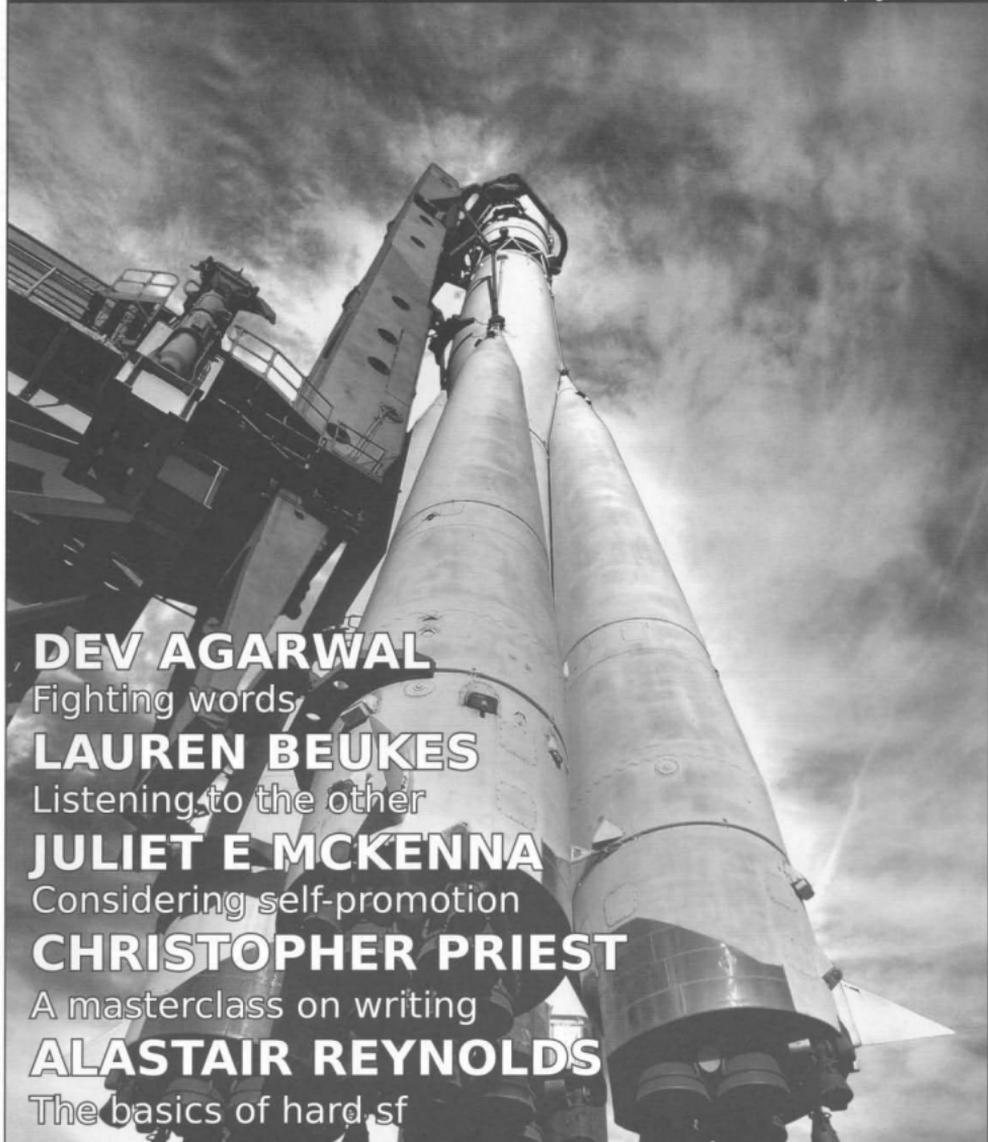


# FOCUS

THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION'S MAGAZINE FOR WRITERS

Spring 2012 No. 58



**DEV AGARWAL**

Fighting words

**LAUREN BEUKES**

Listening to the other

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Considering self-promotion

**CHRISTOPHER PRIEST**

A masterclass on writing

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The basics of hard sf

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# FOCUS

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# MAKING PLAUSIBLE WORLDS

A little attention to detail makes a difference, reckons Martin McGrath

On page four you'll find Alastair Reynolds's article on the basic requirements necessary for writing convincing "hard sf" – and if anyone should know, he's the man. Alastair neatly spears the myth that writing this type of sf requires a higher degree in physics, all that is really required is a commitment to getting the basics right. I recently got accused (in a nice way) of being an author of hard sf, a description with which someone else then disagreed. It was strange to read other people discussing which boxes my stories fit in, but it also made me wonder how I would describe my own writing.

I've written fantasy, horror and sf but about two-thirds of my stories are "core sf" in that they are speculative and set in the future.

Plenty of stories set in the future are, in no sense, hard sf. I've recently read this year's James White Award entries and a surprising proportion of those took, uncritically, the shorthand of "Golden Age" sf – spaceships effortlessly hopping between solar systems, galaxies populated with copious alien species, galaxy-spanning bureaucracies – as a starting point.

Such stories are not, necessarily, bad but I have never been drawn to write them. As a reader I find that stories built on this library of shared assumptions often (there are exceptions) lack the resolution of detail necessary to persuade me to suspend my disbelief.

It bothers me when writers get basic facts wrong. If they can't get simple stuff right why should I follow them on their wilder speculations? That doesn't just apply to physics or engineering, it also applies to ecology, built environments, sociology and psychology. And it is as relevant in horror and fantasy as it is in sf.

My story "Pathfinders" (which will appear in the hard sf anthology *Rocket Science*, coming soon from Mutation Press) features a protagonist who has to get out of a spacesuit. It would have been easy to gloss over this process, but the truth is that it's not a thing that can be done quickly.



Spacesuits: complicated things

Spacesuits are bulky, awkward things. So, even though it wasn't central to the plot, it seemed right to take a moment presenting something like what would actually happen. The character could have run through the airlock casting bits of suit behind him and most readers may not have noticed anything amiss. But, by spending a little time getting closer to reality, I felt I made this world more *plausible*.

In "Home Protection" (published by *Hub*) I wrote a horror(ish) story that revolved around a pistol. The gun was an important character, so it mattered (to me at least), that the details were convincing. I could probably have bluffed most readers with a "Hollywood" gun, but doing a little research made me more confident and, I hope, that confidence was transmitted to the reader.

Whether writing sf or fantasy or horror or anything else a writer must (usually) create a world that readers find plausible enough to believe in. Without drowning the reader in minutiae (though that seems to work for Neal Stephenson) the writer should convince the reader that this world is more than just cloth backdrop against which the author is manipulating puppets.

## THANK YOU, MR PRIEST

This issue sees the last of Chris Priest's "Masterclass" series and I wanted to mark the moment with a brief word of thanks.

When I took over editing *Focus*, nine issues ago, I sat down and drew up a shortlist of authors I'd like to get to contribute a regular column. Chris was number one on the list but I didn't imagine – for a moment – that he'd agree.

I was an admirer of his books and had the (slightly painful) pleasure of spending a week at an Arvon-run writing course on which Chris was one of the tutors (along with Al Reynolds, another contributor to this issue). I'd been impressed by how much thought Chris gave to the craft and business of writing and knew that other *Focus* readers would benefit from his insights.

I sent him a speculative, cheeky email.

When he said "yes" I did a happy dance.

I know from my own experience and from readers' comments and emails that many of you have found the Masterclass series thought-provoking and useful in your own writing.

I hope this isn't the last we've seen of Chris Priest in this magazine, but for now the regular articles have come to an end.

So, thank you, Mr Priest.

# ALL THE SCIENCE YOU DON'T NEED TO KNOW

Alastair Reynolds on getting the basics right

One thing I've learned in my career to date is that there's a certain type of science fiction that editors don't see nearly enough of, a truism that applies just as strongly to novels as it does short fiction. It was the case when I started trying to break into *Interzone*, the better part of three decades ago; it was true when I began to try selling a novel, and (as I know from recent experience) it still applies now. This elusive stuff I'm talking about is of course hard science fiction.

Or is it? What do we mean by hard science fiction, anyway? For that matter, what do we mean by science fiction? It was all so simple once upon a time. There was an area of writing called science fiction, the boundaries of which no one disagreed about, and entirely enclosed within those boundaries there lay a well-defined nucleus of the stuff, a kind of golden citadel in which skilled practitioners executed science fiction with absolute and scrupulous adherence to known physical laws.

Trust me, it really was that straightforward.

But then lots of things happened. The walls of the citadel turned out to be not as well defended as people had imagined. Worse, the outer boundaries of science fiction itself proved to be porous. There was a great deal of unfortunate cross-contamination with lesser forms of

fiction, such as fantasy, romance, crime, the historical novel, and "mainstream literature". It came to pass that no one was very sure what science fiction was, let alone hard science fiction, and there fell upon the land a dark time in which writers experimented boldly, refused to be constrained by genre boundaries, and generally strove to raise their ambition.

Despite all this, there remained a market for something vaguely identifiable as hard science fiction. By which I mean stories and novels in which events were set more or less in our universe, in which the actions and settings were consistent or even *illustrative of*, known physical law, and in which there was a marked absence of supernatural phenomena, creatures from folklore, wizards and so on. A typical hard science fiction story might involve speculation about contact with aliens, the likely realities of space exploration, the limits of artificial intelligence, the consequences of genetic engineering. Even topics that bordered on the fringes of the possible, such as time travel or parallel worlds, were acceptable grist to the hard science fiction mill. Some hard science fiction stories were little more than walk-throughs of some clever technical idea that had occurred to the writer. Others foregrounded character and political/social themes but just

happened to take place against a plausibly rendered backdrop.

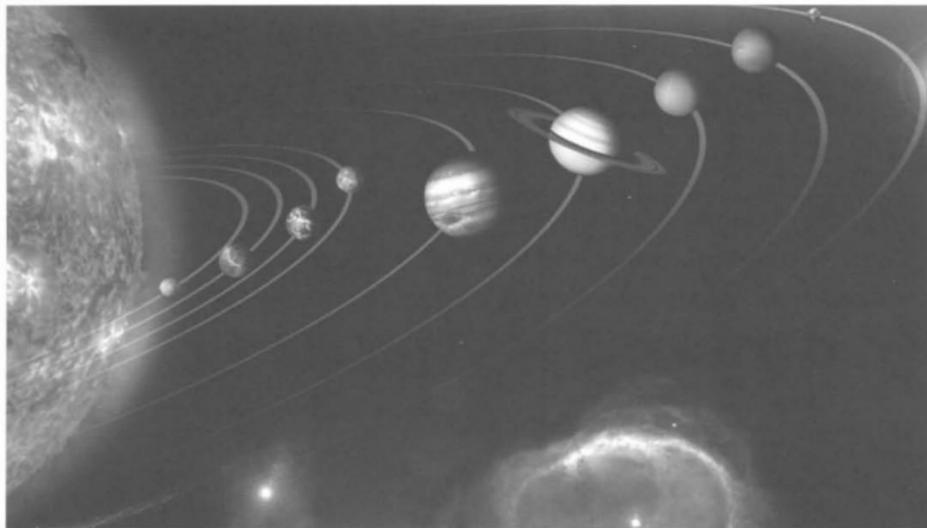
Given these distinctions, it might be easier simply to speak of core science fiction: the stuff where the implied science kind of makes sense, although it may or may not be the whole point of the story. A core science fiction story might not play with scientific ideas in any overt, up-front way, but the depicted actions will avoid impossibility and implausibility as much as possible.

This is the stuff I'm talking about. And I don't for one moment mean to undersell core science fiction: I think it can be as excellent and ambitious and literary as any other area of the field. Really, the sky is the limit. But you can take it from me that editors really like this stuff.

