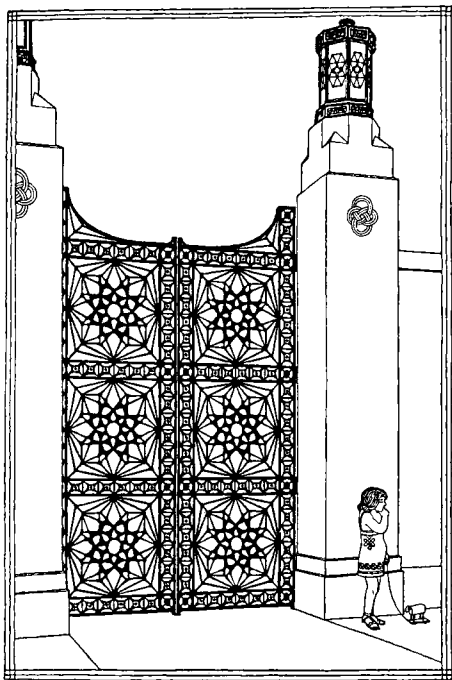


# FOCUS

The Writer's Magazine Of The British Science Fiction Association



ISSUE 14

75p

## FOCUS 14

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## FOCUS

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## Editorial

## "PROFESSIONAL" IS A STATE OF MIND....

I have had quite a few letters about my plans for  
Focus. Most people seem to have fairly strong views,  
one way or the other, about my announcement in Matrix,  
especially regarding submissions and Focus fiction.

That announcement was deliberately strongly  
worded. I wanted the membership to know that I meant  
business, and that I had a clear idea of what Focus  
should be. Some people seem to have read into it an  
intention to ignore the wishes of the members, or to  
drive out fan contributions altogether. This is not at  
all the case.

I simply believe that the BSFA may be an amateur  
organisation, but that we do not have to behave like a  
bunch of amateurs. I have time for only one definition  
of the word "amateur". It's the one that states that  
amateurs do the things they love, not for financial  
reward, but for the intrinsic value of the activity.

If people submit stories to me, the only  
assumption I can make is that, sooner or later, they  
will be trying for publication in the professional  
markets. I might be wrong in this. It could be that  
there are fan out there who are happy to see print  
only in fanzines. For those of you who fall into this  
category, I'm sorry to say you'll have to look  
elsewhere. While I'm editor, Focus will be accepting  
fiction for the Workshop only. Somehow, though, I think  
that the people who truly write only for themselves --  
in diaries, journals and so forth, -- won't submit  
anywhere, and that those who do submit want as much  
exposure and recognition as they can get.

This being the case, how can I do less than try to  
prepare people for what they will face when they do go  
pro? And face it, if you can't prepare your MSS  
properly, you don't stand a chance.

Pause for breath, and to change the subject.  
Perhaps the time has come to introduce myself. My  
name you know. For the rest, I am just turned thirty,  
and I live on the fourteenth floor of a distinctly  
insalubrious tower block in Tottenham, north London,  
with two cats who are driven to distraction by the  
pigeons outside, but neither of whom would know what  
to do with the great outdoors if they ever got there. I  
also cohabit with a computer printer which blew up last  
week, and now sits glaring at me. So much for the  
wonders of high-technology. I hope you realise how  
lucky you are to be reading this at all!

I teach in a primary school just round the corner  
from Petticoat Lane, having given up spectacularly  
unlucrative careers in market research, the book trade  
and as a youth worker (among other things). Just before  
going into teaching, I owned Space Oddities, surely the  
smallest, quirkier specialist book and games shop  
around (all 40 square feet of it). My only other claim  
to fame is being one of the team who used to hold the  
ABAO endurance record. I have yet to be published in  
a paying market, but I am working on a novel, and try  
never to have less than three short stories out to  
market at once. I am also collaborating on a book about  
the Mogul kings, to be followed by a series of  
Bangladeshi folk tales, with illustrator Fareed Zaman.  
We almost certainly have a publisher lined up, as  
Fareed is quite well known. Cross your fingers for us.

Before I go I would like to take this opportunity  
to thank James Wallis, for doing layouts, and especially  
for stepping in to save the issue when the printer blew  
up. I'd also like to thank Stan Nicholls, without whom  
this issue might very well not exist at all.

Hope to hear from you soon!

Liz Holliday

# And You Thought I Was Fussy...

Dave Langford, among other things, reviews books for the role-playing magazine, *White Dwarf*. Sometimes, people send him stories in the mistaken belief that he can buy them for the magazine. This isn't true but, being one of the good guys, Dave usually replies on this form. It's a lot more informative than the terse rejection slips professional fiction editors usually send out. Please don't take that as a signal to inundate Dave with stories just to find out what he'll say -- if you think your stories are up to professional standards, for goodness' sake send them to a paying market. If you think you're only part way there, get your nerve up and let us workshop them in *Future*!

## PRESENTATION:

A tick in this section probably means that a jaded editor would reject your MS without bothering to read the actual words.

- ☐ It's handwritten. Typed or printed copy is essential.
- ☐ It's hard to read:
  - ☐ You need ☐ a new ribbon, ☐ a thorough clean of the typebars, ☐ a better (90%) quality of matrix print, ☐ larger print -- 10 or 12 characters per inch, or ☐ a less fancy type face.
  - ☐ Only black ink is acceptable.
  - ☐ The typing isn't double spaced. Leave more room between the lines.
  - ☐ Never type on both sides of the paper.
  - ☐ Margins too narrow: editors want at least an inch all round. As with double spacing, this is to leave room for copy-editing marks.
  - ☐ No author's name on the MS itself.
  - ☐ No attached title sheet with author's address and rough word count.
  - ☐ No traceable title.
  - ☐ Pages not numbered. (Manuscripts get dropped on the floor...)
  - ☐ Too many obvious corrections. Three per page is a working maximum.
  - ☐ Paragraphs not clearly indented. Set TAB to 5 or 10 spaces in.
  - ☐ Some other weirdly eccentric layout:
    - ☐ Badly flawed punctuation: ☐ spaces are required immediately after commas etc., and ☐ are not acceptable immediately before.
    - ☐ Don't break words over line ends with hyphens. Printers hate this.
    - ☐ The paper itself gives a poor impression: ☐ too flimsy, ☐ shiny, ☐ tinted, ☐ grubby or ☐ unseparated continuous stationery.

