



FAN ART!

DOORWAY

I love my mother
and my mimeograph.

L/L

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WRITING A BOOK is a lot of work. It's also a strange experience. I've written about twenty novelettes and short stories, and I suppose I always thought of a book as a series of connected short stories. Actually, it's both harder and easier than that. Easier because there's a hell of a lot of room in a novel. If you want to lecture the reader on politics or describe a field of flowers, you can usually find a way to work it into the plot somehow. I know one fan writer who goes back through his old unsold stories and finds ways to incorporate scenes from them into his latest novel. (He hasn't sold many books, though.) But the point is that you can do a lot of things that aren't directly concerned with the main thrust of the novel; you can dally in random fields for quite a few pages. Likely as not it won't be cut.

A novel is harder than a bunch of short stories because it demands a concentrated effort. You have to keep the elements of the story in mind for a period of months, not weeks. If you made a remark about the ecology of Venus on page 35 you'd better remember that and not throw in some conflicting chemistry on page 176. On the purely factual level this isn't so hard. If you've done your homework and have your head on straight an extensive outline of the background will keep things straight, even if your memory is lousy, like mine. ~~But for~~ other things I find the going rougher. I've always had trouble with the characterizations I've done, for several reasons. One is that I'm always conscious that people are damned complicated. I can't predict the actions of most of my friends and neither can anybody else I know, Secret Masters included. So how can I believe in a character in a story who's got one or two prime motivations and follows them religiously for the whole time? ~~Okay, there are certain dramatic conventions. A character can't be so complicated that his actions are incomprehensible. And in fact as a reader this point doesn't often bother me.~~ But as a writer it does. The only way I've learned to do a character in a story is to identify with him completely. Every time he has to react I sit at the typer, clutched up in the circumstances of the plot, background details aswirl in my head, and write what I feel. I don't know why it's necessary for me to do this; I envy people who aren't tied to their characters and dragged down by them. I think they probably do a better job of characterization than I do. But I don't write this way from conviction that it's the way to do the job right; it's ~~a reflex, with me. Thus far I haven't been very successful with it; if you've read my stuff in the magazines I don't think you'll find any fantastically involving people in them.~~

simply

All this means I have a rather complicated character (to me) that I must follow through a lot of action and keep his reactions convincing to an ordinary reader. That's hard! Usually I don't even try. Instead I write from the character's viewpoint and if the reader doesn't understand him, too bad. That's the only way I know how to do a decent job. Otherwise I don't believe in the guy and I might as well forget the story; it doesn't have any life for me, and that's fatal. I've got a few stories lying around in partially completed states that'll probably never see print; I just don't have any emotional touch with them any more.

So for me characterization is in some ways harder for a novel than a short story. I can generally sustain a mood internally for a week or so. But for six months or a year? I have no idea how I felt about, say, technological progress vs. rural environments last year. So if my character runs into a situation in which he makes a comment on it, the remark may be in tune with earlier impressions of his personality, but at the moment it may well contradict my own feelings. Then the dialog may come out wooden, just because I don't feel it.

Some of the above sounds like Harlan Ellison: I write from the guts, baby, and I can't control what comes out. I've always smiled wryly at such comments, thinking them self-indulgent. They are, too, if you don't look back at what you've done. Harlan says he never rewrites. Okay; everybody to his own methods. But Harlan is unusual. Most writers need far more criticism than they get. Discarding your own selfcriticism is often a foolhearty gesture. I may write from the guts, but I'd be frightened to send such stuff out without a careful re-examination. I've always followed that policy and for the first year or two of casual short story writing I found myself completely rewriting everything. But for the last two years, when I was free of graduate school and had a chance to put in some solid hours of writing every week, I've found that I needed rewriting less to get across what I was trying to say. I just finished a cover story for AMAZING that was almost entirely first draft. Before I wrote it -- there was a deadline hovering around -- I spent two weeks plotting the thing out in detail, wrote an outline of the background information and checked a few technical details in some scientific references. The story, "Sons of Man," is almost totally a mystery. Scientific detection; two converging lines of action in which two characters each have part of the puzzle; not much characterization. It's a sort of story I've always liked, so I decided to write one.

