FOCUS

The Writer's Magazine Of The British Science Fiction Association

ISSUE 19

75P

Editorial

EDITORIAL

The More Things Change...

So, a new year, and I'm sitting writing a *Focus* editorial, when by rights I should have long since given up doing any such thing.

Just for once I am not going to bore you all with details of all the nasty stuff that has been happening to me: let's just say this time it was about as serious as it gets, and the people who need thanking for being so supportive know who they are.

Most of you will know that this is my last issue as editor of *Focus*. I hope that you've found the magazine enjoyable and worthwhile; I know I've learned a lot during the last two years. As I said last time, I will be staying on the committee to provide services for writers, and to help out wherever else I can. My current plans include starting a library of writers' guidelines, a register of writers' courses in the UK and abroad, compiling a bibliography of handbooks, and producing a helpsheet for beginning writers. I also have various longer term goals, such as starting writers' workshops of varying length, and possibly a writing competition. I'll be publicising the results of these endeavours here and in *Matrix*, but in the meanwhile, if you have other ideas you would like to suggest, or if you think you can help with any of these, please do write to me. Thanks in advance, and thanks also to everyone who has helped or contributed to *Focus* while I've been editing it.

All that remains is for me to introduce your new editor, Cecil Nurse, and to wish him the best of luck!

That's all folks!

Liz

Liz

FOCUS
The Writers' Magazine of the BSFA

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advance notice

Here's another fine mess you've gotten us into!

Turning Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy into symbols/symptoms of the exterior and interior person is perhaps going a bit too far, but all of us have no doubt experienced situations where one of us, whose identity is surely a puzzle, has got the rest of us into something the rest of us would rather not be doing. Writers perhaps more acutely than most become conscious of the disjunction between their subjective landscapes and conditions, and their objective possibilities and behaviour. Perhaps it is out of this tension that writing grows. Which is a roundabout way of phrasing the question: who am I and what am I doing here?

My name is Cecil Nurse (an esoteric phrase with very little meaning I'm sure), I am in my early 30s, I write, I read, I think. I am an incorrigible daydreamer. I live in a 90 year old terrace house with my wife (the wife? a wife? a woman?) and two children who confront me with myself more often than I would like. Our garden is full of the plants most people call weeds. The idea of editing *Focus* began as a daydream and has turned into a reality on me, much to my -- surprise. So what happens next?

Judging by the number of unsolicited letters I have received (one Christmas card, thank you), you're all waiting for me to tell you. Well, this is what I think and what I would like:

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You can get there from here

Or, finding a place in the American market.

Paul J. McAuley

I've been asked to write this piece purely on the pragmatic grounds that I have published both in Britain and in the United States at an early stage of my career, something which, to my bemusement, is still regarded as Unusual (if not suspiciously Deviant, but we won't go into that). My first story was published in 1984, but my first sale was actually in 1974, to Worlds of If, an American magazine that promptly folded. The story was never published. I was never paid, and for a while I gave up writing.

Lesson one: as long as you have faith in your writing, and want to say something (which is very different from wanting to see your name in print), be persistent.

I started writing again when I was living in Los Angeles, collected rejection slips for a year or so and returned to Britain. And a month later learned that Asimov's had bought the very last story I'd sent out while I was in Los Angeles. So you could say I had an advantage: because I was living in the States I had easy access to the American market. But since most of the magazines are based on the East coast, and since I also sold stories to F&SF and Amazing soon after I'd returned to Britain, I have to say the only advantage I had while living in L.A. was that it cost slightly less to post out my mss.

Lesson two: the separation between a British writer and the American magazines is purely geographical. There is nothing especially difficult about trying to break into the American SF scene. Or to put it another way, it's about as difficult over there as it is over here.

By the way, note that I'm going to deal entirely with the short story market. Trying to place a first novel with a publisher in the States when you're working from Britain is not something I'd recommend unless you have an agent, which you almost certainly won't. And you don't have a proven track record in publishing or unless your novel really is the next Neuromancer, which it almost certainly won't be. Of course if you've already sold the novel to a British publisher they'll probably handle foreign rights anyway.

There has been an awful lot written about the differences between American and British SF. They are technophilic and upbeat, and obsessed with spreading capitalism and Pax Americana; we are machine-hating pessimists obsessed with the collapse of our Empire. Their fiction is commercial hackwork pandering to the lowest common denominator; ours is effete, experimental, and often hardly SF at all. All these generalisations are true of course, but like all generalisations there are also so many exceptions to these prejudices that they don't bear close examination. Still there seems to be a general feeling that American SF is so different from the British scene that it is very difficult for a British writer to break into it without radically compromising her work.

Differences there may be, but publication of new American writers like Michael Blumlein and Richard Kadrey in Interzone (not to mention perceived technophiles Gregory Benford and David Brin) suggest that the differences aren't all that great. And the trade is two way: recent issues of Asimov's and F&SF have included stories by John Brunner, Garry Kilworth, Ian Watson and Duncan Lunan. Now you might say that these are all established writers, but an attitude like that is self-fulfilling. And you certainly don't have to write hardboiled optimistic technophilic yarns to get published in the States: see for example recent stories by Lucius Shepard and Judith Moffet in Asimov's. On the other hand, I have to admit that much British SF, while often beautifully crafted, seems to me to be desperately old fashioned, both in themes and treatment, and simply copying the moves of Gibson and Sterling isn't the way to revitalise it. I'm not about to strike up an agenda, but the next century is little more than a decade away, and its concerns, and perhaps the themes of new British SF, are already in today's news headlines. Perhaps you should seek inspiration there, rather than in back copies of New Worlds.

