

FOCUS

The Writer's Magazine Of The British Science Fiction Association



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Editorial

A Time Of Changes...

Those of you who like to read the small print on page 2 may already have noticed that I have moved. As I may have mentioned elsewhere, I've also switched schools. As well as this, or perhaps because of the stress, I have been very ill recently. I'd like to apologise to those of you expecting letters from me. I will try to fit things as soon as possible, but at the moment I'm dancing as fast as I can...

As you'll see, the workshop story in this issue is longer than usual. I felt that it presented a different range of problems than those in most of the stories submitted to Focus.

Talking about submissions, I hate to hammer a point, but if you send stuff in, please type it. (To the person who sent in the handwritten manuscript, I understand that it can be difficult to get hold of a typewriter when you are broke. However, producing Focus takes far too much of my time as it is, and I'm afraid there is no way that I am going to type from handwriting. Besides, I value my eyesight! If I get time, however, I will comment on handwritten manuscripts. But that is as far as that particular compromise goes.)

I would also like to point out that I do not claim expenses for things like postage, so an SAE would not only be appreciated, it is essential if you want a manuscript returned. Sorry to be brutal, but as I said when I took on the job, as far as I'm concerned, I'm in the business of preparing people for the break into the professional markets. Since I've had virtually no negative response to this stance, it is one I intend to maintain.

Whoops, there I go being far too aggressive again. Sorry about that — it must be the stomach ulcer...

Take care until next time,

Liz

JOB OFFER

Yes, really. No pay (the first catch), and a lot of hard work (the second catch), but my profound gratitude (HA HA), and the chance to see everything that doesn't make it into Focus... (there's more than you might think!)

So, what is this stunning job? TYPIST, that's what. I need someone reliable, preferably with access to a PC or an Atari ST, to do the bulk of the typing for Focus.

If you think you can stand the excitement, give me a ring on 01-229 9298

BUMF

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Submissions

Unsolicited articles and stories (for the Workshop only) are welcome, but Focus does not pay for material. Manuscripts should be typed, double spaced, on one side of the paper only. Alternatively, you may submit on 3.5 inch disk for the Atari ST, or on 5.25 for the IBM PC. All submissions MUST be accompanied by an SAE with adequate postage for their return.

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Clarion the Wonderhorse

Nicola Griffith

Once upon a time, if there was such a time, there was a woman who nursed deep within her heart the urge to cross the desert on foot. Her friends whispered amongst themselves and, finally, to her: it is impossible, they said. The woman was stubborn; she began to read and train and plan.

Then the day came when she knew she was as read as she could be. She surveyed the duns and ochres of the desert in the thin air of dawn; surely, she thought, it must be possible, others had made the journey before her. Despite her dream, she was an intelligent and realistic woman, and she had prepared as well as she knew how. On her back she carried water, food, map and compass; in her heart she carried determination.

At first all went well. Though the sun rose steadily until the dawn thickened into mid-morning and then noon, the woman drank her water, checked her compass and walked steadily in a straight line. On and on she walked. Her skin began to burn, her lips to crack. None of the books she had read had prepared her for the way the sun slashed at her eyes and made her head ache until she thought she was going mad. When the sun fell below the horizon the woman lay down on the cooling sand, looked up at the stars and took stock: her feet were blistered and swollen but she had travelled a good distance; her water was almost gone but her map told her that there was an oasis on her route the next morning. She slept, confident.

The next morning she reached the oasis and it was nothing but dust. She swallowed and looked at her map again. There was another oasis nearby. As she slogged on, a wind began to blow. She kept her head down because her eyes were stinging. The wind lifted the sand until it hissed around her ankles. And still the wind rose. Eventually, the woman stopped. She swung her pack onto the sand and crouched down behind it, taking out her map to look for a sheltered place. The wind tore it from her grasp. Helpless she watched it whip through the air and disappear.

Later, when the wind stopped, she stood up and brushed herself down. She had no map, no water and her compass had been wrecked by the sandstorm. Dust filled the sky. The sunlight was diffuse and she could not tell east from west; in all directions there was nothing but sand. She started walking.

Eyes to the ground, she walked for hours. When she looked up, it was evening, the sky had cleared and the setting sun poured orange over the sand. Before her, silhouetted against the light, stood a horse. The woman stopped, uncertain. The horse panted and snorted, then moved a little and turned to face her. She started forward and the horse moved away again. By this time she was tired. The horse showed no signs of running away, so the woman simply sank onto the sand, curled up and went to sleep.

When she woke up it was past midnight. The stars were cold and bright. The horse was nuzzling her shoulder. The woman tried to get up but could not; she thought about going back to sleep. The horse nipped at her arm, then danced daintily around so that its tail hung where she could use it to help herself up. When the woman finally stood, her legs wobbled and nothing looked very clear. She leaned against the horse

and it began to move slowly over the sand. When she felt she could not go any further ever again, the horse looked over its shoulder at her and blew down its nose. She woke from her dream, and plodded on.

With the horse to steer her away from the false promise of mirages, to lean on now and again and to show her the trick of finding shade by day, the woman was able to find a small water hole. In this way, she managed to cross the desert on foot.

Okay, so the woman might have made it without the horse. But what is wrong with a little help? Clarion - the science fiction writing workshop held at Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan - provides help to those who have already struggled most of the way themselves. Most of us, I like to think, would make it on our own eventually but it would take longer and the way would be unnecessarily hard. Why should less experienced writers not benefit from the advice of those who know about the droughts and sandstorms and mirages of the writing world?

Clarion is not what I would call fun. Useful, yes; exhilarating, yes; fun, no. Fun is such a lightweight word, there is no way it can be used to describe Clarion.

