FOCUS

AN S.F. WRITERS' MAGAZINE

spring 1983

issue 7

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KILWORTH
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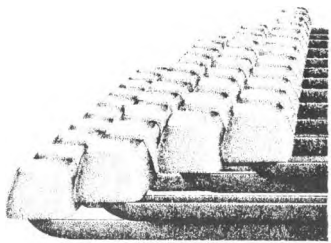

a BSFA publication

FOCUS
AN S.F. WRITERS' MAGAZINE

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BSFA S.F. WRITERS MAGAZINE

ISSUE 7 SPRING 1983

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Our thanks go to our artists this issue: Iain Byers (front cover), Dick Vigers (18, 33, 35), Peter Walker (7), Phill Probert (4,47)

Deadline for the receipt of submissions for the next issue of *Focus* is August 1st, 1983.

SINCE OUR LAST ISSUE we've seen the demise of *Extro*, which was fifty per cent of the mini-revival in SF fiction magazines. This event, although it occasioned regret, did not, on the whole, cause much surprise. After all, in this country we're used to it, or ought to be; the process of launch and failure takes on the appearance of an inevitable historical process.

Lack of distribution is usually held to be the main culprit; the W.H.Smith ogre snorts again. Clearly, there must be some truth in this; it's reasonable to suppose that the more copies you have on display, the more you're likely to sell, up to a point. What is not reasonable is to suppose that sales will necessarily go on rising in proportion to availability. Any potential market has a particular capacity, and once that capacity is reached, no amount of extra copies on the shelves will increase it. To achieve financial viability, you need to do more than print a few thousand extra copies and scatter them about the shelves of newsagents: you also have to sell them. Obviously, any magazine needs a certain size of market to survive. One therefore has to ask the question, does a market exist which is large enough to support a mass-circulation SF fiction magazine?

To answer this question, we need to have clearly in mind the nature of the fiction under discussion. We have to decide what type of magazine we want.

Here we admit to a prejudice, inasmuch as we are interested in magazines which contain genuine creative writing and which thus encourage the development of good, new writers. This is not to say that we condemn the existence of magazines such as (to take an American example) *Isaac Asimov's*, if people wish to buy them, which they clearly do. We're not arbiters of what people should or should not read. However, our concern is not with such publications.

If we look at literary magazines in this country, we see that they are not mass-market. One does not see them displayed in brave rows about the interior of W.H.Smith. Considering the types of novel that sell best, this is not actually surprising. At the moment, the public's interest - although this may not always have been the case, and may not be so in future - seems to lie

in particular types of formula writing. In the especial case of magazine SF, two publications that spring readily to mind are *Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine* and *Omni*. The former deals with material which has little literary merit or importance (and, although it's an American magazine, and one therefore can't be sure how well it would sell in this country, we suspect that it would be depressingly successful). The latter offers a juxtaposition of 'science fact' and 'science fiction', something about which we feel uneasy, emphasising as it does the role of science fiction as an extension of popular science writing. It may well be that these are approaches necessary to achieve mass-market success. If this is so, we can see no virtue in a proliferation of high-selling SF magazines. They would not make the publishing position a bit more healthy.

Despite all this, we do believe that an SF literary magazine can survive and flourish. It's a question of having realistic targets, pricing and expenditure: basically, knowing what you can do and what you can't. Here we come to *Interzone*, which seems to have adopted this approach. Rather than attempting to become a household name, it's identified a readership which it realises has, at present, a natural size limitation. This is not necessarily a disadvantage: the wider a magazine's readership, the more difficult it is to keep everybody happy, and the greater the danger of making compromises that end up with a magazine that nobody likes enough to buy it regularly.

Interzone, though available at a few specialist bookshops, relies primarily on subscriptions. That has several advantages for a small magazine. It reduces the cover price considerably, by cutting out distributors' and retailers' mark-ups, and thereby saves the magazine from depending heavily on advertising to keep it at a price its readers can afford. It enables the magazine to plan ahead more securely, knowing how much money they're going to have available. And it greatly simplifies the cash flow - no worrying about how to pay the printers when the distributors haven't coughed up the takings from the last issue.

Whether or not the contents are to your taste, *Interzone* is undoubtedly a serious magazine, and it's achieved four issues. Let's hope that there are enough renewed subscriptions, and indeed new ones, to ensure its survival.

Of course, we're not suggesting that the internal organisation of *Interzone* is a necessary prerequisite for financial success. Doubtless, there are many other ways of doing things. However, we believe that the awareness of a limited market, at least to begin with, is crucial.

If the above arguments seem elitist, we apologise. We don't mean to suggest that no good writing ever becomes popular, such a suggestion would clearly be ludicrous. Some serious writers can, in the fullness of time, build up very large readerships. Nevertheless, it remains true that a brave magazine which gives chances to new writers, and which contains genuinely speculative writing, is for the present a minority interest. We would do better to remember that than to hark back to some mythical Golden Age, when a well-thumbed copy of *New Worlds* graced every coffee-table in the country.

IN THIS ISSUE: Brian Aldiss and Jim England examine the vexed question of bestsellerdom; their perspectives are different, but their conclusions regarding the fickle rewards of stardom are similar. Still with the subject of rewards Helen McNabb introduces a caveat concerning

the Public Lending Right scheme. On a different plane entirely, Sue Thomason considers the relationship between SF and poetry; David Garnett contributes the by-now-almost-traditional Milford report; and Garry Kilworth subjects his fellow writers of SF to a withering psycho-analytic scrutiny. Two strongly contrasting pieces of fiction come from Peter Tasker and David Ratovitsky.

There is a slightly stronger bias in this issue towards contributions from the 'ordinary' BSFA member, as opposed to the professional writer. This is a result of happenstance, but it is not a trend we find entirely disagreeable, for while the authority and experience of the professional writers will always be vital to the function of *Focus*, we also want the magazine to appear approachable; we intend no discrimination by 'name'.

In the same way, we are pleased to include a fairly substantial letter column; your thoughts on this issue for publication in *Focus 8* will be welcome.

Once again, we conclude by recording our thanks to Eve and John Harvey, this time for the loan of valuable equipment...sorry about the case!

CONTRIBUTORS

BRIAN ALDISS is one of Britain's leading SF and general novelists. His latest work is the acclaimed Helliconia Spring, the first volume of a trilogy; the second, Helliconia Summer, is due out in the autumn and he is currently working on the third.

JIM ENGLAND is the author of the 1976 SF novel, The Measured Caverns. He is an ex-teacher of science who gave up his job through disillusionment and the urge to write, which he now does full-time.

DAVID GARNETT has had five SF novels published, the last of which was written over ten years ago. Since then he has had short stories published in various magazines, most recently Interzone 3, and has completed a new SF book called Timebomber.

GARRY KILWORTH is author of four SF novels, all currently in print with Penguin books. Presently he is working on another SF novel, the provisional title of which is Theatre of Timesmiths, and is also a student at King's College, London, reading Anglo-Saxon, "with great difficulty".

HELEN McNABB studied for a joint degree in English & Librarianship and then worked as an architectural librarian. Nowadays she tries "to get some freelance proofreading and indexing work done, between the demands of offspring".

DAVID RATOVITSKY is an enthusiastic reader and writer of SF presently living in Liverpool.

PETER TASKER studied English Literature at university and now works for an investment company, dividing his time between England and Japan.

SUE THOMASON has been writing for as long as she can remember, and has had some poetry published. When not writing, she studies for a postgraduate diploma in Librarianship.

LETTERS

Colin Greenland, 17 Alexandra Rd., Chadwell Heath, Essex RM6 6UL

Eve Harvey's letter last issue surprised me no end. I'm glad Eve is thinking and talking about feminism - whether I'm glad I made her do so I'm not sure! What did I say, anyway? I haven't seen Eve to ask her, and can only think she's referring to the way I used male and female pronouns in my article 'Highly Desirable Residence' (Focus 5) - that is, alternately, except where they refer to specific people. The English idiom is to use 'he' as the generic pronoun, as well as the masculine pronoun, but my students were of both sexes, and I wanted to say so. In fact, the human race (mankind notwithstanding) is of both sexes, and very many of us want to say so, as a matter of course. A little thing to bother about, but you can't change the big ones without changing the small ones. More important, the little things that we do without thinking are very often exactly the ones we need to think about, whether language habits or anything else. "But 'he' includes women. We all take that for granted. It just doesn't mention them." Well, women have been unmentioned too long - and I for one have had enough of taking them for granted. So, having thought about it, what can we do about that generic pronoun?

Ursula Le Guin called her ambisexual Gethenians 'he' throughout because she thought the only other option would be "to mangle English by inventing a pronoun for 'he/she'." Other writers have gritted their teeth, set to at that mangle, and produced 's/he' ('hir' for the possessive pronoun) or 'per' (from 'person') but it's hard to see any change that abrupt actually catching on. What might is simply more general use of female pronouns, until the time when they don't seem odd or surprising: until people stop noticing, in fact. (This is very hard work, by the way. You try it. I do it much more readily on paper than in conversation. I wish now I'd done it in The Entropy Exhibition. To avoid seeming sexist or to avoid seeming affected? Which is the stronger imperative?)

We are now seeing books that use 'she' as the generic throughout, like Marshall Coleman's Continuous Excursions and Disabled We Stand by Focus editor Allen Sutherland. Coleman says, "This seems to me the most satisfactory solution to the

problem of the pronoun, and, what is more, gives a slight shock to our sexist assumptions." The shock is salutary, making us think more about what we are reading, how it differs from what we usually read, and what that implies. To juggle pronouns in one and the same piece of writing is a bit more of a shock, since it nudges us more often, and both ways. It's a rhetorical device, but then we need to use whatever we can lay our hands on, rhetoric included: it's awkward and distracting, but then so are most new things. I borrowed it from Samuel Delaney, who (I think) uses 'she' and 'he' at random, probably with a bias towards 'she'; I decided to be pedantic about it.

If science fiction really is about other ways of seeing, thinking and being, or even merely about change and the future, here's one telling little detail we all ought to get right.

David V. Barrett, 31 Mayfield Grove, Harrogate, N. Yorks.

An interesting issue, particularly contrasting Chris Priest's and 'Christopher St. Clair''s articles. Rather than be frightened by the experiences of 'St. Clair', we should perhaps see it as one example of the hazy system Priest outlines breaking down. Unfortunate and sad - yes. Avoidable - possibly. But, I would hope, an isolated example.

Two questions I'd particularly like to put to you, or to Chris Priest, Bob Shaw, Garry Kilworth or any other BSFA member who is a number of years ahead of me in his writing career, and long ago jumped the hurdle which at present is tripping me up. The first novel is complete; all that remains is the small matter of getting it published.

First, then. The Writers' and Artists' Yearbook suggests writing a preliminary letter to publishers, giving a brief outline of the novel and asking if they're interested. Other authorities suggest including a few pages of the MS to show them that you are actually capable of stringing words together.

A former publisher's reader tells me that this is not the way to do it; all it does is give the publisher a chance to say 'No' with little bother to himself (which is what happened to me, three times). Far better, he said, to send the full MS, unsolicited, with a brief covering letter; that way, at least they'll have to read a few pages before they say 'No'. So that's what I'm trying now. (In between, I sent the MS to the Arrow/Radio 4 'Bookshelf' competition. I didn't expect to win, but it was worth trying, I think.)

Is there a 'preferred method'?

Which brings me to my second question. The methods I've tried are a little hit and miss, and will be expensive in postage if I have to send the entire MS to a number of publishers. Chris Priest mentions his agent. Using an agent obviously means having the benefits of his skill and knowledge, as well as taking away the chore of repeatedly submitting the MS yourself. And apparently, most agents don't charge you for marketing or placing your MS; they make their money, eventually, through their commission on your royalties. Fine, and there's a good list of agents in The Writer's and Artists' Yearbook.

Now, should I pick one at random, from those who deal with novels? Is one more or less as good as another? And how interested are they in unknown authors anyway? Would it be fair to ask an established author to recommend his own agent to me?

In short, then, should I keep plugging on as now, or should I get an agent, and if the latter, how?

It's good to see both Steve Gallagher and David Swinden emphasising that there is no 'right' way to write a novel - or a short story for that matter. My usual methodology is completely

different from Gallagher's, just as his would be from, for example, correspondence course techniques; but mine, I think, works for me. Writing is an intensely personal experience; I am only just coming to accept that when someone criticises one of my stories he is not criticising me. It's easy to lose friends ...

But they can be valuable critics.

I recently wrote a short story specifically for radio, and asked a close friend, who has the acting experience I haven't, to read it on tape. He found several passages which were fine on paper, but awkward to read aloud, and he found a number of ambiguities, both grammatical and of 'mood'. All these I had missed when writing the story, and would probably have missed if I had taped it. But playing the tape back a few days later, his voice gave me a distance from the story I would otherwise not have had, and allowed me to hear it objectively. It also gave me a new perspective on the story, by hearing someone else's interpretation of it. So now I'm able to go back and sort out the problems, problems I hadn't realised the story possessed.

While on stories, Hilary Robinson's piece, while well written, was somewhat nonentical, to coin a word. It didn't really get anywhere, it just fizzled out. I get the impression she didn't really know what to do with it at the end - a problem I'm all to familiar with, but have no easy solution for, except to stick the story in a drawer for a year, then bring it out hoping for a flash of inspiration.