Okay, so there you are, quivering speck of a neophyte author more than fired up and ready to spew out your latest magnum opus. You want to try it on the American market, but you don't subscribe to *Locus* and you've never been to the Clarion Writer's Workshop, let alone bought Gardner Dozois a drink at the last WorldCon. What to do?

The mechanics are simple. Do more or less what you'd do if you were going to submit a story to Interzone. Print out the mss, put it in an envelope and send it off. There are a couple of small differences worth mentioning. Don't send off your only copy of the mss: make a copy and send that instead (a photocopy or a fresh printout, that is, never a carbon copy). And unless it's a very short story, write a covering letter explaining that you don't want the mss returned if rejected, that it is not a simultaneous submission if it is a photocopy. It has been pointed out to me that some American publishers won't look at submissions on A4, presumably because it won't go through the automatic feeders of American photocopiers. I would guess that this applies to book-length mss, because a magazine editor won't even think about photocopying anything unless she is going to buy it. But if you are worried, and have a sheet-feeder, use good quality sheet feed paper, which after you have torn off the sprocket guides is the same size as American standard paper. Likewise, don't worry about correcting for American spelling. That's what sub-editors are for -- after the story has been bought (but if you are paranoid -- and who isn't these days -- and have a word processing programme with an American oriented spell-checker (such as Wordperfect) I suppose you could use that). Enclose a self-addressed airmail envelope for the editor's reply and a couple of International Reply Coupons to pay for its postage (your Post Office will tell you what you need). Always use airmail, by the way. Seamail takes forever and a day.

Apart from that, the usual rules of manuscript preparation apply -- and remember that while the American market is bigger than the British market, so are the slush piles. A badly prepared manuscript will only get a cursory glance, at best.

And only submit to one magazine at a time. Suppose two decide to buy the same story?

Knowing where to send the story is down to market research. Keep up to date. Even as I've been writing this, Amazing, a good market for fairly unknown writers has just gone belly-up. I've included addresses of some American magazines at the end of this article, culled from the SFWA (the Science Fiction Writers of America) Bulletin. Magazines like Asimov's, F&SF and Analog should be on the shelves or can be ordered from your local W.H. Smith's. You might find Dragon there, too. You'll have to try the specialist shops for the others, I'm afraid, or if you can afford it, subscribe. In which case, as with the postage, look on it as an investment. Writing short stories may not be a business, but selling them surely is.

If you get nothing but a form rejection slip, don't be discouraged. Try elsewhere until you've exhausted the market or realised what's wrong with the story. Some magazines may send a checklist rejection form ticking off one or more basic errors. Everything they tell you is invariably right. Your story really doesn't have a plot; your characters really are vile and/or unrealistic; your neat little tale about two astronauts called Adam and Eve crashlanding on an alien world that turns out to be Earth really is cliche the editor has seen a thousand times this week, and it's only Tuesday. And so on. Whatever you do, don't write back and say your story doesn't have a plot because it's a postmodernist collage, and the vileness of your characters reflects the vileness of modern capitalism. Even if it's true, the story was rejected because it was badly written and incomprehensible, not because of its content. If you get a personal note from the editor, be encouraged. It is not the next thing to being published, but you are on your way.

American Short Fiction Markets

The following is a list of some of the extant professional or semiprofessional magazines. The BSFA occasionally updates what's going on, as does the newszine *Locus* (*Locus* Publications, PO Box 13305, Oakland, CA 94661, USA. $32 for 12 issues seamail). *Locus* also runs news of the everchanging original anthologies market, which I'm not going to cover here, except to mention that Bantam's *Full Spectrum* anthology publishes a higher that usual proportion of new writers, and the call for submissions to its third volume should be announced soon. I guess I don't need to tell you about Omni and Playboy.

ABORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION. Charles C. Ryan, Editor. PO BOX 2449, Woburn, Ma 01888 USA. Ever improving semiprozine looking for "good hard SF stories... or near future space/action stories. But not fantasy or horror, apparently. Flat payment of $250 per story.

ANALOG. Stanley Schmidt, Editor. 380 Lexington Avenue, New York NY 10017, USA. All kinds of hard SF in which plausible scientific or technological speculation is essential and integral to the story. "although this does not mean that machines are more important than people." 6-8c per word up to 7,500; 5-6 for longer.

BOY'S LIFE. W.E. Butterworth, Fiction Editor. 1325 Walnut Hill Lane, Irving, TX 75062, USA. Any type of fiction for 8 to 18 year olds except horror. 500-1500 words, $750 and up.

DRAGON. Barbara Young, Fiction Editor. PO Box 110, Lake Geneva, WI 53147 USA. Gaming magazine looking for serious or humorous well-plotted fantasy, avoiding excessive gore or sex. Horror only if with a fantasy element. 1500-9000 words, 5-8c a word.

ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE. Gardner Dozois, Editor. Davis Publications, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York NY 10017 USA. Where most of the cutting edge fiction is published, to judge by the Nebula and Hugo Awards at any rate. 6-8c per word.

THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION. Ed Ferman, Editor. PO Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753, USA. "Off-earth SF with a strong plot is always in short supply. All kinds of fantasy [needed but], still overstocked with horror." Maximum of 25000 words, 6-8c a word.

MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S FANTASY MAGAZINE. Marion Zimmer Bradley, Editor and Publisher, Jan Burke, Managing Editor. PO BOX245-A Berkeley, CA 94701, USA. Almost any kind of fantasy, maximum 10,000, but 3,000 or under preferred, 3-8c a word.

PULPHOUSE: THE HARDBACK MAGAZINE. Kristine Kathryne Rusch, Editor. PO Box 1277, Eugene, OR 97448, USA. All kinds of fiction especially cross-genre. 3-6c a word, strictly under 7,500 words tops.