The six weeks were built around a Monday to Friday workshoping format. When stories were finished they were handed in, photocopied and distributed to participants. Typically, this would mean four manuscripts a night to read, re-read and annotate in excruciating detail. The next morning we workshoped them. From nine until noon (and sometimes a couple of hours after lunch if we needed to) we went through each manuscript carefully - line by line, character by character, subplot by subplot - taking it apart and then suggesting ways to put it back together. When we were not workshoping we were writing, or reading and critiquing the next set of manuscripts, or researching our next story, or discussing some aspect of our work with the writer in residence. We did a lot of writing. Over the six weeks I averaged only four hours sleep a night; I was not the only one.

Every writer experiences a different Clarion; each of us has struggled to a different place in the desert. What did I learn? It is difficult to quantify. On the purely practical, writerly level: many solid techniques for plotting etc.; some neat tricks for myself out of holes... but most of my learning was on a much deeper and more personal level. Spending six weeks amongst equals forced me to acknowledge the fact that, writing wise, I had spent the last two years hiding; it is much more comfortable to follow a familiar mirage than to face the real world.

Clarion can be brutal.

Imagine a very crude and swift surgical operation - someone ripping your sternum open with a chain saw, forcing your ribcage with a tyre-lever - and you begin to imagine Clarion. A bit excessive? Probably, but you do not pay out over two thousand dollars in fees and travel, meet writers like Tim Powers, Lisa Goldstein, Samuel R. Delany, Kim Stanley Robinson, Damon Knight and Kate Wilhelm... just to get patted on the back. You go to Clarion to learn. As time is short, the learning is

"I Left My Love Behind Me,
and Went Marching Off To War"

by Kev McVeigh

"Tell me not, Sweet, I am unkind, that from
the nunnery
Of thy chaste breast, and quiet minds, to
war and arms I fly."

-- To *Lucasta*, going to the wars
Richard Lovelace

The visions are coming so much more often now -- more today already than even yesterday. It is down to just a few hours between them. What is happening to me? I'm scared. Am I going mad, if I doubt my sanity can I be insane? Or does it all begin with doubts, pointing out the path to my breakdown? Wherever it is that I'm going I really don't think I want to go.

... snow kept falling, thickly across our path, and wind whipped it up around our eyes. The fog of the blizzard dimmed everything to a pale light as we cursed through the sludge...

John had begun his journal soon after the early blackouts; he had never kept a diary before, feeling no point to it, but this was a way to keep the doctors accurately informed. His was a unique case to them, and they wanted to study him as they tried to treat him. None of them knew what was causing the "incidents" (when the psychiatrist Dr Eliot first used the term "incident" John had laughed, saying that it made him sound like a UFO). Now John thought he would never learn what he was suffering from. He did not understand it, and that frightened him. It seemed that all he could do was to try to be somewhere "safe" when the incidents came upon him, and wait for it all to end.

... it fell as white and grey, and stayed though we stained it red, crimson and pink death in great blotches, and flowing in sunset streaks. Elsewhere feet dug brown from below, and mixed it all...

"Have you ever used drugs of any kind, Mr Fisher? Pot even?" asked Eliot, it was their first interview.

"No, none. I always tried to keep away from them." John explained his fear of hallucinogenic drugs, and his belief that he had no use for them. He laughed defensively, "I don't even know what you do with acid or whatever. Do you smoke it, drink it or inject it?"

"Eat it, sort of, but never mind; how about legal things, you don't smoke, do you drink at all?" the psychiatrist made a quick note on his pad.

"Not often, but I was drunk the first time this happened." He felt confessional and embarrassed, but if it cured him it was worth it.

... we pressed on regardless, up towards the summit, slaying as many as would try to impeded our progress. We killed many for that, leaving them to freeze or rot as they would, corroded and consumed in the winter.

The doctors and the psychiatrists asked John long series of questions about

his life, and his job. He took tests as well, but these did not provide any answers either. John Fisher, bank clerk and ordinary person who happened to suffer from strange nightmare hallucinations, was not different from anyone else. Physically he was small built, and of moderate height, with a fair face and short brown hair. His left arm was withered as a result of childhood polio, making it only partially usable. He walked with an occasional limp, but it rarely caused him to consider himself anything unusual at all. He was bored with his job, but too apathetic to look for something better; a quiet person, he spent most evenings with music and a book. Recently, before the onset of his blackouts, he had been joined by Andra Tiresias, his girlfriend. She came to his flat most nights and often stayed all night. It had been her idea to keep the diary, and most of the earlier entries concerned her.

... the slime clung as I sunk right to my ankle, no man should be wandering about in a storm like this. Ahead of me, somewhere, Glarvin sang out a familiar tune as he swung his blade solidly, though his words were muffled and his rhythm distorted by rough breath of his exertions...

Andra bought me a diary today. I don't know what I will have to write about though, except her I hope. If you ask, most days I can't remember. She is the most exciting thing in my life, usually the only excitement. She says that a diary should not be just about excitement and events, but moods and feelings as well. I'll try. I wonder if I am not a little bit too quiet and dull for her, though she hasn't complained or tried to change me much. I love her and she seems quite happy to stay here so I'm happy.

... fifteen of us had left Rikvad a week ago, and we had been joined by two more along the road. I could see none of them, but I knew some lived and a few had fallen. We had not expected so much resistance; with a half-mile still to go, my hands ache to grip my sword...

John, dear John, asked me about clothes and a haircut tonight; he wants to do something, to change his image for me, he says. I can't see him as outgoing or fashionable, he is sweet though, but he won't actually do it anyway. It's just another of his vague ideas to fade away. Silly, he wants to inspire me to love him, but I do. I love him, his books, his silences even. And I'm flattered but I don't want anything dramatic from him. Just what I have now.

... I drove my sword home again, tearing the obstructions of leather before it

slid easily into wet flesh. I twisted it as I withdrew, for full effect, then I threw the falling figure aside, parrying his final swipe, and looking for the next one before he hit the ground...

