

F O O U S

The BSFA's magazine for writers

With CoAxe in Tibet
Outrageous fiction from Mike Cobley

Poetry from Cardinal Cox

The Farce be with you
Tanya Brown with a cautionary tale...

Here comes the Judge
Mike Carroll delivers the verdict

Issue 39 May 2001

ISSN 0144-560X £1.75



The B.S.F.A.'s magazine for writers

Issue 39
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Artwork and photo credits:

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Design Pod Productions

Fancy organising the Orbiter groups? Carol Ann has kindly taken up the job in the interim, but we need someone permanent to help co-ordinate this valuable resource. Contact Carol Ann in the first instance.

Drawn in the snow by apemen with bones, photographed by a passing monolith, and waltzed backwards and forwards through time until the copy fell out. Mushed southwards by the shade of Amundsen, with the finished product hopefully free of all viruses, both biological and electronic.

Digital copy still thanks to Hewlett Packard: CD-RWs rock!

Printed by PDC Copyprint, 11 Jeffries Passage, Guildford, Surrey GU1 4AP

Distributed by Bramley Mailing Services.

The Danube isn't blue. It's green.

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Focus is published bi-annually by the British Science Fiction Association © 2001

BSFA membership rates

Renewals and new members:
Paul Billinger 1 Long Row Close, Everdon,
Daventry, Northants. NN11 3BE

UK residents: £21 per year (E14 unwaged)
Life membership £190

Europe £26 per year

Rest of the world: £26 surface mail £32 air mail.

USA enquiries: Cy Chauvin, 14248 Wilfred
Street, Detroit, MI48213 USA

Other BSFA publications:

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The British Science Fiction Association Ltd is a Company limited by guarantee, number 921596, and is a non-profit organisation run solely by unpaid volunteers

Registered address 1 Long Row Close, Everdon, Daventry, Northants NN11 3BE

Redantry

Back in the dim and distant past, I remember thinking: "Ooh, 2001. I'll be thirty-four. That's really old..."

It's 2001. I'm thirty-four. As midnight chimed, I turned to my wife with a silly grin on my face. "Made it!"

The future isn't what it was meant to be, all those years ago. We haven't got flying cars, AI, or bases on the Moon. But neither do we have smallpox, so it's not all bad news. Science fiction is still around to shed light on the present, and opportunities for writers come and go. Last issue *Focus* carried an advert for *Unhinged*, since sadly folded. Guidelines for *This Way Up* were included: the editor tells me he's now planning issue #3.

As always, the future is what we make it. While a reader of *Focus#39* might not be overcome with awe and whisper "My God, it's full of stars!", I hope we've got enough to keep you busy.

On a different, more difficult note: Brian Hopkins, interviewed in #38, has let his friends know he has non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma. Cancer. Smallpox may have gone, but there are plenty more things out there waiting to leap out at us and cut us off in our prime.

Brian will fight as only Brian knows how. His online journal will tell the story, warts and all. I fully expect to fly out to Oklahoma one day and let him show me around. In the meantime, I shall pray for him and his family, stop prevaricating and get on and do some writing.



Simon Morden
Gateshead, March 2001

About the cover

Canary Wharf – original photograph and digital manipulation by Cal Ghee.

One of London's regeneration zones, Canary Wharf is dominated by an iconic tower (subsequently the target of a terrorist bomb), and sits on the banks of the Thames opposite the Millennium Dome (subsequently the target of sustained info-bombing).

I remember the area when it was all empty docks and derelict warehouses. How things change...

Submission guidelines

Non-fiction

Articles on all aspects of writing, publishing, editing, drawing, printing even, are always welcome. Length should be no more than 5000 words. Letters regarding *Focus* are also gratefully received. Please mark 'for publication'. I reserve the right to edit/shorten them.

Fiction and poetry

Focus needs high-quality fiction and poetry of 5000 words or less. Science fiction, fantasy, and psychological horror all taken. There's no payment, but you'll see your work grace the pages of this magazine.

Art

Black and white only! *Focus* is always on the lookout for covers, illustrations and fillers. Good clean line-art works best.

Non-BSFA contributors get a complimentary copy of *Focus*.

How and where to submit

By post:

Text: double-spaced, single-sided A4, or on disk. I can convert most formats, but always include a .txt file in case.

Art: one illustration per page. Don't send originals – only photocopies. If you want to send a disk, you can. Again, I can read most formats.

If you want your work back, enclose an SAE with sufficient postage. If you don't, mark the work as disposable, and either enclose an SAE or a valid email address for a reply. I like covering letters.

By email:

Text: as part of the body text, please. No attachments.

Art: not by email! Put it on the web and send me the URL!

The address for postal submissions is:

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The address for electronic submissions:

focus.editor@blueyonder.co.uk

Queries regarding the suitability of submissions should also be directed to the above addresses. Please wait at least a month before querying submissions – I do have an increasingly busy life!

NEXT ISSUE DEADLINE:
1st September 2001

With CoAxe in Tibet

Mike Cobley

1. Omens On Asgard's Radar

There's a Death 'n' Resurrection show on at the Palace of Devices. The domes and naves echo to the soft chants of the newly-risen, electric purrs that shake hot blue flashes from the chemical archcurtains surrounding the stage. Aztec dogs chew chalice flies in the huge chamber's corners and I'm at my alcove with a glass-garbed courtesan from Moscow-Troy when a frenzied commotion erupts at the pilaster-flanked entrance. A brace of fist guards go topsy-turvy as an emaciated figure throws off their heavy hands and lunges in through the doors, knocking tables and giggling dowagers flying.

It's Rafael Wheelfoot, scrawny scion of the Ladygold feather-making dynasty. An arabesque of air jewels coils and twists in his wake, and a fume artisan glares his way through a collar of pipes while struggling to rebuild the aeroglyphs fragile integrity. I bestow a mad grin on Rafael as he clammers up the stonewing steps and careers to a halt at my table. Pearls of sweat quiver and drip from his lantern jaw, splashing on the quilted foil floor.

"A surfacing, my captain! There has been a surfacing!"

My grin grows a hungry edge. Over at the stage the show falters to a halt and, to my pleasure, my dramaturgist intones the wolten lines of my most recent horoscopic poem.

"Fires of waking aching hate await you/ The gate swallows you then you swallow the gate/Infected blackness/ Injected sadness/ Through the godwiring to treasure and jeopardy/ A window of rifles/ A head of bullets/ The density of destiny will engage nemesis -"

With a gesture I silence him then lean over the table, softly saying:

"What is it, Rafe? Where is it?"

Eyes a-roll, he licks his lips and mouths a shifting smile.

"...th... the... the book place, captain..."

My laughter comes in knots of raw breath. A window of rifles... It can only be the Texas Book

Depository, womb of the Kennedy deathmyth, arsenal of mighty powers, a history-omphalos greater than any other spawned upon the face of our fluctuating globe. I could topple thrones and shake the pillars of heaven...

