of today, and in many ways is as alien as the most wildly imagined SF environment.

This is one of those books where the actual story I feel is of lesser

importance than its setting. Ian McDonald's India of forty years hence is wonderful. There are many cultural references to ground this as a progression of our contemporary India (many of which concern cricket, and one even manages a mention of the cricket commentator Richie Benaud), whilst enough SF content to be of interest to fans of authors like William Gibson.

The characters we meet are an assorted bunch. Mr Nandha, the Krishna cop - who first arrives in this novel having been sent to eliminate a rogue AI wreaking havoc in a factory. We meet Vishram Ray, the son of businessman Ranjit Ray who is given part of his father's business to run when the old man retires to undertake a spiritual quest, much to the annoyance of his brothers who consider Vishram to be a wastrel. Lisa Durnau is an academic, a physics researcher working on M-Star Theory. Shaheen Badoor Khan is a high ranking civil servant, an aide to the Indian Prime Minister. Tal is a genetically engineered neuter, a sexless person - an yt (the pronoun in this book for the nute's) - is involved with Khan, a relationship that is potentially damaging to Khan.

But in addition to these and the many other folk who inhabit this tale, is the setting itself. Varanasi is a city containing all of the highs and lows that could be associated with a large city. It has great luxury and appalling poverty, it is a dangerous place for some whilst being a comfortable home to others. In these ways it resembles many of the cities on the Earth today. But many of the familiar things have a different slant - such as the soap-stars of the time, idolised by millions, being artificial constructs, programmed CGI's. The section where one of the best-loved 'actors' is interviewed is a wonderfully satirical extension of the current tendency to worship actors.

And add in to the mix, a political situation that seems to heading towards a major war, the discovery of an object that could turn out to be mankind's first encounter with an alien civilisation, and many touches that touch on the territory of the cyberpunk authors, and you have a rich, highly detailed world and a compelling story. SM

FELAHEEN by Jon Courtney Grimwood

Pocket / 357 pages / £6.99 / paperback

Reviewed by William McCabe

Rating: * * *

I've heard it said that a science fiction novel can be a thriller, romance, comedy or any other genre you care to name. If that's true, then any other genre can be science fiction if it wants to. This is a good case in point. The cover says this is a 'mystery'. The quotes on the back include one from CRIME TIME and mention 'Inspector Rebus'. They make it clear that this is a detective novel rather than anything else. They're right.

It still has an alternate history, but not so much that most of the readers would pay attention to. There's also the genetic manipulation plot, but it's the sort

of thing you'd see in James Bond or Frederick Forsyth without thinking of it as SF. More than all of these you have the plot to kill the Emir and the story of Raf's conception (in flashback). This even reads like a detective novel with the revelations at the end.

The worst of it is that this isn't that good as a detective novel. There are parts that make no sense - Raf travels to Tunis to discover who is responsible for an attack on the Emir and starts by getting a job in a small restaurant with no apparent connection to anything. There are other parts that just seem silly - like how Raf can be related to someone yet have no common DNA. Even keeping so much to the end of the book seems clumsy. All of this is a pity because it's such an easy read.

WAM

<<...as reported last month, *FELAHEEN* won the British SF Award for Best Novel of 2003! - RGP>>

THE RAFFLE

Raffle tickets are available as soon as you get to the meeting. You do NOT have to wait until the break when someone twists your arm - do it voluntarily. It certainly saves on ambulance call-outs! The Group needs your cash to pay visiting authors' expenses, the salubrious surroundings of our regular meeting room, etc. It's just a quid - not even the price of half a pint! And you could WIN this month's prize... it could be a book or if you're really lucky it could be a bottle of wine!

SELLING YOUR WARES...