Andra had been annoyed with John when he collapsed at a party; he was drunk, and she did not like it at all. He told her about some kind of hallucination, but they blamed the vodka. John was more concerned with appeasing Andra than with investigating a very brief flash that was probably from some book or a film he'd seen recently.

...I think that for the first time I feel a little scared, beneath the battle ecstasy. I can smell blood, and smoke and the early morning fog begins to let me see things ahead...

"Tell me about these visions, please what do you see?" asked Dr Eliot.

"It isn't just a picture, at first all I got was the fog and the blizzard and sense of being a warrior of some kind. John repeated this as he had explained to Andra and to the other doctors. "I felt the cold, and get excited and so on as well. What is it? Do you know?" The psychiatrist shook his head, while making a few notes.

"What about sex, is there any sex in these scenes? Raping and pillaging perhaps?" Andra flinched at this, momentarily jealous of a dream.

"No, not yet. So far it has just been fighting."

...nine times I had come out with Glarvin, and I was not a beginner before him. The worst fight was in a temple near Freec. There were all those women screaming and running in the way, while the monks fought us hard. The temple virgins all got killed, run through without a thought; just stick a blade in, blood and screams, then out and on to the next one. Only the two of us got away out of thirty who went in...

What are these visions? Things to be, or things from the past, like some race memory of my own. Or is it all a fiction? Oh, god I am so scared. Where did these things come from? I went to the doctor right after the second "incident", he thought I'd had a bad dream and not to worry about it; they are my dreams, only in my head, but they affect me so much. And Andra is upset as well, we argued today because we are both so worried.

he came at me as best a tall man can move in slipping mud, looming in the fog, a spirited attack, but I did him to the death. My sword went into his breast on the left, and he turned to the ground. He was gone to the crows and I bore on...

Robert had introduced me to John, my brother liked his dinner parties to be balanced, so when I said I had no partner he had produced one. He worked with John, but I'm not sure which of he felt sorry for, though I don't think he was deliberately matchmaking. I'm glad he did it, anyway. I liked John from the start, and took very little notice of his arm, though he had kept it by his side as if slightly shy of it. I think that was because he liked me too. It's unusual otherwise for him to be embarrassed by it.

...an arm slipped around me, pulling my neck down. I hate being held and so I twisted into his grip; he wasn't good, and I could slip my sharp knife into his crotch. He squealed and fell, wrenching my neck. I kicked at him and pulled away as scarlet ribbons already marred his earth...

I told Andra that I would have to take sick-leave from the bank as the "incidents" increase. She agreed, and offered to come to look after me. I said yes, but now I feel unsure. Where have my madresses come from? What has changed in my life to provoke them? She has. I met her in June, the first attack came on August 17, we had been going together for two months. It must be her, but it can't be. Has a woman thrown me so far off balance that I am going mad? Why? Love should be caring, not angry. I don't see how Andra can be doing this to me, and even if she is, how do we cure me? Should I send her away? But if I do, and it doesn't cure me, I can't cope without her. She's not a witch!

...I saw one of ours fall to reddening snow, but I was too crowded to count his sharp, for I had barely known him from the axeman who reared a challenge at me. Ducking low, I pulled a shield from a body near, and attacked with that...

We argued that night, so badly that I couldn't stay. It is just stress, I know, but it could still tear us apart. John half-blames me for his illness, with some strange male logic that I can't see, but he doesn't want me to leave him. He thinks he is dying, oh God, perhaps he is! If I give up work for him, to look after him, will he accept me? Sometimes it is worse with him than when we are apart. It hurts so much. Oh, why us who were so happy together?

...I swung my sword hard, until it met with resistance: my enemy's neck. Hot blood sprayed across me but he only delayed me a moment further. I wiped sweat and his blood from my brow, and kicked his head from my path...

The doctors wanted John to stop in the psychiatric ward, but he refused and Andra agreed to look after him at home. She kept a vigil over him, wiping his face, and keeping precise notes on his condition, and the times of the "incidents". They both discussed any signs that showed an approaching "incident" but they were both frightened. Andra was very upset at accusations that it was somehow her fault.

...as I strode on towards the stark blank sky beyond the ridge, I shouted to Glarvin as he left another dying. The storm was clearing as we paused in the shade of the last hill...

"I'm sorry," I tried to bring the words to task, "I love you, it's good to have you with me."

Andra bowed her face, then smiled, she is pretty, in a simple way, though she thinks she's plain:

"Thank you," she said, "it hurts you know, when you go. I can't see what you are fighting, or where you are, or..."

"I know, and I should not have blamed you. You do so much for me."

It seems sometimes that I only get a rest from the relentless, restless fears of my thoughts when I'm in a dream, destroying something, myself?

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...later we would count our kills together if we could. After, we would take up our spoils, and part for a few days: resting, we could clear the blood from our veins. I would eat and drink well, and find a pretty girl to admire my scars, but soon I would get the old feelings back. We would gather by some ancient inn somewhere to boast of aging victories, and daring new raids...

"Who is this Glarvin? Where are you? What are you fighting for? Don't you even know that?" Andra put frustrated words around obvious questions. She felt so useless, as she strived to support her lover. He had different questions, with similar concerns.

"Where have we come from? What are we? Where are we going?" he whispered.

...it had taken us the whole day, but soon we topped the hill and ran across the open stretch to the fury that awaited against us. Crows settle towards our remains, and a bird, a kite circles above us also...

John tries to tell me everything that happens to him in his visions, but he finds it hard sometimes. I think he is trying to avoid the gruesome details, but he might be hiding the worse bits. We studied the notes, looking for a firm pattern. The implications we saw frighten me.

"What happens when the gaps get down to nothing? Is it death, or birth or something else again? Is it going to be like the contractions of a pregnancy?"

