

FOCUS

The Writer's Magazine Of The British Science Fiction Association



Issue 17

75p

Editorial

THE GOOD NEWS, THE BAD NEWS AND THE TRUE
CONFESSIONS OF A (WILL-BE) FULL TIME
WRITER

Where to start, where to start. I'm beginning to think that BSFA involvement and personal calamity go hand in hand. At least, I haven't yet had one of these editorials to write without a tale of disaster to go in it. Stop me if I'm boring you, but the tale goes on.

I gave up full time teaching in December, having decided that enjoying the huge (!!!) salary I was getting would be impossible from the inside of Friern Barnet Mental Hospital — to say nothing of the physical effects it was having on my health. I then had a go at supply teaching, but that was even worse. Anyway, the result is that as I write this, I'm unemployed, but by the time you read this I should be on the Enterprise Allowance Scheme as a freelance writer. God knows if this will work. Something has to.

Unfortunately, this means that I will be giving up the editorship of Focus soon — by the end of the year at the latest. This is where the true confessions come in. Now that I'm trying to survive by what I write, I've found that Focus has become too much of a drain on my resources, both in terms of time and material. For instance, those of you who can remember back to the last issue will recall that I promised an interview with an author's agent. I got it all right — unfortunately, I got an offer for it from a paying market. Sorry about that.

If you feel you'd like to have a go at editing Focus, drop Maureen Porter a line. For the record, I'd like to find someone with rather more time than I've ever had to put into it, but just as bloody minded as I can be when I see the need.

Once I have stopped editing Focus, I will be staying on the committee, where I will be responsible for a lot of new initiatives for writers. For instance, I am hoping to organise a BSFA writing competition in conjunction with various large companies. I'd also hope to get the writer's workshops off the ground, in London, regionally and at conventions. I've already had a suggestion that the BSFA should start a library of guidelines issued by magazines. I hope to do so soon. If anyone has any of these things, I'd appreciate it if you could send me photocopies. The idea is that they would be available to members for the cost of photocopying them. I am actively looking for other ideas to support new — and established — writers, so if you have any ideas, do let me know.

Well, that's the bad news and the true confessions over with. The good news? April fool!

Liz

F*O*C*U*S

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Unsolicited articles and stories (the latter for the Workshop only) are welcome, and should be sent to the editorial address above. They should be typed, double spaced on one side of A4 paper and accompanied by an SAE if you ever want to see them again.

FOCUS is a non-profit making magazine and therefore does not pay for material used. It doesn't pay its staff either. I've been doing this for four issues and I haven't seen a penny yet. And I still don't know the ISSN number. Oh, layout, layout is a wonderful thing. Salute the flag and pass the Spray-Mount, comrade. Articles can be submitted on 3.5" disc for the Atari ST, if you happen to own an Atari ST yourself.

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Liz isn't the only one leaving FOCUS. This is the last issue that will feature the distinctive "messy fingers" layout style of James Wallis. This means the job is open for anyone who feels up to it. A knowledge of layout principles is useful, as well as a good understanding of the quirky nature of Letraset, and a computer that is either compatible with Liz's, or that has a printer with a typeface that looks like Liz's (Star LC-10 or LC 24-10 are a good bet). Successful applicants will be able to work under pressure, late at night, almost overcome by Spray-Mount fumes and knowing that the printer's deadline was ten hours ago. Write to either Liz or Maureen Porter, preferably with an example of your work, and best of luck to whoever gets it.

First Lines

by
Cecil Murse

I have always found it easier to begin a novel than to finish it. This may seem so obvious a statement that it calls into question the intelligence of the person who makes it; however, I am not talking about the dedication that a novel requires. Not finishing novels has never prevented me from beginning them, and over the years I have accumulated what seems to me to be a respectable number of first chapters. Beginning, in fact, has been a far more satisfying occupation than continuing.

One hears that with any sort of writing the first lines are of paramount importance in catching a reader's interest, if not an essential element in the process of turning a browser into a buyer. I do not wish to discuss "how to". More importantly, it is the first words that will convey the atmosphere and energy of the following work. The opening of a first novel may be more aggressive than that by an established writer, but neither will be misleading if the writer is aware of what he is doing. Let me select a few from my shelf:

No windows broke any of the four plain walls of the office; there was no focus of outer-world sunlight on the desk there. Yet the five disks set out on its surface appeared to glow — perhaps the heat of the mischief they could cause... had caused... blazed in them.

Nothing particular about it, a workmanlike hook with promises of adventure to come, the term "outer-world" striking SF chords. To be expected from Andre Norton (*The Defiant Agents*). Contrast this with the beginning of *The Einstein Intersection* (Samuel Delaney):

There is a hollow, holey cylinder running from hill to point in my machete. When I blow across the mouthpiece in the handle, I make music with my blade.

The question in your mind is not "what happens next?", as with Norton, but "who is this person?" Further, the juxtaposition of music and blade has resonances (don't iron-thewed heroes make music with their blades, albeit something akin to a marching band?) There is something gentle and subtle about it, inviting the reader to read slow, and savour.

This book tells the story of the confrontation between Darkscar of Despair and Heljanis, the toy-maker, and the eventual results of their interference with time.

Epic overtones, hinting even of tragedy in the opening of Brian Stableford's *Day of Wrath*; herewith a vision of marvellous things. Contrast this with *Space Viking* by H. Beam Piper:

They stood together at the parapet, their arms about each other's waists, her head against his cheek.

Clearly, a hero in the pause before war and masculine adventure is to begin. Alternatively, M. John Harrison (*The Centauri Device*):

It was St. Crispin's Eve on Sad al Bari IV, when Captain John Truck impelled by something he was forced to describe to himself as "sentiment", decided to visit The Spacer's Rave, on the corner of Proton Alley and Circuit (that chilly junction where the higher class of port lady goes to find her customers).

Cynical, low life, only half serious (Proton Alley can only happen in amusement parks) and deeply genre-SF. Whatever happens in the rest of the book the reader's approach to it will have been "skewed" by the first words he reads, and a competent writer makes sure that those first words are the right ones to take the reader forward. He wants the reader to "click" as quickly as possible into the current of energy that motivates the book.

