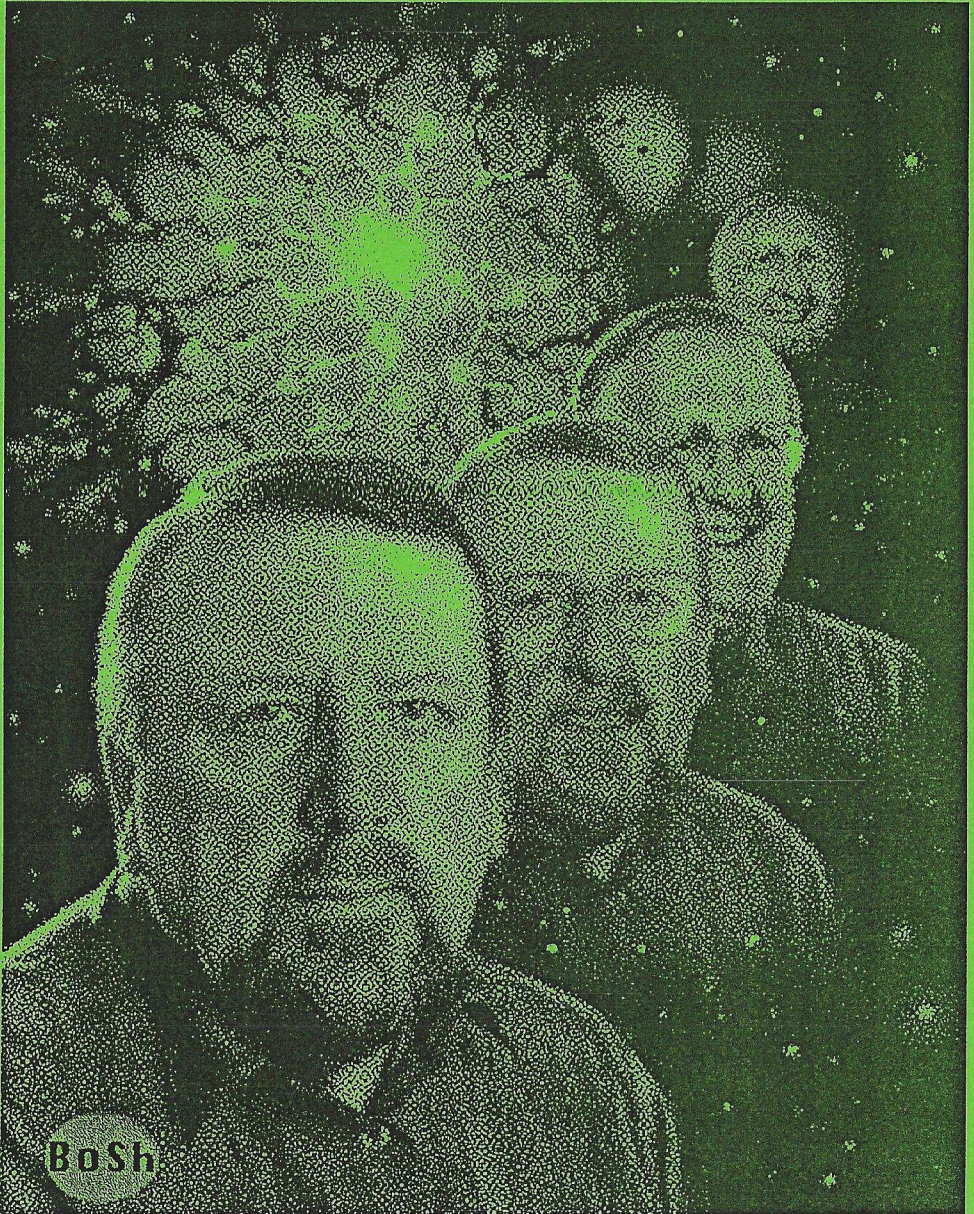


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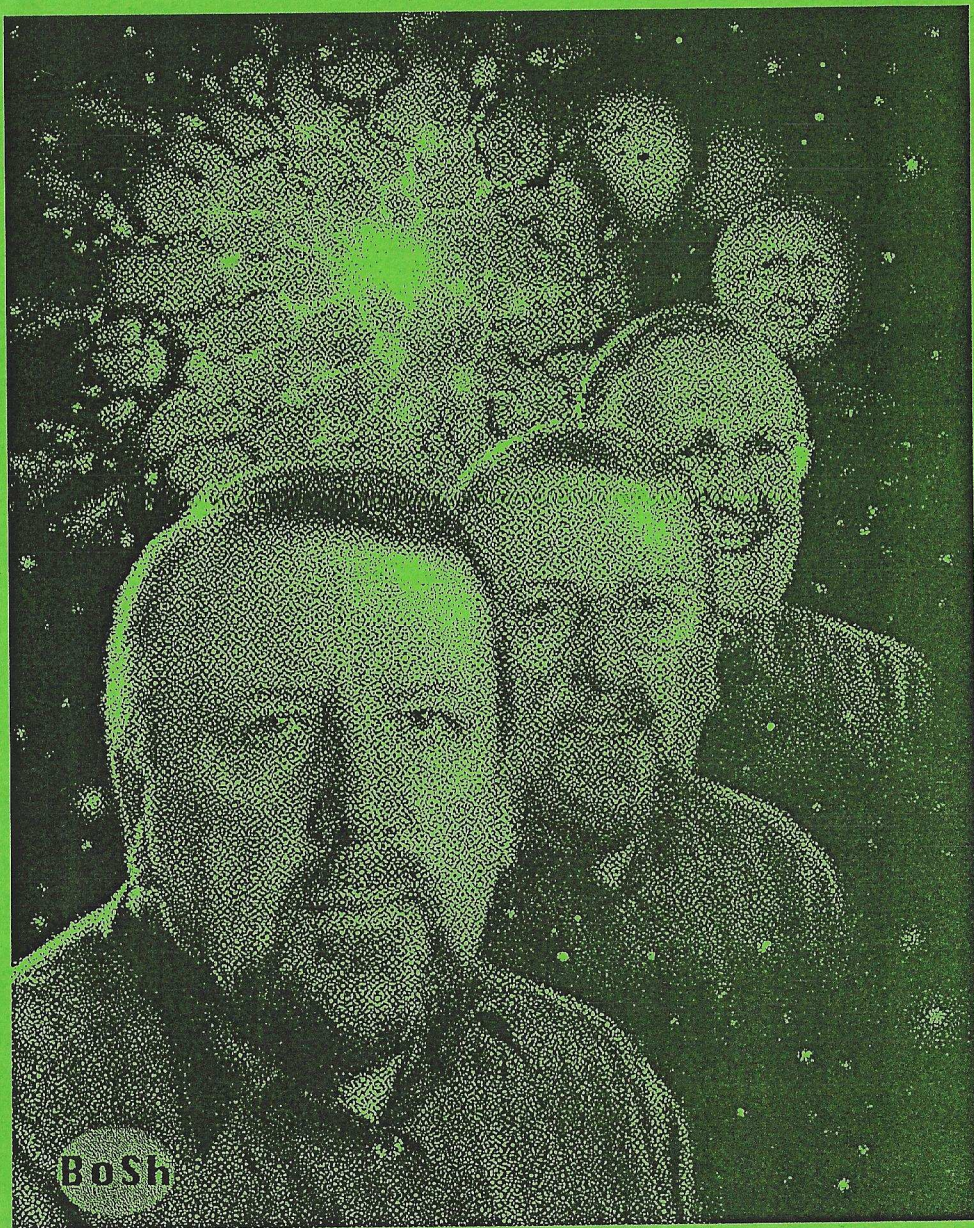
Progress Report Three



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Progress Report Three



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Novacon 25: Chamberlain Hotel, Birmingham, B12 0PJ.
3-5 November 1995. Guests of Honour: Brian W Aldiss,
Harry Harrison and Bob Shaw, Special Guest Iain M Banks.