...night was approaching as we moved on across the field. A burning branch landed beside me as I fought. His weapon struck at my shield, and I seized the branch from the snow and thrust it in his face. He screamed and I ran him through...

"You were away for forty-three minutes." Andra said, noting the times into her book.

"It isn't that long over there." John said, trying to separate the fading memories out. "It only feels like about five or ten maybe, and it is just a few minutes after the last one, not six hours or so."

Andra put everything into her book then looked up at John, smile sadly and said:

"It's so unfair, so confusing. If you had someone else I could do what I needed to do, fight you, or her, or run away but this is something worse. I love you."

"I love you too, not the new mistress out there." John tapped his forehead.

...now we could actually see the small wooded tower and our pace quickened in our eagerness, but we still had to push to reach the goal. Numbers were much reduced, but those still standing had luck and strength, and some god on their side, they would be the most difficult to pass. I was tired, but excited still, enough to step onward...

Andra looked so very weary tonight that I feel guilty for the strain I was forcing upon her. I had been happy before I met her, some of the time. Sometimes I had been less happy, and it all seemed to average out. Then we met, and got together, making us both completely happy. So now why were we so miserable, what was happening to me? And through me, to her?

...a tall bearded defender pushed into my path, bloody saliva trickled down his leather, and I realised he had already killed. Our swords clashed as we pressed our bodies together. He parried my tired pass easily as I lunged clumsily and swung his free, heavy gloved fist at my face...

He said that he had thought of suicide last night, when he thought I was leaving. But he is afraid of that as well. I think he is becoming very disturbed by these things: he fears their conclusion, simply because it is unknown: he has no cure for it, and this impotence angers him; and he fears for his mind. I also think he is worried about me, poor John. I'm worried about him.

...hot sharp wetness ran across my leg with a sting. My pants were stuck to my leg as I moved, and I stumbled in the mud. I was not sure it was my own blood or his. I had other worries as he loomed vast, and gripped my sleeve. He swung again, high this time...

"Sleep now," she said, "in the quiet." Andra hoped anxiously that sleep might bring me some form of temporary respite, but I'm sure that it will be useless. Still she tries to soothe me and I am very grateful. I know that if I, in the vision I, am killed... I let that thought trail away. That is something else I can't bring myself to tell her, with the vague images of past rapes and brutal assaults. It gets closer, the moment when two "incidents" meet. What then? Do I die? Or merely go insane? Odd words. "Dear Diary, today I went insane; nothing important happened."

...I bent my knees to give me room, then thrust up hard and straight. His gauntlet raked my cheek as he died...

Andra cried as she wiped his face, her tears tracing thin lines down her pale brown cheeks. They had been making love, a spontaneous decision, thinking it could be the last chance they would have. John had had an "incident" as he approached orgasm. Andra was deeply hurt, feeling rejected, but she stayed to wipe the sweat from him. It was silk she was using, lingerie that had lain close at hand. John wanted to help but...

I struck with a lucky slash across his chest, a leap of purple spurted from his heart...

All I could do was wait. In desperate frustration I offered a caress of her long black hair. She smiled, weakly, and kissed me.

"I'm sorry," I tried to calm her as she hed for me, but what if this were the last night of our world.

...it was deep enough to kill him almost at once, and I threw his body out of my way, to the crows if they wanted...

"I know you can't help it, love," I whispered, "but that time, it... it was as though you had d-died on me. It frightened me."

"Oh Andra I think it is a little death, each time. I seem to look at life from nearer death each time." He shook his head.

...the ice cold wind cut mercilessly at us, making us ache. I looked at the

crows as they picked at the bones, squealing...

He asked me to explain. What happened. His eyes closed, but not like when we kiss, they just flicked shut. Then he went still. I didn't know if I should move him from me. I hate it, I love him. I feel so good loving him, sex is great, he was still hard but elsewhere. Why? What can I give him?

...Fobus lay screaming as the birds pecked at where his leg had been. I split his neck swiftly, as I could help in no other way...

"Oh love I'm sorry," John said. "I'm scared. Where is this all leading to? I don't know if I'll die, or go insane, completely insane, or which is worse." He held Andra close, crying. A dark bruise was rising on his cheek, and his thigh bled slightly from a thin scratch down its length.

...It was my leg that bled, but Glarvin grinned at me as I slipped a stolen sheath across my sword. His left arm hung limp and useless at his side...

John kissed Andra for what he feared might be the last time. If he went mad would he still love her, and could she still love him. If he died it was at least a straight answer. They could not explain his wounds, misplaced stigmata, but it was only a dream, in his head, wasn't it?

...in the bluish darkness a solemn silence came over the snow. Marke and Jek, his brother, were with us, survivors, but the enemy lay dead or dying...

Andra bathed me gently, and bandaged my cuts. I love her so much, I want her forever, but it looks like I must go... crazy? ...to hell? ...where? Her pain showed in her eyes, beside me on our bed, whilst I walk with the dead? She is angry, but not with me, as I would have been in her place. She knows it is no fault of hers or mine.

...a power was with us as we slashed bones clean, but now as we paused the weariness grows. It lifts as we trudge towards the tower, through blood and...

I hate this thing that is stealing John's life, taking him from me, from us. It is going to drive me mad as well soon. He goes marching off somewhere with death and some mysterious strangers for company, and I dare not hold a breath for his return. I'm trying not to cry, because it will make it worse for John, but it is hard.

...the door was locked, but that was just one more fight after all we had seen. Jek used his weight and the door burst under him...

I saw Andra across the room replace the dressing-gown she had removed to bathe me, and then she drew her long black hair out tight...

...As he stood up a naked girl tried to escape into the frost, but he caught her around the breasts, "First spoils!" he laughed...

Andra hardly had time to note his returns before it seemed that he left her again. Now John seemed to be half dazed as he returned taking a few moments to recover.

