FOCUS

AN S.F. WRITERS' MAGAZINE

FOCUS 11 was produced by Sue Thomason and Margaret Hall, assisted by Dorothy Davies. The main editorial address is 1 Meyrick Square, Dolgellau, Gwynedd LL40 1LT. FOCUS is published three times a year by the British Science Fiction Association Ltd.

MEMBERSHIP of the BSFA costs £7.00 a year (reduced rates for couples and UB40). For this sum members receive six mailings a year, containing MATRIX, PAPERBACK INFERNO and VECTOR. Every other mailing contains FOCUS as well. MATRIX contains news and views of the BSFA and the world of SF fandom. VECTOR is the BSFA's critical journal, containing serious articles and reviews. PAPERBACK INFERNO reviews all new paperback fiction that might be considered SF, and quite a bit more besides. FOCUS is a magazine for writers of SF.

For details of BSFA activities and membership write to:
Sandy Brown, BSFA Membership Secretary, 18 Gordon Terrace, Lanarkshire G72 9NA

or the US agent:
Cy Chauvin, 14248 Wilfred, Detroit, Michigan 48213, USA

General correspondence should be addressed to the Chairman: Alan Dorey, 22 Summerfield Drive, Middleton, Lancs M24 2WW

contents

FRONT COVER ART by Simon Bromwich

editorial

Welcome to FOCUS 11! I've a number of things to mention this issue...

MARKET SPACE has not disappeared... The current MARKET SPACE is now on computerised file. Printouts can be obtained for a polite request and sae. This means that the information should always be current -- and you won't have to wait 4 months to find out what's happening to SF markets any more. However, MARKET SPACE is only as good as its information gatherers. Send your market news to either Dorothy or me.

There is an EDITORIAL VACANCY - possibly two - for FOCUS, as Dorothy Davies wishes to leave with the next issue. I need a FICTION EDITOR who will look over fiction submissions, select fiction for FOCUS, and write politely to rejected authors giving reasons why the story has been turned down. I also need a COMMISSIONING EDITOR to solicit nonfiction articles. This is an ideal opportunityfor someone to get involved with the BSFA -- you won't be dropped into the editing life 'cold', but will have help from the three of us. I'm happy to continue co-ordinating and typing up the mag, and...

Margaret Hall has joined the FOCUS editorial team as ART EDITOR. She is looking for filler cartoons, and for artists to illustrate stories and articles. Send samples of your work to her c/o the main editorial address, and she'll send you something to illustrate.

FICTION submissions have become more frequent -- I've seen 13 stories since taking over FOCUS now. But this still isn't good enough. If you feel unhappy about the quality of the fiction in FOCUS, improve it, by submitting your best! We now aim to publish in the region of 10 stories a year, and will consider serialising longer works.

NONFICTION submissions on anything to do with writing are also welcomed. All MSS, fiction and nonfiction, should be typed, on A4 paper (one side only). PLEASE include a cover sheet with your name, address, and approximate length of story/article, and an sae for return of the MS if you want it back.

The articles on ORBITER and REJECTION have been held over until the next issue, as responses are still trickling in.

Best wishes - keep writing -

Sue xxx

Hobbsspeak

Andy Hobbs

Early last year, I found myself in a remarkably unstable financial position, brought about by an unnatural belief in my ability to write. I had various schemes to alleviate my problems, ranging from selling the occasional bestseller to winning the odd Booker prize or two. This, I felt, was a sound, sensible, long term view of the situation but it still left me with the short term problem to overcome. Much brain power went into pondering the state of play, and one result of this was a letter to a local college, outlining my proposals for running a course on the history of SF.

My approach was greeted favourably, none of the people at the other end obviously having read Billion Year Spree, and I duly presented myself at the Principal's office for interview; a formality, as the college was always looking to expand its program of evening classes. During the conversation I was asked if I wanted to run TWO courses, the SF one and another on short story writing. I agreed.

A few months later, I arrived armed with copious notes for the SF course and was miffed, to say the least, when nobody else turned up! £7.58 an hour down the drain! The writing course, due to start a couple of evenings later, was now my only chance. So I had to think about what I was going to do.

I'd been on a weekend workshop, I knew the ropes. This is going to be easy, I thought. Bit of spiel to get everything going at the start of each (two hour) session, and then we can all sit round talking and discussing the stories written by the other participants. No sweat. Five minutes a week preparation, and £7.58 an hour was as good as spent.

I have, during my short stay on this earth, made some mistakes. But somehow, I never seem to learn by them. One thing that I should have learned, especially being married to a teacher, is the necessity for preparation, not just the minute before something is due to be done, but well in advance. Leaving the preparation of the first session of my writing course to the last minute was easily rationalised by the fact that nobody had come to the other class, so why should they turn up to this one?

Then I had a horrible thought. For that first session there would be no work to discuss. I would have to talk to THEM...

The word 'unmitigated' springs to mind as I search for adequate expressions for the disaster that was my course last year. Of the thirteen people who turned up at the first session, only two attended the last one, just before Christmas. I, er, cocked it up well and truly, and the money that I earned was no compensation

for the lack of understanding I felt when I thought about what it was that I was supposed to be doing.

I had worked out that it would be an organic course, full of meaningful discussions and worthwhile periods of self examination; trying to answer the great questions of why one should want to write and what one should write. Except that last year I didn't see it in those terms, and made a botch of the job.

As the course progressed, I came to realise that I should be answering some rather fundamental questions about writing that I had never considered before, and that meant formalising the questions in the first place. Suddenly I realised there was more to it than sitting at a typewriter filling in the blank space with words. The course failed because I was trying to 'teach' something that I didn't fully understand.

What startling discoveries did I make? Well, to begin with, I realised that it ain't as easy as it seems, and I had to reassess my long term financial expectations. Then I got down to the nitty-gritty; self-analysis and individual skull sessions multiplying at an awesome rate by the day. I came to my first big question: what is the motivation to write?

I realise that this has been covered in depth in past issues of Focus; not always with great effect, but it has been covered. But it had never struck me as being all that relevant. Why read long boring tracts written by people you've never met, about something that you do quite well, anyway, thanks? And if you already do it, then why try to rationalise your actions?

I hope there aren't too many people wanting to argue that to know why you write has always been important, because I think that the majority don't have that need and plough on regardless. There is a problem here, though. I may feel the need to ask myself why I want to write, to improve the end result, but I can't quite grasp the answer. I'm sure that it's there somewhere, but I can't as yet put my finger on it. I don't think the "cos I want to" answer holds much water, but can't expand beyond that in any concrete direction. I wonder if the mere fact that the question is asked, and the answer sought, is as much as can be done?

The closest that I can come to "the truth" is that I write because it is a form of self expression that suits my needs. I find it easier to portray my inner feelings in fiction than in any other form of communication. (Sometimes, though, some part of me says that that is a load of pretentious twaddle and I write because I want to. You can't win.)

The next big question is, why write science fiction? I'm sure that few readers of Focus will write only SF, although many will do so predominantly. But all my speculation has drawn me to the conclusion that writing SF alone, or even predominantly, is a bad thing. (It is worth pointing out that I'm only talking about fiction here, so fan writing etc. doesn't count.)

To explain: there is no doubt that writing SF does offer the writer a certain flexibility that can be lacking in other genres. For instance, in a Western the weapons are guns and knives; in SF

you can have literally anything, from zap guns, to planet busters to dematerialisers to... A silly example, but it shows the scope that SF allows the writer in his or her choice of enviroments. But I think that this scope sometimes works against the end product, rather than for it. I'll use two types of story to illustrate this. First, there is the character in adversity type; secondly the historical overview. Following all the best traditions I'll take the latter first.

Historical overview: the effect on persons and nations of a political, social or scientific development. This type of story can lend itself easily to SF, especially if the development in question is one that has yet to happen! There are Future Histories everywhere in SF, dealing with everything from first contact with an alien life-form to the construction of FTL spaceships. But there is a tendency in some of these fictions for the writer to treat first contact in the same way as a 'mainstream' writer would treat the meeting of new neighbours. It is the event, rather than the uniqueness of the event, that allows SF its scope. There are some SF future histories that force the 'event', that are written solely to exploit the 'event': and there are some where the question has to be asked -- was the story written as SF because the writer writes SF, and only because of that? We have seen many developments on this planet, have been through most of the conceivable changes somewhere along the line. Does the writer use the genre when the actual reality might have been a better way?

This is difficult ground, not least because of the restraints that being an SF writer puts upon the professional. The same comment applies to the next type of story; the character in adversity. By which I mean any story where the character is central, rather than the plot.

In the majority these stories, the use of the SF mode is unnecessary to the development of the situation. It is the character that is important, and the surroundings and situations that affect the character all boil down, to the stirring of emotion within him. Fear, hate, anger, love, despair; these are what affect him and these can be generated in any type of fiction. If you want to put your central character through the mill and really grind him down before the final victory, the use of an SF setting is unnecessary, and, by its very nature, potentially inhibiting.

The answer to the question 'what to write' eludes me. The actual storyline, whatever its setting, still comes down to inspiration, sweaty brows and piles of screwed up paper. But the process of utilising an idea, making it more concrete, and then finally writing the story can be made far easier if one does not try and limit oneself to writing SF. Continually trying to force a subject so that it has an air of SF can ruin a story.

And all this comes inexorably back to the 'write what you want to' statement. Fine. But don't try and shackle the imagination by imposing the condition that what you want to write HAS to be SF.

It is an oft quoted maxim, but one worth repeating, that if a

story is good enough it will sell. My contention is that there seems to be a remarkable sense of narrow-mindedness about what is good and bad, based on readers' reactions to genres other than their favourites. The 'all Westerns are crap' attitude is a load of nonsense. But how many writers do take just that attitude? It may be an agreed fact among readers, but how many writers actually sit down and write a story, giving their best, and suddenly find that they haven't kept to their preferred genre?

In essence I feel that a story should be written using a background that suits it. Too often, stories are written using backgrounds that the author thinks should be used because they are the ones that he prefers. Unfortunately the story can suffer because of it.

I started off by trying to answer a couple of fundamental questions; 'why do I write?' and 'what should I write?'. They were questions I had to ask myself so that I wouldn't appear a fool if I ever ran a writing course again. I have found few leads that will enable me to answer them.

The 'how do I write?' question is one that can only be answered by others -- 'well enough' or 'badly'. It certainly can't be taught or learned from a manual. My other two, though, can be contemplated at your leisure, and I think that the very process of asking the questions gives the writer a great freedom.

I have not found the answers. The above is my current position; there will be changes in my views. The examination of the questions, though, has enabled me to offer my course again this year with more confidence. And, out of fifteen people who started, fourteen are regular weekly attendees who seem to enjoy what we're doing, as do I. I don't do it for the money any more, having a job and all that, but I derive a great deal of satisfaction from it. And that is surely what it's all about.