STRANGE PLASMA. Stephen Pasechnick, Editor. PO Box 264, Cambridge MA 02238, USA. "Looking for unusual, literate SF and fantasy up to 10,000 words." First issue just out, including an Eric Brown story. 2.5c a word.

WEIRD TALES. John Betancourt, George H. Scithers and Darell Schweitzer, Editors. PO Box 13148, Philadelphia, PA 19101, USA. All kinds of horror and fantasy. 50-25000 words, 3-8c a word.

$exercomp$

An exercomp is a writing exercise in which the entry that most appeals to me wins a prize, nature yet to be determined. The first is this:

> **Write at most three sentences describing a couple (a man and a woman) in such a way that it is clear that they, or the person seeing them, belong to a culture several centuries hence, or to a parallel universe.**

No dialogue, please. Comments about how you approach it, and what seems to be the most difficult thing to get right, are also welcome.

Deadline Mid-march (as in Metrix)

Notes from Clarion

Karen Joy Fowler

Compress your information. When you are describing a scene try to to choose details which will develop your character. When you have to move your character somewhere describe the scene.

Choose specific details

Examine your modifiers ruthlessly. What do they add to the story? Cut adjectives, adverbs, similes and metaphors which do not shed light or develop the narrative voice.

Don't repeat yourself.

Give the reader small surprises: moments of humour, delightful metaphors, something that jolts.

Understand your characters. No-one is a villain to him/herself. No-one is clinically sane if you know them well enough.

Resist the temptation to overdescribe. Your readers have their own imaginations.

Resist the temptation to overexplain. Your readers are smart.

Almost any interesting work of art comes close to saying the opposite of what it really says.

Advice from Jack Kerouac:

When you get stuck, don't think about words. Imagine it better and keep going.

Gene Wolfe

The hardest worked cliche is better than the phrase which fails.

If you can't make a section good, at least make it short and get the pain over with.

Try and have something interesting on every page.

Appeal to the senses. What colour was it? How did it smell, sound?

Main characters should be striking in some way -- attractive or grotesque or interesting in appearance. Spear carriers should be more or less ordinary for contrast. If you can't decide which a character is, make him striking.

Perfection is not sexy.

Never name a character Fred.

Vary sentence structure.

Adopt a style suited to the viewpoint character.

Don't use contractions outside dialogue.

Unless a paragraph is very short, the antecedent should be given before any pronoun referring to it.

At least every second speech should be identified: "Fred said".

It is better to repeat a word than to use a series of far-fetched synonyms.

Get facts right. If you wish to flout fact (for example, have argon the principal constituent of the atmosphere) provide some explanation of how the change came about.

If you wish to flout a widely accepted theory, such as relativity, provide an alternate theory.

Unless there is an excellent reason not to, maintain a single viewpoint throughout the story.

If you are stuck for ideas, write down a list of ideas you don't like or feel are too slight. Eventually you will hit several you like pretty well, and one you like a lot.

Try to combine several ideas in a single story.

Workshop

Story

AT A DISTANCE

by S. V. O'Jay

As with all things, atomic energy was a wonderful theoretical principle, but when the minds of the age attempted to solve its inherent problems for practical use, disasters occurred and serious questions were asked. Meanwhile, the military mind placed its own peculiar emphasis upon the new discovery. If the raw power of the atom could be used to destructive purpose, which soon became clear, and if the user of that force could be sufficiently removed (read protected) from its effects then the resulting tactical superiority could be put to use. It was fortunate that saner minds overruled the possible use of this weapon against mainland China.

Several important assumptions about the basic Universe and the ultimate state of Matter were consistently challenged over the years, and theories at first merely tentative gained reality and mass acceptance by the scientific community. It was, of course, only a matter of time before the practical applications of these theories became known.

It had been hypothesised very early on that "antigravity" was achievable under certain circumstances, albeit with great expenditure of power. In fact it was shown that an object could be brought to nil mass relative to Universe, at which point it naturally assumed the speed of light. Therefore upon leaving the area of "antigravity" it reassumed its full mass and began decelerating at the the appropriate rate. The destructive potential of even a small object of reasonable mass (say, a billiard ball) travelling at the speed of light was instantly realised by the Military. Aiming, however, proved an almost insurmountable problem, and the safety of those at the "launch site" could not be guaranteed. A separate application of the phenomenon enabled the "antigravity field" to be projected over space, in fact it could be manifested in distant areas of varying size. This was an ideal way to dispose of enemy armies. By simply manifesting the field in their midst, they instantly assumed the speed of light away from their position. This was a very effective disruptive technique.

The force field was another dream theoretically realised early on. The main problem was that the stronger the field, the less it was tolerated by normal space, and therefore "buckled" after a calculable period of time, causing severe disruption to surrounding space. The immediate application was obvious. If a field could be projected into enemy territory, and the field was of sufficient strength to be stable for only (say) 2 seconds or less, the destruction would be immense. This method had the added advantage of having no side effects (other than a theoretical cumulative weakening of normal space) and being confined only to a designated area, whereas the antigravity effect, with objects assuming lightspeed out of its catchment, could affect a much wider and undeterminable area.

Eventually a lone researcher with little regard for his own safety developed a workable force field using a strobe-type system, where the field, however strong, was not in existence long enough to buckle space, and not out of existence long enough to permit any appreciable leakage from within or encroachment from without. The Military merely modified their techniques to project an unstable field of greater strength into a stable field, assuming (correctly) that one would cause instability in the other.