I had an early stage in 1964-66 in which I imitated a lot of what I'd read for the last fifteen years. It was pretty bad, I guess, because I managed to sell about half of it and the rest appears to be hopeless. But even then I tended toward stories of process and now, I think, most of the material I write is directly concerned with how things are done. It's a peculiar hangup I have, I guess. Even though I like it, I don't think that sort of theme is the sine qua non of sf; implications of ideas are much more important for human beings. Otherwise you get what I call lightbulb stories: "Gee, Frank, look at that glowing sphere." "Yes, Ted, that is an incandescent gas confined by a glass envelope; it is powered by an electrical current and its elements have a calculated heat loss which just matches the power input necessary to cause significant optical illumination." "How long can it work, Ted?" "It's simple, really. Just estimate--" You see what I mean. But processes are important for sf because without a sound knowledge of what might happen, and the imagination to see that and convey it to the reader, the writer finds himself talking about situations that haven't the feel of the future to them.

A lot of people disagree with me about this. There's a lot of the "I am a Writer and I Write What I Must" talk. Like "Why did you have the people on this planet wearing laser guns and riding in space ships when they use horses and carriages in the towns?" "Well I had to write it that way something told me to do it I just couldn't get at the problems I wanted to talk about without a primitive background." Of course, the line between freedom and license is defined differently by each man. I just don't think a story gains any effectiveness by introducing wildly improbably elements; the reader's credibility is strained as it is, usually. As time goes on I find it harder and harder to believe in a lot of the sf that's coming out. Most of it is lacking in background detail that conveys a sense of reality. Phil Dick has always done this to me in his non-hallucinogenic sf -- everything is flat, one-dimensional, peopled by stick figures. (In his better work, of course, that's an asset because it isn't even supposed to be real.)

Then too, a lot of the themes are so old they provoke laughter rather than involvement. Delany irritates me in this way. As Ted White pointed out somewhere recently, Delany is using old pulp plots and turning them to his own ends. Sometimes successfully, usually not. I don't think he really understands the impact of myth on most people. Occasionally he hits something, such as the paragraph or two in EINSTEIN INTERSECTION when his character ruminates on the myth figures of The Beatles, including the one who couldn't sing, Ringo. That's where it's at, now. That's what will grip people. Greek figures mean something to a handful of scholars but they're a curiosity to the masses, me included. Delany gets by because he's got a lot of ammunition in other departments. There are signs he's getting better: NOVA, which I'm finally reading, has its moments.

On the other hand I mentioned some of these thoughts to Len Bailes when he was up here from LA last Fall and he touted an old Delany novel, EMPIRE STAR, as a counter-argument. So I tried to read it. There's this quest, see, by a simple, innocent kid who nonetheless is Something Special only he doesn't know it, and he's going off to the mighty stars to see a lot of complex nonsimplex civilizations, carrying this funny kind of jewel thing which he has to deliver to the Empire Star and you see Only He Can Carry It (why not mail it? oh well) so it's lucky he has along his wonderful octarina because he has to play music to these funny beings the Lill, you know, and he must sit in the hold of this ship and play and it's very hard to work because the Lill make everybody who is around them sad (so why not pipe music in? oh well) but luckily he gets a friend who is a computer and together they go off to find the Empire Star (why should the computer care? oh well) and it's kinda nice y'know because this kid is like Huck Finn a little bit and... Garbage.

