

# 【 FOCUS 】

The Writer's Magazine Of The British Science Fiction Association



75P

# EDITORIAL

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## HOW TO CHANGE YOUR OWN LIFE...

First, the big apology. I had sworn dreadful oaths that I would never miss a deadline... I'm sorry. The strain of getting to Clarion, getting my flat into a fit state to let and the end of term conspired, and in the end Focus was the only thing that could give... Actually, I might still have made it, if only my computer hadn't (apparently) blown up at the last minute.

I tried. I'm sorry. End of grovel.  
So, now I'm a Clarion graduate. It's very, very strange to have accomplished one of your childhood (well, almost) ambitions. It's much stranger to be forced to re-evaluate many of the givens in your life. And strangest of all to return home and find that everything there is still the same.

I haven't yet returned to normal. I think perhaps I never shall. Perhaps by the next issue of Focus I shall feel like talking about it. I'm certainly hoping that one of us who went to Clarion this time will.

The only thing I want to say about it is that out of 18 students, 5 of us were BSFA members: Linda Markley, Paul Grunwell, Mike Christie, Sherry Goldsmith and myself. I don't think the Clarion staff knew quite what had hit them...

As for the future — well, I'm back to teaching full time to pay for the trip. As most of you will know I'm giving up Focus after the next issue (which will be in the next mailing). Don't panic! We are pretty sure we have a new editor in the pipeline.

As for me, I do feel that I have to make the best use I can of the Clarion experience, by committing as much of my time to writing as possible. However, I'll still be on the committee, looking after the interests of the BSFA writing fraternity. I'd be glad of suggestions as to how we can help our writing membership.

Thanks for your patience.

Liz

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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 only. Submissions may also be made on 3.5 inch Atari or IBM disks (ASCII, Wordstar, First Word or Protext formats, please). Manuscripts not accompanied by an SAE are likely to disappear into a black hole kept on my desk especially for that purpose.

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# Word Processing And The Magnetic Manuscript

Alan Fraser

The article by Nick Cheeseman on word processing in Focus 17 provoked in me into some thoughts about what will happen to the growing interest in of manuscripts from universities and collectors as more and more writers use word processing tools to produce work instead of the traditional typewriter. To take an extreme example of how things could change, I've just been reading Christopher Tolkien's (CRJT) *The Return of the Shadow*, Volume 6 of his "History of Middle Earth". In this book he analyses the early manuscripts of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, tracing the development of the plot and the characters in what is now *The Fellowship of the Ring*. It sounds at first as if the book would be unutterably dull, but the story of the writing of this "little" sequel to *The Hobbit* is in fact fascinating. It is most rare that one gets the opportunity to follow the chronological development of a book in this way, and reading *The Return of the Shadow* reminded me of "time travel" novels like Fritz Leiber's *The Big Time* or Asimov's *The End of Eternity* where the main characters are outside the main flow of time, but can manipulate history. They see the rest of the world go through a series of minor and major changes, that can alter ordinary people's names, personalities and lives, or even eliminate them altogether. I found most interesting those sections where Christopher Tolkien presents to us passages and characters that were lost or completely transformed in the published editions, and where he points out inconsistencies that still remain in the final text that stem from rejected or altered elements in the drafts.

Obviously, such detailed examination of this and all his earlier work has only been made possible because JRRJ apparently never through anything away, and his manuscripts are all still available for analysis in this way. Some of them were obviously in a very difficult state, with texts in both handwriting or typescript or combinations of both, and copious alterations in pencil, blue, red and black ink, with different coloured changes or additions representing alternatives to be taken up depending upon which plot line was finally chosen.

When I was reading this book I kept thinking, "What if JRRJ had had a word processor?" Possession of an Amstrad PCW might have had the good effect of speeding up the old boy's rate of production so that he could have published such more in his lifetime. We fans could have had more to feast upon at the actual table instead of having to pick at the bones from his dustbin, which is how you could uncharitably describe CRJT's *History of*

*Middle Earth*". Although some devotees of the typewriter think that word processing only encourages the production of hackwork, I as her assuming, reasonably I believe, that access to modern technology would not have lessened the quality of the finished work JRRJ would have been able to present for publication. On the downside, however, these additional insights into the book that can be gained from the analysis of the manuscript would have been lost if JRRJ had sent of the final version of *TLOTR* on disks to Urruin's and erased all the backup disks for reuse on the next draft of *The Silmarillion*!

I can try to illustrate this problem by describing my own writing habits, although I do not know how typical this is, as I am not a writer of fiction, nor do I depend upon writing for my living. My full-time job is in the computing field, but I enjoy writing, and as a contributor of reviews, mostly on hard SF, to "Paperback Inferno". I also do occasional work in freelance journalism, producing articles on computing topics for the computer and accountancy press. For all these I use an IBM PC-compatible with the word-processing program WordPerfect. Rightly or wrongly, I have never so far kept other than the latest version of any of my work, even when I've had to revise already submitted copy. (In my field, the rate of change is so great that it's far too easy to get overtaken by marketplace events between composition and publication dates, and I often find myself sending updates or even radical rewrites by electronic mail at the last minute!)

Having been caught out in the past and lost work through faulty diskettes, I now keep two backup copies of each article or review, but am very diligent at ensuring these are always up-to-date with the working version. The cost of magnetic media means even essential backups are expensive, and mitigates against any writer keeping a copy of each draft on disk for posterity. Also to save paper and time I very rarely print out other than the final version of anything I write. In fact, when I submit work electronically to computer editors I don't even print that out either.