The parallel universe theories finally became proven with an unsolicited contact with one those Universes, with the idea of energy exchange as a source of power. This, however, proved to be unstabled and would have been ultimately destructive, and so was stopped. The theories thus fell into disrepute. Another lone determined researcher persisted and eventually unlocked the secrets of not one, but an infinity of alternaties. One or more of these alternates was bound to be an Earth where all life had been destroyed due to folly, and it was to one of these that an unusually sane government sent all its so-called military personnel. To minimise the risk to an undoubtedly enlightened set of rulers, this operation was carried out from the inner moon of Mars.

Comment

The process of criticising a story for me often begins with a process of asking myself a number of questions about the work.

The first question I found myself asking about this one was: Is this a story? I came to the conclusion that it isn't, at least not as I would usually define the term. There is, for instance, no characterisation (because no characters), no plot development (because no plot), and I can't really see any narrative tension (or any narrative, for that matter).

At this point it occurred to me that perhaps I was expecting the story to do something it was never intended to do -- in other words, that I would have to redefine my terms if I wanted to say anything meaningful about it.

OK, what do we have here? A jamming together of some science fictional ideas, put together in such a way as to criticise governments and the military. At this point it clicked that a lot of these ideas were familiar from various, mostly old, Asimov stories and novels.

A quick phone call to the author confirmed that this was so, and elicited the further information that *At A Distance* is a parody.

My copy of Chambers dictionary defines parody as "a burlesque or satirical imitation". This would seem to imply a couple of things. We might expect firstly, the features of the original to be exaggerated, and secondly, humour.

On these terms, *At A Distance* is a failure.

Even the earliest stories in "The Early Asimov" display some attempt at narrative and dialogue, however crude. For their day, they were quite original. A parody of Asimov, one might think, would exaggerate these qualities.

I also have to say that I didn't find *At A Distance* funny. This might be a failure on the the part of my sense of humour. I suppose one could also argue that a parody doesn't *have* to be funny. Wit would do, or given that Asimov is the subject, puns.

Alternatively, I suppose it could have been presented as one of those excerpts from the *Encyclopaedia Galactica* in the *Foundation* series. That way, its lack of narrative and so forth would matter less. However, for this to work, I still believe it would need to catch more of Asimov's voice, and to be a lot funnier.

— *Liz Holliday*

I have no great patience with parodies of sf, since so much sf is exaggeration and parody of the perceived world already. To parody it yet again bespeaks an ingrown, 'knowing' attitude that, in my opinion, is a waste of time. I have even less patience with people who write slight, evasive, clever stories, and then call them parodies. 'It's rather didactic'; 'oh, it's supposed to be didactic'. 'The characters are rather wooden'; 'oh, they're supposed to be wooden'. 'It's not very funny'; 'oh, it's not supposed to be funny, it's supposed to be dire.' Yeah, right; so why did you bother writing it? Calling a not-very-good story a parody is a very good defense against criticism, but it means you're missing the point of writing. Writing is about putting yourself on the line.

So, setting that aside, is there anything to be said about 'At A Distance'? Well, not really. 'Minds of the age', 'military minds' and 'saner minds' all in the first paragraph makes it sound like 50s sci-fi movie narration ('all the best scientific minds were working on the problem'), but three decades later it reeds like polemic. Cynicism about the military/industrial complex is easy and right-on, but not very interesting or insightful. A bit of gung-ho would probably make the same point more forcefully, and be more deserving of the term 'irony'.

In summary: an anemic effort. Spill some blood, man.

— *Cecil Nurse*

Reply

This is an extract from a letter in which Barry Walter responds to comment on his story "Amphisbaena" published in Focus 18.

...It was with some trepidation that I re-read [Amphisbaena].

My words whispered to me memories of a time that seemed years, not months, past. They took me back to a lightless winter of anguish, in which I underwent a painful rebirth. They spoke of loneliness, and the terrible beast of depression that feeds on what it excretes. They revealed the dead flesh of my past, failing away to expose a raw fool desperate for any light in which to regrow; a man willing to run towards the unkown rather than stagnate in the mire of his solitary misery.

Amphisbaena was honest prose -- but it was never a story.

Why did I send it to *Focus*? Because I felt it contained some of my best writing, and I needed to know (being a total novice) that I *could* write.

Amphisbaena was made vague so that the pathetic truth of its origin could not show through the surface. This was dishonest. And my two critics effortlessly exposed my dishonesty.

Amphisbaena is an example of "exclusive" writing: it allows no-one to intrude, it does not share, it does not communicate.

The months that have passed since I submitted my story have allowed me to analyse it with hindsight. In so far as I can be an unprejudiced reader, I would say that the only elements of it that excited me were the Lizard and its manipulation of the young man. As the writer, I would agree with that -- and add that the rest is nothing more than self-indulgence, and should be discarded along with all my other dead flesh.

Review

Review of Writers News No.2, November 1989

by Liz Holliday

This is a new monthly magazine from David & Charles Plc, who also run correspondence courses for writers. It weighs in at 40 pages for a hefty subscription of £34.50 for 12 issues (reduced to £27.60 for payment by direct debit).

As is suggested by the title, the emphasis here is firmly on news updates: markets, competitions, and longer articles on widening one's writing repertoire. There is a good mix of material for everyone from the beginner to the established writer. Non-fiction and fiction alike are covered, and in this issue at least there seemed to be quite a lot of information for photographers.

Here, perhaps, lie both the magazine's strength and its weakness. The range is so very wide that just about everyone will find something of interest. However, if you are starting out with the definite aim of writing fantasy or science fiction (or indeed, within any other specific genre), you may not find enough here to warrant paying the asking price. This is particularly true if you already have access to the market space listings from the BSFA, or those in *Science Fiction Chronicle* or *Locus*. It might just have been a quirk of this review issue, but I saw nothing of specific interest to the SF writer.