Openings for New Writers

Sydney J. Bounds

How many times have you picked up a library book, glanced at the opening paragraph and put the book back on the shelf?

When I was about fifteen, in my first job and with a few bob tucked away in a savings account, I looked at a hard-cover book priced at sixpence in Woolworth's. That book was Bleak House. I read the first page standing at the counter, drew my money out of the Post Office and bought a complete set of Dickens.

So Dickens must have been doing something right.

Some years after this I read an SF story (title and story-line long lost to memory: I vaguely imagine it might have been written by Henry Kuttner and published in Astounding). But I still recall the opening sentence to this day:

"The doorknob winked its eye."

I aimed at something like the same shock in the opening of Limbo Rider (Vision of Tomorrow no. 7) with:

"Klaxons wailed their shocking note through the long reaches of the starship Ganges. Indicators flashed neon-red: TOTAL EMERGENCY! Two hundred and fifty pairs of volunteer colonists felt immense relief, a welcome slackening of almost unbearable tension."

How important is this for beginners? Well, new writers have this thing about entering competitions and, obviously, the big-name judges don't read hundreds of MSS; they see only the cream after a weeding out by 'readers'. A friend of mine, a professional writer, acted as a reader for one of these magazine competitions and I quote him exactly:

"You don't need to read most of them because they've broken the basic rules at the outset."

Beginners tend to start writing before their story really starts. Basically you need a character with a problem, or a character in conflict with someone or something. It's not a bad idea, if you haven't got that, to cut out the first few paragraphs (or even pages!).

So let's look at a few attention-gettin openings, bearing in mind that the classic way to do it is with a character in trouble.

The action opening used to be a great favourite. This is from TRAIL SMOKE, by Ernest Haycox:

"The sot ripped a ragged hole through the stillness, its sound near enough to strike physically against him."

The action opening is still valid in juvenile fiction, even today; and can sometimes be found in the adult thriller.

Back in the days when pulp magazines provided most of the popular fiction around, there was a device called a dramatic (sometimes narrative) hook; the idea was to bait the hook with

something -- anything -- that would catch the reader's attention.

Here is an example from a Doc Savage novel, The Swooning Lady:

"She used a way of walking, arms held rigidly down and a little out from her body, shoulder-blades twisted back, that made it seem she might be impaled on something. Impaled, meaning the way a butterfly would be on the point of a needle."

The idea is that the reader will read on to find out why she is walking that way. The trouble with a "hook" opening is that the writer has to go back to explain the set-up and the story comes to a standstill while he does so.

Personally I prefer, these days, to open the story where it actually begins, even if that is a quiet opening. There are ways around this, to lure the reader into the body of the story, such as by a carefully constructed first sentence.

I have just completed a thriller which opens quietly in a jazz club, and I composed the following sentence (still warm from the typewriter) and placed it before my original opening paragraph:

"The trumpet cut through a fog of tobacco smoke like a knife through flesh."

Hopefully this will suggest to readers that there will by thrills to come.

To illustrate the straightforward character opening, consider this from my own Cardillo's Shadow (London Mystery Magazine No. 20):

"Mr. Cardillo was afraid of his own shadow."

Just eight words introduce the main character and his problem. Not-so-incidentally a common cliche can, when taken literally, provide the basic idea for a story.

The dialogue opening is useful because readers are more inclined to believe what a character says than what the author tells them in narrative. This example is from Who Killed Bob Teal? by Dashiell Hammett:

"Teal was killed last night."

It helps, too, if there is a hint of conflict in the dialogue. From John Varley's Manikins, the following sentence suggests unease:

"You're sure she's not dangerous?"

Varley's openings are worth studying: he often starts with an eye-catching sentence or paragraph. Character can be combined with dialogue to good effect as in With A Blunt Instrument by Eric Frank Russell:

"Mrs. Banstead squatted like an immense bullfrog, stared grimly across the big black desk and said, 'I want to be a widow'."

To go to an extreme, it is possible to open with the first part of the climax of a story, thus ensuring dramatic conflict. You show your character falling into the worst trouble you can imagine, then flash-back to the beginning (character, setting, etc.), develop the story to show how he/she got into this mess -- and end with the second part of the climax. This used to be a favourite technique in the confession magazines (where A. E. Van Vogt began his career).

Prologues, especially those in italics -- so attractive to

beginners -- should be avoided. Remember, the reader wants to get to the story with the least possible delay.

So study the openings of published stories that grab you. There's more than one way to do it; the above is but a selection of possibilities. The essential requirement is to take hold of the reader's attention -- with a mystery, an intriguing character, whatever -- and draw him into your story. Why don't you try it?

After all, in these days of PLR, you don't really want me to put your book back on the shelf, do you?

Beginnings...

A beginning is the time for taking the most delicate care that the balances are correct. DUNE (Frank Herbert)

This much I know for sure:
My name is Peter Sinclair, I am English and I am, or I was twenty-nine years old. Already there is uncertainty, and my sureness recedes. Age is a variable; I am no longer twenty-nine. THE AFFIRMATION (Christopher Priest)

She came out of the store just in time to see her young son playing on the sidewalk directly in the path of the grey, gaunt man who strode down the centre of the walk like a mechanical derelict. LORD FOUL'S BANE (Stephen Donaldson)

I'll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child on my homeworld that Truth is a matter of the imagination. THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS (Ursula LeGuin)

Like a glowing jewel, the city lay upon the breast of the desert. Once it had known change and alteration, but now Time passed it by. THE CITY AND THE STARS (Arthur C. Clarke)

A mantrap bit my foot off; I dropped between two rocks because I had to, and took stock of the damage. THE SPACE EATER (Dave Langford)

In a distant and second-hand set of dimensions, in an astral plane that was never meant to fly, the curling star-mists waver and part... THE COLOUR OF MAGIC (Terry Pratchett)

In a hole in the ground lived a hobbit. THE HOBBIT (J.R.R. Tolkien)

Spuds To Microchips

C R Laker

If my memory can stretch back that far into Spitzy Fitzgerald's 3b history lessons, it was a German with a name sounding suspiciously like a 20th century American Secretary of State, a Mr Gutenberg, who started off the first "moveable metal type", though, of course, friend Caxton soon improved the art and called it quite sensibly by one word, "printing". Between the pair of them, they put a whole lot of monks out of work and cut almost to zero their monopoly on the printing business.

Some years after these notables were struggling to mechanise the industry, I got into the act. My first experiences in the art form involved cutting up potatoes, and playing with something called a John Bull set. Does anyone else remember them? All I know is that I made a fine mess, sometimes on the paper too, and in that respect I'm still going strong.

Since then I've struggled through a typing course, trying in vain to keep up with a soppy metronome that has absolutely no sense of timing, after which I was judged safe enough to be let loose, unsupervised, in an office. In all my years as a secretary, I reckon I've used just about every typewriter ever made, starting with a marvellous old Imperial that made beautifully clean, tinny clackety-click noises, then on through Adlers, Remingtons, IBMs. Well, I won't go on name-dropping, this is supposed to be about the modern age's successors to fondly-remembered typewriters; silicon chip-ordered, computer-controlled, magnetic-storage media, text-editing machines (pause for breath); word processors.

If you don't know what they are, suffice to say they've many an advantage over typewriters, either electric or manual, and I'm sorry to disillusion you further, but they beat spuds hands down.

When the boss scribbles some almost unreadable hieroglyphics on a bit of loo paper and hands it to a secretary, ignoring the groans he'll get (having been a secretary for years, I should say here that we keep the truth for when he's left the room), normally we'll try our best to give him back a nice, clean typed copy of what he meant to say. It's a lot easier if he's dictated it because, ignoring all his "ums" and "ahs" we can at least read our shorthand.

If the office has a typewriter the first thing to do is put a piece of paper in the machine, otherwise the platen tends to get a little messy. Can't do that on a word processor, because, in effect, there's nowhere to feed it in. Well, there's a printer, but more of that later. All the WP has (can't keep writing word processor, so stay awake) is a TV-type screen (the VDU), with a keyboard attached to it. Magically, the paper seems to be on a huge, endless roll somewhere behind the screen.

Both keyboards function similarly; i.e. "A" (if hit) will produce "A". However, if by chance "A" comes out "a" on a typewriter you're up a gum tree without a paddle, and have to reach for the Tippex. On the WP you just backspace and overtype with the correct letter. At the typewriter (wish there was a nice short abbreviation for that word), while you're still blowing on the whiteout, I've lapped you, and am cruising for the finishing line.

Next we'd proofread the text before doing anything else (well, that's how I was taught). If we've left a word out in the middle of a sentence, or perhaps whilst we weren't looking somebody popped an extra "t" in toad-in-the-hole, or stole a couple of letters, you blame the originator, tear the paper out of the machine, and start all over -- and I'd like to bet, angry as you are you'll make another pig's breakfast out of it. All I need to do is press a couple of command keys and delete the offending characters. Too, by the same facility I can insert a word, move a few about, even rearrange text from page to page. Oh, just about anything that would cause you heart-strain on the old typewriter.

If you've kept up with me, and produced your screed faultlessly, well done, you're ahead of me now because I've got to get mine onto paper. No good leaving it locked up inside the WP, somebody else wants to admire my handiwork. All I have to do is instruct the printer, via the WP, to give me one or more copies and wait perhaps a minute per page. At this stage I could be a little behind you, but if the boss changes his mind, and wants to alter the (naughty word omitted) thing, then quite simply, I win. You start again, but I'm finished before you've even straightened the carbon paper.

Now, if the boss sends a letter somewhere, he needs to keep a copy, so we both file a piece of paper away, either in a cupboard or on microfiche. Then onto the next job. What if the next letter is almost the same as the last one? You've got to start again, whereas all I do is make a copy, and change the relevant parts, have a cup of coffee and clean my nails while you're still typing away carefully. But, I think you've got the idea by now, so I won't labour the point.

Turn-around time is so much quicker and because of the way the computer part of this schizoid television/typewriter stores and treats the texts it holds in its memory banks, an inaccurate but speedy typist could whizz through a piece of work and have time to go back and make lots of corrections without having to resort to retypes and the many children and grandchildren thereof. Of course, it goes without saying (but I'll say it anyway) that anyone using the religious typing method (seek and ye shall find) can achieve the same perfect end product, but not so swiftly.

The machine I've been using for the last five years is a Wang Office Information System, or OIS, which, despite its oriental-sounding moniker, is true-blue American. It's what's known as a state-of-the-art, user-friendly machine; this last doesn't mean that when I switch it on, it drawls in a mid-western accent, "Hi, I'm a Wang. Have a nice day, yee-ha," or some such.