When I write my first chapters, I usually but not always have some idea what the thing will be about. Sometimes it is a plot, sometimes a set of characters and a situation. The actual writing, therefore, is about searching for an atmosphere that inspires me, an introduction that will lead me, the writer, deeper into the story, that will determine what "colour" the writing will actually take on. Will it be brooding or bright, discursive or functional? For example:

The orange signal-light on the tele-telc flashed moments before its sallow chime interrupted the buzzing machine silence. "Call for T.P. Mailard." The digital voice paused for a few seconds then spoke again. "Call for T.P. Mailard."

Here a possible novel pokes its head out of the void. It is economical, somewhat hard-edged, perhaps a little quirky. The details chosen, the style of name and the fact that it is repeated, suggest a brisk and narrowly focused story, without digressions or lyrical flights. Compare this with:

A miserable drizzle falling on a dirty lowland town, a lifeless drizzle, as grey and cold and imperturbable as the concrete roads.

Like the striking line "to wound the autumnal city" that opens Delany's monster *Dhalgren*, it is an incomplete sentence, promising a textured work with a slow-moving majesty. The environment will be as important a player as the protagonists, and the writing (and reading) of it will be demanding in a literary sense. The latter might also be said of the following:

We lived on headquarters planet so we were always aware of the war in a way. They were always leaks or else rumours or some general or other getting drunk and giving out some information about atrocities occurring somewhere we'd maybe heard about but didn't not know where it was. We always knew it was going on, but we never actually felt it in any suffering way.

(Continued at foot of next page)

Book Review

The Way to Write Science Fiction. Brian Stableford: Elm Tree Books: 97 pp: £6.99 p/b. £10.99 h/b.

"...in addition to the general problems which arise in any kind of fiction writing sf poses some problems which are uniquely its own." Brian Stableford asserts near the beginning of this book. He goes on to say that he will concentrate on those writing problems which are specific to genre fiction.

Does he succeed in this? No, but that does not stop this being an excellent book.

Consider this: "Knowing what someone is like is a matter of knowing how they relate to their environment: we can quickly get a sense of the particular personality of a fictitious character if we can observe his or her idiosyncratic response to a situation which we already understand in terms of norms and customs. But in SF the environment of the story usually does not have those situations in it." (p60)

Stableford has quite obviously said as much about writing mainstream fiction as he has about writing sf. It is a technique he uses throughout the book, generally to good effect. He also discusses problems which impinge hardly at all on the mainstream writer, such as world building, designing imaginary technology, and inventing realistic-sounding names and languages, taking the quite reasonable attitude that the sf writer needs to develop methods and resources to "fake it" wherever necessary! In among all this, he discusses quite a bit of the philosophy of science fiction: why write it, what it can do that mundane fiction can't, and the place of humour in SF.

Before this review starts to sound like a total puff for the book, I have to add that I disagree with Stableford on a number of points. On a philosophical level, I don't think he is right to claim of sf writers that "Some sf writers are not as good at characterisation as they could

be... no matter how clever they were, they could only match the performance of the best writers of mundane fiction by placing severe limitations on the kinds of imaginary worlds they put into their fiction." (p 61)

Stableford is only talking about characterisation, I hasten to add. Still, I don't think he's right, and I do think that there is a danger that some beginning writers will use his comments as an excuse to quit trying. The same thing goes for his assertion that putting in great wedges of technical explanation is OK. I will admit, however, that this may largely come down to a matter of taste (which is odd, because I rather like Stableford's work). Finally, those of you who read Focus regularly will know all about my views on fanzines, so I won't go on about Stableford's attitude to them. One last niggle: the lack of a bibliography and an index is really unfortunate. Here's hoping that Elm Tree will sort this out in future.

So, in the end, who is this book aimed at? Well, the writer clearly expects his readers to know their sf. I suspect you would miss a lot if you hadn't read the material he uses by way of example. On the other hand, I don't think it's aimed at the absolutely beginning writer. I think this may be because of the way Stableford contrasts mainstream and sf writing techniques, which can come across as if he is saying "This is what you are already doing: here's how to apply it to SF." But this is no bad thing: it simply means you have to work a bit as you are reading. In fact, put that together with the ethical and philosophical issues Stableford raises, and you have the main strength of the volume.

Well worth buying, and a worthy companion to the other excellent books in Elm Tree's "Way to Write..." series

(Continued from previous page)

It is chatty, confessional, locates the (first-person) viewpoint outside the corridors of power, and begins, presumably on a central subject. There won't be long description passages, but there had better be some pretty plausible characterisation.

Many writers do not bother themselves about the opening until they have a fairly good idea what the book will turn out to be and thus where it will begin and what will have to happen first. I do not perceive a novel in this way. It is a living, linear thing that grows from and upon itself. The opening is a toehold which, if strong and firm, will allow me to draw the as-yet-indistinct entity out of my subconscious and then will support it once it has dried out

and hardened. A similar process will occur within the reader's mind, for whom the text as it unfolds is the only clue to what the thing really is (ie what the writer was imagining), blurb, reviews and introductions notwithstanding.

The uncharitable might point out that none of these openings seem to have resulted in the full emergence of the entity, so to speak. This may be so, but it is not the toehold that is at fault. Rather, I have been surprised by the weight of that which I have grasped, heavy beyond my present strength. I consider this a good sign, and would suggest that another novice writer encountering the same problem be heartened by the thought of what might eventually appear.

So You Think You Need A Word Processor?

by
Nick Cheeseman

It might be said by the computer illiterate (of which sadly there are a great many) that a word processor (or W.P.) is little more than an expensive piece of yuppie gimmickry. After all, a typewriter is generally less troublesome and a good deal cheaper, or so the saying goes. These days, neither argument stands up to scrutiny particularly, with electric typewriters getting more expensive and more sophisticated, while W.P.'s are becoming less so. The major snag is that a typewriter, no matter how sophisticated is still... well... a typewriter, and so seems a more comfortable object to live with. A word processor (in common with computers in general) has an image of being an almost magical object that will change your life: disappointment can quickly set in. It certainly won't write a novel for you, or turn you into a literary genius, but like a typewriter, it is a tool to help you achieve that end.