I have to say that I'd rather spend the money on an airmail subscription to *Locus* or *SF Chronicle*.

Writers' News *is available on subscription from David & Charles plc, Brunel House, Newton Abbot, Devon TQ12 4YG. £34.50 pa.*

FORUM: symbols

The exclusiveness of *Amphisbaena* and [Liz's] two questions in *Focus 18* ("Should dictionaries be prescriptive or descriptive?" "Can one ignore the resonance a particular image has or can one just impose one's own meaning on it?") seem to me to be facets of a single problem: namely, the relationship between writer and reader, speaker and listener.

Words can refer to the symbols with which I think, and the symbols with which I communicate. I cannot decide whether they are the same set of symbols used differently, or different sets of symbols used in the same way. If I think "love" to myself, and then read "love" on the page do experience them differently? "Love" in my mind triggers memories and leads me down particular lines of thought, but so can my lover's face, or her touch. Does love on the page do the same? Perhaps it just takes a different path.

If my lover asks, "Do you love me?" is she referring to "love" in her mind, my mind, or some vaguer notion like love on the page? If there could be such a "love" as one in *our* mind, she would not need to ask. Perhaps when she asks "Do you love me?" she wants to know something about "love" in my mind rather than if, simply, I love her.

I will look in my dictionaries and see if "love" is in them.

No. I can only find love. Curiously, the love of one dictionary differs slightly from the other. But they both keep love with a territory of meaning that includes many aspects of my "love". And indeed, those of any person that looks into the dictionaries.

The dictionaries appear to be aiming for general agreement: their definitions of what a word symbolises seem only to include its broadest aspects. They want to provide people with common ground on which to begin communication. Dictionaries are not concerned with "truths". They are concerned with social interaction. People are free to qualify the definitions in what-ever way seems appropriate to them; but they should be aware that the more personal they get in their qualification, the more they risk misunderstanding. Ambiguity is desirable, but only if it offers a choice of paths leading the same way.

Dictionaries are prescriptive in the sense that they prescribe an area of meaning that speakers and writers would do well to stay within if they wish to be easily understood. But because their definitions can be very broad, dictionaries are also presciptive in that they allow users room to express their personal experiences of what the words symbolise. A dictionary is volume one of a guide to communication. It represents the starting point of a journey through language.

I now know that when my lover asks "Do you love me?", she is offering a beginning: a place from which we might discover what "our love" could be.

-- Barry Walter

When a writer uses symbols, he must appreciate the multiple meanings those symbols have and either pick the most appropriate symbol, or direct the reader to the most appropriate interpretation. A story's imagery must reflect and reinforce itself -- which is best achieved by repeating the themes and images on a variety of overlapping levels -- a not a collection of disparate tableaux with a plot running the through them. A story is a train that goes from A to B, but to get from the one to the other passes through scenery which illuminates A, B, and the character making the journey. In this sense it may be quite different from reality, where a plot, a happening, may run through scenes and images with no obvious connection, except that of the person travelling through them. It's not good enough to invent scenery and imagery as you go along to progress the plot with no thought how these things *reflect the plot* and weaken or strengthen the story. Together with themes and characterisation, imagery (visualisation and interpretation) should strengthen and reflect each other. I point to *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* where the toad (possibly a reference to the mock-turtle, another aquatic animal) that the end has a meaning, significance beyond that of being a toad, or a simulacrum. It is also an ironic statement and reflection of the themes, concerns and plot of the entire novel -- it is not only symbolic to Rick Decard, but to us, the readers, who can further see it as a comment on Rick's world, its physicality, uncertainties and politics. And it only does all these things because Dick allows the plot, scenes, imagery, characters, themes, concerns of the novel to work together and lead us to these interpretations of the toad. The toad fulfills many purposes apart from its purely physical focus. McClean does not seem to have fully appreciated the variable interpretations that could be given to the use of a whale as a symbol (and if it isn't symbolic, what's it doing there?), and has not given enough thought to using images to strengthen each other, and to guide the readers to the interpretation he requires of them.

So, to answer the question. Can one ignore the resonance a particular image has, or can one just impose one's own meaning on it? You can't ignore the resonance of particular images -- many of them are deep rooted in our psyche (reflections, shadows, doors, mirrors) and will be interpreted along these lines unless one *consciously* writes the story to reinforce a less obvious interpretation. And to do that, you must be aware of the various interpretations the images have. Images should be used appropriately -- the best ones -- the ones which strengthen the story the most -- with an appropriate framework that will direct the reader along the lines required. That's not to say you should use the most obvious symbols in the most obvious ways. It is conceivable that card index boxes, for example, could be used to symbolise flight -- but unless you're careful with setting the situation up earlier in the story, it will be misunderstood. Likewise, whales could be used to reflect themes on intelligence and spiritual matters, but one can't ignore the fact that most people would not understand why whales are picked over -- say -- dolphins, and would find it hard to imagine whales as spiritual creatures (which is the implication of reincarnation). Grace is a

cont on page 10

More Vocation than Vacation

by Linda Markley

I thought the story was extremely well hidden... Viruses don't make deals... I kinda feel like I'm watching a chainsaw being taken to a souffle... I still don't think it's a story, but I'm awfully fond of you...

The above quotes are some of the first words from this year's Clarion Workshop to be published -- on the commemorative T-shirt.

Clarion is an SF writing workshop held for six weeks each summer at Michigan State University, USA. This year Tom Disch, Karen Joy Fowler, Octavia Butler, Spider Robinson, Kate Wilhelm and Damon Knight each led the workshop for a week.