## MINOR POINTS, LESS DAMNING:

- ☐ Photocopies are sometimes a turn-off unless marked "NOT A MULTIPLE SUBMISSION".
- ☐ Slight justified text is disliked by many editors.
- ☐ Underlining is clearer than italicization even if you have a fancy word processor.
- ☐ The Euro-standard for paper for professionals is A4, although American 8.5" x 11" is OK.
- ☐ Identifiers like page numbers are preferably placed at the head, rather than the foot of each page.
- ☐ Some markets like page headers to include your name and an abbreviated title.
- ☐ The top third of page 1 should be left blank for the copy-editor's title layout.
- ☐ Paper clips or staples are the preferred way to hold MSS together -- elaborate bindings offend the pure in heart.

## SKIMMING THE OPENING:

No single idea here need drive you to despair (though a bad mark for spelling should close the message is, "I want to be a professional, but I haven't learned how to use a dictionary yet!").

- ☐ The title is ☐ uninspiring, ☐ clichéd, ☐ pretentious, ☐ incomprehensible, ☐ an over-familiar quotation, ☐ already used by a better known author.
- ☐ The opening sentence or sentences is/are ☐ uninspiring (doesn't encourage one to read on), ☐ clichéd, ☐ pretentious, ☐ incomprehensible, ☐ over-melodramatic.
- ☐ Spelling a bit dodgy: the first page contains several mistakes, riddled on the MS if this is *also* soiled.
- ☐ A high level of apparent typing errors.
- ☐ Grammar and syntax dodgy: the first page has errors, underlined on the MS, if this is enclosed.
- ☐ Dodgy use of punctuation: dubious marks may have been underlined. Worst common faults: ☐ contracting "it is" to "its", using "it's" as a possessive, putting spurious apostrophes in plurals (e.g. "plural's").
- ☐ Eccentric choice. If words have question marks written over them, it's because I've no idea what they're supposed to be doing.
- ☐ Proper names start with capitals, e.g.: Focus, *Trantor*.
- ☐ The opening features needless explanations, lumps of information or fussy footnotes. Be subtle.
- ☐ Sentences too long, defused by add-on clauses and afterthoughts.
- ☐ Over-use of stock SF jargon.
- ☐ Over-use of ye olde fantasy fustian style. Too many sentences starting "And" or "But" are a dead giveaway.
- ☐ Over-elaborate style -- can't see the story for the words.
- ☐ Over-bald style -- lack of atmosphere or sense of place.
- ☐ Over-use of adjectives/adverbs: indirect evocation, via metaphor, simile (in moderation) or sheer choice of words, can be more effective.
- ☐ Too-determined avoidance of the word "said" for dialogue. Critics call this "said-bookies", referring to books of elegant variations on "said" sold to aspiring writers.: Trying for freshness by writing "HELD", HE YAWED; "GOODBYE," SHE PUKEED soon becomes mechanical and silly. ☐ In a long boring "the said"/"she said" exchange, several "the said"s can often be left out once the rhythm of dialogue is established.
- ☐ "Make dialogue sound like talk, not writing." (Wolcott Gibbs).
- ☐ Character names too ☐ jokey, ☐ clumsy, or ☐ somehow familiar.
- ☐ Initial situation seems far too familiar. Even if you've got surprises on the next page, the editor mightn't bother to turn over.
- ☐ Some awkwardness with "point of view". Who's telling the story? If the narrative voice is one character's, don't insert omniscient commentary from the author -- and vice versa.
- ☐ Nothing of sufficient interest on page 1 to compel further reading.

## THE ONE YOU'VE BEEN WAITING FOR:

- ☐ No visible problems in this necessarily brief sapping. But I'm not the person to send it to. Try a real editor.
- ☐ You seem not to have studied your market. Fictionally, *Dwarf* dislikes the following:
  - ☐ graphic combat scenes, ☐ "adventure" write-ups (Dave means stories that read as though they are write-ups of role-playing game sessions -- *Lit*), ☐ romantic fantasy, ☐ gratuitous sex and violence, ☐ plotless "good" pieces, ☐ rude words, ☐ story lengths outside the range 3000 to 6000 words. Ask the editor for the standard submission guidelines.
- ☐ A professional editor probably wouldn't have read beyond page 1. Keep trying... but remember.

I'm still not the person to send stuff to. No further correspondence will, as they say, be entered into. Please.

shouldn't he suffer too? Note, though, that Dwarf uses very little unsolicited fiction. It's general preference is for humorous fantasy or (less frequently) SF.

[...] No -- or too little -- return postage received. MS thrown out, unless I happen to feel simultaneously philanthropic and solvent. Sorry. (If this is ticked and you live outside Britain, you should ask your post office about international reply coupons.)

# FINALLY, AMONG INSULT TO INJURY...

[...] You enclosed postage, and the MS is returned herewith.

[...] MS forwarded to the White Dwarf editor. Why

## How To/Holiday/1

.....THIS IS HOW TO DO IT

by

Liz Holliday

This page shows how a manuscript should be prepared, in order to give you the best chance of impressing an editor. The first things are the wide margins and the space between the lines of print, leaving room to mark any corrections clearly and to write in typesetting marks. You should leave at least an inch all round for margins, and a full line between the lines of type (double spacing). If you do have corrections to make, do them neatly in ink. Handwritten full stops should be circled. More than three merits a retype (and that includes spelling errors, for which you should check carefully.)

If you, like Focus, use a dot matrix printer, use a high quality (QLQ) mode. Don't use any fancy typefaces; in particular, italics should be shown by underlining, not by doing italics on the printer. If you use continuous stationery, make sure you take off the tractor feed sprockets and separate the pages.

You should show paragraphs by indenting at least five spaces. This makes it obvious where new paragraphs start, especially at the tops of new pages. Don't leave extra space between the paragraphs, unless there is a complete change of scene, when one extra line is enough. Put one space after a comma, colon or semi-colon, and none before; and put two spaces after a full stop. Indicate speech by speech marks. It should be put on a new line and indented.

The manuscript should be accompanied by a cover sheet, bearing your name and address, the title of the work, a pen name (if you are using one), and what rights you are offering. Each page of the manuscript should have a "strap" at the top ("header", if you use a word processor), with your name or initials, and a short form of the title of the story or article. Number each page, preferably at the top. You should put the letters "mf" (more follows) near the bottom of each page, in the right hand margin. The manuscript should be held together with a paperclip in the top right hand corner. Staples and fancy covers are not only unnecessary, they are a downright nuisance.