So why upgrade from your trusty typewriter? Imagine you are typing away merrily one day and (horrors) you not only misspell a very simple word but realise that a paragraph in Chapter Two really belongs in Chapter Three. What do you do? You could easily cheat by breaking out the Tippex, reducing the manuscript to what appears to be something of a passing seaquill has relieved itself on and cutting out the relevant paragraph and glueing onto the correct page then photocopying it. Upsets publishers no end. Well, a W.P. allows you to amend mistakes before printing onto paper by displaying the text on the screen and also has "cut and paste" commands that allow the user to move "blocks" of text from page to page that would normally require scissors and glue.

All right, so you are an exceptionally good typist (well, not much is anyway) and you send your latest blockbuster to the publisher, who demands certain changes be made. Chances are, the entire manuscript would need to be retyped. But with the W.P. you simply call up each page needing changes, do the work, and the machine will reformat the entire chapter, if need be. You can then print it out and send it back *mucho pronto*. Saves a lot of time!

It'll also print copies, although printers do wear out, so printing two hundred fanzines a month is really not on. You must also use NLO (Near Letter Quality) mode, because editors hate seeing dots before the eyes -- Lizi which is a bit slow. Mass storage of text is usually on magnetic floppy discs, which do occasionally fail, so keeping backups is essential.

So it isn't all sweetness and light, but definitely worth the slightly increased trouble and expense. Of course, virtually any home computer is capable of running a word processor programme (even the humble ZX81) but few do it well and many need extra hardware such as a disc drive and printer -- the adding of which may not be an inconsiderable task in itself. As a small example, some systems will only print a £ (pound) sign if a \$ sign is typed because the standard computer alphabet is (ASCII) is American.

The easiest way to avoid such hassles is to buy an all-in-one system with the printer and software preset to run in

unison. There is only one and it is (cue fanfare) the PCW 8256/8512/9512 family made by (ta-da-da) Alan Michael Sugar Trading (Amstrad to you) available for around five hundred gold drinking tokens guv'. The system comprises a green screen monitor, an excellent (non-standard) three inch disc drive, a (slightly naff) keyboard, a (relatively cheap and slow) printer and a (comparatively slow) word processor programme called Locoscript (copyright Locomotive Software Ltd, which all adds up to a power-on, slot-in-a-disk-and-run, non-nonsense, powerful, easy-to-use word processing package (freebie PCW to me, Mr Sugar, not the editor). It is also an excellent general purpose computer running CP/M and Mallard BASIC (copyright Digital Research and Locomotive respectively). It even plays colourful (well, green) games.

There are no less than three magazines (at time of writing) devoted to the machine and many books available covering the use of Locoscript. Locomotive gives excellent support to Locoscript owners offering an upgraded version called (imaginatively) Locoscript 2, with add-on techno-wonders such as a database, mail-merge and spelling-checker with more to come, apparently, and all at very competitive prices (freebies to me, Locomotive, not... etc, etc...).

With all of that, do you really have a choice? Well yes, you do, if the PCW family doesn't turn you on (bang go the freebies!) then there are alternatives, although you may have to fiddle around to get it all working. They all require a separate printer (prices start at around £150) and a W.P. programme (unless otherwise stated) which vary enormously in price and quality, so shop around.

ATARI ST/COMMODORE AMIGA: both are essentially graphics machines, so buying either simply to do W.P. is akin to buying a washing machine and only using it to wash your socks! Both will drive a TV display but it tends to be fuzzy, so ideally you'll need a mono monitor (prices around £90). The Amiga is the superior machine, but the ST has a better selection of software available. You pays yer money and you takes yer choice!

(The editor would like to stick her oar in at this point to offer an opinion. I have an ST with an Atari mono monitor, running the Protext word processing programme by Arnor Ltd. The mono display is, quite simply, superb, unlike the one on my old Amstrad CPC (which, I believe, is not the same as the one on the PCW family of machines) which had me reaching for the Magna-lev after a couple of hours. I also had Protext on that system, and it was streets ahead of any other programme on the ST it is blindingly fast. The trick is that it ignores the Gem interface (mouse, menus, icons) and uses commands typed in at the keyboard. I suppose learning the commands takes a while (but an on-screen help facility lists most of them), but you don't have to take your hands off the keyboard to find the mouse!!! As a touch typist, I can tell you this is a real boon. It is also far more logical and flexible than the other three programmes I have used

on the ST (First Word, First Word Plus and Word Up), which may be all right for the odd letter, but are useless for anything longer (OK, OK that's only my opinion — I know there are people who will be climbing out of their prams at it.) Incidentally, Protext is available for the other systems mentioned here including the PCW (Z88 excepted). Accept no substitute!

PC/IBM COMPATIBLE: The machine most widely used in business, and the one you will probably want if you need to bring work home from the office, or if you want to send your work to a typesetting bureau or publisher on disc.

The Amstrad is the best supported by dealers and magazine, although the machine and software are a little pricey. The portable uses different size discs and has a funny display (or so I'm told — sorry, Mr Sugar). Tandy do a nice range, but be sure you by one with at least 512K of memory. The only other one of note (for the price!) is the Olivetti, sold by Dixons, although it cannot be upgraded with extra hardware.

(Liz again — the market in PC's is quite volatile, especially regarding bundling deals where you get software and/or a printer thrown in cheap, and also where dealers offer discounts off the list price. Shop around, and check out the magazines. Computer Shopper is a good one for mail order specialists, though be careful if you decide to buy this way, as some — not all — mail order computer companies are inefficient if not downright unethical. You may also want to find a specialist magazine that explains the different display options for PC's, as these are a bit too complicated to go into here.)

CAMBRIDGE COMPUTERS Z88: This remarkable machine is a true portable, the size of an A4 sheet of paper, and has built in W.F. software (amongst other things) which I understand is easy to use. It runs on

batteries, but a mains adaptor is a must for serious use. Mass storage is on memory chips, not discs, which makes it rather an expensive proposition at present. The display is rather cramped (eight lines) but it can transfer files to a PC relatively easily for editing and storage. Cambridge are also working on a PC, but don't hold your breath...

(Since this article was written, Atari have announced the launch of their Pocket PC, which is fully IBM compatible and the size of a Walkman. Apparently it has a minute keyboard and uses completely non-standard "Smartcard" data storage. A bit weird, but as filofax for technopyppies it may be just the thing — if they don't consider it too cheap at £200 — Liz (yet again.)