...we entered eagerly, yet with caution. Nice ran excitedly around our feet, but here was what we had fought for...

Normally quite ordinary, now Andra was beautiful to me.

...I had come for what I would find in this warm dark room. I looked around at my friends, our eyes penetrating the dark slowly. What had we won?...

I am about to lose him.

...something in that corner, as I moved closer I heard a cry from the others, but the mystery was over as I saw...

Andra slightly out of focus, beside me. She had collapsed. I touched her face carefully to convince myself that it was all real, as well as to let her know I had returned.

"I'm back!" I sounded surprised, as she looked up. "It's over, I won!" Won? Perhaps, but anyway, it was over.

"Oh John, are you sure?" I asked him, still afraid because I had been hurt already.

"Yes, I think so," he nodded, "thank you for staying." What else could I do for the man I love? I held him then, close and tight. After a while I undressed and we made love, though John was reluctant and worried at first. We first slept together a few weeks before the beginning of our nightmare, but that night felt just like the very first time all over again as we explored each other. It was good, very good, and John didn't leave me.

Sitting here at my desk writing this, some two months after it all happened, I can look back and smile. Life is duller now, thank God, but it is all over and we are happy again. I'm going back to work but I will look for a new job. I told them that I had had a "glandular virus" that caused hallucinations while I was weak. After all we went through, Andra and I are getting married and she thinks she may be pregnant; incredibly this probably happened on the night I "came back", or perhaps when I left her in "le petit mort". She had missed her pill through trying to care for me.

"I've studied your notes, which were well done by the way," said Dr Elliot, "but we still aren't certain about what you suffered from so we would like to continue to keep an eye on you if we may?"

"Yes, but have you any near guesses?" Andra asked.

"Certainly, we can guess, Miss Tiresias. It could be sexual frustration, do you mind asking how your sex life is?"

"It is good, I'm pregnant! But I think John sometimes worries about me getting pleasure." John smiled beside her and squeezed her hand.

"And do you?" asked the doctor.

"Yes, probably more than him at these times. I don't think he could be described as frustrated though." She was no longer disturbed by such questions.

"What would Freud say?" John asked.

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W
his interest sharpened by the discussion.
"I don't think he ever saw anything quite like your case. but I don't know who has."

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The psychiatrist talked about people turning to archetypes when they cannot function in an unfamiliar situation. I think he meant John could not cope with me. I got annoyed, but he also suggested that John's subconscious could not conceive of its own death, at which John looked confused. I can't help. Obviously something needed to get out, but what?

R
What kind of neurosis did I have? At least it came out in dreams. I didn't rape anyone or murder somebody. It makes me shudder to think what could have happened to me. I'll finish these notes soon and send them to Dr Eliot, even though he has no more idea than I do.

K
...Glarvin looks around the tavern trying to pick men for a new raid. I am at his shoulder giving my thoughts. This could well be our most dangerous job yet. A quest, but for what? I don't know but the pay is good, even though I am still rich from last time. I feel odd, is this all wrong? I could be killed, but I must go. I'm getting old, but what else is there in my life. I don't fit in any town, and I have no trade. Here I stand, I can do no other...

S H O P Comment

There are quite a few things wrong with this story, but they can be fixed.

(1) Having two different first person narratives, one third person narrative plus first person, italicized "incident" inserts makes the structure unnecessarily complex. Simplify it. The first person "incidents" plus a third person, detached viewpoint should be enough.

(2) There seems to be some confusion throughout with tenses. Decide which tense you are going to use for what, and stick to it. Tenses can be a useful way to differentiate viewpoints without having to italicize. It might be worth experimenting with, say, the present tense for the first person "incidents" and the past tense for the rest.

(3) At present, the dialogue has all the repetitions and irritations of real speech. Written dialogue should be a shortened, more concise version of the real thing. Also, it needs to be more character-specific; this would obviate the need for many of the "He said, she said" tags.

(4) The way the incidents become more frequent as John moves further and further from reality is effective. However, more thought needs to be given to their content; after a while they become repetitive, and the language too convoluted. It should be made clear at the beginning what physical affect these incidents have on John -- explain why Andra has to look after him.

When I called John to bed he was crying at his desk. It still disturbs him. I thought he was over it. I asked him to leave it, so I could comfort him. He kissed me and said he would.

... we will leave soon, we need perhaps three more. I call for another ale, and explain our choice to another. He looks strong, and able, but he is the quiet type whom I always distrust...

"KILLING IS A WAY OF WARDING OFF ONE'S OWN DEATH?" I wrote, finally. How can I tell her what has just happened? It leaves my world on edge, and she looking. I love her, need her but I can't ask her to stay again, through that pain again (and again? and again?) and possibly to see me die somewhere she can't be with me. Why? Oh what can I do, I only ever strove to create what I believe I ought to be, and this happens, killing me and torturing my love, the mother of my orphan.

"Do not weep, maiden, for War
is kind"

-- Do not weep
Steven Crane

(5) From the beginning, clarification is also needed of John and Andra's relationship by detailing how they interact with each other, rather than by telling us how they feel via their first person narratives. More information on how John feels about his actions during the incidents would strengthen readers' identification with his struggle.

(6) Keep the narrative in chronological order -- this will eliminate confusion -- and cut the epigrams, which are unnecessary.

(7) Are John's physical deformities essential to his character? If not, cut them. If they are, tell us about them at the beginning.

(8) If you are going to use contractions in the narrative, be consistent.

(9) Explain why John suddenly stops suspecting Andra of causing the incidents.

(10) The title fits the story, but I feel it is too long.

(11) The psychologist and his theories need careful consideration. If they are meant to be integral to the story, they need to be given more space; mentions at the beginning and end are not enough. If they are not essential (and I think they are not), cut them.