What do authors who use word processors do about their magnetic manuscripts? As a reader of the American magazine *Byte*, I always enjoy Jerry Pournelle's articles in his regular "Computing At Chaos Manor" column, but I don't ever recall him mentioning this matter, or whether he allowed for it. Going back to the Tolkien example, JRRJ sold his manuscripts to Marquette University in the USA, and have heard of several SF authors who have been able to increase their earnings from a book by

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disposing of the manuscript for cash also. Would a text document on disk be able to command any sort of price? Part of the appeal of an original manuscript lies in its uniqueness, whilst data held on computer disks can usually be copied freely, with multiple copies all indistinguishable from the original. A photocopy of a manuscript is easily recognisable, and does not have the value of the original, but a first draft of a book on disk could be used to make thousands of "top copies" on printout.

A problem for the future with magnetic manuscripts is that to read word processed text from a disk file usually requires exactly the right hardware and software combination, of which there are many alternatives in existence. Think of the BSFA's ubiquitous Amstrad PC's and the difficulty of exchanging text with IBM PC compatibles — not to mention Atari ST's, Amigas etc. A whole sub-culture of the computer has grown up dedicated to solving the problems of transferring information between incompatible computer systems. A disk file created in an early version of Wordstar on a seventies 8-bit micro, or using the proprietary software of a now defunct dedicated word processor might be difficult to restore today, and in fifty years time text created now on Amstrad PC's or IBM PC's could be impossible to retrieve outside a science museum, assuming the disks will be readable after that length of time. Because of the newness of the technology, we have no experience of

how long diskettes will really last, even under ideal storage conditions. Think how Hollywood has been caught out by the perishability of early colour film stock, so that some films made as late as the Fifties have now been lost.

To keep the draft texts available for study the owner will have to store them in whatever computer archiving and retrieval system is in current use in his or her establishment. The original disks could be preserved, not as readable magnetic storage media, but merely as objects of historical interest, in the same way that we now regard punched paper tape, punched cards and the original eight inch floppy disks since we no longer have equipment on which they can be read. The question is, of course, would such items have any sort of value compared to that set on hand or typewritten manuscript? Although I am a keen advocate of computer technology, I suspect the answer in this instance is "no".

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*So how do other word-processing Focus readers deal with the problems of keeping their various drafts? I have my own disaster stories to tell, others may not. Replies (keep as reasonably short, please) by next copy date, to the editorial address.*

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WORKSHOP

## Amphis Baena

by

B. D. Walter

The lizard leaned across the table and asked, "What do you fear?"

The young fool struggled with a brogart's nonchalance and replied, "I've seen too much. Nothing frightens me any more."

The lizard pondered, then reached gracefully, deliberately with its long, thin arms towards a box on a stool beside the table. Nimble green fingers lifted from it a pack of ancient Cards. The lizard paused.

"Once, then, you did fear..."

The young fool — exploring his chin with thumb and forefinger knuckle, lips pursed, lightly frowning a study of Man Considering — was then moved to reply, "I suppose so. Boyish fears. Adolescent obsessions. Nothing more."

"I see," said the lizard, with something other than a glint in its little black eye. It placed the Cards before the young fool.

"Mix these as you will..."

You have been experiencing a nightmare, a terrible nightmare, and now you are waking up. As you awaken, you sense your body moving, rhythmically smoothly, gracefully, you are running. It is warm. The air is

clean and sharp, with an invigorating tang to it. The sun is low, but still bright. The sky is tall and wide and blue, swayed wide with high clouds. Under your feet the sand is cool and firm. You like the feel of its ridges between your toes. It is good to run. You have been running for a long time, without knowing. If there was ever a threat that made you run, it is gone now.

Why not stop for a while, you think, and look around?

Behind you there is a thin, greenish line on the horizon. It is the land. Cliffs, grass, trees, houses, people, cats and dogs. It is a long way away. You feel very tired now that you have stopped running. There is a throbbing in your head or your ears, it is difficult to decide which. The light is fading. Dark clouds are now building quickly behind you. You are naked and cold. And the tide is coming in.

He stood in the big, cold room. The night was silent. A greyish light seeped in through thin curtains from the street lamp outside. He did not want to be here. He did not want to be standing shivering in a damp, striking coat in this hollow grey room. He wanted to be lost. He wanted the harsh streets of the East Quarter to chew him into the pulpy filth of their gutters and swallow him; he wanted the dregs of his conscience to trickle like lime acid bile down the long throat of the night.

He leant his head back, felt the tendons tighten in his neck as he clenched his fists deep down in the pockets of his stinking deer coat. There was a frayed grey ribbon of light on the high ceiling. He could see paint up there, like the exploded papies and flaking skin of a giant's arse.

He lowered his head and saw a small, dull table in the corner. He moved reluctantly over to it.

There were scattered Cards. Carelessly, he picked one up and held it close to his face. The High Priestess. It hurt his somehow, somewhere deep inside, to see the cool eyes and placid face close to his, so he jerked his hand away a little. The Card seemed slippery; it was not one Card, but two, clinging together somehow, friction and static combining to hold them, but now slipping apart in his fingers. He held the other Card up. The Fool. Of course.

It seemed to him all of a sudden that he had come a long way to get here; that this was in some way an end to something bigger than himself that he had not realised could exist — like stumbling upon the funeral of a priestess in a forgotten land. His face cooled rapidly. An airless wind stirred, and then sucked up the scents of his life and blew them into his face; they fluttered away behind his back like the decaying pages of a sacred book, like a flock of shadows flying from the sun. He had come a long way without ever really seeing; the priestess was dead, and he had wasted all his youth trying to find her.

