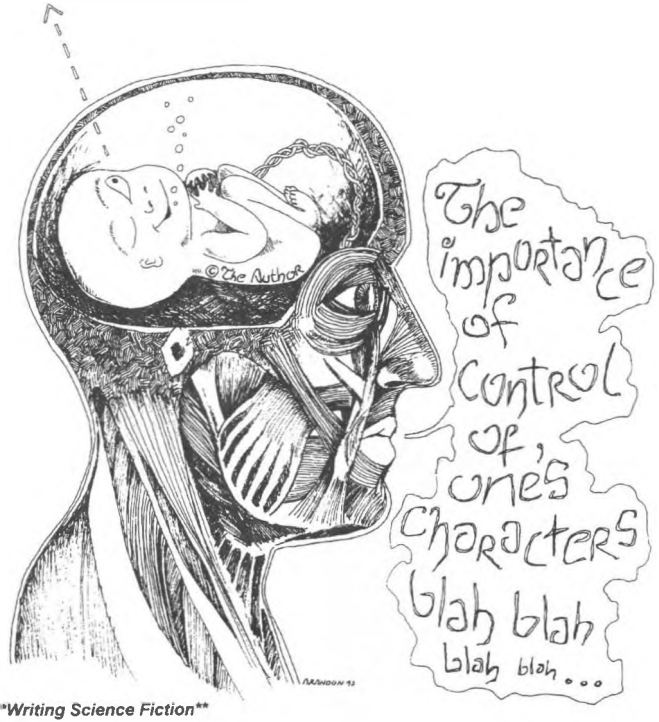
Focus

The B.S.F.A. writers' magazine
Issue 24 June/July 1993



Writing Science Fiction
Stories
Forum on Character
Writing a first novel
The Cassandra Experience

Brian Stableford
Syd Foster
Cherith Baldry
Lisa Tuttle
Stephen Gallagher
Colin Greenland
Gwyneth Jones; Stuart Falconer; Geoff Ryman - and many others...

Editorial

Through a telephoto lens, lightly...

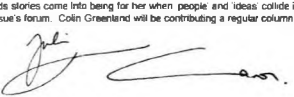
Welcome to issue 24 of **Focus**. Too many people out there care about this thing to let it fade into fin de siecle apathy; many of them have written to us or to **Matrix** to express their support, and the zine you see before you is the product of the efforts and enthusiasm of more than the two of us.

We have been encouraged at the response to our call for contributors, and we aim to widen your involvement next time by including a letters page for feedback and debate. By the way, recent discussions in **Matrix** have highlighted the importance to individual members of being able to contribute in their own way, and find their own level of involvement in the association. If you want to offer feedback without wishing to see your words or your name in print here, mark your letter DNQ for do-not-quote and we will respect that.

There is an orthodoxy which states that characterisation in SF necessarily comes second, at best. It seems to be based on a pie-chart image of fiction, consisting of discrete 'slices' labelled 'ideas', 'characterisation', 'plot' and so on. The theory goes that if, as in SF, your 'ideas' slice is too big you won't have enough left for a credible portion of characterisation, at least not within the limited word-length of a short story. This rests on the assumption that these elements can be isolated from one another, each requiring a ration of the available words. Yet surely we create stories by bringing these elements together: if you haven't got people (even if they're alien people) and ideas, where's your story? Doesn't all fiction, regardless of genre, rely on the interaction between ideas and characters?

For Carol, vivid characters are the most vital element of the story. Julie finds stories come into being for her when 'people' and 'ideas' collide in her head. For more views on character and characterisation, turn to page 7 for this issue's forum. Colin Greenland will be contributing a regular column to **Focus**. His first offering can be found at the end of the forum section.

Regards,



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Contributions to **Focus** are always welcome.

Fiction should be of a very good quality and no longer than 5,000 words.

Articles about all aspects of writing are always needed, up to 4,000 words. Please contact the editors if you are unsure whether the article fits our remit. We also require short pieces around 600-800 words for our Forum – see elsewhere in this issue for the subject of next issue's Forum.

Contributions should be submitted on A4 paper, double-spaced on one side of the paper only; discs may also be submitted – please contact the editors for more information in the first instance.

Cover art, illustrations and fillers are always welcome.

Publisher's Survey

Earlier this year, we undertook a survey of ten major British publishers to see what their submission criteria are, their attitudes to new writers, and the kind of material they accept. The full results of this survey will appear in the writers booklet we are preparing. Below are some of the results:

Eight out of the ten will accept unsolicited manuscripts; Penguin and Transworld now prefer to receive only agented manuscripts.