SPECTRUM +3 Works well with a TV and a good W.F. programme is available from Tasman (Or a better one from Arnor — You Know Who), despite the limited 64 column display. CP/M is also available from Locomotive, although the display is again limited, this time to 51 columns.

SINCLAIR QL: Available only on the secondhand market for around a very reasonable £50 in basic form, bundled with an excellent WP programme (Paicon's Quill). Unfortunately, it only has 128K of memory, uses microdrives for mass storage which are somewhat unreliable. Upgrading to a disc drive could prove expensive. CP/M and MSDOS emulators are also available.

SPECTRUM 16K/48K/128K/+2: Only for enthusiasts and game freaks!

COMMODORE 64/64C/128/128D: As for Spectrum.

BBC/ACORN ARCHIMEDES: Too pricey.

And if you're wondering, I'm using LocoScript 1.4 on a PCW.

The Technokid Talks

The one thing that the article above proves is that everyone thinks that their computer is the best. In the name of truth, justice and filling a big white space in the layout, I'm going to put the record straight as best I can.

The PCW is the machine which runs the BSFA: it's almost a requirement of committee membership that you have one. Nick seems very fond of his. I was very fond of mine until I traded it in a few months ago. The basic problem with the PCW is that it's slow. Painfully slow. LocoScript, the supplied word processing program, is nicely designed but can take minutes just to move from the top of a document to the bottom. The printer is also very slow. Since the PCW is one of the only machines that uses 3" discs, it has compatibility problems if you want to transfer documents to other makes of machine — for example, a computer at work. It's a reasonable machine for a beginner, but essentially it's obsolete.

The Atari ST is basically a games machine; which is not to say that it can't be used for word processing. Having listened to Liz swearing at hers, I would advise against it.

IBM-compatibles are nice, fast and

incredibly expandable. They are also very expensive. My Amstrad PC1640 set-up cost almost three times as much as my previous PCW512. Having said that, I wouldn't change back for the world. The problem here is the word-processing program itself. The cheapest is around £12.95. If you want something that will work well, you'll spend over £80. A program which uses your machine to its full capacity will be over £200.

The Z88 is not to be recommended as your sole computer. It's a nice machine, basically a glorified filofax with built-in typewriter, but extra memory is very expensive, there is almost no software for it apart from the built-in programs, and it eats four AA batteries for every twelve hours of use. Still, I have no complaints about mine.

Nick under-rates the smaller, home computers. I sold my first professional works from a Dragon 32, which was much worse than anything currently on the market. They can be quite reasonable if you want to experiment with word-processing cheaply, and blast a few aliens when you're feeling bored.

A conclusion? If you're happy with a typewriter, stick with it!

James Wallis

Story

Workshop

WHERE THE WHEEL ENDS

by

James Maclean

The wheel turns, and into the world is born a child strong and happy. He is given the name Daniel and with the loving care of his parents he grows.

His world is bright his life good, the future holds no bars to him but something happens and Daniel changes, he leaves his family and deserts his friends. An anger burns in him, one he can't explain even to himself but inside it seethes until it turns to hatred and loathing for all things living. Like a cancer it ate away at Daniel, feeding off him like a vermin would eat at a carcass; gnawing, eroding his soul.

One night as Daniel walked alone in the streets he comes across a woman alone. The fire in him is strong this night and Daniel kills her.

Afterwards when he has finished he smiles with power that he carries in his hands. It is his to control; his mercy that will let someone live or his fire that will take them from this world.

He kills again. A man, a good man, but Daniel no longer cares. "This is good," he thinks, "I am powerful, I am strong."

Once more he takes a life. It no longer mattered to him who or what the person was the fire had to be fed, only this time Daniel is caught and is locked away, safe from the world where he can no longer use his power.

Time passes and Daniel grows old and weak. His hatred has turned to sorrow and remorse. The life that he has led shames him. All the pain and suffering he caused and the realization of what he has done makes the fire die in his heart. He becomes tired of his life there is nothing left for him.

Then late one night, safe from the world that he once tried to harm, he closes his eyes and out of the world flows the life force that once was Daniel.

The void is cold. Light never shines here, the night is complete.

The wheel turns again and from the chilling void the life force enters the world once more, the life force that was once Daniel.

The rabbit was blind. Newly born, instinct drove it towards its mother to suckle. The world is filled with scents, the earth, damp, the air shifting, always changing. The smell of the rabbit's mother is strong and the life force that was once Daniel sleeps, safe, content and warm.

The rabbit was one of many in the burrow, its life filled with warmth and play, eating when it felt the need sleeping when the urge came. Sometimes in the night the rabbit would pause in its play and stare at the silver light that filled the air and even though its world was simple it would feel... something; a restlessness that it was too primitive to understand.

Fear! The rabbit could smell its own fear as it ran and hopped through the undergrowth. Its run was one panic, it had strayed too far from the burrow and now it was lost, though not alone. Behind the rabbit a short way the fox run. It was close now and it could smell the terror of the small creature. Quickly it was

cornered, the rabbit struck motionless in fright could only stare as the glistening eyes and drooling maw of the fox drew closer.

The world flashes red and the life force that was once Daniel leaves the world one more time.

Turning, spinning The wheel revolves again and the life force that had been Daniel surges into the world.

The caterpillar had little awareness. It ate, it crawled along green stems that was its world and it would warm itself in the bright light that would shine down on it. In the cold mornings when the dew lay on the ground its only instinct was to lie still until the sun rose and burned away the mists, then it would crawl out once more and begin to eat again.

One morning the caterpillar never moved with the rising sun, lifeless it clung to the stalk of a plant, its only motion that caused by the stirring wind, except that inside the cocoon the life force that had been Daniel slept.

It felt the change. It was new again, bursting with life it carefully clawed its way out of the surrounding walls that tried to imprison it. The rays of the summer sun were strong and soon when its wings were dry and firm the butterfly flew up into the air, the scents from the flowers pure and inviting. The wind was gentle and with the shimmering sun the life force that was Daniel danced its way over the meadows.

The swallow dives into the meadow, darting over the flowers turning one way and in the blinking of an eye another. There! The waft of wings against the swaying flowers alerts the swallow and down it swoops.

Into the empty night the life force returns.

