FOCUS

AN S.F. WRITERS' MAGAZINE

SPRING
1982
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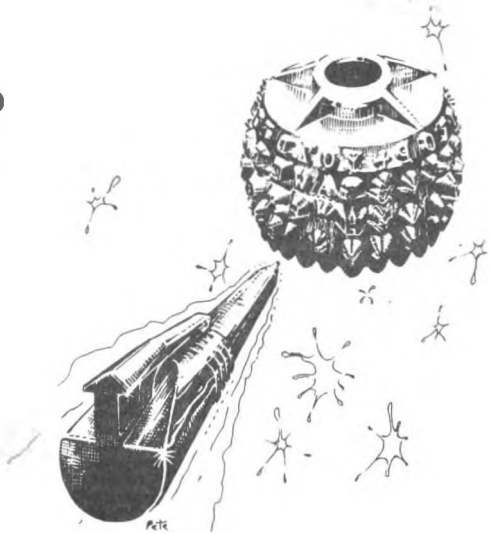
GREENLAND
GALLAGHER
SMITH
DAVIES



TEACHING CREATIVE WRITING
SCRIPTING SF FOR TV
MILFORD 1981

a BSFA publication

FOCUS
AN S.F. WRITERS' MAGAZINE

EDITORS: CHRIS BAILEY, ALLAN SUTHERLAND, DAVE SWINDEN

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BACK ISSUES of *Focus* and *Vector* are not looked after by anybody much at the moment. Any volunteers?

MEMBERSHIP of the British Science Fiction Association costs £6.00 per year. For this sum you receive six mailings per year, containing *Matrix*, *Paperback Inferno* and *Vector*, not to mention two issues of *Focus* per year. *Matrix* contains news and views of the BSFA and the science fiction fiction world. *Paperback Inferno* reviews the newly published paperback books. *Vector* is the BSFA's critical journal. *Focus* is a magazine about science fiction writing. Membership also gives you access to a number of other BSFA services - such as Orbiter, the postal writers' workshop described in an article in this issue. For full details of BSFA activities and membership, write to the membership secretary:
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ISSUE 5 SPRING 1982

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Art this issue by Pete Lyon (front cover), Harriet Long (p.19), Peter Walker (pp. 32, 34).

The deadline for the receipt of material for the next issue of *Focus* is 1st July 1982.

Editorial

WE'D LIKE to begin this, our first editorial, by acknowledging the debt we owe to the previous editors, Chris Evans and Rob Holdstock. *Focus* was their idea, they launched the magazine and set standards of content and presentation which will be hard to match.

We are all new to this business, and will inevitably make mistakes; it's up to you to point these out to us, and to make it clear to us what it is that *you* want from the magazine.

The immediately obvious difference between the old and the new *Focus* is the size; we've gone from an A4 to an A5 format, not from choice, but so that the magazine can be accomodated on the BSFA litho machine.

Focus is smaller than its predecessor in another, more important way: it simply has fewer words in it. There are several reasons for this, the most obvious being lack of time.

To meet the next BSFA mailing deadline, we had to produce the magazine in about half the time normally available; soliciting articles can be a lengthy process, and three months didn't leave a lot of time for twisting the arms of contributors who hadn't delivered the articles they'd promised. But we wanted to maintain continuity with the previous *Focus*, and so have for our first issue a smaller magazine than we would like. Things were not helped by our unwillingness to lower our editorial standards for the sake of filling up pages; particularly with fiction (always the most difficult part of the magazine to assemble), we felt it wouldn't be fair on contributors or readers.

We've been very short of unsolicited material. We're often told - indeed, it's become an article of faith among British SF readers - that the country is full of young writers without an outlet for their fiction. If this is true, where are they? A magazine such as *Focus* can only succeed if people are prepared to submit material to it: an obvious point, but one that seems to need stating.

Having said all this, we'd like to record our thanks to those people who have submitted material - we enjoyed reading and commenting on the fiction, and hope that our reports may have proved useful to those concerned; indeed, we're looking forward to reading and perhaps publishing future stories from people whose work we turned down this time round - and to those who promised us articles and came up with the goods.

So, what do we have in mind for the future of *Focus*?

We don't envisage any radical changes, although, as we've stated previously, we'd like to increase the fiction content, *provided* that we can get sufficient material of the quality that we're aiming for.

From Issue 6 we intend to run a letters section, which will be as extensive as you can make it. We welcome comment on the magazine, on particular pieces and on more general subjects. We see one of the most important aspects of *Focus* as being to act as a forum for debate, using both letters and articles.

Although *Focus* is not primarily a workshop magazine, we would like that element to be present, and we're toying with the idea of having a workshop section. In this we would publish a story along with our criticisms and the author's response to these, and would invite comment from readers for the next issue. We'd be interested to know what you think of this possibility.

We'll do what we can to carry on the *Market Space* section, but as has been pointed out before, *Focus*, with its six-monthly publishing schedule, is not the ideal place in which to provide up-to-date market news. However, we intend to give, in each issue, a list of markets as they stand at the time.

We'd like to include more artwork in future issues. The response from

artists among the BSFA's membership has been quite good, though the standard was not always as we desired. We had to send a lot of paintings, photographs and colour drawings back; we can only use material in black-and-white. We're especially well-disposed to work drawn in styles that aren't influenced by the prevailing fashions in book covers, comics and other commercial SF art. We're not averse to a bit of wit in drawings, either, which is why we liked Pete Lyon's cover drawing for this issue so much.

The most important thing to remember is that *Focus* exists to fulfil your needs, not ours. The only way we'll know if we're providing the sort of thing you want is if you tell us. And if there are particular topics that you'd like to see covered, let us know and we'll do our best to oblige. We welcome unsolicited material in all categories (except, perhaps, editorials), although for long articles we'd appreciate an outline in the first instance, so that we can avoid duplication of material.

We're aware that in this issue there is a heavy bias towards the mechanics of writing; the commercial and market side of things has been neglected. We hope to redress this imbalance in future issues.

So this is something of a provisional issue, by way of saying, "Here we are!" However, we trust you will agree that there is nothing provisional in the quality of the material which we do have. Colin Greenland writes about his work as a teacher of creative writing. He makes several pertinent observations on the nature of the creative process which we hope will draw a response. Steve Gallagher illuminates the problem of scripting SF for television and voices doubts about the SF writer's chances of retaining her integrity within the medium. Kevin Smith is another who is not content to confine himself to the strict limits of his subject matter. His report from the Milford (U.K.) Writers' Conference branches out to explore the function of the author-as-critic. And Dorothy Davies demonstrates her continuing enthusiasm for the ideals of *Focus* by infiltrating its pages twice in one issue: the only piece of fiction that (alas!) we felt prepared to accept, and a short article which points out that for the beginning writer money should not necessarily mean everything.

Finally, we'd like to give our best wishes to the new professional SF magazine, *Interzone*. This seems to us to be one of the most exciting and promising events of recent times in British SF, and your support is richly deserved. Indeed, we consider it to be the moral duty of anyone who is seriously concerned with fiction in this country to subscribe forthwith.

CONTRIBUTORS

DOROTHY DAVIES's work has previously appeared twice in Focus; *Home Thoughts* (issue 3) and *Somewhere For Baby To Sleep* (issue 4). She writes commercially for men's magazines but becomes somewhat reticent when pressed on the topic.

STEVE GALLAGHER has written for radio and has scripted TV SF for *Dr Who*. He wrote the novelisation of the movie *Saturn 3*. His first novel proper is due out shortly; he has completed his second.

COLIN GREENLAND is Fellow in Creative Writing at the North East London Polytechnic; he describes the saga of his activities in the article in this issue. He is responsible for persuading the present team, while in an inebriated state, to undertake the editorship of *Focus*.

KEVIN SMITH, who has recently begun to sell his fiction professionally, has been a stalwart of British SF fandom for many years now. He has edited the BSFA's magazine *Vector* (issues 99-106), and is currently engaged in life-or-death combat with Rog Peyton to win the Transatlantic Fan Fund ballot.

HIGHLY DESIRABLE RESIDENCE

Colin Greenland

THE LETTER from the new *Focus* triumvirate suggesting an article about my work as a Fellow in Creative Writing arrives at the same time as unexpected news from N.E. London Poly. Having already said that the Poly could not afford to, the Director has now decided to renew my post. That ensures another twelve months of financial buoyancy for me while others with more experience and more ability languish all around. It also makes this a good juncture to discuss what I've done and what might happen next.