On the other hand now I can sympathize with every sf novelist I know because writing a novel has impressed me with the work demanded. At first you think it's so much looser that you can put anything you like in, as I said before. But then I started to think. (Always a dangerous tack.) I've seldom liked books that were constructed as though a monomaniac had written them. That is, books that had lots of wallop in its science or characterization or background or plot or fundamental idea, but never in more than one or two of these things. Balance, yes, that's the thing, I thought. But this means there's suddenly not enough room left in the book, because those things take space to do correctly. If you opt for a standard length then you've got to make every word work for its money. This sort of thinking got me back into the basic short story

claustrophobia I'd just escaped. Suddenly the prospect of doing things the way I'd fondly thought I'd do them assumes enormous proportions: I'd have to write a quarter of a million words, just to get it all in. And in fact in sf we're starting to get people who do just that. John Brunner seems to be following Dos Passos in constructing huge tomes like STAND ON ZANZIBAR. Piers Anthony recently talked about his next novel THE MACROSCOPE which runs somewhere around 200,000 words. I suppose these are legitimate approaches and I wish their proponents well. But the thought of writing that much myself is frightening. For me the answer lies in a comment Damon Knight made on a novelette I wrote last year ("Deeper Than The Darkness"): "This story should be like a poem, condensed." Perhaps so. Except that requires a very high standard of writing; words so clear they slice the air; phrases that won't let go.

That prospect is even more frightening than the million-word novel. And mind, this is all in pursuit of a mere well-balanced sf novel, not an item that will win a Pulitzer. It was then that I began to realize just how difficult a field sf is and why we have so little that will stack up against the mainstream on strictly mainstream terms. The specific areas in which sf is strong lie outside most writing as it's viewed today. That ol' Cosmic View we know so well is as fascinating and valid as it ever was, but it's diffusing slowly into other areas of writing. The best-seller stock item that comes closest is probably the historical chronicle like HAWAII or EXODUS or other Michener efforts.

START So I suppose sf will retain all of its present vitality and continue to interest a small segment of the population. Certainly a lot of the new consciousness that is welling up through the New Wave is now bringing a lot of new people in, as Terry Carr noted a mailing or two back. There's not much communication between the factions, either. ANALOG continues to pick up circulation among some mysteriously growing crowd of engineers and logicians, but I honestly don't see why. Tim Leary was in Berkeley recently and commented on the student strike at Cal Berkeley over the Black Studies Department. He pointed out that on one side was the administration and the Reagan administration, average age 55; on the other were the students, average age 20. There wasn't any question who was going to win, he said, spreading his arms and smiling in that fuzzy way he has. By analogy I'd say there isn't any question about what will happen to ANALOG either. The audience for that sort of thing has to die. But things are never that simple. Somewhere there are a lot of uptight kids who love to read Christopher Anvil puzzle stories. There must be. I won't be writing for them, though. It's a waste of time.

Carr recently Terry mentioned a sense of wonder he gets about the prospect that sf may again have something to say about what's happening to mankind. I can dig that; I feel somewhat the same way. A lot of the kids are into Delany and Disch and I suppose I can see it. But I still think the most moving combination of these divergent tastes has yet to be made. Somewhere there's a middle ground that doesn't discard plot but also doesn't get hung up on sophistry and cute ANALOG-style games. (Imagine living in the conceptual universe of a Campbell editorial!)

To some extent all this concern is misplaced, anyway. The rev is indeed upon us, thank God, but sf is only a small corner of what's coming down. The printed word is probably the last medium in which the McLuhan ideas should be applied. It's by necessity pretty linear. Movies, rock, visual arts, yes. I think the attempts in this direction haven't cut much ice (so far) in sf. In our little corner a lot can be suggested

by those ol' nonlinear techniques, but a lot can be obscured too. Sf casts the reader into totally strange situations. Hand him a new viewpoint or insight without any of his normal referents and there's some chance he'll get lost. So this approach must be handled carefully and I think it often isn't. NEW WORLDS presents some of the best and the worst in this line. Two items that did work were the Ballard pieces on the Kennedys. The Downhill Motor Race bit was fantastic. A lot of all this is highly personal (~~it wouldn't surprise me if Terry thought the two Ballard pieces were utter crap~~). I sometimes wonder what James Blish would be saying if he dealt intensively with some New Wave stories.