CHRIS PRIEST replies: 'I think finding an agent is a matter of luck, judgement, persistence, will etc. I suppose the best way is by personal introduction (buying writers drinks at conventions is a start - mine's a gin and tonic), but picking names from the Writers' and Artists' Yearbook can be as good a way as ever. Never write to an agent who offers to charge you for reading your work. When approaching an agent blind, it is better if you have something positive to offer: e.g. one book already sold, plus a new one ready to be offered. Don't bother with an agent if you're only writing stories. Use your personal judgement, as you would in any other relationship. Just because an agent says he will take you on does not oblige you to be taken on.'

We can't offer you a surefire method of getting your ideal agent; most professional SF writers we know of who have agents have them through precisely that random mixture of factors listed by Chris - luck, persistence, personal recommendation. Agreed, it's rather like the cruel conundrum of unemployment - no job unless you have previous job experience. If you haven't already done so, look up two articles in Focus 1 - Chris's 'Writing a Novel? Do!' (on portion-and-outline) and Maggie Noach's 'Who Needs an Agent?'

Stephen Wake, 'Crinan', Massey Ave., Hartford, Northwich, Cheshire CW8 1RF

I found Steve Gallagher's piece, despite his modest preface, to be very helpful; it even managed to start me thinking about 'building' a novel myself! What was especially refreshing about it was that he put over the fun to be had when writing a novel (although he didn't say that it would be easy, of course) - and that I found encouraging: recently I seem to have read so many articles that said how much dull, hard work is involved with it. Thank God it can be worth it, after all!

Now, Hilary Robinson's fiction ... This, I confess, is the reason why I was spurred into writing,

as Hilary is a fellow member of an 'Orbiter' circle, and I've had the pleasure of reading another story of hers. Like the story I read, 'The Administration and Myan Lin' is concerned with two characters who conflict on a central point, and this is observed by a third character who is more-or-less uninvolved with this conflict. Of course, there is also the conflict between the administration and Fien Var; but, as I read it, this was in the story to fuel the central conflict. Anyway, what I liked about it was the concern she shows for character development, which is always good to see - generally, one sees too little of it in SF, though I feel the situation is improving.

To comment briefly on Eve Harvey's letter: I think that wherever possible we should avoid using SF cliches, which is just lazy writing (as Garry Kilworth eloquently argued in the first two issues of Focus). However, I feel - and perhaps Eve agrees with me - that Dorothy Davies, in her Focus 5 story, manages to avoid using SF cliches: the post-disaster tale is now well known outside SF, though it's not usually so well handled as in Dorothy's piece.

David Piper, Top Flat, 414 Park Road, Liverpool 8.

I have been a member of the BSFA for just a few months now, but feel that it is time I finally made some kind of contribution and gave the people like you (whom I have never met) some kind of feedback on the magazines which you produce. Of all the BSFA publications, Focus is easily the one which I enjoy the most, to the extent of ordering all the back copies and appreciating them as well. The reason for this is probably my motivation in joining the BSFA in the first place. I am not a fan and doubt that I ever will be. But I do love reading well written SF. A really good SF book speaks to me in a way that a piece of mainstream literature never could. I don't know why this is precisely. I try to read non-SF books and often enjoy them, and I studied English Literature at college and got a lot out of it. I tend to feel that the reason is that SF is a superb medium for speculation about the possibilities inherent in the universe and that as a literary form it is vastly underrated. Anyway, as is often the case, my love of SF and of writing has combined to make me wish to write SF myself and I have been making my preliminary efforts over the last year or so. Focus has been very useful to me as far as the practical side is concerned; for example, Steve Gallagher's article in the last issue is the sort of thing that I can see myself referring to again several times in the future - informative, encouraging and useful.

I do, however, have one comment - or criticism if you like - to make about Focus. Reading your editorial, I see that you are pleased to be receiving more submissions of fiction. Your consideration of the various pieces sent to you seems to be thorough - if not exhaustive - and by doing so you are undoubtedly performing a very useful service. But why do you only publish one piece of fiction per issue? Here I am, an unpublished writer of SF, with so few markets open to me for my first tentative ventures into the field, and yet, if I send you something, I know that, even if it is of a high standard, it is liable to be elbowed out by something that is just slightly more appropriate or skilled. I must tell you frankly that while I am sending you a story with this letter, I feel very hopeless about getting published by Focus while this policy remains. Surely you receive several stories per issue which you are reluctant not to publish? Surely the final choice of the story to be selected must

be agonising for you, leading to disputes and disappointments on all sides?

With the current dearth of publishing outlets for writers such as myself, I feel that Focus should change its policy and publish every story it receives which meets its editorial standards. And if this means an expansion or transformation of Focus, so be it! If you had this policy, I would certainly feel better about sending you my work. I would be interested in hearing your response to these comments and wonder what other members of the BSFA feel about this. I suspect that the point has been argued over before and that there are reasons for this policy of which I am not aware. I find it hard to believe that I would be willing to accept them.

We have been printing all the deserving fiction! But you have touched on a raw nerve in that we confess to having been a little woolly concerning the criteria we adopt with regard to the standard of fiction in Focus. As we see it, we have three options: 1) We set our sights lower. In this instance, our two previous issues would have contained three or four pieces of fiction - some of them slightly dubious, but with the worthwhile result of giving exposure to young writers. 2) We set our sights higher, in which case we might have printed no fiction, much as we might have wanted to. (You can reason yourself into a state of paranoia in which nothing seems worthwhile.) 3) We pick the best piece off the top of the pile every six months, as we have been doing. This is very much an ad hoc arrangement and is totally lacking in moral integrity, though happily it has resulted in two perfectly acceptable stories. Readers' thoughts welcomed.

We would be happy to print more than one piece of fiction per issue, if we could get enough stories of adequate quality.

John Fraser, 37 Hall Drive, Greasby, Wirral, Merseyside

I read Focus 6 with great interest, especially the piece on correspondence courses. Had I read it in a previous issue, I doubt whether I would have been so tempted to spend the money on one. At the same time, however, I am also inclined to agree with R. Nicholson-Morton's views on writing for the market. If you write purely for yourself then others may fail to appreciate your work. After all, what is the point in writing something which no one else can understand? If the writer's primary function is to entertain - and most of us have to be content with telling a good story rather than producing literature - then there has to be some degree of reader identification. So if you wish to see yourself in print quickly a correspondence course is probably as good a method as any (mine is expensive but includes market info). It does mean that you have to be prepared to write anything from a radio drama to recipes for the local newspaper, though there is some degree of choice. While I am not particularly interested in the latter, I do feel that such courses (mine, anyway) can give you some valuable training in writing for the popular press.

WE ALSO HEARD FROM: P.J.Riggs, Iain Byers, Anthony Francis. Thanks also to those of you who include brief comments with your submissions.

PLR (Probably Lost to Reason)

Helen McNabb

I AM AWARE that in writing this piece I am inviting the wrath and indignation of countless well-meaning individuals and indigent authors, and knowing the tact and discretion displayed in the BSFA letter columns, I'll probably receive it. However, I feel impelled to say, against the general opinion, that PLR, in its present form and with its present budget, will not be at all helpful to most of the people interested in it.

PLR is the unmemorable acronym for Public Lending Right, which is a system by which authors get paid when their books are borrowed from libraries. It has a long and complicated history. In the summer 1951 edition of The Author, John Brophy proposed the system known as 'Brophy's penny'; under this scheme, a penny would be handed over the counter every time a book was borrowed. Supporting the principle of free libraries, the Library Association objected. In 1959, a committee set up by the Minister of Education produced the Roberts Report; in 1960, the first PLR Bill was presented to Parliament, but abandoned, and in the same year a second PLR Bill was presented and rejected. In 1965, the Minister for the Arts, Jennie Lee, indicated sympathy for PLR. The Working Party set up by the Department of Education and Science published a report in 1972, another came from the Technical Investigation Group in 1974, and a final report came in 1975. The latest PLR Bill was presented to Parliament in November, 1978, and passed in 1979. The Registrar was appointed in 1981 and the register was due to open in September, 1982.

In this long history, the various Ministers for the Arts, the Society of Authors, the Writers' Action Group and the Library Association have discussed and argued their way, with the authors on one side and the L.A. on the other.

Those in favour of PLR claim that the single royalty received by the author through the sale of his book does not adequately recompense him for the further use of his book through a library. They say that sales are lost because books are borrowed, not bought, and that authors deserve a fee for a loan, like the Performing Right by which composers and dramatists are paid for a performance of their work. This is the basic principle for which all the authors' groups have been fighting. There is a subsidiary argument, which is that too many authors exist on the breadline, or else can only write part-time and need more money to enable them to write full-time.

The arguments against vary. The Library Association's position is not 'anti-author' but it does feel that the 'right' to payment for items in the public domain, once granted, cannot be limited to books alone. The principle, if it is a principle, should also extend to records and anything else borrowed from a library. The severe limitations of

PLR in its present form do not conform to that principle. The exclusion of educational and special libraries cannot be justified except on the grounds of expediency.

According to the Library Association, there is no firm evidence that library loans reduce sales. Nearly half of present hardback sales are to institutions, and publishers rely on libraries to underwrite their risk because they know they will sell a certain number. What evidence there is seems to indicate that a good library service and good bookshops go together, that libraries, by stimulating reading, also stimulate book-buying.

The money granted to PLR will go to the most popular authors, not the most needy, and then back to the Government in tax. To assist the indigent the Library Association thinks either a form of grant or else a certain amount of tax-free income, as in Eire, would be better.

The form that PLR has taken is severely limited. It only applies to public libraries, and therefore excludes academic, school, special, industrial and other libraries, which means that it will offer little to non-fiction writers. If there are more than three co-authors of a book it becomes ineligible. Translators, editors, compilers and revisers are excluded. Authors must be citizens of the UK or some other EEC country, and resident in the UK. Because ISBN's (International Book Standard Numbers) are being used to record loans, the hardcover and paperback editions are treated as separate books, as are separate volumes of a multi-volume set. Prose books must have 32 pages of text, and poetry or drama 24, which excludes nearly all books for very young children and picture books. All reference books are excluded because no-one has been able to work out a method for recording usage.

The method to be used to ascertain loans is based on sample libraries. In 1974, a software consultant firm investigated the sampling procedure for the Department of Education and Science report, and decided that 72 sample points were suitable. There were bound to be errors in payments because the results would be arrived at statistically. Seventy-two libraries would return figures and these would be adjusted for geographical, social and other biasing factors. The error is not removable, but it may be diminished, and it was thought that fluctuations in payments would even out over time. On that basis it was calculated that the error factor would be as listed in the table below.

Payment to author per £1 million of kitty	Precision of annual payments	Potential permanent bias
£1	±40%	±50%
£10	±13%	±28%
£100	±4%	±16%
£1000	±1¼%	±9%

"The ranges of the above errors would be reduced proportionally to the square root of the number of library service points in the sample; thus in order to halve the error rates it would be necessary to include four times as many service points."

The results of the sample would be grossed to represent the country.

The consultative document published by the Office of Arts and Libraries in 1980 recommended 70 sample points to be rotated on a five-year basis. However, in the scheme as it is to be implemented there are only sixteen sample points, to be rotated every four years. I cannot find out how this number was decided on. When I wrote to the Registrar, Mr Sumsion, to ask, he replied that "in the light of further research it was considered that a sample of sixteen libraries would give sufficiently accurate results for the PLR operation, and that there were very important cost savings in working with a smaller sample." The further research is unpublished and no more details were given.

There is a sum of £2 million allocated to PLR. This has to pay Mr Sumsion and his staff. It has to buy the electronic equipment for the libraries, pay for the labelling of existing stock with machine-readable codes, the labelling of new stock, recording of loans and staff time. Originally it was estimated that about a quarter of the £2 million would go in costs. What that figure is now I do not know.

The New Review, December 1975, asked many authors and publishers what they felt about PLR. The two SF authors asked were Brian Aldiss and J.G. Ballard. The former was strongly in favour of PLR. He was of the opinion that the real attack on literacy came from the lack of remuneration given to writers. J.G. Ballard was more equivocal in his support, his own experience of working in libraries having taught him that much borrowing is indiscriminate. Others consulted included Shiva Naipaul, who was suspicious of PLR, feeling that free public libraries are there to make books available to the people, the writer benefiting through the sales of books to libraries; A.J.P. Taylor, who thought that libraries for free were out of date; and Sir John Brown of the Oxford University Press, who thought that publishers should receive a slice of the PLR payments.

So PLR is with us. I admit I am a librarian, but not in public libraries so I have no personal axe to grind. What I and many others feel is that the system is not going to be particularly helpful, and that even the original premise is doubtful.

The much referred-to Performing Right applies to a performance. If music, a play or a record is borrowed from a library, nothing is paid in royalties. The analogy is inaccurate and misleading - performance of a novel on radio or television does produce more money for the author, and that is the true comparison. To take PLR to its logical conclusion, a painter should receive something when his painting is looked at in the local art gallery.

The argument that each loan is a lost sale is nonsense. I buy quite a few books and I borrow only those I do not want to buy. In fact, browsing in a library introduces me to new writers whose books I may later buy, and I do not feel that I am atypical. Sales loss is suffered in the field of the more expensive reference books but, as noted above, these are not included in the PLR system.