He sat on the bed, trembling. His body was tired so it fell backward onto the thin blankets. The bed was uncomfortable but his mind contrived to tuck itself into a layer between himself and the room, and drifted off on waves of cotton sheets to a dark beach somewhere.

I am a man of no fixed identity. I have neither past nor future. All is a colour less present.

I have no direction. But not like a rudderless boat in open water. Like a halfsunken wreck lying in shallows, rolling pathetically from side to side. I am tied to the land. Pieces of me may occasionally detach themselves and float away into the mist, but they never reach new shores or drift into kindly hands — they either forlornly return, or sink without sention or regret.

The land to which I am attached is an island. It was not always an island. But years of covert undermining and careful excavation have made it so. And helped by my own hands. Only the most fragile of causeways exist between my island and the mainland, and these only appear by courtesy of the shifting sands, or in times of freakish weather. I dug deep when I made my island, and fate dug with me.

By the reckoning of the planet and sun I am still a young man. But in truth, youth stagnated in me long ago and left only a foul scum of childish mistrust to mark its place.

I never leave my island. I only wander its shores and search apathetically for signs of the elusive causeways. It is almost always dark. I can often see lights across the sound. Sometimes, the sing-song of laughter floats to on the wind, like meaningless news from a foreign land.

When there is light enough, dead trees can be seen dotted around my island. The fierce sea-winds have blown all but the sturdiest branches from them, and a fine pale sand encrusts their surfaces, so that they appear as petrified bolts of lightning protruding from the earth. They are the only manifestation of life to be found on my island. There are no animal visitors; no fertile pockets of soil to welcome wind-borne seeds; no gaping fish washed up on

the shore. I remain alone. The trees shelter me from violent storms. I sometimes climb them to watch for fish in the shallows. I know that the trees were once moist with sap and held up great handfuls of leaves to the sun like proud children. But they are silent and still now, and their souls have flown far away.

The island is littered with the rusting and decaying detritus of nameless people. I once spent thinking hours in debate of their pasts. No single object has intrinsic value nor even a perverted usefulness, but the whole seemed to speak in a deathly chant, hinting at secret hates and esoteric rites. I followed the dance of this empty music for much of my early time upon the island. Now, though, it has faded to less than a seacry.

There were once many airrirs. They nestled at clever angles in the crotches of tree-limbs, or lay propped against piles of rubbish. Everywhere I looked I would see a face; the island was populated by a nation of one man. The wind has rooted them out over the years, however, and only dusty fragments can be seen amongst the sand and stones where they have fallen and shattered.

I sometimes think about leaving the island. During the rare bright days I perch high up in one of the trees and strain my eyes at the mainland. There, smudges of colour show to a music I can barely hear and never understand. Flickering curves of white seabirds dance effortlessly to that same music whilst tiny boats sway in counterpoint. A rippling wave of green roars a chorus on the hills and in the fields for the people that live there, and the sun cries a pure, clean tone until the twilight when the moon begins to beat its drum and the first stars sparkle in poignant silence. And all the while the people leap and dance, each soul tugged along by a different strand of the rhythm, every voice responding to the song of laughter — like troop of giggling children flung about by a whirling maypole.

I have tried to sing to that rhythm. But my throat is dry with years of dust, and sand, and the salt wind.

A dream comes to me in the nights after the bright days. I am lying on the beach of my island, in the still moonlight. A soft sea whispers onto the shore. All is calmness. And out of that calmness a wild tune begins to twist its way, and I am drawn up by it, tossed to-and-fro, shaken by the thrill. My heavy feet begin to move. A shrill note issues from my lips. And suddenly I am dancing; I am singing; All around me I feel the fluttering of wings, and behind me the crackling of twigs and leaves in a sweet wind. There are hands on me. Laughing faces. Music and laughter everywhere. "Watch me dance. Hear me singing madly." I cry. So much colour and life! So much colour and life.

Awakening brings the bare branches over my head and the dull sky. A dry wind rattles a sheet of corrugated iron by my feet. I get up stiffly and stand with my face to the wind hoping for a stray thrill of music from the mainland. But it never comes, and the causeways slip further into the sea.

He lay on the big, cold bed. The pillows were unforgiving and would not let him sleep. Helplessly tired, he lay motionless on his back. His eyes stayed open.

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The hard pillows began to translate their stiffness to the muscles in his neck, and a tight ball of hurt struggled for release in his stomach. A warm shiver infiltrated his lungs and he sensed a strange panic rising in him, like flickers of pain towards a scream. His face began to contort seemingly of its own volition and the warm shiver spilled from his lips as a thin moan. He sat up, frightened by a turbulent thrill of emotion. It clawed at his deep inside, and he tried to fight it, suppress it — but he was too tired; the tears, with his fear and panic, tumbled like so many lemmings down the cliff of his face and he abandoned himself to shuddering release as the first waves battered against his body. He understood none of this, and alone in the big cold bed he embraced his thighs, and shut out the world with his knees, and waited for the rest of his rioting body to find its peace. But what peace? he thought. Where is that peace? And another wave came crashing down.

"It's the Fool they're burying," he cried desperately into the night. "It's the Fool!"

He had known all along about the Cards, of course. But he did not know what it really meant to turn one over.