You don't really need to include a covering letter, unless there is something the editor needs to know about the story. If you do send one, keep it simple and to the point. Above all, don't tell the editor how wonderful your story is, and how their magazine cannot do without it. They can make their own minds up.

Finally, you must enclose an SAE with sufficient postage for a reply, and if necessary, the return of the manuscript. If you don't want the manuscript back, mark it "Disposable". If you do this, it's a good idea to also mark it "Not a simultaneous submission", as editors do not like to look at items that are being seen by other people at the same time. If you are sending work abroad, send International Reply Coupons, which you can get at the post office. Two should get you an airmail reply, though not if you want the manuscript back.

Good luck, everyone!

## Workshop

This section is the only place that you'll find fiction in Focus, whether by aspiring writers or professionals. However, it's not here as a showcase for talent but a place where stories will be examined and criticized by a panel of Focus readers and other interested people. Since the idea behind "Workshop" is to let aspiring

writers learn by having their mistakes pointed out, this criticism will be constructive rather than denigrating or insulting. People interested in joining the criticism panel or brave souls willing to have their work criticized here should write to the editorial address.

### genesis

I wrote this story about seven years ago at an Arvon Foundation course, tutored by Angela Carter. As you will see, it's a fairly awful story, included here simply because it's the only thing I've got that is short enough to fit.

Fannish cynics will be thinking "She's giving herself an ego boost here", but even I realize that I'll win no praise for a story like this one! I simply want to show people that I won't expect them to do anything I wouldn't myself, and that even harsh criticism can be helpful.

### story

#### THE COST OF LIVING

The first time I died, it was a Sunday. I remember it well. Who wouldn't?

The master wanted songbird pie for dinner. There were no birds of any sort to be had in the market, so I set off nice and early, to catch some myself.

I timed the branches of a couple of likely looking trees, then went for a quick one in the village. When I came back, there were a good dozen birds caught up there, kicking up a racket fit to raise the dead (that's a joke you'll understand later). Well, I collected the first lot all right, but the weight of the sack unbalanced me when it came to going up the second tree. One minute, I'm sitting pretty, the next I'm on the way to the ground, head first. Next thing I knew, I was on a slab in the morgue of St. Mary's, the big teaching hospital in the town, wondering what they'd say at home when I turned up having been dead.

You'll gather from this that my last moments weren't exactly final. I drive a hard bargain, you see, so when I said I wanted to live for ever, that's what I got. I have to admit, though, that I thought that meant I couldn't die. But it's not quite the same thing, do you see? So, when I felt my neck snapping, I panicked, I can tell you. Thought the chap I'd dealt with was the devil after all, though he promised me he wasn't. Reckoned my chances in the hereafter would be pretty lousy after that -- no wings or harp for me, I remember thinking. Still, it seemed like a good bet at the time, and I've always been a sucker for good odds.

The bloke wanted me to answer a few questions, give a few samples: nothing they wouldn't ask for at the hospital. In return for which, anything. Anything I wanted, in the whole wide world. I'd have peed all night long, if he'd wanted me to. Well, wouldn't you? He offered me millions, or a mansion, or to be emperor of the world. I nearly said yes. But then I thought, what use is it all, if you're dead. So I asked for immortality.

You'll understand then, that when I died that Sunday, I was most surprised. Still, I woke up at that hospital slab, and pulled myself together in short order. I slipped out of the morgue and was away without anyone noticing.

I don't suppose escaping corpses are exactly what they would be watching for.

I got home without too much trouble, though I did try and stay out of sight, because all I had on was the sheet they had covered me with. That was Sunday evening. The master said he'd changed his mind about the songbird pie, he'd rather have beef. He would. It meant going out in the dark to the cold store, and you never know what you might meet, these moonless nights. Still, it was better than a regretted over the songbirds, which I, of course, didn't have.

I was on edge the whole of the next week, waiting for the police to start searching for a missing body, but they never did. In fact, the worst that happened was that the cook complained of a funny smell. First she demanded that I take a bath, which I refused to do at her order, on principle. Then she said I'd have to scrub out the cold store. When that didn't work, she accused the butcher of selling rancid pork. She finally settled for banning Ted, the gamekeeper, from the kitchen, so he had to eat his dinner in the shed. She'd have done the same to me, if she'd thought she could get away with it.

Apart from that, things went on much as they had before. Then one of the lightbulbs in the master's study went. That room has a very high ceiling, so I had to use a pair of steps. I was on the top rung, tiptoeing to reach. There was a disturbance outside, a cat I think. Anyway, Ruby, the master's young Labrador, was up and heading for the window before I could shout a warning. That was all it took. She barreled into the staid ladder, and I was falling again. This time, I landed right on top of the master, who was dozing in front of the fire. He never knew what hit him.

Just like the first time, I woke up in the morgue. This time, the old duffer was on the next slab. He hardly looked likely to wake up, I can tell you. Not that I cared. It just meant I was free of my indenture.

I went back to the house. I had nowhere else to go, having been in the master's service for forty years, near enough. The cook had packed up and gone. She'd only joined us recently -- well, five years ago, after Mrs. Mortuary died -- so she probably had family elsewhere.

They'd taken my clothes again, but I found the spare keys in the garden shed, and let myself in. I went straight to the master's quarters, and made myself at home. His best suit, a good cigar, a glass of port. All I needed was a manservant. I dined well from the cold store, that night, and for the next few days. That was when I noticed the smell. It was every bit as bad as cook had claimed.

At the end of the week, I decided I had better secure my future. The old man kept his valuables in a well safe, in his study. I knew where it was, and I knew the combination. All his riches, they would be mine now. I could live for years off the proceeds, and no-one the wiser.

Funny, though, how I had to stop myself tapping on the door before I went into the room. I could almost see the master sitting in his big leather wing chair. The fire was dead, but it could almost have been banked for the night. His Bible was still open at its usual place. All that was missing was the silver tray, with its teapot and cup and saucer.