And don't forget that YOU can bring along your unwanted books, magazines, videos, etc., and sell them to other members - NO CHARGE, NO COMMISSION. Start rummaging through your collections - you KNOW you'll never read some of that stuff again. BRING YOUR GOODIES! Lay them out on one of the tables provided and wait for people to start throwing money at you.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

The Central Library SF and Fantasy Reading Group meets on Thursdays at 5.30pm to 7pm monthly, in GP5 on the 5th Floor at the Central Library, Chamberlain Square, B3 3HQ. It's a small friendly group meeting to discuss SF & fantasy books. Contact person is Pam Gaffney on (0121) 303 3398. Future meetings...10th June

The British Fantasy Society has invited Storm Constantine to Holmcroft Library, Holmcroft Road, Stafford, on Tuesday 15th June at 7pm. She will be doing a talk and reading from her latest book, the Shades of Time and Memory. She is also willing to talk about her Immanion Press publishing company.

www.britishfantasysociety.org.uk, or email aunico@hotmail.com for more info.

Borders Book Shop in Birmingham's Bull Ring and the **British Fantasy Society** have invited **Simon Clark** and **Ramsey Campbell** to do readings from their latest books on Thursday 29th July. Time and book details to be confirmed. Contact Dave Massey on dmassey@bordersstores.com phone (0121) 616 1094.

They're also starting a number of readers' groups - details from Dave Massey

A COMMONWEALTH OF SCIENCE FICTION, Liverpool Foresight Centre, Liverpool, UK (Thursday 5 to Sunday 8 August 2004). Guests of Honour: Damien Broderick, Jon Courtenay Grimwood and Nalo Hopkinson. (An Event Organised By the Science Fiction Foundation).

NOVACON 34 - the Birmingham SF Group's very own convention will again be held at the popular Quality Inn, Walsall over the weekend of November 5th to 8th. Guest of Honour is Ian Watson. Cost of registration is £35 - send to NOVACON 34, 379 Myrtle Road, Sheffield, S2 3HQ.

email: xl5@zoom.co.uk **BOOK NOW!**

THE 2005 WORLDCON will be held in Glasgow next year

All details are correct to the best of our knowledge, we advise contacting organisers before travelling. Always enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope when writing to any of the above contact addresses.

Any information about forthcoming SF / Fantasy / Horror events are always welcome - please send to me at rog@rogpeyton.fsnet.co.uk

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FUTURE MEETINGS OF THE BSFG

July 9th - SF/Comics artist **Bryan Talbot** (awaiting confirmation)

August 13th - Summer Social. We'll be going to the Black Eagle, Handsworth - just a short trip from Snow Hill on the Metro - for a convivial evening of food and drink. If you haven't already booked, there's still a chance for a ticket but contact **Vernon** or myself **NOW!**

September 10th - to be arranged

October 8th - **Peter Weston** will be returning from being Fan Guest of Honour at this year's Worldcon. Peter has written a 130,000 word history of his life in SF fandom and it will be published at Worldcon. It contains a LOT of history of the Brum Group and many of you are mentioned in it! Peter will be talking about the Brum Group part of the book and also signing copies of his book. He will also be talking about the **WHOLE** book in a talk at NOVACON 34.

December - Christmas Social - Skittles at the Selly Park Tavern

January 8th 2005 - Annual General Meeting

March 12th - Peter F Hamilton

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Thanks to all the named contributors in this issue and to William McCabe who sends me reams of news items every month from which I sift through for the best/most entertaining items.

The BRUM GROUP Website address is www.bsfg.freesevers.com
NEW! ----The email address is bhamsfgroup@yahoo.co.uk ---- NEW!
Contributions, ideas, etc. always welcome.

And I'm still interested in receiving your email address so that I can add it on to a list of people to receive up-to-date hot news. Two weeks ago I found out about Brian Aldiss doing a radio programme. I was able to distribute full details of the event to all who I thought would be interested a couple of days before the event. I'm actually compiling a list of email addresses - not just of Brum Group members - of people who would be interested in receiving hot news. If you want to be on it, send me that address to rog@rogpeyton.fsnet.co.uk

ABOUT US... The Birmingham Science Fiction Group meets on the second Friday of each month. Membership is £16 per year per person (or £21 for two members living at the same address). This includes the 12 free issues of the Newsletter plus reduced entrance fee at each meeting. Cheques should be made payable to "The Birmingham Science Fiction Group" and sent to our Treasurer, Pat Brown, 106 Green Lanes, Wylde Green, Sutton Coldfield, West Midlands, B73 5JH