So—whisper it—if you can do this kind of thing *even half well*, you're well on the way to getting published.

But, I hear lots of readers cry, I can't write core science fiction, let alone hard science fiction, because I don't know very much science, and therefore I'm bound to get lots of things wrong and look a bit silly.

Well, here's the second secret. Whisper it again: you don't really need to know skiploads of science. Just a tiny bit. And since even people who know quite a lot of science still get stuff wrong occasionally, and indeed look a bit silly in the process, there's no shame in it.



For the purposes of this article, let's think about the basic knowledge set needed to write about other planets and solar systems. Let's not pretend that modern astronomy is anything other than a richly complex, constantly evolving area of knowledge. I was an astronomer and I only got my head around a tiny part of it. But for the purposes of science fiction, you don't need to know more than a few very simple facts and general principles. The rest, you can fudge around or look into in more detail if you're that way inclined. This knowledge set, in fact, is pretty basic stuff – almost insultingly basic, in many respects. But keep in mind that lots of people still aren't sure that the Earth goes around the Sun.

So let's start with that one.

Planets go around stars. Yes, I know. But a surprising amount of bad science fiction doesn't even get this far – or at least it's situated in a kind of conceptual void in which you're never entirely clear what, if anything, goes around what. In the series *Space: 1999*, the runaway Moon was forever encountering alien planets. But my recollection (which may be slightly unfair) is that there was usually little mention of which stars these planets were circling, or whether or not there were other planets in the

same solar system. Something similar was true of the later series *Firefly*, in which the writers never seemed clear whether the action was taking place in one alien solar system, or many. If it was just the one (which is what they settled on for the film), it had an improbable abundance of life-supporting planets. But that's another story.

To their credit, the writers of *Star Trek* were generally pretty good at getting the planet/star thing sorted out. In episode after episode, mention is made of alien solar systems, with particular (made-up) classifications of stars and planets. It's also clear that the writers grasped something else: solar systems are still *incredibly* small compared to the distances *between* solar systems. If you could look into the night sky and see the planets going around other stars ... you wouldn't be able to. That's because, on the scale we're dealing with, the planets would still be squeezed into the tiny cosmic pinprick already taken up by the star. (This, incidentally, is why direct detection of alien planets is so difficult).

So planets go around stars.

What else do we need to know about planets and stars? Are there particular rules governing what

type of planet can be in which orbit, around which type of star, and so on?

Basically, no. Or more properly, the whole thing is still up for grabs. Once upon a time, astronomers expected that alien solar systems would be quite similar to our own, only with a few details moved around. It was assumed that most planets would be in mostly circular orbits, and – based on the example of the Sun and its family of worlds – it was taken as a given that one would expect to find a progression from rocky planets (Earth, Mars) to heavy gas giants (Jupiter), to cold snowballs (Pluto), as one moved further and further from the star.

We know now that that's not the case – although exactly how anomalous our own solar system is remains to be seen. But of the many hundreds of alien solar systems now known, the only rule seems to be to expect the unexpected. We now know that very heavy planets can orbit very close to their parent stars, which is not something you'd typically have seen in any science fiction story written more than a decade or two ago. This was unexpected, and it essentially liberates writers to make up almost any solar system they can think of. As to the typical distribution of lighter planets, we still don't have

Stars:  
Planets  
go around  
them (not  
to scale!)

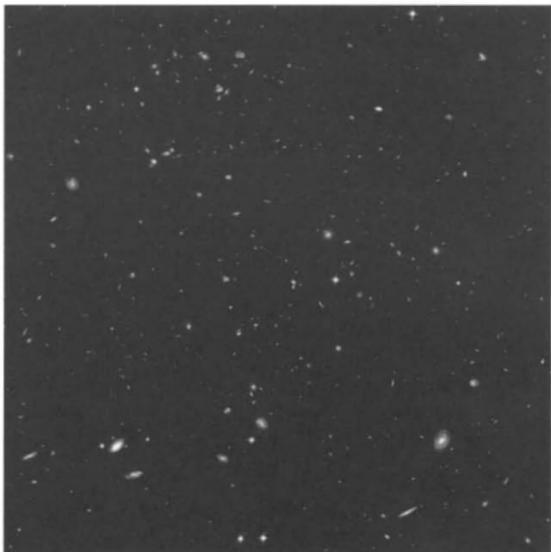
enough data to say anything useful – although it's *beginning* to look as if our own solar system is perhaps a little atypical – again, not something you'd have seen in much science fiction written until recently.

Before we go making up our alien solar systems, there are a couple of other considerations to bear in mind. The first is that these planets must still obey Kepler's laws. This means, in effect, that you can specify a planet's year, or its distance from its alien sun without needing to look anything up – but if you want to put both figures into the story, you'll need to do some sums. My advice would therefore be not to bother unless the plot mechanics of the story absolutely demand it. You can also get away with the generalisation that planets further from a star will orbit slower than planets near one. But again, don't put numbers in unless you really need to.

In the first draft of my first ever science fiction novel, I had two planets going around the same star in different orbits, but with the same period, so that they kept up with each other like two cyclists racing side by side in a velodrome. Sadly, it doesn't work like that: the planet on the inside track will always pull ahead and eventually lap the one on the outside track.

If you insist on it, but still don't want to do any calculations, you can always pinch the distances and orbital periods of planets in our own solar system, and simply rename everything. The type of planet doesn't matter: at a given distance, a tiny world will orbit at the same speed as Jupiter-sized monster. You can make up the rotation periods of the planets – their days – as you see fit. And you don't need to include every planet. Once you've renamed them, and come up with some alien equivalent of the hour, who's going to notice?

This brings us to the second consideration, which is the star itself. Stars are not all the same, which is why they come in different colours and sizes and why astronomers have careers. Fortunately, it's really not too complicated. For the purposes of science fiction we're presumably interested in the types of stars that are likely to have planets. Luckily



The rhetoric of scale: The Hubble ultra deep field image. All those galaxies, far, far, away.

this seems to be most of them. Very heavy, hot stars – they tend to be blue or white for most of their lives – may or may not have planets, but since these stars put out a lot of radiation, their planets wouldn't make very good candidates for life anyway. They also don't live very long: mere tens of millions of years, which is nothing on an evolutionary timescale. These are also the only kinds of star which end their lives dramatically, blowing up in a supernova explosion. While it might make dramatic science fiction to imagine an alien culture faced with the imminent and violent death of their sun, it isn't plausible from an astronomical standpoint. The kinds of star that live long enough to nurture life-bearing worlds don't go out with a bang. Our own Sun will gradually swell up over billions of years, shed its outer envelope, and then fade down to a white dwarf.

The safest rule of thumb here is to assume that your made-up star is of similar mass to our own Sun. That way you can transplant the distances and orbital periods of our own solar system onto your imagined one, and no one will be any the wiser. And while the Sun is outnumbered by

stars of lower mass than itself, there are still hundreds of millions of Sun-like stars just in our own galaxy.

What else do we need to know about stars and planets? Not too much. Keep in mind that while planets will tend to orbit their star in the same sense, and in the same ecliptic plane – think of marbles rolling around grooves in a flat disk – there's no reason at all why two different solar systems would be orientated at the same angle. That means that if your expedition is arriving in another solar system, they're much more likely to approach at some random angle to the local ecliptic than to come in at exact alignment with it. Science fiction quite often gets this wrong, though, which is why you'll sometimes read statements like "we passed the orbit of the solar system's equivalent of Pluto", or even worse, "we passed the solar system's equivalent of Pluto", which implies that the planets have helpfully lined up in readiness for these new visitors. Of course, if the plot of your story simply requires your characters to jump into the thick of the alien system from hyperspace, the angle of approach no longer

matters.

There's plenty more we could get into – the probable dispersion of rock and ice through a solar system, the presence of asteroid belts, cometary clouds and so on – but as long as you keep away from specifics, you can avoid getting into this stuff too deeply. It's worthwhile thinking about *habitable belts* – the “Goldilocks Zone” a planet would need to orbit in for life to be possible on its surface, but again, don't worry about it overmuch; these things are at present far less strongly constrained than some dogmatic types would have you think. Given a different history, Venus could be habitable, and Mars may also have been habitable for a period in its past. A *heavier* version of Mars could be habitable even now. So there is quite a lot of leeway.

Beyond that, what else do we need to know? We've spoken of planets and stars, and I've mentioned the fact that stars tend to be separated from each other by distances on the order of a few light years. All the stars we can see with the naked eye in the night sky are of course part of our own galaxy, a vast whirlpool of stars spanning at least a hundred thousand light years from edge to edge. The galaxy is huge, in other words, and it contains unimaginable multitudes of stars – literally hundreds of billions of them, a large fraction of which probably have planetary systems. There are other galaxies out there, but the nearest is more than two million light years distant and most are a lot further than that. One dead giveaway of a lot of bad science fiction is that it just doesn't get this basic point: the galaxy is huge, and other galaxies are almost unthinkable remote. In so far as we could ever reach or communicate with them, they may as well not exist.

But time and again in bad science fiction you'll hear speak of aliens who've come from “a world beyond your galaxy” or “galaxy seven” or something. To me this conveys a fundamental misapprehension about the relative size and significance of things. Another giveaway is the use of “constellation” as if it referred to some well-defined volume of space, as in “we come from your constellation Gemini”. A constellation, as I'm

sure everyone reading this already knows, is merely a pattern formed by the chance alignment of stars, all of which could be at very different distances. It *would* make sense for aliens to say they've come from a particular star cluster, since a cluster is a real entity. The term “star system” is a science fiction coinage that (in my experience) isn't commonly used by scientists – although (just to confuse matters) binary and trinary system are.

John Clute once wrote, if I'm remembering rightly, about a book's “mismanagement of the rhetoric of scale”, and I'm afraid scale is something a lot of bad science fiction still hasn't got to grips with. Imagine a crime novel in which terms like “precinct”, “district”, “city” and “state” were used interchangeably: you'd soon lose patience. But we put up with far worse abuses in our science fiction. We shouldn't need to, though, because the basic concepts and yardsticks really aren't that demanding. Again, to go back to *Star Trek*: no one would hold it up as a paragon of scientific excellence, but it did mostly have a good grip on the rhetoric of scale. Although the universe was not rigorously consistent from one episode to the next, the writers got the basic relationship between worlds, stars and the galaxy pretty well right and this fundamental understanding was only deepened in the later series, such as *Voyager*.

The point is, though, that it's really not hard to get this basic stuff right. And while we've only said a little about relative timescales, there's nothing too treacherous there either, even if some of the numbers can be a little mindboggling. The universe is about twelve to thirteen billion years old. Our own galaxy is maybe half that age, and our Sun about a third. The Earth is about as old as the Sun, and there has been life on Earth for at least three quarters of its existence. Animals and intelligent life, though, are much more recent innovations. Someone once said that, compared to the age of the Earth, the time occupied by humans is like the last layer of paint on the top of the Eiffel Tower. I don't know whether that's *strictly* true, but it does offer a handy and vertigo-inducing sense

of the relative importance of things. We really are a very late chapter in the story. Actually, we're more of a footnote on the last page of the last chapter.

If there's one thing I want to leave you with, it's this: we've only touched on some very simple astronomy, and we've scarcely touched on timescales at all. But already there's enough in there to be getting on with. Clearly the universe is a lot older than we are. So what does that tell us about our place in the cosmos? There are lots of Sun-like stars out there and there must be Earth-like planets around some of them. Even within our own galaxy, you'd think the chances were quite good that someone, somewhere, must have evolved before us. Millions, maybe even billions of years before us. So what happened to them? Where are they now?