It fair gave me the willies, no mistake, but I wasn't going to be put off. I crept in like a mouse. Over to the safe I went, trying not to look over my shoulder. The combination was easy, but then the door stuck. I braced myself as hard against the wall, and pulled as hard as I could. Finally, it gave. The jewels, glittering in their velvet trays were beautiful, of course. The wads of parchment bonds, thick as Monopoly money, weren't bad. But what I really liked were the heavy little bars of gold and silver. Almost as good as having the cash. I played with them, and looked at them, for I don't know how long. Then I thought it must be time for dinner (eight sharp, that's style), so I put the stuff away.

It wasn't till I had closed the safe door that I noticed the two strange worry things clinging to the handle.

I looked at my hands. The left one was normal, but the right had the thumb and forefinger missing. The first joint of the little finger fell off as I watched. It didn't hurt. Suddenly, I knew what the smile was.

I only have one more question. If I shoot myself through the temple, do you think it will be like giving myself a lobotomy?

## critics

Well, it's not very good, is it?

Let's be frank. At the heart of this short story lies a basically sound version of a traditional story genre; the 'deal with the devil'. Unfortunately, many things have got in the way between the initial idea and the final manuscript.

The first thing that struck me about 'The Cost Of Living' was its structure. In a story around 1,200 words long, it seems illogical to expose your 'twist' ending as early as the fourth paragraph; and the differences between eternal life and never dying aren't readily obvious. To be fair to Liz, the structure does show some ideas -- the maltreated manservant inadvertently killing his senile master (I assume he's senile, otherwise the point of the songbird pie has missed me completely) and inheriting his wealth, only to have fate deal him a cruel blow -- but these themes aren't developed enough to make them immediately apparent in a story which, to be honest, I wouldn't have read a second time. On the other hand, if the story's length had been increased then the deal with the devil would have become almost a sideline; a convenient hook on which to hang the ending, whereas it should be the centre of interest.

The style is quite engaging; pleasantly chatty although hopelessly anachronistic. Gossamers and cold stores blend uneasily with training hospitals and lightbulbs, and the old manservant seems to be going a bit senile himself; it takes him a while to spot his missing fingers. Perhaps too much space is spent gloating over the money and not enough developing the decomposition of the central character. Surely a man would notice if his body was rotting away?

I think it's kill or cure. The story needs to be totally rewritten from scratch; working out the setting and the characters (at least three major ones) in more detail, putting the meeting with the mysterious "bloke" into context within the tale, and developing the central storyline, as well as the themes behind it further. This might take the length up to around 2,500 words but I reckon the end result would be a far more satisfying read than the version as it stands. I just hope Liz notices if any of her fingers have dropped off before she starts typing the next draft..

James Mallis

Apart from the fact that the end is quite obvious, this short story is not beyond redemption. As it stands some lingering impressions of the black comedy experienced in *An American Werewolf In London* do echo as we progress through the morgues. However, more could possibly have been made of the initial realisation of not being dead when circumstances would suggest otherwise. I feel that a great deal of comic potential is wasted here.

'Highly contrived' is the least cruel way in which to describe a massive reliance upon the intercession of fate in order to motivate plot, and this is perhaps the major criticism of this basically comic piece. Lines such as 'I don't suppose escaping corpses are exactly what they would be looking for' lift the work to a point a little above average.

What is particularly nice is the build-up in which the hero finds himself apparently amidst the good life now that his master is dead (unlike himself, the master has the decency to remain so). All the good stuff: food, comfort, money and so on are turned upside down when in a moment laden with true 1950s B-movie horror, the hero sees the first joint of his little finger fall off as he watches it. Horrific realisation of what escaping death means is halted mid-gasp by the line that even Poe, the master of witty macabre, would have been proud of, "Suddenly I knew what the smile was".

So basically on the negative side the story is too contrived and I feel lacking positive direction, especially with the bargain scene; while in its favour its black comedy and timing give it more than junk value.

Mark Lees



## write to reply

I am having some difficulty writing this, as I have not actually seen the final versions of most of the criticism. At least one piece has been delayed in the post, and another had to be rewritten, because I felt it was not sufficiently constructive in tone. I say this as an encouragement to potential contributors, as I am determined that the critiques I publish will not

be destructive, either in content or style. It can be hard to take even the most constructive criticism, but it's worth it. After all, how else can you improve your work? This doesn't mean though, that there is any value in bald statements like 'this is a godawful story', so I won't be publishing criticism at that level. Potential commentators please take note.

CONTINUED ON P. 11

# Legend In The Making

An Interview with Deborah Beale

By  
Stan Nicholls

Deborah Beale was appointed by Century/Hutchinson on the 15th of November, as the new *Sci-Fantasy* editor for their Legend imprint. She is also responsible for general fiction.

Deborah, 28, has worked in publishing for five years, starting with Collins before moving to Pan, where she was a non-fiction editor.

The following interview was conducted shortly before she took up her new job.

Beyond acquiring new books, and checking and preparing manuscripts, what does an editor actually do?

Before commissioning for *Arrow*, I was a desk editor at Pan. This means you are more involved with the actual editing than with acquiring rights and building a list. I was responsible for every stage of a book, from post-commissioning to final production. As a non-fiction editor, I commissioned illustrators and designers and decided generally how the books were going to look. That meant a lot of liaison with other departments, for instance Production, on the commercial feasibility of a book. And Marketing, because you have to feed them so much information on a book: what market we were aiming at, and how the book should be presented to the trade. You talk to the Art Department about the cover and overall presentation. Very often I'd be writing back cover copy, which is an art, and one which takes considerable practice to master.

What are the criteria for whether an editor reads an unsolicited manuscript? Do manuscripts go through a filtering process before they get to you?

It depends on the publishing house. My assistant filters things for me where there were time at Pan when I was solely responsible for the slush pile, as it is unfortunately, but accurately, called. The majority of the stuff that comes in from the public is very weak. Many people write thin imitations of what's already on the market, or novels which show a faint grasp of writerly skills, but about very parochial subjects. For example every publisher gets a lot of books dealing with marital infidelity taking place in Hemei Hempstead, or wherever. Obviously, these are things people have been through and want to talk about. We get a lot of thinly-veiled autobiographical material, too — and often from people who haven't done an interesting thing in their lives — emphatically not the stuff of best sellers.