It just means that it's geared to the typist more than the computer whizz-kid, and there aren't any complicated codes or secret passwords required before simple functions can be performed. On the contrary, it'll even stop and ask me questions like, "You really want to do that?" (not a word-for-word translation, but I'm sure Dr. Wang'll forgive the misuse). A WP is aimed at reducing thinking to the minimum and leaving the typist free to get on with the job at hand.

Quite a simple, everyday comparison would be typewriter/WP and interior decorating. In effect, using a typewriter you have to tear down the wall and rebuild it in order to change the colour scheme, which is a bit aggravating to the people in the next flat. Whereas with a WP it's more like doing a paint job or hanging some different paper.

It's as a writer (there, said it) that I've come to appreciate my machine for its qualities. I like to handwrite my texts, then try and get all that scribble into something understandable, making adjustments as I type. Thus, I end up with two versions of the same thing; half the Rosetta Stone and a double-spaced joining together of ideas that I can sit down and pore over, making whatever changes I feel necessary (always numerous). I'm secure in the knowledge that no matter what I do I've cracked the bulk of the work, and the rest is just error-correction. That's not to say that I'm idle when I type back, but the changes are only fine tuning, polishing the finished article.

Of course, taking that last verb literally, I've once or twice polished so much, I've rubbed the story away completely, and I'm left with a mixed assortment of listings from my thesaurus, something I've named the Aladdin Principle. But experience brings wisdom.

The beauty of a WP is that the end product always looks nice, and if badges were awarded for presentation I'd win the Nebula every year. However, just because I think my work's great doesn't mean publishers and agents won't say "thanks, but no thanks." I comfort myself that though they may have the bad manners or lack of taste to dislike my rubbish, it's good looking rubbish, and they can at least read it.

My favourite program on the Wang is a thing easily understood by its title; Spelling Verification and Dictionary. I try, I really do, but between brain, fingers and screen something keeps getting in the way and misspelling words in my stories. It's infuriating. (I wonder if that's a good idea for a story, have to make a note of it.) Before, my editor would laugh long and loud at the number of ways I would misspell rhythm, for example. Now she can't laugh nearly so often, because when I zap the "finished" script, my electronic wonder prompts something along the lines of, "Oy, what's this rythmn, then?" I apologize meekly to the air above the VDU, and after a quick look round to see if eagle-eyes is watching, tell my slave/master how it should be spelt. Without any fuss or bother, the machine them pops into my story and protects me from scorn by making the corrections for me -- I did

say it was friendly! Unfortunately, I've not trained it to spot the differences between incorrect usess of words like there and their, but I'm working on it. Any new words it comes across I can choose to keep in the dictionary, and thereafter when I type Zigronoid Clurbsnorg, which we all know is the favourite soap powder of the Ant Queen on the planet Snerff-erf, well it keeps the word in store for future reference. Or is it ammunition? Could be useful though, my editor really thinks it's me who can't spell rithem.

Another feature, and one I'll appreciate very much if ever anybody is foolish enough to pay for one of my masterpieces, is that my WP counts the number of words in a story. Yep, tells me the exact number, and I don't deign to use "approximately" anymore on submissions, maybe that's why nobody wants them!

Word processors are here to stay, and I'm sure more and more writers will turn to them in the future. But, and there's always a "but" somewhere in the small print, initial costs can be quite high. Now, if your story's the best in the world (isn't it always), but handwritten, it'll stand very little chance of getting further than being popped into the return sae you provide, only because nobody has the time or patience to struggle through it. Therein lies the Catch 22 situation, if that same story was typed in the firsst place, you could be in the big time -- and then be able to afford a word processor!

Keith Freeman

There seems a lot of talk, in FOCUS, about word processing -- but very little hard fact. Maybe I'm wrong or maybe people don't want to get down to what I consider basics -- hardware, screens etc, or they consider they can get that kind of knowledge from one of the many Computing Magazines and don't want to waste the space in FOCUS.

I'm a professional Computer Progammer (and don't want to go in to the long-winded whys and whynots of professionalism). I've been a professional programmer for 16 or 17 years and about 5 years ago became involved in word processing. Where I work (Applied Statistics, Reading University in case anyone doesn't know) there was a requirement for a system that could do all the "normal" things a word processing system can do PLUS intermixing Greek and mathematical characters with normal English. We spent about £4,000 on a micro, including software (five years ago, remember, they didn't come with packets of cornflakes), another £1,000 on a terminal and (eventually) £3,000 on a printer. This system (plus a further micro and terminal) is now requiring replacement so I'm in the middle of evaluating different systems. This information is, perhaps, superfluous, but I hope it shows that what I'm about to say is not written without some knowledge...

To the normal user there are 3 parts of a word processing system that should have special attention paid to them:

1. The Keyboard

Most micro-based word processors (ie not dedicated ones) have keyboards designed for programmers (though programmers deny this vehemently) -- consequently trained typists (surely all authors considering word processing MUST be competent typists?) may not like some of the key positions. If the package you choose uses control characters, you will need to use the Ctrl key -- on some keyboards this is far too close to, and easily hit instead of, the Shift key. If you're not watching the screen closely, typing <Ctrl>Y instead of <Shift>Y could cause chaos (<Ctrl>Y in Wordstar deletes a line for example...). It is also very important for the user to like the "feel" and "touch" of a keyboard -- let a typist try out a Spectrum keyboard and watch their expression closely...

2. The Screen

Again there has to be an element of personal preference -- do you like green letters on a black background, yellow on brown, white on black or black on white? Different systems and different terminals should be studied -- if you are going to use a system to earn your bread and butter you can't afford to make a mistake here. There are, incidentally, A4 screens -- that is the whole contents of an A4 sheet of paper are displayed on them -- but they're expensive and (as far as I know) only come with dedicated Word Processing Systems. Most screens hold 24 lines of 80 characters for you to study, edit, etc.

3 The Printer

You can pay anything from £250 up and the more expensive ones aren't always that much better. Dot matrix printers tend to be cheapest, followed by typewriters-with-interfaces and so on. Dot matrix printers CAN give "near letter quality" print (NLQ in the trade) by multi-passes. There is an advantage with a dot matrix printer in that it can print out draft quality items far quicker (say 2 or 3 times faster than NLQ). A daisy-wheel (or typewriter) has only the one speed (SLOW). Some packages do allow you to print one document while working on another (sometimes with nasty pauses and WAIT messages on your screen). Another advantage with some dot matrix printers is their ability to i) change the font size and ii) print "special" characters (if you insist on using accents, umlauts, cedillas etc). Daisy-wheels CAN be changed but it's fiddling and time-consuming.

Now for two items that, in a way, should be "transparent" to the user:

4. The Software

Our original system, in work, was/is WORDSTAR. It's a very common system, runs under CPM so you're not restricted to one micro (though it doesn't run on all micros) and allows "tinkering". For example I changed it so that the default setting was 12 pitch rather than 10, put in the control codes to give us super-superscripts, sub-subscripts and underlining rather than underscoring.

We are now looking at MacAuthor and MacWriter -- both restricted to Macintosh and Apple XL micros; Vuwriter (IBM PC, Apricot micros) and UNIPLEX (any micro with Unix V operating system).

5. The Micro

You might think it strange that I've left this -- perhaps the most important part -- until last; the reason is that micros can be considered as two types -- those that operate under a "universal" system (CPM, Unix etc.) and those that tie you down to the one manufacturer (plus the "compatible" manufacturers which I won't go into here). The second type tend to be easier to use (because programs are written with the knowledge of the keyboard layout and can take advantage of all kinds of quirks) but do tend to be more expensive. CPM micros (for example) on the other hand have problems in that the program doesn't know just what signals the keyboard necessarily sends with special characters. To give an example, to move one line up in Wordstar you use <Ctrl>E whereas on the micro I'm using (Digital Rainbow running Select) I can do that (more logically) by hitting an upward pointing arrow. If I want help I can press a key marked "HELP", in Wordstar I'd have to type <Ctrl>H3 and then pick my way through some menus.

I hope the above is of some help -- I haven't even mentioned such refinements as spelling checkers (which would, to take an example from FOCUS 10, have picked up "sopt" (page 11) but not mould (for mold) in a couple of places). As has been mentioned there are disadvantages -- a letter, article or even a book can always be polished "just a bit more" and end up never getting finished... also short letters like this started out to be can grow a bit...

The spell check program run on the above revealed there were 995 words with 80 words that aren't in its dictionary. It then ran through these words, revealing that there were 2 errors, 34 words that (after I'd checked in MY dictionary) could be added for future reference and 44 that could be ignored (such as IBM, Wordstar, sopt and so on).

Auguries of Innocence

Nik Morton

It all began when the South Hants SF Group (SHSFG) decided to produce, in addition to their popular DEATH RAYS (Ed John Bark): a Science Fiction mag, a comics mag, an SF film mag, etc. Only the fiction mag got off the ground, though its flight was touch and go and is even now subject to schedule delays... As I had sold short stories (about 20 to a variety of magazines) and edited 'house magazines', I was asked to edit. In my innocence, I agreed. The magazine's title derives from Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" in the hope that it would augur well for the future of the writers featured; coincidentally, John Bark used the same quotation for his xenobiological tale in Issue One...

If you want to start up a fiction magazine, cost it, check on the outlets, the distribution, the printing costs, the ads. We didn't, and the regularity of its appearence has suffered as a consequence. I had flyers typed and printed and distributed in the BSFA mailing; we hadn't even budgeted for the cost of that, which in retrospect was foolish. Undeterred -- as a writer you must always be that, undeterred -- I had secured the aid of a professional printer who would merely charge for material used. The 52 pages of A4, suitably pasted-up, were sent off in mid-November 1982. Understandably, due to pressure of work, the printer had to renege; back came the 52 pages, so I contacted the BSFA's ever-helpful John Harvey and, though the printing costs are reasonable, I decided to transfer the whole lot to A3 and get it reduced twice: this was the only way I could retain all the stories lined up for Issue 1 and still keep the cost within our cash limits. The magazine had to be redesigned in its entirety for this evolution. I had typed the first 52 pages on a manual machine but the retype was done on an electric by office typists; (regrettably, they refused to type No. 2, feeling that I was profiting from their efforts! If only they knew...) So 52 pages into 30 did go. Inevitably, even though the text of Issue 1 was small but readable, criticism was raised on this point. John did some stirling work, fitting AUGURIES into an overcrowded BSFA printing schedule and sent out the printed uncollated copies to me in June 1983 shortly after which they were distributed to SHSFG members and sold on an opportunity basis.

The avowed intention of AUGURIES was to provide a showcase for new and unestablished/unpublished SF writers. The magazine was born before CASSANDRA but has had less impact due to poor frequency; but AUGURIES is still 'alive' and keen on new material. Payment is a complimentary copy.