Turning, turning wheel,
Dark. Cold. Lonely. Silent.
Pause, timeless
Turns, the wheel

the rush, the life force as it enters the world again.

The eagle was strong, magnificent. On the thermal it glided, gazing on the world below its only urge was to hunt.

Beneath, on the Moor the rabbit scurried from its burrow. The life force that had been Daniel viewed the defenseless creature through the sharp piercing gaze of the eagle. It prepared its dive, tilting tall feathers just so. The eagle tensed ready, but a feeling inside halts it in mid flight, a sense of something its small mind could not understand. The hunger waned suddenly and the eagle lazily turned towards the cliff face, there catching another thermal, it soared effortlessly into the sky the rabbit far below forgotten in the glory of its flight.

The winter was hard. With the snows driving into the valley, the old greying eagle was cold. Hungry, it huddled in the shelter of a ledge as the wind whistled past, the eagle's eyes were fading and now it could no longer see its prey in the snow. The old eagle shook the ice from its wings, even with the hunger pains it was at peace, as though it knew its toils would

W
soon be over. The wind surged stronger and the eagle stretching up fully called a wailing cry into the storm.

O
The warmth came then and slowly, peacefully the eagle's eyes closed one last time and the life force flowed into the void.

R
Spinning, over and over
The wheel turned
Music. The life force that was once Daniel could hear music. Its very first awareness was of the song, enveloping, embracing.

K
It remembered before is birth. It could recall the past lives, past events and the past mistakes the deaths of each life and how each time it returned to the void. That desolate place where there was nothing. It remembered everything.

S
The whale opened its eyes.
Welcome brother! the music sang, filling its being, rejoicing in its birth. The small whale, surrounded by others kicked for the surface and breathed the air. The music was all around; from whales close by to others at the far side of the earth they sang the same song. It told of life, tears and laughter mingled as one, it cried of hope and despair, love lost and love found it rejoiced in all living things and mourned each death as the life force returned to the

darkness. The song was eternal, the song was life itself.

Slowly the life force that was once Daniel, that was once a timid rabbit, the life force that was once a carefree butterfly and was once a majestic eagle on the wing, slowly, tentatively, the small whale began to sing.

"Aho! On the starboard side. There she blows!" the sailor called to his shipmates.

"Ready the gun!" the captain cried. Around him there was organised chaos. He could feel the tension rise in his crew, as they prepared the harpoon and checked the ropes.

"Steady lads she's a big one but we can handle her." The captain waited a few moments then after a slight pause to steady his voice cried out:

"Set?"
"Aye captain."
This moment always hurt him, there was something about these beautiful creatures that made them feel almost kin like. Perhaps one day they would begin to understand what these animals really were.

"Fire!"

And the music died.

Comment

S
Somewhere in this story, the writer is trying to make a serious point. I think. It is difficult to tell, because if it exists at all, it is buried within a mass of bad writing and sloppy thinking. I'm sorry to be so blunt, but I cannot think of another way of putting it. I suppose this is the time for me to make the standard workshop disclaimer about this being only my opinion, and that the writer should not be too discouraged by it, but should accept it as a challenge. Consider it made.

The problems with the story can be divided, broadly, into three main areas: thematic, technical and stylistic.

H
The underlying theme of the story is undoubtedly serious. The writer seems to have some kind of spiritual point to make, perhaps one which seeks to equate violence with the possibility of redemption of the soul, or at least with the working of the wheel of Karma. There may also be some kind of message about ecology, and humanity's misuse of nature, since the whales are sympathetically portrayed. Or perhaps it is none of these things. The writer seems to mistake repetition for focus, and does not appear to have thought his theme through at least I hope he has not, because the one clear link or metaphor I can discern is one which I find deeply offensive.

O
Daniel kills for no reason. We are shown nothing which might have caused his rampage (indeed, we are told his parents are loving). Nevertheless, he kills. There is an implication that he is a beginning point, not a reincarnation of any other creature (if his soul were that of, say, a wolf this might have explained why he "burned" to kill, since a wolf would only have a carnivore's instincts, which might not be tempered by human intelligence or perhaps hardy as a dubious concept in itself). Whether the rabbit nor the butterfly kill: such is not their place in the ecological web. There is nothing unreasonable in portraying them in this way. However the eagle is shown refusing to kill, and dying

for it, since it can live in no other way. This apparently contributes to Daniel's spiritual development, as he is born again as a whale. I find this deeply suspect. It implies that human violence (as committed by Daniel when he killed) an animals killing to eat are qualitatively the same thing, which they clearly are not. I might have been able to accept this a little more easily if the writer had used as his example an animal which is wanted in its destruction. That might have drawn an apt parallel: another could have been to have "Daniel" starving to death because he refused to eat meat.

Technically, the story is a mess, but one which a bit of thoughtfulness could easily put right. There is a matter of tense. The story slides from present to past tense and back again in a manner which suggests that the writer has not even noticed what he is doing. The punctuation and grammar is equally haphazard. Unnecessary commas are rife, others are missing altogether; sentences which should be split in two are run together without so much as a conjunction or a punctuation mark. None of these things are fatal, but taken together they point to a writer to has yet to develop an ear for the rhythm and music of language. No amount of stylistic trickery with the paragraph breaks can make up for this: I'd suggest the writer reads his work aloud, immerses himself in poetry and prose by the greats of literature (and not just the greats of SF either!) and above all, listens to the language that surrounds us in everyday life.

P
The other part of the problem is worse in a way. My first response to the story was boredom. I'm sorry if that does not seem constructive, but it really is the truth. The main problem is that there is hardly any narrative drive. I'm not saying that all stories have to work in the same way, but if there is no narrative and very little characterisation, there had better be some damned good writing to carry the reader forward. This story lacks everything except

a philosophical point, and that is fuzzy edged. In the first "Daniel" part of the story, the writer is just not specific enough to get my interest. Who is Daniel? What makes him go bad? Why does he repent? We are not told, and the result is that the rest of this part of the story reads like an anecdote.

The rest of the story helps to confirm a suspicion I have long held: that animals' lives are basically boring. If it were better written, I might have been able to put up with it. As it stands, the writing is so flat and uninviting that only the fact that I promised to do this critique induced me to finish it.