Think about it a bit. Write some ideas down, no matter how outlandish. Think about them from different angles. See if one idea has some particular emotional resonance for you. Does it make you feel sad or lonely or exalted and special? Does it evoke a chill of cosmic dread, or give you a weird tingling feeling? How is it likely to make your characters feel? Can you relate your big idea to some human drama that you can stage in the foreground? If you can zero in on something like that, you don't yet have a story. But you're half way there, and that's a lot better than not being anywhere at all.

Alastair Reynolds is the author of ten novels and around fifty short stories. He has a background in astronomy and worked for the European



Space Agency before becoming a full-time writer in 2004. His next novel, which is due to be released in January 2012, will be *Blue Remembered Earth*. A Doctor Who novel, *Harvest Of Time* will appear in 2013.

# FIGHTING FOR WORDS

## Dev Agarwal knows the first rule of fight club

As one of Christopher Priest's masterclasses dealt with writing about sex, I thought I'd offer some thoughts about what is perhaps the other side of the same coin -- violence.

Why write about violence? The two most obvious reasons are to drive the story and to illuminate your characters. Writing effective violence presents particular challenges. Too much attention to detail can make you seem obsessed with gore. But if done correctly, scenes of violence add drama and immediacy to a story.

I recently read a story as part of a writing group which was notable for its total absence of any conflict. Three characters went through each scene agreeing with one another, until the narrator made his farewells and left. Ordinarily, we'd find that a protagonist is opposed to other characters who are all struggling for a resolution to their conflict. That was absent from this story. That is not to say that you can't construct a story built around harmonious relations, but in that story's case, nothing happened, as none of the characters sought something that they didn't already have. Conflict is the engine for most story telling, and in particular, for genre fiction. Carefully handled this is not only a visceral experience, but one that deepens the characters' motivations for the reader. This is perhaps most acutely the case with physical violence. Depicting physical conflict often invites disasters for writers. In our daily lives, most people are rarely involved in violence and we lack direct knowledge of what it's like to be hit -- or how to throw a punch. We struggle to imagine how our bodies move, or where we might feel the impact.

A scene randomly selected from Simon Scarrow, a popular military fiction writer, demonstrates this:

The warrior's momentum carried him forward, straight onto the point of Cato's sword, which passed through his collarbone and into his heart. He dropped to one side, taking Cato's blade with him.

(*When the Eagle Hunts*, p129)

For me, this short example is almost a "how not to" guide. What do we know about the attacker? He's a warrior, undifferentiated from anyone else. He posed very little threat to Cato (he "carried forward") and appears to have basically killed himself. There's no threat to Cato, and by extension this is a violent scene devoid of any conflict. Cato loses his sword, but how did that feel? Physically, was it wrenched away? Did it slip from his grasp and leave him feeling foolish? When he's unarmed, does he panic? I'd suggest that Scarrow is writing long choreographed sequences. These were all surface and don't reflect the physical or psychological demands of violence -- either on its subject or on the aggressor. His over-choreographed violence doesn't get close to illuminating the characters' emotional state.

I was given a good piece of writing advice early on, which was both simple and fundamental. This was to *invert*. Like Scarrow, I had focused on choreography as well, mistakenly believing that this was where the writer's, and the reader's, interest lay. Instead, I was encouraged to see the physical contact as being only the finale. When two people decide to fight, there is normally a chain of events that culminates in this decision. Looking at that is often

the way to maximize the "truth" of your story telling. If we imagine the story as a pyramid, the emotional reaction is most of the body of the pyramid, and the apex, that moment at the very top alone, is the instance of violence.

An example of this occurs in Lucius Shepard's story "Shades." Two men, Witcover and Puleo -- the protagonist, who is a Vietnam war veteran -- are arguing.

"That so?" I was shaking again, but with adrenaline not fear, and I knew I was going to hit Witcover. Shepard announces the action, setting up the coming moment and also breaking a "rule" of violence, that it should surprise the reader.

Old horrors were stirred up, and I saw myself walking in a napalmed village rife with dead VC, crispy critters, and beside me this weird little guy named Fellowes who claimed he could read the future from their scorched remains and would point at a hexagramlike structure of charred bone and gristle and say, "That there means a bad moon on Wednesday," and claimed too, that he could read the past from the blood of head wounds, and then I was leaning over this Canadian nurse, beautiful blonde girl, disemboweled by a mine and somehow still alive, her organs dark and wet and pulsing, and somebody giggling, whispering about what he'd like to do, and then another scene that was whirled away so quickly, I could only make out the color of blood...and a dead man was stretching out his hand to me and...

I nailed Witcover, and he flew



Are your fight scenes convincing?

sideways off the chair and rolled on the floor.

(*The Ends of the Earth*, p222)

Shepard delivers the inversion by first establishing the hostility between Puleo and Witcover, then veering away from it. Instead, he goes inside Puleo and explores his interior state. Puleo has reached a decision about violence, and his anger propels him into a steep emotional spiral. The images become more grotesque and violent, and then accelerate, becoming faster and shorter. This increases the pace that the reader comes to them. The physical fight is the shortest element of the scene, the apex of the emotional pyramid. Shepard constructs Puleo's inner monologue with a single line, and with images that deliberately build in intensity.

Puleo hits Witcover with his fist,

but what we know is that he "nailed" him. Not where on the body, or how, but that one precise word that conveys the whole act of one person striking another.

That is, of course, only one way to depict violence. You can also approach it from other angles: but what's always effective is conveying the "sense of impact" (Shepard's use of "nailed"). This challenge is particularly complex in violence that isn't immediately physical -- such as the use of weapons, as in gunfights.

Mitchell Smith, who's probably not on many genre readers' radars, is better known for his contemporary thrillers. In one of these, *Sacrifice*, he begins the novel with a bank robbery, perpetrated by Tyler Pierce. To add excitement to the scene, the robbery goes wrong and one of his men is killed.

Pierce returns fire at a bank guard. Smith guides us through this encounter with a compact minimum of elaboration and in a way that simulates the abruptness of the violence itself.

Reduced to its essential elements, this sequence would be that a security guard surprises the gang and shoots one of them. Pierce shoots back and wounds the guard. This might have a visceral, exciting element in its telling. However, Smith uses this encounter to deepen his characterisation:

The young man...stepped back a little to clear his pistol -- a Glock, it looked like -- and aimed at Pierce through the bars and shot at him and missed. Pierce didn't know where the slug went, didn't hear it at all in the noise. He lifted the Smith & Wesson, sighted up the stairs, and fired one shot and didn't see where that one went, either. Fired another, and deaf from gunfire, barely heard the bullet clang off one of the slender steel bars. The young man jumped back, scared. But he came to the gate again and raised his pistol and Pierce knew this round would hit him, so he hurried a little and shot the man between two bars centering his belly.

It was so close and such a personal thing it was as if he'd shanked the guy, or kicked him -- and the young man sagged and sagged and fainted down along the bars and ended sitting there with his face resting against them."

Then,

Pierce felt as tired as the young man, and couldn't think what to do. He sure wasn't going to shoot him again. They were both worn out in just a few seconds... Freddy came running and yelled at him, got him moving.

(*Sacrifice*, p12)

Key details fill this sequence, elevating the specificity, "so close and such a personal thing it was as if he'd shanked the guy." *Shanked* is carefully selected as a verb. Not knifed, but a more precise term that comes from the American prison

subculture. And who would think of a gunfight in terms of knifing or kicking someone? Those words convey immediacy in ways that, for me, Scarrow's writing did not.

The victim doesn't just fall down, he sags and sags, the repetition describing the slide as he falls against the bars. The description also utilizes and reinforces the setting, reminding us of the gate between them, and this then adds to the moment by prolonging the man's collapse.

And what does this violent encounter do to Pierce, who hasn't been hit by a bullet or physically harmed? He is "worn out" and "couldn't think what to do." The gunfight has been an extreme experience, one that affects even the aggressor both physiologically and emotionally. Anyone in a violent encounter or even an accident will know that sense of displacement and shock. In this example, the fact that Pierce has past experience with violence is revealed in the line, "He hurried a little."

Just as violence can be used to convey conflicting experiences or emotions -- abruptness, turmoil,

exhaustion, it can also convey humour. In Elmore Leonard's *Freaky Deaky*, two black criminals discuss scamming a white millionaire. Donnell tells Juicy Mouth to threaten the man in a men's room, "Tell him it's fifty bucks to take a piss or you gonna cut his dick off. See, then I come in just then and throw a punch at you like in the movies, dig? And save the man's ass, I don't hit you, I pretend to."

Juicy does that and Donnell follows. Donnell "slipped on black leather gloves before going in and hit Juicy hard, the knife flying, blood flying, hit him in his surprised face again and got the man zipped up and out of there." (p135).

This is funny, the humour derived from surprising us (in the way that Donnell surprises Juicy). The scene is made vivid with the use of key details and repetition, "knife flying, blood flying," and how Donnell violates their compact not once, but twice.

Physical violence short circuits situations, and we often find that stories move more quickly because of it. One of the reasons we might read fiction is to gain a more visceral and

stimulating experience that we find in our daily lives. Conflict is a form of communication -- of disagreement between two parties reflected in the extreme situation of physical challenge. Where depicting violence is mishandled it ironically reduces a scene to *less* credibility. Successful writers show how violence has an emotional core, and that describing these actions are a way to reveal the characters' attitudes and mentality. I also began by talking about a story that had no violence or conflict in it. After we'd fed back, the person submitting the story responded. She assured us that she'd listened to us and heard that we were encouraging her to make her story "more gritty." So she rejected what she felt was an imposition to make her story into something it wasn't, rather than the message that conflict *is* story. Writers may not want to write about violence, but conflict is one of the engines for driving a story. And an understanding of this, and of how we might use violence to show conflict, can heighten the story's drama and emotional depth.



## BSFA workshops for writers

The BSFA's Orbit writing groups allow writers of all levels of experience to share stories and learn from each other. Whether you're just starting out as a writer or you have a string of publications to your credit, you can learn from studying the work of your fellow authors and receiving their critiques of your stories. If you're working on a novel or producing short stories there's an orbit group for you.

For more information about the BSFA writing groups contact the Orbit co-ordinator, Terry Jackman:

[terryjackman@mypostoffice.co.uk](mailto:terryjackman@mypostoffice.co.uk)

# TAKE YOUR WRITING TO THE NEXT LEVEL

# News from orbit

TERRY JACKMAN, CO-ORDINATOR OF THE BSFA'S ONLINE WRITERS' WORKSHOPS, REPORTS

## TWEETFICTION!

BSFA CHALLENGES WRITERS TO TELL A STORY IN A TWEET.

I recently came across a definition of editing as "putting every word on trial for its life". I suspect, however, that the upcoming BSFA TWEETFICTION scheduled over the Eastercon weekend will not be so strict – except of course that the maximum length of a tweet is officially 140 characters. So if you are going to Eastercon. [By the time you read this it should be coming up fast.] be sure to look out for the tweets. And please, please join in?

All you need is to tweet an sf 'story' that, in practice, totals not more than 134 characters [140 less the necessary tag] you can enter by tweet, obviously.

### HOW TO ENTER

**Tweet (obviously):** All tweets must include the hashtag #TBSFA

**Email:** If you're not on Twitter, you can also email your entry to:

[tweetfiction@bsfa.co.uk](mailto:tweetfiction@bsfa.co.uk)

**Paper:** If you're at Eastercon, pick up one of our paper tweet forms and pop it in the box on the BSFA table in the Dealers' Room.

However you enter, all stories must end with the hashtag: #TBSFA. And in case you think you can get out of both, I'll even be open to you emailing one, or more, entries to me, as long as you do it by 5pm Friday 6th April before I leave for the con. Which I will take with me and post for you! My email address is at the bottom of the page.