Some background information. As well as subsidising individuals and organisations, the Arts Council of Great Britain makes a number of grants to institutions, often educational ones, to allow each of them to support an 'artist in residence' for a year. If the institution wishes to repeat the arrangement for a second year, the Council will usually pay three-quarters of the sum and require the institution itself to provide the other quarter. N.E. London Poly applied for a grant to have a writer attached the Science Fiction Foundation, a research library located at its precinct in Barking. The idea was that the writer should help to generate interest in and use of the library, maintain a link between the Poly and the SF community at large, and stimulate creative writing by the Poly students. N.E.L.P. is primarily a scientific, secondarily a social scientific college; it has no English Department as such, and so there is no curricular

demand for creative writing or literary appreciation, though there are departments and courses which offer literary options: a B.A. in Cultural Studies, for example, and the School of Independent Studies, in which students earn diplomas and degrees by study courses of their own devising.

I promised you background, but any SF critic will tell you that I have now made it foreground, by delivering it as primary information instead of letting it be perceived and pieced together from the implications of other information. I've done that because these circumstances create the peculiar conditions of my work, conditions which it would be hard to account for without this information. The purpose of Arts Council subsidy, in the words of a recent publicity sheet, is "to improve the overall quality of life". Times of economic stringency, however, require such nebulous good thoughts to be justified quantitatively, so the Council prefers an artist in residence to spread his attention around as many students as possible. The interest of the students who sought me out in my first year was high. The number of them was not. I worked with perhaps a dozen: frequently and intensively with some; others I saw perhaps once or twice. I don't think this reflects unfavourably on the Fellowship, on the apathy of the students, or on my laziness. What I think it does reflect is the internal complication of N.E.L.P., which has three major precincts and maybe ten other centres widely scattered north and east of the city, and the difficulty one newcomer in one very peripheral department has in putting information around the college effectively and reinforcing the information as needed. I'm sure plenty more students are interested in SF and writing, but they may never come anywhere near the Barking site; it may be a long way out of their individual ways. Nevertheless, the fewer the students who turn up, the more time I can devote to each. The value of individual attention in education is something nobody doubts, and at the end of a year in which a lot of individual tuition has been possible, I see how efficient it can be, especially for a subject as personal as creative writing. Again, current economic conditions make individual tuition a luxury colleges cannot afford. If Arts Council residencies actually can provide it, surely that in itself is the best possible justification for the scheme, over and above dubious numerical ones.

Case rests. Preamble over. Now for the matter. No, you can't teach anyone to write. Not everyone can write, any more than everyone can

cook, keep accounts, or lay bricks. Some sort of internal urge is needed, together with a general personal disposition that favours or at least permits the fulfilment of that urge. There is an old-fashioned word whose meaning, remarkably enough, includes both of those things. It is 'talent'. You can cultivate a talent, in yourself or in others, but you can't create one. The whole populist, downwards-and-outwards movement of the late fifties and sixties, identifying creativity with self-expression, obliterated talent in a big way. Perhaps that is how the word became old-fashioned. Everyone can and to a large extent should express herself. Not everyone can do so in a way which merits attention above and beyond the immediate and necessary gratification of personal attention: that is, not everyone can attract or deserve public attention. Public attention is an inextricable part of creativity, part of the structure by which it can be identified. Unfortunately the structure, like so many machines and systems in human society, is not guaranteed to work. It may be broken. It may be potentially operative but incomplete. With the intervention of the media industries, people can get public attention and acclaim without being creative, without even 'expressing themselves'. People who are creative do not automatically get public attention. How do I know? Because I've observed it. Like creativity, criticism is ultimately the product of some such subjectivity, a talent. I would rather accept that creativity and attention do not guarantee each other, and work within that, than regret it and protest and try to work against it, though inevitably the critic finds himself speaking up for 'neglected genius' every so often.

The amateur writer has to have a public to test her own creativity, and to develop it. That, to me, is why this magazine is important. The fanzine tradition offers lots of scope for the testing and developing of all sorts of journalistic and autobiographical talents, but fandom, though nominally clustered around science fiction, currently offers little or no opportunity of feedback to the amateur writer of fiction. I don't understand this. Considering the present dearth of openings for the amateur to get that response by addressing himself to professional markets, there is a special need for fandom to organise some kind of forum. That it isn't doing so is, I think, a great failing, so I hope it's merely a local and temporary lapse. *Interzone*, the new fiction quarterly I shall

be working for, will help, if only a little. *Focus*, I hope, will help more.

A functional definition: for professional writers the critic is a self-appointed authority, voice of the public. Likewise: for amateur writers the creative writing fellow is an Arts Council-appointed authority, substitute for the public. I can't teach anyone to write. What I can do is address her in the role of an alert, informed reader - essentially a sympathetic reader, because I'm a writer too, and I know what it's like. I can try to show amateurs how their writing appears to a reader, how it works for me and why, where it doesn't work and why not.

Last year I ran - convened might be a better word - a creative writing workshop, on the principle of extending my role as audience-substitute to a group of student writers. Our method was ruthlessly egalitarian. Everyone was expected to read a piece of his own writing. Everyone was allowed to comment on what she had heard. I suggested we all go away and prepare a page on an imaginary city. The following week Mark read us his page. A couple of lovers met in a beautiful city. An old man (if I remember rightly) looked out over a decaying city. There were separate passages describing a mechanical installation in an open place on a cold night. It was struck by the rising sun and broke down, perhaps actually melted, as the heat of the day increased. Intercut, some cataclysm overtook the old man and the lovers. In the general destruction they somehow became able to see each other's cities superimposed on their own environments. The end.

There was little for me to say about Mark's characters, scenes or style. All I picked up was a sort of indistinct science fiction structure to his story (which was obviously complete, not just a portion of something), and a vague impression of something symbolic in the unexplained relationship between the unexplained machine's meltdown and the unexplained collapse of the city of cities. I also mentioned my interest that most of us had chosen to write about destroyed cities, though that did not seem to lead back to anything about the writing of them. The rest of the group found even less to say than I did. One or two puzzled questions as to what Mark's piece was 'about' drew quite honestly-meant but unenlightening

replies; otherwise people said it was 'quite good' and found things in it to commend, politely but unenthusiastically. (The intransigent politeness of the group and their insistance on talking only about content and verisimilitude are two problems I have not yet solved.)

Only as the session came to an end and we all started back towards our own fragments of the real city did Mark explain his story to me. The machine was a storage facility for millions of personalities, each one recorded electromagnetically. Preserved in this way on the dark side when their planet came to rest, like Earth in Ballard's *The Day of Forever*, with one face turned permanently toward the sun, everyone experienced his life continuing in a city which was a projection of his own state of mind. The story was set at the time when the planet began to rotate again. The installation designed to cope with sub-zero conditions suffered its first dawn for millennia and broke down from the direct heat. The machine was the city: Mark had described how three of its 'inhabitants' experienced its last minutes.

What he had not done was give in the text any clues to the rationale he was now giving me in person. By then it was too late; and Mark never returned to the workshop. What use it had been to him I can't say. It had shown him a sample of readers who could not understand his story; he was, I think, in no danger of attributing that to their stupidity rather than to his narration. We had no chance even to start identifying its inadequacy, much less discussing any means of dealing with it. The horror (I dread letting people down) of my inability to 'teach' Mark anything was of use to me, however. It showed me that if teaching people to write is fundamentally impossible, teaching them to read is not only possible but vital.

Linda, who occasionally attended the workshop, visited me for private tutorial work on her poetry. At first the problem was always the same. The poem itself was standard adolescent stuff, without much character - but the 'explanation' that accompanied it verbally showed me that Linda had an unusual and, yes, talented imagination. Linda's problem is to get the 'explanation' -what the poem means to her and why - into the poem itself, where the reader can get at it. My problem was to demonstrate to her that the poems were not self-explanatory; that to the reader they

meant little of what she wanted them to mean and, in the absence of that meaning, sounded commonplace and unimpressive. My problem, in short, was to teach her to *read* what she had written. Another student could turn out competent knockabout satire, but, when he tried to write a critical essay, degenerated into apparent illiteracy; and he didn't realise he was doing it. To learn that what he had written completely garbled what he meant to say, he had to learn to read what he had actually put on the paper. Once you learn to read what you've written, to forget yourself the All-Important Author and look at it from the reader's point of view, then you are ready to begin writing. Then you are considering your audience and how you are going to gain and manipulate their attention. Words are communication; public attention is an inextricable part of creativity. Art is not for art's sake, it's for our sake. Jean Cocteau said, "Poetry is indispensable; if only I knew what for." Fortunately I am not required to say what fiction does, only how it does it.