"And where?..."

He's still all of a sudden, mouth a dark wet gap, fear and delight glittering in those moire eyes. He stares and swallows. "The Cliff of Tibet, my captain, up high, hundreds of miles, thousands of cubits. The centurion of a gyromantid flock saw it and crossed half a world to our watchtowers with the news. But one of his braves fell, caught by a netbolt over... Shamboula..."

And thus does Fate seal its borders around us. I take a vril cheroot from within my black samite swagger coat, light up, inhale, and give my courtesan a valedictory breathkiss. Smoke curls and flows through the folds of her glass robes, hazing the curve of her breasts, blurring her sweet mons. But it is the crater-valleys of Shamboula that loom in the crucible of my mind's eye: Shamboula, domain of my oldest, deadliest rival, Marcus Mazarin, Baron of Thorns. Vildest of miscreants, worthiest opponent. Memory unpacks our numerous past encounters from which I lingeringly recollect the Quest for the Nest of the Pygmy Whale (and our epic struggle amid the Moving Forest of Niger), and the Adventure of the Last Compass (and that crazed race through the rafter-roofs of Gangestown).

Marcus Mazarin. If he holds the gyromantid captive, then he knows of the Depository and will already be assembling his army.

I rise and all eyes are upon me. My lieutenants emerge from the Palace's pleasure sacs, obedient to my mental call, and head out into the pipe-alleys of Negev-London, foreheads aglow with pressgang warrants.

"I am Sylvanus," I declare. "I am Captain CoAxe - who will follow me to the end of the world?"

Eager cries go up, volunteers surge forward,

their entertainments forgotten, and Rafael wheels and weaves among them, orchestrating their worship, picking their pockets. But my thoughts swirl back to the malefic Marcus and his hideous resources. Like him, I can call forth from the trembling earth loyal ursinoid warriors, leather-and-steel machineries, and flocks of groundsharks. But only he would delve down, deep and dark, and deal with demons.

Thus are we meant for each other.

2. Sweatswords In The Basilica Of Moons

The main duct of Negev-London is aswarm with people. Crammed into apertures and waypores, they cheer our departure and scatter fogberries before the wheels of our vehicles. Fetishmongers run alongside, tossing handfuls of lucky font fruit into the air and offering a variety of charms for sale - fragments of the True Elvis Guitar; utterly genuine Anomalign seeds; slow-burning prayer scrolls; a map of the mythical Timebrain of Earth, as scribed by the Neon Swami...

As we emerge from the city's bulbous contours, continents of clouds drift down to see and windwords burst from their long grey flanks to whirl and hum over our heads.

One says: "Sooner let earth, air, sea, to chaos fall/ Men, monkeys, lapdogs, parrots, perish all!", while another insists that, "Great things are done when men and mountains meet/ This is not done by jostling in the street."

As they expound away to nothing, I sigh and smile. It is a holy moment. How sublime are the blessings of deities, even ones as ephemeral as these. I sow either side of the trail with paean chips and the ground flowers with the faces of Blake and Churchill, Hendrix and Morrison, all murmuring beatific anthems from the Ascension of St Byron.

We crest the solid ridge oversurrounding the dusky basinland of Negev-London. I order a valedictory broadside of flags: truck-borne cannon fire volleys of cloth-pupae and the air fills with piranha pennons, garish emblematic predators whose colours ripple and flash in a glorious frenzy as they consume one and other.

Later, I ride above the armoured column in my balloon mast, presiding over a war council in the crow's lounge. I dispatch Rafael and two lionmoths on ahead to scout the unstable approaches to Apollo's Gorge, a chasm that bypasses the vile environs of Shamboula. Then I send orders to my forces and for hours they scribble formation after formation upon the land below. As night begins to build its wall of nothing across the world, I unroll on the chart table the most treasured of my treasures - an

ancient flux map, brown and worn, its original markings long since erased or redrawn by entropy and previous owners - and contemplate its contours.

Ah, these tortured topographies! Hills, lakes and promontories that move to the molecular convections of Earth's strataless abysses. Planet-spanning plates forever gone in the Nanowar. Humanity's final great warfing, dissolved along with the long heavy history of the race's radioroads. Once, the gypsy paladins say, all the world was a place of ironclad stability and durable statehood. Then, no new mountains wrenched themselves from the wound of the ground and weathered down to drumlins in hours. No uncharted littoral seaboard rose and sank in the course of a single night. No creatures were conjured from horse dung and poppy seeds, nor were storms engineered in polar steamiron caves. Such it was and never again would be.

Brooding done, I raise a jewel-nailed finger and my lieutenants follow it down to the map where I point to the eastward earldoms and principalities. Silence, as I trace a groove route through those soft, yielding territories, all the way to the Hybrid Highlands, past Baffin Island Mountain to where the Cliff of Tibet stands back to back with the Great Barrier Reef Range.

"So, and so, and...so," I explain to my lieutenants who nod happily, eagerly. Such overt cameraderie! A remembrance tear forms at the corner of my right eye but before my reliquarian can remove it for safekeeping, shouts and trills come from the leading groundshark squad.

"Smokewaves and firespouts, captain, from a building! Its bricks flow, its spires fuse!..."

We round a sharp bend and the sacrilege is clear to see. The Basilica of Moons, home to a million curses and questions, and their guardians the Netherhood - all is in flames. I force my fury back down and call my crawling crusade to a halt, and when all motion has ceased I go within myself, my psyche, and invoke the Involvement.

The CoAxe family history is a serpentine masterpiece of accident and design. Much has been lost to the ages, but much has been gained. The Involvement mind ritual was 'learned' by that wily bandit Great-Great-GrandUncle Nikolai CoAxe from nameless mystics in the Valley of Rust, since when it has been a mainstay of family erudition and warcraft.

The ritual begins and reality unfastens. In clear mind I enter the first cell, the Calyx of Seeing, and behold/ *inside the Basilica the ideogram walltiles melt into bubbles, while dead*

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bodies of the Netherhood are everywhere, animated by the doctrine motors inked into their skins. The torn and scorched carcass of a lionmoth sprawls on the flagstones outside the altar vault. Beyond the door the remains of the second lie scattered within the vault itself. I want to think of Rafael but the red oak floor is splatter-marbled with opalescent blood. It threads and drips from the gymromantid impaled with a ceremonial keystaff to the huge Book of the Infinite Second, the Basilica's most treasured icon, chained half way up the wall. The atrocity-taste of the Baron of Thorns is everywhere. I decide I've seen enough/ and I enter the second cell, the Calyx of Doing and, ignoring my amazed lieutenants, I step to that spot, chainsaw numbergun in hand.