So, having now been warned, you can start thinking about what to send, now, or at worst while you are stuck on that train/bus/plane en route? Which ever way you tweet it there'll be the chance of being published, or even read out at the BSFA Awards ceremony on the Sunday.

The competition opens on 4 April 2012 and closes at midnight, 10 April.

FULL RULES AT: [WWW.BSFA.CO.UK/BSFA-NEWS/TWEETFICTION-TWEETSTREAM-TBSFA/](http://WWW.BSFA.CO.UK/BSFA-NEWS/TWEETFICTION-TWEETSTREAM-TBSFA/)

## AT EASTERCON? SAY 'HELLO'

This page should reach you the week before Eastercon in Heathrow, a very good venue last time. If you don't know about the con just Google for info.

To those I already know are coming, I hope to see you in the flesh. To anyone else considering it, hope you'll also find time to say "Hi" to me. I'll be there Saturday through Monday this time and, for at least part of the time, I'll be doing my share at the BSFA table in the dealers' room or, I hope, at the Milford meeting on the Sunday.

So if you're going, have a great time whether I see you or not. If you're not,

then you especially should read the Tweetathon insert, also on this page.

### LEGITIMATED!

There's an Agatha Christie mystery in which a character, born a bastard, has the word 'legitimated' stamped across his birth certificate. The following struck me as rather similar.

In *The Times*, Jan 23rd, an article entitled 'How to give your child a private education without spending a penny' included a reading list for secondary maths pupils. The only fiction in its 18 titles was *Flatland* by EA Abbott, described as "a

## SALES FROM ORBIT

The Orbit writers' groups allow BSFA members to improve their writing by sharing stories with a small number of other writers. You receive comments on your stories and learn by studying and commenting on the work of other writers. Here are some of the recent sales made by current members of the Orbit groups.

**Mark Iles:** placed three feature articles in *Martial Arts Illustrated*.

**Sean Jones:** sold the short story 'Alex' to *Bards and Sages Quarterly*.

**Martin McGrath:** sold "Pathfinders" to the anthology *Rocket Science* from Mutation Press. The book will launch at Eastercon.

**Rosie Oliver:** congratulations on receiving a distinction, no less, in her creative writing degree.

*Congratulations to all these Orbit members for their successes. If you're a BSFA member who has recently sold a story or novel, we'd love to hear your news.*

Victorian classic about life in two dimensions." They noticed us!

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Want to be wowed? Try reading Cory Doctorow's *Little Brother* and Barbara Erskine's latest, *Times Legacy*? For me each alone had the "wow factor" but it was even stronger reading them together.

Terry Jackman, is co-ordinator of Orbit, the BSFA's online writers' workshops. Contact her via [terryjackman@mypostoffice.co.uk](mailto:terryjackman@mypostoffice.co.uk).

# BECOMING A BETTER WRITER...



Writing is like any skill, practice might not make us perfect but it will make us better. These short exercises are designed to help you think critically about what you do when you write. You should be able to complete each exercise in fifteen minutes or less. This issue, we look at the characters you put on the page.

1. Pick three people you know. Write a paragraph about each of them as though you were introducing a character in a short story or novel.
2. In a public area, look at the shoes of the people around you (try to be discreet!): what might they say about that individual's personality? Write a short paragraph describing one person by discussing their shoes.
3. Write a passage of dialogue between two people who have just had an argument but are discussing something ordinary – what to have for dinner, what film to see at the cinema, where to go for a drink. Hint at the conflict under the surface, but don't deal with it directly.

## ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING & MINI CONVENTION

Saturday, 9 June 2012  
10:00 am – 4:30 pm

### GUESTS OF HONOUR

Aliette de Bodard

BSFA Short Story Award Winner  
Author of the Obsidian and Blood trilogy

Marek Kukula

Public Astronomer at the  
Royal Observatory Greenwich

**Location:** The Royal Astronomical Society,  
Burlington House, Piccadilly,  
London. W1J 0BQ.

**Cost:** Free!  
Membership is not required.

**Updates:** [www.bsfa.co.uk](http://www.bsfa.co.uk)  
[www.sf-foundation.org](http://www.sf-foundation.org)

The day includes panel discussions, interviews with the guests of honour and the Annual General Meeting of both the BSFA (13:45) and the Science Fiction Foundation (noon).



# Christopher Priest's MASTERCLASS

## No. 9: What I Know

**'N**ot a lot,' is what I usually say in response to that.

It is probably time to bring this *Masterclass* sequence to an end, as there is a limit to what any one person can say about the craft of writing. I think that what I have to say on this subject I have mostly said already, so instead of my writing about one dedicated subject let this end with a fairly random selection of suggestions about writing and writers, a note of some propositions, facts, punishable offences.

You might think the use of the personal pronoun in the title of this will make it autobiographical, to which I would say: not really. All non-fiction writing is to one degree or another an expression of self: review someone's new novel, describe a journey through North Africa, write a biography of a famous figure, even compile a textbook on some practical matter, all of these will to some extent reveal personal choice, ideas, preferences, attitude, experience. Sometimes that revelation might be easier to see than at other times, when it will seem to veer towards the autobiographical, but the principle remains. Inevitably, this essay will rely more on my own experience than the earlier ones have.

So here are a few propositions.

### All writers make mistakes

No one is perfect. No one has yet written a perfect novel or short story, although some have come close and a handful have come astonishingly close. Some poets have attained perfection – Shakespeare, Keats, Hughes, Dickinson, for example – but prose writers work in a longer, looser form, where things can and usually do go wrong. All writers should seek

perfection, but equally should never believe that they have achieved it. Improvement is always essential. Never write anything that feels easy: always push against what you see as your limitations.

Everyone has quirks, bad habits, things they fail to get right. Some make spelling mistakes, others reveal habitual obsessions or blind spots, some go on too long, others don't go on long enough. Most real writers (and by 'real writers' I mean writers most people will have heard of or read, or who have published consistently for some years) are aware of their shortcomings and see much of their daily work as an attempt to put such failings away, or at least to disguise them effectively.

We are all people: we have a singular point of view, we do things that others get annoyed with, no one fully understands the way the world works, everyone has off days.

This essay is not perfect.

### How should I work?

It's a widely acknowledged fact that all writers work differently. You would think that in a process that invariably starts with blankness (blank paper, new computer workspace) and ends up with a manuscript (handwritten or typed or printed or saved as a document) there would not be much room for people to set about it in different ways. But I've yet to come across two writers who work identically.

Even the parentheses above set up the parameters of variety: some people cannot work except with pen and paper, others must type at a keyboard (and some will dictate to a machine or a secretary). Some writers are neurotic to the point of fetishism:

they must have a certain type of paper, or exercise book, or they must have a pencil (or a felt-tip pen, or a fountain pen). Some computer users become fixated on a particular word-processing software, or they can only write with music on (or off), some need drugs or alcohol; many need tobacco. I once saw a famous writer having what looked like a nervous breakdown, after she dropped her mass-produced fountain pen and bent the mass-produced nib.

In the end every writer will find his or her own best way of working, as they do.

However, I have always believed that there is one principle of writing that every fiction writer should adhere to, which is so important to the making of good work that it should probably be considered a rule. That is the writing of separate drafts.

Nearly all writers now work on computers, either drafting from scratch, or typing up from written notes ... or at least at some point having the text in front of them on a computer monitor. Most publishers require or expect submissions in computer format, so there's a good reason for that. There is an irresistible temptation at this stage to start picking at the text, deleting this or that, adding sentences, changing words, moving paragraphs around.

Every change of that sort makes a difference, which is why writers do it. It's also fairly painless to do, which is the less advertised reason writers do it.

It is, however, a piecemeal and superficial process, and the more it is done the greater the risk of losing the original intensity of vision.

A complete separate draft is *essential*. What this means is that at some point the computer text



All writers work differently! Ernest Hemingway's room at Finca Vigia in San Francisco de Paula, Cuba

should be printed out, the document files archived somewhere they can't be accessed easily, and the writer should then again redraft the book (or short story) from beginning to end, working only from the hard copy. No reference should be made to the existing computer text, not even (especially not even) to copy-and-paste one of the good bits that allegedly doesn't need any more work, with the misguided intention of saving an hour or two of hard graft.

Fluid linear drafting – which is to say, writing everything down in the right order – is a process in which the hand of the craftsman and the imagination of the author blend seamlessly into the production of a good book. Redrafting is a process of re-imagining, of recollecting in tranquillity, of instinctively restructuring or anticipating, on a line-by-line basis. It also, crucially, involves working with what the author knows will be revealed or described in scenes yet to come.

Good internal structure builds invincibly as the work proceeds. It is undoubtedly a lot of hard work, but it is also a deeply satisfying thing to do.

Writers who say a separate draft is not necessary have never tried it, or are denying something. Those who say they have tried it and still think a separate draft is a waste of time, have not done it properly, have skimmed it somehow, and literally know not of what they speak.

If you have never tried it, do so next time and do it properly. Marvel at the difference it makes.

### How should a writing career be managed?

Careers are for careerists. Writers who plan a career are probably going about things in the wrong way. Oddly enough, the word has two meanings in general use, which are more or less opposite in meaning. A real career (such as one in the legal profession, rising from raw recruit through the various levels to Lord

Chief Justice, and taking most of a lifetime to achieve it) is a structured thing. Many others will have followed the path before, and there are a number of objective steps which can be taken at appropriate times: examinations, training, practice, promotion, and so on.

The other meaning of 'career' is a headlong dash, uncontrolled movement, some swerving at hectic moments, and a desperate jab at the brakes from time to time. That sounds a bit more familiar, doesn't it?

Most writing 'careers' are in reality a sort of blend of deliberate choice and unpredictability.

Everyone starts writing with a thought in mind: a wish to make money, perhaps, or to become famous, or to write a great novel, or to amuse people, or to satisfy a deep personal urge to communicate something ... this is the element of choice. It drives you on, gives you a purpose, makes you become and remain a writer. But a career can't be

planned on that basis alone. To take one of the above examples, anyone starting out as a writer thinking they'll make a lot of money is almost certainly in for a few hard surprises and a great deal of disillusionment. Yes, it is possible to become rich as a writer, but rarely as a result of a plan of campaign. In the last twelve months the novelist Julian Barnes has received at least £90,000 in tax-free literary prizes – you can campaign for a Booker Prize, you can plead, grovel, etc., but the only way you can win a big cash award is to write a book that happens to impress other people. You can't plan for it.

And that is an example of the happenstance quality of a writer's career. Things come along, unexpectedly, unplanned, sometimes not even wished for. Someone sends you a book for review, and that leads to something else: a side-activity as a regular reviewer, perhaps, or an unexpected friendship, or a rivalry, or an idea for something else you might want to write.

Things come along. In the mid-1960s, when I was barely out of my teens, I happened to meet the managing director of Victor Gollancz at a SF convention. That led directly to a part-time job as a first reader of manuscripts for Gollancz, something I did for the next six years, and that in its turn led in different ways to enduring friendships with people like Malcolm Edwards, Richard Cowper and John Sladek. It also led to a lifetime's loathing of the works of Piers Anthony and Harlan Ellison, but we won't go into that here.

In summary: plan the stuff you are sure of, but be open to change if something happens along.

## Words and Grammar and Punctuation

Here we take a header into pedantry, or so some will claim. Never mind.

Words are the building blocks of literature. It pays to use them correctly. In these days of tweets, text messages and rush-to-judgment comments on website, a casual freestyle of English is emerging. This isn't such a bad thing: English is a living language, where meaning changes or widens all the time. It's always risky to say that such-and-

such usage is *wrong*, for that reason.

Writers have a duty to reflect the times in which they live, and that should include a working knowledge of the vernacular, and an understanding of linguistic growth. But a novelist or a short story writer should at least know the difference between what is 'good English' and what is not. Both are essential and valid, but in many cases casual or careless English leads to a blurring of meaning, which is just about the last thing a writer wants to happen. Good English is clean and readable, enjoyable to read, and makes its meaning clear.