How should the fiction writer go about this impossible task of tinkering with the insides of other people's heads at long range? That's a question I haven't had to cope with yet; I'm still trying to teach my students to read. I know that other workshops start with the second lesson, identifying and imitating techniques. You know the model. "The SF story starts with a narrative hook. 'Napalm aside, he took to the idea of a month in California'; 'The tintinabula was very ching that night, just before old Earth blew'; 'He put a twenty-dollar platinum coin into the slot and the analyst, after a pause, lit up.' Now go away and write ten narrative hooks."

To me this is suspect. The principle seems to be that because the critic can dismantle a story into sections and label each with its function, the writer should be able to create one by doing the same thing the other way round. This is a case of mistaking the map for the journey, the name for the thing itself - a confusion all writers should learn to recognise. I imagine this sort of teaching, if successful, can also make a very mechanical process out of the uncertain, semi-intuitive daze of composition, and that must obstruct the possibility of innovation.

Teaching creative writing by technique must presume the existence

of talent - and this is where writing differs from cooking, accounting, and bricklaying. You may well have a talent for all or any of these, but if you haven't, a thorough application of technique will suffice. A writer, on the other hand, cannot apply his technique unless he can come up with something to apply it to. Creativity includes supplying the raw material (eggs, money, bricks) as well as processing it effectively. That's why workshops or courses in writing technique are suited only to students already secure in their own creativity, people who do write and know they can write, but who value some exercise of their writing muscles. At the Poly I have met only one writer with that security, and he was another participant who may have derived no benefit from the workshop: because he was confident enough to ignore the feedback and concentrate on his own inclinations. Full marks for a student who takes no notice of what's said in class; creative writing's a funny thing.

Rather than teach beginners that there is an existing armoury of techniques which they should learn to select and handle as soon as possible, I prefer to help them identify techniques they have already used in what they have written; to unfold the implications of them and spot their advantages and weaknesses. Even this is too much for some students unfamiliar with the practice of textual criticism. All too often the faces go blank around me as I start to talk about ways of rewriting the piece we have just heard; the author turns defensive and falls back on the old mystique of inspiration and the inevitability of what she has written. Lots of patience is needed, as with all teaching; also immunity to disappointment, willingness to dispense with ideals and accept what response you can get. The most rewarding moment is when a student suddenly lights up and tells you the spontaneous insight he has just had - something you have been trying to get through to him for the last twenty minutes.

Some professional writers write because they can't resist the impulse, some because they are offered a commission or because they perceive something outside themselves that needs writing about. In the same way, some amateurs will turn up with their latest personal project, while others require me to send them away each week with an exercise to do. Write a page about a city; write a page about breaking glass; write a page with no adjectives; write

a page including these five words: belly, hoary, praise, fix, cosmetic. In my experience these exercises produce better work, because they challenge the student to do something she wouldn't do of her own accord. This is the best way I know of getting past the element of self-indulgence in amateur writing - and the narcissism in amateur self-appraisal.

The impersonal exercises detach the self from the writing, and make the student attend to the fulfilment of an external demand - the next best thing to identifying his audience. They also usefully generate writing which is not precious, which is only 'this week's exercise'. Nevertheless, I won't impose exercises on students who would rather produce their own work. It's necessary to trust them to find their own way (nobody taught *me* to write, after all), even when they seem only to be polishing the same old fragment of mirror. In any case, I'd rather have them turn up time after time with incorrigible trash than not turn up at all. I take it as a mark of success that most students who do the exercises find ingenious ways to avoid straightforward, frontal approaches. Mark's city in a box was a creative if conventional attempt to meet the challenge in an unpredictable way, though it proved impossible to appreciate his attempt without a key to the box. Fiction depends on such tricks, deceits, and surprises: their techniques cannot be isolated and taught.

Now that I've got into conventions, unpredictability, and deception, I must say something about science fiction. It's obvious from what I've said so far that I don't confine my teaching to SF. I can't afford to, because that would exclude even more students, but also and more generally because I remain opposed to the idea that SF should or can be separated off from other kinds of writing. Whatever L. Sprague de Camp and Lester Del Ray would have you believe, there is no special formula for creating an SF story. What there is, as with other literary forms whether generic (the detective story) or technical (the sonnet), is a historical set of assumptions and conventions, which you may choose to follow, bend, or break. How close you keep to them governs how much you can draw on the traditional significance and appeal of the form. If you keep too close, you risk the independence and originality of your creation. If you move too far away, you lose touch with the power of the tradition, and therefore a certain section of your audience. For the purposes of my students and indeed any amateur writers, I

think it best to emphasize the problems and necessities common to all creative writing, so that SF is not an end (a pre-existing form which requires to be filled with certain contents in a certain way) but a means (a set of approaches and observances which may be useful in working out any fictional impulse or idea).

Samuel Delany is another writer who endorses an absolute distinction and even opposition between SF and other fiction, though his analysis is quite different from de Camp's and Del Rey's. While I do not believe in the actual existence of the hard and fast line he draws around it, I think he is very good at specifying some of the special conditions of SF. Briefly: in mundane fiction, fiction set on Earth past or present, the writer makes use of the world her audience knows - from experience, memory, and learning of history. What she makes up will be judged 'realistic' by its conformity to what is already known. In SF, however, the writer has to make up not only the events but their context (the future, another planet, a parallel world). He has to persuade the audience to accept not only imaginary characters and events, but an entire imaginary frame of reference.

This is true whether the imaginary world is intended to be 'realistic' - that is, a creation which seems to be as complex and substantial as the known world, like Herbert's *Dune* - or a symbolic, poetic, or absurd construct commenting on the known world, like Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan*. In writing SF you gain complete freedom from the boundaries of the known in return for the obligation to create a fictional alternative to the known, and to convey all the extra information to your reader at the same time as telling her the story. The technical problems are immense, which is one reason why the young writer so often contents himself with the cliches, which were originally yesterday's solutions. On the other hand, SF offers her a very desirable chance to step outside her own cultural matrix, to re-examine it and suggest alternatives.

The new term has begun. I've reconvened the workshop. Three new students came along to see what was happening; all of them seemed to be intelligent and responsive, and to have got some pleasure and stimulus out of our first session, so I hope for some interesting work from them. Others who attended last year were missing, so numbers remain about the same. I would like to attract more students, not just to satisfy the Arts Council, but also to assure myself that I'm

doing something that is useful and could be popular, and to provide those who attend with as much dialogue from as many viewpoints as possible. Very often the single most important critical response to a contribution is not picked up by anyone around the table, but emerges from the overlaps and disagreements of the whole group. I shall also be continuing the teaching and advisory work I began last year and hope some more students find they want to use me as a tutor or at least consult me for advice from time to time. With my own critical and creative writing, articles, reviews, entries for reference books, and the hopeless struggle of trying to keep up with new books as they come out as well as reading old books I missed and manuscripts for *Interzone*, you can see I shall have little time to take on many new responsibilities. However, I'd be glad to communicate with anyone about creative writing, either in the pages of *Focus* or in person - though that doesn't mean I will welcome piles of unsolicited manuscripts or that I'll be able to help you find a publisher for your novel. I haven't even found a publisher for my novels yet! And don't forget that the Science Fiction Foundation is also there for you to use. Its collection, founded on the BSFA library, whose books can be borrowed by any member of the Association, is available for research or for just idle browsing to anyone who cares to make an appointment. The address is:

SF Foundation
NE London Polytechnic
Longbridge Road
Dagenham
Essex RM8 2AS
Telephone 01 590 7722 extensions 2177 and 2179

The more use we make of our libraries and our writers in residence, the more chance there is that such facilities will continue to be provided, even while economic recession and repressive government force the arts further into the excisable margins of our culture.

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loneliness (is a personal thing)

DOROTHY DAVIES

"I think it's Monday, 27th September. Sometimes I wonder why I'm bothering to keep any sort of calendar and why I persist in taping a diary. Perhaps it's part of a subconscious plan to keep me sane. Who knows? Does it matter? After I recorded my diary last night, I took Jerry for a walk along the beach. It was pretty cold. The nights are getting chilly already."

The waves were begging hands, outflung along the sand, touching, beseeching, getting nothing, withdrawing into the greenness that I remember as once having been blue-grey water. Perhaps one day I'll find out why it all went green. Perhaps.

"Jerry loves the sea. He leaps about in the waves, biting the white tops, barking at the big breakers that threaten to crush him with sheer size, running free before they break."

Jerry helps keep me sane, too.

"Got a load of dog food in today, went over to the industrial estate north of here, plenty of stores there. Just have to work out where to stockpile it all."

Upstairs? Third bedroom might do, if I organise it properly. Cartons stack, don't they. Need all the tinned food I can find, along with calor gas, batteries, paraffin, logs, tablets for purifying the water, warm clothes. That's some shifting, girl ... at least I won't put on any weight!