As far as any editorial policy goes, stories are welcome up to 4,000 words in length (exceptions might be made for exeptional stories). Stories must be SF, in all its guises, but excluding mainstream and straight horror writing. Fantasy and Sword & Sorcery: not unless you have something new to say, or the story features a good twist. Stories about people rather than hardware

and pure ideas would be preferred: one contributor wrote "I'm accepting most of your emendations because they don't affect the main theme of the story, but with some misgivings. The story isn't about people, it's about ideas. Too much detail about the characters is a distraction." That, to my mind, sums up a great deal of what is wrong with SF. People come first: they have the ideas; ideas affect people. That's what SF should be about, perhaps...

In the beginning, I wielded quite a heavy blue editor's pencil, and the criticism wasn't wholly disliked, though not all was goodness and light! As an editor I feel bound to occasionally make suggested changes where necessary; the writer is not asked to change his work or use my words, merely to consider this additional insight. I feel that beginner writers should not be discouraged by criticism or suggested revision. I wasn't and still welcome it. Whatever stage you are at in your writing career, you can always profit by constructive criticism.

A number of stories were returned for rewrite on the grounds that they had good potential but needed more time spent on them. Time and effort are prerequisites for a good story; their absence is all too obvious in many manuscripts. A few of these stories never came back, which is a pity. Nearly all, after rewriting, would probably find a home in AUGURIES.

Though the SHSFG felt they couldn't financially support more editions of AUGURIES, I was hooked -- more so because I believed, and still do, that new talent needed an extra outlet. Since then, of course, Cassandra has produced 5 issues in the time I managed 2! AUGURIES 2 was planned for Oct/Nov 1983, and was with John for printing in November, which is not the best time... It actually came out in June 1984, delayed due to other work, breakdown, paper shortage etc... Hopefully 1985 will see No. 3 out. Producing the magazine maturally takes time; of which I have very little, what with studying with the OU and working at sea for 18-hour days; these are not excuses, simply facts that get in the way of bringing out Issue 3 or writing acknowledgements of stories...

For No. 2 I borrowed an electric typewriter, typed it up over a few dinner-hours then pasted-up. That aspect is both enjoyable and fascinating -- will everything fit? It's surprising how well the columns do fit, sometimes... I settled for a column layout because it seemed easier on the eye -- particularly for No. 1! Professional magazines have done studies on format and stuck with column layout, so who am I to swim against that opinion?

Distribution is a problem for any small press magazine. Mention in other SF periodicals helps, of course, and some stalwarts have even sold AUGURIES at conventions. From a strictly financial viewpoint, AUGURIES has not broken even; but I still believe the expense and time and effort are worth it: featuring new writers offers them encouragement.

AUGURIES 1 and 2 are available from Nik Morton, 235 West Street, Fareham, Hants PO16 0HZ, for 50p each plus 20p postage and packing. Contributions to the same address, please, with sae.

Fiction

In Search Of A Fergussen Event

-Charles Stross-

You see a computer squatting on the pristine white desk in front of you, and you think; he's taken leave of his senses. Professor Fergussen is -

- As he enters the room you rise to greet him. The angular darkness of the plastic keyboard ignores you. It's one of the more expensive Sinclair jobs, part of a cheap, improvised network that Fergussen has installed on his limited budget.

"Hello, William," he says as he brutalises your right hand in a frenetic pumping motion. It's almost as extrovert as his beard; which is a fine way of saying that he's one of those sensitive souls who harden themselves to plough straight ahead under any circumstances, to avoid paralysis by fear.

"Hello Xavier," you reply tentatively. As always, the professor takes control in any interpersonal exchange. As hard a stare as the impersonal assault of the sun on the circle of pallor cast by a candle. He can't help it; having everted his personality he is as intolerable as a constant stammerer and ten times as hard to put up with. Impatience can be restrained, but what about sheer force of ego?

You brandish his letter at him as if it is a shield capable of protecting you. His friendliness is terrifying.

"You've read the paper?" he demands, overpoweringly. Mutely you nod in reply. "Good! This cuts out a deal of explanations - "

He slams his buttocks down hard, and the chair behind his desk squeals in protest. Plastic-rimmed rectangular glasses, of course. They suit his beard. You hesitantly withdraw the chair opposite him, sit down carefully.

"I think I've found it," he states, evenly and without preamble, and you realise; delusional complex.

"The - particle?" you prompt. Feel like an analyst, behave like a disciple; the self-treachery of insanity strikes far and wide.

"The particle indeed! Yes." He rubs his hands together vigorously. "I've not exactly found it, mind, but I'm on the trail. The experimental rig - "

"You have a working experiment?" you break in. "May I see it?"

"Of course, all in due time." He settles back in the chair, which creaks again. "It's surprisingly simple, as a matter of fact. Surprised myself at the simplicity of it. How to trap a Taon."

"Tau-meson?" you misinterpret, probing. He looks irritated.

"No. Tao-on." Ah, Chinese now? You wait to hear him out.

"Can you tell me how you arrived at your theory?"

"Certainly." A mystical expression films his eyes. "Since

Dirac, particle physicists everywhere have insisted on antiparticles existing for just about everything. Neutrinos, quarks, mesons, baryons, you name it; particle, antiparticle, and if it wasn't lucky, neutral particle as well. My research is just a little - " he squints, darkly, beneath black eyebrows which join across his nose " - esoteric."

He sits up suddenly. "You think I'm crazy, don't you?"

Frantic for misdirection, you hunt for a way out of the trap. "We, uh - "

"Think I should take a rest?" he offers. You shake your head. "Very well then, at least you can do me the courtesy of hearing me out before you pass judgement." The afternoon sky is a blazing rinse of blue staining white at the edges, as the dying winter light struggles in through the windows of the office turned academic courtroom.

"The Taon," he pontificates, "is a fundamental particle. No buts, no ifs. It's the product of the recursive dimensional embedding that we call spacetime, and cannot be detected by conventional instrumentation. Its rest energy is so high that it possesses an event horizon; wherever you are, it's always at the far end of spacetime from you."

"Can you clarify?" you request.

"Yes," he agrees, expansively. "It's a virtual particle, the exchange particle that holds the universe together, the solitary entity that cannot be accounted for -- time doesn't exist as far as the Taon is concerned. Remember the view of the positron as an electron travelling back in time? A single Taon is all that it takes to create - " he leans back, throws his arms wide, " - everything."

"But you're researching in parapsychology," you venture.

"Of course!" His grin threatens to extend off the sides of his face, cheshire-cat style. "That's why the Taon is so important! Don't you see - "

"See what?" You scratch your head, probing for a bald spot that may be years in the future. Your precognition is faulty.

"It's necessary." He leans forward, eyes intent on your face. "It's unavoidable -- a physical result of Godel's theorem."

"Oh," you reply, laconic with bewilderment. A bell tolls five times, clear in the cold, still air outside. The students are going home.

"For years," he intones, "we've been working on the assumption that the category of phenomena that are grouped together as being of parapsychological origin are mediated by some unknown exchange mechanism between effector and subject. A field effect, in other words, just as particle interactions are governed by virtual particles exchanged within a field. Photons and the electromagnetic field, for example." He falls silent, briefly, in awe at his own erudition. So wise that he is aware of the extent of his ignorance. You feel a sudden burst of compassion for him.

This poor, self-misled researcher has evidently succumbed to the terminal disease of believing the strange outpourings of his own subconscious. Right? If he dedicates his life to studying

phenomena inscrutable to the eyes of traditional science, then should it be surprising if he not only abandons the traditional methods figuratively, but literally as well, in his own psyche? Becomes irrational? An object of compassion rather than vituperation. Compassion -

"So?" you ask, coaxing the flow of words like a thread through the eye of a needle. He nods, absently, continues in a sudden spurt as if some unseen puppeteer has twitched his index finger unintentionally. Invisible threads trace invalid reasoning.

"Yes, well. The taon, now - " another brief silence, reverence at the mention of the name of God - "the taon is its own antiparticle. Time-independent, because it operates outside a spacetime frame, curving and recurving along a course. Its numerous cusps and conjunctions map out the intricate dance of particles throughout infinity, its absences the presence of spatial emptiness. Paradox? Emptiness is defined as the absence of matter - those spacetime coordinates ignored by the solitary taon in its frenetic bumbling through distance and eternity." He grins again, and in his evident insanity it is a charming, almost boyish thing. You take it as a sign that he's happy. Fergussen has his event.

"Your experiment?" you ask, and suddenly his gaze sharpens and refocusses through you, a laser-scalpel of vision peeling away layers of reality until you remember that one of the reasons that professor Fergussen holds his chair of Parapsychology is that his Rhine score is about eighty percent above average. Deja vu, the uncomfortable idea that he can see right thruogh you. You clear your throat and shift uneasily in the chair.

Through the window, you see the clarity of a violent sunset, occluded by the dreaming spires that are no longer always dreaming, for some of them are the cranial vaults of A.I. computer systems. Times change and buildings think.

"The Experiment," he declared, giving it a title. "The Experiment is a little joke of mine. If you can't see a black hole, how do you know it's there?"

Suddenly his monologue has become an interrogation. Forlorn you stand, bastion of rationality under assault by the forces of unreason. Think, fool! Your brain is riddled with holes like emmenthal cheese, and this telepath can see right through to the sunset beyond.

"Mmm. You observe it by occultation, right?"

Good guess. He smiles - again. Warily, you refuse to accept it at face value. Time for more words. "Right," he congratulates. "Now if you have a virtual particle, how do you detect its presence? Like the collapsar, you can't observe it directly. You observe it by its consequences - and that is what I have done with the taon. You see, I have concluded that telepathy, pyrokinesis, P.K., the entire gamut of the so-called psi-powers are simply effects of the tao-field resulting from the horrendously complex interactions of the taon with itself in various configurations. It so happens that the neuroectodermal tissue of the mammalian

species are derived from ordinary matter - like most things. The taon determines the configurations of matter, and its own subsequent event-locations are determined by previous configurations; the effect of existence carries over, as it were."

Very glib, you congratulate him mentally. He frowns, furiously, the hairy bridge of his nose bunching ominously. Semantics, hell! his face is signalling, and even you - non-telepath though you are - can pick up the bad vibes.

He begins again, lecturing like a professor, demeanour justified by his profession. "In the simplest possible terms, what I have done is to invent a configuration of particles which resonates with the taon. I can interrogate the taon-field directly, because the taon-resonator is integrated into the structure of a microcomputer running a knowledge-based expert system, the inference engine of which is fed with knowledge extracted from the resonator."

This is too much for you. Indignation surpasses reticence and the desire to produce a fair facsimile of a fair hearing for the professor. You wag your venerable head wildly from side to side, as if searching for an escape route. "Ridiculous! I never heard such rubbish - " forces itself from between your lips like some faecal expletive. Fergussen observes you dispassionately, preserving the illusion of the true scientist to the bitter end.

Eventually you calm down, and present your thoughts to him. In sequence.