Dead monks stagger blindly after me through halls of burning scrolls as I hunt for their killer. Catechism-tattoos on their jaws make mouths open and close, lips curl, and tongues dumbly writhe. Grim with compassion I break their legs to keep them from hindering me, and press on. In the Crypt of Axioms I finally confront the Baron's emissary, a bispinal Formtrooper. It is in the process of filletting my faithful Rafael, still alive though drained of even his previous dubious sanity. Pausing only to activate my apparel's blazoncolour system, I charge into battle. My coat articulates my rage. Black, it goes. Black Red Black Red Black Red Black Red Black Red!

We snatch dripping sweatwords from the wall and engage in a rampaging duel of delirium and devious dodging. We thrash and grunt our way down smoky corridors, along charred balconies, across ashen cloisters where the burning stanza trees strew flamelets all around. And all the time Rafael remains impaled on the Formtrooper's spike limb, arms waving, head lolling. At last our mad shindig leads us into the refectory where I trick the trooper beneath the pan rafters and loose a deluge of skillet, woks and samovars upon its head. I free the lifeless Rafael, then drag the stunned monstrosity to a long table, strap it down and pour half a precious vial of trepidness into its ear.

But something seems to snap within it and as it slumps into gristle and ooze, something moves in the liquefying offal, a small figure. Suspicious, I raise my acidic sword, look closer at this homunculette and see a glistening, grinning, abominably familiar face, its tiny eyes regarding me with deranged amusement. It licks its lips.

"Greetings, darling adversary - " is all I let this accursed proxy say before smashing it with my commandeered blade. When faced with

malevolence, violence is eloquence.

I return to my army with Rafael's poor broken body. The Basilica I order closed up, the spiked flames from its Scrolls of Hate left to rattle and burn as a permanent reminder.

In the dreamgardens of nearby Tintagel we bury his remains in a full ceremony of prayers, limericks and equations. Among Rafael's effects was found a flash-frozen windword which, thawed and released, chatters lines from the Mahabarata as the ritual winds to a close. I vow to harvest his reprogeny on my return from vengeance.

3. The Armature Of Karma

Only after crossing the radiant breadth of the Harpsichord River under cover of dusk do my advance helibuzzards spot the distant victory flags of the Baron and his absconding rabble. In glee I take a button-sized simago from my weskit and place it on the flux map at the reported location. The simago writhes beautifully into the form of a toad and starts creeping slowly across the soft chart.

"Pursuit!" I cry. "The transgressor flees our fury and fire!"

An angry joy swirls through the synthetic ranks of my HQ company and the eager groundsharks leap hither and yon in a scattering of turf and dew. I dispatch a platoon of stenog bees, bulging with new orders, off into the restless gloom. Moments later comes acknowledgement, a sweet mass chorus of howls offset by the rhythmic brandishing of fiery banners. Glints fly from the piezohorns of ursinoid berserkers, steel-and-leather dozers spin their toothsome turrets, and soon my legions are climbing a bouldery slope sparkling with candle plants.

Up in my balloon mast I savour the splendid precision of the precombat phase, that pattern of iron unsullied by improvisation. I glance at the glowing arrays below, then relax back into my howdah's padded embrace and consider the strange entourage that has gathered in my quest-wake. Beside the wide viewpane, a solitary troubadour fingers a fibreglass microgrand, composing. Against the wall, before an audience of ensigns, a burlesquer juggles the letters of my name into anagrams and phrases (he juggles with his life, methinks). The air is skeined with fumes from the syrupoteen retort around which pierettes giggle and cast me wanton winks. I smile a ghostly smile and turn my attention to a nearby exchange between two junior senators and a Thulian professor who insists that the turbulent lands of Earth may be quelled. Engrossed in

the vigorous dialogue. I fail at first to notice the troubadour's approach till he is almost at my elbow. I regard his mohair-swathed bony frame with ritual loftiness.

"Your business?"

"If it pleases your excellency - ." He bows deep, baggy sleeves sweeping the parquet floor. " - I would present to this resplendent agglomeration a musical piece, nay, a supramozzo to accompany your forthcoming victory over the nefarious Baron of Thorns!"

I find myself much taken with the fellow's low-key approach and bid him continue. Roisterers vacate the floor which he sprinkles with tiny red feathers before taking a device of strings and curious snouts from a shoulder pack and planting it before him. Then he gazes all around him, lastly locking his gaze with mine. Unease frissons my thoughts as he flicks a switch and says, "Attend, you gilded minions, to your magnificent deaths!"

I am halfway out of my seat when he vanishes in the dark blue wave that spreads from the contraption, all light negated. A deep sawing drone fills the circular lounge which lurches violently as the balloon mast starts to lose height. I fight the blind panicking mob in my long lunge for the great lounge window. Once there I pause a second, then duck as a screaming man - I recognise the juggler - comes flying out of the eldritch midnight blueness and hits the window. A splintering crash and the reluctant skydiver is gone in a razor-fragment cascade. I straighten to follow his showy trajectory but a figure swings down from the ceiling, blocking my view. The troubadour.

"The Baron bestows a fine end upon you, Captain," he says above the throbbing moan of his insidious gizmo. "Your vasty crypt awaits below. Behold your demise!"

So saying, he backtumbles out the smashed pane and I see the lifterpack on his back, its nozzles glowing, repelling the planet. With an unhinged grin and a farewell flip of the hand, he soars skyward, leaving me to turn my eyes down.....

An utter black hole gapes in the hillside, chunks of rocky ground falling in as its edges widen and eat at the terrain. Many fragmyths and bloodcomedies are but sly commentaries on our distant forebears' atrocities, and it is with the sudden recollection of Melville Amalli's *Visions In The Hand* that I realise that this abomination can only be that spawn of the labs of the Ancients, an Anomalign. Its stygian maw grows, tugging boulders and streams of topsoil into its fractal gulfs, and I wonder if it could be a living thing, this fusion of mathematics and pan-

dimensional madness!

The balloon mast plummets, my hair flutters wildly, and the cantos of an embryonic autoeulogy sound at the back of my thoughts as I gaze down into that inky kernel of infinity. Then a burst of crazed distant laughter breaks my fugue and far above I glimpse a figure in the air, a silhouette dancing against turmoiled sky. Then he is gone as night swallows all.

4. Kitetowns And Anomanauts

"What peril!" says the Caliph Revealed. "What a taunting of Fate!"

He sips from the goblet of honey-sweetened poison in one hand, then from the lemon-flavored antidote in the other. I smile, nod, drink from my tankard of Tobruk tea and say:

"Risk and danger are the price of greatness, O Caliph. Truly, though, my gratitude for your assistance outstrips all words. Help my followers and I back to the surface somewhere -" I think of the Cliff of Tibet, of the Book Depository. " - and my gratitude shall be most tangible."

Sip, he goes. Sip. "Hmm. Tangible..." Sip, sip. "Hmm..."