(12) The ending needs a lighter touch; let the horror speak for itself.

--Nicola Griffith

*** I get the feeling that this story is supposed to work on more than one level, perhaps as character study, perhaps as social comment. If the first, the characterisation is not well enough developed; if the second, we do not see enough of the world the characters inhabit to make the point.

*** I don't think the multiplicity of viewpoints helps. You could probably do without the bits in third person. I found these confusing, though in some ways the other parts of the collage worked very well.

*** The names have resonances which are not developed in the story. Andra Tiresias, especially, has mythic connotations. I don't think this works, since Andra doesn't perform the function of seer or even doom-sayer in the story. And why Andra? She's far from androgynous! The other names are less obvious, but we do have a Dr Eliot — and of course, Tiresias appears in T. S. Eliot's work. This would also link in with John Fisher, the Fisher King, of course, being one of the great mythic archetypes and symbolic of the Wasteland. Perhaps I'm over-intellectualising, but this would also provide meaning for John's deformities which are irritating in that they are mentioned at the beginning of the story but not thereafter. I'm willing to accept that these things may have many reasons or none. But I don't think it's clear from the text, and I don't believe the reader should be left quite so unsure — the story should stand alone.

*** The here and now parts lack narrative drive. Perhaps if you could link the two halves of the story together more in the sense of events in one mirroring the other etc., a lot of difficulties might disappear. It might also be better to show more and tell less.

*** The here and now parts lack narrative drive. Perhaps if you could link the two halves of the story together more in the sense of events in one mirroring the other etc., a lot of difficulties might disappear. It might also be better to show more and tell less.

*** I know it may be entirely intentional, but I was left deeply uneasy that I didn't understand the cause of what was going on. Is it that Fisher can't handle a meaningful relationship? Or something else? Perhaps somewhere — at the beginning or as a flashback — you could show the incident which triggers the whole cycle. You could leave it ambiguous, since that seems to be the tone of this story, with its significance clearer to the reader than to Fisher or Andra.

*** As it stands, the ending is irritating, but I think this might be because you've left just a bit too much to the reader's imagination. On the other hand, that expository wodge near the end (where the doctor asks Andra about her sex life) is horrible, easily the worst bit of the story. Thing is, I think you could do without it, if the rest of the narrative made what was going on clearer.

*** On the plus side, the relationship between Andra and John is rather nicely done, even if a bit static — told not shown — as is their characterisation (though they do seem to exist in a vacuum — don't either of them have families?). Not sure I really believed Andra would give up her job for someone she'd known for two months. Similarly, the atmosphere for the fighting sections is great — but I'm not sure where they are! Is it just supposed to be a generic background, or Roman, Greek or what. It is important, as it has implications as to whether Fisher is making it up, or whether real events are taking place. Also, I was far into the story before I was sure that all these bits were part of the same raid.

—Liz Holliday

Reply

Carol Ann Green replies to the Workshop comments of her story *Voices* in the last issue.

After just having read *Voices* and the criticisms on it again after a period of a couple of months I feel more able to reply.

Basically, I have to admit to agreeing, to a greater or lesser extent, with most of what was said. *Voices* needs to be at least another 1500 words in length to be able to cope with and explore the idea thoroughly.

However, to take each criticism in order: clichés — Colin P. Davies, quite rightly, pulls me up about using clichés. That I admit can be a problem with me. At first I was put out about the reference to Eddie Large, but I guess that a lot of people watch him (poor them!) and would pick up on *Stepping back* in amazement, which I wouldn't. Other than that, I have nothing more to say about this one.

I must admit that I found Mary Gentle's comments the most useful, succinct and helpful. They have certainly given me a lot to think about regarding uses of telepathy in Science Fiction.

Nick Cheesemen, stop apologizing for criticising, that is what you were asked to do. However, I did find some helpful comments in your piece. Yes, I remember *The Tomorrow People* with affection, and indeed it is through them that my interest in telepathy started.

I do intend rewriting *Voices* (work and college commitments allowing). I have some ideas on how to improve the story, I intend keeping the rather unsavey character: I think he adds interest to the story and I have some good ideas on how to get him to show off his new found abilities and cause a certain amount of real havoc, before him being "shut down".

This is the first time I have had my work criticised publicly like this. It is a nerve-racking experience, but if you are considering submitting a story to Focus, don't let that put you off: what you get out of it will be worth all the nail biting.

A Writer's Bookshelves

David V Barratt

WRITERS NEED BOOKS LIKE ORDINARY MORTALS need air. Go into any writer's home and you'll find books piled on books on shelves, tables, chairs, the floor... And many of them will be non-fiction, essential reference books. This doesn't only apply to SF and Fantasy writers, of course; just about all writers are bibliofanatics.

But which reference books will the beginning writer find most helpful to his or her writing?

Like any other article — or book — about writing, 95% of this one will be already known to some of its readers, a different 95% irrelevant to some others; but for the sake of that odd 5% — and more than that, with luck, for still others — this is a brief guide to some of the books I find essential, or useful, or handy to have around just in case I want to check.

1. Dictionaries.

Vital. No-one's spelling is perfect. There's no point in pleasing off an editor because of your carelessness; my own weaknesses are single-or-double letters in words like *resurrection* and *vicissitudes*, and *-ence/-ance* endings. Any decent-sized (preferably etymological) dictionary will do; I like the *Concise Oxford* for handy use, but I have the two-volume *Shorter Oxford* to hand for safety. Other people swear by *Chambers* or *Websters*. And remember that a dictionary's useful for a lot more than just checking spelling: the relationships between, and the origins of words, are fascinating and often illuminating.