Much later, at dawn, he walked down to the harbour and then aimlessly northwards along the coast road. At one point, the Ostwyth Rocks could be seen gleaming in the sharp morning light — the tide was going out, and the steely wet sands seemed to run almost all the way out to the beach. Impulsively, he ran down onto the beach. The cool air felt wonderful on his face, in his hair as he stumbled across the drier sand. He threw off his damp, stinking coat, then his shoes, and his socks, and then his sweater. Finally, as he reached the firmer wetter sand he paused to strip completely. And then he truly began to run. He ran hard and wild toward the sea.

It felt like he could run forever.



## Comment..

AMPHIS BENE contains some powerful and vivid writing. Those aspects of it I'm not so happy with could all be changed.

1. My main problem with the story is that I can't understand it. I don't know what is happening to whom, where or why. I'm sure the author knows all the answers, but they need to be incorporated into the story so that the reader can get the point. I'm not suggesting a huge wall of exposition; more information about the characters, setting and development of the story needs to be woven unobtrusively into the narrative so that it unfolds as we read. Even simple things like names of characters would help make the story clearer, but more drastic action must be taken for it to really work for me.

Most of the sections made some sense in themselves but I was unable to relate them all together to form a story. The taller lizard caught my attention in the

first section but not only were its vocal skills never explained, neither the lizard or anything similar are ever mentioned again. The 'young fool' seems to be the central character throughout the story but I'm not sure whether he's the 'I' or the 'he' or the 'you' or maybe even all three, in the following passages. Is he actually, and confusingly, older here and the rest of the story a flashback? If so, does the introduction serve any purpose? I'm only guessing.

The second section reads like a hypnotist's patter, but I don't know who is hypnotising who or what the role of the passage is in the story. Does the rest of the story have no more reality than a hypnotic trance?

The remaining sections appear to be connected together by sleep, dream and the turning of the tarot pack. But who the characters are and how the connection works is all too vague to form a satisfying whole.

Whilst on the subject of confusion, I also failed to understand the title or its relation to the story.

The connections may well be there but if so then, for my money at least, they should be clearer. Either way, this problem is rectifiable, although it may necessitate a major rewrite. I suggest looking at each section in turn and answering some basic questions — What purpose does it serve in the story (the story might be simpler if some could be cut); what is important about the character(s) in this section; what are the events and what is their significance; how does this section relate to the others? Then decide where and how to get this information across to the reader.

Next, perhaps, look at each character throughout the story. Have you portrayed their essential points, relationships with each other and brought them to life so that we can identify them and their roles?

It might also be worth looking at the suspense in the story — Is the reader intrigued by the possibilities; believing that something worth reading about is going to happen? And, of course, the events must have enough impact to satisfy the reader's expectations.

2. One thing I do like about AMPHIS BENE is the style of the writing, particularly its atmospheric quality. Each of the sections has its own atmosphere, all well conveyed by careful use of language and benefiting from the contrast with the other sections.

3. Having said that, I think the story would be improved by pruning some of the adjectives and, even more so, similes and metaphors. The frequency of the last two reduced their impact. I believe that they are best used rarely and kept simple, to create a particularly strong and precise impression, and thus help to bring the story to life. Savvy or over used and they have the opposite effect, killing both the image and the reader's involvement in the narrative.

Two examples which stood out for me as possible candidates for the knife are: "sucked up the essences of his life and blew them into his face, they fluttered away behind his back like the decaying pages of a sacred book, like a flock of shadows flying from the sun."

If one simile doesn't create the desired

image, wouldn't it be better to cut it rather than throw in another one" *"the tears, with his fear and panic, tumbled like so many leavings down the cliff of his face"*

I think it was a mistake to include fear and panic in this image.

4. I also felt that some of the writing was overdone. For example, in the fifth paragraph, I liked having detail about the young fool but there was too much, particularly the author's comment "a study of *War Considering*" and his being "saved to reply".

5. Rather than being introduced to "the young fool" I would prefer to have seen him being young and foolish and worked out his character for myself.

--Linda Markley

Before I begin my critique of the story itself, I'd like to talk for a moment about presentation and cover letters. Regular Focus readers will know that these are my pet hobby-horses. However, judging by the state of some of the ms I've received lately, the message still hasn't got across. Barry's presentation was actually pretty good, but clean typebars and new typewriter (or printer) ribbons helped my eyes enormously. A word count is also absolutely essential. Professional editors demand it and even I need some idea of whether the story to hand will fit in the space available.

Cover letters. A lot of editors, especially in America don't expect one, unless there is something particular about the story that they need to know. British editors do seem to like them more. However, no editor wants the cover letter to say what the story is about. The story itself should be its own explanation. Barry told me in his letter that this *Aphzshens* is a story about a man under a curse. He also reminded me about the meaning of the title. I can see the temptation, but it really is the mark of the amateur. I've discussed this further in my critique. Here, I'd like to say that the ideal cover letter really only says something like: "Please find enclosed my story XXX which I hope you will find suitable for publication in your magazine YYY. I enclose an SRE for your reply." If you've had previous dealings with this editor, or previous publication, you might want to mention the fact. And that's all. Don't explain don't puff your story, and don't run it down.

Moving on to the story itself, I have to say that it is quite beautifully written. Some of the imagery is quite breathtaking though there are one or two awkwardnesses too.

But — and it's a big but — most of the time I had no idea what was going on. That was with the benefit of Barry's cover note. Having typed the story out, I now feel I've come some way to understanding it — but not to the extent that I could easily explain it — and I think this is asking too much of the reader. I'm not saying everything one writes has to be instantly accessible. I am saying that however such one writes for oneself, the moment one publishes something, one enters

a contract with the reader. At that point, the refusal to explicate one's subject matter becomes self-indulgence. The inability to do so indicates lack of experience or technique.