The majority of the publishers will accept simultaneous submissions, though Headline at least ask that you state it is a multiple submission.

All ten publishers stated they were willing to encourage new writers, and that covering letters are required when submitting manuscripts. There was no consensus on sending full or part manuscripts, though the synopsis and sample chapters are popular.

Publishers included in the survey are: Headline, New English Library; Penguin; Pan; HarperCollins; Millenium; Virago; The Women's Press, Legend and Transworld.

Forum on Worldbuilding

How do you create a believable world? What kind of clues do you need to give your reader to enable them to believe in your alien planet? How important is such background information as gravity, geology, zoology, etc? Do these need to be explained?

How do you as a writer get across the subtle changes needed to portray a near future landscape?

Focus invites you to contribute small forum pieces (600-800 words) on the theme of worldbuilding for the next issue.

Deadline for next issue: 31st October 1993.

Drabble Competition

Send us your drabbles! The one we like best will win for its author a signed copy of Colin Greenland's "Michael Moorcock: Death is no obstacle" kindly donated by Colin.

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Tell Me The Old, Old Story

by

Stephen Gallagher

Earlier this year I had a letter from a student who'd chosen, as the springboard for a new course project, an article that he'd seen in the Sunday Times concerning 'new' and potentially dangerous trends in horror. New I suppose, because the article was based around Hannibal Lecter and **The Silence of the Lambs** and newspapers always reckon that the definition of 'new' is something that may have been around for years but that they've only just noticed. The writer of the article reckoned that Lecter was a step much closer to home than the traditional horror villain, and that as such he represented an approach to horror fiction that, deprived of the usual fantasy distancing devices, might signal the turning of a trivial amusement form into one that could do some actual psychological damage.

I'm probably exaggerating the slant of the original because I only got its contents second-hand, but then again, thinking of the way such coverage usually goes, I wouldn't care to bet on that. This, anyway, was the way that I responded.

The conventional view, I suggested, seems to be to consider horror as a limited set of literary conventions with its roots in the nineteenth century and its most visible manifestation a commercial explosion of late twentieth century schlock. One way or another it's seen as minor, downmarket, at best a kind of guilty pleasure like a taste for Guinness or Italian gladiator movies.

But horror has been a human emotion for much longer than it has been a marketing category. Back to the beginnings of literature and beyond into oral tradition, the invoking of a sense of terrified awe by metaphorical means has been a staple – I'll go so far as to say the staple – of all narrative. Consider the **Odyssey**, with Odysseus' blinding of the cyclops and voyage into hell. Or the Oresteian Trilogy of plays, in which men supposedly cried out and women fainted at the appearance of The Furies in the open air auditorium just as they supposedly did at the first screenings of **Psycho**. Or consider **Beowulf**. Or the Gospels, and the coarsened and vigorous Mystery Plays that were generated from them in the middle ages where The Harrowing of Hell was one of the most anticipated sequences and the Crucifixion the most graphic, detailed, and intense. You could run on, though **Sir Gawain and the Green Knight** and **Doctor Faustus** and much of Shakespeare – the point is a simple one. Whenever literature has set out to address major and timeless issues, its natural means has been that of the ambitious, complex, non-naturalistic metaphor, gods and demons, monsters and angels, things from the woods, creatures from the dark.

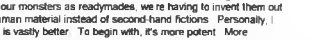
Metaphor is a means to an end, it conveys an idea. When the interest is in the metaphor itself and there's no particular sense of an idea behind it, then you've got literature that has no higher ambition than to amuse. There's nothing wrong with this; amusement fiction has always been around in one form or another, and the modern bestseller is just the current version of it. But literature has a value beyond amusement, or it would have gone the way of wassailing and Nine Men's Morris a long time ago.

What happened in the 70s was that, for a while, the metaphors became fixed, commercial, and fashionable. You might consider the progressive treatment of the vampire, a dark and sexual metaphor with no exclusive meaning. As a start, Bram Stoker's arbitrary 'rules' – sunlight, garlic, wooden stakes, holy water – were taken as a set of givens, enabling devices from which a story could be worked. The metaphor sank; the vampire was now a villain. Rationales were worked out as to exactly why he acted as he did; it was a blood-transmitted virus, he was a mutation, he was a separate and parallel species.