An example of just how personal it is was reflected in Terry's comments on the Love Phenomenon and flower children. They drop out, he says, because of hate. Then the kids feel guilty about it. They run around extolling Love to cover up. As a theory I can see that it makes a certain amount of sense. X follows from Y. But emotionally it doesn't ring true to me. The hippies I know don't seem motivated that way. They are in some rather complicated emotional states and have complex relations with their parents. The stereotype hippie one sees on TV doesn't stay around the hip scene very long, of course; he isn't hip. The sort of flippant Freudianism that can dismiss the hippies can as easily wave away the revolution Terry finds so exciting. It can "explain" sf, too, while we're at it. Actually, that sort of thinking is just the bag the rev is trying to escape (or one of them). Among the new sensibilities I'd like to see in our country is a breakdown of categories for people; less abstract talk about groups who are assumed to be homogeneous; more direct contact with people who're operating on quite different assumptions than yours. The answer to dehumanization is people, for Chrissake. It would be delightful if the friends of the cultural revolution Terry is talking about would refuse to pigeonhole anybody, even the Establishment. The whole assumption behind people like Paul Goodman is that maybe community units small enough for communication and participation on a human level are the answer to some of our problems. But that certainly isn't going to work if even the people in the revolution don't communicate or empathize with each other.

All this theory and speculation places a heavy weight on the shoulders of anyone who wants to write decent sf. The field is damnably difficult; it seems to be very easy to just plain run dry and never have anything more to say (few writers stop there, though -- they just keep turning out hackwork). All I've written here is shop talk by a guy who thinks of himself as basically a fan, not a pro. So I don't let the weighty significance of my obligations bow my head. I don't think anybody should. It doesn't seem improbable that new writers can get fouled up trying to decide issues like how to characterize people in the future, if they just sit around and ruminate on it. The only way to find out is by doing. After all, anybody who goes into writing should like the act of writing itself, not the talking about it. The woods are full of the grandmothers who attend writing workshops and gab about character and pace and style. All the good theory in the world doesn't put one word of fiction on a page unless somebody somewhere likes to write.

The more I've written, the more I've realized that for me the best stuff comes out when I relax, do my homework before I come close to the typewriter, and just let it flow. It may not be a coincidence that it's also the most enjoyable way to write. For me all this is a hobby; if it isn't fun it's not worth the time. And if some readers enjoy a story of mine, all the better. That's really what it's all about.

NO NEWS IS... Since the events of 1968 Joan and I have been trying a new experiment. We don't follow the news any more. I don't know whether the decision to drop our newspapers & magazines was the result of disgust with 1968 or simple fatigue with following it all. Probably both. During the Fall of 1968 we just let everything go. I tried another experiment in the summer -- watching a TV loaned by a friend -- and after two months never wanted to see a TV again. In September I stored away our only radio.

Some magazines and one newspaper (Christian Science Monitor) still show up in the mailbox, but most are running down the tail end of subscriptions. HARPERS, ATLANTIC, NEW REPUBLIC, NEWSWEEK -- all gone. Joan likes the Monitor because it has a lot of Boston news and pictures. I don't look at it any more, though. Note that the above titles are those primarily devoted to reporting or explaining current events. I still get others -- GALAXY, F&SF, ANALOG, AMAZING, NATIONAL WILDLIFE, SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN, SUNSET, GOURMET, ESQUIRE, PHYSICS TODAY, SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH.-- and I even find time to read most of them.