In a way, I think what Barry has created comes close to the prose poem Alan G Keefe spoke of in his criticisms of James McLean's story last issue. Certainly the writing approaches that level of 'intrinsic interest' he mentioned. This is so, as long as one is talking about each individual part of the story. The difficulty lies in trying to make them add up to a coherent whole. There are insufficient linkages between the sections, and for this reason, I think that the story would be vastly improved by the use of some more traditional narrative material as a framing device. This would render it more accessible, and accentuate the hallucinatory qualities of the dream-like sequences. At the moment it's all pitched at an intense level which almost approaches hysteria at times. You need the laws to appreciate the high.

There are some minor points which concern me. The writing is at times just too ornate, striving for effect instead of letting it flow naturally, to the point where it gets in the way of understanding. The story also suffers a bit from Capitalitis, which can seem mannered and arch, as can not stating clearly what a thing is (why Cards? Why not just say it's a tarot deck since it plainly is?). *Modes of the Ancients* by David Langford (a couple of issues of Focus ago), goes into this in detail. Be warned, it is a bit — er — stringent about this kind of thing.

The title is somewhat obscure, and not explained in the story. This possibly indicates that it may very well be the wrong title. Generally, titles should complement and add depth to the story, but here all that's been done is to add another mystery — even for a reader with some knowledge of the relevant mythology.

I felt that the story was not helped by the way it kept shifting tense and viewpoint. Again, it's a case of accessibility versus effect. I just about made out the reasoning behind the shift from first to third person — though to be honest I felt it was unnecessary — but the section in second person has me completely flummoxed. Ditto the shifts of tense. I sight have got the reasoning behind these, if they had been a bit more consistent in the other hand. I may have totally misunderstood everything — which may make another point!

Finally, I'm not sure I understand the choice of tarot cards. The Fool? Well, maybe, but I'm not sure it resonates on any deeper level than the name. I know it can just seem foolishness on the mundane level, but it also means randomness, the animating force, edges, anarchy and so on. Maybe it's right. Who am I to say it's wrong? But it didn't quite work for me. It might have in a slightly different story, perhaps, or paired with a different card.

The High Priestess. Huh. I wish we had been given more clues as to the what and why of the cards chosen for for that matter, what and why the curse. These things traditionally work by exact interpretation of the words used! I wasn't sure whether the intention was that the High Priestess sent down the curse, or was symbolic of the one who did, or was somehow the animating force of the curse? Or something else entirely? Is there

supposed to be some intimation that the protagonist's problems are somehow wrapped up with his relationships with women (but the Empress represents the pure female essence in the tarot, if there is such a thing). Or is it a question of not admitting fear of hubris. In that case, wouldn't one of the asaculine symbols be a better bet — the Emperor, say, or even the Magician, since these might be thought to represent the protagonist's growth towards maturity? Or could it be that he has to get in touch with his "female" side — his anima. Now that sounds more like it! In fact I could almost agree with this choice in that case. But (here I go again) is this likely to be picked up on by the average reader? (Tarot, I should point out, is a long standing interest of mine, so I'm not.) Again, I think the story could do with some kind of narrative on the mundane level, maybe explaining why he's cursed, who he is (as a reader I get very irritated with the level of abstraction used here. I like story, theme, and character) and certainly the meaning of the cards. I'd also like a clearer explanation of his final fate. I've never between thinking he overcame his curse, and thinking he died/committed suicide (and let me repeat: I wouldn't have known it was a curse if I hadn't been told, because I think that is the central problem, difficulties with the actual narrative aside).

It is interesting that my critique of this story has largely taken the form of questioning the intent behind it. I think it indicates that it has real potential, and I would be very interested to read the next version of it.

— Liz Holliday

## Orbiting - an inside story

Margaret Hall

Some time ago, Margaret Hall sent this letter, which describes her experience with *Orbiter* groups in some detail.

I wish John Duffield the best of luck with his story critiquing scheme (Issue 14). The only snag I can see with it is that the "sucker in the middle" (as he puts it) will get fed up of the burden of organising the whole thing and also the cost of the postage. I really think John should ask for staps from the writers wanting comments. Also, if the story is to go to several different people for their opinions, it may be no quicker than a well organised, keen *ORBITER*. It seems fashionable at the moment to be dismissive of *ORBITER*, but I had a terrific amount of help from the group I joined and though the group disbanded by mutual consent after running for several years and we no longer *ORBIT* stories officially, three of us are

still in close touch and send stories and chunks of novels back and forth for comment regularly.

When our group was at its height, the parcel was taking no more than eight to ten weeks to go right round and that was including postage time between Wales, Northern Ireland, Dabris, Salford and Yorkshire. Thus at the end of two to three months you had four long, detailed critiques of your story in return for writing four. Postage was shared equally and more than that, all our group began to correspond independently of the parcel, and in fact unofficial, extra story swapping was rife. If you were desperate for quick comment, you could ask for a copy of what someone had said about your story to be sent direct to you.

The strengths of *ORBITER* are that it can become more than just a story critiquing service; it can be a self-help group, source of moral support and friendship. Members come to know one another, get to know one another's imaginary worlds intimately and fall in love with one another's characters. These can, however, also become weaknesses. We disbanded because we got to the stage where we could predict pretty accurately what the other members were going to say about a given story. But perhaps that was because we'd reached an almost-professional standard, and had outgrown amateur workshops: the comments were no longer simply picking up faults, but more related to matters of taste and style, which are personal.