Membership & Enquiries: Attending membership costs £25.00 until the 30th September, rising to £30.00 from the 1st October and on the door. Supporting membership costs £8.50. Cheques should be made payable to "Novacon 25" and sent to Carol Morton at 14 Park Street, Lye, Stourbridge, West Midlands, DY9 8SS. General enquiries should be sent to Tony Morton at the same address or you can call him or Carol on 01384 825386 (before 9pm).

Room Rates: £17.50 per person per night for people sharing a twin, double or triple room and £35.00 per person per night for single rooms, all inclusive of full English breakfast. (*Please note that Hotel booking forms and deposits must be received by Carol Morton no later than 20th July 1995.*)

Advertising Rates: Advertising is welcome for both Progress Reports and Programme Book. The rates are as follows (fan rates in brackets): **Progress Reports** - Full-page £20.00 (£12.50), half-page £12.50 (£7.00), quarter-page £7.50 (£4.00). **Programme Book** - Full-page £40.00 (£22.50), half-page £25.00 (£12.50), quarter-page £15.00 (£7.50). Anyone interested in advertising should contact Martin Tudor at 845 Alum Rock Road Ward End, Birmingham, B8 2AG.

Deadlines: Camera-ready advertising copy for Progress Report #4 should reach Martin Tudor at the above address by the 9th August; it will be mailed out in September. The deadline for both Novacon 26 Progress Report #1 and the Novacon 25 Programme Book is the 27th September; both will be distributed at Novacon 25.

Bookroom Rates: Tables will cost £15.00 for a six-foot table for the whole weekend. However, if you are allocated a smaller (four-foot) table the cost will be £10.00. To book a table (or tables) you must be a member of the convention and complete and return the booking form enclosed with this Progress Report.

Committee: Tony Morton (Chair) and Carol Morton (Registrations), 14 Park Street, Lye, Stourbridge, West Midlands, DY9 8SS. Richard Standage (Treasurer), 116 Shireland Road, Smethwick, Warley, West Midlands, B66 4QJ. Chris Murphy (Programme), 7 Mullion Drive, Timperley, Nr Altrincham, Cheshire, WA15 6SL. Tony Berry (Operations), 55 Seymour Road, Oldbury, Warley, West Midlands, B69 4EP. Martin Tudor (Publications/Hotel Liaison), 845 Alum Rock Road, Ward End, Birmingham, B8 2AG.

Acknowledgements: Many thanks to Paul Kincaid, Carol Morton, Tony Morton, Chris Murphy and Tony Berry for their articles, and to David A Hardy for the cover and for his sterling work on the Novacon 25 flyers and adverts. This Progress Report was printed on the CRITICAL WAVE photocopier, contact Martin Tudor at his address above for details of WAVE's competitive prices.

The Chairman's Piece by Tony Morton

It's Progress Report #3 time! Good grief, where *does* the time go? Everything progresses well from our side, with all systems on-line and functional. The programme is looking good - see Saturday's schedule in Chris's piece. We are still hoping that more people will join (we *do* want to fill the hotel). Here, we hope **YOU** can help - we've tried adverts everywhere we can think of, but if you can suggest anywhere we haven't 'hit' we will be glad to hear from you. Please continue to spread the word to your friends and acquaintances, but remember that those people who are coming to Novacon 25 and *expect to stay in the Chamberlain* had better get a move on! Carol will, I'm sure, explain it all but the date to note is **20 July**, after which the hotel will start releasing bedrooms to non-Novacon people!

To encourage more people to join the £25.00 attending membership rate stays until

the end of September. A hotel bedroom costs only £17.50 per person per night for sharers in doubles or twins (£35.00 for people in singles) inclusive of full English breakfast. As far as most recent cons go that is damn cheap - why wait? Fill in your booking form now! Yes, I know lots of you have already sent in your hotel forms, but the more the merrier - where else can you get *four* guests of the calibre of Brian Aldiss, Harry Harrison, Bob Shaw and Iain Banks?