Most publishers have a 'house style', which means they want everything they publish to achieve a certain textual standard, and within a varied list to have continuity of usage.

My first publishers, Faber, had a printed booklet they sent to every author, which set out their own house style preferences. I learned a lot from that, and it is, by the way, why all my books up to *The Affirmation* were printed with double quotes for dialogue and the '-ize' formation for some verbs: 'realize', 'cauterize', etc. For that reason I have grown used to, and still prefer, '-ize', but the house style of my current publishers, Gollancz, is for single quotes and I now prefer to use those.

The Faber booklet was produced in the 1960s. These days you generally find out about house style the hard way, when you see what the publisher has set up in print and how your work might have been changed, but it's possible to discern in advance what the house style might be from informed study of books that have been recently published. (You can also ask a member of staff.)

Now here is an admittedly short list of usage I dislike seeing. This is not complete by any means, but I have noticed most of the following in recent books.

**Alright.** 'Alright' is never all right; 'all right' is always all right. Note that 'always', 'already' and 'altogether' are all right too, but you will perish in misery if you try to summon them as an argument with me in favour of the abominable 'alright'.

**Crescendo** (often as a verb).

'Crescendo' is a musical term, a noun, which means a gradual increase in volume. Writers often use the word metaphorically to mean a peak or a climax, or the state of someone who is already there.

**Disinterested.** The favourite of pedants everywhere, but we fight the battle for this word because it has a special and subtle meaning which is in danger of being lost through widespread misuse. The true meaning is that a disinterested person is free from personal bias; an uninterested person couldn't care less. Thus one can write a disinterested review of someone else's book, while being completely interested by it.

**Onto.** Almost everyone now writes 'onto' as if it is a one-word preposition. It is not. It is an adverb and a preposition: 'on to'. In many cases the 'to' can be left out, and still be good English. 'Into' is correct. 'Onto' now appears to be standard American English, incidentally, but Americans also turn 'different from' into 'different to' and the amazingly horrible 'different than', so make your own mind up about the weight of American precedent.

**1960's.** Adding an 's' to the numbers of a decade is making a plural, not a possessive. It's therefore correct to write 1960s without the apostrophe, and if a possessive is needed then it goes at the end: 1960s' fashion, for instance. If you want to contract the numbers, then the apostrophe goes at the beginning: the '60s, the '80s, etc. It is also technically correct (but awful) to use both the contraction and the possessive: '60s' cars, '80s' music ... but much better in that case to use words: sixties' cars, eighties' music.

**Noone or no-one.** Both are incorrect: 'no one' is two words, with a space between. This usage, incidentally, underlines the fact that 'no one' is singular, not plural. 'No one were there when I arrived' is obviously wrong; 'no one from the builders were there when I arrived' is less



Free with a handmade bookmark!

obvious, because of 'the builders' getting in the way. If in doubt, think of it as 'not one', and then the need for a singular becomes clear. (The same is true of 'none', which is a singular often forced to behave as a plural.)

**Contractions:** I'd, we'll, should've, wouldn't've, etc. Contractions are regularly used in speech and conversation and are widely accepted as correct and unobjectionable, so what's wrong with them in fiction? Nothing at all in dialogue, because that's the way people speak, but when used in narrative or description, the writer should always think twice about using them. Contractions certainly give a racy, vernacular feel to prose, and can make long passages seem more readable or comprehensible. The argument in favour of them is to suggest that uncontracted forms ('I would not have', etc) look fusty and mock-formal. I personally argue that contractions are often used hastily or casually by writers in an attempt to sweep over other bits of careless grammar or syntax. A well constructed sentence which

uses uncontracted words will be just as readable and will not seem pompous.

Dictionaries. Worth an essay in themselves, a subject of almost endless interest to the geek side of me. I have about a dozen general dictionaries in the house, of varying ages and intensity, but the two I refer to most often are *Collins English Dictionary* and *Chambers 21<sup>st</sup> Century Dictionary*. For Americanisms I use *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, which has helpful little pictures to aid the understanding of the harder words. All three of these are one-volume dictionaries.

It's almost pointless to say that there are dozens of books on English usage, but my own indispensable favourites are Fowler's *Modern English Usage* and Eric Partridge's *Usage and Abusage*. For American usage I recommend Strunk & White's *The Elements of Style*. A reliable journalistic guide is *Guardian Style*, published by the newspaper of that name. Intended for the use of *Guardian* contributors, but available online, it contains the newspaper's current preferences: for example, the difference between 'Baroness Thatcher' and 'Lady Thatcher', should you ever want to know. Finally, for the sheer fun of reading a short-tempered but entertaining rant, there is Kingsley Amis's *The King's English*, which combines sarcasm, wit and a real love of English in detailing his various strictures on usage. Do you know the difference between 'alternate history' and 'alternative history', and which is correct? Sir Kingsley will tell you and afterwards you will never forget. He also advises against ever using **infamous**: it's too ambiguous now, he says.

### A shameless plug

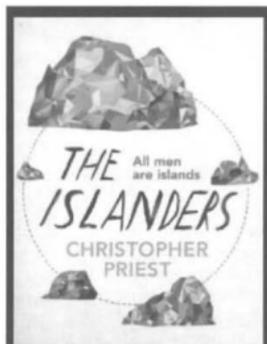
Finally – I have written a book that discusses the craft of writing from a more personal and historical point of view, a detailed account of my struggle to become a writer. Adolf Hitler pinched the appropriate title before I got to it, so I called my book

*Ersatz Wines*. It is the story of the first five years, and includes all the short stories (previously unpublished, for the most part) I wrote in the period between absolute ground-zero no-hope beginnings, and starting the precarious life of a freelance a few years later. I describe the stories as 'instructive' rather than 'instructional'. Each one is appended with two descriptions: what I thought I was doing at the time, and what I think of that now.

*Ersatz Wines* can be ordered from me direct, using PayPal, at [grimgrin@gmx.com](mailto:grimgrin@gmx.com) Price: £16.99, including p&p. As well as receiving a beautiful hardcover you will also receive a handmade bookmark for which lesser mortals plead in vain.

If you prefer, *Ersatz Wines* is also available on Kindle. It costs £4.75 from Amazon: <http://amzn.to/wuRnWB>.

No bookmark with that, though.



Christopher Priest has published eleven novels, four short story collections and a number of other books, including critical works, biographies, novelizations and children's non-fiction.

His previous novel, *The Separation*, won both the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the BSFA Award in 2003. He has been nominated four times for the Hugo award.

His latest, *The Islanders*, returns to the Dream Archipelago and is on this year's BSFA Award Best Novel shortlist. It is available now from Gollancz.

# ONE VIAL OR TWO?

Real biochemists do more washing up than *CSI*, says C John Arthur

I am a biochemist and work in a lab. This is rather unusual in academia at my stage of life--but I am inspired by Fredrick Sanger who, once he'd got his first Nobel prize, didn't rest on his laurels but went back to the lab and got a second one.

Nowadays, if you look carefully at what people who call themselves biologists or life scientists actually do, then it is often really biochemistry. We are in an era in which biology is defined at the level of the molecule. If, however, you observe what people who purport to work in a lab on TV actually do (say *CSI* or *Silent Witness*), that's a whole different story. They are not doing biochemistry, they are doing *Science Fiction*. Of course, when I say science fiction, I don't mean the genre we are interested in, I mean fictitious science. So what's real biochemistry like?

Let me start at the beginning of my career. As a PhD student, at the end of every working week there was the washing up to look forward to. There was no dishwasher: this hallowed servant was reserved for undergraduate practical classes. There were just two sinks and a lot of dirty glassware, mostly test tubes, and there was a routine. Following a period of soaking, came a phosphate-free detergent wash (with much zipping up and down with the test tube brush), followed by the 8 rinses in cold tap water--deemed sufficient by my boss to get rid of the aforementioned detergent--and finally a wash in distilled water.

One Friday my exertions at the sinks were interrupted by the appearance of our technical assistant and a local school girl on a work experience visit-- who was strenuously objecting to the fact that she had been asked to wash up.

The technician pointed to me and said, "See, he has 'A' levels and a degree and he's doing a Ph.D. and he's washing up." Quite.

Working in the lab helps me to feel I am really doing hands-on

science. So what did I have my hands on today? Well, I was separating small molecules using high performance liquid chromatography (HPLC). You will have even seen such equipment on *CSI* or *Silent Witness*. My molecules have a radioactive tag which means we can easily identify them in a cellular soup. So the separated materials leave the HPLC column and are then fed to a pipetting robot which diligently, following a prescribed program, puts different amounts of the liquid coming from the column into plastic vials--more than 200 of them.

When I say robot, don't get your hopes up. The comparison between this faithful automaton, and my smart phone, is the difference between me and a pan-dimensional AI. The robot has, on occasion, stopped for no apparent reason in mid-run, or skipped the one crucial vial that had my molecule of interest in. So it has sentience, but it is not benevolent.

Each one of more than 200 vials then gets a squirt of a fluorescent cocktail that acts as a detector. Is this automated? No. And to keep me on my toes different vials need different volumes of the detection agent. The vials are individually capped and shaken. And then each gets a number 1-200+. You can leave off the numbers to save time and effort, but what happens when you drop the rack? Well you lose a set of data from an experiment that took several weeks to set up and perform, never mind all the money spent on expensive chemicals. So you do the numbers. Then you load the whole lot into a machine that reads the level of radioactivity in each vial. The instrument is run by a computer utilizing MS DOS. It can even export data (theoretically)--but you would need to find a copy of a 720 K floppy. Unfortunately, it is smart enough not to try and read or even format your standard 1.44 Mb floppy. These days the aforementioned smartphone is used to photo the dot-matrix print



Squirt, close, number, repeat. 200 times.  
Science in action.

out and then transfer it to a OCR program from which the numbers are finally imported into Excel-- thus the phone is an indispensable part of lab equipment.

This whole process is repeated at least twice a day for up to a couple of weeks.

From this description you probably get the impression that my star burns feebly in the scientific firmament. In fact, I work in a big research centre and run my own small group. We've had a few papers over the years in the top journals.

The thing about education is that it lifts you out of the mire the less qualified have to endure. There are no monotonous production lines for us. Science, or at least biochemistry, is a whole different thing.

## DOING IT FOR REAL...

Ever seen the job you do misrepresented in print or on the screen? What is it really like to do what you do? Tell your fellow writers, help us get it right in future.

# WRITING THE OTHER

The best way to learn about how others live? Ask them and listen to what they tell you, says Lauren Beukes

**W**riting *The Other* is a sensitive topic. It should be. Not least because it's so often been done so very, very, badly.

But the truth is that unless you're writing autobiography, any character you write is going to be *The Other*.

I am not a serial killer. (Unless my multiple personalities are hiding something from me.) I am also not a fifties' housewife, a parking attendant, a car-jacking reality TV star, a Ugandan email scammer, a Tokyo mecha pilot, or a future-world stubborn-as-heck gay anti-corporate activist. And even though my novelist friends Thando Mgqolozana and Zukiswa Wanner like to joke that I'm a black girl trapped in a white girl's skin, I'm not *Zoo City's* hip, fast-talking, ex-journo, ex-junkie **black** Joburg girl protagonist, Zinzi.