"Spent my usual hour dialling telephone numbers. Did ten pages today, I'm up to TR already."

Stupid daily penance. Stupid to hope that one day someone will answer me. Probably won't be able to do it for much longer, anyway - as it is, it's a miracle that any of the automatic exchanges

are still working.

"Jerry scared off a pack of dogs today. Hope they leave us alone. I don't want to start shooting them."

Soft eyed labradors, perky eared terriers, sad mongrels, ragged Afghan hounds, little ones, big ones, oh, if only I could open a hundred tins of food and make friends with them all! But they're like the cats, they've all gone wild.

"Brought home some new records, too - Dire Straits, Genesis, Gerry Rafferty, Elvis Presley, good additions to the collection. Come winter I'll have music and books, heat and light, food and clothes. Not like last winter."

Not like last winter. Poor Jerry, trusting puppy, cold and hungry, pushing against me, me clinging to him in the dark, listening to the gale - never again! It's been a long summer, but we've made it, Jerry and I, a lot of hard work, a lot of driving, but we'll be okay this time.

"Sometimes I wonder what I'd do if someone did answer their phone. Would I say, 'Hey, come on over, the house is plenty big enough, I've fitted it up with everything I need.' Or would I say, 'Nice talking to you, glad to know that someone else is alive,' and put the phone down? Do I want anyone else here, now? What would Jerry do if someone else came here to live? I think he'd be jealous."

If a man answered, would the woman in me cry out for his strength, his body, possibly his love?
If a woman answered, would the lonely me cry out for her gossip and chat, possibly her friendship?
Yes ... No.
No ... Yes.
It hasn't happened yet, and I don't think it will. I'll decide when it does. The day the ringing stops and someone says, 'Hello?' I don't like being alone.

Who's going to listen to my tapes in the years to come? Look at the row I've made already! Perhaps when I'm old, I'll sit and listen to my young voice, and wonder where the years went. Or will I cut my foot off with the axe, drive over the cliff in a gale, be eaten by a pack of starving dogs, become fatally ill with something the books can't tell me how to cure? What will Jerry do if I die? Go wild like the other dogs? What will I do when Jerry dies? ... Get

Get another pup and tame it, of course.
Of course.

"Train of thought, thinking of me, old, listening to these tapes of me, young. Will the woman who listens to these tapes in the years to come understand why this woman, now aged thirty-eight, and lonely, still washes her hair every other day, uses makeup, wears exquisite jewellery and beautiful clothes. Will she understand why I couldn't leave the jewellery sitting on velvet pads, looking disdainfully at the world, but took it for myself, boxes full of shining silver and imperial gold."

Will the woman who listens to these tapes remember the ache of unshed tears, the burning, dry eyed lump I seem to carry always, will she recall the arms that ached for a child?

"Continuing train of thought, 'old' reminds me of the fact that there was a skeleton over near the warehouse, the first I've seen for a long time. I would have thought that by now the wind and the dogs would have dispersed any that were left. I wonder how long it's been there, could it be someone I missed in my telephoning sessions?"

Foolish question to ask a tape! When did I start phoning? Earlier this year, wasn't it? The tapes would tell me, if I wanted to listen to them again. I'm sure it was earlier this year, after that black and terrible morning, when the clouds hung over the land as heavy as they hung over my mind. I remember ...

Reaching for the pills, they were so close, then Jerry knocked the phone over. I thought, don't do that, someone might ring!

Do you know, Jerry, I spent all morning ringing numbers? Started at A, didn't I, and fool that I am, I've been doing it every day since, haven't I? I know, your eyes are telling me that you think your mistress is as foolish as I think she is, too.

Now the pills are here, round my neck, in case the axe, the car or the dogs get me.

So I blame you for my lonely life, Jerry! Big pink tongue lolls out, eyes watch my every move, paw rests on my foot. My shadow, my doppelganger, my lifeline to sanity. I wonder if I really meant to end it then, or was it a false alarm, even for me? Another foolish question.

"I went to Church today for the first time since I found myself alone

... it was thick with dust, dead flowers powdering away in vases, hymn and prayer books mouldering in the pews. I lit the candles on the altar and knelt at the communion rail. A draught or something flickered the flames, and there were ghosts. But I didn't pray."

Oh yes, there were ghosts all right, did I not feel Jerry's hackles rise as he pressed against me, and hear the thunder of the growl starting deep in his body? The ghosts of the priest, choir, congregation, muted mutterings of a hundred prayers, massed voices of soaring hymns, ringing organ. Yes, indeed there were ghosts. I put the candles out before I left. I'm not sure whether I'll go back.

"I wish I could talk to Jerry about being lonely. No, what I mean is, I wish he understood. I can, and do, talk to Jerry about a great many things, usually of what we're going to do, not very often of what I did before. Because remembering hurts. Perhaps remembering is what life is for, we live on memories and moments gone by. That makes my life equal to very little. No, I can't talk to Jerry about it. It's too personal."

But I can, and often do, stamp and scream and rage at the world, even if it doesn't hear me, or even care.

"Well, I think it's time to stop recording tonight. I'll open something for us to eat, and then I'll take Jerry for a walk."

And walking along the beach, I'll throw wide my arms, and shout my loneliness to the cold, far stars.

THE MEDIA MAZE

~ Steve Gallagher

THIS IS a piece about writing for television. Its main angle of attack is to look at some of the practical considerations in scripting SF, although most of the 'information' - if I can try to pass off such a mass of speculation and opinion under such a worthy banner - really applies to TV in general. It isn't a piece by someone who got famous through writing for television, or even rich. In fact, I might as well declare my prejudice right away; that for a writer to aspire to getting regular series television work as the ultimate aim of his or her career is on a par with trying to get into the finals of the World's Tallest Midget Competition.

Which may sound snobby, and probably is, but the fact remains that I don't believe TV - and series TV in particular, but we'll come to my reasons for making that particular distinction in a moment - to be a writers' medium. It certainly *needs* writers, in the way that the car industry needs designers, but in both cases the initiator of a concept doesn't control the process by which it is realised - that's at the mercy of a number of factors which include the type of plant, technology and investment available, the skill levels of the production line personnel, the amount of time allowed for development, and the limits within which a project can be considered cost-effective.

So a car designer can dream of the perfect vehicle, and yet the end-product of his work will be just your average jalopy with the usual tendencies towards breakdown and body-rot. It does its job to a degree that matches the price that the buyer can afford. The gap between the dream and the final reality is a measure of the many limitations that the production system has introduced along the way. But the writer working alone, writing to be *read*, works only within the limitations of ability and language - and whilst these are stiff enough barriers at the best of times, they're at least assailable entirely with the weapons to hand.

Now, I might be starting to sound as if I think that television is an irretrievably second-rate medium. Well, put it down to a few fairly recent wounds that are still smarting. Television frequently shows itself to be capable of quality, even of excellence, although it just isn't feasible to expect such a standard consistently or continuously. The point that I'm trying to push home is that, as a writer entering television for the first time, you can no longer expect to be a sole and controlling creator. You become a contributor - a highly important contributor, but a contributor nonetheless. Discovering the truth of this can be a painful experience, a blow to your ego; but before we start to talk about scripts and the way they have to be written to take account of the production machine, let's talk about the production machine itself.

Success in building audience figures depends largely on the development - or, to put it more precisely, the *encouragement* of viewing habits. The individual programme becomes a single element of the more important whole, the schedule; this was an approach developed initially by the commercial companies but which presented the BBC with the simple options of follow suit or go under. Consider for a moment what it is that a commercial TV company actually sells; it doesn't sell TV programmes except as a minor spinoff, supplying overseas companies much as they supply us with inexpensive bought-in material. What it sells is the time between the programmes, carved down into units of five, ten, twenty, thirty and sixty seconds, assembled into break sequences running to a maximum of three minutes and forty seconds, with a daily permissible average of seven minutes' commercial time to every hour of on-air transmission.

In fact, we can define it even more closely than that. What's being sold is not even the time in which the customer's advertisement is aired; the actual sale is of a demographic block of x million attentive people, all sitting vulnerably in their living rooms and waiting to be hit with the sell. They're there because a carefully timed and selected programme has lured them there and because well-planned scheduling has kept them in place. Seen at its most cynical, the primary function of the TV programme is to act as bait.

We're saved from the worst effects of this by two factors. One is the restraining legislation of the IBA, which companies must

follow if they want to see their licences renewed at the end of the contract period. The other is the integrity of individual programme makers, whose primary interest is in the work at hand. Cut down on either of these, giving the companies too much commercial self-determination and placing heavy incentives before producers to pull in audiences by aiming at lowest common denominators, and I suspect that what you'd get would have an awfully close resemblance to American television.