The main snag with *ORBITER* is that it's simply pot-luck who you get put with. This can be a good thing as writing critic of a type of story you wouldn't normally read from choice will considerably broaden your outlook. It can mean, however, that you get hopeless, inefficient people who take forever with the parcel, or that there will be an imbalance of talent in the group. One of the most difficult things to cope with is a writer who has no talent whatsoever, but who obviously puts a lot of effort into their work. How to be helpful without being hurtful? Again with my first group we struck lucky, all hit it off well and were fairly evenly matched as far as writing skills went.

Perhaps someone who's used John Duffield's system might like to comment on whether it works well in practice. Can it cope with a whole novel in instalments? Or will someone who hasn't a clue what went before suddenly receive chapters nine and ten of an epic and be expected to say something sensible about it? I really enjoyed my first *ORBITER* group, it helped my writing a lot. As proof that *ORBITER* can work, perhaps I could mention that of the original five members, all three of us have now sold stories to professional magazines (though in my case it wasn't SF) and are all working on novels. Can any other *ORBITER* group beat this, or is it a record? But when *ORBITER* is bad, it's a dead loss. I joined a new group, hoping for a fresh outlook on my stories and I have been disappointed. I've only seen the parcel once in two years (can it really be that long!) and it now seems to have disappeared without trace. So I've abandoned *ORBITER* and simply send stories to my writing friends made through the first group.



# Gazing Miserably at Cans of Baked Beans

or, what makes a story?

About ten years ago, when reality first began to impinge upon my consciousness, but many years before it had any impact upon my behaviour, I wrote and submitted a flurry of short stories. Some of these, apparently, were not really stories, despite being weird and wonderful ideas, atmospheric and generally meaningful and expressive of what I wanted to say. The editors wanted well-drawn characters and well-planned plots and upbeat endings. Pah! I thought. Commercialism! They want me to fit into their little marketing box and churn out something like the slight, contrived "stories" they're already publishing. I won't do it. And I didn't. And here I am.

Reading over the letters of rejection I received at the time, I see that I was given quite a lot of good advice that either didn't sink in or which I managed to miss the point of. No doubt it was my writer's ego at work, sure of its uniqueness and unwilling to entertain any hint of adverse comparison. But my ego was keeping sight of what my ambition was ignoring: that I, as a writer, was not really interested in writing the sort of thing that was being published. That is, the strictures of writing for others felt like a nuisance because it was more important for me at the time to examine and explore my tools and purposes. My desire to be published was premature, and part of me knew it. Looking back, my non-stories have more gold in them than my stories, and I regret that I spent so much energy wanting and trying to be published.

So, what distinguishes a story from a "slice of life", an anecdote, a plot summary, a prose poem or a "good piece", all of which, I hasten to add, can be good, readable, and publishable in the right circumstances? Or, to put it another way, how do you avoid writing a non-story when you want to write a story? This way, you must recognise that a story is a particular medium for communication between writer and reader, with rules and necessities that you must understand, accept, and learn to use. Their purpose is to help orient the reader and writer so that they have some idea what to expect of each other. A tangential example of the power of expectation: trying to read a work of general fiction by a well-known author. I succumbed to boredom after three pages, not because it was badly written, but because I knew nothing weird and wonderful was going to happen. (I could be wrong, but I won't find out will I?)

Firstly, a story needs a protagonist. This is the readers' "handle" on the story, and they will need to know or find out what he (or she, or it) is doing, what he's trying to do, what he wants, what his

problems are. This is called motivation. He must be made flesh, and his surroundings and everything that happens to him must be made concrete. This is the essence of fiction, to evoke a picture in the reader's mind. This is called "visualisation". Further, there must be at least one point where the protagonist is faced with a choice, the choice that he makes must be intelligible within the context of the story, and likewise the consequences of that choice. This is called "conflict and resolution". There needs to be a period of time between the presentation of the problem and the final resolution of it. This is called "suspense". This is all in aid of the reader knowing what to hope for, or worry about, or think about, as the story progresses. A protagonist is "sympathetic" when the readers try to figure out his problem or cheer him on, or can imagine themselves in his shoes.

And that's it, as far as being a story goes. It is a simple skeleton. You will be read, and published, much more easily if you accept it as a necessity than if you argue with it. It will provide you the standpoint from which the readers can take the point, survey the setting, or absorb the atmosphere or mood that you wish to convey, and will also provide the leverage to draw them in and hold them. Alternatively, think of it as the structure into which and which you must place your idea/emotion/mood/message if it is to be displayed to any effect. If you find yourself leaving out any or all of the bones, I suspect it is because you are still working out what you are trying to say, and how to say it. You are doing valuable work, but it is essentially private work.

Where my earlier self was mistaken was in thinking that telling the story was the important thing about writing. It is not. Developing narrative drive - dramatising, showing not telling and all that is just technique, once you have mastered it, you will be able to churn out yards of drivel if you have the mind for it. To make a comment about the human condition, however, you will first have to have some idea what it is. The rigours of story telling will then act as a filter and focus, taking a finite segment of one's thoughts on the subject and arranging them in a particular light. By its nature it will force much to be discarded and require new substance to be clarified. This is what they mean, I think, when they say that a good story is only the tip of the iceberg - only a fragment of what the writer has thought on the subject. The fragment will be sharply defined and accessible if the focus is good; that is, if the story has been crafted to suit. Just remember, you can't →

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polish fudge. If you don't know what it is you're trying to say, you can't say it clearly.