Pass the word to your friends and let's make '25 The Big One; even if the arguments as to whether or not this *is* the twenty-fifth anniversary are still raging - more on that in the fourth progress report (and, I've no doubt, at the con...).

Registrations by Carol Morton

Well, the registrations are coming in, but the hotel booking forms are not arriving quite as fast. The Chamberlain have said that they will keep the whole of the hotel for the exclusive use of Novacon 25 members up *until 20 July 1995*. After this they will begin to book out rooms to the general public. When you consider that we tried to book the Chamberlain for Novacon 26, more than 18 months in advance, and found it unavailable due to a prior booking, you will realise that this is a very popular hotel. **SO IF YOU WANT A ROOM IN THE HOTEL, SEND YOUR BOOKING FORM IN NOW.** For those of you that have sent in your forms, I have passed all that I currently have on file on to the Hotel this week, so you should be hearing from them in the near future. For those that haven't I enclose a form with this progress report and I'm eagerly awaiting its return!

With regard to car parking at the Chamberlain, when you arrive, park your vehicle in the hotel's car park. You will be given a pink slip of paper which must be handed in at reception in exchange for which you will be given a token which will allow free access to the car park over the whole weekend. (Please note the token must be handed in when you check out.) Charges are £2.00 per car per day or £3.50 per van per day - very reasonable rates.

A word of apology to a few members who sent in their hotel forms just prior to the mailing of the second progress report, but still had a hotel form sent out. Sorry, no one is perfect but I assure you that I have sent the hotel all the forms I have received.

Okay that's about it, send in your hotel forms and I'll be back to nag in the final progress report.

Programme by Chris Murphy

This column is mostly about what will be happening on the Saturday of the convention. The plans we announced for Friday in the second progress report remain unchanged, so far.

Saturday's programme will commence at 10.00am with a talk on a scientific subject by Jack Cohen and Ian Stewart, authors of *THE COLLAPSE OF CHAOS*. They will be followed by the Book Auction, fronted as usual by demon auctioneer Rog Peyton.

Following the Book Auction we have, at 1.15pm, an sf variant of *MASTERMIND* - or do we? There haven't been any volunteers for contestants yet. Is no one brave enough to take up the challenge? Anyone who thinks they are should contact me with a specialist subject at the address given below. Next is a panel on comedy in sf and fantasy, with humorist Tom Holt and Special Guest Iain M Banks talking about the pleasures and problems of this type of writing.

At 4.00pm come Guest of Honour speeches from Brian Aldiss and Harry Harrison. Take your seats early for what is bound to be a popular item. This is swiftly followed (honest!) by Steve Green and Kevin Clarke's *THE HOUSE OF FUN*, a distinctly non-sensible team game described as "the hypertext version of the convention".

At 8.00pm Pam Wells takes the stage for a fannish edition of ROOM 101. Who will be trying to get their pet hates consigned to oblivion, and will the audience agree? Come along and vote. Those who have enough energy left can bop the night away at the disco, from around 10.00pm.

In the fourth progress report we'll let you know our plans for Sunday, and bring you up to date with the inevitable changes and developments. If you have any suggestions or offers of help for the programme, please contact me at 7 Mullion Drive, Timperley, Cheshire, WA15 6SL.

Humour in SF: An article in four fits by Paul Kincaid

Fit the Second: Affection

It's curious, but when Bob Shaw finally got around to producing a humorous sf novel in the late 1970s most people were probably surprised.