I curb my entirely reasonable urge to shove this jowly buffoon off his heap of cushions and down into the plaza of his aerial town. Instead I reflect upon the gargantuan net that halted our downward plunge. I recall the moment of impact, the snapping of the balloon mast, the creak of ancient ropes beneath our wild weight, and the sight of troops and vehicles falling through ragged gaps in the mesh. Then came three peculiar vessels, ramshackle barges built from junk and jetsam, which brought us to the aeromobile autarky of Al-Irgansh.

And into the poison-potent hands of the Caliph-Revealed.

My grovelling gratitude and crassly obvious hints of colossal bribes prove futile. He leans in close (honeystench fills my nostrils) and tells me of the Anomalign's depths, the grinding cloudpools of debris where kitetown ejectees are able to survive for brief moments. Then he refills both goblets and has me removed.

Dog-headed guards bind my wrists with ceremonial sisal and march me from the Caliph's tovertop gazebo. Doldrums stain my sluggish psyche. A gantry swings over from a nearby minaret, bangs on the platform lip, and they hustle me down, thin grinning lips drawn back from their fangs. I sneer, then stare moodily out over the kitetown of Al-Irgansh. Suddenly the air above the town centre ripples as if from rising heat. I think nothing of it... till a tall wooden spire, sliced clean and diagonal,

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topples. And a bracing convulsion of havoc erupts.

With my captors distracted, I commence a seamless sequence of derring-do and agile antics. I bamboozle their grasps and leave them gantry-hugging as I clatter down the minaret's spiral stairs to street level, dodge collapsing buildings, discuss the existence of the Timebrain with a suave court assassin till a falling ripple cuts him neatly in two, sample the delicacies of an abandoned suitemeat stall, and treat the good burghers of Al-Irgansh to an impromptu display of acrobatics as I evade the unwelcome attentions of a brass mechanical which curses me in the Caliph's voice. All is nimble footwork and barbed lampoonery until I vault over a low wall and swandive into emptiness.

I am about to let out my death bellow when an open craft sweeps in below and I land face-down in a pile of furs and cushions. "Captain!" go several familiar voices and I surface to see four of my lieutenant-senators crouching in the craft's bows. They crawl over, laughing and quipping, but when I ask how they come to be aboard such a fortuitously positioned vessel, a harsh voice from behind speaks in their stead.

"My purpose is clear, Captain, and my dreamplan is well-designed. But only with your aid may a dread bane be brought to its final end."

I turn and behold a leather-clad, eagle-headed man sitting in the carpeted stern, lace-cuffed hand gripping the tiller.

"You have the advantage of me..." I begin.

"Enemies flower and multiply - " A spidery forefinger indicates Al-Irgansh's disintegrating underside and the silver mechanicals drifting towards us in single-seater dirigibles. Far above, the bright calltrops of hostile kitetowns circle. "Foes gather, and Time vetoes procrastination, CoAxe. There is but one exit from the trap and that is by the door of your questing desire. Take this, and dream us through it!"

On an outstretched palm lies a miniature Anomalgn, black and solid, flat as a coin. It tips it into my cupped hand and lines from my horoscopic poem knife into the moment - *The gate swallows you, then you swallow the gate....*

I eye the eagle-headed man, the antiquated cut of his leathers, the rich copper texture of his feathered neck, and the unshrinking unwinking unity of his gaze. Habitual suspicion concocts a hundred ignoble intentions, a thousand awful aftermaths. But with my stare hooked into his, I raise my hand and lick up the Anomalgn,

tonguing it to the back, grinning.

Instant alteration. All around, reality shivers and quivers like a tide of shadows as the Anomalgn slips upwards into my astonished brain.

5. Timebrain Games

Behind us, pursuers dwindle to gnat-lights as I steer our craft down into the mad, ever-repeating motifs of the Anomalgn. My lieutenants huddle together against the dazzling rush while the eagleman clings to the gunwale, his thoughts a clear ringing chain in my mind - *Fractal phantoms hinder us yet. Envisage your prize, CoAxe. Think of reaching out to touch it...*

In the cold streaming hurtle, I comply. I visualise the Cliff of Tibet, cramming its shocking immensity into my mind, tundra heights cleaving low grey muffles of cloud that conceal ...the Depository... and with a blur, a stretch, a shift and swerve, we tear joyously free from the Anomalgn's membrane.

Now we sail a strange darkling void, we fix in this vessel of my furious desire. Huge pieces of Anomalgn membrane, caught in our wake, fill the void with spectacle: a great surging river wriggles and mates with a rainbow; globes of fire play a shell game with moons of ice; minnows eat carp eat barracudas eat sharks eat whales; a gargantuan cow gives birth to a glittering city which in turn spawns a torrent of scrolls, books and pictures. Meantime, a myriad tiny shapes orbit our vessel - lighthouses, teepees, archery targets, helicopters, rose blossoms, playing cards, chess pieces, a succulent neon swarm.

"Ho, eagleman," I cry in delight, "an unslighting of Humanity's symbolstore..."

Then I turn to see him climbing over the side and before we can leap at him, a hand comes up holding an oval-barrelled weapon.

"We are cruising through the Timebrain of Earth, Captain, and it is here that my dreamplan says I must leave you." Just then a titanic curve of river sweeps past and he dives for it. "Be persistent in your crusade... we shall meet again..."

The muted words fade as he flies and cease when he plunges into the bankless waters. I shout, urging return, but he swims powerfully out of sight. My lieutenants regard me in hope but I lack answers. Only my finest expression of heroic resolve suits this moment and I am duly garbing my features when grey light and mist engulf us and we find ourselves sprawling on cold, hard ground. Familiarity sparks my senses - I can taste destiny on the air.

"We've arrived!" I mutter, and we scan the

surroundings. The incline behind drops into murk while up ahead a large building juts from the slope, a dark tilted block of forebodeance. I gather my compatriots close and chant the ancient warwhispers of Negev-London, forge the promises they need to hear, praise their strengths, invoke the images of past glories.

Then we climb the Cliff of Tibet. Battleblood beats in my veins as the cracked ground underfoot becomes piled, oddly polished rocks. We are forced to jump from rock to rock, mounting the slope closer and closer to the book place. I am only metres from its base when a scream shocks the silence and I turn to see one of my lieutenants half-dead in the pincer-grip of a grey-helmeted Formtrooper. The others stumble in horror as the polished rocks tilt underfoot and more Troopers rise like death.

"No!" I bellow and on springheels of rage leap towards the madly-skewed building. My clever hands find holds on the stonework and I climb out of reach, hurling defiance down at the cretinous brutes as they squabble over the remains of my companions. Then I turn my face up and stare straight down the muzzle of a freakish rifle aimed from an upper storey window by a white-shirted man. And between his shoulders sits not a head but a big gleaming artillery shell.

For a moment I hear no shot, feeling only the tremendous impact to my skull which jars me loose. Then I am on my back on the ground with the detonation crashing and resounding all around me. Reflex invokes the Involuntation, opens the Calyx of Retaliation...but my play is wrecked as Warhead's deviant carbine falls from his open hands to land on my chest. And as I watch, legs unfold from being the rifle's butt and a slit in the firing chamber speaks to me.