This raises the question of length. For any particular thing one wants to convey, there is an ideal or suitable length. Some things won't fit into a short story, others will get lost in a novel (or have to be repeated half a dozen times). I believe there are three distinct stages in the development of a writer's feel for the correct length. In the first stage, the stories are too slight for the ideas. This is partly due to not properly grasping the requirements of a story, partly due to a compensating grandeur of conception. Typically in this period a writer comes right out with what he is trying to portray. For example, in a story about paranoia in a bureaucratic State, you read "John lived in a bureaucratic State. He felt paranoid." In the second stage, the struggle is to find an idea small enough to suit the length of story the writer feels comfortable with. Eventually, the ideas begin to appear already labelled with their suitable length. (Those labelled "ten words" are what you call "just an idea".)

Implicit in the above is that story-telling has a natural density: a single scene takes a certain amount of writing to "set", a story will require X-number of scenes to take it all the way through, the bigger ideas need longer stories. Many non-stories, while looking wonderful to the writer are in fact too dense (abstract) for a reader to appreciate. It's no good complaining about the standards of readership/editors (I tell my earlier self, but he's probably not listening). If you want to communicate, you must use the right language, in this case a "story". It doesn't matter what you want to say, it can be done. It just takes thought, a dollop of daring, and the understanding that your artistry need not be compromised by the compromises you make.

Does this make sense to anyone out there?

(Notes: The title is from the editorial in Interzone 19, characterising the "static good pieces" that they frequently receive and generally reject: I am indebted to Lois Wickstrom, then editor of Pandora, for the points about choice and visualisation, and to Charles Saunders, then editor of Dragonbane, for the point about motivation.)



## Write to Reply

James McClean answers criticisms of his story "Where the Wheel Ends" in last issue's Workshop

Wine, wine, wine! What service is here!

I think our fellows are asleep.

Carolanus (Act IV scene V.)

The above could easily be described as my first thought when I read the comments concerning my story. Then I read them again and my view changed to something like: Read it and bleed (as the swathing swords hacked...) ah! yes cliché or was that hackneyed.

Then I read it again and a voice inside my head whispered: "He has got a point there."

"Traitor," I screamed. My creation lies bleeding and I have the audacity to agree with some of their comments (or should that be knife wounds?)

Yes I do. But in saying that I feel I should answer some of their points (if only to stop my bottom lip from quivering.)

I got the impression the critics read too much into my story. The writer's fault? Perhaps. There is no "Deep Message" to my story. The whole thought behind "Where the Wheel Ends" was to take the idea of reincarnation. And linking it with the basic theology of Karma, ask what that final life might be. I use as my end result a whale. Why not? Many people believe I do not count myself as one that whales are sentient beings. Okay. For the sake of my story, I say that too. But alas, mention a whale and people climb on the ecology bandwagon. If you will note, in my story I not say whether I approve of the whale being killed or not. I only say that it happens. The ship captain's thoughts (they are hackneyed). I agree with Alan on this point) just mention that he felt sad at this moment and that he felt "kin like", serging the idea that he might also end up in this reincarnate state.

I realised at the time of writing that the tenses flowed from past to present almost at will. I did this deliberately. With the style of narrative that I employed, I felt the story could carry this. I still think it could under another guise as the critics thought this particular style of narrative did not work.

James Wallis felt that the descriptions of each life were dull. Alan found them boring. Again though, through the style of writing used I only wanted to "dip" into each life and extract for the reader a picture of each. Okay, a boring picture perhaps.

Questions are left open is another charge put to me. Good. Isn't that what speculative fiction is all about, to leave the reader to think after a story has finished not package it in a box with ribbon? Although it should not be necessary (bad writing?) some may need the answers pointed out. Is this the end of the road for the life force? Look at the title. If the captain doesn't like killing whales, why is he the captain of a whaling

ship? Firstly, do I actually say that he doesn't like killing whales? And secondly, there are many people around the world who do jobs they do like for many reasons.

Oh yes, can I please register that "nav", while meaning the fourth stomach of a ruminant, also means open jaws? Well it does in my Penguin dictionary. Hmm. But not in my Chambers or Oxford Concise. Of course, this does open up the whole question of whether dictionaries should be prescriptive or descriptive. Comments, anyone? — Liz.

"Where the Wheel Ends" was one of the first stories I wrote that was not consigned to the bin: it was an interesting experience to have my work flayed in public. There are a great many points that I have picked up on that I think will help my writing, not least that I will have to learn joined up writing again. Was it painful? Yes. When you work on a story you become blind to it and need someone to point out a few home truths (I said a few, goddamit!) and of course the truth always hurts.

Finally, one of the critics says that the story can be saved perhaps under another theme, while the other says it should be scrapped. Well I have decided to... no I think I will leave that unanswered too.

Would I submit a story again? You bet.

— James McClean

James's point about the use of the whale image in his story opens up an interesting point about the use of symbols and imagery in fiction. The question I'd like to raise is this: can one ignore the resonance a particular image has or can one just impose one's own meaning on it? I'd really like people's ideas on this one, because it's something that I thought a lot about at Clarion — Liz.

## ORBITER UPDATE

Sue Thomason writes:

Orbiter has been fairly quiet over the summer, with only a couple of enquiries from potential members. There are ten complete groups up and running, a new group (Orbit 11) is now being set up and the time of writing still has at least 2, possibly 3 vacant places. Anyone who feels like getting involved in the BSFA's newest postal writers' workshop should contact me soon at 111 Albersaria Road, York, North Yorks YO2 1EP.