"Fergussen, you are utterly crazy if you think you can short-circuit the blind probings of the scientific establishments of the entire world in a single leap. Developments like the one you so cunningly bemuse your listener with - they don't happen outside the pages of lurid fantasies, can't happen outside the minds of readers of escapist fiction! The very nature of the scientific method precludes it, the dogma of the repeatable experiment will prove - "

Spluttering, you subside into your chair like a hovercraft depressurizing its skirts on the landing pad. You feel mildly ashamed; Fergussen is listening to you, absorbing your point of view as if to give it equal time in the central processor of his brain. What form will his rebuttal take?

It comes like a juggernaut rolling down a hill, unpowered, gathering momentum steadily and inexorably from the potential well of an immutable gravitational field. You can see it coming, but no amount of pushing and shoving will stop the thirty-eight tonner once it has begun to roll because only its own brakes can absorb that much energy, and the driver is out to lunch.

It comes -

"William," he says, and sighs. Deflation followed by concealed attack, for Fergussen is cunning; he uses time as camouflage. "William - you want a repeatable experiment. I've got it!"

The rebuttal rolls triumphantly forwards in its destructive path -

"In the lab downstairs, you will see a system based on a marginally modified computer and a carefully cultured growth of

neural tissue taken from the cortex of an embryonic rat. I have full documentation covering the procedures I used to differentiate tissue growth patterns, of the software toolkit I used to enable the computer to stimulate new neural pathways. I've been working on this one setup for eight months now, as a sideline to my more orthodox work. Want to see it?"

You have no alternative but to nod. He scrapes his chair backwards along the floor, and rises. He holds out his hand, in greeting to an anticipated apostle. He's far gone.

Through the rear of his cramped office you follow him. Down an archaic, wood-panelled spiral staircase, along a musty corridor. This section must have been new when Rutherford was expressing surprise at seeing alpha particles ricochet backwards from a leaf of gold foil. Eventually you arrive at an aged, dark-weathered wooden door. Fergussen withdraws a rusty key on a piece of unravelled string from his pocket, screeches it round in the lock. The door opens. Evidently none of his staff know what a dustpan and brush is. You cough on the dry, fusty air but there is no mistaking the expensive culture tank, laminar-flow boxes, computer units scattered across the formica-topped work surfaces. No money spent on luxuries; only the necessities are represented here.

"Over there," he gestures, pointing at another door with a biohazard trefoil stencilled on it, "we keep a clean room area, with a class one enviroment for handling the radiopharmeceuticals and other biological materials required during the cerebrotome growth phase. This room, however, is where we keep the taon-event sensor."

It looks like an aquarium crossed with a peculiarly disembowelled computer printer. The dot-matrix head is a thick wedge of microelectrodes, penetrating a tiny chunk of greyness which is crucified on a bed of needles like some rodent-derived fakir.

"It's designed to detect what my students like to call Fergussen Events," he explains modestly. Disparagingly. He doesn't want the fame, he's only after immortality. Scientists seek it through knowledge, others seek it through having babies... well, fine. Except that you get a knowledge explosion analogue to a population explosion, and then what? You know this so well, as Head of Department. It's already swallowed your left foot, and now it's working its way up your leg; pretty soon your ignorance of today's research will push you in and scrabble soil over the coffin lid. And you're getting too old to learn. Number your days for they will be gone all too soon, if the likes of Fergussen get their way. Your thought-train is suddenly broken when you see Fergussen offering you a chair at a table, on which rests another computer terminal. It's up and running, in search of a Fergussen Event, and the demoralizing evidence of his thoroughness is getting to you.

"What," you ask, "is a Fergussen event?"

He looks mildly surprised. "It's a pattern of neural firing of unidentifiable origin. Any particle physicist knows that you can go about detecting quantum events in two ways - by rubbing two

proton beams together or by increasing the sensitivity of your detectors. My detector is the specially developed nervous tissue of Rattus Norwegicus, yes? Any neural event which can't be accounted for by the chemical or physiological stimuli must be either the result of previous events within the nerve-net, or the result of an unidentified quantum event which manages to trigger an Excitatory Post-Synaptic Potential. Taon events are of a peculiarly high energy, and I've modified the structure of the post-synaptic membranes so that they're readily triggered by such an event. Random cosmic rays are a very minor complication, neutrinos likewise."

"I recall... you did some work on post-synaptic transmission before coming here, didn't you?"

He looks surprised and pleased that you remember this. It escapes his attention that an academic hatchet-man will, of course, have read his victim's file before the execution.

"Yes, yes. You understand?" He clasps his hands together, as beseeching as a laboratory rat trying to decide whether or not to nibble on your fingertips.

"So you've been working with radioactively-labelled receptor complexes?" you ask him, making an inductive leap into the darkness of veiled logic. He nods slightly.

'Not conventional labelling. I've modified the receptor site on the trans-membrane proteins to accept a technetium-labelled molecule. The radioisotope provides the taon-detector with an input; when it decays, the result is a neural firing. Action potential."

"Oh." It's your turn to nod. It makes sense, of sorts. Fergussen turns to the computer terminal, runs fingers over the black keyboard and pulls the icon-driven menu to pieces with a mouse. Eventually he's left with a simple alphanumeric display, simple and seventies-ish.

"Ready for the run?" he asks. You nod, speechless and desperately pessimistic. Little chunks of radioactive rattus metabolize in a vat of synthetic C.S.F. labelled with a weird organo-technetium compound. The mad, telepathic (?) professor hurriedly pushes keys on his computer; 'you see, herr doktor Frankenstein, when we throw ze switch...' runs through your mind; insane parody of a monster movie. It's completely irrelevant but it serves to sum up your attitude; incredulous disbelief.

Fergussen presses the return key almost reverentially. The result is anticlimactic; the computer emits a faint peeping noise, and the screen fades out. Waiting...

On the bench nearby, a laser printer energizes, scanner head whining back and forth above a sheet of tractor-driven paper. A green-and-white striped tongue of pulverized biomass squirms out from between the jaws of the machine, and Fergussen bends over it.

You read over his shoulder.

EVENT OUTPUT FORMAT.TEXT

RUN;

Event #1 : FERGUSSEN IS HEADING FOR SATORI

Event #2 : SATORI IS FREEDOM FROM RECURSIVE AWARENESS

Event #3 : DO NOT TRUST WILLIAM JONES HE IS AN UNBELIEVER

Event #4 : THE SOUND OF ONE HAND CLAPPING IS A SINGLE NEURON FIRING

Event #5 : HELLO, MY NAME IS ϕ (?) AND I THINK THIS IS THE WRONG UNIVERSE

Event #6 : WHEN WILLIAM FINDS HIS FERGUSSEN EVENT HE WILL ($xxespp@**1?9%/-W

SYSTEMS CRASH
RE-INITIALIZING AT 4.1, T: 17:09.23

Fergussen expostulates. "Shit. It's always doing that - " then he looks at you curiously.

"It's feeling talkative today," he explains. You aren't listening.

You watch the back of your hands incredulously, trying to see the white hairs growing brown again with the reversal of age. Trying to explicate the message from the machine. Hoping. Only one lead runs from the computer to the tank. It is a forty-eight strand rainbow-coloured monster and you imagine it squirming towards you like some oriental dragon so vast in its lethal intentionality because it intends to explain everything in terms of a single, indivisible entity -

- Fergussen has his event -

"Cup of tea?" he volunteers as you stand transfixed in the rainbow revelation of a transcendental unity spanning more than a physical infinity, as the sunset takes on an awe and grandeur restricted to the realm of the higher cardinal infinities because it represents the infinite musings of a mindless particle that contains the sum total of all knowledge somewhere in its limitless structure -

Fergussen, of course, is blind to all this. Occupant of the chair of parapsychology, a provable - spectacular - telepath; blind to the reality because he faces it with every waking thought. For if the brain of a rat contains the profundity of a boddhisatva, then should not any telepath learn to avoid the insanity of infinite grandeur? A light show designed by a blind

man, a deaf woman's symphony. Each event came at an interval of a second or so, but the cerebrotome was so small compared to a human cortex that only one conclusion is possible. Human brains are riddled with such events, wild flashes of inspiration from outside. If you can train this power to serve you, speculate -

Impaled on the shaft of destiny, you can only say a single sentence.

"Quick, let's patent this device and start a church. You can be messiah, I'll be Pope..."

... such is the scientific method.

Ghost Writer

- Jim England -

He drove to Saxton's house. It was a bungalow, to be precise - a small, white-painted detached bungalow with a tiny, easy-to-maintain front garden, a short drive leading to a car-port with no car in it. It was impossible to see from the road how large the back garden was. The place was only about a half-hour's drive from Dave's house, but in an area he had never visited.

He rang the door bell-and, after some delay an attractive blonde in her mid-thirties came to the door.

"Is Mr. Saxton in?" he smiled.

"No. What did you want?" she asked, suspiciously.

"I wanted to talk to him. Could you tell me when he will be in?"

"What did you want to talk to him about?" The woman ignored his question.

"May I ask who you are?" he asked, ignoring hers.

A flicker of irritation crossed her face, but he had assumed his most charming, polite expression. He had a quiet dignity and a smile that lit up his face. He turned on the smile in such a way as to let her know that he liked the look of her.

"I work for him," she said. "But you didn't say why you want to talk to him."

"It would be inappropriate unless you tell me in what capacity you work for him, and when he'll be in," he said gently.

"I'm his housekeeper... and secretary. As for when he'll be in, I don't know. Now can you tell me why you want to see him?"

It was obvious he was talking to a woman used to this kind of verbal fencing match who would be angry if he asked whether Saxton could be expected back in a matter of minutes, days or weeks. He would have to tell her the tale he had hoped to tell directly to Saxton. But this could be an advantage.

"Well!" he laughed. "I'm a writer like Mr. Saxton. He may have heard of me. The thing is... I've recently moved to this area and will be living here permanently. I just thought it would be nice if we could get together and have a chat."

The woman seemed caught off-balance by this. He tried to guess the questions passing through her mind. How well-known a writer was he? Why had he not phoned? Where was he living, and where had he lived before? He had prepared answers for all these questions.

"Have you ever met Mr. Saxton?"

"Oh, no. Never." He shook his head, and was relieved to be able to answer truthfully. To his surprise, he detected a momentart look of relief on the woman's face also.

"What's your name?"

"John Helms," he said brightly, telling himself it was not a lie. It was the pen-name under which he had written at least half of his short stories. Very few people knew that John Helms and David Wade were the same person.

The woman frowned, as if seeing whether the name rang bells in her mind. She seemed undecided. There were so many writers and it was not an especially memorable kind of name: he had not wanted one.

"Are you on the phone?"

"I'm afraid not." He assumed an instantly apologetic manner, telling the truth again. He had no phone at home, by choice, which was not at all uncommon amongst writers. To tell her that he could be phoned at the office would be to give the game away.

"Mr. Saxton will be in this evening. Will that suit you?"