In the last part of the story, we are back to human beings, but they are not particularly well realised. To be honest, I don't believe that whalers talk the way they do in this story. Whether they actually do or not is irrelevant: the art of the writer is to render speech into believable dialogue; I would not believe this if it was a direct transcript of a taped conversation. The ending is a complete let-down. Whalers kill a whale. So what? However much some of us may deplore it, it is what they do, and the fact that one of them has a few qualms about it hardly makes for a dramatic climax. Incidentally, whales take hours to die after

they are first shot; if you want me to accept a quick and easy death as artistic license to facilitate then ending, you had better show my some artistry first.

It seems to me that everything I have written is useless if I cannot suggest ways to improve the work. I think the writer really needs to consider what it is he is trying to say, and to find a way of articulating that through narrative drive, preferably by way of character interaction. If I were the writer, I think I would begin by working out who Daniel is, and what makes him turn into a psychopath. I might not decide to use the information, but I think it would help to sharpen up the story. Perhaps his destiny could be linked with someone else's (the whaling captain's?), so that at the very least something is happening. There might even be a completely different story here, about a soul trapped in the "wrong" body. The problem with the story at the moment (as opposed to the way it is written) is that part of it reads like a philosophical tract and the rest like a plot summary. If the writer is intent on maintaining the present structure, he could perhaps work towards providing some intrinsic interest in the prose itself, in which case we may be talking about a prose poem rather than a story.

- Alan O'Keefe

Belay the mainbrace, me hearties, 'tis an ecologically sound reinterpretation of a Don Maclean track with Buddhist overtones!

I think it is important to realise first that this story is over-ambitious. It tries to operate on several levels and fails on most. I don't believe all its problems result from this but "Where The Wheel Ends" is a good illustration of the perils of trying to run before one can walk.

The most obvious fault is the use of grammar, which should be easiest to correct. Tenses drift uneasily from past to present. The punctuation is abysmal. The trick of putting the Wheel on a separate line each time might work in the hands of a more skilled writer, but here looks pretentious.

The use of language is almost worse than the grammar. This may be a fault of over-ambition, since it is mostly elaborate phrases which end up meaning nothing. For example, I quote the second section: "It (the fox) was close now and it could smell the terror of the small creature. Quickly it was cornered, the rabbit struck motionless in fright..." This reads very badly: the pursuing fox is apparently suddenly cornered and hit by the rabbit! This is typical of a number of badly-written areas of the story.

In contrast with this attempted grandeur are hackneyed phrases such as the eagle's "sharp piercing stare"; and the use of "timid rabbit... carefree butterfly... majestic eagle on the wing" made my teeth hurt. The language in the final section is so anachronistic it's laughable. And can we please register that the word "maw" means stomach, not mouth?

The repetition of certain words and phrases is annoying. Most irritating is the constant use of "the life force that was once Daniel", which I suspect is being used for some kind of effect, but it becomes tiring very quickly.

The structure of "Where The Wheel Ends" is almost too simple for what it is trying to do. Daniel kills, finds out what it's like to be on the receiving end, goes through a metamorphosis (yawn), does not kill, gets his reward and then gets shot by a nasty man. The last part confuses the rest, as does the fact that the butterfly gets eaten as well. The dominant theme is not one of "kill or be saved", but "eat or be eaten". This leads to much of the story's haphazard feel.

The individual episodes themselves are frankly dull. We could be interested in Daniel if we knew what was going on in his mind. I think if this story could be developed into something interesting, it would be Daniel's life history, but it is consciously avoided apart from the most bland details. As his "life force" moves on, there is no real attempt to see life as a rabbit, butterfly or eagle; we are given a short description of each and then they die. There is also no exploration of the themes which back up the story. We learn almost nothing about the Wheel; and the abrupt shift of emphasis at the end means that all we have finally is yet another example of man's inhumanity to his environment. Questions are left open: did the life force exist before Daniel? Is this the end of the road for it? If the captain doesn't like killing whales, why is he captain of a whaling ship? How can the music die when we're told that "the song was eternal"?

I hate to say it, but I don't think this story can be saved. The episodes, especially the first, need to be lengthened to make them interesting enough to involve the reader, but to increase the length would only draw attention to just how flimsy the climax is. To concentrate only on the whale would lose what little atmosphere the succession of previous lives has managed to build. The only area with potential for expansion is Daniel himself. Sorry, James.

- James Wallis

Everyone's A Critic

by
Liz Holliday

One of the things that I most frequently get asked in letters is "Where can I send my story." As most of you will know, I generally feel that if a story is worth reading, it should be paid for. However, what quite a lot of people mean by this is not, "Who will publish my story," but, "Who will help me improve my writing."

The answer is that there are a lot of places and people who are willing to help. The difficulty comes in trying to find the one which will suit your personality, pocket and stage of development.

Perhaps this would be a good place to discuss exactly what is available. Firstly, there are the postal workshops, such as the BSFA's own Orbiter groups, run by Sue Thomason. They work by putting a group of writers in contact with each other. They then circulate story manuscripts among themselves, with each member commenting on the work, before sending it on to the next member. John Duffield does something very similar in his "Writer's Bootstrap", but, as I understand it, takes the manuscripts back in himself between each lot of criticism.

I have to admit that I haven't been in an Orbiter group, though I have considered the idea — which largely seems to come down to the commitment of the members — they are excellent. I suspect that if you live in an area where there is little going on in the way of writers' groups, or if you are housebound for whatever reason, they may be the perfect solution. The other good reason for joining would be that it is probably easier for someone you have never met to be upfront about your work. The trouble with conventional writers' groups is that you tend to end up being friends with the other members, and at that point objectivity may go out of the window.

However, I have heard of some Orbiter groups fading away, and others where manuscripts get stuck in the works, so to speak, for months. In fact, my main reason for not joining an Orbiter is quite simply that I know I would never get around to doing the criticisms fast enough to be fair to the others in my group.

I have sent a couple of things to John Duffield in the past. I have to say that I will not be doing so again. Let me make it clear that this is purely my own opinion (so if you want to send the boys round John, make sure they come to me, not to "the editor of Focus" nor the BSFA committee). In fact, it was that experience which prompted me to write this article. I do not wish to be too specific, as I feel that that would be invidious. However, in the second half of this article I will be discussing what one should expect from any kind of workshop, postal or otherwise. Readers may draw their own conclusions.