When taking on someone new, you have to be convinced they have more books in them, and the talent to justify putting a lot of resources into getting their name known. It's very expensive to publish first novels, because fiction sells principally on its author's name. Without talent jumping up and biting you on the nose, you deal with submissions from the public in the minuscule amount of time. You have to. You've got another forty novels from literary agents and professional writers demanding attention on the same day.

What do you expect of a covering letter?

Something a little bit different. A competent, professional approach. I can't stand it if people tell me they're going to be the biggest thing since, I don't know, Arthur C. Clarke. I'm looking for an accurate, knowing assessment of their strengths, and what they have to offer. I will not take on books accompanied by illiterate, badly written submission letters. If



they can't compose a decent covering letter, they can't write a book. Period. And people should remember publishers have enough experience to see through bullshit pretty quickly.

An American editor once told me she judged unsolicited submissions on the strength of the first line of the covering letter, which seems a bit hard.

I'll give it three lines! I do have two unfavourable opening lines, though. "I am a novelist" and "I have written a book". You've got to be very good if I'm going to give you thirty seconds past that. And this is not an irrational prejudice, because such statements are symptomatic of a wholly wrong approach to writing.

So if the covering letter displays those sorts of attitudes, it's likely the manuscript will too?

It's a bit wider than that, obviously. Those attitudes tend to come from people who don't realise that writing for publication is a professional discipline. It's not like writing for school, whacking out an essay, then doing an extended version because you think you've got a story to tell. The vast majority of writers go through an extensive apprenticeship, and a lot of them will have written all their lives, for themselves. That's what makes a writer. You can't just sit down and write a 50-70,000 word manuscript and send it to me with a covering letter telling me how tough it was. Everybody knows all about that, and I've no patience when I hear it. The majority of novelists have several unpublished books in their bottom drawers. Take Ian Banks: he was writing solidly for ten years before getting published. It's that dogged persistence that's vital. When I get ill-conceived submission letters, they're usually from people who have written something closely imitating Tom Sharpe, and think they're going to be published tomorrow with a £100,000 advance. I don't have a lot of sympathy for them. Many aspiring writers don't think to go into a bookshop and do a bit of decent market research, check out if their wonderful idea isn't quite so original, or ask themselves what they

can evolve that's really new. If you're going to be published you have to have one, talent; two, something new; and three, a solid grasp of subject, invention, imagination. An ability to write books people will want to read.

*Assuming the covering letter hurdle has been got over, what do you look for in the manuscript?*

You look for all sorts of things. Dialogue, for instance. It takes an ear to write plausible dialogue. Modern dialogue requires too much editing to put right, even if other elements are OK. Characterisation. Plot. Originality. You can judge all these things in a matter of paragraphs.

*What recurring faults do you find among unsolicited manuscripts?*

The wooden prose, crap dialogue, stereotyped characters, rampant sexism, predictable endings...you find all of this in 99.9% of the slush pile. Very, very rarely are there marvellous things to be found there. I recently heard of an unsolicited fantasy novel which came into a publisher. An editor gave it a cursory glance, got to page ten, and phoned the author to buy it there and then. I believe the American rights went at the Frankfurt Book Fair for something like £100,000. Not massive in current publishing terms...

*But not bad for a first novel!*

I know, that's incredible for a first novel. But I'll bet the author was writing for themselves for at least several years.

*What about non-fiction submissions?*

I expect writers to be able to talk knowledgeably about their subject. It's no good submitting a book on say, anorexia. That's been done to death. But submit a book on anorexia with a new and different angle, some new and valid reason for it being written, then I'll look at it. I'd like to make it clear that viable submissions come in from literary agents and professional writers, such as journalists -- and the majority you reject, because they're unsuitable for your list, or last year's topic. There are many reasons for rejecting something. It doesn't mean it won't get published, just that your house won't take it.

*How did you deal with highly-specialised non-fiction submissions?*

Sometimes we would ask authors of ours, who had been published in the same field, to read those kind of manuscripts. But highly specialised submissions weren't really suitable for Pan's mass-market list anyway. But other things -- sports books, diet books, books with a specific audience -- very often I'd read them and look at the market demand in that particular area. I remember a friend of mine had a submission for a wholegrain cookbook. She needed to research the level of interest, what else on the subject had been published, and think about how this could be marketed to get round its slightly bad image. You know, bulky stuff that makes you fart. Some things you can do for yourself, others need readers.



*Tell us how manuscript readers are used.*

Most editors have teams of readers, either in-house or on call. It has to be said that if you

went to get anywhere in publishing you're expected to do a lot of reading. But you can't read everything that comes in, it's impossible. You're talking about half a hundred manuscripts every week, if you want to keep on top, so you have to have many read for you. And if a reader says something is absolute crap, and they explain their reasons for that assessment, you evaluate their judgement and briefly look at the manuscript. If a reader has something positive to say about a submission, even if they don't think it's right for us, you'll read it and, with luck, be able to steer the author toward a more suitable publisher.

*So you would never publish a book on the say-so of a reader, but would reject a book on their opinion?*

Very few readers understand all the reasons for and against publishing something. But you have at the back of your mind the fact that the press loves the story of the famous novel that was turned down. So you do make the time to look at things, even if only for thirty seconds. Which sounds crass, but very often it comes down to that. Publishing is a high-pressure industry, and it teaches you to exercise finely honed judgemental skills in the minimum amount of time. No good editor works nine to five. Your job becomes your life.

*In the case of a manuscript needing alteration before it can be published, who takes the job on, the author or the editor?*

There is hardly a writer in this world who doesn't need editing. An editor I know once made the comment that she believed high-brow, up-market literature should be left relatively unedited. But even authors like Saul Bellow have their favourite editors, people they work closely with. Developing a manuscript to its highest potential is not a power game in which you force horrible things on a writer and bend them to your will. An editor knows how a book is going to be sold, and very often it needs tailoring for a specific market. A novel can come in in a raw state; characters need developing, areas of the plot could go because they're weak, or don't add a lot to the overall theme. The plot may be too complicated, or too simple, and need development. You work with an author on that, making suggestions to them. You go to them and tactfully say, "I think this should be cut because at the end of the day it won't do your reputation a lot of good". When you get to know a manuscript really well, which you can't until you've read it through several times, you and the author can talk it over.