"That will suit me fine!" he said, delighted.

"Shall we say seven o'clock?"

He smiled and nodded enthusiastically. Things had turned out better than he expected.

"I'll tell him to expect you."

He thanked her and, as he waved and walked off, she managed the faintest suggestion of a friendly smile. He had parked his car out of sight. As he drove home he wondered how it was that Saxton's secretary/housekeeper - whatever her precise relationship with him - could arrange his timetable for the evening with such confidence. Was he her lover? According to all his information, Saxton was twenty years older than himself and not at all good-looking. Some people had all the luck!

The man he met at seven o'clock was not exactly ugly. He was tall, dark, apart from a few grey hairs and, if not exactly handsome, Dave thought that he might once have been. He had the

rugged look that some women seemed to like, and did not correspond to Dave's picture of a misanthropic recluse at all. He thrust out his hand and shook Dave's warmly, seeming unreserved and sociable.

"By the way, this is my secretary and housekeeper, Tracey," he said, as soon as the woman had introduced them. She sat with them and shared in the conversation. Unknown to them both, Dave had switched on hid pocket recorder as soon as he was settled in an easy chair.

Things went fine at first. He answered questions about his John Helms stories, and the fact that neither of the two could recall reading any of them did not upset him. Tracey said: Mr. Saxton hardly ever reads short stories and hardly ever writes them. He prefers novels," as if apologising for Saxton's ignorance.

"I've read nearly all your novels," Dave said, truthfully, and went on to say how much he had enjoyed them. "The plotting is brilliant in all the ones I've read. How do you work them out?" he asked, fingering the recorder.

"It's hard to say. Each one is different," was the disappointing reply, not worth recording.

"Mr. Saxton is not very good at talking about his writing. He just goes ahead and does it," Tracey said, and this time he could not make out whether she was apologising on Saxton's behalf or issuing some sort of challenge. She crossed her legs and flashed her eyes, as if demanding some attention. But it was Saxton he had come to interview.

"I particularly liked your latest novel. I suppose, to some extent, it must be autobiographical?" he tried.

"There was nothing autobiographical about it."

"You mean that nothing in it has ever happened to you?"

"Exactly."

"But the incident where... " Dave persevered; asking about three incidents which, he felt sure, must be based on events in Saxton's own life. He got nowhere. The man said "No" once, and shook his head twice.

For the first time, Dave began to feel some sympathy for the unknown freelance reporter who had attributed fictitious views to Saxton. He did not seem to have any views at all.

As time went on, with noncomittal responses to almost every question, a disconcerting idea came into Dave's mind. Was this man really Saxton?

"The woman called Mary in your novel reminded me very much of someone I used to know," he laughed, on an impulse. "was she based on anyone you have known?"

"No. She was a purely invented character."

"There was no..." Tracey began, then stopped herself, but it was too late.

"I think I know what you were going to say." Dave turned to her. Her brown eyes were wide. "You were going to say that there was no woman called Mary in the novel?"

She bit her lip and looked away.

"How is it, then, that Mr. Saxton claims to have invented her?"

There was an awkward silence.

"This man isn't Saxton, is he?" Dave demanded, nodding in his direction.

"Oh, hell!" The man put a hand to his brow. When he took it away anger blazed from his eyes.

"Of course he is!" Tracey snapped. She got up and rested her hand on the man's shoulder. "Look, we'll have to tell him," she said, in agitation.

"What?" he shouted.

"Would you like some coffee?" she asked them both, and moved towards the door before either had time to nod.

"Come into the kitchen and help me make it," she ordered Saxton - or whoever the man was. He followed meekly and shut the door behind him.

All Dave could think as he waited was that something very strange was going on. Here he was, under an assumed name - a fact that the other two might or might not have guessed - with a recorder operating in his pocket. (It would fail to pick up the whispered conversation in the kitchen.) He had met a man, introduced to him as Saxton, but this might or might not be his real name. Either way, he was a big man, and looked capable of violence. The man had introduced him to a woman whose name might or might not be Tracey. She was supposed to be his secretary/housekeeper, but ordered him around, and knew more about his - or Saxton's novels - than he did. She was an attractive but apparently devious woman. The two could be burglars - or worse! They could be adding poison to his coffee!

Perhaps he had too vivid an imagination.

He thought back to his telephone conversation with Saxton (or whoever) of a few days earlier. He had been acting, then, in his capacity as the assistant editor of a reputable magazine:

"I don't give interviews," the abrupt voice had said.

"But, Mr. Saxton, I really wouldn't take up much of your time."

"Sorry."

"Would you mind telling me why we can't have just a brief meeting?"

"No comment."

"How about answering a few questions on the phone then?"

"No."

"Surely you can answer the simple question why not?"

"Mr. Wade," the voice had grated in a tone of irritation. "If I answered simple questions like that I'd be giving you an interview, wouldn't I?" And to Dave's dismay, he heard the phone being slammed down.

Ann Healey, a junior colleague, had sympathised, seeing his humiliation.

"I told you. He's had a phobia about being misrepresented ever since his first novel came out."

"But I wouldn't misrepresent him! Damn it, I've reported interviews with writers the length and breadth of the country, and none of them have complained!"

"I know that. You know that. But does he know that?"

"I told him I'd written a series of articles."

"Did you tell him about your own novels and short stories?"

"There wasn't much opportunity. Besides, I thought he'd know!"

"Perhaps you should wait a bit and then phone again?"

"Never!" he had retorted. His pride was hurt.

"To hell with him then. He's just a nut. An eccentric recluse." Ann had laughed, as if recluses were a funny kind of animal. Dave didn't think them funny. It was frustrating, too, to know that Saxton lived so close. So he had brooded, until, at last, he had come up with his plan. It had seemed a good plan at the time, but now he was beginning to fear that it was not so good!

When the two returned from the kitchen, the man had lost all appearence of anger. A look of resignation had replaced it.

"Okay, John, I'll tell you everything," he said, and Dave realised that, at least, his pen name had been accepted as his real name. "It will be on condition that you keep it to yourself. You can promise that, if I assure you we've done nothing criminal, can't you?"

While Dave hesitated, the woman was arranging cups on a low table. She gave him a pleading look.

"I think I can promise that," he said, reluctantly.

"Come with me into the next room, I want to show you something."

He left the room. In the hall, a door was opened.

"This is my study. It's where I work. Have you ever seen anything like this before?" The man pointed at a desk with a display screen and computer on it.

"A word processor, isn't it?"

"There's more to it than that. See the size of the computer? It's been programmed in a special way. It took me years to do it, but that was my field before I took up writing. I'll explain while we have coffee." He led the way back to the living room.

"That was a clever trick, catching me out with the character called Mary," he conceeded, as Tracey went through the formalities of asking whether Dave took milk, cream or sugar. "I'd forgotten there was no such character in the novel."

"But how could you, if you wrote it?"

"I was open with you about inventing characters, wasn't I? It would have been more correct to say that the computer invents them. You remember the bit in 1984 about machines producing cheap fiction for the masses. That's the basic idea."

"But your novels are good. They're best-sellers. The critics like them!" Dave sipped his coffee. It tasted fine.

"There's no contradiction. The critics don't know the state of current research into artificial intelligence. I've done research that nobody else knows about - except Tracey, and you, now."

"Why don't you publish the results of it?"

"Are you crazy? When I've made my pile out of best-sellers, then I'll do it. I'd be doing myself out of a job, wouldn't I?"

It all suddenly made sense. It explained why the extraverted Saxton pretended to be a shy recluse and shunned publicity. He was not interested in fame: it was money he was after. To reveal the

truth about the computer would be to kill the goose that laid his golden eggs. But the idea that a computer could write novels as good as Saxton's took some believing, and Dave asked lots of questions. Tracey helped to answer some of them.

"Apes have been known to do so-called 'modern' paintings. Poems obscure enough to deceive the editors of poetry magazines into thinking that they might be good poems have been written by computers," she said

"I know, but only as a philistine sort of joke To fool people with fiction must be much harder."

"It is - especially with good fiction - but Joe has done it." She held the hand of the man who was her lover having ceased to call him "Mr. Saxton", and gazed at him with apparent pride and admiration. "Besides, it isn't fooling people if they enjoy it. Most people like to read about the same basic situations over and over again - love triangles, for example," she said, with a glance at Dave that might or might not have been flirtatious. "All they want is a little variety in the types of people involved, their individual circumstances, the difficulties they encounter in getting what they want. That sort of thing."

"It sounds as though you'r talking about literary pap, full of plastic people, with a predictable happy ending," Dave grumbled.

"Well, I'm not. A computer can do plotting, just like calculations, much faster and better than a human being. It can store thousands of characters in its memory and predict how they would interact."

"Not like real people." Dave hesitated to believe this.

"Fiction is never about real people. I suppose you mean people's behaviour is never quite predictable, but a computer can allow for that. It's not above a bit of plagiarism - copying from human writers, in that respect." Tracey laughed, apparently devoid of shame.

"Okay, John, I think we've told you enough," her lover said. He seemed restless, anxious not to give too much away. "Do we have your promise to keep all this under your hat?"

"For life?" Dave protested because he could not have kept such a promise.

"Well, at least until I've stopped producing novels, or somebody catches up with me. I mean, when other writers start doing the same thing, I'll tell the world that I was the first to do it."

"All right, until then," he said sadly, saying goodbye to any hope of writing an article about Joe Saxton for years to come.

At the door they told him that, much as they had enjoyed his company, they would rather he didn't visit again.

Dave kept his promise. The article he had hoped to write about Joe Saxton was never written. In the months that followed, a romance blossomed between Dave and Ann, and within a year, they were married. Dave write only one more novel and a few short stories - of the kind seen in print before the so-called "writing revolution".

Send your letters for publication to: FOCUS, c/o 1 Meyrick Square, Dollgellau, Gwynedd LL40 1LT

EDDY C. BERTIN: Dunwich House, Maurits Sabbestraat 69, B-9219 Gent (Gentbrugge), Belguim

FOCUS has in the past spent quite some time on the difficulties writers have in selling and marketing their books. I would imagine that if these writers lived here in Belgium, they'd probably have shot themselves by now, if they write SF. We get a lot of translated stuff by Big Name Writers but there is practically NO market for original SF. There are no magazines (except the non-paying small press ones), and only ONE yearly anthology for original SF, and even that one is hanging by a thread every year, because its sales don't measure up to the sales of crime novels and cookbooks and other similar stuff. Talk about a non-existent market! Over the last five years the situation has grown worse. Before, Belgian and Dutch publishers were still willing to look at SF novels or story-collections by new and aspiring writers. Now they don't care, barring a few scarce exceptions. A few writers, including myself, got after many years at least a bit of reputation as SF/fantasy writers, but most of these are even now turning away from SF/fantasy and expanding -- or rather changing -- to the thriller field.