Next, there is the Cassandra SF Writer's Workshop. This costs £5.00 per year, and you have to provide "a brief account of your year's work to date, enclosing photocopies of professional correspondence relating to at least five submissions." Actually, you don't have to do the last part if you are well known, and I presume that if you send one story, however awful, to five professional

magazines, that would also get you in. For your fever, you get a bimonthly (I think — I'm not a member) newsletter, with a fairly good market report section and other news, and the opportunity to join various postal and weekend workshops. They may do other things too, but as I said, I am not a member.

That covers all of the postal workshops that I know about. My own preference is for face to face workshoping. For one thing it is faster, and for another I can't forget to put the manuscript back in the post — and no-one can forget mine either.

There are really two kinds of workshop. Residential workshops involve going off for a weekend, a week, or longer, and really get stuck in, to the exclusion of all else. The result is intensive, and for at least one person on a course I was once on (not me, thankfully) quite harrowing. You really are at the mercy of the other members, and a lot can ride on the skills — both in terms of writing and socially — of the co-ordinator or tutor. There are several in this country, some of which are run on university campuses during the holidays. I have not been on these, nor have I come across any SF or Fantasy specific ones. There is a co-ordinating body for these but since I'm writing this right at the last minute, I haven't been able to track it down. If anyone knows about it, etc. etc.

The Arvon Foundation is a literary charity, and one of their main activities is running workshops at their two sites in Yorkshire and Devon. I have been on two of their courses, both some years ago. For your money you get five days in an isolated farmhouse (self-catering, but even that was fun), and the services of two well known tutors. The first one I went on was not genre specific, but one of the tutors (who had better remain nameless) was a Famous English Fantastist, Well Respected In The Mainstream. She had also done an awful lot of Arvons, and knew exactly how to minimise her workload — and how to put people down. Nothing daunted, I went to the first SF specific workshop Arvon put on, and it was truly excellent. The tutors John Brunner and Lisa Tuttle pushed everyone as far as they could go, and then some, without ever making anyone feel like a complete idiot (well, there was one exception — but even he got over it). There was not a person on that course who was not writing much better by the end of it. Moral: go on a course with good tutors, and if you want to write SF, make sure they aren't literary snobs.

The other major British workshop is Milford. I'm not going to say too much about this because (a) I haven't been on one, (b) You have to have had a story published professionally and (c) Attendance is by invitation only anyway.

In America, there is something called the Clarion SF Writers Workshop, which Nicole Griffith described last issue. For those of you who have just joined, it is like Arvon, only moreso. It lasts six weeks, with all students residential on the campus of Michigan State University. Each week of the course is taught by a different writer-in-residence. This year's include Tom Disch, Karen Joy Fowler, Spider Robinson, Octavia Butler, Kate Wilhelm and Damon Knight. The workshop is very highly

regarded, but it is neither cheap nor easy to get on. Applicants have to submit two complete stories, and competition is fierce (fifteen places and well over a hundred applicants each year, if I've got things straight). The cost is \$1900, which covers tuition and part board, but not travel, so obviously it is only for the deeply committed. For the record, I have applied for this year. I haven't heard yet whether or not I'm in, but I have everything crossable crossed...

I have also heard of, but cannot find addresses for, other similar workshops in America, all run on the same lines. If anyone has any information, I'd be grateful if they would let me know.

Finally there are regular, local workshops. These tend to be run by Local Education Authorities (try your town hall or local library if you can't find any). I am hoping to start a BSFA group in London. I have also co-ordinated one for a local community bookshop, so presumably there might be others run by such organisations.

The thing about these is their immediacy and their regularity. It is true that after a while some people may lose their objectivity, and may find it difficult to be as honest as one might like. For me, this is offset by the fact that in the space of two hours I can find out what ten people think of my work. I have the advantage of being able to balance one opinion against the other, and I can go away and do something about it. There is also the cattle-prod effect, of major importance to a backslider like me, who finds it far easier to constantly start stories than to do the hard work of actually finishing something. In other words, people do expect to find out what happens next! I have to say it may not be for the faint-hearted — the same thing goes for weekend workshops. It can be daunting to see that ring of faces all waiting to pounce when you have finished reading out your work (but believe me, dead silence is worse!).

This brings me on to the other thing I wanted to discuss in this article: what you should expect from a workshop. Now, I don't particularly want to lay down laws, because I'm pretty certain that different approaches will work better for different people. Still there is a difference between constructive and destructive criticism, and I have to say that I have found that however well intentioned, some people just don't know how to criticise effectively. What follows is personal, biased, bloody minded and should not be construed as having anything to do with the rest of the committee. Despite all that, I hope it will help both those who are about to have their work laid open to criticism, and those engaged in commenting on the work of others.

The first thing, I think, is to be certain what you are letting yourself in for. If you write Van Vogtian space opera, there may not be too much point in joining a group whose touchstones are structuralism and detailed character analysis. I'm not saying you should only join genre oriented workshops, only that you should know that there are different approaches, different concerns, and that maybe not all of them will be of use to you.

Secondly, I think you need to have a fair idea of your own level of development. Apart from anything else, a sense of your own strengths and weaknesses will allow you to put up with those occasions when you feel that the criticism you receive is misguided (whether it is or not). Also, if you can look at the other members' work

and sometimes think, "That was amazing", you'll probably find yourself more inclined to accept what they say. You need to be sure they have a certain level of perception, and if you think their work is never up to scratch, the chances are you won't think that is so.

Assuming you have found a group that suits you, what should you look for? And what should you do when faced with someone else's work?

It seems to me that the most useless approach to criticism is the one which says "I would have done it this way". A postal workshop I know of makes practice not only of doing this, but of scrawling out the writer's text, and inserting what the critic thinks ought to be there. For my money, this just isn't on. I don't see what is to be gained by it, and it certainly isn't constructive criticism in any event. A critic should be helping to release the story that is trapped in the cage of words, however inept those words are. By indulging in rewriting, the critic is effectively saying "I am a better writer than you are, go away and let me rip off your idea".