The building of viewing habits requires repetition and association. And lo, thus was born the television series. The series form dominates with very few exceptions; even single plays are shunted into groups and presented under a series banner, usually with a common set of opening graphics to take the unpleasant edge off their uniqueness. Feature films get the same treatment, becoming Monday Matinees and Tuesday Movies. Familiarity is the key, a smoothing of the difficult path of conscious choice.

Sticking with drama, as we'll have to if we're to grope our way towards some kind of perspective on SF in television, I'd suggest that the series form serves the schedule rather than any innate potential of the medium. David Gerrold's book on writing for *Star Trek - The Trouble With Tribbles* - details some of the difficulties that face a writer who joins a caravan that's already up and rolling. Apart from purely mechanical limitations of the number of sets and actors and effects which can be used - and it's arguable that these aren't really limitations at all, just spurs towards imagination and ingenuity - the real difficulty lies in the nature of the story that you can tell.

Series characters are pretty well set, and can't be tampered with (for tampered with, read *developed*). They have to end one story much as they began it, ready to start the next a week later as their old recognizable selves. *Nothing important can happen to them* - at least, nothing so important that it changes their lives, nothing so great that they can't shrug it off at the end of the episode and go on to behave as they always have and, as long as the series stays popular and on the air, always will.

Which isn't to say that changes in character and lasting reactions to events can't take place in television series drama, *but* - and it's a big but - they can't take place as a result of the initiative of the writer. They're the exclusive province of the producer and

his script editor, to be given to the writer as a part of his assignment when the series is being planned and his place in it is being determined. A writer in these circumstances puts his professional skill to work around a set of givens; and whilst the result of this may be a worthwhile product and something to be proud of, my own feeling is that it's a qualified pride. It's markedly different from the satisfaction to be derived from a piece of work that is totally your own, an enclosed imaginative world in which people and events work on each other to make the points that *you* wanted them to make.

Let's consider SF and the television series before we look at the rarer birds of single plays and serials and adaptations. Let's consider, specifically, writer opportunities.

There aren't many.

Opportunities are few because the number of SF series is small, and as a consequence the percentage of excellence is very small indeed. Imported American material may feature the peculiar kind of lobotomised sci-fi that underpins the premises of shows like *Feyond Westworld* and *Logan's Run*, but the opportunities for British-based writers in this context are zero. Another difficulty is that, by the time you as an outsider to the production machine get to hear about a new series, it's most likely that all of the script assignments will have been made already and that no new writers will be needed. Word gets around that most elusive and informal of arrangements, the professional grapevine; producers and script editors will both contact writers that they've worked with before and who they know to be reliable and competent. Having said which, there is a genuine interest in finding new talent, but the time and the energy available for pursuing this are limited. You have to become pretty conspicuous in some related field before you can get noticed.

But then again, you can stack the odds in your favour. Series frequently run for two or three seasons, and the early weeks of series one are those when you should be making a play to be considered for an assignment in series two, should it happen - and the decision on this is likely to be made within a very short time. Write directly to the producer with details of your track record so far and some material to support your PR; don't waste your time on a script of any kind as you won't know what the 'givens' of the next season are likely to be, although a brief story outline would probably be a good idea.

If there's no existing series that you want to try for, make a similar approach to the head of the script unit either at the BBC or at one of the 'big five' commercial companies (Thames, LWT, Yorkshire, Granada, or ATV). The smaller commercials have a limited drama output, but your chances of scoring with them are slimmed down drastically. An interest in writing SF is so specialised that you're just about certain to be passed along to any producer who happens to be preparing an SF-related series. After that, it's up to you and the attraction of your submission.

This last route is the one you'll probably have to follow if you have a series concept of your own that you'd like to try launching, but you'll have to do a lot more work in order to be taken seriously - probably down to at least one completed script and a string of outlines to demonstrate that your idea is capable of series development. I don't recommend this until you've spent at least some time inside the television whale in order to understand what's being looked for and how best to put it across, but if you feel sufficiently motivated then don't listen to me - going against advice is one of the things that originality is all about. The success of your series will depend on its finding a sympathetic producer who will work to make some kind of mutual accommodation between your idea and the production machine...so you've gone one better than series contribution, where the accommodation has to be entirely on your part.

The scales tip even more in your favour if you're able to sell a single play: suddenly the script moves to a position of pre-eminence. In order to do this you'll either have to write the complete script on spec - more feasible since you don't have anyone else's series requirements to meet - or else be able to offer a very detailed outline plus a mass of backup evidence that you can deliver the goods. This means published work, or success elsewhere in the media. If you're looking to make your first big breakthrough, then only a finished script is going to do it for you. Even then, this might only buy you an invitation to go in and chat and get some encouragement for your next project...but what do you want, miracles?

A couple of words about serials and adaptations, before we move on to talk about the script itself. Although I've never actually tried to sell one, I suspect that a serial might be a stinker to get

launched unless your name happens to be Francis Durbridge, and then I wouldn't lay any bets. Soaps excepted, a serial has to be followed from week to week with some degree of commitment and concentration; which sounds like good news in view of what we were discussing before about the encouragement of viewing habits, although the facts aren't quite as neat as we may hope. It's like buying a partwork; miss one instalment, and you can easily lose the will to go on. Come in late, and you may feel that you've missed too much already. But if you feel that this is the way you have to go, by all means do ... bearing in mind that the same provisos about completing the work on spec or having some good form to back you up still apply.

Adapting an existing piece of work may be starting to sound like an easy way out. Less sweat, with most of the graft already undertaken by the original author ... well, maybe. The truth is that most adaptations start out as producers' projects, with a writer being brought in when things are already starting to move. If you still want to make an adaptation proposal, bear in mind that it'll be up to you to track down the rights to the original and to be able to say at least that they're available and affordable. In some extreme cases you may even be expected to acquire an option on them yourself, just to prove that you mean business. Also bear in mind that adaptations don't pay as well as original work; TV rates are calculated on the length in minutes of the finished product, and a lower figure per minute applies in a case like this. But then that's what you get for trying to do it the easy way, you cheapskate you.

Whichever of these options you're going to choose, it all comes down to the same basic document; the television script. "What you have to bear in mind," one script editor told me, looking over a first draft that was as densely written as a short novel, "is that a television script has to be read by a lot of people, and some of them aren't very intelligent." The implications of this took a long time to get through to me, and they're responsible for the reserve that I have - from an entirely selfish point of view - towards the medium as a whole.

Get hold of a TV script, and read through it. Bag a real script somehow; the cosmeticised versions that appear in print are no guide, and nor are the short sample pages that you get in How-To

books. The first thing that will strike you is the absolute paucity of words. I'll guarantee that the dialogue will strike you as being impossibly banal, and the descriptions of the scenes will be unevocative.

This is because a TV script isn't a document to be read - at least, not for pleasure in the way that prose is read. Instead it's a structural blueprint designed to set a number of departments in motion. Only the barest indications of scenic requirements are needed, because the design department will take over that function and even if you go into the most minute detail they'll ignore you as a matter of professional pride. The same goes for actor movements, because the director will take over, etc., etc.

In fact, all that's left to you is your constructional skill as a writer. You sketch out the board and you lay down the moves, and you indicate what has to be said and where. You have to be resigned to the abandonment of the interpretation of every element to others. It's a skill in itself, but it's a limited one compared to the range of skills that - in my unfortunately less-than-humble opinion at least - a writer should need to develop. World's tallest midget, remember? Looking through an old script just before I sat down to write this, I was struck by the one-line paragraph, step-by-step breakdowns of screen action; the only published writer that I've seen to use a similar technique is Barbara Cartland (also, one might unkindly comment, read by a lot of people, and some of them not very intelligent). This may give you some idea of the simplicity required ... and also serve as a warning of how simplicity can easily go hand-in-hand with simplemindedness.

I learned this the hard way, by having one of my scripts completely worked-over and rewritten. For a long time I went around telling everyone about it, until it filtered through to me that people were sick of listening. I'd been too well-paid for it to carry much weight as a hard-luck story.