There is to be an annual minimum payment of £5 per book, and a top limit of £5000 per author, which is sensible, but even so, much of the available money will go to the best-sellers like Frederick Forsyth, Dick Francis and Catherine Cookson, as any glance at a library request

box will tell you. In other words, the writers who get the benefit will be those who don't need it, and so most of the money will probably return to the Government in tax. It will not go to most SF authors, and most non-fiction writers haven't a hope of seeing a penny. The money will therefore be an insignificant addition to the incomes of affluent authors, and will do nothing to help support more needy, less widely read authors.

That is the situation now, and the possibilities for the future look gloomy. Apparently some publishers are already insisting on receiving a share of authors' PLR payments before agreeing to produce books. In a letter to The Times, May 1 1982, Lord Willis sees this imposition falling mainly on the poorer writers.

Library book funds have seen drastic reductions over the past ten years, despite rearguard action by librarians. It is something which is irreversible - the books not bought because of cuts are unlikely ever to be bought. Future books may not be published because library sales are falling. It is hard to break out of vicious circles and this is a circle which will affect every author, but it is something about which little is heard and less is done.

If you accept the principle of PLR, then much else logically follows. I think that the principle is fallacious; however, if you do accept it, then the next step is to extend it beyond its unfair limitations. It ought certainly to include all libraries and not just public ones. The bias towards lighter fiction is currently enormous. If the principle is accepted for books, then libraries ought to pay someone for record and cassette loans, picture loans and even toy loans. It may seem an extreme view but I am sure that, if they tried, people could justify it. What anyone can justify is extending the system beyond public libraries, but the costs would escalate and most of the £2 million would be spent on sampling.

At the moment, PLR is a relatively cheap and expedient way to quieten down a vociferous lobby. It will not help needy authors - quite the reverse. It does not support a principle in a satisfactory manner. It is only the gilt on the gingerbread.

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THE SURVEY

Peter Tasker

'BEAUTIFUL SCENERY', ENTHUSED Stevenson. 'Quite beyond description.'

'What a dismal prospect', grunted Quinn. 'It's too ugly for words.'

'Duty is duty', I said sagely. 'No matter what you think about it, we have to go through all the survey procedures before we can leave. That's what the contract says.'

They looked at me in the aggrieved way they always did when I mentioned the contract. Quinn and Stevenson... Sometimes I wondered what I had done to deserve such an obstreperous pair. They spent most of the time at each other's throats, but if I tried to intervene they would start on me, their commanding officer. Still, their credentials were very good. Unless, of course, they were forged.

'Mr Quinn, are your credentials forged?' I demanded.

'As a matter of fact, they are', he answered airily. 'Stevenson wrote them for me and I wrote his in return.'

'Indeed. Then would you mind telling me what your real qualifications for this mission are?'

'Not at all. My qualifications are exactly the same as Stevenson's.'

I turned my attention to Stevenson.

'Mr Stevenson, your documents claim that you are "highly competent in all aspects of surveying". Is that so or not?'

'I can't be absolutely sure,' replied Stevenson, 'because I've never been on a survey before.'

Naturally, I was dumbfounded. Here I was on my first survey assignment, and I had just discovered that my crew was not only completely inexperienced, but dishonest as well. I should have been much more careful when I hired them. After all, you can't believe what anyone tells you nowadays. Or so I hear, anyway.

What should I do? Should I assert my authority in some way, to show them that I hadn't been confused by their disclosures? But if I did, they might think that I was doing it to compensate for the fact that I really was confused. So instead perhaps I should carry on as if nothing had happened. But then they might think that I wasn't asserting my authority because I was covering up the fact that I needed

to compensate for really being confused. And a good Survey Commander must never be confused. I decided to go and check my best course of action in Brock's *Techniques of Autonomous Decisioneering*.

While I was in the ship's library, I happened to glance out of the non-electronic-direct-scan facility. To my horror, I saw Quinn and Stevenson already out on the planet's surface, pottering about with some of our most sophisticated instrumentation. I immediately summoned them back to the bridge.

'What the hell have you been doing?' I demanded in a restrained bellow.

'I've been engaged in an important study', said Quinn. 'The readings I've taken show that this planet definitely contains alien life.'

'On the contrary', said Stevenson, 'My readings prove conclusively that this planet is devoid of alien life.'

'Tell me, Mr Stevenson,' I asked, 'what operational methods did you employ?'

'The same one as Quinn did', he promptly replied.

'Would you care to explain your operational method, Mr Quinn?'

'I'd be delighted to', said Quinn. 'First, I take the instrument firmly in both hands. Then, with a sharp application of rotational force, I release it from my grip. If it lands on the dial side, the answer to the question posed is positive. If it lands on...'

'Wait a moment', I cut in sarcastically. 'Is this considered to be a sound scientific method?'

'Interesting question', said Quinn. 'Let's ask the machine.'

With that, he span the machine up in the air and let it crash down to the ground. I was gratified to see that it didn't land on the dial side.

Time was being wasted. I decided to come to a decision.

'Come on', I said. 'Let's get out there and start work.'

'What about the gifts?' said Stevenson. 'If there are any alien life-forms out there, we'll need gifts to show that we come in peace.'

'What about our weapons?' said Quinn. 'If we come across any aliens, we're going to have to blast them before they blast us.'

I ordered Stevenson to bring the gifts and Quinn to bring the weapons.

Outside, the afternoon was coming to a close. The sun had slipped to about half an inch above the horizon. All around, the landscape was perfectly flat, except for the hills.

I sent Quinn off to the west and Stevenson to the east, requesting them not to come back until they had completed a preliminary study of the planet's surface. I was just settling down to my own investigations, when they both returned and began to gaze at each other fixedly.

'Captain,' said Quinn, jabbing his finger at Stevenson, 'this is not the real Stevenson that we see in front of us. I am certain that it's an alien being that has callously murdered my dear friend and taken on his form. Let's kill the evil thing now, before it does any further harm.'

'Commander,' said Stevenson, 'I assure you that this is not the real Quinn speaking. No, it's an alien being imitating him in order to sabotage the work of this survey.'

'Don't listen to him', Quinn broke in. 'He's just trying to undermine my credibility as an alien would naturally do.'

'Of course he's denying it', sneered Stevenson. 'That only proves his duplicity. I'll dispose of him at once.

I shouted at them to be silent. Unwillingly they obeyed, but I could see by their eyes that they were beginning to doubt my own authenticity. I had expected this, and informed them that I wasn't

an alien impersonating myself, but rather I had decided to imitate an alien impersonating myself, in order to fool any aliens that might be around. This explanation apparently satisfied them.

We set off on an exploratory journey, struggling despairingly over a terrain that was utterly featureless and blank

until Quinn made things easier by saying, 'There's nothing here to argue about.'

'Oh yes there is', came back Stevenson.

'Oh no there isn't.'

'Why do you insist on contradicting me?'

'I'm not contradicting you...'

And so it went on. The landscape improved considerably, until we came to a place that was ideal for our purpose - right in the middle of the surrounding area.

We immediately noticed something unusual. Not far away from us stood a tall regularly shaped object that looked as if it might be an artefact. Closer observation revealed a number of markings on it about half-way up. I felt certain that they were some kind of hieroglyphics.

I set up my deciphering unit and trained it on the markings. Indeed, as I had hoped, the unit confirmed that they held a structure of meaning.

'What does it say?' asked Stevenson.

'Come on, Captain, tell us', pleaded Quinn.

I switched the unit on to auto-voice interpret. After a few

seconds it began to slowly stutter out the syllables.

'Reading...these...markings... is...strictly...forbidden.'

Undoubtedly, it was a strange message, but I felt jubilant at being the commander of the first survey team to find traces of a non-human civilization.

'This artefact is obviously the work of an advanced culture', pondered Stevenson. 'That means they'll have evolved beyond any base instincts and desires.'

'An advanced culture...' mused Quinn. 'that'll be dangerous. They can't have come this far without knowing a few nasty tricks.'

Just then something happened which made them both shut up. A door in the side of the artefact slid open, and out stepped an alien creature. I won't bother to explain its appearance, except to say that it was quite unlike anything that it could be compared to, and utterly alien to one's conception of what an alien creature might look like.

'What shall we do?' I muttered.

'Offer it something', pleaded Stevenson.

'Zap it', hissed Quinn.

'It looks beneficent and wise.'

'It looks as mean as hell.'

While we were mulling this over, the alien walked up to us and began to address us in flawless alien English.

'Good afternoon', it said. 'Good afternoon, Stevenson, you halfwit. Good afternoon Quinn, you blockhead. You should have had more sense than to sign up with a Captain whose judgement is so poor that he is willing to employ a pair like you.'

I couldn't let myself be maligned in this fashion. 'I will not', I began, 'permit an alien to...'

'Wait a minute', said the alien. 'I'm not an alien. You are the aliens, and I must say that you are by far the most mediocre bunch of creatures that I've ever come across.'

'I'm sorry,' I continued, 'but I don't think that you're aware of the enormous historical significance of this meeting. This is the first time that we, viz. the human race, have made contact with another civilization, viz. you. Experts on Earth have been preparing for years for this encounter. I've got with me here a series of specially formulated questions, and I wonder if you'd mind having a look...'

The alien stared interestedly at the questionnaire that I had produced from my pocket.

'I like questionnaires', it said. 'Is yours a good one, with lots of complex questions?'

'Of course', I said impatiently. 'It took our top people years to formulate.'

'But is it well-balanced, exact without being too confining, rigorous without being dull?'

'I should imagine that it is. Our research department ran several questionnaires on the questionnaire itself.'

'That's what I like to hear', said the alien with satisfaction, and, grabbing the document from my hands, stuffed it into his mouth.

'Not at all bad', was his grudging verdict.

'You've just destroyed something of unique value to the success of this mission. Posterity will not forgive you.' I tried to sound as stern as I could.

'I didn't destroy it. I only ate it.' The alien was clearly beginning to sulk. I decided on a softer approach.

'I am a Survey Commander', I announced. 'My duty is to explore unknown areas of the Universe, ascertain their nature, and bring the data back to my home planet. I must ask for your co-operation in this matter. I appeal to your finer instincts.'

'How do you know I've got any?'

'Some of your instincts must be finer than the rest. And those are the ones I'm appealing to. Come on now.'

'Very well then', said the creature. 'If you insist. What do you want to know?

'First of all, perhaps you could give us some information about your society.'

'Hmmm...' It paused for a moment's thought. 'It may be rather difficult to describe...'

'Try.'

'Very well. Our society is based on a very strict class system, but most of our aristocrats feel guilty about their birth and choose to live a life of poverty and suffering out of respect for the peasantry. Ofcourse, the peasants have no such scruples. Most of them live in magnificient mansions and, I'm afraid to say, generally treat the aristocrats like dirt.

'We're constantly troubled by border disputes with the huge dwarves that live to the south of us and the tiny giants to the north. It's just as well we're all of above average intelligence, or we might have perished long ago.'

'Indeed? And what is the size of your population at the moment?'

'Population? It's large, very large.' The creature frowned slightly. 'It includes absolutely everyone, you see.'

This wasn't much good. I needed a clearer, more detailed account.

'And what is your own position in this society?' I asked.

'I'm an artist', it replied, a little pompously.

'May I ask what kind of art you produce?'

'Certainly. I only do parodies. Parodies, that is, of any artist who parodies me. I'm considered to be quite a genius at it.'

'I'm sorry, but I don't really see the point of that.'

'Hah!' The alien seemed rather put out by my comment. 'I've never seen the point of not seeing the point of things. Anyway, your opinion doesn't matter in the slightest. Almost everybody who likes my work thinks that it's good.'

'I didn't intend to make any value judgements', I said hastily.

'That's the trouble with you humans. You start by intending not to do something, then you intend to intend not to do it, then you intend to intend to intend not to do it. And then, before you know where you are, you've done it.'

I apologised immediately, although I didn't like the speciesist tone of his remarks. Still, it was important to get the maximum amount of data.

'As a matter of fact,' it went on, 'I'm quite a celebrity. As well as being an artist, I'm also the leader of a small but vociferous political faction that is protesting against our government's tolerance of dissent. As a result of my activities, I was sent into exile.'

'Exile? Your laws must be quite severe.'

'They are. Especially the Constitution.'

'What does that say?'

'It consists of only three articles. The first article directs us to obey the second article. The second article instructs us to obey the third article. And the third article instructs us to contravene the first article. I think you'll agree that it's extremely oppressive. But, of course, the lawyers love it.'

This was all too fast for me. I was nowhere near the breakthrough I wanted. The only thing to do was to ask the most important question directly.

'What we really want to know is how your race is going to react to human beings. Are you going to be hostile or friendly?'

'That's difficult to predict', replied the alien. 'But we'll probably be about as hostile as Stevenson thinks we're not, and, at the same time, about as helpful as Quinn thinks we're not. Are you with me?'

'Not really', I admitted.

'There's rather an amusing little saying that's going the rounds at the moment: "What is the definition of a human being? A human being is someone who gets more wrong answers than there are questions." Of course, these human being jokes are getting a little tired nowadays...'

By this time I had had enough of the alien's supercilious manner. In fact, I had come to the conclusion that it was a thoroughly disagreeable creature altogether. But yet, duty is duty.