"Ah, delicious Sylvanus - I have such plans for you!"

I savour the moment's terror as Marcus Mazarin, Baron of Thorns, completes his transformation from weapon into homicidal maniac, accompanied by a string of boney creaks and chesty groans. My half-invoked ritual suspends the senses and I feel no pain as he dismembers me, laying my segments out in neat piles. All has become a wild reverie of dislocated pain. Warhead sits in the background while the Baron works on me, keeping me alive while eagerly showing me diagram after diagram detailing the ways in which he will employ my bones and organs in this mechanism or that biodevice. The novelty soon palls for him and I (that is to say, my head) am left wedged between two boulders as night sables the encompassing sky.

I wish for even the faintest puff of breath with

which I could sling a curse at my tormentor, and can only laugh within the cage of my mind. Thoughts at last melt into sleep and I dream of bathing in champagne, attended by Apache concubines who pleasure every part of me then wave goodbye as the bath opens into an estuary along which I drift -

- and awake to find myself surfing on downhill-surgng waters. Segments of my fleshy frame bob and wallow close by. I catch the raucous hunting cries of fliers overhead but my rescuing deluge soon finds a cavemouth and I am borne into underground gloom.

The flowing torrents swirl to a halt in great tunnels and cavities, and somehow I am not surprised when an eagle-headed figure comes splashing through the shallows. Waterdrops glint like jewels among his feathers and on the sagacious curve of his beak. Patiently he collects all of me, then sits down and starts putting me back together.

He tells me stories and sings me songs, but I am not lulled. His fingers tease my portions into new shapes and part by part I am reconstructed to a new design, well and smoothly fitted, surface to heavy surface, a steady accumulation of linear purpose. The essence of Sylvanus CoAxe abdicates, and another is enthroned.

Then he stands, cradling me in strong arms as the waters rush and sweep us away. Grottoes and caves give way to chambers mysterious through which we drift, past magnificently adorned walls, murals of pistons and springs, mosaics of hammers, mobiles of bearings, gears and levers, ceilings tiled with golden circuitry. My remaining self-vestige knows we are again somewhere in the Timebrain of Earth, confronting the unfathomable. Truly, it is a strange brew of circumstance that only tasting will unscramble.

Surroundings haze and melt. The eagleman wades across the current, steps up onto a wooden platform and into shadows. Darkness gathers. Menace. He pulls back the bolt in my head, sees the miniature Anomalign nestling blackly in the breech, and nods.

"Soon. Very soon."

I am too much the grim gun to answer. Then, as he slides the bolt back in, a window ripples into blurry existence by his side. He turns, raises the stock of me to his shoulder, and sights down my barrel at the figure of Warhead who crouches by another window, one hand gripping the transmogrified Baron. From our higher vantage we can see past Warhead to the slope beyond where a sudden irruption of dark fog disgorges five dishevelled forms. My self-vestige quivers with recognition,

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but otherwise I concentrate on my rifleness, on the target, on aiming, on releasing the pent-up trigger, on containing the detonation....

Warhead comes to readiness, swinging the Baron-weapon round to point it out of the window. And I feel the eagleman's angry snarl as he triggers the rifleness in me and I ROAR.....!

6.The Virtue Of Steamers

While the final details of my physique return to their former inestimable configuration, I sit against a rocky protuberance and ponder my experiences. Thoughtfully, I put a forefinger in my mouth and press teeth and gums, prod tongue, poke palate. I try to imagine a miniature Anomalign rocketting along past the furniture of my throat, and find it a test of my envisioning skills.

"Astonishing," says my companion, the former eagleman. "That this place was to be my escape route."

I nod, attempting to look unconcerned as the Book Depository slowly grinds and rumbles back into the ground. But its loss is offset by the complete disappearance of the Baron of Thorns: I console myself with the thought of Marcus Mazarin, trapped in a room filling with pebbly soil as the building sinks...

"I can't thank you enough, Captain. I've been a captive of the Timebrain for several eternities...Tell me, is all of Earth like this?"

I consider him. On our exit from the shadows of the Timebrain his ornithic features transmorphed into a more human countenance, that of a grey-haired, round-faced man, ordinary-looking at first glimpse. Not at the second, though.

"That is the truth of it. Our planet tracks an uneasy orbit and we can only dance on its turmoil." I indicate the mist-veiled lands of the west with a sweep of my arm. "Would you care to join me on my homeward-bound-faring? - good!" I whistle up my lieutenants, restored by the vagaries of ruptured reality, then turn back to him. "And what, pray tell, is your name?"

He smiles ruefully, secretively even, then delivers a flashing grin. "Jack," he says. "Call me Jack."

Events, I sometimes feel, are their own reward. From the foot of the Cliff of Tibet we catch a pleasure steamer across the moisture zones of Kalimantan. On board, Jack and I play devildrums with two travelling well-sellers from Rio and become briefly involved in the intrigues of rival bands of wire-smugglers. All is resolved

by the time we put in at Nairobi-Dundee and we receive the appropriate gratitude from the NaiDun Prince and his troupe of festival wives.

From there we take an airship orecarrier to the Melbourne Neverglades where we charter a Tuareg bikerboat and sail down the long great wash of the Gattara River. Jack opts to leave us at Oslo-Rangoon, entranced by the open and democratic nature of their despotism. With hoarse camaraderie I bid him farewell, then continue on our way.

I arrive in Negev-London as I left it, in a flurry of celebration and bustle. After a whirlwind round of salutations, citymap awards and the like, I retire to CoAxe Towers and settle back into my routineless routine. From time to time I receive word of happenings in Oslo-Rangoon, and later hear of the election of a new Pope Minister who promises a radical new future. I keep meaning to visit the riverport but whenever I consult the child-seeress Marianna (one of the reprogny I retrieved from the Tintagel dreamgardens soon after my return), she goes into a twitching, mouth-frothing trance, speaks in several guttural voices at once, scrawls demonic sigils on the walls, and when recovered advises that the omens are not yet propitious. Together with several recent unsettling dreams, it has forced me to consider the deceptive nature of the future. The unknown has its own uses for the unwary. Besides, there are many more pleasant ways of hurling oneself into the psychically murderous jaws of Fate than overfamiliar perils.

Aren't there?

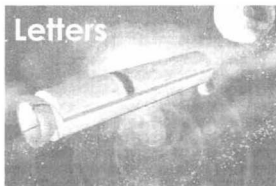
Michael Cobley had his first story published in the *Cassandra* Anthology back in 1986, and first professional publication in *Other Edens II* p/bk anthology in 1988 (although Roger Robinson insists that his drabble for the *Drabble Project* was the 1st). He's had stories published in several UK magazines, including *REM*, *Auguries*, *Interzone*, *BBR*, and in Canada and the Czech Republic. He's also been known to write various reviews, articles and acerbic polemics for a variety of pamphlets and journals, including *Science Fiction Eye* and *Territories*. More recently, his stories have appeared in *Noesis* and *Albedo 1*, with another due for publication in *Roadworks*. His first novel, *Shadowkings*, will be published by Earthlight in July.