What's the point? I felt I was getting saturated, dragged down by the day to day fluctuations in the world. Heinlein has wondered about the wisdom of involving yourself with the worries of 200 million strangers, and I question it myself. The State Department doesn't need to know my instant response to its maneuverings; why bother to learn about them? Following the news had gotten to be a hobby with me, taking up 30 or so minutes a day and generally serving only to depress me. Some of it is interesting, but most is of little import. Several people have accused Joan and I of ignoring the cares of others, making ourselves insensitive to humanity, not carrying our fair share of the load, etc. I think they are deluding themselves. It seems to be an unspoken assumption, particularly among liberals, that keeping up with current events is itself a positive gesture toward improving the world. Nonsense. It's strictly an entertainment for most people; something to relax with at 6 PM. Keeping informed about really important happenings doesn't require much time, and actually doing something about them takes the same essential energy it always did. I still write letters to senators and even Mr. Nixon (whom I gather is now president). But more important, I also have the time to find out about local matters; boring stuff like zoning and school bonds and minor elections. Traditional liberals don't get involved with that; the John Birch people have realized this for years, and that's why they are winning so heavily at the local and county level.

All this ties in with my own feeling that the problems of these decades can't be solved through the Federal government. They must be met on a very small scale, preferably in two- or three-person groups. The 20th century liberals have really been running on a world outlook invented by Marx. They've changed it around, toned it down, but it's still the same intact vision. A master plan. The lessons of post-WWII have been that master plans don't seem to work out. Anomie and bureaucracy thrive on both sides of the "iron curtain." Some liberals have recognized the lack of driving principle (or so they call it) and are looking around for something to replace Marx. I think that's a mistake. We don't need any more big-deal plans with power brokers at the top. We do need genuine feelings of community, security, involvement with our fellow man. That only comes of individual effort on a scale a person can understand. How to start such things? I don't know. Experiment, look around you, try things. Put your toe in the water. But as a first step, I've stopped being involved with the day by day machinations of the Czars and political hacks on top;

that isn't going to buy me any real understanding of our society, and how to change it. Anything really important -- the ABM question, say, which I happen to know something about -- I hear of and write my congressman. I'm sure most of my friends think the ABM systems are stupid; probably most of them know a lot about how it fared in congress and what Nixon's view is. But how many raised a voice against it? Last week I wrote three letters protesting its construction; they took about 30 minutes to write -- the span of a news program.

More important, though, I really feel better without the weight of knowledge I'd get from TV or newspapers. Disasters, plagues, the inevitable weaknesses of the human race -- these things fill the news. But they contribute nothing to my happiness and indeed have a numbing effect on the will to do anything about them. There's a serenity to be gained by ignoring the news. In the time I spent on it I now read novels or write or perhaps talk to friends. All these things are more rewarding. I could get carried away with this subject and suggest that we abandon the news as a cultural institution altogether, except then Harry Warner would be out of a job. But that's fine, too -- I've always wished he had the time to make HORIZONS larger.

AND THEN I WROTE It has probably gone completely unnoticed that I am not writing much for fanzines any more. This is no disaster for fandom -- I was never in competition with, say, Walt Willis -- but it follows a fairly normal pattern of declining interest. But in my case my interest hasn't declined so much as it's been displaced.

Burbee once remarked to me that in the final decade or so of his FAPA membership he found himself writing for the benefit and hoped-for reactions of a handful of other people. The rest he really didn't give a damn about. These people were other humorists or good friends; fans who could appreciate what Burbee was doing. I guess I've reached a stage like that myself. Most fans probably don't agree with my tastes in writing so they probably won't like the sort of thing I'm moved to write. Consequently I don't give much thought to their reactions. In fact, as Johnny Berry has lamented, there are whole categories of fan writing that don't draw any response at all. Johnny writes a fan column for SFR (nee PSYCHOTIC) and the comments on his material have been very very few. Admittedly PSY/SFR is devoted to backbiting among the sf greats, but it does have a large fan circulation and it should provoke some response on any topic. But it doesn't. I think the reason may be that writing about fan history or topics isn't where it's at right now. Maybe so; I've always found it interesting, but then I'm getting to the stage where some fans regard me as an oldtimer, so my taste is probably a little warped. I take the view that if the audience has fallen off, I might as well not write for anything more than the response of a few friends. I've never been a redhot fanwriter anyway. I like writing humor but there's damn little of it in the current "revival" of olden fanzines (Tucker's LE ZOMBIE was a marvelous exception). Humor requires a mood and atmosphere. INNUEENDO had it -- the fingers itched to shoot back a letter with 3 or 4 paragraphs of light commentary. Until a fmz arises which can do that again I'll admit to no "revival" of the era of fannish fanzines.