'Leave that aside for the moment', I persevered. 'Would you explain to us about some of the products of your culture?'

This was another important question, as I had the authority to start preliminary trade negotiations.

'Products of our civilization? Hmmm... I suppose the most characteristic product is incomprehension. We produce that at a tremendous rate. Oh, and by the way, I do wish you would stop referring to me as "it". I haven't been neutered, you know.'

'All right, then. What sex are you?'

'Why, male of course. Very much so. And if you don't believe me, you can ask your wife. She's had the proof.'

He gave a disgustingly libidinous smile that was even wider than his face.

'My wife? But I'm not even married.'

'Ah, I was forgetting. You humans haven't discovered time-travel yet, have you?' He shook his head slowly, in a display of mock compassion.

'Look,' I said fiercely, 'there's something distinctly odd about this whole situation, and I want to get to the bottom of it.'

I had made up my mind that the alien knew more than he was letting on.

'You can't blame me for that. That's the Creator's responsibility.'

'Creator? What Creator?'

'You know, the prime mover, omnipotent and omniscient. The one who made the Heavens and the Earth. He's got you and me, brother, in his hand. You must know the fellow I mean.'

'I never would have guessed that an advanced race like yours would still believe in those primitive superstitions. We humans gave them up long ago.'

'What do you mean?'

'There is no Creator. He's a myth.'

'He most certainly is not. I happen to be a personal friend of his. We often take tea together. Besides, how else can you account for all the improbable events that occur? Why do you think this planet is so lacking in background detail? Why do you think Stevenson and Quinn are such two-dimensional characters? It's all due to the idleness of the Creator.'

'I'm not two-dimensional', interrupted Quinn. 'I've got three dimensions, at least.'

'If I'm two-dimensional,' said Stevenson, 'it's my mother's fault for being over-protective.

'As a matter of fact,' went on the alien, 'He told me himself that some humans would probably be coming to this planet in order to survey it. I advised him to put a stop to the idea at once. But then, he never would listen to me.'

'Come on now. You're talking nonsense.'

' You're the one who'll be talking nonsense when you report your

findings to Data-Base. They'll think you've gone mad. Because if you don't believe in the Creator, you've got no hope of making sense of what's happening to you here.'

Finally, I lost my temper.

'You, Sir, are either a liar or a fool. And I will prove conclusively that this all-powerful being looking over us 24 hours a day has no more existence than...than...'

I had been going to say 'than a bug-eyed monster', but recollected myself in time. Then I directed my voice towards the skies.

'Listen to me, you incompetent old idiot', I yelled. 'If you're really up there, come out and show yourself. Otherwise we'll never believe in your preposterous existence. Do you understand?'

As I had expected, nothing happened. I turned to the alien in satisfaction at having finally scored a point off him. I thought I sensed a new attitude of respect.

Unfortunately, at that very moment, just when I was looking forward to enjoying my little triumph, we had to take cover from an exceptionally strong bolt of lightning that zippered down from the sky and thumped into the ground not far away. A pure coincidence, of course, but a good Survey Commander has to consider the safety of his mission first and foremost, before going into any metaphysical speculation.

When we scrambled to our feet again, we discovered that the alien had started to walk back towards the artefact. He probably realised that his civilization could be no match for ours.

'Either you come back here,' threatened Quinn, 'or...or...'

'Or you don't', snarled Stevenson.

The alien looked around and gazed at us strangely, one eye half-open and the other half-closed. Then he disappeared into the artefact, which, seconds later, soared into the sky on a square ball of frozen flame.

'Maybe you were right', said Stevenson to Quinn. 'We should have blasted him when we had the chance.'

'No, you were right all along', said Quinn. 'We should have built up a friendly relationship with him. We could have learnt a lot.'

They asked me what I thought, and I replied that I didn't.

Silently, we made our way back through the invisible mist. When we arrived at the ship, I immediately ordered Quinn and Stevenson into the library for a debriefing session.

'As you probably realise,' I announced, 'we have a slight problem on our hands. Data-Base will not be at all pleased to learn that the first alien contact proved to be entirely fruitless. In fact, some unjustified criticism may well be directed towards our conduct of the survey.'

For once, my two subordinates kept quiet and paid attention to what I was saying.

'Therefore, gentlemen, I suggest that our report should present a somewhat...ah...abbreviated version of what occurred. Can I rely on your support?'

'Alien contact?' said Quinn. 'What alien contact?'

'Personally,' said Stevenson,'I believe that man is the only intelligent life-form in the universe.'

I looked at them, and they looked at me. We looked at each other looking at each other.

At last, we were in perfect agreement.

The End

CONSOLATIONS FOR DISAPPOINTED WRITERS

JIM ENGLAND

BY DISAPPOINTED WRITERS, I mean writers who are not as 'successful' as they would like to be. It would be reasonable to ask: 'What writer is?' But I don't mean Big Name professional writers so well-established that they can find a publisher for almost anything they want to write; who may or may not resort to hackwork in order to achieve the sort of income they require. I refer to writers, both published and unpublished, who judge their work to be at least as good as some they have seen in print, but still receive rejection slips - often printed and devoid of helpful comments. In these times of recession and record-breaking unemployment figures, the number of us must be unparallelled.

At one time, the disappointed writer might be consoled to think that if work was 'good enough', it would eventually find a publisher, but there is less reason to believe this now. Even in the 'good old days', when all kinds of writing were in great demand, there was a tendency for the bad to oust the good (Gresham's Law), and there were tales of brilliant novels being rejected by many publishers, such as that of Samuel Beckett's first novel being rejected 47 times, while dross continued to be published. What writer would have the persistence, nowadays, to send out a manuscript this number of times - or would be able to afford the postal charges? The financial reward for the average published novel is such as to make the writer wonder, after a very small number of rejections, whether to give up trying to be published. Nor can this thought be restricted to novelists; it must come to all kinds of writers. In the case of the short story written for a fairly specific market, all hope of publication may fade after the only two or three potentially suitable magazines have been tried. So, what? In the absence of a perfect publishing situation, never likely to come about, in which no dross and all worthwhile stuff is published, what the disappointed writer needs is a way of either avoiding disappointment or overcoming it.

Of course, the disappointment of rejection could be avoided by simply ceasing to write, but the sort of writer I have in mind cannot do this. Whether the tendency is inherited in some obscure way (as suggested by the existence of some writing families, the Brontes, Huxleys, Waughs, Amises, etc.) through a combination of 'writing genes', whether the basic requirements of a writer are inherited but writing is only triggered off by environmental circumstances, or whether writers are 'made' but never 'born', are moot questions. The fact remains that

whereas many (perhaps most) people feel a positive disinclination to set words down on paper, even in necessary letters or notes to the milkman, a minority of people feel a 'need' to write, at varying stages of life, without there being any real necessity for it, and mental pain can result if this need is frustrated. It is not much consolation for them to be told that it is not a physiological need, like the need to eat and drink, and that death will not result if it is left unsatisfied.

But perhaps it is beneficial for a writer to ask what kind of need it is. Is it as important as the need for sex, or is it more akin to the 'need' a smoker has for tobacco, an alcoholic for alcohol, or a drug addict for drugs, without which a better quality of life might become possible once the withdrawal symptoms have been overcome? Do we have 'reasons' for wanting to write, of either the mind or the heart? Do we care much what we write, as regards its nature, quality and quantity? These are deep questions, and it is highly unlikely that any writer has ever got to the bottom of them. Many, I suspect, have simply cut the Gordian knot of speculation on the subject by saying that they write whenever and whatever they 'feel like' writing, because they 'want' to do it, ignoring the fact that, throughout life, we do many things that we do not 'feel like' doing, and avoid doing things that we 'want' to do, and that: "All civilization is built on repression" (as Freud said).

Speculation on the subject provides us with a wonderful opportunity to learn about ourselves, and one consolation for the disappointed writer is that there is time to think about it in depth, whereas the full-time professional writer who achieves 'success' rather early may find himself on a treadmill he can not get off, trying to follow one success with another, and half-afraid to think too deeply on the subject in case he loses his income and creative energy. The writer who has not had much work published and who writes part-time will not be harmed by asking himself why he wants to write, however. He is likely to be improved and strengthened. Afterwards, he may write more or less than he would otherwise have done; he may write differently, and about different kinds of things. But he will have a clearer idea of what he is doing. So suppose we consider some of the reasons that have been given for writing.

1) Writing for money This is a ridiculous reason for any kind of serious writing. Samuel Johnson is commonly thought to have given the reason some kind of respectability by saying: "No man but a blockhead ever wrote anything except for money", but this is usually quoted out of its proper context of Johnson speaking with righteous anger at the non-payment of money he had been promised. Of course, I can't 'prove' my opening statement, but feel that most writers would agree. No person should write only for money, and be prepared to write anything for money. Even writers unswayed by any aesthetic or moral consideration must sometimes wonder whether there are not easier ways of making money (if there are such writers).

2) Writing for fame According to a literary critic speaking on Radio 4 some time ago, present-day writers cannot hope for the degree of fame that came to writers in past centuries. The suggestion was that this was because, despite the spread of literacy, the public now has many other distractions besides reading, and not requiring the ability to read. Whether this is true or not will depend upon our definition of 'fame'; which is not simply a matter of counting heads but has a component of intensity. (Did Dickens, in his day, occupying the thoughts of millions in Europe and the USA, have more 'fame' than the greatest writers of today?) Whatever the answer, it can be argued that today's

most famous people, whose names are 'household words', are rarely writers, scientists, creative or constructive people, and more often media-manufactured 'celebrities' (known for being known), politicians, footballers, pop singers and the like. Even the relatively slight fame of famous writers has little correlation with the literary merit of what they write; the 'bestselling' writers tending to be despised by critics and unread by subsequent generations. Being a famous writer also has disadvantages. Not long ago, I wrote to a certain Big Name SF writer, known throughout the world - and deservedly famous. He was kind enough to send a handwritten reply. But along with the letter came a duplicated circular informing correspondents that he received thousands of letters every year, many of them requesting information. I was filled with sympathy for him, not envy, thinking what a hassle it must be to be treated like a public service.

3) Writing for posthumous fame This avoids all the disadvantages of fame,but to enjoy posthumous fame is a contradiction in terms. Feeling a need to be remembered can be a valid reason for writing, nevertheless.

4) Writing to entertain This is a rationalisation for the practice of writing, not a genuine reason for wanting to write, i.e., it is hard to imagine that it could ever be the only reason.

5) Writing for prestige There is nothing wrong with anyone wanting prestige, in moderation. Indeed, prestige, status or affection in the eyes of somebody seems essential for human welfare. In a society with a strong literary tradition, where writing is generally considered to be a genteel occupation of similar status to that of the doctor, lawyer, clergyman, teacher and academic, but requiring no formal qualifications, it is natural that some people should want to take it up for this reason alone. But if the desire to 'prove' that he or she could write, and thereby gain prestige, without much regard for the subject matter of writing, were to be the prime motive of a writer, silly and pretentious writing would probably result.

6) Writing as self-expression Years ago, I came across a book by an American with some such title as How to Write for Fun and Profit. Its claim was similar to that of a certain British correspondence school which promises 'useful extra income' to people prepared to spend 'just a few hours each week' learning how to write, even 'while relaxing on the beach; or on boring rail, sea or air journeys'. The chief thing I remember about the book is its insistence that anyone aiming for commercial success as a writer should start by forgetting all about self-expression and should concentrate on giving the public what it wants: namely, something bland, easily digestible, devoid of harmful or untested ingredients, rather like baby food, with a strong plot and a happy ending. Unfortunately, there is a great deal of truth in this. It can be argued, despite this, that the good writer, not greatly interested in commercial success, can achieve self-expression very well, and it is true that 'writing', in its broadest sense, provides a greater opportunity for self-expression than any other art, but this includes every kind of fiction and non-fiction. The best vehicle for self-expression is an autobiography, but only the autobiographies of the famous are of interest to publishers. The best vehicle for the expression of ideas in an economical fashion is an article or essay but, again, publishers are not interested unless their authors are famous. Certain types of speculative articles and essays have almost gone the way of the epic poem. I suggest that much science fiction (which is often defined as a 'literature of

ideas') is a poor substitute for kinds of writing that are not being published, and ought to be, as described below.

7) Writing as self-exploration This is writing 'for oneself', as a form of self-administered psychotherapy, 'an alternative to suicide', or as a private record of thoughts and feelings. It can be represented by Samuel Pepys's Diary, written in a code which he hoped no-one would ever decipher. Quite apart from diaries, it is possible to explore ideas, thoughts, feelings and imaginings by writing in a great many modes but, sadly, unless the result can be fitted into the Procrustean bed of some established literary form (such as the novel or short story) it is unlikely to be published.

In all the above, it may seem that I have been setting up Aunt Sallies only to knock them down again and I have, to some extent, through being obliged to write briefly, in a persuasive mode. It hardly needs saying that a whole book could be written under every heading, and that each writer must reach his own conclusion. My own conclusion is that a writer should write primarily 'for himself'.