This can only go on for so long. Even before the variations run out, the act of variation loses its freshness and becomes tiresome. Some of the books were rather good – **Fevre Dream** springs to mind as an example in the vampire cycle – but most were just marketing. Throughout the 'horror boom' I'd say that the amount of actual good stuff was probably about the same as at any other time.

So, what's happening now? I'd say that the fashion is subsiding and the horror sub-structure is becoming more apparent again. Instead of taking our monsters as readymades, we're having to invent them out of real human material instead of second-hand fictions. Personally, I think this is vastly better. To begin with, it's more potent. More challenging and harder to handle, but more potent. Hannibal Lecter is an expression of the same myth that was originally expressed in the figure of Dracula – the charisma of an ultimate inhumanity that feeds on the others – but whereas the vampire has become an easy cultural icon that stirs little in us beyond a sense of friendly recognition, Lecter is a new thought on the same theme and has a renewed capacity to disturb.

The Sunday Times writer's 'new trend' isn't a new trend. And it won't 'affect' society, at least not in the negative and unwholesome way that seems to be implied. Horror fiction in its highest form always shines a little light into the deepest, bleakest darkness. And that's got to be a healthy act, by *anybody's* definition.



Second Coming – Barbara Davies

They sighted God's hot air balloon at ten thousand metres. Its descent was irresistible – nothing could divert its course.
Upon landing, the occupant emerged: ten feet tall, hermaphrodite, the colour of sunlight. People fainted; the Rev Ian Paisley was carried, gibbering from the field.
God seemed quite interested in human history.
"Next time, I'll make you a single sex and colour," it said, "and save a lot of trouble."
After three days, God re-entered its balloon and set off skyward.
"Please come back," wailed the crowds, bereft.
"Flying visit," came the fading reply. "See you again in two thousand years."

The Way to Write Science Fiction – Brian Stableford

Reviewed by Andrew Butler

If readers were to approach **The Way to Write Science Fiction** in order to discover where to get crazy ideas from they would be disappointed. Such a volume cannot be written. Inspiration cannot be taught. Nor is there any single correct way to write SF – or indeed any type of fiction – which will guarantee publication.

But what Stableford offers is a subjective guide, backed by examples from his own career. As he writes in his autobiographical preface: "personal testimony, will, I hope, allow you to judge how seriously you need to take the advice offered herein." He writes candidly about his earliest works, mistakes he now finds in his first few novels and even arguments with his editor over the relatively recent **Empire of Fear**. I find author's autobiographies fascinating – I devoured Delany's **The Motion of Light in Water** – and the book is worth its price for this element alone.

Whilst tips on characterisation and style have perhaps been covered better in other manuals (such as, presumably, **The Way to Write**) Stableford does not neglect these areas. However he sensibly spends more time on the elements that make SF special and different: extrapolation, worldbuilding and hardware. It would be impossible to teach someone how to do such things, instead Stableford traces the implications around such acts.

The most important piece of advice he gives is: Show, don't tell. This seems to be ignored by many newcomers, and even experienced writers who are new to the genre. Failure to apply this one rule results in "info-dumping", undigested chunks of exposition, which have the side-effect of slowing down the narrative flow.

I feel that the book would be excellent for the newcomer to SF, with its opening and closing chapters on the nature of the market. However it is helpful even for the most experienced writer to occasionally return to first principles. In any case the book contains enough ideas, meditations, hints and food for thought to make it an essential addition to any **Focus** reader's reference shelf.

Senses

by Syd Foster

There's a man in the snow

Grass shoots up around him, shouts up at him in dropvision, hyperclear vision, one sliced second of rolling vision rolling on past, beyond, behind him as he runs

Through the brittle biscuit of the snow the snow goes: charging over the ground like a rippling manta ray keeping pace with the man not barking at his heels

The trees, their faces wrinkled with surprise and age, stop gossiping as the rippling man runs past. They stare after him: he catches small whispers in the distance behind

s' running... running... 's a frickl-lin'-lot... 's a tin lung... 's a running... running-in this... 's a pin... a pain, ...' pain...

The man knows. The man understands

He runs

His legs leap beautifully, thin acrobats reaching out of this trapeze of his prowling hips

All round him hangs the winter air. So precise it would shatter if he slipped

He slips himself so quickly through, the stiff bright air hardly flickers

She jumps at him from behind a bush. The blood sticks thick on her head, gleaming in dark tangled pools in her hair. That hair howls in the silence at him

He swerves quickly to avoid her, dodging around and away again in the shifting silence. He does not look behind. His calm acrobats solemnly hurl themselves ahead

He breathes evenly, deeply, and listens to his thoughts.