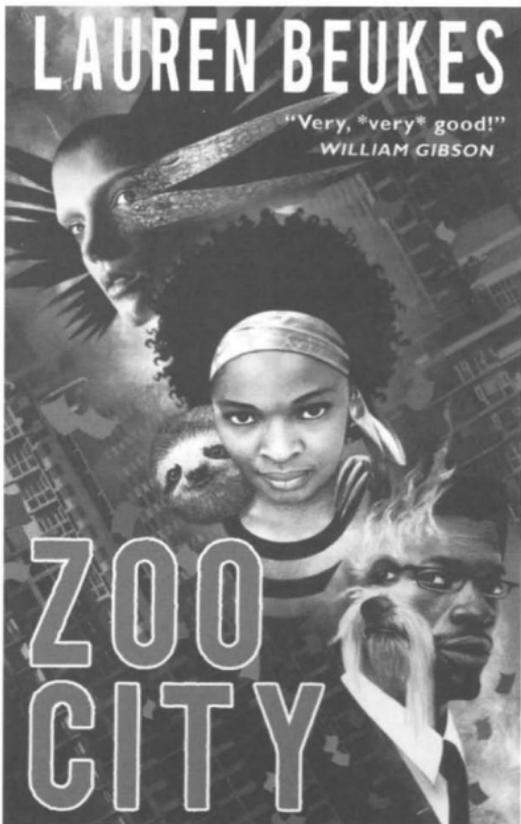
I don't have a lot of patience for authors who say they'd be too scared to write a character outside their cultural experience. Because we do that all the time. It's called using your imagination.

The other people I don't have a lot of patience for are the ones too lazy to do any research. I heard a radio interview recently with a poet who had written a whole book of verse about the sex workers in Amsterdam's red light district and the incredible empathy she had for these women and how she tried to climb inside their heads to really expose the painful reality of their experiences.

Number of sex workers she interviewed or even tried to engage in a casual chat to get that in-depth insight into the painful reality of their experiences?

Zero.

Sometimes imagination isn't



enough on its own. People are people. We love. We hate. We bleed. We itch. We succumb to Maslow's hierarchy of needs and traffic makes us pissy. But culture and race and sexuality and even language are all lenses that shape our experiences of the world

and who we are in it.

The only way to climb into that experience is to research it, through books or blogs or documentaries or journalism or, most importantly and obviously, **talking to people**.

I was lucky to have good friends

like Lindiwe Nkutha, Nechama Brodie, Verashni Pillay and Zukiswa Wanner who were all willing to take me round Johannesburg AND read the manuscript afterwards to make sure that I got the cultural details of the people – and the city – right.

I read books on Hillbrow, like Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207*, watched documentaries and movies and turned to Twitter to get expert first-hand info on city details like storm drain entrances and good places to dump a body (!).

I chatted to music producers and journalists to understand the South African music industry and interviewed refugees like Jamala Safari to get insight into what he'd been through (and referred him to my publisher when he mentioned he'd written a novel about his journey from the DRC to Cape Town – his book will be published later this year by RandomHouse Umuzi).

I visited the Central Methodist Church where four thousand refugees were sheltering in the worst conditions that were the best possible option for them in that moment, got bounced from The Rand Club, paid for a consultation with a sangoma (who diagnosed a dark shadow over my life

and recommended I sacrifice a black chicken) and did follow-up interviews with other traditional healers to make sure I was on track on the details before I twisted them to my fictional purposes. And I spent a week just walking round Hillbrow and talking to people.

As my official "culture editor", Zukiswa Wanner busted me a couple of times on inaccuracies – almost all of them on inner city living details, like Zinzi stopping to buy a single Stuyvesant cigarette from a street vendor. "No ways, dude, I'm sorry, it would be a Remington Gold. That's the cheap generic," or providing the correct slang for the ubiquitous plastic woven rattan suitcases used by refugees: "amashangaan"

"But is Zinzi black enough?" I asked her, after going through all the notes in her commissioned reader's report which hadn't addressed the point even once.

Zukiswa laughed at me. It hadn't occurred to her.

"Oh Zinz is hip and black enough," she said, "Fuck anyone who questions that. What does that even mean? Don't worry about it. I too am going to be catching flak. I write purely from the male perspective in *Men of the*

*South* so you'll have company."

No-one (yet) has given me flak for being a white South African writing a black South African. And Zukiswa's *Men of the South* was just short-listed for the Herman Charles Bosman prize. She says she only gets flak from people who assume she's a man and that Zukiswa is a pseudonym.

In the end, I think my question should never have been "Is Zinzi black enough?" but "Is she Zinzi enough"? Because it's not about creating one-trick ponies that reflect some quintessential property of what we think being *Other* is about. It's about creating complex, deep, rich characters driven by their own motivations and shaped by their experiences.

People are different. There are things we don't get about each other. Usually it's because we haven't asked.

So ask.

And then write.

Lauren Beukes is the South African author of the novels *Moxyland* and the Clarke Award-winning *Zoo City*. This article was originally published on The World SF Blog ([http://http://worldsf.wordpress.com/](http://worldsf.wordpress.com/)).



# OVER THE WALL



Gary Budgen argues that we should extend the idea of *the other* across class boundaries.

On a recent MA Module on character we were introduced to *Writing the Other* by Nisi Shawl and Cynthia Ward. This is an attempt to encourage writers to tackle realistically the creation of characters that belong to groups that are considered 'other' by the dominant sections of their societies. This admirable book focuses on race, gender, ability and sexual orientation. It does contain a curious comment in the introduction about social class:

"As we've said, the focus here is on those differences that are generally presumed to be important. While class is arguably as important as race in terms of characterization, and is certainly more scientifically quantifiable, on this continent it's not a difference majority culture recognises as significant."  
[p 7]

The authors are not claiming that there is no social class in north America, just that those of different

social classes are not perceived as an *other* in that society. I wouldn't want to comment on that since my knowledge of that society is limited; however within British society class has always been something that people are conscious of and that has had a profound effect on the lives that they lived and the way they are perceived.

In a *Guardian* article about a radio series she has made, Polly Toynbee points out how class has become a stronger determinant of life chances than it has been for many years. She also says something revealing about how all pervasive class as an issue is in our society:

"I asked everyone I came across if they had a story about class: everyone has – either working class people confounded by middle class snobbery, or privileged children embarrassed by being posh. Pretence, shame, pain, guilt, anger – the stories tumble out. Scratch below the surface denial and class is

everywhere, as I found in making these programmes."<sup>1</sup>

It is often pointed out that the first question a new parent asks is what sex their child is. They don't ask what class; they don't have to.

Without getting into definitions of what social class is, what it is based on, and whether there is an underclass or a 'precariat', I find the concept of cultural capital useful. This idea, originally from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, argues that the linguistic and cultural advantages that certain children get at home give them advantages in later life. Basically it is *not* just how much money your parents have that determines life chances but the books, music, art that you are exposed to, the ideas that you are introduced to in education and the expectations people have of you.

I think that the important point about all this is that people with a lack of cultural capital of the sort that is valued by mainstream society are perceived as being outside of the

intellectual culture of that society; in this sense they are regarded as an 'other'. These groups will have some *relation* towards this lack. This could be envy, resentment, an inverted snobbery or outright hostility to what is deemed to be elite culture. But often this relation is characterised by a failure to recognise the very lack itself.

This cultural blindspot is brilliantly discussed in a recent book by Lynsey Hanley called *Estates: An Intimate History*. This is both a memoir and a history of social housing in Britain. The author's own childhood on an estate outside Birmingham is described along with her growing awareness of a world she has had no access to. In the chapter "The Wall in the Head" she discusses how this 'wall' divides off those who grow up in isolated working class communities from the cultural products of the wider world.

"The wall is about *not* knowing what is out there, or believing that what is out there is either entirely irrelevant to your own life, or so complicated that it would go right over your head if you made an attempt to understand it." [p153]

Partly her point is that the way that social housing in Britain has isolated the rich from the poor has contributed to this wall. Where classes live in greater proximity then I would argue that 'the wall' is sometimes more like a slated fence, with gaps you can see through to a landscape you might not understand; but Hanley's argument remains valid. She then talks about her growing knowledge of the existence of the life that goes on over the other side

of the wall. As she grows up she begins to realise that there is a world containing a culture she hasn't been exposed to before. One point of interest is the way in which popular culture, and she emphasises *good* popular culture, can play a decisive role in fostering this awareness. For her it was the music of the Pet Shop Boys:

"...my favourite pop group from the age of nine, when they sang a song about the West End of London and made it sound like the most exciting place in the world. They had other songs, about the kinds of lives in which you had the choice of becoming a pop star, a writer, a composer or a revolutionary." [p154]

Finally from the point of view of a writer, as opposed to a character, the sort of cultural capital you have and its value becomes rather more complex. What is valuable to a writer goes far beyond what is often valued by society in general. Like actors we have to be able to assume lots of roles and so in our case having once worn a Peckham Manor school tie is as valuable as having worn one from Eton or Old St Pauls. Daniel Day-Lewis, the son of a poet living among working class youth in south London, talks about how his childhood informed his approach to acting. This is part of his BAFTA award speech for *There Will Be Blood*:

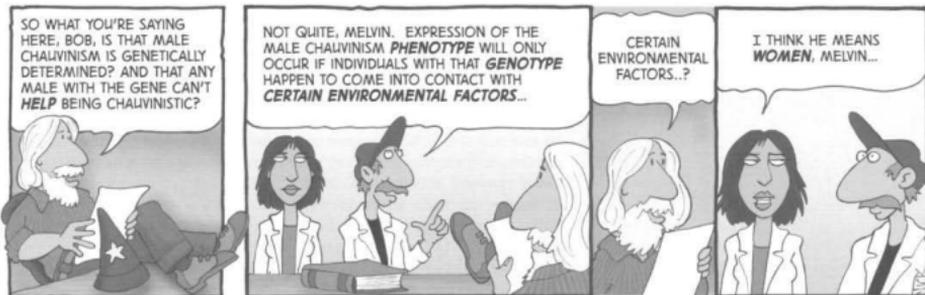
"...Invicta infants school, Sheringham Primary School in Charlton; Greenwich Park, Blackheath, the streets of Deptford, Lewisham, New Cross, the bomb sites on the Isle of

Dogs, the wharves and shadowy lanes of the south-east London docks, the terraces of Millwall football ground, those were the playground of my early life."

He goes on to talk about how this 'play' informed his work as an actor; how he has never stopped playing. So it is when we think about creating characters we have to draw on all the resources of the method actor, no experience is ever wasted.

And hopefully we will be contributing to that 'good' popular culture that Hanley talks about. SF can be a form that discusses complex issues in an accessible way. It certainly made me aware of the world beyond the walls I lived behind. One thing that always appealed to me were those stories, such as those by Samuel R. Delany, where characters moved from the lowest to the highest echelons of society seemingly without effort. Or those stories where the current order was overthrown entirely. SF in general offered accounts of societies that were not like my own and gave me the same sense, an almost palpable shiver, that I remember getting in one of my first days at primary school when the teacher told us a story about pre-historic man wearing skins and living in caves: things haven't always been like they are; things don't have to be like they are.

1. *The Guardian*: "Money busts the convenient myth that social class is dead" <http://bit.ly/wCrrkU>



# TO PLUG, OR NOT TO PLUG...

Promoting your work is good for a writer and good for readers, says Juliet E McKenna

As always, at this time of year, there's been a fair amount of discussion about awards and award etiquette. It's time for nominations and/or voting on a good few genre awards; the Hugos, the BSFA Awards, the David Gemmell Awards.

I've been watching with interest, because, yes, I have a dog in this fight. I am on the long list for the David Gemmell Legend Award for best fantasy novel, with *Dangerous Waters*. I'm also an Arthur C Clarke Award judge this year and next, and judging the James White Short Story Award. While these are different in that they're juried and judged rather than voted on, it's fair to say I'm taking a closer interest in the whole awards business than has been my custom.