So although I was bitter for a while, I hope that I can handle it better now; television is, after all, as ephemeral as smoke, or so it seems until a twenty year-old episode of 'Sergeant Bilko' comes along and knocks that little theory on its tail. Writing for the medium involves treading a very narrow trail, avoiding condescension on the one hand - it'll show through faster than you could know - and yet on the other being wary that you don't carry over the techniques

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«IT'S NOT A CLICHÉ, IT'S A TRADITIONAL NARRATIVE ELEMENT» (NOTES ON MILFORD U.K., 1981)

BY KEVIN SMITH

(THE MILFORD Writers' Conference was originally an American phenomenon, the first of these annual gatherings being held at Milford, Pennsylvania, in 1956. Founder members included Damon Knight and James Blish. When, during the last years of his life, Blish left the U.S.A. to take up residence in England, he hit upon the happy idea of bringing the principles of the American Conference along with him, and he established the first U.K. session in 1972 at - guess - Milford-on-Sea in Hampshire. The ninth of these U.K. Conferences was held there this year from 27th September to 3rd October: the writers present were -

Patrice Duvic	Dave Langford
Malcolm Edwards	Marianne LeConte
Chris Evans	Pip Maddern
Dave Garnett	George Martin
Rob Holdstock	Geoff Ryman
Gerry Kilworth	Andrew Stephenson
	Lisa Tuttle,

Not to mention KEVIN SMITH, who sent us this report.)

The mechanics of Milford are very straightforward. Each participant brings at least four copies of either a short story or an extract from a longer work plus as much synopsis as is necessary. (10,000 words is the limit.) The committee prepares a running order of stories to be dealt with each day during the week of the conference. During the mornings the participants read stories and make notes on them. In the afternoons the stories are criticised; each participant has three uninterrupted minutes to comment, the author five minutes to reply, and a second round for afterthoughts. In the evenings there may be a group discussion, or a game of 'Call My Bluff', or whatever. Generally, the 'new bugs' are done over on the second or third day -- this giving them one day to see how it's done, but then getting their agony out of the way as quickly as possible. Mercy killing, if you like....

Well, there's one of the myths of writers' conferences straight away -- 'dealt with','criticised', 'done over', 'the agony', 'mercy killing' -- the myth that

each author in turn is given a roasting, his precious creation shredded before his eyes, and he, the creator, spat upon with disgust and contempt by the rest. Like all myths, it has elements of truth: some shredding is carried out, but not indiscriminately and never without justification. Not at a good conference.

There is, in fact, a genuine problem in finding a single word or phrase to describe what a story undergoes that doesn't carry unwanted undertones. 'Dealt with' is not inaccurate, but carries undertones of condemnation -- "I'll deal with you later, boy." The last three terms I used are over the top, deliberately so. 'Criticised' is probably the best, being a literary term anyway, but some people will insist on interpreting this only in a pejorative sense; criticism is destructive. So they invent a new term, 'critique', used as a verb, and talk of the (good) stories being 'critiqued'. Ugh! In an effort to find a neutral word, some people 'workshop' the stories, which I'm not too keen on either. It is in any case not properly applicable to Milford.

As it is set up, the Milford writers' conference is not actually a 'workshop'. All the stories are written beforehand and there is no official provision for writing or rewriting stories during the conference itself -- though of course there is nothing to prevent participants doing so in their free time. So there is no workshop process at Milford, unlike, say, the Clarion workshops. One reason for this is that Clarion is for students and has teachers present, whereas Milford is for professionals, those writers who have already been professionally published, and all participants are there on equal terms, at least theoretically. Why then, if they are professionals, do the writers undergo this process. The trite answer is that no-one ever stops learning. More accurate is that the professionals tend to be new professionals who haven't actually published very much, such as me. (I'm not trying to insult those who are well-established writers and attend Milford; I'm merely pointing out that they are in the minority.)

Just as the use of certain words, such as 'criticise', can lead to the myth of the roasting authors, so the use of other words, such as 'critique', can lead to the myth of the mutual appreciation society, in which all the authors tell each other how good they are.

It should be evident that neither mythical variety would be worth a damn. If all that happens is destruction then the author learns nothing that will enable him to improve, and may also have a genuine but unorthodox talent suppressed. Similarly, if an author is told nothing but how good he is, he learns nothing that will enable him to improve. I am told that both myths do exist. I have no experience of either, and Milford is neither, though it does show signs of both, which I'll come to later. It is tempting to say it steers a middle course, but the mid-point of learning nothing and learning nothing is learning nothing....

(Final chat about words: I'm going to talk about stories being 'criticised' and mean it in a neutral sense; it may be constructive or destructive.)

The criticism at Milford is, first and foremost, the result of hard work. Just about everyone reads just about every story twice or more and makes a positive effort to understand what each author intends, to point out the flaws of plot, structure, character, style and so forth, and to identify what is good in the story, what works, what are the nice touches. Without the hard work there would be no Milford. I would have been much more distressed by indifference to my story than by any criticism, and very much inclined to repay indifference with indifference.

The result is that each story receives considered opinions from each participant (except the author, who has his own opinions already), opinions that are

frequently contradictory and which may concentrate on different aspects of the story. It is not possible, generally, to comment exhaustively on a story in the space of three minutes. Nor is it desirable to repeat, in detail, what has already been said by earlier participants -- though it may be useful, or even necessary, to reiterate points briefly so that the author is made aware that an opinion is general and not particular. What is very difficult to do is reproduce in a critical session one's initial reaction to a story, the reaction (perhaps superficial) of the casual reader rather than the critic.

I grant you that one's initial impression might well colour all subsequent perceptions of the story, to the extent that the detailed consideration is no more than a detailed and pseudo-objective justification of that initial impression. But it is also possible for one's opinions to be reversed. Certainly this happened to me at Milford. A story which seemed at first trite and superficial repaid a second reading by revealing some rare satirical humour, devastating insights and a multi-level structure. I point this out only as one of the difficulties experienced by the author-as-critic at Milford, and make no attempt to resolve the problem here. It would take far too long, and belong, in any case, more properly in the pages of Vector.

I said earlier that different participants might well concentrate on different aspects of a story. It is noticeable -- and not surprising -- that the aspects they choose are the aspects they themselves would emphasise in their writing. So, at Milford, Patrice Duvic was alert to the humour in the stories, Dave Langford to the science, Rob Holdstock to the emotive imagery, Geoff Ryman to the compassion and sympathy of the characters, George Martin to the plot and structure, for example. This is not to imply that they could talk sensibly about nothing else, nor that their own writing is that limited. Far from it. But given a restricted time they would tend towards these aspects. What this meant to me as a critic was that I could safely leave some areas alone, or give them only cursory consideration, the better to concentrate on areas which concerned me more. For instance, I am not too bothered about plot in a short story (though I reckon I can spot a gaping hole as quick as anyone) and could quite happily leave that aspect to others. George Martin completely rebuilt the plot of one story by changing the emphasis of a few elements within it; it was a joy to listen to a master at work -- though I didn't actually like the plot he came up with. Similarly, if the science in a story bothers me I can guarantee that Dave Langford has a detailed -- and probably very funny -- destruction to hand, and quite often an equally detailed reconstruction. I remember a story involving a fourth primary colour. This concept, though impossible, did not worry Dave or myself unduly (I thought it jolly good, in fact) but others were put off by its 'scientific impossibility'. Dave promptly produced a plausible scientific explanation of how something might be seen as a fourth primary, or at least a new colour, and then another plausible scientific explanation, and another. I refuse to compete.

I also said that opinions were frequently contradictory. In fact, it is rare for everyone to agree about a story, as you might expect. There are a variety of reasons why, but again this is not the place to go into them. However, there is an interesting psychological effect arising from the contradictions.

The person who has first turn in a critical session may be able to set the tone of the session. If he expresses his views strongly, either for or against, then the people following will tend to go along with him, either because they do actually agree or because they reinterpret their views to accord with his. They do not necessarily change their views, but will give the benefit of the doubt to the first speaker and suppress minor disagreements and contradictions. As more people go along with the prevailing view, it seems to become harder to contradict it, and only the most confident will do so. It is all a matter of confidence. There is always the nagging thought: "What have I missed in this

story?" -- so that when someone seems to have spotted it there are strong temptations to believe him. There can be some intriguing results. On one occasion at Milford everyone appeared to like a particular story until the last two, who hated it and said so in no uncertain terms. In the second round, some people picked up on minor quibbles they had voiced (and some they hadn't!) and amplified and reinterpreted them to accord with the new orthodoxy. People who had said they quite liked the story now said that, actually, they didn't really like it. Quite extraordinary!

In doing this, Milford shows signs of the mythological extremes I mentioned earlier. If participants are not honest about their views, at the risk of appearing to be unperceptive critics, then Milford cannot work. People attend Milford as authors, not as critics. They function as critics, and also as readers, sure enough, but no one is going to be bothered about their perceptiveness. Any genuine reaction to a story has to be valid one in the context of Milford, and if an author-as-critic fails to spot a subtlety in a story then it is likely that a proportion of casual readers in the big wide world would also fail to spot it -- which is a failing of the story's author, if anyone. Fortunately, though these vacillations might threaten to undermine the structure and value of Milford, they don't seem to have done so as yet. The truth always seems to emerge, eventually -- but future participants had better watch out. There's no room for anything but honesty, be it ever so brutal.