The Clarion method is for all participants to have a copy of the typed manuscript in advance to read, critique and annotate with comments, however minor.

In the workshop session the students take it strictly in turn to voice the main points of their criticisms whilst the author remains silent. Next the director of the course gives his critique, followed by the Writer in Residence. The author then gets a right to reply, and, finally a brief open discussion takes place. The marked manuscripts are returned to the author.

Priority is given to stories produced at Clarion, encouraging the students to continually work on first drafts and leave revisions until after the course. This is a good way to learn a lot in a short time, to experiment and get immediate feedback. The workshops and informal discussions are also excellent breeding grounds for story ideas.

The criticism was hard, even brutal occasionally. Some of it was also sharp and very helpful, including analysis from different viewpoints, such as the scientific. Part of the process is to break down the author's ego so that they can see what's wrong with their work and hence move forward. This is a very tough experience to go through.

Perhaps inevitably, there were also put downs and destructive criticism. Consciously or not, each writer set the tone for their week's workshops and some took a more positive lead than others.

Each writer in residence has an individual session with each student lasting from thirty minutes to an hour. Some were available in the evenings for further discussions or social gatherings.

The rest of the time was spent writing, reading or with the other Clarionites. The reading took from two to four hours per day. Some stories demanded additional time to gel before going onto the next.

My main criticism of Clarion is that it lacked overall structure. The Writers changed each week, invariably before I'd finished the story I'd been working with them on. Whilst it was nice to get so many different views, there could have been more continuity. Also, nearly all the lectures, which might have been more appropriate at the start, were in the last two weeks.

Competition for places at Clarion is high. Applicants are selected on the strength of two submitted short stories.

There were eighteen students this year, including four Brits and a Canadian. Previous years have seen students from as far away as Australia and Japan.

The average age of our group was twenty-nine, with six recent or current full time students and three full time writers. Past courses have included retired people.

All the students were serious about their writing, worked hard and lost sleep fairly often. Clarion is definitely not a holiday.

This year tuition cost $1,135. Accomodation is in single rooms in a post-graduate hall of residence. This cost $460 including a small food allowance. I usually ate two meals a day in the cafeteria and paid an additional food bill of $135. Because of the difficulties of transportation and US electricity, I rented a computer and printer (cost $232.50). My flight cost me £322 and insurance £64. This added up to about £1,600.

I arrived three days early and took an essential three days off to recover when I got home -- a total of seven weeks off work.

Was it worth it?

For some of this year's students the answer would be an emphatic yes. Some sold stories for the first time whilst they were there and some came to realise they had talent.

For many of us, myself included, the answer is not so clear cut, yet. We learnt a lot about the techniques and business of writing and witnessed the significant improvement of others, but it might be a while before we can see the improvement in our own work.

One of the most common problems was confusion. We heard opinions of our work from six established writers and seventeen writers-in-the-making, and guess what: they differed!

We were often to close to our stories, completed the day before, to have formulated our own opinion, and many people had to completely re-evaluate long held views of their previous writing.

The experience was one of extremes. One person left half way through. Others would have appreciated a short break to get back perspective. Nearly everyone felt depressed and under stress from time to time.

My lowest point was the middle weekend. The feedback I had received was by no means all negative but my self confidence had suffered and I didn't think I was learning much. I needed the support and encouragement of a couple of my fellow students to finish my next story. Fortunately, this and my last one received a strong, positive reaction from many of the people I had come to trust.

Such self doubt was not uncommon. Many people tried to experiment at Clarion but some met such a harsh response that they immediately retreated to what already worked well for them.

I was surprised to find more enthusiasm for my experiments in other fields than for my standard SF. That leaves me undecided about what to write next.

And the answer, up to this article, has been nothing. Apparently, a period of writer's block often follows Clarion, and in the ten weeks, I haven't been able to read the stories I wrote there, let alone revise them or send them out.

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On competitions

SUBMISSIONS

Angus McAllister

As most readers of *Focus* will already know, the problems for beginning writers are as much psychological as technical. Why a blank sheet of paper (or its modern equivalent, the blank VDU) can inspire more terror than the best efforts of Stephen King or Clive Barker remains a mystery, but it is undoubtedly so. As the testimony of many established writers has shown, this is not a problem that necessarily vanishes with success. However, for part-time writer it is particularly acute: he or she has to overcome this hurdle after a hard day's work at the office when the temptation is just to put the feet up and watch TV is almost insurmountable. Nor does the beginner have the incentive of a publisher or editor eager to see the the completed work, but only the prospect of yet another kick in the teeth from an indifferent publishing world. Faced with these obstacles many literary careers die stillborn.

My original solution to the problem of discipline was simply to get out of the house and find another workplace or, better still, go there straight from my place of employment. After a spell as a student at Glasgow University, I continued for some time to use the library in the Students' Union. This was ideally designed for the constitutionally indolent who wanted to trick themselves into unnatural effort: half of the seating consisted of armchairs with pieces of board that sat across the arms to serve as a crude writing desk. After a meal in the Union canteen, I would install myself in an armchair with a newspaper. Then I would recover from the day's toil by having a half hour nap: this was not in the least embarrassing, as I would be surrounded by students, several of whom were doing exactly the same. After a coffee and yet another read at the graffiti on the writing board, boredom would induce me to start writing. Eventually, to my surprise, I would be trotting downstairs for a guilt-free pint, with a thousand or more words of fiction in my notepad.

An essential tool of this method is the Papermate Powerpoint pen, which can write at any angle, allowing great writing to emerge from the horizontal human figure: during passages of high dramatic tension, however, it is better to sit up straight.