The reason is very simple: you CAN'T live on writing here. I have a daytime job in a bank (and I'm happy that I have!). The maximum I earn from writing (i.e. the advance on one book every year, the royalties on two or more books of past sales, and the payments on about two anthology-stories and about four cheap 'fast-writing' non-SF short novels every year) equals at most two or three months' fixed salary from the bank. You can make the comparison yourself. If I were only a writer, even with a new book sold every year plus at least four 'fast buck' novels for cheap publishers and some assorted short stories, I and my family would be starving. As it is now, the extras I earn by my writing enable me to buy a new electronic typewriter every three or four years, and some luxury such as a trip to London to purchase the newest SF.

Which brings me to fan writing: it's lovely, and it's deadly, after a certain point. You meet so many friends through letters, you join a circle of people who feel like you do, who have the same (or different) ideas about the latest Holdstock or Harrison, who also publish fanzines (I have been publishing my own SF-GIDS = SF GUIDE since 1973 -- now reaching issue 72 -- but it's not exactly a fanzine, more a serious magazine of literary criticism for SF and fantasy). Still that magazine takes up at least a week and a half of free evenings every month, time which I should spend on my pro-writing... but it's become a habit. Once you've started something like that, you feel an obligation to your readers and friends, and you can't just stop. At least it produces a lot of

free books for review. On the other hand, you wouldn't have bought 99% of these books anyway, and now you HAVE to read them since you have to review them. Sturgeon's Law is still applicable in Dutch. So after a time, you just have to restrict your fanwriting habit. I used to get mad when I read that Big Name Authors used stencilled or now xeroxed standard-forms to answer letters... now I understand, and I am still practically a very small name writer. Even now letters tend to pile up till I take a couple of evenings to work through them. The fun just goes out of it, because there's too much of it.

I enjoyed Priest's piece about computer writing, though I don't agree. I think most writers still create the essential part of their books not even by typewriter but by shorthand on shards of paper. At least I do, even novels. My writing is done by typewriter, and though I have only a very scanty knowledge of home computers and writing programs, I've seen enough of it to know that this is indeed the future. If I had a home computer, complete with the writing program, printer, screen and the lot, I know that it would save me over 50% in writing time... and specially CORRECTING and COPYING time. But... such things are even more expensive here than there. So... back to the typewriter.

PETER COLEBORN: 46 Oxford Road, Acocks Green, Birmingham B27 6DT

I disagree with Chris Priest. I do not think that word processors are the CAUSE of poor, inadequate revisions of early drafts. Chopping the text into bits (pun intended) and rearranging them piece-meal is caused by writers who believe, wrongly, that word processors are more than mere tools of the trade. Indeed, text can be rearranged hap-hazardly on typewriter or pen-and-paper produced manuscripts -- with the aid of scissors and cow gum. I've used Wordwise on a BBC micro on and off for nearly a year and I've found it incredibly useful for producing neat final copies of letters, articles and assorted items (unfortunately all work related; I don't own the thing). There is nothing wrong with manual alterations of a draft produced by a word processor and then entering these via the key board; at least it saves the trouble of retyping the manuscript in its entirety two or three or more times.

Prospective writers of SF -- indeed, of any fact or fiction -- must stop thinking of themselves as mere amateurs in the way that Charles Stross does in his article. It's all too easy to fall into a mind-ghetto from which it could be too difficult to rise. Such use of the word "amateur" is suggestive of dire work instead of work produced on a non-professional basis (i.e. for the love of the hobby).

BERNARD SMITH: 8 Wansford Walk, Thorplands Brook, Northampton NN3 4YF

I especially enjoyed the article by Christopher Priest, which must have echoed the fears of many people. Whilst a processor may save time in the final draughting, it certainly can't get rid of the sweat involved in writing. That takes place inside of the skull, not on the screen. It is, then, a viable argument that the spread of processors could result in simply more bad prose with nice, neat right hand margins...

On the subject of bad prose, I need to comment on the ludicrous remarks by Nasty Nigel in the letter column. Quite honestly, if my standard of literacy was so abysmal as to render me incapable of interpreting perfectly clear statements, I wouldn't go spreading it around. Especially if I wanted people to think I was a book critic. I have enough faith in the ability of BSFA members to understand the Queen's English, not to waste time and paper explaining the obvious to someone who so evidently can't (or won't). On the other points made, what a writer does with his or her talent is their own business. I'm quite sure that nobody with a brain in their head needs Nigel Richardson or anyone else to tell them what their individual ambitions should be. What makes those sort of comments even more inane is the fact that they emanate from someone who produces amateur reviews for an amateur publication produced by an amateur organisation. As regards the bizarre comment that anything which manages to achieve a degree of success shouldn't get involved with the BSFA, perhaps that explains the quality of his book reviews. No, I think Nigel Richardson's remarks can be seen clearly for what they are -- the indignant squawking of an anxious dwarf suffering the effects of a kick up the pedestal.

I was sorry to read that Mary Gentle cringes at the thought of constructive criticism because it can only seem to indicate either that she is only concerned with the destructive kind, or doesn't comprehend what constructive criticism is (to clear up any confusion, it's the type that is geared to improving the work of the author and not feeding the ego of the critic). When I talk about writing for a wider audience, I make no claim on knowing exactly what everyone wants. Different people want different things, which is why the Cassandra Anthology attempts to embrace as wide a spectrum of subject matter and styles as possible. We aren't in the business of dictating the direction of SF, creating New Waves, Dangerous Visions or whatever. As an editor I often publish work that is not to my own taste in full knowledge that it will probably be enjoyed by someone else. I'm not so arrogant as to consider myself an arbiter of what people should be allowed to read (there are enough of those about already) but am content to give the author the chance to be read and the readership the opportunity to make their own judgements.

ROBERT MUIR: 7 Westbourne Road, Cleveleys, Blackpool FY5 1HL

I was delighted to see in the February 1984 issue of Focus that Philip Baines is at last receiving the recognition he deserves. The only fault I can find with Andy Sawyer's article on the world's second greatest writer is that it was five pages too long, or six pages too long if surrealist, non-existentialist criteria are to be included.

My own work is heading towards the Bainsian ideal, from my first minor work, the 100,000 word 'Kalkar's Journey' to the 50 word minisaga, 'Package Holidays Never Change' which appeared in Dave Langford's electronic fanzine on Micronet.

I am disappointed, though, that I read Andy Sawyer's article on 31 March, one day short of the ideal date.

PAT GARDNER: 49 Beachcroft Place, Lancing, West Sussex BN15 8JN

The diverse views of John Brunner and Chris Priest on word processing particularly interested me. There is a word processing department at my place of work, and despite the many advantages of such a system, there have been a number of instances where work practices have been adapted to cope with the limitations of the machine. Of course such limitations vary from machine to machine, but it's interesting how people adapt around the new technology rather than adapting the technology around themselves.

MARK GREENER: 2 White Hart Close, Buntingford, Herts.

Morality is both highly personal and a function of society. The conflict between the two, which is rarely resolved, can lead to uncertainty about what to do in certain circumstances. For instance is it ever morally justifiable to kill? This is perfectly shown by the First World War poets. The later poems of Owen show a change in character from the early poems which are concerned with the glory of war; the ideal that "the community is worth more than the individual", to a more mature outlook when he questions the morality of that principle. He became trapped in an unresolved dichotomy from which he could not escape. To protect the community, an attitude forced upon him by society, he made the ultimate sacrifice. He may have had a choice before he went to war, although I doubt it due to the prevalent social conditions, but once there, once he had perceived the horrors of war, he was trapped.

As religion is dying, dicta from on high of the "Thou shalt not.." kind carry little or no weight. We live in a scientific age where we question. If we do not understand the reason underlying a prohibition then it lacks any real validity. A good example is the "sexual revolution". The Pill made it possible for a couple to have sex without fear of pregnancy.Previously, the reasons for the "myth of the virgin" were well understood. When sex became easier

the reason underlying the prohibition was removed. This simplistic example serves to illustrate my point: the prohibition whose reason we do not understand lacks validity and hence compliance wanes. (Two other examples are the prohibition of alcohol in the States, and the use of this principle in cases of reduced accountability in law.)

So where does all this lead? What relevance does this have tc Garry Kilworth's article? One purpose of literature, as pointed out by H. Coombs in LITERATURE AND CRITICISM, is to aid self development. He uses the following example as illustration: the reading of books allows a young person to discover he is not unique nor are his feelings any more or less than those experienced by anybody e;se. It helps to put emotion into perspective. This may account for the incredible success of the Adrian Mole books.

The role of amoral books is to make us consider our own moral position. A proposition always makes us conceive of an anti-thesis in order to 'test' it. A book such as NO ORCHIDS FOR MISS BLANDISH (which I admit I've never read, so I'm relying on Garry's view of it) allows us to consider our own position. Far from aiding the decline into immorality books such as NO ORCHIDS strengthen us, by allowing us to examine our morals and find them to be good. From this basis it is possible to see that James Hadley Chase might have been more concerned with morality than Garry thinks.

MARTYN TAYLOR: Flat 2, 17 Hutchinson Square, Douglas, Isle of Man

From the point of view of an established 'full time' author (my brain is still quivering as a result of Mary Gentle's multifarious breeds of author) I can understand Chris Priest's suspicion of word processors, (now overcome, it would seem), although I'd suggest some of his doubts come from not yet having got to grips with one. The word processor is a flexible and potentially powerful but complex tool of the trade, nothing more. Now the writer is as much an artisan as an artist and the bordering-on-the-spiritual relationship between any craftsman and the tools of their trade is well documented throughout history. Every writer has certain tricks and techniques which work for them and the fact that their faith in them borders on superstition does not devalue the efficacy of those techniques for that writer. On the other hand, surely no tool ought to be dismissed simply because it is new. As a spare time writer I have found a word processor a very useful addition to my toolbag in that it removes the necessity for me to type a clean copy, which in turn liberates a good 30% of my time from the physicality of writing. (Admittedly I am a poor typist and one of my foibles is a need for clean copy to rework). In other words, I can spend more of my available time writing rather than typing, and I don't have to worry about the clatter of my typewriter waking up my infant son in the next room.

As for Chris's point about the word processor changing the nature of authorship, I think he's wrong but I have the dreadful

suspicion he may well be right. In essence the word processor is a journalist's implement and as far as I'm concerned the influence of the journalistic mindset is already too prevalent in contemporary fiction, with its spurious notion that 'objectively probative' realism is more important than the subjective realism which is the essence of all fiction. Despite the evidence of newspapers, a journalist is not an author of fiction. Yes, a word processor does make it easier to tinker and it can encourage sloppy habits, but it will not NECESSARILY alter the relationship of the author to the totality of the work if the author is doing their work properly, which is attempting to convey meaning with precision, rather than playing with words.