So much for how the Milford critical sessions tick, and occasionally miss beats. What of the rest of it, the evening discussions, the 'Call My Bluff', the talking and socialising? The 'rest of it' is as important as the criticism of the stories, though in a much more indirect way. It helps to create an atmosphere in which the participants can get to know each other and build the confidence in each other in which stories can be condemned, severely condemned, in the knowledge that there is no malicious intent -- or at least, it can help. (It doesn't work perfectly, of course, or else what I've written in the previous two paragraphs wouldn't be true.) I almost wrote "stories can be condemned.... without the author taking it personally" just then. Well, the person doing the condemning doesn't mean it to be taken personally, but that's someone's hours of effort and agonising on those sheets of paper. You condemn it and and think he won't take it personally? Ha! But if he knows you're not being malicious it softens the blow. On the other side of the coin, everything might go sour and an edginess can begin to build, a tension that can destroy much of the value of Milford. It didn't happen at Milford '81, but I gather that it has previously.

The evening discussions were quite fun and I enjoyed taking part in them, but I can't say they were of any direct benefit to me. We decided that there was room for more humour in science fiction, but that it was difficult to do well. (I had taken a funny story, which dragged in places and had other flaws -- so I knew that already), and we decided that the most memorable features of books we remembered from years ago were quite specific visual images rather than plots or ideas or characters. I'm not sure what that proves, and I suspect that the way the question was posed biased the answers that way. George Martin, I think it was, asked us all to describe something from a book we remembered from our childhood reading. I found this very difficult, as I tend not to remember books anyway, and most of what I remember from my childhood reading I remember because I've read and re-read it several times since -- which it would have been cheating to use. Personally, I don't recall visual images, and I don't think I should let the conclusion affect my writing.

I've started to get personal, and will continue with it. As Milford critic it was necessary to have a wider perspective and a greater sense of responsibility than as, say, a reviewer for Vector. There were thirteen opinions of a story

in addition to the author's own, all different to one extent or another (as I've already said) and all coming in quick succession. There was time for brief and instant debate (no prior discussion of a story was permitted) and a chance for others to add to one's own appraisal of a story. There was also the chance -- and responsibility -- of affecting a story, since nearly all of them were in an early draft, and thus an incentive to make positive suggestions for improvement.

As 'author-as-victim' (and despite all my fine sounding words at the beginning that is how it feels when it comes to your own story) the main value of Milford is quite definitely not the criticism and advice one receives on the particular story. At least, again, not directly.

What?

I feel that a story taken to Milford ought to be somewhat experimental, that the author ought to be trying something he hasn't before (and I confess that my story was not all that experimental, though I was trying a slightly different style, a little more ornate and extravagant with more auctorial presence than usual). What he should be looking for especially is reaction to that experiment. He shouldn't draw attention to this, as it will bias the response. Nor should he ignore the rest of the criticism. The value of the reaction to the experiment is not solely for that single story, but for all the times the author might want to use the experiment as a tool or a regular feature of his writing. I don't particularly want to give chapter and verse about what I gained in this way; suffice it to say I did gain.

Another gain is in the confirmation of one's own feelings about one's story. This sounds terribly smug and conceited. It isn't. An early version of any story will contain things about which the author is not happy, but which he can't for the moment see a way of avoiding or improving. Or he might try to get away with something, in the hope of bluffing or fooling the readers. Someone will spot it. Milford teaches you that you won't succeed in any bluff. As Geoff Ryman said (more or less): "You can't get away with anything. I thought I could, but I won't try in future."

An author must also remember that he needn't accept all the criticism and advice proffered. Apart from anything else, it will be impossible, since much of it will be contradictory. I said earlier that the critics tend to concentrate on aspects akin to their own preferences in writing. The corollary is that an author should pay most attention to those critics whose preferences are similar to his, and give less weight to the others. He must not allow himself to be railroaded into a type of writing which is not his. (I have heard of a participant who paid attention only to Richard Cowper and Christopher Priest at a Milford, who were the most well-known and established authors present -- presumably on the grounds that they knew How It Was Done and the rest were a bunch of no-hopers. Need I say that this is not very profitable, not to mention insulting to the 'no-hopers'?)

Milford 1981 was hard work, very enjoyable and most worthwhile. I came away pretty tired, mentally and physically, and sorry that it was all over. I think that Milford could do with being more intense, if anything; it could stand another four people, making eighteen in all and three or four stories per day rather than two or three. It would maintain the creative pressure for longer periods, at the slight cost of limiting the critics strictly to three minutes (on slack days four or five was not uncommon this time), which I think would make the sense of achievement at the end of it that much greater.

If they ask me, I'll go again.

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Casting Bread Upon The Waters

DOROTHY DAVIES

ONE OF my writing friends recently confessed she could not give away any of her stories as she hadn't enough to give away, she being one of the slow writing types. In the *Focus* statement in *Matrix* the editors said "We will be on our guard against any trend that might indicate that the magazine was becoming a professionals' wastepaper bin".

The *Focus* statement sparked off the recollection of the earlier statement, my mind started its usual game of rouletta, spinning round wildly until I had worked out the connection between the two, then I started on this item.

Giving things away. This is a very debatable point, and depends on what you mean by the statement anyway.

Define 'giving away'. My friend means not receiving money for her stories. But to me this is not 'giving away': I will allow any stories or articles of mine into print for no financial reward, because I get feedback.

The writing profession is one of the loneliest, and any help, encouragement and cheering up along the way is of vital importance to a young writer. (I'll let you know whether the same still applies when I've just had my sixth book accepted. I've attended my fourteenth signing session and written my 100th article. I anticipate that I will say the same thing.)

Right now, sitting here at my desk with my battered old portable - the electric succumbed to my tears - under my fingers, a letter from the *Focus* editors requesting an article on one side and the letter rack containing letters from people with such giant reputations as David Langford on the other, I know how much these requests for articles and fiction, and letters from established writers, mean to me. Telling you what I get out of a vast correspondence is very much more difficult, as it is more abstract than concrete. There *are* the concrete aspects, of course - market information, tips, criticism, advice, almost always accepted by me - but the friendship, the sharing, the...

I told you it would be difficult.

Let's go back to the beginning and set out how it has worked for me.

In the beginning there were stories printed in Blake's 7 fanzines. It was nice to see them duplicated or lithoed with my name on top and it was a good feeling for a brand-new writer. There came letters from readers, co-writers, people to share feelings and opinions with. I found some good friends through those early stories.

'Home Thoughts' brought me a letter from Cherry Wilder, charming lady writer living and writing over there on the Mainland, through her introduction, Al FitzPatrick, whose departure from these shores I bemoan as it will cost me more to write to him...

'Somewhere For Baby to Sleep' (*Focus 4*) along with various mentions of Dorothy Davies scattered liberally throughout various periodicals brought me a letter and the start of a busy correspondence with David Langford - need I say more?

An article on writing erotica printed in *The Freelance Writing Magazine* brought me a letter requesting help, something I always respond to, having had plenty of help along the way from others, and a new friend. An item in a religious newspaper, under my pen name, brought me another letter seeking advice. This time he did not stay to become a correspondent, but seemed grateful for the pathetic advice I was able to offer.

What I'm trying to say is that, other than what I think of as purely professional writing - women's articles letters to womens' magazines, my erotica - everything I've had printed has brought a response.

And it goes on. A story not yet printed has brought me a new friend. It was sent to Guido Eekhaut and ended up in Belgium with a magazine called *Progressef*. The story won't appear until this winter issue comes out, but already the editor has visited, and among other things I'm ancestor-tracing for him, which could, if successful, result in a couple of articles later on.

So, how important is the money? For me, very important, of course; to pay for my stationery and postage I write the erotica, as I find it easy to write, the magazine likes everything I write, and I get paid. Because of this it constitutes a major part of my writing life, as anything that earns money has to, but there is time for the fantasy, horror and SF, the writing I can lose myself in, and that is earning me a reputation even if it isn't making me rich.

What, after all this, am I trying to say to you out there?

Just this. Never be afraid of giving anything away, whether it be your time, postage, fiction or an article. And never, never send something just because it has been unable to find a home elsewhere. Roelof Goudriaan, on whose fanzine my success be forever poured, has a story of mine (I hope) in *aFF4*. That story had only one single rejection slip attached to it prior to Roelof's acceptance. I have a story in my folder now that has been rejected ten times, but I did not succumb to temptation and send that, in the hope of ridding myself of it forever, simply because it was not what he wanted.