*I imagine you need to be something of a diplomat.*

Absolutely! But it's not a matter of imposing your will. One of the comments I get from people outside publishing is, "Oh, you're an editor. One of those people who bludgeon authors into totally distorting their work". Which is, of course, quite untrue. You have writers who are very important to you, for a number of reasons. The first and most obvious is that they make money for your company. The second is that they are somebody you want to develop for the future, somebody you really care about publishing. So up to a point you'll take your time. Deadlines can be flexible, although not to the point of infinity. If you take too long to publish a book, the delay could damage its potential sales.

*But in the last resort your loyalty must be to the company.*

Yes, but publishing is a very intimate business. When you work with a writer, you can't know their work, or know them as a person, without caring, at least a little, for them and their future. You make allowances for your writers. After all, their the company's main asset. However, every editor has had the experience of not being able to publish a book



because they've come up against insuperable difficulties. It's heartbreaking for everyone concerned. As an editor acquiring rights for a paperback house, I'm not now involved in a great deal of actual editing, as the books that come to me have generally been published elsewhere. But you still retain author contact. You talk to them about covers, blurb, marketing. You want writers to trust you, to believe you will publish their books well.

*It's been said that not a few books should bear the editor's name on the title page as co-author. Do you agree with that?*

No, I don't. But I can think of a few that should have carried my name somewhere! You could have an endless list of people who helped shape a book. If you did you'd end up with a roll of credits like they have for films. I must say that I'm not interested in that sort of personal publicity.



*When turning down a submission, do you try to send the author some kind of personal letter, or resort to the dreaded rejection slip?*

My assistant sends out a simple two-line rejection letter — "Not for us". Often we concisely give a few reasons, such as "Market too small to justify Arrow taking this on". Occasionally, to a slush pile who shows promise, I'll show some encouragement. But I do get very angry at letters and phone calls demanding in-depth critiques. We are not an advice agency. They should use initiative, and find feedback elsewhere. Critical writing classes exist for this....

*Nevertheless, you must get many more unsolicited submissions than those from agents and established writers.*

It depends on the publisher; there's no general rule. It can be down to something as basic as where you're listed in the "Writers" and Artists' Yearbook! If you're right at the front, like Arrow, you get a hell of a lot of manuscripts.

*What you've said about the very small number of unsolicited manuscripts getting published is a depressing message for aspiring first novelists. It's Catch-22. You can't get an agent until you've got a contract, and in effect you're saying you can't get a contract until you've got an agent.*

I'm not saying that at all. With a first-timer, it's potentially more advantageous not to have an agent. You're taking a risk with the first-time writer. If you can get a book for a relatively low advance, that's all to the good. It's going to be cheaper to publish. If it becomes a runaway best seller, the author will certainly make money out of it, but it'll come in the form of royalties over a period, rather than a large up-front advance. Then can be the time to get an agent.

*Is the decision to publish a collective one?*

The ultimate decision to publish, in any company, lies with the Publishing Director and the Managing Director. As an editor, I'll tell them I want to buy rights for a particular book, and my reasons. This is the purpose of editorial meetings. Everyone gets together and discusses the books under consideration.

When it comes to one you want to buy, in an area you're in charge of, you put forward your case. Sometimes you have to fight like crazy for something you really believe in; other times, everyone agrees with you. The collective decision is a crucial safety net.

*Would one of your jobs be the preparation of the estimate?*

Yes. Obviously, you need to know the costs involved before going any further. I will work with the Production Department to estimate a gross margin. If your gross margin doesn't work out, no matter how you up the print run — risky — or press the argument for a lower advance or cheaper printing, there have to be strong reasons for publishing at a loss. Almost always you come to the point where you're forced, regrettably, to say no. You have to have a good business head. If you haven't, you'll soon find yourself out of business. That does no one any good.

*One criticism, particularly of larger publishers, is that communications between the various departments could be better. How closely does Editorial work with other departments?*

In a good publishing company, everyone talks to one another. Not that we sit around and gas all day, because we can't. There have to be good lines of communications with Sales, Promotions, Export and so on, or we're not going to reach the right decisions.

*Do you continue to liaise with authors post-publication?*

You need to maintain a relationship wherever possible, because again, you're thinking of future books. Sometimes you say ring someone up and suggest a book on such and such. Remember, ideally you become a friend to your authors.

*In the case of a commissioned, original publication, at what stage do author and editor begin to work together?*

It's horses for courses. In the ideal author/editor relationship, you work in tandem at all stages. You know what your authors are working on, because there's an options clause in their contract.

*Do you find it useful to see an author's work in progress?*

I'm very often too busy, but in some cases it works like that. You tend to work that way a lot with non-fiction.

*There must be some writers who grow to rely on you for advice, opinions, ego-boosting. How do you handle a situation where an author leans on you too much?*

It doesn't happen a lot. But authors can be sensitive creatures, living in terror of the next critical review. Some can be drunken bastards whose lives are falling apart. I know editors who have had to fish their authors out of all sorts of dreadful situations. You know, bail them out of the police station on a drunk and disorderly charge, or hold their hands for three weeks while their marriage disintegrates — and there's worse!

*That sounds like an agent's province.*

They do that sort of thing a lot too. It depends who the author is particularly close to. Some don't have a very close personal relationship with their agents, although the business relationship is good. But you can be best buddies with your editor.

*You are now responsible for the Arrow/Legend SF*

list. Where do you want to take it?

Arrow is a very together company, with some very talented people generating excellent ideas, and it's going to expand in a big way. Like all the other editors in the field, I'm in pursuit of excellence -- quality books and commercial books. The Legend list is not going to be "Arrow Science Fiction". It is going to be Legend and Legend is set to grow into a major imprint for SF. I'm not looking to make it just another science fiction list. It's going to be a very prestigious line, because it's both quality and a bloody good read. You can't settle for anything else.

Currently, Arrow has a fairly comprehensive list, covering most of the SF/fantasy spectrum. Presumably there are authors you would like to represent solely?

There are people I'd just die to publish. One priority is also to find the newest and best talent. I'll be looking for people I can break.

When this interview appears, you'll be inundated with manuscripts from hopefuls.

Well, I've got something to say to those people. Know your measure; know your genre; and for God's sake, don't send me a whole manuscript. That's so off-putting that you minimize your chances before you start. I only need to see a synopsis and three sample chapters. If I want to see more, I'll ask. If I'm faced with a bulky manuscript and no to-the-point explanation in the covering letter, I'm just too busy to pay much attention. There's a certain arrogance in a submission like that too. It's the thoughtful submission letter and concise, clear synopsis or proposal that look professional and grab my interest. And guess what -- for original novels, agents and writers almost always work that way too.