After several years of this, the acquisition of a word processor and the possibility of writing directly on to a keyboard forced me back to the problem of home discipline: on a winter evening, how do you make the transition from the warm living room and the telly to the cold study where the computer and its paraphernalia accusingly await you? One way is to bring the computer through to the living room and plug it into the telly, where you can suddenly find yourself writing while kidding yourself on that you are really watching TV: this method has the disadvantage that another member of the household may prefer to watch *Coronation Street*.

Paradoxically, word processors are now becoming so small that the library method could become feasible again.

I am sure that many *Focus* readers less terminally lazy than I am will find simpler methods of getting down to it. However, there remains the problem that the beginning writer is writing in a vacuum, driven only by ambition and a self-confidence that receives a fresh battering with every rejection. The role of the BSFA and writers' workshops in combatting this has already been amply explored in these pages. Instead, I want to concentrate on another method which I have found useful: the writing competition. This supplies the beginner with two advantages usually only enjoyed by journalists and established writers: a specific goal to aim for and a deadline to meet. The obvious possible reward is a prize in the competition, which may or may not change your life depending on the status of the competition: at the very least it will add a credit to your literary CV, which may help to keep your head above the surface of the editorial slush pile. But even if you win no prizes, you will gain practice in the art of writing. You will also accumulate a body of work which might otherwise never have got written, some of which may well find a home elsewhere.

I have lost count of the number of competitions I have entered over the years. This has resulted in a mixed portfolio of (mainly unproduced) plays for stage and screen and (mainly unpublished) short stories, some of them SF, some not, most of them best left buried. However my persistence has twice been modestly rewarded.

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The first time was in 1978 when I was a runner-up in the SF section of a BBC competition: I was rewarded by a free trip to London for the prizegiving and a brief (and silent) appearance on TV. Then the BBC wrote to say they had sold my story to *Woman* magazine, apparently the magazine's editor, enquiring after the fate of the winning stories in the romantic fiction section had taken a shine to my SF entry. My story duly appeared in the magazine, wrapped around an advert for Heinz Toast Toppers and cunningly hidden behind a front cover portrait of Prince Charles. For a week my work was available in every newsagent's shop in the country, before vanishing completely. The BBC, in an act of unparalleled meanness, kept a third of my £84 payment as an agency fee, no doubt to finance a TV series.

My other "success" was less spectacular: as a runner-up in a competition run by *Omni*, I received a year's subscription to the magazine; they did not publish the story (or any of the other winners, as far as I can gather), and the magazine began to arrive through my letter-box before they even got around to telling me about the prize.

The moral to be drawn from these examples is not entirely negative, and illustrates some of the points I made earlier. The story that won the prize in the BBC competition was actually an unsuccessful entry for an earlier competition: as I was too busy at the time to write a new one, I simply pulled it out of a drawer, gave it a quick polish, trimmed it down to the required word limit and sent it off. On another occasion I wrote a radio play in 10 days to meet the deadline for another BBC competition: the BBC turned it down, but it was later broadcast in translation in West Germany, where it was repeated several times.

More recently I have experienced competitions from the other side of the fence when I acted for two years running as a judge in the SF competition run by the *Glasgow Herald*. It has been gratifying to see past prizewinners go on to further success; they include William King and Andrew Ferguson, who have since been published in *Interzone* and elsewhere. They might well have made it without the competition, but I like to think that we gave them a useful morale boost. Much more recently (10th October 1989) all four winners so far and several of the runners-up have been published along with some better known writers in *Starfield*, an anthology of science fiction stories by Scottish writers (edited by Duncan Lunan and published by Orkney Press). The competition has also provided a means by which aspiring SF writers from the West of Scotland can get to meet each other, not only at conventions but also at an annual extra-mural class on science fiction and writing run by Duncan Lunan at Glasgow University and in the Glasgow SF circle, which runs its own writing workshop. Details of the former can be obtained from Glasgow University Adult Education Department and of the latter from Veronica Colin (041 339-8297).

The fifth *Glasgow Herald* competition has been given the go-ahead for 1990, and entries from south of the border (which have already been represented among the prizewinners) will be welcomed.

Having earlier examined the psychological hazards of being a writer, let me examine some of those experienced by judges. I imagine that many of these are shared by fiction editors and that useful tips for writers will emerge.

(1) If there is a prescribed word limit, stick to it. No judge will not thank you for having his reading task lengthened, and may disqualify you. The discipline will help your writing skills and, in any case, most stories can be improved by trimming; the accumulated savings from deleting surplus adjectives and restructuring clumsy sentences into elegant ones can be substantial.

(2) Again, if there is a word limit, write a story whose material can breathe easily within that limit. I have read countless stories where the writer has tried to cram his great idea for an SF novel into 2,000 words; the result is like the "story so far" synopsis that appears before the second episode of a serial, and is very boring to read.

(3) A good opening can work wonders for the psychology of punch-drunk judge during a long reading session. This is important though in published fiction as a means of attracting a reader's attention: it is even more desirable for hooking the judge or editor, who does not have the benefit of an eye-catching blurb or the assurance that someone else has thought the story worth publishing. My favourite opening line was by David Knott in the 1987 competition: "When I awoke the corpse of James Joyce lay outstretched on the laboratory floor." I reached that story near the end of a long Sunday morning session when I was about to give up and make for the pub, having reached a state of mind in which I felt I could no longer do the entrants justice. That line restored me to life more effectively than a cold shower. Conversely, some openings can have a completely negative effect on the mind e.g. "Far beyond our planet Earth through miles and miles of galaxy --"

(4) Presentation is crucial. This point has been made many times in previous issues of *Focus*, but cannot be made too often. A well-typed piece of rubbish will remain rubbish, but a good story can easily be overlooked if disguised by a tatty exterior. I appreciate that not every would-be writer can afford a word processor, but typing skills can be improved by practice, and sometimes a manuscript's appearance can be transformed by something quite simple, like cleaning accumulated dirt out of the typewriter letters. I remember on competition entry which I read with indifference, before being pulled up short by an ending which (to my warped mind) was nauseatingly hilarious. I re-read the story and found that it was much better than I had initially thought. I had been reading it through a veil created by poor spelling and mediocre typing on a machine that badly needed a good clean-out. Needless to say, a second read is not something you can rely on from hard-pressed judges or editors.