When considering your fiction for submission to *Focus* (and you are considering fiction for submission to *Focus*, aren't you?) don't please start thinking along the lines 'I won't get paid for this, this'll do'; think more in terms of what you will get back in the way of feedback.

That is sometimes much more valuable than money.

THE MEDIA MAZE *Continued from page 26*

into other forms of work. It's a medium in which the ability to compromise is a virtue; what I'm really urging is that, once acquired, it's an ability that shouldn't be put to work in the short story or novel.

Bear it in mind or dismiss it, whichever you like. After all, it hasn't made me rich, and it doesn't seem to have made me famous.

«ORBITER»

BY ANNA PRINCE

ORBITER is a postal writer's workshop. It is made up of a series of self-sufficient groups, each of which contains five people.

To become a member of a group, you write to me and I then send you a sheet explaining ORBITER in more detail. (My address is given at the end of this article.) I do appreciate a stamped, addressed envelope.

If you like what you read, the next step is to send me something you have written. When I have four other manuscripts, I form the five of you into a group, appoint a leader and leave you to it. You need only contact me again if someone drops out of the group and you need a replacement. Obviously the length of time you will have to wait before being slotted into a group will vary.

So what next? What is it that I have left you to do?

Imagine that you are a member of a a group. The envelope/padded bag/parcel has just thunked through your letterbox and you rip it open eagerly.

Inside are five potential masterworks, needing only the cold wind of critical appraisal to bring them to fruition. Or so all five authors hope. The contributions need not necessarily be SF, unless the group as a whole has decided to restrict itself to SF. Usually, the group will be prepared to read whatever to write.

One of the enclosures tumbling round your feet might be a chunk from a half-written novel. A couple could be short stories. The fourth may be a novella.

The fifth, of course, is whatever you sent out last time, which has now circulated round the whole group.

Attached to it (you can hardly bear to look) are four ruthless pieces of criticism.

After a day or two of telling all your friends that the group's misunderstood you completely, the idiots, you begin to see what they meant. You think about the changes you now see are necessary.

Before you get too involved, you have to complete your duty to ORBITER.

You read the four other enclosures carefully, and write your own criticism on each. You too can be ruthless, but must also be both fair and constructive. A couple of brief comments are not good enough: you must produce a carefully thought-out page or two about each. Because that's what you expect about yours.

Laying tenderly aside the aching remains of your last piece, you send off a new offering to be dissected by the surgical knives of the others in your group.

That, basically, is how ORBITER works. There are a few other frills.

For instance, if someone fails to send the package back into orbit, the person expecting it snarls (postally) at the slacker. The leader of the group will have told everyone when to expect the package.

Anyone interested in joining a group should write to me at the address below. Please mention if you would be willing to lead the group: someone has to.

Anna Prince
ORBITER
81 George Tilbury House
Chadwell St Mary
Essex
RM16 4TF

Market Space

ANALOG Hard SF stories of 20,000 words or less seem to be preferred. As far as we know, rates are still the same as those given in *Focus 2*: 5c a word up to 7,500 words, $375 for stories between 7,500 and 12,500 words, and 3c a word thereafter. Address: 304 East 45th Street, New York.

THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION Hasn't taken on many serials as such recently, though getting one story accepted seems to provide opportunities for intermittent series of follow-ups. Anything seems to go - hard SF, space opera, fantasy, occasional poetry - with lengths up to 20,000 words approx. Rates start at 3c a word. Edited by Edward Ferman at Box 56, Cornwall, Connecticut 06753, USA.

ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE Short, hard SF stories are preferred. The last we heard, rates were 5.75c per word for short pieces, grading to 3.5c per word for anything longer than 12,500 words. Rapid reply time. Edited by George Scithers at Box 13116, Philadelphia, PA 19101, USA.

2D ASTRA pays about £10 per thousand for fiction (mostly very short) and articles. Have been known to try to get away with offering less to unknowns: don't accept such offers; if your work's worth publishing, it's worth full payment. Address: 22 Offerton Road, London SW4.

OMNI BOOK OF THE FUTURE seems set fair for national release during 1982 after test marketing. It isn't possible to confirm their attitudes to fiction as yet, but if they decide to carry it rates should be quite good (at least £35 per thousand words). Watch this space.

INTERZONE, in case you hadn't heard, is a new British short story magazine, to appear quarterly from February 1982. According to its editors, "It will feature the very best imaginative fiction of all kinds, from hard science fiction to the avant garde, and especially fiction that's too original to label! Unlike other fiction magazines, *Interzone* will have no rigid editorial predispositions, no rules, and no spaceships on the cover." Initial rates should be at least £35 per thousand words.
Interzone, 28 Duckett Road, London, N4 1BN, UK.

EXTRO is a new British SF magazine appearing bimonthly as from January 1982. They say that they welcome SF and fantasy submissions - "With lengths in the range from 2000 to 12000 words. Fiction up to 15000 words in length may be considered in exceptional cases, as may extracts from forthcoming novels. We buy first English-language serial rights, with part-payment on signature of agreement and the balance on publication: rights revert to the author if we fail to publish the story within a stipulated period. Rates are negotiable, normally in the range £15 to £25 per thousand words."
They also accept non-fiction, but would appreciate an outline in the first place if the piece is unsolicited. "Our general rule is that non-fiction should have some relevance to SF - not an article on spaceflight but one on how spaceflight has featured in SF, and so on ... The rate is £15 per thousand words, other terms being as for fiction. Fiction submissions to Paul Campbell, 27 Cardigan Drive, Belfast BT14 6LX; Non-Fiction Editor is Dave Langford, 22 Northumberland Avenue, Reading, Berks RG2 7PW.

The above rates are intended as a guide only, and generally refer to the minimum you can expect. Big names can often command more, especially from the US magazines. But if you get offered *less* then ask around.

If you want your manuscript back, don't forget to enclose a self-addressed envelope plus stamps or (for US)International Reply Coupon.

VANITY PRESSES Don't get conned by firms who give you a glowing response to your work, and then ask you to contribute towards the publication costs. No genuine publisher ever asks writers to pay for the printing; the money a publisher invests is your guarantee that they'll publicise and *sell* your book. A vanity press makes its profits from highly-priced but cheaply-done printing on books that don't get into the shops. So be very wary of small ads that purport to be from publishers looking for manuscripts, or you might be the next sucker to end up with a large overdraft and a pile of books that are so shoddily printed they're unsaleable.

PRESENTATION

You shouldn't need reminding of this, but the work you've put into writing your incipient masterpiece can go completely to waste if the manuscript is poorly presented. You may not think it fair, but almost any editor (including the editors of *Focus*) will be better-disposed towards your work if it's easy to read, keep track of and prepare for printing.

So always type your MSS, using a ribbon that's new enough to be legible. Use double spacing, which is easier on the eye and leaves room for writing in corrections, and leave margins at least an inch wide, to allow room for the printer's symbols used in proof-reading. [If you're not familiar with these, you ought to be, because you should be using them in correcting your own typing errors; you'll find a list of them in the 'Writers' and Artists' Yearbook']

Give the MS a separate title sheet, with your name and address in the top corner, plus the title of your story and name or pen-name underneath in the middle of the page. At the top of each page, just below the page number (and it's vitally important not to forget *that*!) type your name again and the title of the story, so the sheets can be reassembled if someone knocks the MS on to the floor.

Before sending it off, go through the MS checking for typing errors, spelling mistakes and other items that need changing, and correct them - legibly.

Count the number of words in your story (an estimate will do, but you may lose money if it's inaccurate) and type the figure prominently on your title page: opposite your name and address, or in one of the bottom corners.

If you're enclosing a covering letter, keep it short and to the point, and don't try to bully your reader; the story will have to sell itself.

If you want your MS back - which you should do if you've taken as much trouble over preparing it as you should - enclose a self-addressed envelope, stamped if it's going to a British magazine or publisher, or with a money order or International Reply Coupons if it's going abroad.

But above all, remember the needs of the editor the manuscript's going to. If you're not sure what those needs are, find out. A good place to start would be Richard Evans's article in *Focus 2*. Because although most editors try to consider each item on its merits, it's a hell of a lot easier to see the merits of something that you can read without squinting, and that's ready to be used.

In other words, present your MS in such a form that, when an editor first sets sight on it, she feels she's dealing with a professional, and starts to anticipate how good it may be.

And when you get right down to it, if you don't have enough consideration to make your work easy for an editor to read and prepare for publication, why should she be bothered to do her share of the work? And how much good do you think it'll do your chances of future sales to that magazine or publisher if they come to think of you as amateurish, incompetent and so little convinced of the worth of your own work that you can't even be bothered to see that it's free of typing errors?