After Every Happily Ever After

Cardinal Cox

Wolves run in dark forests
 Where woodsmen tread warily
 Hobbled and humbled, step-
 Sisters plot palace coups
 Scuttling behind skirting boards
 Mice misremember footman's duties
 And frogs, once the Prince's friends
 Dream of driving coach and four.

Cardinal Cox is a member of the Peterborough SF group. Arts, theatre and comics reviewer for *Prism* (British Fantasy Society), he has been published in *Roadworks*, has a short film in pre-production, and is a regular fictitious character in the novels of Robert Rankin (which one is left as an exercise for the reader...)



From Mark Greener via email

Neal Asher's attack on slipstream fiction was clearly heartfelt and his defence of narrative fiction passionate. But at the risk of being condemned as "too arty for my own good", I can't help responding. (And this isn't a demonstration of the wonderfully circular argument that you only like modern art to avoid appearing ignorant.)

The best slipstream fiction – in common with much modern art – *intends* to be experimental and provocative. The Tate bed (which I thought was a witty comment on urban, 20/30-something life) exemplifies this. Whether you liked the object or not, it provoked debate, not only about the content, but also about what constitutes "art" and the nature of "aesthetics".

Similarly, the best slipstream fiction aims to challenge our preconceptions, not just about the human condition, but also about the nature of literature and the function of narrative. To do so, slipstream literature experiments with form and content. But as any scientist knows, most

challenging experiments fail time-and-time again, before there is a paradigm shift. Nevertheless, it's only by stretching the boundaries of genre and testing literature's foundations that art advances.

But there is also a more fundamental reason not to dismiss slipstream fiction too rapidly. The form of modern narrative was established in Aristotle's poetics. And without experimentation, it would have remained there. The novel developed by stretching the boundaries of genre and testing literature's foundations. Over the last century, the experimentalism of Joyce, Beckett, Pollack, Pound, Stravinsky and many others all helped redefine modern art and our understanding of the human condition. Many of these were condemned by the critics when first published or presented. Now they're an established part of the canon. History – not ephemeral critiques in the national press – is the true measure of artistic greatness.

Yet, we tend to remember only the successes. Behind these giants, the literary magazines and art galleries were once full of brave, well-intentioned failures, now – usually fortunately – forgotten. To take an example close to home: if it wasn't for the 'slipstream fiction' of the 60s new wave modern SF would be unrecognisable. But if you read some old *New Worlds*, much seems pretentious crap. Sturgeon's law applies to all art.

The problem with modern art is that it fits poorly into our frantic, sound bite culture. You need to think hard about modern art for it to make any sense and before you can make a value judgement. Similarly, you need to make a

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greater emotional and intellectual investment in slipstream fiction than conventional narrative. Sometimes, perhaps much of the time, that investment doesn't pay dividends – which is clearly what Neal found in his reading. In a few cases, that investment is repaid - by several orders of magnitude.

Art progresses through the Hegelian principle of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Narrative fiction is the thesis, slipstream is part of the antithesis that reacts against conventional narrative's intrinsic limitations. Eventually, a synthesis emerges adding to the narrative tools and the structures that all writers and artists employ. That synthesis then serves as the thesis for the next generation ...

Certainly, if you have a story to tell, tell it. But what if you want to make an artistic statement about the nature of urban life? A 'plot less' story that suggests a meaningless existence might "just ... continue" may reflect your concerns, beliefs and attitudes. That makes it an appropriate form of expression. It's all about choosing the right form for the message. Burroughs' cut-up narrative captures and reflects the characters' alienation and disenfranchisement far better than any conventional narrative.

I disagree fundamentally with Neal's inference that slipstream is intrinsically worse than a "real story". Writing good avant-garde fiction is more difficult than following a well-trodden narrative line. However, neither slipstream nor narrative fiction is intrinsically better than the other. They are simply tools. You may prefer one to the other, but that doesn't negate the validity of the other to express the artist's intent.

Neal's last Rabid provoked much heated debate (which was as intended, methinks). Mark's letter is a good summation of many of the comments both Neal and I received.

For those who have yet to come across (Theodore) Sturgeon's law: "90% of SF is crud. Then again, 90% of everything is crud."

He may have said 'crap', but you get the gist...

From Rosie Oliver, Bristol

By one of those quirks of fate, I ended up submitting several short stories to various magazines during the last few months of 2000. Whilst none of the stories were accepted, I found that there was a considerable difference in the types of rejection I received. These are summarised in the table below.

A 'standard reply' included anything from a brief 'no thank you' letter to a standard set of general guidelines as to where stories usually fail. 'Useful feedback', on the other hand included individual comments on the submission which could be used to help improve it in the future. (Note that the return date is taken from the postmark and not necessarily the date indicated on the letter.)

The table in no way indicates the time the magazines would take if they are actively considering a story for publication. They could take longer.

A lot, if not all of these magazines rely on people giving up their free time to get the magazine out on a regular basis. It is therefore very much to their credit that all of them replied within three months.

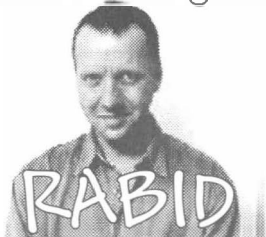
However, from the viewpoint of someone who is trying to get into the science fiction market, the stars are undoubtedly *Fantasy and Science Fiction* and *Absolute Magnitude* for making that extra effort to encourage people like myself to greater things with constructive criticism. They certainly will be my preferred choices for future submissions that I consider good enough to go out.

In the meantime, it's back to the drawing board for my short stories...

Response times are a perennial chestnut for short-story writers. You wait for ages, only to discover that the magazine had folded six months previous. I can only recommend that writers subscribe to Zene, Scavengers (available from BBR), and consult market sites like ralan.com. I will attempt to be more prompt with my replies – promise!

Magazine	Date sent	Date returned	Time taken	Standard reply	Useful feedback
Absolute Magnitude	18/09/00	28/11/00	71		Yes
Analogue	17/11/00	19/12/00	32	Yes	
Azimov's	22/9/00	06/12/00	75	Yes	
Fantasy & Science Fiction	07/09/00	21/09/00	14		Yes
Interzone	06/10/00	04/12/00	59	Yes	
Scifi.com	26/09/00	16/11/00	51	Yes	

Neal Asher gets



Censor censorship

We live in a very strange society in which it is considered more dangerous to display an erect penis on television than it is to show, for example, someone having his throat cut. This is just one symptom of the strange disease that afflicts the so-called great and the good, bringing about in them a myopia in which they come to see sex as somehow a more heinous sin than violence. Certain words are not allowed because of their shocking sexual connotations, yet it is alright to show people being shot and knifed. The sex act itself must be ridiculously disguised, yet the scene in which someone is burnt to death is as realistic as possible.