If Legend is open to new talent and young writers, will you look at submissions sympathetically?

If the approach is professional, then yes, but in honesty it has to be briefly. So market yourself! It almost goes without saying I want to hear from agents who want to contact me -- they are, to a degree, the talent-scouts of the business.

Legend is only interested in novels at this stage?

I'd be interested to see non-fiction as well.

You intend publishing non-fiction dealing with

I'm just interested in anything which is well written, readable, and publishable.

What about short stories?

An anthology of unknown writers has to be marketed with an angle, such as the winners of a competition. It's a risky venture for a publisher, so I'm not really into one-offs.

How do you feel about receiving ideas for anthologies?

Most anthologies are developed in-house. It's not really enough just to send me an idea. You don't earn anything from ideas alone. Unless it's an agent sending me a ready-made package with established writers, it's not worth anyone's time.



Some people in the SF world think the genre should break out of its ghetto, while others believe it's losing its identity by being absorbed into the mainstream. Do you have any thoughts about this?

I don't believe, just because Doris Lessing has picked a few ideas, that SF is being absorbed into the mainstream. I do think the genre is widening its frame of reference, in that there are more books crossing genre boundaries -- SF that is also fantasy, for example, is one of the commonest. All art forms continually evolve -- you can't stop change, and not perceiving that fact is reactionary and ignorant.

Although SF continues to thrive, with a substantial and growing share of all sales in the US, the general book market is said to be flat at the moment.

The overall market here may not be as flat as many people in the business believe. A recent EIC Business Ratio Report remarks, "Over the five year period to the end of 1986, book sales grew by over 30%". For the past few years I've heard a lot about the market being flat, that people are either readers or non-readers and the industry has captured about as many of the former as it's going to get. If book sales are increasing that's good for everybody: writers, publishers, agents -- all of us. Most of all it's good for the public, because more people out there are reading. I like that Samuel Johnson quote -- "The chief glory of every people arises from its authors".

This is an era of incredible flux within publishing, with multinational takeovers going on left, right and centre. How are these changes affecting the industry?

1985 and 1987 were years of manic activity on this score. Publishing is seen as easy right now, with more conglomerates and City money coming in. That has all sorts of knock-on effects. There is the major danger of asset-stripping, and of companies being forced into publishing programmes wholly at odds with their historical strengths. On the other hand, waking up what was once an industry laid-back to the point of complacent immobility, with the energy of keen marketing sensibility, could be a good thing. It's a bit wait-and-see right now. But the atmosphere is fiercely competitive. That's why there has been a lightning escalation in the advances paid for books. In some instances it works -- major advance publicity for the books and the publishing house/ in other instances, you get grossly inflated values applied to books. The market in this country is not big enough to support so many millions of the final product going out; publishers end up with substantial losses and authors with damaged reputations. In the end, it's good judgement that ensures survival.

There seems to me to be two dangers here. First, standardisation. Books being published because they fit a defined slot. Second, the same slight that crept into Hollywood: studios run by accountants, not movie makers.

Books have always been published because they fit a defined slot. They make money, allow you to publish the worthier, less profitable stuff.

People still make good films, so maybe talent will out, whatever the obstacles.

You do occasionally hear stories of the money people interfering with the creative and marketing sides of the industry. But this is a unique industry, and accountants with blinkered vision can shoot themselves in the foot. It seems to me any sensible multinational taking over a publisher would be very short-sighted to walk in and asset strip. It should understand the business's strengths and weaknesses; it'll capitalize on the one and eliminate the other.

Buying a publishing house only makes sense as a long term investment - any intelligent proprietor knows that.

*Do you see anything positive you can do to bring along more women writers?*

Something I hate, and which we all run across from time to time, is the depressing number of women who say "I'm not a feminist, but..." Witness the relevant chapter in Haim Attallah's book *Women*. The number of women who take what feminism and its struggle have given them for granted, and then blithely say, "I am not a feminist, but I enjoy all of its privileges", make me want to vomit! I am a feminist, it's very important to me. But I'm not looking to push anything other than good science fiction. I'm at a loss how to publish women writers outside this criterion, because I'm not running an overtly political list. I do appreciate that women SF authors, such as Nancy Kress, generally treat the sexes with an equality missing from the older schools. Edger Rice Burroughs, for Christ's sake! At the age of 14 I couldn't stomach his chauvinism. On the other hand, Julian May, who's written under a man's name for years, was extremely pissed off when it got out that she is a woman. She felt it could damage her in the eyes of the SF community, bearing in mind the ingrained chauvinism that says only men can write SF. That sort of attitude should certainly be broken, and I would be very unhappy if any woman I published felt she had to write under a man's name. I think that's all wrong.

*If you were working in almost anything other than publishing, I'd be tempted to ask how it is, asking your way in a man's world. However, there are a lot of women in the industry. But how far do they get?*

There are a hell of a lot of women at editorial director level, but not many at managing director level. There are a few notable exceptions, like Carmen Cellini at Virago and Philippa Harrison at Macmillan, and one or two others. I'll give you an interesting little story. In the absence of a Managing Director at Pan, Macmillan had been effectively running the company until a permanent appointment could be made. For some time the staff at Pan had been waiting with bated breath to see who would get the job. The announcement of who had been chosen started with the immortal line "Well, I have to tell you it's a man and not a girl". A girl! Asargh! With that sort of approach, it's extremely unlikely a woman was ever seriously considered. It encapsulated an attitude which still exists in publishing. In spite of the number of women employed in the industry. You still have to be better than the men to reach equality with the men. Having said that, I think you make the most of your opportunities. If you want to be Managing Director, and you're prepared to be very single minded and put up a fuck of a good fight, then you'll get there.

Deborah Beale, thank you.



CONTINUED FROM P. 6

I won't try to defend the story, except to point out that it was written a long time ago, and was, in fact, about the third story I ever finished (believe it or not, the first two were worse). I was on an Arvon Foundation course, and was determined to write at least one complete story in the weekend. I was also terrified I would block, which I do at boringly regular intervals even now. So on the way down, I scribbled a series of opening lines, including the one that starts this story. It worked, at least to the extent that I wrote not one but two full stories during the course. I'm sure you'll be relieved to know that the other one was considerably better.