I'm still doing a lot of writing though. Now it's sf, the literature of tomorrow. If the mood of fandom seems inappropriate for doing the sort of thing I liked in the past, sf is just the reverse. I think a hell of a lot of invention and experimentation is going into the

field these days and some of it is even paying off. I think when I started writing sf I was hung up on the standard story of the late 50's as seen in GALAXY or ANALOG; those were the last years in which I read a good part of the total yearly output. It took me a year or two to realize just how different the 60's were. I still think a lot of the new stuff appearing is weak in plot line and real conflict, not to mention believability. But it's going in some mighty interesting directions and it's picking up on quite a bit of fascinating tricks along the way. It's great to see a sf writer who can write middling well and still keep his story away from a cliché theme. Joanna Russ seems to be in that league, though she hasn't developed yet.

I suppose one reason that I turned to sf when fan writing got dull is the fact that it's awfully easy to turn my mundane knowledge to use in sf. If I were writing mainstream stuff my physics training would be useless. But since my head is bent in that direction I find all sorts of things cropping up in science journals that beg for a story to be built around them. Generally I resist the impulse to crank the latest scientific finding into the body of a story, because there's danger of changing the thing into a gadget story or even worse if you're not careful. But some ideas are worth treating at length and I'm amassing a file of them for future use. Thus far I haven't used much. Or it doesn't seem like much science to me; when I read most of the magazines I'm aghast at how little real science (as opposed to arm-waving incantations) there is in cl' stf. There seems to be a universal assumption that a story with a rocket ship in it has got to be sf. I've always thought that the plot had to follow from the premises and background presented, but a lot of writers (Laumer, lately, for one) are content to superimpose detective thrillers and war stories on a future backdrop and pawn it off as the real stuff. Oh well; there's room for even that. The field is getting bigger all the time.

SAN FRANCISCO is getting better. Admittedly it's turning into a tourist and convention center, but in the low rent districts there are a lot of deep things going on that are bringing back the flavor to the city. The Haight seems to be drawing more good people these days, even though the crime rate there is high. North Beach is picking up. It's too early to say for sure, but I'd almost believe people are beginning to recover some of their belief that cities are practical and won't go to pieces right away, at least. As far as personal friends go, I'm finding more reason to go over to SF -- Andy Main, Earl Evers, Mike MacInerney & Gordon Eklund have moved to within a few blocks of each other, and Bob Lichtman, Bill Blackbeard and others are nearby. Samuel Delany recently moved in. The Goldstones are there and Randall Garrett is around. Ron Goulart has moved back east somewhere but still there are a lot of good people within reach. There has been a revival of GGFS but it doesn't seem to include many of the fans I want to talk to. Maybe some other club is needed, or a bi-weekly party. But even without it SF is a better scene than it's been for years, with a lot of psychic energy radiating out in the form of rock music, underground newspapers, ZAP COMICS and Krishna priests. Too bad the worldcon won't be here this year.

THAT'S ALL, FOLKS. I'm running out of things to say. I think the mailings have been rather boring of late, with few sparks to brighten the haze. I wonder when FAPA will get out of the doldrums. The loss of WARHOON was no help. I suppose I should hustle out a DOORWAY every mailing, but somehow without the inspiration of a virile FAPA it just isn't in me. A gestalt is hard to establish. Here's hoping things change for the better.