This just one of the crazy inconsistencies of this madness called censorship. If we are to suppose that films on TV cause children and the weak of mind (neither of which are likely to pay licence fees) to emulate them, this begs the question: which of the above would you want your children to emulate? The censors would of course want the lot censored and to feed us on a diet of gardening and cookery programs. I can only say that if this was to become the case then it would only lead to people turning off the television and seeking their entertainment elsewhere, perhaps out mugging pensioners to get the money to rent a decent video tape or two.

I hate censorship and would throw more weight behind the argument calling for it to be removed. It is wrong. It is another mishandling of power that takes responsibility away from the individual and in effect makes individuals more irresponsible. I wonder just how many *really* scientific studies have been made of the effects of TV violence on the individual. None I would warrant, simply because it would be impossible.

For one thing there is no possible control group for any experiment or study. All that has really been done is the kind of statistical analysis that comes up with the result that 'violent people watch more violence on television than non-violent people', which goes nowhere in revealing the why those people were violent and renders the analysis meaningless. Still though, censorship persists, and grows.

In the literary world that hideous creeping fungus called 'political correctness' is walking censorship in through the back door of children's books, and I have to wonder how long it will be before it reaches adult books. How long before this force that has emasculated our teaching profession and police starts turning all fiction into an inane mush? How long before 'conflict' is removed from fiction because it is too ... confrontational.

But how about a reversal?

There is a school of thought that believes TV violence to be cathartic, and that the people who watch it are likely to be more relaxed and less inclined to violence than they might have been. In Jung Chang's *Wild Swans* she describes China, during the cultural revolution, as a pressure cooker without the relief valves of spectator sports or violent films. Now there, I think, is a woman more fit to judge morality than some who consider they have the right. The same applies to literature: recently, an interviewer pointed out how the body count in my most recent book started high and continued to rise, yet my last encounter with violence left me feeling sick to the stomach because I had been involved in something really sordid. Those who are the spectators of violence are perhaps less inclined to take it up as a pastime – probably because they really know what it is. If violence is removed from all our forms of entertainment then people will lose a valuable learning resource and wander naively into truly dangerous situations. We cannot wrap everyone in cotton wool – because there'll always be someone out there with lighter fuel and a match.

Unfortunately, the censors are very often precisely the people to whom we must perforce complain – they are those who think of themselves as the 'the great and the good', and are difficult to cure of their myopia. Complaining to them about censorship would be the same as writing to an MP telling him you consider politics unnecessary. Entrenched self-interest is as difficult to get rid of as a verruca. And the censors will never admit any argument that might reduce their power.

Gndlinked by Neal Asher is published by Pan MacMillan, and is in the shops now!

ParcelForce Problems for Budding Authors

or

The Revenge of the Class System

Tanya Brown

I'm sitting here getting a cramp in my neck, listening to a recorded message which occasionally says "We are sorry there is no one available to take your call. Please continue to hold, or press '1' to leave a message." Occasionally it rings a couple of times and then they put me back in the loop. At least they don't have music.

I am waiting for someone - anyone - in the managing director's office (I asked for the Complaints Department) of Parcelforce Worldwide, to pick up the phone and explain exactly why they are incapable of actually delivering a parcel to the addressee, and instead prefer to hold it hostage in their Charlton depot for three days (while not answering the phone there either) before returning it to me.

A world class organisation, allegedly.

On 2nd November 2000 I sent off a big, steamy manuscript (220 A4 pages) to Big Engine. It cost me £3.85 to post, but I felt this was a worthwhile investment.

It's just come back via the Charlton depot. I've been waiting in all morning for them to deign to deliver - 'between 7 and 2:30'. My novel, returned, with no covering note. Doesn't bode well. I send a plaintive email to Ben Jeapes. I am oddly heartened to find that he never actually received it - and that I'm not the first victim of this.

And hence I'm on the ... wait! An answer!

"We don't deliver to postal boxes," says the helpful and pleasant lady who takes my call.

"Then why didn't you say so?"

I give the nice lady the parcel number. She tells me it went from London to Oxford then to Charlton. There was an attempt to deliver on 17th. "Yes, that was to me." There is no sign that an attempt was made to deliver it anywhere else. But there is a different address added to the envelope - 'Random Arts ..' Parcel Force don't mention this.

Perhaps it is something to do with the weight of the package. A letter is up to 2 kilos. This is less than 2. So it should have gone letter post unless I specified Parcel Force (which I didn't). The Post Office should have advised me that it couldn't be delivered via Parcel Force. (But I never mentioned Parcel Force). And Parcel Force, surely, shouldn't have accepted it with a

PO Box address on it? And 3 weeks turnaround time for the parcel's trip to the Oxford depot and back does seem a little excessive. "It's been in the system for 14 working days." Would have thought this would be more than ample time for someone to read the words PO BOX and reject it.

"You could split it into smaller parcels so it went at letter rate," the nice lady suggests. I can only suppose this is how they make a profit.

Apparently (and she has to check this) 2nd class letter post is only up to 750 grammes (this parcel is between 1.5 and 1.85 kilos). But the restriction is on size of package - if it's more than 600mm x 450mm x 450mm, the Post Office won't take it.

"So I can't get this parcel delivered at all?"

"You could try a different carrier"

She's going to call me back with details of how to make a complaint to Post Office Counters. She can understand how I feel. (I doubt this. Words are starting to fail me. It is like something out of a Seventies sitcom.) Apparently I can reclaim the postage I paid. My joy is bounded, to say the least. Shall also claim for phone charges, wear and tear, first class train fare to Abingdon, relief of third world debt and anything else I can think of?

It is a wonder how people like Robert Jordan get published at all. Or Jeffrey Archer. Maybe they hand over their MSS in person, in brown envelopes?

Meet you at Victoria, Ben? I'll wear a carnation ...

Postscript:

Post Office Counters are very sorry.

"Our staff and agents are expected to give out correct information at all times, and I am sorry if you feel it was not so at this office ...

I note you were given to understand that this package cannot now go through the postal system; however, this is not the case. Post Office Network accept first class items on behalf of Royal Mail up to 30 kilos in weight. ... You can send your package Royal Mail first class for £6.83. ... I have enclosed two books of first class stamps as a gesture of goodwill."

So that's how the Post Office make a profit... by making second class obsolete for certain items. The stamps were very nice.

ParcelForce are also very sorry. They regret everything, though without attempting explanations. They have sent me a cheque for the full postage amount. "Payments are limited to the compensation levels available on the ParcelForce service used." (I suppose this

would be helpful if one *knew* one was using ParcelForce).