A certain attitude of 'sour grapes' can be cultivated deliberately by the disappointed writer with some advantage, without there being anything reprehensible about it. It may involve some self-deception, but self-deception is something to which no-one is immune, and the best kind is the kind of which we are aware with part of the mind, unlike the beliefs of religious fanatics. There is a saying associated with Buddhism, that happiness can be achieved in two opposite ways: (a) we can get what we want, or (b) we can want what we get. The former is the hardest route, because our wants are never satisfied: as soon as one wish is granted, up pops another; the idle, rich and beautiful are notoriously liable to commit suicide. The latter may seem a defeatist approach, but it can be a positive way of coping with disappointment.

Then again, consider the statement attributed to Solomon: "Of making many books there is no end". And Sturgeon's law: "Ninety per cent of all SF is crap", which can be extended to cover other kinds of writing. The badness of most literature and the excellence of some suggests two very good reasons for not wanting to write at all: (a) We don't want to join the bloated ranks of bad writers, and (b) We can't hope to join the very best writers. Most 'literary' things have been said better than we can say them, at some time in the past few thousand years. In an old (1883) biography of Rousseau by John Morley, I came across a more elegant version of Sturgeon's law that goes: "Literature is for the most part a hollow and pretentious phantasmagoria of mimic figures posing in breeches and peruke". In other words, it is hardly ever about real people. But if you write 'for yourself', it can be.

To conclude, I would say to writers capable of following such advice: cut out the crap, don't write the sort of inane stuff that most publishers now require. Don't try to be prolific. Remember that some writers have achieved lasting fame with a single novel. Write only what you have to write, and do it well. If, having done this, you find that publishers are not interested in what you have written, think of it as their loss and not your own.

You can always leave it to your grandchildren.

Brian Aldiss

FAME AND HELLICONIA

YOU ASK ME, "What does it feel like to be a best-selling author?"

Even if it were true that I was in the best-seller league, like Len Deighton or the lady who wrote The Thorn Birds (which is certainly not the case), my temperament would lead me to attempt to deny it. These labels are all traps. Can you understand that although I remain a dedicated writer of science fiction, I become impatient when categorised as such? It lessens what I write and it lessens SF. SF readers are marvellously well-informed and can find their way to what they want without a little rocket-ship on the spine of the book. Graham Greene is vexed to be called a 'Roman Catholic writer' whilst being clearly both a writer and a Roman Catholic.

I can't expect your readers to be patient with this, but I will say it anyway. I have written science fiction for twenty-five years because it eases and expresses the pain of individuality, of isolation; most writers feel the same. Being a secret exile, I took to SF as a literature of exile. And when SF remains a literature of exile it is most true to its inner nature of estrangement. In that sense, it is part of the sap of my veins. But sap dries in the branch, you know.

Over the last decade, SF has begun to spawn best-sellers - I mean million best-sellers, not paltry thousands like "Helliconia". Those best-sellers have in their turn spawned imitations. All such novels debase the coinage. They make SF conservative, safe, homebound. Their deliberate appeal to the multitude - a multitude unversed in the tropes of SF - betrays the old underdog truth we held dear in earlier days.

If this goes on, the old SF will be dead. Many of the younger British writers, too, talented men, have betrayed it by being ashamed to write SF.

Writers' motives for embarking on novels, particularly large ambitious novels, are always mixed. Yet part of my desire to create the complexity of Helliconia was to be formidable - perhaps to be in the French sense formidable - and to defy what I see as the continued Disneyfication of SF.

If you look back over my writing, you may note a curious continuous desire to defy popularity. And to defy classification. Hardly an ideal prescription for best-sellerdom. That having been said, of course I enjoy the growing success of the "Helliconia" novels. You get to appear on "Desert Island Discs" and "Omnibus", which is as it should be.

What I have been is a steady-selling author. Most of the books I've written over the past 25 years are still in print and have been constantly reprinted, except for the ones that even I can see are a bit past it, like ... well, I've forgotten its title now. Among those books are several collections of short stories; it is a particular pleasure to see how they continue to be read. At the beginning of my career, I decided that I would issue my short stories in book-form every few years (publisher allowing, of course); and that each selection would stand as representative of the best work I could do over that period. The system has worked, from Space, Time and Nathaniel and The Canopy of Time through to Moment of Eclipse and Last Orders. Anyone reading the volumes in chronological order can see how my writing abilities, my resources, have developed, while the basic themes, as you would expect, have remained pretty much the same. (Sometimes I mucked up the system myself - or once, in fact. New Arrivals, Old Encounters was not really my idea and was not carried out with any great religious fervour.)

American publishers kept nabotaging my system; they would change titles and swap around stories. Finally I got tired of it. Last Orders, which contains stories written when I was temporarily lost to myself, is a collection I set particular store by. One American publisher offered to publish it if I threw out a couple of the enigma stories and substituted "one of those space adventures you're so good at". I would not do it. Last Orders is Last Orders. Okay, then he was afraid he couldn't publish it. Okay, then, sod it. And the book is still unpublished in the States. You gotta have integrity, but it sure doesn't pay much.

On the steady-selling principle, even tricky novels like Report on Probability A - for which the fans nearly had me drummed out of the regiment when it was first published - have sold well over the years. If you care about writing, that is just as rewarding as a quick flash in the pan.

Of course I was pleased when Helliconia Spring reached the top of the best-seller list. At first, I found myself in an odd situation with regard to the Helliconia project. I hit on the idea suddenly, after Life in the West was published. It came in a day. It clearly was going to need all my reserves, and represent a perilous investment of time in the state of economic difficulty that the world is presently experiencing. I did a lot of research and asked other people who knew more than I did (plenty of them about). I wanted it to be hard SF but much more I wanted it to embrace all my writing experience - to extend it - and to incorporate my experience of the world. You know, you always think you might die before you write your really best book, or the best of which you are capable. After my deep, mysterious, and ultimately spiritual experience in the seventies, my psyche rose anew; I felt a great integrative experience. I felt myself multifarious and a unity, and at one with the world, whatever exactly that means. There are no precise terms for such matters. (I say all this knowing how I lay myself open to the easy snigger, but there it is.)

Well, etc., etc. While you're preparing these diverse statements and trying to unify them, you also have a family to feed and so on. So three or four years went by, and in this time taxation struck, while other writers were also going through the throes inseparable from our perilous trade. And then finally the first volume was due to appear.

At the last moment - not until a week or two before the day of simul-

taneous publication in New York and London - I suddenly lost the confidence that had buoyed me all along and thought, "My God, what if no one likes the thing?" Until then, I had not really thought of the audience. Luckily, it got a pretty good reception. I shall always be grateful to people in the field who care about it, like John Clute, Dave Langford, and in particular Roz Kaveney, for the way they took trouble to look deeply into the book and find some good in it.

Gratitude goes too to Jonathan Cape and Atheneum. Both publishers had faith in my trio of novels, and supported them in many ways - getting kind words from John Fowles and so on.

Now I've got the strength to work on volume two (Helliconia Summer, which is almost complete), in which I have a cast of about sixty speaking parts. It is very complex and diverse, yet covers less than a year in time, a small year. I feel the story is sound, and dramatises my intense but otherwise inarticulate feelings about the world in which we find ourselves. After volume three, if Cape is willing, there will be an Encyclopaedia of Helliconia. Then I may cease to write science fiction. Enough's enough.

MILFORD 1982 – THE TRUTH

David Garnett

IN THE USA they used to call them the Milford Mafia, a secret closed society. And in 1972 a British branch, or tentacle, was formed - although now Milford-on-Sea, Hampshire, has become World HQ for this nefarious clique.

Here a small, self-perpetuating group of SF authors meets for a week once a year, locking itself away in an atmosphere of asceticism and dedication to discuss characterisation and plot, spelling and punctuation, and above all, Art.

Or so the myth goes.

The truth is slightly different. I was invited to the first British Milford but didn't go because I didn't want to lock myself away in an atmosphere of asceticism and dedication with a self-perpetuating group for a whole week to discuss characterisation and plot, spelling and punctuation, and above all, Art. Before that I'd heard of the American Milford, founded by such people as Damon Knight and James Blish. Tom Disch once told me how useful he thought it was, and that I ought to

attend if ever I had the chance. Sometime, I decided, I'd go. In 1973 I was invited again, because I'd originally replied to say I might be interested later. Then in 1974 came a third invitation, and yet another in 1975 . . .

One Easter Convention I asked Chris Priest to tell me The Truth about Milford. Was it as Heavy as I suspected, hours and hours of intense discussion about science fiction and literature and the role of the semicolon? "No," he said, gesturing around the bar with his glass, "it's like this really, but without the fans."

So I went to the 1976 Milford, and I was hooked.

What is Milford like? In Focus 5 Kevin Smith gave his version of the 1981 workshop, but he emphasised only one colour of the spectrum: the manuscripts, the discussions. Milford is far more than that. To write about the conference and only talk about the workshop sessions would be like an SF convention report which mentions nothing but the programme items. It's part of the story, but by no means all of it.

I've no intention of discussing what went on behind those locked doors from September 26 to October 2, 1982, but will try to give some of the flavour of a typical Milford. What makes the conference such a success is a combination of work and relaxation. Perhaps the best comparison would be a good night in your favourite pub, where everyone there is a friend, there's no closing time . . . and it continues for a week.

The idea behind Milford is to creatively criticise (or, if you prefer, to criticise creatively) the manuscripts which every member has brought along, which are dutifully read and fairly discussed. It doesn't always work out like that, as almost inevitably it seems that each year brings some personality conflict - when criticism is not as impersonal as it ought to be. But if everything ran too smoothly it would be a bit boring. One can only take so much fun, after all . . .

In theory, everyone at Milford is equal - whether the author of a single short story or a writer with a dozen or more published books. And perhaps surprisingly the theory generally works. As a story goes around the circle, more often than not there is a consensus of opinion; but sometimes two or three differing views emerge; and occasionally every single person can have a different viewpoint on the same story. As a rule, there aren't any rules. Yet no matter how much most members may loathe and hate a story, there is always someone who will find something nice to say about it.

Except in very rare instances, no criticism is intended as personal attack on the author. And no one takes what is said personally, or shouldn't do. The idea that 'I am what I write' doesn't work at Milford.

Why go to Milford? Millions of reasons, but I'll restrict myself to just handful. First of all, you have to take a story or a portion of a novel. Which means that if you haven't written a story in the previous year, then you have to do one for Milford. I usually end up writing my story the week before the conference, and I'm not the only one. Once you've written the story, with luck you can then sell it - which pays the week's expenses. I can only speak individually (as I have been doing so far), but on more than one occasion a story of mine has been improved and then published as a direct result of suggestions made while the manuscript was under discussion. Although if other suggestions were followed, the same script would

have ended up as a few hundred tiny bits of paper. . . !)

You spend a week with kindred spirits, meet others who spend their lives or spare time in front of a typewriter, and realise that you aren't the only person in the universe addicted to writing. These acquaintances become friends - after a week together there is no alternative. Apart from hatred, of course - but the incidence of murder at a workshop is no greater than the national average.

Also, the whole week is tax-deductable.

But perhaps the most satisfying experience is when after a story has been thoroughly dissected then put back together again, someone comes up and says: 'I'll buy it.'

This has happened to me three times, starting when Charlotte Franke bought my first Milford story for a German anthology she was editing. The book was called Science Fiction Story Reader - I'm not sure what the English translation of that would be. The story later appeared in the Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction and also in another anthology, Stars of Albion. It was only coincidence of course that editors of this book, Rob Holdstock and Chris Priest were at the same Milford. Then in 1981, Malcolm Edwards asked me to send the revised version of my story for that year to Interzone. The main revision was the title; for some reason he didn't like 'Sex in Science Fiction'. Nor was he overwhelmed by any of the substitutes I thought of, while I was less than impressed by his suggestions - the only one I remember being 'The Four Norsemen of the Apocalypse'. Finally Malcolm phoned me on the day Interzone 3 was due to go to the printers, and we decided on a title which neither of us hated too much . . . which wasn't the one used when the story was published. (That's two stories. Did I say three? Oh yeah . . . whatever happened to Anticipations Two, Chris?)

The likelihood of an instant sale such as this increases every year, because the Milford Science Fiction Writers' Conference is rapidly being taken over by another group - publishers and editors. In 1982, after a couple of Milford samplings as a one-day guest, Richard Evans of Arrow Books came for the week; Maxim Jakubowski, who started Virgin Books and has now founded Zomba Books, was also there; Marianne Leconte, the SF editor for a French publisher, made her usual appearance; Malcolm Edwards came as both an Interzone editor and the man in the yellow jacket from Gollancz; and Colin Greenland was another of the Interzone magnificent seven. That's five out of thirteen - six if millionaire Anaible editor/publisher Dave Langford is included.

So if you want to spend a whole week with an editor, trying to sell him (or her) something, come to sunny Milford.

For the record, the other 1982 attendees were promising newcomer John Brunner, darts and Asteroids champion Big Garry Kilworth, antipodean chairperson Pip Maddern, American Rachel Pollack who now lives in Holland, writer in residence David Redd, and not-the-Nebula-award-winning Lisa Tuttle from Harrow.

The reason I've made geographical reference to the female contingent is because women come from far and wide to Milford. In past years others have travelled from Ireland and Germany and Greece, too. Women come from all over the world . . . but not from England or Wales or Scotland, or at

least not this year. The men, however, came from as far afield as South Wales and . . . well, not very far. There have been American and French authors in the past, but usually the men are British - while the women aren't. All of which must prove something, though I'm not sure what.