I did not know this would happen. Each time it happens I do not know it will happen. I am always running along like this, through the snow and the cold air splitting the sting of cold tears out of my eyes, and then it happens. Afterwards, I am running. I am also thinking, but the thoughts are not mine. They come into the empty room of my head, where there is no brain, the same way a strip of paper skimps out of some computer onto the floor of its room. I am running, with these thoughts lying in my head, until the wind of my passing hooks into my nostrils and scoops through my head to pluck them away, and then I am running

After a long pause, there in his head, he forgets to listen and goes on running. Perhaps he looks down at the pouring earth parachuting away past. Once in a while, mushrooms beard his breath as it mingles with the cold.

In a moment he is running down the centre of a terrifically long dinner table. There are shocked faces in rows somewhere below him as he rushes past them down the wildly white tablecloth. Champagne glasses cackle and burst up from beneath his feet like frantic hens. Gangs of peas race as crazily as lemmings over the edge of the table into the laps of the people sitting alongside. Ahead of him, a fat man balloons up from beneath the end of the table, in the position of honour. He runs down the table towards the fat man, whose mouth hangs open with a unique small fear that he will be trod upon. Mashed potatoes foam on the lips of his shoes

He charges on. Big furry flakes have begun to fall tentatively. Some of them nip furiously at his feet, swirling in to chase him off

He runs right up to the wretched fat man, who is unable to move in the thrall of anticipation. He puts his foot down on the fat man's chest. His leg sinks into the gooey mound of the fat man, then he pops free and shoots off down the corridors, leaning into the distance

There was a girl who had never wanted him to go in the first place, and when he returned and they were wheeling him in a basket back to the hospital, he watched the wheels of his basket turning, turning, and didn't notice her as she watched, the eyes in her head turning, turning

He runs on. Mother snow, eternal symbol of oblivion, zoom.

His feet fall fall, *chump* fluff *chump chump* fluff, two big snowflakes feeling their way to the ground, the white and rushing ground piling out of threadbare towards bouncy. With the bloodstains here and there along the way

For a while there is blood dripping from his fingers, slottering out in bright arcs as he swings those arms. One glistening bead bounces from his knee, leaving a short stain which fades and quickly vanishes

He did not want to go either.

In time the snow has stopped falling. The slight breeze which has been knocking shyly at his flabby tracksuit has turned quietly aside

There is an old poster hanging on a dark wooden board from the branch of a tree. It creaks forlornly on its hinges in the stillness as he passes

as the creak corkscrews through an open window into his head
it thrusts the pint of its own head
upward
and snags the ceiling of his skull
so dangling like a strip of flypaper
catching the cinders of an episode.

Please raise the right hand
I have no choice?
The candidate has no volitional duties in the-
Stuff it
(?) *a minor flurry of reaction is quickly quenched*
Where's my lawyer?
There is no need for legal-
I want advice
Please, try to control yourself. Under the current Emergency Provisions you have been summoned-
Kidnapped, asshole!
-to be inducted into the Psycho-Marathon Project dealing with the long-term psychological effects of extended exposure in the recently calibrated observatory in the region of sedimentary ectoplasmic manifestation on Mars. The Psycho-Marathon Project-
The Bullshit Brigade
Sir! *a strangely childish stamp of the foot from the gaunt figure*
You have a very bad habit of interrupting.
There! *a gleeful finger stabs.* You *are* human!

Right, grind your teeth, it's good for your gums
Enough! This is a digression.
I always digress
It is not healthy
It's my nature
Then you are ill
Ooh! Your skin's showing again!
You persist in being an obstruction to the smooth flow of our business here.
Well dammit!
a breathing silence walks onstage left, offstage right
My *life* is what we're talking about now! My bloody life is being stolen from me!
You are growing hysterical. Under the power of Martial Conditions I am authorized to release the depressant into your bloodstream and to swear you in *in proxy*.
Huh! You've done it! You bastard! You can't take a philosopher against his will and make... make me hunt down ghosts... on ancient Mars.
I assure you this is completely legal. As the leading authority on residual psychology in the world, you must be prepared to proudly serve your Nation
...bastard... shanghaied... press- gagged ... shtodl.

fluff fluff fluff *chump* fluff *chump*

The flow of the first one's thoughts broke softly into big white leaves which have begun to fall from the white sky again

The slim breeze has returned as though from a short tea break and is reaching into his empty skull with polite fingers, and has unhooked the crowded strip of flypaper from his ceiling, allowing it to descend through another window into the world. There is no change of temperature between the abandoned room in his head and the filling emptiness outside. The blackened strip of flypaper drops, leaving a wrinkled shadow in the snow receding behind the running man.