2. Literary Reference Works.

A *Thesaurus* is useful, not for giving you a synonym when you can't be bothered to think of one, but for leading your mind into slightly differing shades of meaning. A *Dictionary of Quotations*, apart from being an unputdownable browsing time-waster (but is such time ever wasted?), lets you dip into other people's thoughts on whatever word or phrase you're following. The Penguin edition of each is as good as any; I also have a couple of other cheap *Thesauri*, and the excellent *Oxford D-of-Q*. And a good literary encyclopedia: the classic is *Brewer's The Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*: a mine of useful information. Don't bother paying for the latest edition; you can still pick up a facsimile of the 1894 edition in remainder shops or railway bookstalls for under a fiver. Also useful is Benét's *The Reader's Encyclopedia* (A&C Black), which fills in many of the gaps in *Brewer*, and brings it into the mid 20th century.

3. Encyclopedias.

They can't afford the Britanica, but there are several good one-volume jobs; I have the *Hutchinson* and the *Macmillan*, and several smaller ones. You never know when a story will demand that you have at your fingertips the currency of Albania or the differences between dolphins and porpoises. Also, specific *Encyclopedias*, *Dictionaries* or *ABCs* of *Science*, *Psychology*, *Politics*, *Philosophy*, *Religion*, *Saints*, *Mythology*, *History*, *Dates*, *Literature*, *Biography*, *Surnames*, *Forenames*, *Place-names*, etc., are extremely useful. So is a good world atlas — and if you're writing "off-earth" SF, the *Larousse Encyclopedia of Astronomy* or similar, both for ideas and to stop you making geographical or cosmological errors.

4. Indispensable writers' books.

Obviously *The Writers' and Artists' Year-book*, but take a look also at *The Writer's Handbook*: more idiosyncratic, but an interesting and very useful alternative. Get a new one every couple of years: the way publishers keep changing hands, you need to keep up to date.

5. How to Write — Grammatical.

Don't take offence; do you know exactly when a period should fall inside or outside a closing quotation mark? Or the precise difference between *will* and *shall*? I realise the original of Fowler's *Modern English Usage* is over 50 years old, and the 2nd edition that I use is over 20 years old, but it's still one of the best. Others include Fowler: *The King's English*, Sir Ernest Gowers' *The Complete Plain Words*, Eric Partridge's *Usage and Abuse: English Made Simple*; and one I've only recently discovered which is unbelievably good: *The Right Word at the Right Time*, published by Reader's Digest (an English translation of the American *Success with Words*). As Gowers points out, *The King's English* devotes 20 pages to *will & shall*, which is probably more than any of us needs — but I reckon we all need at least one of these for reference.

6. How to Write — Creative.

The Art of Writing Made Simple is a good overall overview; it includes sections on (amongst such else) novels, short stories, plays, poetry, non-fiction, Journalism, radio and TV. Then there are a few books which are inspirational more than anything else: I'd particularly recommend John Braine's *Writing a Novel*; Dorothea Brande's *Becoming a Writer*; and a wonderful little book I found reprinted and have never seen since: somebody please republish it in the UK! Sidney Cox's *Indirections* for those who want to write (written in 1947, published by Kudos & Godine).

There are also three series of books, published by A&C Black, Allison & Busby, and Elm Tree Books, which on the whole fit the 95%-is-already-known-but-5%-is-useful criterion I started with. Some are far better than others: browse before buying. Elm Tree's titles all begin *The Way to Write...* and include *Novels*, for *Television*, for *Children*, *Poetry and Radio Drama*. A&C's often begin *The Craft of...* and include *Novel-Writing*, *Writing Romance*, and *Writing Articles*; but don't bother with their *Writers' Questions Answered*, which is aimed solely at hobbyist magazine article writers and part-time Mills & Boon aspirants with IQs in single figures. A&C Black's titles begin *Writing...* and include *Crime Fiction*, a *Thriller*, for *Radio*, *Historical Fiction*, and, of particular note to most of us, *Science Fiction*, by novelist and former *Focus* editor Christopher Evans.

7. SF-Related Works.

Also useful, for inspiration as much as examples, are books by and about SF writers and how they write. For example: *Hull's Cartographers* (ed. Aldiss & Harrison); Charles Platt's *Dream Makers*; *SF & Fantasy Writers at Work*; and *Of Worlds Beyond* (ed. Lloyd Arthur Esbeck).

8. Other Types of Reference.

This section is far more personal, and may not be books at all. I'm thinking of things like books of art or architecture: pictures which speak to you for some reason which might be specific only to

you. I have a couple of books of surrealist art, another couple which include some John Martin and Turner, and three on Hieronymus Bosch. Pictures of people, particularly faces, can be invaluable for speaking characters; if you ever think "That's an interesting face; I wonder..." when you see a postcard in an art gallery shop or outside a tacky tourist shop — buy it. I have various collections of postcards; for one story, I kept six postcards of Glastonbury Tor above my desk; I wasn't writing about Glastonbury, but I needed that specific elsy, mysterious, mystical atmosphere. Tarot cards sometimes serve a similar purpose — amongst others — for some writers. And, of course, music, which is an article in itself.

8. Research.

Some SF stories and novels spring wholly from the writer's own experience and imagination (this involves research as well: select-ing, culling, redefining, redesigning and organising data from the resource which is yourself). Others need outside research. You don't set a book in a real foreign country unless you know a hell of a lot about the place, preferably by going there, certainly by studying it. And you can always tell those writers of novels about nuclear power stations who have never visited one, and whose knowledge of the theory and practice is slight.

I started work on a new novel about 18 months ago. I quickly realised that you could drive chariots through the gaps in my knowledge of a certain nation's mythology, vital for the book. I started filling in the gaps, only to find unsuspected links with the myth-ology of other nations; then I found I needed to know a lot more about the early factual history of that nation (and others it had dealings with), and most especially its religious beliefs and practices (and theirs). Accepting that I already had a number of relevant books (this had been a long-time inter-est, hence my wanting to

write the novel), I had to buy a whole lot more, many of them long-out-of-print academic texts, difficult to track down secondhand, and expensive. I now have 64 books, in one way or another directly relevant, and at least 75 others peripherally relevant to the proposed novel, which I'm not much further along with writing — but when I do write it, it'll be from knowledge, not ignorance.