There were odd amusing stories, such as his private eye farce, "The Gioconda Caper", which has since been packaged with the Gollancz paperback of WHO GOES HERE?. But that wasn't what Shaw was known for. Shaw was known for slow glass and ORBITSVILLE, understated classics that were among the best straight-down-the-line science fiction available. Here was someone who understood the genre, knew how to come up with truly original ideas, played with the conventions, and produced serious science fiction that was everything the genre was supposed to be. When Shaw wrote science fiction he stretched our imaginations, evoked wonder, made us feel that this is how things might genuinely be. "Light of Other Days" is one of the most humane and affecting accounts of how life might be touched by a scientific development. Someone who could use science fiction to such empathic effect surely couldn't be expected to take the piss out of the whole genre.

Of course those of us in fandom had privileged information. We had heard another side of Bob Shaw in his "serious scientific talks", a series of the most dryly witty speeches conventions have yet staged. We had heard him take empirical scientific observation (every beer drinker knows that when you go to the loo you get rid of more liquid than you ever took in) and conjure from it a novel way to power a space ship. We had heard him ridicule pseudo-sciences of every kind: Von Donnigan, the Bermondsey Triangle.

But WHO GOES HERE? was something else again. Wasn't it?

Well, actually, no it wasn't. WHO GOES HERE? springs directly from his knowledge of, and affection for, the genre. Respecting what science fiction is capable of, understanding its conventions, does not mean it has to be treated like gospel. And if you can see how scientific method and pseudo-science can be skewed neatly to make them seem ridiculous, it isn't much of a step to skew science fiction similarly.

And WHO GOES HERE? is one long, affectionate homage to every hallowed trope the genre can muster or, to put it another way, it is a catalogue of clichés.

There is a plot, of sorts. At least, there is a slender narrative thread that somehow contrives to bind one end of the book to the other. But the plot is irrelevant, an afterthought, something imposed on the string of incidents merely to fashion them into the semblance of a novel.

What matters is that every scenario familiar to every reader of science fiction recurs somewhere within the book. And is then twisted, exaggerated, turned upside down to make it ridiculous. It bears about as much relation to science fiction as a Rory Bremner impersonation does to John Major or Desmond Lynam. Bremner might use his caricature voice to tell a joke, but it is funny mostly because we recognise who he is doing. In the same way, Shaw's novel contains a fair few jokes, but it is funny mostly because we recognise what he is doing.

So, just as skiffy adventure writers have churned out endless rewrites of BEAU GESTE in space, Shaw has his own Space Legion, and in this Legion it is a condition of joining that your memory is wiped. Then he compounds the joke by turning the archetypal bullying training sergeant into an instant coward.

But that's only one joke. In rapid succession we also get silly aliens with silly names (throwrug), time travel (in a toilet, for good measure), supermen, wonderful devices (the powered shoes that propel Warren upon the enemy in his first taste of battle), meeting your younger self.

Each of these incidents is no more than a cartoon. Broad, simple lines, no attempt at subtlety or depth, the characterisation which is a hallmark of Shaw's work is completely absent. We're not meant to take this as cutting-edge science fiction, this is not what you might call radical hard sf. These are the staples of sf drawn out and illuminated to show them as we have always secretly imagined them to be: ridiculous.

Yet there is nothing in WHO GOES HERE? that Shaw has not dealt with in his own more serious science fiction. The grunt without a memory finding himself thrust willy-nilly into hazardous situations is analogous to the prisoner without sight in hazardous situations in NIGHTWALK. The transformation into supermen effected by the alien throwrugs is an echo of the transcendence achieved in PALACE OF ETERNITY. Warren's meeting with his own younger self reflects the dual identities encountered in THE TWO TIMERS. The situations are not silly in and of themselves. In fact Shaw knows that science fiction wouldn't exist without them. But he also knows how easily they can be taken to extremes, and in WHO GOES HERE? he is like an impressionist impersonating all those who have taken those few extra faltering steps.