He runs.

It is clean to be free with the landscape dark and luminescent, with the bare trees so black against the pale spread thighs of the snow. He hurtles along the track, his hips like panthers leaping up the good firm boll of his body's trunk, his lungs as rhythmic as the moon, stinging. The room is empty again.

And he runs. He always runs, looming along joyfully, almost jiving as the cool swing of the white jazz world walks down around him. Head rolls musically on the camels of his shoulders, shuffling panoramas like cards in the two hands of his two eyes.

Now he runs through an awareness. I can hardly wait to get home to get my hands on her.

It's
horrible!

Please don't make my job any harder than it already is. Your husband-

But he isn't!

I beg your pardon?

He's not my husband ... anymore. He's a lump of useless gristle. And now you want to take that away from me! Aren't you satisfied yet?

I am hardly more than a messenger. If I try to explain, will you give me a chance and listen? Please?

Yes. All right. I'll try to understand this macabre obscenity.

Uh, with an attitude like... *doesn't matter.*

Well, first your husband's bod- *uh! start again.*

Ah, let me start by explaining that your husband's brain is functioning perfectly well. It is only the mind which has been destroyed. The brain is perfectly capable of logic, and even a certain amount of lateral thinking, though this is somewhat of a surprise: we are frankly a little puzzled at that development.

There is some evidence, however, that although the mind, and hence the personality, of your husband is completely shattered, after the removal of the brain there will be a certain *residual – ah, presence,* or *activity* we might say – yes, yes that would do nicely: an *activeness* in the seemingly empty chamber ... you see... ah, do you follow me?

No.

Ah! Well... let me put it this way, in more simple terms. You'll have to excuse the metaphor I use here: it will be, in short, after the removal of the brain, almost as if the *essence* of your husband will be haunting the empty house of his skull. You see, in short, a ghost haunting his own body...

Ah! Ummm... can I get you a drink of water?

No.

Yes. *oh god.* Well, you see, *that* is why we've decided to return the... your husband's... your *husband* to you after the operation. You see he won't be a dead loss- *oah!* That is, he will function perfectly on a physical level you know, with the addition of certain microprocessors to the residual limbic stem, and... well, being a healthy woman and... a healthy *married* woman, you can understand... well *both* of you... well with the epidemic viral mutations these days, and since the... *his* sexual function and libido will be almost completely unaffected you know and- ah, you could also try to interest him in physical sport... *running!*
Running in the beautiful countryside around your lovely house here.

No! A zombie! You take away my husband and return a *zombie* to me, and then tell me to make *love* to it?

Well, as a release you see... he might grow violent if- *oh god! stupid thing to say!*

... gone. always. always evil uncoils out of the testicles of men. violence. rape. gone.

Ummm...

No! I want him back! I want his brain at least, I might be able to help him find his way back to me, find him in there and wake him to me, to himself...

You don't understand what has happened. Officially I can't explain how *impossible* that would be. You could as easily wake up Mars. Accept it.

Give me his brain! How can you do this, what do you want to do it for! He wasn't a mathematician-

Ma'am, a brain is a brain, a miraculous computer. And without a personality to get in its way it should operate at full functional capacity.

You fucking bastard! You and your scavengers looting through the remains of my life! I'll sue, I'll *oh god...*

May I remind you that your husband, however much there is of him, is still a member of the National Effort. We are doing you a service by allowing you to keep even his... even his body.

- no, I don't want his brain, it
would be too cruel to speak with
a computer I once knew as human

right. Then you can keep your favour. I don't want him back at all. I'm afraid you must! There is no place else for him to go then kill it. I don't want it. Kill it.

Oh no no, couldn't do that. It would be against all moral, social and legal tenets.

Oh – my – god.... Can he believe himself? Can he believe himself?

I, madam, am only a messenger.
my hands on her body. ummm...

But he has run on through the awareness and out the other side, and the last wisps of it have slid from him, slipping into the still ponded air and swimming into the vanishing distance. He has forgotten his lust.