But overall, although my stint as a judge confronted me with many stories that could have been improved, as well as many that were unreadable, there were also sadly far more competent and publishable tales than could be represented among the runners up. Recently I undertook for the first time the writing of an academic text book and was amazed by how easy it was to get a well-known publisher to give me a commission. Fiction is by far the most competitive writing market, and only patience and perseverance can shorten the odds a little: cultivate these and you have acquired the most valuable psychological tools of all.

Symbols, from page 7

good physical representation of spiritual matters, and dolphins have it more than whales.

— Terry Broome

Images, resonances of. An image -- even one word -- that has a symbolic resonance will be so understood by readers whether one means it or not; if not, another must be substituted. If one uses an image with purely private meaning, private it will remain (not to say meaningless) until one laboriously explains it. The ultimate example is that much praised but (to me at any rate) unreadable opus *The Waste Land*. 29% of which consists of notes (and which drags in six languages besides English -- he does kindly stoop to translating the Sanskrit). Eliot confesses that he doesn't know the Tarot, which is more stuffed with images than a pomegranate with pips; he then uses it anyway, even inventing new cards "to suit my own convenience... quite arbitrarily." In consequence nobody knows what he's trying to say and he doesn't know what he *is* saying -- which isn't really what language was invented for.

-- Theo Ross

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I've also had difficulty in readjusting to ordinary life. As after many shorter breaks, I was reluctant to settle into the old disciplines and activities which seemed mundane, pointless or over-demanding. I felt physically and emotionally drained and found that much of Clarion was too personal or too alien to other people's experience to talk about.

Withdrawal symptoms are inevitable after six weeks of such close contact with fellow writers, likeable and interesting people to boot. The American friendliness was especially welcome as they were supportive from the first week when many Brits would still have been reticent.

Many of us sharpened our critical abilities and we plan to start a postal workshop. A similar ongoing network was cited by one of last year's graduates as his main benefit from Clarion '88.

Criticising so much of other people's work also helped me focus on what's important to me in a short story. Over the next few months and years I hope to apply this understanding to my own work, and to examine and test the many opinions I received with further examination.

One of the useful skills I learnt was to write a first draft more quickly. I was amazed to write seven short stories in six weeks.

Clarion gave me much that is hard to quantify and describe, including one or two memories which are among the best of my life. These should remain with me when I've forgotten or come to terms with the confusion, self doubt, exhaustion and cafeteria food!

For details and application forms, send a self-addressed airmail envelope and two international reply coupons to:
Mary Sheridan, Clarion Workshop, Lyman Briggs School, E-35 Holmes Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824-1107, USA

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Writing is hard work, for two separate reasons. One is that there are objective standards and requirements which no amount of excuses can get around (spelling and grammar, for example), and a vast corpus of work with which one's own production will always be compared. The other is that one's own standards must always be in advance of one's capabilities, otherwise one never improves or writing turns into just another job. While publication has financial, psychological, and social benefits, writing for publication is a much less demanding standard than either of the two mentioned above. To be a good writer, you have to aim higher than that.

So I would like to talk about writing: process, problems, principles, purposes. Why do you do it? What are you trying to do? How do you do it? To avoid having to make authoritative statements, let's be personal about it. Speak about yourself, the way you work, the way you judge your work. Let's understand that very few of us are born successful, that each of us must individually relearn the lessons that every preceding writer has had to learn, and that those who have learnt them have things of value to say to those who haven't. Different writers, different *individuals*, consider different things to be the essence of their writing -- compare Geoff Ryman in *Interzone 33* with M John Harrison in *Foundation 46* (I squirm with envy: I want those pieces for *Focus*, dammit!) Consider that if you are writing or trying to write sf (or related), and belong to the BSFA, then this space is for you. How many of you are there? I want to hear from you. Consider that the more serious/committed we are, the more work we are putting into it, the more trouble the pros will take to write something for us.

I understand that many of you would like *Focus* to publish fiction, but I do not intend to do so, except for drabbles, which I will consider for filler and amusement. There are many magazines whose fortunes depend on the quality of the fiction they publish, and if you are writing quality stuff you should offer it to them, first and foremost. Likewise, if you want to read fiction, they will be glad of the spondulicks. I will continue the Workshop, but *only if* a reasonable number of people offer a) to submit something b) to make comments. Story fragments (ie. the first 4-8 typed pages of a longer work) will be acceptable, considering that professional editors don't seem to read even that much before making up their minds. If you never liked the Workshop, now's your chance to get rid of it: all you have to do is be silent.

Market listings are a necessary part of a writer's zine, and I will be concentrating on British and European English-language zines, anthologies, competitions, and book publishers. All information, and other sources of information, welcome. Following the example of *Scavenger's Scrapbook*, which is an extensive listing of American markets, I will include large press, small press, and non-paying outlets. Writer's circles, workshops, and anyone who would like to correspond with other sf writers (penpals), please send details.

Deadline for next issue is Mid-March (see Matrix for exact date). That's the next mailing, so don't procrastinate, you writer you! Write to me! After that, *Focus* will appear in every other mailing as usual.