I'd recommend that anyone sending a manuscript makes sure it isn't being entrusted to ParcelForce, especially if it's being sent to a PO Box. (Your postage rate may vary; first class is an investment worth making in this instance!) Don't expect the Post Office to dispense correct information; they'd probably be the first to admit that their current system is

overly Byzantine. It's up to you, Sender, to make sure there's a reasonable chance of delivery.

Tanya Brown is the BSFA's webmistress and has been contributing features and reviews to *Vector* since 1994. She has recently taken over administration of the BSFA Awards, while insisting that she has plenty of time to make up fiction.

Judging the James White Award

Michael Carroll

I became involved with the competition not when it was in its infancy, but when it was in its twinklecyc. James Bacon – a long time friend and fan of James White (and one of the most influential people in Irish fandom) – decided that he wanted to do something to remember the late Mr. White, a brilliant writer and one of the nicest people ever to grace the SF scene with his presence.

James (Bacon) chose an annual short story competition, and contacted me for advice. As far as we could tell there hadn't been an annual SF short story competition in Ireland since the Aisling Gheal (in which I'd been involved in the past).

Mr. Bacon assembled a team and we spent a long time deliberating over the rules. Many questions were asked: Must the stories be SF? What about Fantasy? What about Horror? What about a prize? How on Earth are we going to pay for all this? Who will we get to judge it? And how will they judge it?

One of the most important questions raised – How do we make this an *official* award? – was easily answered: James Bacon contacted Jim's widow, Peggy, and received her blessing.

Organising something like this is incredibly difficult. There are so many things to take into consideration... Once the submission rules were finalised, we had to choose a date and time for the ceremony. We knew that we wanted it to be on the Octocon weekend, because Jim was a former guest of honour at the con. Plus, the con was sure to draw a lot of visitors from other parts of Ireland. The date for the ceremony established to a closing date for the competition – after all, the judges would need time to read the stories.

On top of all that, there's the cost. There's a trophy and prize money on top of such things as booking somewhere for the ceremony, photocopying the entries, postage for the acknowledgement letters, and a lot more. Luckily, we managed to get sponsorship that

would help to cover some of the costs, but it wasn't enough. This meant that we had to charge an entry fee.

The entry fee necessitated more changes to the submission rules, but finally we were ready.

So, we had rules, sponsorship money, and a closing date. Now all we needed to do was get the word out to the people. Announcements were sent to the SF press, a website was set up, flyers were printed and distributed. We sat back and waited...

And then, slowly at first, the entries began to arrive. James Bacon held onto all of the stories until the closing date, and then passed them on to the first-level judges.

For a competition of this magnitude, it's unreasonable to expect the final judges to read through every story. The initial plan was that a team of first-level judges would be assembled, and they would read every story and create a shortlist to be passed on to the final judges.

When the number of entries passed the half-century, James Bacon decided that – come judging time – we were going to need *three* levels of judging.

In the first level, the stories that were clearly not going to make it were dropped. Just to be on the safe side, it was decided that only the truly unworthy stories would be dropped: if a story showed even the slightest possibility, it was allowed through.

I was one of the judges for the second level... I was handed a Warner Bros. Stores bag containing twenty-one stories (all with any trace of the author's identity carefully removed), and told absolutely nothing about them.

To be honest, I went a bit manic over it: I didn't even *look* at a story until I was ready to read it. I kept the unread stories in the bag and pulled them out one at a time. I even went so far as to set up a spreadsheet and enter my comments as I read the stories.

A typical comment might go something like this: "An old story idea, though with a nice twist. It reads as though the author doesn't have much experience: The indefinite noun is occasionally used incorrectly, and thus several

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sentences require re-reading. While clever, it does stretch the idea a little thin."



So, after all twenty-one stories, I went through my comments and picked six that I really didn't think were good enough, and then I went through the process again. The story that received the comment above made it through the first reading, but not the second: "Too old-fashioned, and not written well enough to overcome that.

The twist at the end is clever, but it's not original." By the end of the second reading, I'd dropped another six stories. And it wasn't nearly as easy this time around.

Now I had ten stories, each of which – I felt – was a pretty strong contender for the title. Two stories really stood out (and in fact had stood out on the first reading), but I thought that a third reading was fair.

After the third reading, I had a bit of a panic attack... I'd planned to list them in order of preference, but where to begin? By this stage I knew each of the remaining ten stories very well, and it was tough to decide which of these were the weakest. On the other hand, it wasn't hard to tell which stories were the strongest (that said, I was still dithering over which of my two favourites was top). So I made three groups, high, mid and low, and assigned each story to one of the groups.

A-ha! Now we were getting somewhere! Suddenly it all became a lot clearer. Within each group, I looked at each story and asked, "is this at the top end of its group, or at the lower end?" Once I had all that sorted, I picked the top five stories overall and called them my shortlist.

My shortlist was combined with those of the other second-level judges, and we finally came up with an official shortlist of five stories.

When I was judging the stories, I looked at the usual things: originality, credibility, characterisation, humour, dialogue, atmosphere, pacing, and so on. It's quite an achievement to get all these things right in a story, so I have to say well done to everyone whose stories got into one of the second-level

judges' shortlists – you were up against stiff competition.

So, now we were at the final judging stage... For the record, the final judges were Morgan Llywellyn, David Langford, David Pringle, Michael Scott and yours truly. At this level, we were all high-techy and conducted our deliberations via e-mail.

I waited a couple of weeks before re-reading the stories, and then – surprise – I ended up with an order of preference that was identical to my shortlist.

It wasn't too long before each judge had very much his or her own ideas as to the winner. Unfortunately, we didn't all agree on the same story. Remember those two stories I mentioned earlier? The ones between which I found it hard to decide? Well, those two were the subject of some furious discussion. I can't go into all the details here, but in the end we chose Mark Dunn's "Think Tank".

Of course, at that time we didn't know who had written the story, but the name of the author wasn't important to us – just the story itself.

Now, looking back on the spreadsheet I'd created, I see that "Think Tank" was the fourth story I'd read. This was my comment: "Excellent stuff – good writing, nice story and background, good pacing, some great dialogue. Can't really fault this one."

"Think Tank" is the only story in my first pass that didn't receive any negative comments... If only I'd realised that earlier – I could have saved everyone a lot of work! But I guess that wouldn't have been fair to everyone else.

There is one more thing... I don't know how this will make me look, but what the heck – it happened, so let's be honest here. When I was deliberating between the last ten stories, I asked myself a question: "If I was a plagiarist, which of these stories would I rip off if I thought I could get away with it?"

I suspect that it may not be the most professional question a judge can ask himself about the stories...

The James White Award website is at:
www.jameswhiteaward.com

postscript

Thank you to everyone who offered me material for *Focus#39*. I could have filled this issue twice over, with the consequence that I've kept some articles back for #40. I shall be speaking again at the Greenbelt Arts Festival in August – if you're there, don't be a stranger...