And if you think that the coarsened images of WHO GOES HERE? preclude the inventiveness of Shaw's other science fiction, remember his space ship. That the ship is like an overgrown Portakabin is a joke, but no more inherently daft than the phallic rockets of popular imagination. But the means of propulsion - "Non-Euclidean tachyon displacement" - transmitting itself almost instantaneously along its own length so it makes its way through space without ever actually moving; that's as original a science fiction device as slow glass, or a spaceship powered by drinking beer. You could present that notion (with a little dressing up) in a serious hard sf novel and probably get away with it.

[Becon publications recently produced a booklet featuring a collection of Shaw's "serious scientific talks" to mark his appearance as guest of honour at Confabulation, the 1995 Eastercon. Entitled A LOAD OF OLD BOSH copies are available from Becon Publications, 75 Rosslyn Avenue, Harold Wood, Essex, RM3 0RG, for £4.95 (inclusive of postage and packing) all proceeds to the RNIB.]

Humour in SF: An article in four fits by Paul Kincaid

Fit the Third: Anger

There is a joke in Iain Banks's first novel, THE WASP FACTORY. Actually there are lots of jokes, but this is the one everyone seems to remember. A character is killed in South Africa when he is hit by a black who has suicidally thrown himself from a window high in the police building, and has torn his fingernails out on the way down.

(Actually, there is a joke in how that joke came to be written, as Banks has revealed several times in interviews. The original joke was considered, at the last minute, to be too risqué, so Banks had to substitute a passage of exactly the same word-length, which he phoned through to the publisher from a phone box while he was on his way to an evening out.)

The trouble with that original joke, the South African one, is that when you think

about it, it shouldn't really be funny. I mean, here we are laughing at a story about death, police brutality, state lies and institutionalised racism. It's a bit, well, you know, near the knuckle, old chap.

Come to think of it, what do you make of a book about a girl who imagines she's a castrated boy and who indulges herself in a series of bizarre murders. Not exactly P G Wodehouse, is it? Or Terry Pratchett.

But then, Iain Banks isn't writing comedy.

He's writing very funny books. You only have to think of the Glaswegian barbarian in *THE BRIDGE*, or that precious little drone in *PLAYER OF GAMES*, or the twee twins who torture our heroine in *AGAINST A DARK BACKGROUND*, or the opening line of *THE CROW ROAD*: "It was the day my grandmother exploded."

You couldn't be reading anything else but an Iain Banks novel, could you, when you come across a line like that.

Funny, yes, but comedy? The sole purpose of these books is not to amuse. They are not light diversions intended to pass a little time and leave one appreciative of the author's wit. Banks is witty, but that is incidental. The humour in his books comes out of something else altogether: his anger.

Banks's books are a rage against the system. My god, he gets angry at racism and sexism, at the brutality of power and the cruelty of pornography, at the Tories and the lairds and the thousand and one things that grind us down.

And he expresses that rage by taking the piss.

He also expresses it by being as cruel and violent as some of those he attacks, in much the same way as his serial killer in *COMPLICITY* attacks all those that we'd like to see getting their comeuppance except we're too soggy liberal to say so.

Let's take those twins in *AGAINST A DARK BACKGROUND*. They crop up in ludicrous situations: sunbathing on an ice planet, for instance. They talk in a very prissy way. They are silly. How can you take them seriously: two bald queens who behave like refugees from a Jerome K Jerome novel. But what they do is very serious indeed. What they do is violence of such an intimate nature that it is genuinely shocking. But at the same time they are funny characters; we are clearly meant to laugh at them.

How are we supposed to react? It is confusing. Is the humour meant to negate our abreaction to the violence? Is the violence supposed to make us choke on our laughter?

There is a rather mundane point about the banality of evil, the untrustworthiness of appearances. But there's more than that. *AGAINST A DARK BACKGROUND* is an incredibly violent book; the body count by the end is so great that just about every single character mentioned by name at any point in the novel ends up dead. The violence is initiated by those great twin evils of religion and greed. The object of both the religious fanatics and the avaricious collector is the Lazy Gun, a weapon that turns murder into something like a cartoon. Fire the Lazy Gun at someone and as likely as not an anvil will pop out of nowhere and flatten them.