This follows through into all areas of the work. You have to try and see why a writer gave a character a particular personality, a world a certain background. If you can't see why, say so. The object, surely is to make the writer aware of inconsistencies, failures of logic, clumsiness of phrasing. There is not a writer alive who cannot gain from cogent criticism. But you cannot teach by demonstrating, only by making the writer aware of other possibilities (Why is this woman afraid? Would the story not be better if she were stronger from the start? If she is a wimp here, why is she so strong in that situation?). A story is like an iceberg. Nine-tenths of it is below water. The person reading it will never see all of it, and that is only proper. The critic, however, is not just another reader, their job is to make sure the writer knows of what that unseen ninety percent comprises. Besides which, if you really want to rewrite part of a story, you had better make damn certain what you come up with is better than the original — because if there is one thing worse than arrogance, it is unjustified arrogance.

ADDRESSES

- Orbiter:** Sue Thomason,
11 Albemarle Road,
South Bank, York YO2 1EP
- Writers' Bootstrap:** John Duffield,
24 Fordwich Rise,
Hertford SG14 2BE
- Cassandra SF** Simon Ings,
Writers' Workshop: 10 Marlowe Court,
Lymer Avenue,
Gypsy Hill,
London SE19 1LP
- Arvon Foundation:** Toteleigh Barton,
Sheepwash,
Beaworthy,
Devon
- Clarion SF** Albert Drake, Director,
Writers' Workshop: C/O Mary Sheridan,
Clarion Workshop,
Lyman Briggs School,
E-35 Holmes Hall,
Michigan State
University,
East Lansing,
Michigan 48824-1107
USA

Etcetera

ORBITER UPDATE

SUE THOMASON writes:

ORBIT 10 is now up and circling; still one place in existing group. ORBIT 11 is the next group to start. . . offers to me at the address below.

No ORBITER newsletter in view at the moment, nobody has sent me any ORBITER news for months. Write to me about problems, solutions occurring in your own groups.

I know of at least one ORBITER request to me that went astray in the mail strike. Thankfully, the person concerned wrote to me again. I answer *all* ORBITER/marketspace mail as quickly as possible. If anyone else wrote to me and didn't receive an answer -- *please* write again.

Sue Thomason's address is,
111, Albermarle Road,
York,
North Yorks. YO2 1EP

Because you demanded it, and because we've got the extra pages (and because I wanted to prove I can write ungrammatically if I want to) -- the new improved...

MARKET SPACE

Sue also says:

Another dozen Market lists sent out after the last Focus. As yet I've had NO feedback on market listings. Are people finding them accurate? Useful? Unhelpful? Who's to say?

As a point of general interest, SF Chronicle do a good, if irregular, listing of all the standard genre markets. Obviously, there is a lot of overlap between this and Sue's listing, but it is worth keeping an eye on.

BSFA WRITERS' WORKSHOP

The meeting I proposed in the last issue, to discuss setting up a London Area Writers' Workshop, happened -- but only by the skin of its teeth, since only one person (apart from me!) turned up.

Maybe I'm a masochist, but I am willing to have one more go. A meeting will be held at my flat on:

Saturday, 8th May 1989 at 2pm.

My address is:

31, Shottsford, Wessex Gardens, London W2

which is at the junction of Ledbury Road and Talbot Road. Nearest tubes are Westbourne Park (Metropolitan) and Notting Hill Gate (Central and Circle and District). Bus routes which come close include numbers 7, 15, 27, 28, 31 and 52A.

I would appreciate it if you could ring me first, on 01 229-9298 -- but just turn up, if you can't get hold of me.

STOP PRESS!

ACCEPTED BY CLARION

FOCUS EDITOR GETS
WRITERS' WORKSHOP SHOCK!
... SHE'S CHAL ABOUT MAY 22 ALL, really...

OPPORTUNITIES

Digital Dreams: the BSFA's own David V. Barrett is editing this anthology of computer stories for Hodder and Stoughton. Preferred length 2,500-7,500 words. David says he is looking for original ideas, no sentient word processors, *deus ex machina*, and if you submit cyberpunk it will have to be "of an extremely high standard to be considered". Not necessarily SF, and wants the anthology to have a distinctly British tone. Closes May 15th. Submissions to: David V. Barrett, Digital Dreams, 23 Oakfield Road, Croydon, Surrey, CRO 2UD.

Horror writing by women: Lisa Tuttle is editing an anthology of horror by women writers for The Women's Press. Not sure if she'd mind me mentioning this, or if she's still looking for material! Submissions (women only) to: Lisa Tuttle, 1, Ortygia House, 6, Lower Road, Harrow, Middlesex, HA2 0DA

There Won't Be War is the working title of a new anthology edited by Harry Harrison and Bruce McAllister, for TOR books. An attempt at what they term "literary glasnost" the theme of the anthology is aptly stated in the working title. Submissions to: Harry Harrison, Estrel Ridge, Vale Avoca, County Wicklow, Ireland.

The Manchester Short Story Competition has been announced by the magazine Freelance Writing and Photography. The prize is £1000 plus publication, there is a 1,500 word limit, and the closing date is October 31st 1989. This is not a genre competition, though if I remember correctly, last year's winner had a hint of fantasy about it. There is an entry fee of £5, and submissions should, of course, be accompanied by an SAE. The results will be published in December's FWP. I'm not sure if you have to be a subscriber to enter (I don't think FWP is available at news-agents), but it is a useful magazine, and well worth the £7.50 sub anyway. Entries to: Manchester Short Story Competition, Freelance Writing and Photography, Victoria House, Victoria Road, Hale, Cheshire, WA15 9BP

Coriander: Not sure what to make of this, but it may be worth a go. Coriander is a new short story magazine, expecting a wide distribution. It will not be produced on a regular basis, only when enough good material has been accumulated. Editions are planned in various categories, including SF, and Ghost/Mystery/Horror. To submit, you have to get a contributions form, and there is a reading fee of £3, plus £2 if you want a copy of the reader's report. Payment is based on royalties (?). Sounds like you could wait a long time to get published, and longer to get paid. Personally, I think I'm going to give this a miss, but if you do try it, I'd be interested to hear how you get on. Coriander, Coriander House, 2 Kepler Heights, Durham City, DH1 1LN

If you have any information for Market Space, or feedback about places you have submitted to, please let me or Sue Thomason know