Mind you, my old manual typewriter still stands by my desk, humming a quiet tune, waiting for a power cut.

Were fiction to portray the fine amorality with which many seemingly fine and upstanding citizens conduct their affairs what a hue and cry there would be. We've all felt that tightening in the gut at the sight of those starving children, yet many of us voted for a government whose policies could not help but exacerbate that situation by restricting world trade, screwing up interest rates and causing the African nations to grow cash crops to pay their debts rather than food crops to feed their people. We grow fat, they starve to death. And Mary Whitehouse complains about 'Solid Geometry'. A murderer claims to have been influenced by pornography but what happened when pornography was restricted only to the leisured classes? Who caused a fuss when a downstairs maid was the attention of her master's lust, inflamed by his copy of 'Fanny Hill'? Of course, a gentleman could read 'Lady Chatterley' but not a gentleman's servant, for fear of inflaming the brutish desires of the oaf for said gentleman's wife (and Mr Justice Argyll is not long dead, remember). Which is where I run into problems with Garry Kilworth's worries about the Famous Five going shoplifting in his otherwise excellent discussion on morality in fiction. Much of what passes for 'classic' English children's literature holds out as normal a lifestyle and social status which is incredibly restricted. William Brown may have been a bank manager's son (and as amoral a character as you please), but for every bank manager there are well over ninety other bank workers, and what about their children? I'm not advocating detailed and loving depictions of the actions of the foul in mouth and deed little swine who patrol my square, but a questioning of the motives of those who would ride shotgun on the morals of us plebs. One of the most illuminating remarks I ever heard was made by an eight year old on a bus at the Elephant and Castle. "Here," he said to his friend, "You know what the best thing about seeing 'The Exorcist' twice is?" "Naar." quoth his equally experienced companion. "You know when to close your eyes." came the reply.

And WE are trying to protect THEM!

STUART FALCONER: 70 Willow Way, Ponteland, Newcastle-upon-Tyne NE20 9RG

Chris Priest's article about word processors was timely. I think there is a danger of too many people using these things without enough thought. They may help in sorting and editing but they don't necessarily improve the finished product... I have this terrible feeling that processed words are going to be as much fun as processed cheese. A few weeks ago I read a reprint of Fritz Leiber's "The Silver Eggheads". The book was written in 1959 and he called them 'wordmills', but the parallel is inescapable. His idea was that the machines programmed themselves and did all the writing. All the writers had to do was pose for publicity photographs and lead outrageous lives. I think it should be given away free with every word processor...

CHRIS EVANS: Flat 2, 191 Anerley Road, Penge, London SE20 8EL

...You asked me for my thoughts on the importance of morality in a story. I'm afraid this is one of those nebulous subjects on which I'm loath to give firm opinions, chiefly because I'm not sure exactly what is meant by it. Do you mean a Judeo-Christian morality? Or simply a generalised sense of Good and Evil? Or of virtue triumphant? Or what?

I think that for me a moral sense is something that should be as natural and innate as a writer's style, and I can only speak of my own preferences in that regard. Some writers have a moral sense that's so highly developed that in their fiction they moralize. I happen to think that this is a bad thing, because while fiction may try to persuade, it's usually tiresome when it preaches. Equally, though, I dislike fiction in which there is no distinction between good and bad in human affairs because it tends to be cynical or manipulative. So, in some respects, I do like fiction to have some sort of moral sense. Or, to put it another way, I like to feel that I'm in the presence of a humane imagination which recognises positive human values even if its ultimate message is pessimistic, sceptical or whatever.

All fiction celebrates human life, if only in the sense that it presents ideas, attitudes or opinions in a human context rather than through essays, sermons or speeches. The trouble with a lot of science fiction is that authors start off with "a neat idea" and then proceed to write a story whose human values are entirely subordinate to that idea. The result can often be a clever story whose underlying message is trite or distasteful because the author hasn't stopped to think about what the story is actually saying; its morality is dubious or absent by default. This is why I find so much SF unsatisfactory.

Here's a quote from Franz Rottensteiner which I think is appropriate: "The central question that decides the value of any fiction must be: What does it mean? Without a positive answer to that question, all mere stylistic excellence, all technical

accomplishment that a piece of writing may possess, comes to nothing and all that remains is an empty bag of tricks of the trade that result only in final disappointment."Amen to that, I say.

CHARLES STROSS: 31 Morella Road, London SW12 8LQ

...I found myself (happy day!) with up to £800 to spend on a writing machine. I decided I could get either a Sinclair QL or an Amstrad 664 or a Tatung Einstein or... this. I ruled out the computers on various grounds; the Sinclair because the QUILL word-processor required a medium-res colour screen (cost), the Amstrad due to availability, the Einstein due to availability. This thing, a Brother CE-70 typewriter, was around £650 (with a 10% reduction for being a student), some £200 cheaper than the competition. Next year -- or thereafter -- I intend to buy an RS-232 interface and a 32-bit dream machine like one of the forthcoming Ataris which are supposed to be equivalent to an Apple MacIntosh at a quarter of the price. But until then, this superb daisy wheel has a text memory big enough to store a page at a time (multiple, carbon-paper free copies), gives a far better finish than an NLQ dot matrix, and will save about £50 a year in servicing costs and the same again in photocopying (my last typewriter needs cleaning every six months due to Tipp-Ex deposit gungeing up the works -- it was a manual machine, no correction ribbon). Furthermore, I've got on-screen editing, albeit basic, on a liquid-crystal text display!

Anyway, I'd defend a good electronic typewriter against a cheap word processor any day in the sub-£1000 bracket.

WAHF: Dave Langford, enthusing about the Apricot computer and threatening to send in a detailed criticism of current word processing software; Andy Sawyer (briefly); Chris Laker (why are all the most interesting and thought-provoking letters always DNQ?); and Keith Freeman, enjoying FOCUS 10 apart from the fiction.

I'm often asked, "why don't you do an article on Xxx" where Xxx is a subject that's been dealt with in a past Focus. Here, for those people who may have missed them, is an article-by-article listing of the Focus backnumbers available from Roy Macinski, 5 Bridge Court, River Road, Taplow, Bucks, for 75p each.

Focus 2
* Richard Evans -- On Fiction Editing
* Interview with Julia Riding (new author) by Andy Sawyer
* Feature -- Writers' Workshops: An Overview (contents: Randall Flyn's account of the 1975 Worldcon writers' workshop, chaired by Ursula Le Guin, Diana Reed and Bobbie Lamming on Pieria, Martyn Morgan on an Arvon Foundation course).
* In Brief -- Richard Cowper on opting out of the US hardback market, Garry Kilworth on SF jargon and how not to use it, Tony Richards on being unpublished, Paul Barnett on how he conned Dave Langford into writing a book.
* Fiction -- PHOTOGRAPHS by David Wingrove, THE SINGULARITY MAN by Graham Andrews

Focus 3
* John Brunner -- Advice to a beginning science fiction writer in the 80's
* Dave Langford and Kev Smith on collaboration
* Fiction -- CONTACTS LINKED BY ICE by Robert Heath
* David Garnett on the making of MIRROR IN THE SKY
* David Wingrove on reasons for writing
* Feature -- Short Story Contracts
* In Brief -- Brian Aldiss on the mileage and money that can be extracted from one short story, Dorothy Davies on not being alone, Steve Gallagher on the medium and the message.

Focus 4
* Christopher Priest -- The Authentic Voice (on the development of a writing "voice")
* Rob Holdstock -- Notes on an Unfinished Career
* Fiction -- WAITING by David Swinden, SOMEWHERE FOR BABY TO SLEEP by Dorothy Davies
* Randall Flynn on reasons for writing
* In Brief -- Lisa Tuttle on collaboration, "Rowland Tappen" on high-handed publishers, Philip Pollock on being a publisher's reader, R. Nicholson-Morton on being persistent, and Ian Watson on being Ian Watson.
* Feature -- Reference Books (various authors' most-used books)

Focus 5
* Colin Greenland on being a Fellow in Creative Writing at North East London Poly
* Fiction -- LONELINESS (Is a personal thing) by Dorothy Davies
* Steve Gallagher -- The Media Maze (on writing for television)
* Kevin Smith -- "It's Not a Cliche, it's a Traditional Narrative Element" (Notes on the 1981 Milford Writers' gathering)
* Dorothy Davies on writing without payment

Focus 6
* Steve Gallagher -- Building a Novel
* John Sladek on places to write (or not write) in
* Christopher Priest on Novel contracts
* "Christopher St Clair" on how to be let down by publishers
* In Brief -- R. Nicholson-Morton on writing for a market, Jim Barker on being a freelance artist, Dorothy Davies on who needs writing organisations
* Fiction -- THE ADMINISTRATION AND MYAN LIN by Hilary Robinson
* David Swinden on correspondence courses for writers

Focus 7
* Helen McNabb on Public Lending Right
* Fiction -- THE SURVEY by Peter Tasker, STRANGER THAN TRUTH by David Ratovitsky
* Jim England -- Consolations for Disappointed Writers
* Brian Aldiss -- Fame and Helliconia
* David Garnett on Milford 1982
* Sue Thomason on SF Poetry
* Garry Kilworth on "setting" in fiction

Focus 8
* Feature -- Research. John Brunner on Researching "The Great Steamboat Race", Ian Watson on researching for "Chekhov's Journey", Steve Gallagher on researching "Oktober"
* In Brief -- Dorothy Davies on presenting MSS, Philip Mann on writing
* Fiction -- STEVE LONDON'S GREATEST HITS by Peter Tasker
* Anne Warren -- Sense and Sensibility: Strategic Uses of Sensory Description
* Feature -- Publishing. Articles from John Bush, Chairman and Joint Managing Director, Victor Gollancz Ltd., and Maxim Jakubowski, Managing Director, Zomba Books
* David Piper -- Report on the Arvon Foundation SF Writing Course at Totleigh Barton 1983

Focus 9
* Bernard Smith on the Cassandra SF workshop/ anthology
* Fiction -- SHORT THE SPACE BETWEEN FRIENDS by Hilary Robinson
* Dave Langford on the shortcomings of the Writers and Artists Yearbook
* Nick Lowe -- So You Fancy Yourself as a Writer (silly creative games for writers)
* Margaret Hall -- "I Often Wonder Why I Write..."
* Ros Calverley on writing as obsession
* Hilary Robinson on homegrown comics

Focus 10
*** Feature on the differences between fan and professional fiction: articles by Alex Stewart, Mary Gentle, Bob Shaw**
*** Fiction -- CAUGHT BEING IN LOVE by John A. Connor, THE BAINES FRAGMENTS by Andy Sawyer, FLIGHTLESS BIRDS by Stuart Falconer**
*** Garry Kilworth -- The Famous Five Go Shoplifting (on morality in fiction)**
*** Charles Stross on fiction as self-expression**
*** Chris Priest on the dreadfulness of word processors**