Now this is funny; it is also one of those great science fictional inventions that authors would - if you'll pardon the expression - kill for. But what it does is remove any notion of dignity in death. You cannot be heroic if a ball with "BOMB" written on it is going to appear in your hands, then blow you up. There is plenty of death that is squalid and ugly in the book; with the Lazy Gun it is also shown to be stupid. So the only defense, the only half-way sane reaction, might be to laugh.

There are plenty of jokes in Banks's novels. There are witty lines, ludicrous situations (just think of the opening scene of *CONSIDER PHLEBAS*). You can't take the piss out of the conventions of heroic literature more effectively than by having our bold

adventurer, in the traditional castle dungeon scene, up to his neck in shit), and silly people. Though you have to beware of the characters you laugh at, usually they turn out to have a rather nasty side. The very few genuinely good characters in Banks's work, such as Bascule in FEERSUM ENDJINN, may raise a smile (once you've screwed your eyeballs back in from trying to read the text) but we are never meant to laugh *at* them. The trouble is that there is always an uneasy edge to the humour. If you're laughing you should also be looking over your shoulder waiting for the next batch of nastiness to wallop you right between the eyes.

The Nova Awards by Tony Berry

Fanzines eligible for the 1995 Nova Awards which have been produced and/or received since Progress Report #2:

ANSIBLE #92-95, Dave Langford, 94 London Road, Reading, RG1 5AU. **BALLOONS OVER BRISTOL #6**, Christina Lake, 12 Heatherly Road, Bishopston, Bristol, BS7 8QA. **DR BEECHING'S COLD FUSION TRAMWAY #1**, Steve Brewster, School of Mathematics, University of Bristol, Bristol, BS8 1TW. **DRAGONS BREATH #15-16**, Zine Kat c/o SA Publishing, 13 Hazely Combe, Arreton, Isle of Wight, PO30 3AJ. **DREAMBERRY WINE**, Mike Don, 233 Maine Road, Manchester, M14 7WG. **EMPTYES #15**, Martin Tudor, 845 Alum Rock Road, Ward End, Birmingham, B8 2AG. **ERG #128**, Terry Jeeves, 66 Red Scar Drive, Scarborough, North Yorkshire, YO12 6RQ. **EYEBALLS IN THE SKY #9**, Tony Berry, 55 Seymour Road, Oldbury, West Midlands, B69 4EP. **FANS ACROSS THE WORLD**, Bridget Wilkinson, 17 Mimosa, 29 Avenue Road, Tottenham, N15 5JF. **FTT #17**, Judith Hanna & Joseph Nicholas, 15 Jansons Road, South Tottenham, London, N15 4JU. **MAVERICK #3**, Jenny Glover, 24 Laverock Road, Trinity, Edinburgh, EH5 3DE, Scotland. **OBSESSIONS #4**, Bridget Harcastle, 13 Lindfield Gardens, Hampstead, London, NW3 6PX. **SOMETHING FOR THE WEEKEND #3**, Steve Green, 33 Scott Road, Olton Solihull, West Midlands, B92 7LQ. **THINGUMYBOB #14**, Chuck Connor, Sildan House, Chediston Road, Wissett, Suffolk, IP19 ONF.

All of the above are available for "the usual" which means in return for letter of comment, trade, article, or a large SAE. Enquiries about the Awards or a copy of the Rules (50p to cover copying and postage), contact Tony Berry at 55 Seymour Road, Oldbury, West Midlands, B69 4EP.

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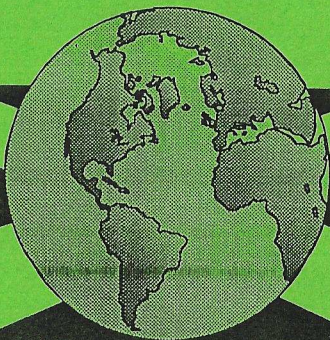
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