I've had a letter from a member who wonders if other Orbiter members present or future, would be interested in starting an Amstrad users' Orbiter to circulate text on disk rather than paper. Any potential members of this group should contact Geoff Cowie, 9 Oxford Street, Bletchley, Milton Keynes, MK2 2UB, by letter, stating which Amstrad model and which word processing software you use.

If wonder if this idea might spread to users of other computer systems? Anyone interested should contact me at the editorial address and I'll endeavour to act as a clearing house.

## Courses and Workshops

Clarion: After this year's BSFA invasion of the Clarion workshop, I can't do anything else but suggest that anyone with the requisite £2000, six weeks and dedication apply. (Full report next issue — if you go, prepare for things never to be the same again!!!)

Details from: Mary Sheridan, Clarion Workshop, Lynnann Briggs School, E-35 Holmes Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan 48824-1107 USA.

Clarion West: Clarion's younger sibling in Seattle. Cost and dedication required are such the same as for Clarion. Details from Clarion West, 340 15th Avenue East, Suite 350, Seattle, Washington 98112 USA.

Now for some things a site closer to home.

Brian Stableford will be running a ten week course in "Reading and Writing Science Fiction" for the University of Reading's Department of Extended Education, using his book *The Way to Write Science Fiction* as a textbook. The course will take place at the University's London Road site on Thursday's at 7.30 to 9.30 pm, starting on January 18th 1989. The fee is £19 (concessions for unwaged and OAP's). Enrol via the Extramural Office, School of Education, The University, London Road, Reading RG1 5AO.

Glasgow Science Fiction Writers' Circle have written in "to get a bit of free publicity if we can." They have been established for two years and currently meet at the Synod Hall at the rear of St. Mary's Cathedral on Byres Road, near Kelvinbridge Underground station. Copies of stories are circulated one week for workshoping the next. The criticism "is constructive (or tries its very best to be) and oriented towards making professional writers out of us." Seems to have succeeded, since they say half a dozen of them have had professional sales. Sounds good to me! More details from Craig Harnock, 23 Radnor Street, Kelvingrove Glasgow G3 7UA.

The BSFA London Writers' Group finally met on the 6th of May. Apart from me it was attended by Alan Sullivan and Jeff Houghton. Full report and update next issue.

## Competition

Cosmopolitan magazine is currently running a short story competition for published and unpublished writers. Obviously, this isn't a genre competition. On the other hand, the prize is £3,000, with two additional £1,000 prizes for the best story by an unpublished writer, and the best story by someone under 30. I'd strongly suggest you read the magazine first, if you want to have a go. You'll need the coupon out of the September or November issues to enter. (Closing date November).

# MARKET SPACE

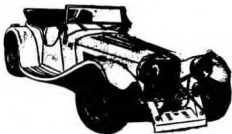
This is a selection off Sue Thawson's list, plus some other things that have come to my attention.

Fear Just switched to monthly format; mostly horror, though editor John Gilbert tells me he would like to run SF. Also says he is currently overstocked, but hopes to clear the backlog "soon" — might be better to try them in a couple of months; prefers under 4,000 words; commitment to publishing new writers; payment up to £70 per 1,000 words. Contact: David Western, Fiction Editor, Fear Magazine, 47, Gravel Hill, Ludlow, Shropshire SY8 1GS



Space and Time need all types of fantasy, SF and horror. Pay .5 cent a word. Up to 10,000 words. Contact: 138 West 70th Street, 4B, New York NY 10023-4432.

Tales of the Unanticipated need SF, fantasy, poetry, cartoons. 1 cent per word. Sample issue \$3 (plus postage?). Contact: Eric M. Heidman, Box 8036, Minneapolis, MN 55408.



Marion Zimmer Bradley is currently reading for a new anthology of original Darkover stories. Polite request, with SAE and international reply coupons (or US stamps) gets you a set of writers' guidelines. Contact: Marion Zimmer Bradley, PO Box 245-A, Berkeley, California 94701 USA

The Gate. Published quarterly, SF, popular, readable work "with flair and imagination". Payment: £30 per 1000 words. Contact: Maureen Porter, 114 Guildhall Street, Folkestone, Kent CT20 1ES

Fantasy Tales. Published twice yearly, fantasy rather than SF. Payment: variable. Contact: Stephen Jones, David & Sutton, 194 Station Road, King's Heath, Birmingham, B14 7TE

Fantasy Macabre needs supernatural fiction to 3,000 words. Pays 1 cent/word. Contact: Jessica Salsoren, PO Box 20210, Seattle, Washington, 98102 USA



Liberty and Justice For All. Anthology. We are interested in powerful stories on the future of law and justice. We are not looking for courtroom dramas set in the future. 2.5-5 cents per word. Contact: C/O J.E. Pournelle & Associates, Attn: John F. Carr, Assoc. Editor, 3960 Laurel Canyon Boulevard, #372, Studio City, CA 91604-3791 USA.



Zenith 2. Second in David Garnett's well received anthology series. David likes cover letters! Payment: ? Contact: David Garnett, West Grange, Ferring Grange Gardens, Ferring, Sussex BN12 5HS

DAM Magazine. Horror, fantasy, SF to 5,000 words. Write for guidelines. 0.5 cent/word. Contact: Gretta M. Anderson, Box 6754, Rockford Illinois, 61125-1754 USA

Universe is not currently reading.



A full listing can be obtained from Sue Thawson, 111 Alhambra Road, York, North Yorks, YO2 1EP. Please remember to enclose a large SAE and an extra 19p stamp to cover the cost of the printout.