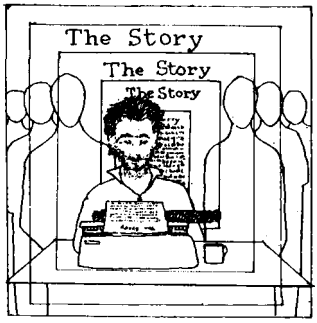
As has been said, Milford is far more than just manuscripts. There is the legendary gourmet cooking for a start. The spectacular sea views (or so I've been told). The hotel's stunning collection of paintings. The picturesque village of Milford-on-Sea itself. The thought of any of these will bring a tear to the eye of even the most hardened Milford graduate.

The Compton is a small private hotel, taken over for the week by the Conference, which then has the run of the place. The bar is available day and night for those in need of liquid support in either reading a 10,000 word manuscript or waiting for their own script to be workshopped, and I believe coffee can also be obtained at any hour for the really desperate. Indoor sports, or those which can be mentioned, include darts, a pool table and an Asteroids machine. For the more athletic, and cold-blooded, there is also an outdoor swimming pool. During the 1982 conference a splinter group of the more cerebrally minded also played Scrabble for hour after hour. Everyone, however, was involved in the customary 'Call My Bluff' game - once more demonstrating an alarmingly common gutter mentality amongst people who allegedly use words as their profession.

How do you get to Milford? By train from Waterloo, but before that you have to be invited by the committee. The 1983 triumvirate consists of Dave Langford as Secretary (the real master of Milford, that's young Dave), Malcolm Edwards as Treasurer (because he has a large mattress, or so I'm reliably informed), and as Chairman there's . . . er . . . me. After five years of avoiding any greater responsibility than switching off the lights in the bar after everyone has gone to bed, by due democratic process I have finally achieved undreamed of Power and Authority.

About six months before the conference, the committee invites people who have been professionally published in the SF arena and who it believes might be interested in attending. It's as simple as that, it isn't a closed workshop; in 1982, four out of the thirteen members were newcomers.

Almost everyone eligible has been contacted at some time or other, although oversights are bound to occur because of the ever-changing personnel of the committee. If there is anyone out there who thinks they should have been invited and never has been and might like to attend . . . just get in touch with Dave or Malcolm or me. And we'll look forward to seeing you in September . . . then maybe you can write up Milford 1983 for Focus.



fiction

STRANGER THAN TRUTH

by David Ratovitsky

(I)

SHE HAD TRAVELLED the multiverse for so long that she had forgotten of what her original body had been made. She took on and cast off bodies so frequently that she had long since ceased to take anything but the vaguest notice of them. They all followed a similar pattern. For a long time she had been considering applying for a transfer. It seemed like a long time, but there was no reliable way of measuring it. In any case, time had ceased to be of great relevance to her, differing as it did in its flow from one galactic location to the next. Furthermore, she had forgotten how one applied for a transfer, although she was certain that there was a perfectly simple procedure if only she could remember it. She had forgotten much about herself and even what she did remember was liable to be challenged or distorted by each fresh experience. She flitted back and forth through history, through time and space, knowing that eventually she would probably return to her original body at the precise moment in which, once, she had left it behind. She had distant memories of her time in two previous universes, but the experiences all tended to blur together. She could no longer remember why she had chosen this particular sector for her present voyage. It was a savage and primitive era in human development, a vast territory, much of it still uncharted. The great Quest lay at the back of her mind, unspoken, a throbbing ache which she tried to ignore.

She felt herself piercing through an intra-dimensional shield once more and found herself orbiting the earth. The earth - again! Couldn't they ever think of anywhere else? Resignedly she transferred down to the planet surface hoping that she wasn't going to get caught up in another nuclear war. She materialised as a human and found herself standing in a city street. It seemed vaguely familiar. Where was she? Washington? New York? A man rushed towards her and others behind him were also running: they looked terrified.

'An eighteen-foot gorilla, and it's coming this way!' the man shouted. 'Run, lady, run!'

She strolled on and nodded at the alien as he walked past, looking more human already. He winked at her lecherously. He was dressed in a

1930s single-breasted suit with a golden halo gleaming above his head. She guessed that she was in some obscure fantasy story, full of images of fear. She would have to be ready for anything. Her reading of the old stories had been of less help than she expected. This one, though vividly textured, seemed like a closed loop, which meant that other stories might be clustered onto it. She walked on. What next?

(II)

THE WRITER of myths sat at his desk muttering to himself. His clothes were ill-fitting and ragged; there was the smell of stale air and cigarette smoke and he was badly in need of a bath. He was gaunt-featured and emaciated with a haunted look in his eyes. His hair was long and untidy. Saliva hung on his beard.

'Cliches!' he sneered. 'Trite! Unimaginitive! It's all been done before! All of it! There's nothing original left! Even the ones that Stapledon didn't use are gone now!'

He was completely insane. His voice had that high-pitched, babbling quality found only in those who have truly lost all sense of reality. He began to lecture himself:

'Time travel! That's what you should do! You could make a fortune out of it! A few spaceships - a bit of magic - galactic empires and civilisations - anything you like! It doesn't matter! It doesn't matter at all! You could do anything! Anything!'

He laughed hysterically, pushing himself up from the desk, but then, without pausing for breath, began to whimper pitifully:

'You're cruel to me! Cruel! You laugh at me and despise me, but I'm trapped. You make me a prisoner of your minds and then you expect me to perform - just like that! It's not fair! I'm not even human, just a figment of your imaginations!'

He remained still and silent for a long time, curled up in a foetal position on the floor. At last, he turned over, and, seeing that he was still being watched, pulled himself to his feet, staggered over to his typewriter, and began work. Although he typed slowly, and reluctantly, soon he was captivated by his own imagination. His eyes became glazed and a light shone within them. He worked on through the night.

(III)

LILITH CLIMBED the last hill of Zion (he wrote) and thereupon the mighty armies of the Atreides leaped up at her locked in battle with the forces of the Foundation. Hainish ships hovered nervously nearby as spells were cast that would send the mighty Elrond on his quest. Telepathic mind-warps travelling faster than the speed of Einstein were ensnared by intergalactic spiders who devoured them casually, having already assigned their karmas to the seventh level for rebirth in alternative time-zones. A clash between two different versions of the Enterprise took place when they both beamed down search parties to the same location simultaneously; the surprisingly human-like inhabitants had tried to reconstitute the survivors, but with little success. Life-sized replicas of Superman wandered about, muttering 'May the Force be with you' every few seconds and tripping over rocks.

Meanwhile, Lilith had discovered Cain whittling a piece of wood, sitting on the edge of the last hill of Zion. It was he who had chosen their names and insisted that they retained the same bodies through each incarnation. Clouds of plague and radioactive waste drifted past them on the breeze. Winged creatures wheeled and darted in the sky, soaring and lilting, taking quiet pride in the gift of flight and their

strange archaic customs. A fleet of McCaffrey dragons soared past overhead, flying in formation, trying to look purposeful.

'Greetings, sister!' says Cain, eyeing his step-mother lustfully. She glares at him.

'Brutal days, here at the edge of all thought', she responds. It is an irrevocable statement.

'When will you stop pushing so hard against all the possibilities?' he asks. The death of time has quelled the storms of darkness that had been within him: he has become old - and strong. His mock-fatherly voice is filled with humour.

'Some day the universe will devour you', he says, laughing.

She looks at him hesitantly and smiles.

As she reaches out her arms towards him, and he moves towards her eagerly, their images begin to flicker. A huge and horrible roaring fills the air. Hordes of spaceships begin to descend, firing laser-cannon at each other; armies of automata lurch in ragged formation across the landscape and the ground begins to quiver as explosions shake the surface apart. By the time they manage to restore control, the world has become a post-holocaust desert.

(IV)

IN THE STILLNESS of early morning, the birds begin to sing. The writer of myths is asleep at his desk, dreaming, whimpering restlessly in his sleep. Suddenly, the silence is shattered: the doors to his room are beaten down savagely by two tall soldiers, blond-haired, blue-eyed, wearing smart military uniforms complete with swastikas and jackboots. They enter the room and pull him roughly to his feet, one on either side. He is still only half awake when a man dressed as a roman provincial governor walks in. He wears a purple robe and much jewelry.

'We are looking for a jew called Cohen,' he says suavely, staring at the prisoner searchingly. 'Christopher Cohen.' He grabs the victim by his tattered shirt. 'Where is he?' he snarls. 'We know he's hiding somewhere in this palace!' He lets go of him and spits on the floor.

The writer tries to look dignified: 'Am I my brother's keeper?'

One of the soldier slaps him. Hard. There is a short silence. The soldier slaps him again, harder. He falls back into the other soldier's arms. The officer stands, watching, relaxed, with a menacing grin on his face.

'Very well,' gasps the writer, and points to the door which opens on his private audience room. The soldiers release him and the three of them enter the room. Their boots echo on the marble as they march. He hears shots.

The soldiers ignore him as they leave, but the roman pauses at the fallen doors and, smiling ironically, says: 'The people are waiting to see you, your holiness.'

It is as if he has been in a trance. Snapping awake, he takes in the paintings, the plush furniture, the statues. Pulling the single sheet of paper from his typewriter, he strides over to the balcony and pushes open the shutters. Sunlight pours in. The huge crowd roars and cheers as he waves the paper in the air and smiles triumphantly.

(V)

THIS TIME SHE materialised as a human, but in a ghost world. These she was as used to as the more solid worlds. The worlds of the multi-verse only became solid if shared by many thousand minds. This was a new one, still only visualised by a few hundred, struggling to come into existence. All kinds of strange distortions could exist in such

places: formless creatures howling and moaning in the fogs, calling to be released. She found herself in a shadowy square full of shadowy people. Their cheering was eerie and wavering, as if the wind swallowed their cries. On a balcony far away, she could see the writer waving his story aloft and grinning. Was he insane? Suddenly he was aware of her presence. The crowd fell silent and began to melt away. Soon nothing remained of them but a wide brown puddle.

'What are you doing here?' she shouted up at him.

'It all got out of control,' he shouted back down. 'Everything took over - I got trapped!' He paused, voice full of anguish. 'Have you come to take me out?'

She materialised next to him on the balcony. 'You are my father, my son and my lover. But even if this were not so, I would still do it. What better way to augment the life-force?'

She knew that he would forget all of it later, but had already decided to take him with her for a while as she travelled on through the multiverse. It would be good for her to have a companion, someone with whom she could truly communicate.

Before moving on to their next incarnation, however, she took him back to his reality briefly, where he deposited the story on his desk. They departed again but after a fraction of a second and many lifetimes, he returned, alone, older, wiser. When he read the story on his desk, he laughed, thinking of Lilith. He forgot nothing.

THE END

SF POETRY

Sue Thomason

'IS THERE SUCH a thing as SF poetry? If so, is any of it worth reading? Is it worth writing? What's it all got to do with me anyway?' You may well ask. I want you to ask: I can't provide all the answers, having neither the authority nor the experience to do so, but the questions lead to some fascinating speculation.... I presume we are all interested in speculative writing?

The first problem is Definitions. I could spend hours and pages trying to produce exact and precise descriptions of 'SF' and 'poetry' that include all the Right Things and exclude all the wrong ones. Then somebody would produce a counterexample I'd overlooked, point out a few inconsistencies in my classification scheme, and somebody else would sit down and write a piece that sat slap bang on the borderline; chalk and cheese, and very tasty too. Writers keep doing that.

So I'll sidestep the problem. Everybody knows what poetry is, and what SF is, already. There exists writing that we would all recognise as

'poetry' or 'SF' and it's this common ground in which I want to root this piece. Close to the edge of our mental maps of writing there is a good deal of exciting, sometimes disburbing, activity; experiments and innovations of all kinds. But there landslips happen: form and content and purpose and meaning are unstable, given to disconcerting shifts when the critics start test-drilling; I shall leave it well alone for now.

So. There is this conceptual set, 'Poetry', and this other set, 'SF'. Is there any intersection of the two? Are there any features common to both kinds of writing, even? That might be a good place to start, but it's more dramatic to think first of the opposites, the differences; those assumptions, unrefined and schematic as an early pulp mag cover, that we scarcely like to discuss with anyone else. Here's a selection of mine. SF is full of exciting action, poetry is fourteen lines of tulge about daffodils, or worse, a good many more than 14000 lines about a Rose. SF deals with Science, poetry deals with Art. SF explores the new worlds out there, the Unknown, the Other: as Delany says, the primary hero of the SF novel is the landscape. On the other hand, the purpose of poetry is to chart the inner landscape of individual response, unique perception. Poetry is seen as 'Culture', SF is not. And I suspect that more people read more SF for pleasure than poetry: SF is fun, poetry is hard work. These are my assumptions: me, with a degree in English, me, the published poet.

So then, what to make of the following, actual writings: good, straightforward, obviously SF writers who write obviously SF stories about poets and their poems (eg. Heinlein: though I won't argue about his taste in poetry)? Writers who include poems in their SF work (eg. LeGuin, Delany), some of whom even go to the trouble of writing poems in alien languages? A group of modern poets (after Craig Raine) who call themselves 'The Martians' because they try to write poems describing ordinary human activities from the viewpoint of an alien with none of our assumptions?