There are some very strong opinions out there about what level of mention an author may reasonably make of such things. There are those who seem to think so much as mentioning their own novel's eligibility for nomination crosses some invisible line into the unacceptable. Others see nothing wrong in writers actively canvassing through their blogs and regularly tweeting 'Vote for Me! Vote for Me! Then there's every shade of opinion in between.

I have a good deal of sympathy with those who think that an author's work should speak for itself. That a book should prompt others apart from the writer to speak for it, if it is to have any claim on a nomination or votes. Personally I cringe at the thought of waving my new novel at people uninvited, still less urging them to buy it with the extravagant self-praise that I occasionally encounter, in person or



online. I was brought up to consider such behaviour utterly reprehensible, no ifs or buts. Besides, in today's book trade, such behaviour is all too often associated, fairly or unfairly, with the most deluded of self-published no-hopers.

Except – how are people to know that an author's book is eligible for nominations or long/short-listed, if no one tells them? It's no answer to say that if readers are following an award they will already know. What if they're not even aware of that particular award? Is it a publisher's responsibility to tell potentially interested parties? Insofar as they can, yes it is, and they do (though

I've seen that criticised as well). But what if an author's fans don't happen to follow that publisher's website or Twitter feed? I am getting fed up, in this age of information overload, with being told I should/must follow dozens and dozens of feeds, blogs, social media manifestations and networks, that I have some sort of nebulous obligation to keep current with such things, if I am really committed. Sorry but there are a great many other calls on my time and the number of hours in a day is unaffected by my personal level of commitment.

The most effective and straightforward way for me as a reader to learn what's going on with the

specific authors I am interested in is to check their personal feeds and blogs. So why should they be discouraged by online hostility insisting they're not allowed (and who exactly decides this anyway?) to tell me about their eligibility, nominations etc? With that insistence followed by threats that if they do, such behaviour should automatically stop any right-thinking person for voting for them now or in the future! When, incidentally, publishers' marketing departments and publicity officers for these awards will be encouraging those authors to share exactly that information, in keeping with their own job descriptions. When one of the most valuable functions of awards is to prompt the debate and discussion so vital for keeping a genre developing in ever more interesting ways for readers and writers alike.

What about what happens after that? If such self-promotion is acceptable, where does one draw a line? Is it acceptable to let people know your work is listed/eligible for an award? But not to openly solicit votes? But not to post, for instance, a short story online for people to read for free? But not for an author to privately email all their contacts who might be eligible to vote, offering to send them a copy direct, at once? Because I've seen all those things go on. And yes, I can see how the latter practises might well skew a vote, if one candidate's material is far more accessible than another's. But who's going to decide these things, given subjective opinion on what's acceptable behaviour can vary so widely between different people? More practically, who on earth is going to enforce any such rules that might be made?

I've seen similar hostility directed towards authors retweeting or linking to favourable mentions of their books. But why shouldn't we direct potential readers towards information which might help them decide if our book is likely to be to their taste and is something they might like to consider buying? This is a business after all and authors operate in an increasingly hostile environment. Changes in bookselling have pretty much done away with the days when a reader could browse a shop's shelves and expect to see the new releases and

the midlist authors displayed on equal terms with the big names, for the reader to pick and choose.

I remember the first time I was on a panel at a US convention when the moderator blithely announced, 'I'll ask the panel to introduce themselves and plug their latest books.' Everyone in the room stiffened, sitting up straighter on their chairs. Me with shock at this challenge to my Traditional British Reserve. The audience with keen anticipation, clearly eager to hear about new books and authors new to them. My fellow writers by way of preparation to inform potential customers about their work in a friendly and professional fashion, standing their books up on the table to show cover art, etc.

Why should an author feel awkward or embarrassed about offering such information? But at UK conventions I often see writers barely making mention of their own work, brutally self-deprecating if they do – and then I hear con-goers afterwards asking each other for more information on a panel member's titles, where that writer's work sits in the genre, trying to work out if someone whose contribution they've appreciated in that discussion is also likely to write books to their taste. If such information's available in the programme, all well and good, but all too often it isn't. How does such reticence encourage that broader conversation that keeps a genre vibrant and evolving?

When considering hostility to self-promotion, I think there's a clue in that word 'pimpage', which grates on me like fingernails on slate whenever I hear it. I don't care if it's being used ironically, post-modernly, self-deprecatingly or whatever other justification might be offered. Writers are not pimps and our books are not whores. We are not sleazy money-grubbers demanding cash for something that decent, clean-living people otherwise exchange for free. We are offering our work-product and inviting the reader to purchase it, to give us a return on our endeavour. How is this different from any other commercial transaction, where goods and services are exchanged for a fair price?

Ah but TS Eliot had to work in a bank, we are told. We read infuriating

articles like a recent one in *The Guardian* insisting that 'real writers' don't seek monetary reward for their art. We see the enduring literary snobbery that insists a commercial best seller must self-evidently be devoid of true merit precisely because such popular appeal can only be meretricious (from the Latin, meretrix, a whore). Such snobbery then promptly inverts itself, insisting a 'challenging' or 'important' novel must be lauded, even if it's sold under a thousand copies. Presumably because only the clever people can understand it. Sorry, but I cannot read these self-selecting, self-regarding critics without wondering if they've ever heard the story of *The Emperor's New Clothes*.

Such people have clearly never studied basic logic. A best-seller can indeed be devoid of literary merit. A chair can have four legs. A best-seller need not be devoid of merit. Something with four legs need not be a chair. It can be a racehorse. With all respect to Dr Johnson, I don't know a single author who writes only for money. This is not in the least the same as saying we cannot justifiably expect for a fair reward for our writing.

To return to the subject at hand. Ultimately every reader and writer will find the level of self-promotion that they're comfortable with. I have decided that am not going to be discouraged from offering useful information to potential readers, such as links to reviews online or a brief introduction to my work if I'm on a panel discussion. I see nothing wrong in letting people know that one of my books is eligible for consideration for an award. What readers choose to do with that information is then up to them.

Juliet E McKenna is the author of the fantasy series *The Tales of Einarinn*, *The Aldabreshin Compass* and *The Lescari Revolution*. Her latest novel, *Darkening Skies* (available now from Solaris) is the second book in her latest cycle of novels, *The Hadrumal Crisis*



# LEARNING TO LOVE LEARNING

Paul Graham Raven is currently studying for an MA in Creative Writing at Middlesex University. In this, the second article in a series, he talks about his personal and academic progress.



If I wanted to be trite, I might say that if it were possible to list everything I've learned since October last year in a 1,000 word article, then I'd have been wasting my time.

I started reading writerly advice books and blogs back in 2003; if exposure to self-evident advice was all it took to break through into publication, I'd surely be out on my bestseller signing tour right now. That's not to knock advice books and blogs, mind you, but the best of them simply expand on a central truth: that to learn to write well, one must read, and read critically; then, one must write, and write often. Knowing that fundamental truth is one thing; putting it into practice, for me at least, is quite another.

A Masters won't teach you that either, of course. When it comes to motivation, you need to bring your own. That said, I know from

years of writing reviews and non-fiction that I respond positively to deadlines. As such, I've found that regular and structured demands for tangible written output have got me turning out more copy than I've ever managed before... though I make no claims as to the consistency of its quality.

Interestingly, though, I'm less intimidated than I used to be about producing work that I feel is substandard. Workshopping and the development of early drafts is a central component of every module of the course, and the opportunity to find out what your peers think of your works-in-progress might well leave you feeling better about them, not worse. Which isn't to say you'll never get anyone saying bad things about your work, of course – far from it! But you might find the bits you loathed pushed everyone's buttons, while your darlinest paragraphs

are the most in need of murdering. That's valuable knowledge, a weapon for beating back your inner editor.

Come to think of it, the greatest value of a Masters might well be your access to a small but qualified audience: your lecturers, of course, but also your course-mates. At its best, the workshop scenario provides an opportunity for accelerated learning, because the group can make instructive mistakes at a greater rate than you can on your own. (The same goes for successes, too.) Combined with incisive feedback from your lecturers, this is vital stuff; this is where the generalist aphorisms of the advice book are transcended with specific feedback from people who know and care about good writing.

There may be someone on your course who just doesn't like your style or subject matter, or with whose work you have the same issues. This, in a way, is valuable preparation for an important writerly reality: even the great masters can't please all the people all the time. (Indeed, evidence suggests that the bigger you get, the more people will find fault with you... but that's another essay for another time.)

However, an environment where everyone has a problem with your style or subject matter by default would be hell on earth and, I imagine, very demoralising. That's what makes the Middlesex course so special, in that – uniquely for UK universities – it has a strand explicitly dedicated to science fiction and fantasy. Reports from writers of sf and/or fantasy who have attended (or even simply attempted to apply for) MA courses in Creative Writing elsewhere suggest

that the hostility of the literary academic establishment towards those genres has not abated. Here, however, the genres have a happy home alongside their literary cousin, supported by writers and critics and tutors who value them and study them closely.

Incidentally, I've not once heard my lecturers make derisive comments about the artistic merits of literary fiction; indeed, we've studied a fair bit of it. Make of that what you will.

## A PERSONAL DISCOVERY

I was still waiting for my first semester results when I began this piece. They were posted a few days back, and I found I'd done much better than I thought I had.

One thing I'd forgotten about the academic experience is how important the benchmarks of assessment becomes to me, and that's amplified somewhat by the very nature of a creative writing course. That isn't to say you don't get a lot of feedback on your work during seminars and from your tutors – far

from it! – but creative writing is not easily graded on a numerical scale. So while I was aware that I was doing good work, I didn't know *how* good. Just good? Really good? Just good enough?

That's an interesting distinction, because I enrolled on the course with the attitude – consciously-held, at least – that it was the learning that mattered, not the qualification. Now I find that the qualification matters at least as much. I am no longer content to pass; I want to pass *well*. I want to get a first. That was an undreamable dream until it was shown to be within my theoretical reach.

What's different about my academic experience this time out is that, since I'm studying something I really care about, my engagement with it isn't a chore. On the contrary, I find myself getting frustrated at having to do anything else – like my day-job, say, or the washing up. I talk to PhD students, and find myself thinking I want to be one. Sure, it's a lifetime of hard work for comparatively low pay. But making

a career out of creating things, out of thinking about the things that fascinate you most, and writing about them – how could that not be tempting? Academia, it seems, has more attraction for me than I ever suspected... though it probably helps that my day-job, which I started around the same time as the Masters, is also academic in nature.

And now my inner pessimist wants to say that I'm probably just riding off the combined serotonin rush of my good results and the seasonal shift into spring, and that the worst is yet to come, and I might yet fail or fumble, and cross the finish line somewhere in the midfield, rattling around near the nipple of the Gaussian bell-curve. Maybe I'm just enjoying the grass-is-greener effect, doing to the academy what I always do when I travel: falling in love with wherever I visit and wondering if I should move there forever.

Well, maybe I am. But then again, maybe I amn't.

I like it here. Perhaps, if I work hard enough at it, I'll convince them to let me stay.



Illustration by Nearing Zero <http://www.lbb-into.com/>

# POETRY IN AN SF MAGAZINE?

No, it's not a mistake! Charles Christian, the new poetry editor of *Focus*, introduces himself and sf poetry.

Poetry and science fiction – surely they have nothing in common? Sci-fi is all about setting the controls for the heart of the Sun whereas poetry is... well it's all mimsy verse about nodding daffodils and skylarks isn't it?

Leaving aside the fact some of the earliest and best known examples of SF&F writing in world literature – Homer's *Odyssey* and *Beowulf* – were written in verse (all the easier to remember in non-literate societies), Edgar Allan Poe's stories were a strong influence on early science fiction writers such as HG Wells and on Gothic horror yet Poe started out in literary life as a poet. And then there is HP Lovecraft, another writer who started as a poet, before moving into sf and horror. He was still writing poetry until shortly before his death. Fast forward to the present day and if you ever catch a Neil Gaiman reading, you'll see him reading some of his own poetry.