Kindsight, especially at long range, is wonderful. Just in case the others missed anything, I will now attempt to use it to summarise what I see as the main failings of my non-masterpiece.

\*\*\*\*Title: Boring. Bears no real relationship to subject matter.

\*\*\*\*Setting: Confused. I remember that I was trying not to use a standard fantasy cod-medieval background, but what I ended up with is a mess. Might have been more interesting to go for a high tech setting.

\*\*\*\*The idea: Isn't really a cliché. It just sounds as if it ought to be one. (In other words, done better, it might work if you like deals-with-the-devil stories. But if you don't, forget it.)

\*\*\*\*Characterisation: More or less non-existent. Obviously, this isn't the kind of tale where psychological motivation is paramount, but there aren't any people here. They aren't even cardboard. They simply do things because I needed those things to be done.

\*\*\*\*Structure: The weakest part of a weak story. The "McGuffin", or twist in the tale, telegraphs itself in the first quarter of the story, but at the same time there are few real clues as to what the answer might be. This sounds like a contradiction, but it isn't. To work properly, a story like this should have several possible endings, but should function so that at the end, the reader is left saying "Oh, of course that's right" to herself. Re-reading the text, she should be able to see why the given solution is the only one possible. What shouldn't happen is that the reader guesses the answer very early on, and is, without doubt right. This is what happens here, largely because of the business with the snail.

\*\*\*\*Voice: At least the tone of the piece is consistent. Looking back, I think I was trying to do it as if the protagonist was trying to make a joke of the whole thing. This was a mistake, as it was almost inevitable that the twist in the tale would be given away. In any case, given the subject matter, it hardly seems likely that the "hero" would be joking about it anyway.

\*\*\*\*The ending: Tries too hard to be cute. Emphasis is put on the wrong things, and the whole idea of the protagonist being surprised seems unlikely.

\*\*\*\*PLUS POINTS: Very few, though I still like the opening sentence. At least the plot-line, such as it is, is relatively clear. Some isolated bits of description and incident are not too bad.

To finish off, I would like to point out that I regard this story as "dead", and have done so for years. I have no plans to rewrite it, though I may one day reuse the opening line. I do, however, have a sneaky itch in my brain which tells me that there may be some merit in a story which uses this idea, but which has as its central theme the idea of someone whose mind is decaying because the brain it inhabits is rotting. Sort of "Flowers for Algernon" meets "Son of Frankenstein". Move over Clive Barker, I'm coming to get you!

Joking aside, the best thing about this story is that I now write far better than this!

## NOT AN ORBITER, BUT A STAR

BY

JOHN DUFFIELD

Sigh. Another, "Dear contributor not suitable so fuck off" rejection slip. What am I doing wrong? Never mind, says my wife, and I bite her hand. Then I stop and think: duh, there must be other people like me. Maybe we can help one another. What if I can get people to swap their stories, and say what's good and bad about them?

Geez.

"It's called an Orbiter" the old hands down the Wellington say. "Takes ages" they frown. OK, I say to myself, so let's not have an Orbiter where stories go the rounds gathering cosmic dust, but a kind of star with some suckers in the middle getting stories in, sending them out for opinions and then returning them to their authors pronto.

So that's what I'm doing. Costs a fortune in stamps, but what the heck. It works.

OK, so you can take what any one guy says about your story with a pinch of salt. But when somebody else comes up with the same thing you say "Oh". And when somebody else says it you -- uip -- begin to think they just might have a point. But it works even better than that, because after you've sat down to think up something to say about a story you've been sent you start to sharpen up your ability to assess your own stuff.

No kidding. It works.

Come on now. How are you going to write good stories if you're sitting in a box? Editors frankly don't have time to tell you why your submissions aren't up to scratch, and the people you know probably don't have the inclination. The ideal person is someone in the same boat. So all you writers out there, let's pull together.

(Interested writers should send their stories to John Duffield at 24, Fordwich Road, Hertford, SG14 2BE. Please don't sent NISS to FOCUS unless they are intended for publication.)

## A FAST ALTERNATIVE TO ORBITER

One of the criticisms of BSFA is that for the majority of the members, it is nothing much except the meetings. The newly reinstated London meetings are an attempt to remedy that. Below, I set out some ideas of my own, aimed at the writing action of the membership.

Some years ago, I coordinated a writers' workshop at a community bookshop near where I live. It was very much a self-help group, with little in the way of professional tuition, and a wide range of experience and interest.

I am hoping to start a similar group, but for SF and fantasy writers, this time under the auspices of the BSFA. It would meet at a time convenient to the members, somewhere in central London (I have one or two possible venues in line). There would be a small charge to cover costs, and I would hope to draw in professional writers to lead workshops from time to time. I would also be willing to give help and advice to anyone wishing to set up regional workshops.

The other idea I have is to set up a residential (weekend?) writers' workshop. Again, this would be self-financing, but under the auspices of the BSFA. As before, I would hope to get professional tutors. I do have a couple of possible venues in mind, but before I can go further, I need to know what the level of interest might be, bearing in mind that the earliest possible dates would be in late 1988 or in 1989.

Anyone interested in either scheme should write to me as soon as possible, at the editorial address. SAE's appreciated.



## In Focus 14

Next issue should see the first "real" workshop. I think I have one, or even two stories for it, but don't let that put you off, as I haven't yet received permission to workshop them from the authors. Besides, I promise I will comment on any stories I am sent, even if I can't use them.

There will also be an item on the ethics of writing fiction, for which I would like short contributions, of up to 500 words. For instance, when you write, do you find yourself censoring the work as you go along? If so, what is the difference between that and editing yourself, and where and how do you draw the line?

I would also like readers comments on "beating writers' block". Again, I would like short items,

rather than epics, please, as I want to show a variety of methods

As for the rest, there will be an article on choosing a word-processor, a column on "books for writers", and a lettercol (if people send enough interesting letters that they don't mind me printing!).

I do have some other things planned, but I'm keeping aum till I am sure of myself. I'm quite open to suggestions, so if you want to send in articles instead of fiction, feel free.

Submissions should be typed, double spaced, one side of the paper etc. But you know all that, now that you have read this issue of Focus, don't you? By the way, handwritten letters are fine!