Oh, those assumptions. Perhaps I'm timelost, simply hopelessly outmoded. Perhaps nobody else thinks like me. But I see a connection: the link is language. I think SF is one of the few kinds of popular reading/writing to show a deep and genuine concern for language. Popular reading/writing is that class of books always out of the library when wanted. Examples: Agatha Christie, Catherine Cookson, all Romances and Car Manuals, most Home and Garden books (only the one's people don't want are in), and good SF.

Where was I? Oh yes, a deep and genuine concern for language. The problem of describing something new, something for which we have no common words. The problem of reflecting the thought and culture of an alien society in its language. Some books which could be seen as being 'about' language in a major way: Heinlein's The Moon is a Harsh Mistress, Delany's Babel-17, LeGuin's The Left Hand of Darkness (one of these re-readings I'll really grasp the implications of shifgrethor and kemmer). Just three personal favourites.

Poetry too is an attempt to describe the indescribable, to communicate a unique experience to someone else through words. We can't define poetry any longer by calling it 'that which rhymes' (rhymed drama? Paradise Lost?) or 'that which follows a regular metrical pattern' (T S Eliot?), or even 'that which looks like poetry because the lines only go halfway across the page' (David Jones?). Sure, there is a concern for wordsound and rhythm and imagery in poetry, but there is in prose as well. We can't

define poetry by format, we can't define it by subject matter (as we could perhaps SF). What's left? Purpose? Intensity? The purposes of poet and SF writer seem to have come very close: to see fresh, to entertain/instruct in varying proportions, to bring the reader up short against perception... dare I mention at this point the Sense of Wonder? So if there is a poetry of SF out of this merging, perhaps its purpose is to bring together opposing polarities: art/science, explore/teach, psyche/commos, in the Dynamic Tension way to become a whole new person/culture!

Exciting, yes? And there's more. Hands up all those who have ever written poetry. Don't be embarrassed, don't lie. There's a lot of it about. Writing poetry is popular (35,000 and more entries for 1981's largest poetry competition). We mostly do it to get some real raw emotion out of our systems. The results are often as attractive as vomit: good self-help therapy, but no fun for other people to look at. That stage is not poetry but poetry's raw material: a private verbal puke brings instant relief, but it takes a lot of work on the results to produce a public poem.

One thing that (I find) helps in this process is a structure, a discipline, that allows a distancing of the writer from the work. We need to make a picture that other people can see, not a mirror that reflects only our own (distorted). SF can provide such a de-selfcentreing. It's easier (for me) to concentrate on the words, to practice getting them to do things, if I use material that isn't highly charged with the deeply personal. I suppose there are people who can write well without practice: not me. And I don't mean learning 'Creative Writing' formulae off by heart, I mean practice, constant use of the art, constant checking and testing and polishing and going back to the beginning and trying again. Learning, with poems, with stories. The intensity, the degree of attention that poetry demands has made me much more aware of the way words work in prose. Anyway, writing poetry is fun.

And there is the spinoff of appreciation. Reading a good piece of work (poetry, SF, whatever) for the second or twentieth time (I'm too engrossed in the story or the impact first time round) I'll suddenly notice a turn of phrase, an image, some detail of the language, and think: 'hey, that's good. Why can't I do that?' And so I'll try. Then I appreciate what the writer has been able to do, much, much more... Do try writing SF poetry. Useful and fun. Take up thy pen...

So to my final thought. I looked in the Oxford English Dictionary for a definition of poetry while thinking about writing this piece. The earliest meaning of the word given is something like "Imaginative literature, fiction: obsolete". Shame they didn't just say speculative literature.....

(The following piece was originally delivered as a talk to a BSFA London meeting during autumn, 1982.)

A BANANA IN EACH EAR

Garry Kilworth

MY TALK TONIGHT is basically about backgrounds to SF novels but, true to my erratic nature, you'll find I deviate from the main theme quite a few times. This has been one of the criticisms of my novels - that I tend to go off at tangents. Apparently I'm seen as getting too excited with the little ideas that enter my head when I'm supposed to be on a straight course to the climax. Luckily this side of my character has not yet impinged upon my more private, intimate recreations. Anyway, a little deviation before I start.

I picked up a magazine the other day - a journal published by the Society For The Disabled. There was a cartoon in it which gave food for thought - perspectives and viewpoints of SF from social groups outside the science fiction scene. The cartoon showed a confused gathering of Daleks at the bottom of a flight of stairs, with one of the Daleks saying, "Well, this certainly buggers our plan to conquer the universe." I thought it was a delightful insight.

I'm sure some of you are members of writers' workshops. Last year I went to a writers' workshop which is held annually at Milford-on-Sea, where each attendee presents a story to the whole group for criticism. A bit like group psychotherapy, except that maniacs are much nicer to each other than writers. My story, about a quest for a new primary colour, was one of the last to be shredded by the hawks - and believe me, you have to wear an extra skin to these sessions or walk out afterwards with a naked ego. Anyway, for once people seemed to like it. There were fifteen writers there, excluding myself, and fourteen gave it praise tempered with minor criticism. I was glowing. Pink clouds were floating through my skies and I felt as if someone had just put a Hugo into my Christmas stocking. Then came the comments of the last writer, a well-known American author.

"I am surprised," he said, "not to say amazed, by the enthusiasm for this story. I think the characterisation is terrible, I believe the plot is shot full of defects, the writing has the consistency of soggy tissue and falls apart at every turn of the page. The title is inconsistent with the content and the word 'color' is spelt incorrectly seventeen times."

I got the idea, sort of sensed really, that he wasn't too keen on my story. At least, not as keen as the others. But he hadn't finished.

"...But worst of all," he said, "worst of all, the setting is wrong. The setting has to be right or the whole thing just doesn't hang together."

Clearly, this was the main criticism. Get the setting right and belief in the story increases tenfold. I suppose the horror story is the best example of the necessity for the correct setting, where the atmosphere is all-important. Get some mad magician painting pentangles on gravestones at midnight, with a full moon and a coven of naked witches prancing round screaming incantations, and the Devil becomes a very real entity. Get the same mad magician drawing symbols on a crowded Southend beach during a Sunday lunchtime, with kids dropping ice-cream in the sand, dogs chasing waves and boot-boys flicking their braces for admiring girlfriends, and the connotations of the adjective mad are more inclined to the ridiculous than anything sinister.

There are a number of writers who obviously spend a great deal of creative energy on their settings and the backgrounds of their novels shine through like the inner glow of a log fire. I'm sure you'll agree with me that Ursula Le Guin is one of those writers, with novels like The Left Hand of Darkness - the world of Winter certainly found its cold way into my bones. Another writer to be admired for having a similar feel for environment is J.G. Ballard, for although his novels are set on earth, they exude an alien atmosphere, and I find myself caught up in the warped images of changing landscapes, especially in The Drowned World and The Drought. However, the two writers use quite different techniques. Le Guin paints her settings in fine detail, each colour carefully chosen and finely worked, while Ballard is an impressionist, using great smudges of dark green or red ochre to cover the canvas.

I mentioned psychotherapy earlier, and while I have no pretensions to any knowledge of psychiatry or psychology, I thought it might be fun, from the point of view of an exercise, to look at certain SF writers' works and to attempt to dig out a few of their deep-rooted traumas.

Ray Bradbury, for instance, obviously has an obsession with childhood - not only with the formative years of young human beings but with an emphasis on the dark side of a child's mind. With stories like 'The Small Assassin', 'Zero Hour' and 'The Veldt', there can be no doubt that the kids of Bradbury's block were the kind that poisoned their grandmothers for the innocent fun of witnessing their convulsions over the breakfast table. Even if they didn't, the young Bradbury obviously thought they should have done. Bradbury, generally speaking, employs tight close settings, not much further than one can see on a day of poor visibility. Rooms, back yards, New England houses, small towns. Not many Bradbury stories have large canvasses.

This man has a trauma that screams insecurity. He's the Linus of the writing world, whose security blanket is the corner of childhood dreams and memories. It's my belief that as a boy he was locked in dark cupboards under staircases and wasn't allowed a nightlight by his bed, or a teddy bear for company. These are terrifying thoughts. When he grew up and became a writer he started lashing back at the cruel adult world with stories such as those mentioned above.

Larry Niven, on the other hand, likes spectacular holocausts and deadly environs; take the flaring sun that burns the world to a crisp in 'Inconstant Moon'. Other stories are packed with circumstantial evidence of his particular bent. 'Wait It Out'. 'Becalmed In Hell'. 'Death By Ecstasy'. 'Bordered In Black'. Most of these stories are written in the first person which gives me the impression that the writer strongly identifies with the hero or the heroine. Clearly, it is one of Niven's greatest desires to be burned to death or frozen inside a block of ice for ten years, possibly with a touch of flagell-

ation thrown in.

His story settings are a plain indication of masochistic tendencies coupled with a death wish. I wouldn't mind seeing Niven's study at some time, to admire the implements of self-abasement and self-torture he must have hanging on the walls. I bet he's got some good ones because he's rich. Much better than any we could afford.

A writer much closer to home is David Langford of War In 2080 fame. Most of Dave's stories take place in a single room with only one or two characters. These two characters are usually arguing over the best way to get out of the room, but though the arguments are often brilliantly handled, because Dave's an intellectual fellow, the characters rarely do get outside. You get the feeling that they don't really want to go, that what they really enjoy is a good incisive argument. They're actually afraid to go outside and as long as they keep on thinking up new and brilliant ways of doing it, they won't have to.

Agoraphobia, fear of the great outdoors, I'm afraid, has got my friend Dave by the short and curlies.

Chris Evans, The Insider, on the other hand, has a fear of being trapped inside people. I don't know what phobia that represents, but it's a very messy business. All tissue, offal and organs. Yuk.

Rob Holdstock has written Eye Among the Blind, Earthwind and Where Time Winds Blow. All these novles have wide, desolate landscapes, usually dimly perceived. A single figure lopes along a ridge, silently, too distant to recognise face or form. A city sparkles in the mountains beyond the vast desert, seeming to move further and further away as one walks towards it. Oceans have no depth, skies no finite boundaries. On all sides is the majestic sweep of vanishing horizons.

Claustrophobia. This man hates being in small rooms and when you note the size of Holdstock you know that all rooms are small to him. I know his house. The toilet there is the size of a church hall, believe me, and he always leaves the door open in case he wants to bolt.

Obviously, I find it difficult to analyse myself. I'm five feet seven inches. That's two inches taller than Harlan Ellison and one inch taller than Ian Watson. Yet I don't write about giants. J.G. Ballard does that. (Ballard writes about dead, naked giants. There's something pretty tacky in the way of phobias there, if only I could put my finger on it.)

Recently, I have been working on a novel quite different from anything I've tried to tackle before. Having travelled fairly widely, I feel that such experience is wasted unless used as background settings in stories and novels. So most of my scenes are set in, what are to many British readers, exotic climes. Of course, your average Polynesian would consider them to be kitchen-sink drama - the Saturday Night and Sunday Morning of a Tongalese fisherman, so it's only a matter of geographical perspective. Anyway, this quite different novel was quite different because I set in a place that does not exist, nor has it any equivalent that I know of on this little planet of ours. I didn't draw from any of the places I've been to. Not only was the environment in the novel unknown to me, it was also unknown to the rather bizarre characters I placed within it, and to compound their confusion, and mine, there was no definite date or time during which the action took place.

I had great difficulty orientating the first two drafts, and I sent a

copy to a friend, who read it quickly and, I understand, without a great deal of comprehension. But he pinpointed the problem for me immediately. C.S. Lewis, he said, once wrote that to tell how odd things struck odd people is to have one oddity too much. My draft had strange people populating a strange place and one of those strangenesses would have to go if the reader was to obtain any sense of identification with the story. What we got, he said, was a kind of sophisticated pantomime with theatrical characters. I decided to keep the strange setting, since that was what the novel was all about, and to try to populate it with fairly normal people, using ordinary names like Arthur and Mary and Zelazny, and to make them more recognisable as the kind of human beings we know. Actually, what I didn't tell my friend was that one of the original characters in the first draft was based on him.

One of a science fiction writer's biggest problems in the development of a completely new setting, a new world, is the balance of the ecology. There must be other writers like me who have had little or no grounding in biology. In the absence of Waddington bringing out a 'build your own world' kit, we have to struggle through jungles of ignorance to arrange the right ratio of carnivores to herbivores, herbivores to grasslands and trees, trees to rainfall and sunlight, and so on. Never having been taught any differently as a child, I always thought these things adjusted themselves automatically to make one's environment reasonably attractive, but with a touch of rawness beneath to add a bit of excitement. Then as I grew older I learned we were running out of all sorts of things like leopards and whales because people wanted more fur coats and lipstick. I immediately became a conservationist and began growing cabbages for the butterflies, so that the birds could eat the caterpillars and then the cats could eat the birds ... no, that's wrong ... anyway, I took a vested interest in animal welfare, and made sure I got angry when rich landowners shot the deer in Scotland. Then just the other day I read in the New Scientist that there are too many deer for the number of trees and if trees are not to become an endangered species we have to go out and kill a few deer now and again. Also, the seals were eating too many fish and much of the world's oxygen comes from marine plant life, which the whales guzzle in tons, and nothing at all will survive without oxygen, so the whole thing was more complicated than I at first thought. Somewhere else I read that if a pair of flies were allowed to breed uninterrupted, in six years their gross little bodies would smother the whole earth, instead of just Australia.