Quite simply, there is no incompatibility between the worlds of sf prose writing and poetry, they are just different forms of creative writing, which is why I'm now editing a poetry page for *Focus* magazine and plenty of other publications in the sf&f field also carry poetry.

Want to know more? The granddaddy of the sf poetry scene is the Science Fiction Poetry Association (or SFPA) a US-based organisation that has been around since 1978, producing a quarterly print (and PDF) magazine of sf poetry called *Star\*Line*.

The SFPA defines sf poetry as "poetry with some element of speculation – usually sf, fantasy or horror." [www.sfpoetry.com](http://www.sfpoetry.com)

The SFPA is probably best known for its annual *Rhysling Awards* (one

award for long poems of 50 or more lines in length, one for shorter poems of 49 lines or less). The Rhyslins are named after the blind poet Rhysling, a character in Robert Heinlein's short story *The Green Hills of Earth*. However *Star\*Line* can also claim to be one of the first publications to start publishing scifaiku, the illicit love-child of sf poetry and the Japanese 17-syllable haiku form (actually haiku are a lot more complicated than that but you get the idea). Here's one I wrote earlier (not selected because I think it is good but because it avoids copyright clearance issues)...

space time dilation –  
when I return  
the only face I know is mine

Terry Pratchett uses scifaiku as chapter epigrams in his non-*Discworld* novel *The Dark Side of the Sun*, while David Brinn's *Uplift Universe* series even includes a race of intelligent dolphins that speak a haiku-like language called Trinary.

While the Americans seem to accept sf poetry as a legitimate literary genre, as do sf&f magazines, over here in the UK, the poetry establishment, including most Arts Council-funded magazines, is definitely not a fan. Submit sf poetry to them and many will reject it with a snuffy note along the lines of "we do not accept light verse." Being accused of writing *light verse* is a great insult in poetry circles, on a par with being told you write like Pam Ayres.

But, there is a way around this. Instead of describing your work as science fiction poetry, call it 'magical realism'. People on creative writing MA courses can – and will – argue forever on the exact definition

of magical realism but I'll leave it to two other authors to succinctly (and cynically) sum up it up. According to Gene Wolfe "magical realism is fantasy written by people who speak Spanish," while Terry Pratchett said "magical realism is like a polite way of saying you write fantasy."

So, good luck with your writing. Please do remember that poetry does NOT have to have clunking rhymes at the end of each line. NOR does it have to be split into dinky little stanzas – the piece by Beverly Ellis on the next page is an example of a 'prose poem' – a form that sits on the borderline between poetry and flash fiction. DON'T worry about all that iambic pentameter stuff you were taught at school – all you need to write poetry is an ear for words. In fact reading a poem out loud is a very good way of seeing if it works as a piece of writing. AND if anyone ever gives you a copy of Stephen Fry's book *The Ode Less Travelled*, sling it in the bin as reading it will set back your understanding of poetry by about 50 years.

Charles Christian is a barrister and Reuters correspondent turned technology journalist, newsletter editor, blogger, sometime poet, photographer, and writer. He founded the *Ink Sweat & Tears* poetry website and his first collection of short stories *This is the Quickest Way Down* was published last year by Salt/Proxima Books. He also just launched *UrbanFantasist* – a website dedicated to the urban fantasy genre at <http://www.urbanfantasist.com>



# POEMS FROM THE STARS

## SOMETHING ABOUT LOVE

She had the smallest waist,  
so how the queen could lace her tighter  
taught us a lot about hate.  
My brother dwarves unlaced her,  
but not before my breath also stopped.

She had the cleanest hair,  
and it shone—a hundred brush-strokes  
every night. When the queen  
gave her the poisoned comb,  
it told us a lot about envy.  
My brothers washed her in wine  
and she gasped, but not before  
my limbs also grew heavy.

She had the sweetest breath,  
so we didn't know about the apple  
till the prince persuaded us  
he knew more about love,  
and we let her go.

At Christmas now,  
an owl brings me bright ribbons.  
A raven, a lock of hair.  
A dove, sweet fruits.  
I chase dust-bunnies. My brothers  
work to craft her children toys.

Because of what we learned  
there is no bitterness.  
Because of what we saw  
there is no sorrow.  
We are simple men,  
but we do know something  
about love.

Jennifer A. McGowan

## DATING A NEEDY NERD

on star 74836 i tried  
to let you down gently  
explaining that we were  
now supernova  
but you failed to accept this  
becoming all cling on  
to such an extent  
i had to resort to an  
intergalactic restraining order  
may the force be with you  
to arrest you deport you  
if you come near me again

Nancy Paula Millstone-Jennings

## ADVICE FROM A CLONE TECHNICIAN

And so we watch the muscle  
rise and clamber onto bone.  
The ligaments and sinews  
thread the ghost of movement  
through each minute vault  
in the architecture of the frame.

The organs will bloom and expand  
to meet the space available.  
The brain creates itself in folds,  
thousands of concise notes to self  
form the origami of this knowing.  
The skin swaddles everything.

The moment of this becoming  
lies on the breath of electricity.  
The kiss of shock that contracts  
the heart and sears the synapses  
with the quick fire of existence.  
Savour this instant of power.

The scramble to the surface  
of embryonic fluid comes next.  
Watch the gasp for the first breath,  
learn that air is the mother of being.  
Note, their heads will turn to the light  
as if searching for something vital.

Andrea Porter

## WOODWO

Claiming to be going home for lunch, my  
big sis and her mates use their dinner  
money to buy chips from The Happy  
Plaice. Chucking them at people and  
each other, they stray towards the cliffs,  
forcing mums with pushchairs off the  
pavement – don't even notice.

As streets run out, they duck fence wire  
and cut through Seven Acre, discarding  
crumpled wrappers under oak trees, hand  
round ciggies and point at the spot where  
the police found that dead tramp. Then,  
just before the holiday camp (still closed  
for winter), something flits across their  
path, looks right at them: something dark  
and very hairy – too small for a man, but  
walking upright, and definitely not an  
ape or a panther escaped from Big Kat  
Kingdom. And it doesn't disappear, but  
races along the beach, lacing through  
upturned boats, then hand-over-hand up a  
cliff and off across the rifle-range.

Instead of Double Maths that afternoon,  
they tell the teacher to back off and look  
it up online, find images of carved heads  
in nearby churches. Now all lunchtimes  
are spent in the school canteen, feet on  
tables, cleaning under fingernails with a  
fork, peeling back chipped polish.

Beverly Ellis

## FREE WILL

I will take the future by surprise:  
For me it's impossible to tell –  
While I let the web wander and touch my  
eyes  
And create a complex spell –

I will let the Internet ride my mind  
As it dominates my soul –  
the Web can form a common kind  
Computers can control –

The web is memories as it links –  
As computers soon start giving  
Where computers begin their learning a  
mind and thinks:  
As the common mind starts living:

What makes a life as thoughts can bind?  
Computers standing still  
The World Wide Web defines the mind  
What if we have free will?

I doubt it, the Internet is a tool  
Where uneven thoughts lie odd.  
The brain of the linking line can force a  
school

And become the mind of God  
Ben Gribbin

## MANNEQUINS

What you have long suspected  
is actually true.

When the lights turn off,  
they awaken.

And stumble stiffly in search  
of their forsaken genitals

to reproduce their kind  
in an orgy of awkward passion:

a race of plastic people  
in the latest designer fashions!

Daniel Klawitter

# AND FINALLY...

## "BURLY DETECTIVE" SYNDROME

This useful term is taken from SF's cousin-genre, the detective-pulp. The hack writers of the Mike Shayne series showed an odd reluctance to use Shayne's proper name, preferring such euphemisms as "the burly detective" or "the red-headed sleuth." This syndrome arises from a wrong-headed conviction that the same word should not be used twice in close succession. This is only true of particularly strong and visible words, such as "vertiginous." Better to reuse a simple tag or phrase than to contrive cumbersome methods of avoiding it.

## The Turkey City Lexicon

This could be trouble, thought Harvey Hampton, the space-toughened astronaut. He tapped the console screen, hoping, vainly, that there was some kind of error.

An alarm started to howl.

"Bridge?" The thickly-accented voice of McKay, the bluff Scots engineer, cut through the blaring siren. "Bridge! We have a situation -"

"Really?" The hotshot space-jockey made no effort to hide his irritation as he slipped lithely into his seat, pulling the harness tight across his body. He killed the siren's banshee howl. The ship trembled. "Tell me something I don't know, Chief."

"We've lost the automatic stabilisers, we cannae hold her!" A sudden buffeting almost flipped the *The Desperate Endeavour*. "You're gonna have to land her manually laddie."

"Damn!" The broad-shouldered rocket-wrangler yelped and began to work furiously at his console. The starship juddered violently, but the wilder oscillations were dampened, the ship was back under its pilot's control. "Engineering? Engineering! Can you give us the power to get back to orbit?"

There was the sound of something heavy smashing into something hard, a soft moan and then silence.

"Chief?"

There was no reply.

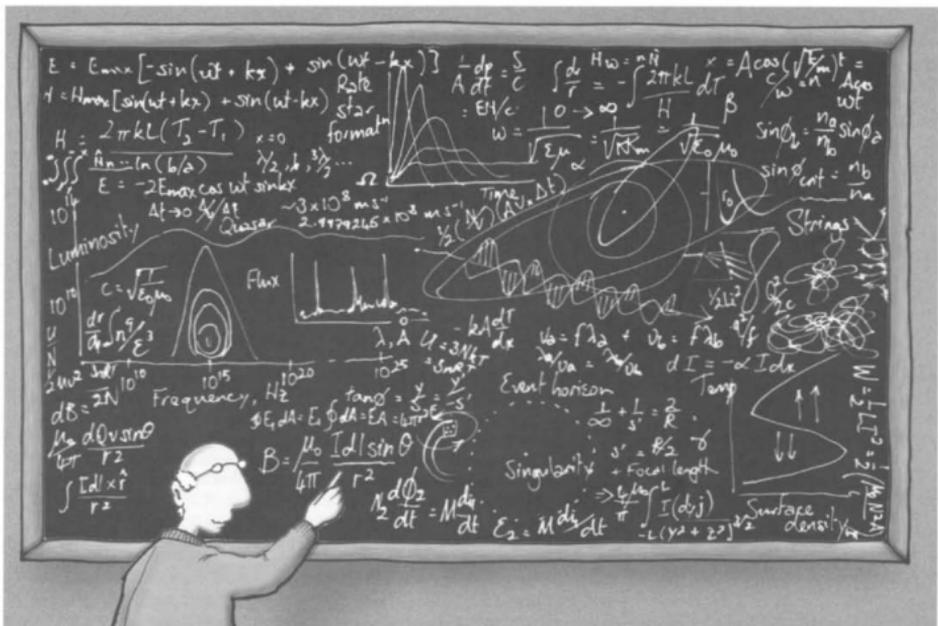
The slick-faced space-pilot dipped his head to his shoulder, scraping sweat from his brow with his uniform's epaulets as he frantically tried to bring the nose of his ship up into a shallower angle of attack. He tried again to raise engineering.

"I need more power, dammit."

The only sound on the com channel was a low hiss.

The strong-willed steersman ran his fingers over the panel. He tried to reinitialise the automatic landing system but the console burped an error message. Shaking his head Harvey swiped away the overlay of pilot aides, revealing the basic flight controls. Warning lights flickered, they were still coming in too steeply.

"Well, it looks like we're going to have to do this all on our own," muttered the quick-thinking flyboy. He patted the console. "Come on *Dessie*, let's get us down on the ground."



Astrophysics made simple