And sometimes you find yourself accumulating large numbers of books on a particular subject, without really knowing why. Don't worry, it's probably only your subconscious putting in a bid for your next work.

10. Fiction.

I can't do better than to paraphrase Chris Evans (op. cit.): Be well read in SF & Fantasy so that you know your preferred genre (no problem there) and know what's been done to death already; but an exclusive diet of the genre will make your own writing constipated and derivative — there's a hell of a lot to be learnt from writers outside the field, particularly on style and tone.

There are probably few writers who don't desperately need a larger home, just to house their books. That's one of the problems: books expand to more than fill the space available (or affordable). But if you need a particular book for your work, you must buy it, even if you have to eat bread and cheese for the rest of the week, and forego the pleasures of your local hostelry. If you're serious about writing, you'll make the sacrifice.

Two caveats:

1. There's been more than one good writer who hasn't owned or read a single one of the above (but they're rare).
2. Owning, reading and carefully studying every title mentioned above won't make you a good and successful writer — only you — your talent and effort — can do that (but they might help).

FROM P.2

not always gentle: each writer has just seven days to pass on all of her or his accumulated stock of handy hints, short cuts and dire warnings.

Clarion is special because of the ~~process~~

Normally, it takes me a while to relax with strangers — I can be intolerant and untrusting — but after about three days of Clarion I felt so close to the majority of participants as I do to people I have known for several years. The situation we were in demanded that we did not hold back in any way; it was almost as if we had to strip away all protective barriers in order to absorb everything. Many of us opened ourselves wide with the kind of innocent trust not given since childhood. Although the seventeen of us gathered at MSU this summer were just about the most honest and generous bunch of people I have ever met, were not perfect. Mistakes were made, cruel words were uttered or written, and because we were so open, severe wounds were sustained. But we always understood that

the cruel words were mistakes, and forgave each other.

Being so close for what seemed such a long time meant that leaving was painful. It was not just the people but a whole way of life we were leaving behind: a situation where it was ordinary, accepted, for you to do nothing but write, where you were allowed, expected to be taken seriously. Normal life re-entry procedures were difficult. Perhaps impossible for some.

So, considering the cost and the emotional upheaval, was it worth it? Oh yes.

Details of next year's Clarion Workshop are available from Prof. Albert Drake, Director, Clarion '89, Holmes Hall East, Lyman Briggs School, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824.

Please remember to enclose an SAE with sufficient International Reply Coupons for an airmail reply.

Et cetera

Market Space

Due to lack of pages in Focus, I have had to limit Market Space to competitions and other urgent news. However, as well as co-ordinating the Orbiter groups, Sue Thomason also maintains a computerised Market Space list. Sue writes:

As of today (28th September) I've had 11 requests for the printout of outlets for fantasy, SF and related writing. I hope to add/update listings as I hear back from users. The list is now about 4 pages long (mostly British markets) so I'd be grateful if anyone who wants a copy could write to me enclosing an A5 SAE (ordinary 2nd class postage is fine), with one extra 2nd class stamp (loose, so I can use it!).

The Market Space List is available from: Sue Thomason, 111 Albemarle Road, South Bank, York YO2 1EP — and please remember that SAE!

Both Sue and I would like details of any new markets people discover, whether in this country or abroad. Remember — we are only as good as our information!

Competition

The Academy of Children's Writers is running a short story competition. Stories should not exceed 1000 words, and may appeal to children of any age. The competition, which is for previously unpublished authors only, has cash prizes ranging from 50 down to 0. The closing date is January 31 1989. There is no entry fee, but manuscripts must be accompanied by an official entry form, available from: The Academy of Children's Writers, 3 Regal Lane, Boham, Ely, Cambridge CB7 5BA.

In Focus 17

With a bit of luck... an interview with an authors' agent; writing for the American

FORUM:

Last issue's Forum on "Beating Writers' Block" drew a lot of contributions — far more than I was able to use. Consequently, I would like to make the Forum a regular feature. Some of you may remember that I asked for your comments on the ethics of writing, and also on the suitability of various computer systems as word processors. However, these haven't drawn enough response to make worthwhile articles (so far) so if you feel you have something to say on either topic, but thought it was too

Workshop

I have not yet succeeded in finding a suitable venue for the London Writers' Workshop. However, I plan to hold a preliminary meeting at my flat, on Saturday, January 14th 1989 at 2.00pm. The address is: 31 Shottasford, Wessax Gardens, London W2. You won't find this on any map. Look instead for the junction of Talbot Rd W2 and Ladbury Rd W2. My phone number is 01-229 9298. The nearest tube is Westbourne Park (Metropolitan Line), or buses 7, 15, 27, 28, 31 or 52. I'd appreciate it if you would let me know in advance if you are planning to come.

Orbiter Update

by

Sue Thomason

There are currently 9 Orbiter groups in existence that I know of. There is one spare place in an existing group, and I'm about to start setting up a new group so anyone who'd like to join a postal writer's workshop/support group should write to me (with SAE) for further details. I'm also interested in hearing "success stories" from Orbiter members, for inclusion in the next issue of *Do You Read Me* the Orbiter newsletter.



magazines; breaking into comics; and of course, the Workshop.

late, let me know. I'll run them if and when I have enough material.)

So, for the next issue —

Forum: One of the most common problems I've found in submissions for the Workshop is that they are not really stories at all. Note that I'm not talking about quality here. I'm talking about the difference between an anecdote, a story and a series of events. Your opinions please, in 250 words or less.