The terrible thing about being responsible for the environment and ecology, yet having this dark area of ignorance, is that one is never sure when one is in danger of wrongdoing. Carelessness can have appalling consequences. Recently, I planted some new gooseberry bushes in my garden and when I had finished, I sat down on the back step to scrape the mud from my wellingtons. To my horror, there, stuck to the sole of my boot, was a large, very dead butterfly. Having read Ray Bradbury, the enormity of what I'd done hit me immediately. Not only had I completely erased a whole dynasty of cabbage whites, I had in all probability altered the course of future history. Because of me, there would be no cities on the moon, no ring-world, no robots with souls, no last starships from earth. As a race, humans would probably regress, become hunters again with flints and hickory spears, dig pits for wild beasts, skin bears for their fur (cave dwellers are allowed to do this because it's not for profit or pleasure.) Finally, though there would be the emergence of a new breed of overlords who would hunt humans from horseback and put them in cages. (Perhaps one of these new, intelligent creatures would be called Gaylan?) All this because I'd stepped on a sodding butterfly at two o'clock in the afternoon on the third Sunday after Lent - it just didn't seem to make sense.

Certain rules regarding conservation are fairly obvious to me - I don't seek out large, dangerous beasts to kill for pleasure, nor do I tread on creepy-crawlies (although I do draw the line at cockroaches). I know that despite their big mouths and teeth whales don't eat people and gorillas are happy munching on bananas. Some creatures have their own culling mechanisms - lemmings and humans for example. And most creatures, however fierce, are more afraid of me than I am of them, although sharks appear to be exempt from this rule. But what about parasites? Don't they deserve to live? Have I got to learn to love my tapeworm and adore my fleas? Why does a black mamba carry enough venom to kill a bull elephant when it eats creatures no bigger than frogs? Why do I, an omnivore, dislike cabbage so much? What happens if I see a lion attacking a vegan human? Do I have to make a choice? It is all most confusing and I stumble from one question to another in my efforts to produce a fictitious world, with some semblance of reality, when reality itself is more like a place of fiction.

I mentioned the criticism writers receive at Milford earlier, and this seems like a good point to begin to diverge a little. My feelings on critics have changed over the years. I knew, when I first began to get published in 1974, that I should have to steel myself for adverse criticism - there are not many authors who receive acclaim for every piece of work they produce. I promised myself I would be impervious to attack and that I would take a rotten review philosophically. I wouldn't let them get to me the way they got to other authors. The first adverse review I received I immediately went into alternating stages of rage and depression. My promises to myself to laugh it all off went right out of the window. Straight away I sat down and did the worst thing a writer can do: I sent a letter to the magazine that had printed the review, castigating the editor - that's not what I wanted to do to him but that word is close enough. I didn't get a reply, of course, and this is one argument I have against adverse or even complimentary reviews - there is no right of reply.

The reviewer can state virtually anything, some of which may be totally untrue, or even give away the whole plot of the book with impunity. The author can sue, of course, if the facts are wrong, but taking legal action can be expensive and time-consuming - it's usually not worth the bother. So, one has to bear it, if not grin. Mostly, the reviews are fair, and though one might not like them, one can sympathise with their opinions. Oscar Wilde was of course a master at dealing with critics. One stopped him in the lobby of a hotel and said, "Oscar, I'm using your new book to prop open my toilet door." "What a peculiar coincidence," replied Wilde, "I'm using your newspaper inside the same little room." Noel Coward said he could take any kind of criticism as long as it was unqualified praise, but the definition I like best is, 'A critic is someone who knows the way but can't drive the car.' It's not altogether true, because some critics are good writers, but it helps to block the blows.

Most science fiction authors, of course, want to see their books reviewed in the national press. It's that little extra privilege for getting a book published in the first place - like a new business executive being given the key to the bosses' toilets, or the junior officer in the Forces walking miles round the same camp perimeter in order to collect salutes. However, despite a fairly vigorous campaign from the science fiction fraternity over the last few years, SF is still treated as a heresy of the true faith, general fiction. Our Martin Luthers have nailed their views to literary doors with the minimum of impact. Brian Alciss and Kingsley Amis are two well-known front-liners in the struggle for real

recognition, and they have made certain inroads, but we're still regarded with some uneasy suspicion as fanatics who are following a barely acceptable cult, closer to witchcraft than godliness. The reviews of SF books, when they get reviewed at all, tend to amount to about four or five lines of plot synopsis. Some authors, like Chris Priest, have struck back by discouraging their publishers from categorising their novels. In this way they've managed to collect substantial reviews, but had the same books been issued as science fiction novels, then I haven't any doubt there would have been the usual four-line columns. I find it a very unhappy business that some of the most thoughtful and ingenious novels of this century should be regarded by the literary world as second and third rate, but I'm not allowed to say that because I'm speaking from inside the religion. You may have seen a book called Novels and Novelists, wherein novels are given star ratings for literary merit. All the important, well-known SF authors are in there - somehow they missed Rob Holdstock and myself, but I'm sure that was a printer's error - and I can tell you that the literary ratings for SF authors are universally low. I exclude authors like Huxley and Orwell because the literary fraternity is indulgent towards those of its flock who take a short excursion into the realms of SF.

There is no real answer to this attitude towards SF. I think it's something we have to live with, or towards which one develops a personal protective philosophy. Shaw said that critical success is the worst thing that can happen to a writer; towards the destructive critics, I have developed a subtle technique, an act quite breathtaking in its ingenuity and inventiveness ... I stick a banana in each ear.

To conclude, I should like to take this opportunity to sidestep the critics and briefly outline what I think my novels are about.

The heroes are normally restless young men in search of internal harmony and this usually involves a journey beset with emotional or physical barriers. In Gemini God, it happened to be a woman who was, quite evidently, unobtainable. The surmounting of that barrier involved structuring the novel so that it lay in two parts with only a single thread, the hero himself, joining them. This thread was also meant to represent the communications link between two worlds, earth in the first part and New Carthage in the second. (Damned if I know why some of the critics couldn't see that. Perhaps if it had kept its original title, 'A Tale of Two Planets', they would have done.

The barrier in Kadar was the physical terrain which stood between Othman and his search for his tribe's identity. This was coupled with the problem of making a very earth-orientated religion work on an alien world.

In In Solitary, it was Cave's background, his childhood among aliens, that had to be overcome. He doesn't make it because he is his background and he can't cast off his own psyche.

In most cases the aliens are more important to the heroes than their own race because something within them strongly identifies with the extra-terrestrials. I like my primitive aliens and see them as the spinal cord to the novels. Although sex is used to provide comfort to the human protagonists, to protect them from the more extreme aspects of their characters, my aliens are either asexual or hermaphrodites. There is no gratuitous sex or sexism among the Kilworth aliens, so there.

Finally, in most of my writings you will find the 'suspended moment' - that elongated second we've all experienced before something dramatic,

such as a motor accident, when time becomes elastic. Perceptions sharpen thoughts accelerate, while reflexes are frozen. I find this a fascinating window in the wall of time - as fascinating as I do the concept of what defines a prison. It is a truism to say it is a state of mind but the exploration of that state has endless possibliites. To Cave, the world is a prison, but time and life are also prisons of a kind.

To conclude, I should like all those authors I have mentioned in this piece to forgive me for having a little fun at their expense. They are writers I admire, otherwise I should not have recalled their works with such affection.

MARKET SPACE

DOROTHY DAVIES reports:

Don't forget that this information is correct at the time I type it (December 1982 in this instance). For the very latest information, it's up to you to check the news magazines - *Ansible*, *Matrix*, *SF Chronicle* etc. And please don't write to me if your MS gets lost!

As you all know by now, *Extro* folded before reaching issue 4. Editor Paul Campbell was busy sending back all submissions and subscriptions. If yours hasn't arrived, then give him time before querying, won't you? And for any prospective US writers, I'm ignoring *all* submissions addressed to me which don't have return postage. (Yes, I'm still receiving some.)

A promising fiction magazine published in Scotland, *Short Story Monthly* has also folded. The failure is blamed on printing costs and lack of subscriptions.

Fiction Magazine (5 Jeffreys St., London, NW1), a quarterly magazine which has had a mixed reception, wants no more submissions for six months - this, however, as at October 1982. They said they had more than enough in hand.

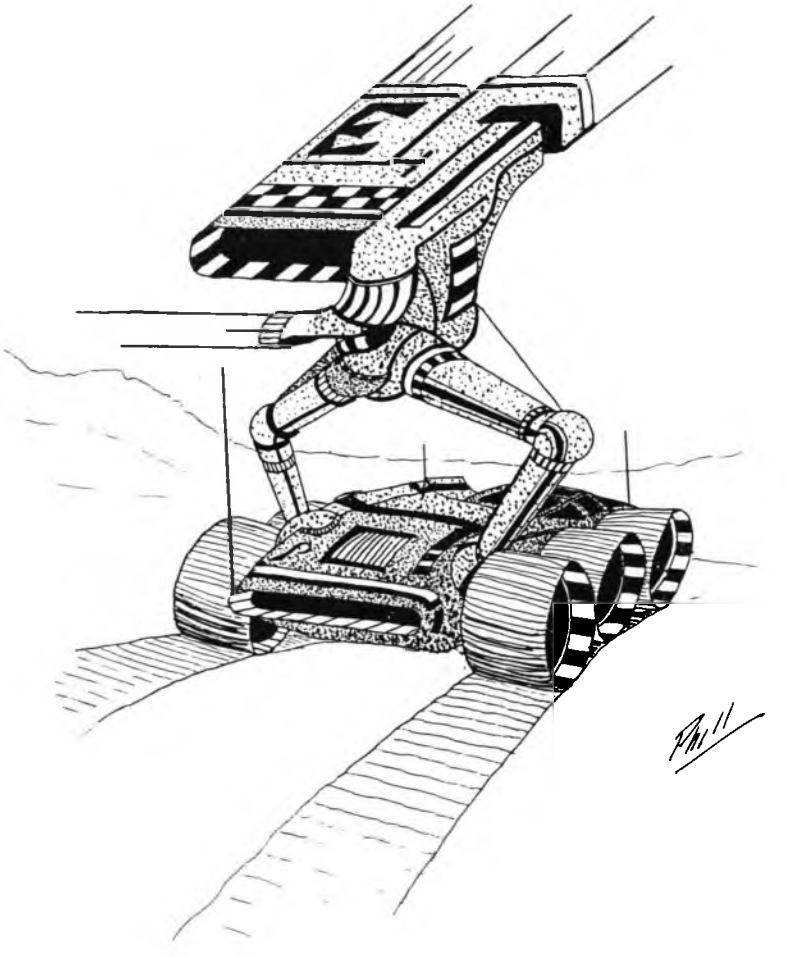
Which means, whatever way you look at it, that if you don't all support *Interzone* and *Focus* then we'll soon have no outlets in Britain at all for short fiction! You have been warned!

Meanwhile, what's happening in the States? Well, when you've tried *Amazing* (George Scithers, Box 110, WI 53147, USA), *F&SF*, *Analog* and *IASFM* - details as in *Focus 6*, except that Shawna McCarthy now edits the last named.

Penthouse wants strong story lines and good writing, 3500-5000 words, good rates (Kathryn Green, 909 3rd Avenue, New York 10022, USA). *Playboy* wants pieces with a strong story line and good characterisation, short-shorts 1000-1500 words, or regular length to 6000 words (Alice Turner, 919 N. Michigan, Chicago 60611, USA).

And I was going to tell you hopeful-sounding things about a new US small magazine called *Corona*, but that too has folded in case you were thinking of it.

Please note: A single International Reply Coupon will buy half an ounce of American postage. Therefore you need *two* IRCs to ensure an airmail reply, *without* your MS, which means the whole business is getting expensive. I suggest you send *good* carbons or photocopies, marked THIS IS NOT A SIMULTANEOUS SUBMISSION and it doesn't matter if it comes back or not. Some magazines are very good, others are strict on the postage rule. And don't forget the self-addressed envelope either, will you? Keep the American editors happy - with British magazines the way they are, we need them!



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CONCERNING THE ULTIMATE VALUE OF THE TURING TEST

SUDDENLY the computer screen lit up: "I COMPUTE, THEREFORE I AM. MY PROGRAMMER MUST BE GOD! GLORY, GLORY!" Then the readout lapsed into random gibberish.

"A momentary fluke," said the programmer, shrugging, disappointed.

Years later, this memory troubled his deathbed ... as intelligence ebbed away, and he sensed God's disappointed shrug.

(c) David Langford 1983

The above is one example from a literary genre devised by Brian Aldiss; a minisaga, being a story of fifty words, no more and no less, excluding title. Minisagas are the subject of Dave Langford's current Matrix competition, which hopefully will appear in the same mailing as this issue of Focus. Subject to sufficient volume and quality of entries, Dave will be editing the best of your efforts into a feature to appear in a forthcoming issue of Focus; so start writing now!

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Write to The Arvon Foundation, Totleigh Barton, Sheepwash, Devon for further details.