But he runs.

The track he is running along is freshly made, black bootprints toothing the weak snow mercilessly, the line of his progress lashed to the ground like a wrinkled lip.

The trees are gaunt old beggars in the rags of their bodies, lurking along one side of the track, jaws thrust down below their shoulders in ghastly confusion at his progress. Far ahead of him, so far he doesn't even notice it, a tree stands in his path: waiting for him.

Arms dance at his sides, conducting the puppets of his feet.

He comes up to the tree, he sees it there waiting for him; it's not a black gaunt tree, it's a black gaunt man. He is standing on one leg. He is leaning forward, arms poised, head chucked. Frozen on the point of mid-gallop.

The man's pace does not abate. He runs up behind this blurred vision of a man, darts quickly to his side and they're away, both of them launching themselves continually into the bald air, battering at the smooth skin of the cold air with the single fist of their two bodies: heads dive together, legs strip as one, shoulders crouch and spring.

There are two men in the snow.

The man is slightly curious, as much as the unshaded bulb in his skull will allow. As he runs, he turns his head towards the other man. This fellow wears a tracksuit identical to his own. There are huge fists of snow sitting daintily on his head and shoulders where they have fallen. Since his head is turned, he can also see a large snowflake riding on his own shoulder, close to his face like a fluffy white kitten. The other man's head is turned away, as though he too might be watching a fellow traveller at his far side.

The sound of one man's heavy breathing falls through the black forest, settling rhythmically to the ground.

sift and sigh
that sound
it's just like the ripple of bedsheets in the dark
when i run in the darkness
when i move
on her

Oh you can't, you can't know how... *frightening* it is. I feel so alone out here. The memories are bad enough: when I see him down there by the well, my heart wrings itself so tight I cry from the sheer pain! It hurts me like a knife in there. And he hurts me too. He's not gentle any more. He takes me, like a barbarian, rough, brutal, and quick... (I'm afraid of him now. Is he listening?)

No, he's playing with his toys.
He's staring at us.
He doesn't see us. It's a vacant stare.
Oh David, you don't understand... his stare is *always* vacant.
Hush, hush there... no, come here... don't be stiff... there...
You're so gentle... so kind... I need another human being.
Let's be honest, you need a man.
Yes. Is he-
hush...
all right... alright...

alright... alright... alright...
klungd!

He has reached up an unconscious hand, clenched like his knotted jaw, and wrenched a brittle branch down from a passing tree. It comes away in his hand, satisfying as a bone, balanced as an icicle.

Droplance.
Doomfoot.
Gone
Confetti vision zoom a flap of cards, a doff of falling feet, a chasm splinter *in that moment* his head has turned to the other side: another identical man running his head averted turn it back, shootinglance, *the first other man is gone* aglance again the *second man is gone* snapvision
panic!
Gone
He stops
He is alone
A dead branch dangles from his hand.
Desolation
A threadbare wind wanders aimlessly through the dusty streets in the ghost town of his empty head
In the very far distance, a hundred years down, a seagull creaks like the hinges on the porch door of a long-abandoned house
A well runs quietly dry And dies
On the ground, in front of him, in the centre of the track, there is a dead snake Black Frozen
It is beautifully indented, twisting like a burl of scrubwood on a Greek hillside It sings to him
Beautiful snake, pretty snake, oh snake of the winter hardness
In a moment he has dropped the branch and bent to the snake and has begun to run
Run with the snake held high above him: eternal flame: eternal runner bearing the gods' olympic snake:
Run to her, run to show, to show her this, this prize, this wonderful find:
She'll be pleased, she'll be pleased
She'll like me again
hung-*chass* hung-*chass* huhhh-hung-*chuhss*
He begins to laugh: chuckle, giggle, grunt, rant, chant, howl, shout, choke, hysterical scream laugh
He laughs gaily, madly, without even his ghost-thoughts: all the way home
He was nearly home anyway
It doesn't take long now.
Just a few more steps, a few more hysterical lunges of his lungs and
fluff *chump* fluff fluff*chump crump*
crump, crump chugg
chugg chugg
tuff
he's up the steps across the porch and into the house on the carpet *tuff*
The snake held high above his head, brandish, brandishing it like a war club.
Hurtling, screaming, with unabated speed into the living room
Screaming, running running
Running to show her the snake and make her like him again.

She's crouched over the other man's body, which lies where he left it when he went out to run Her mouth is open, her face turns like a flat fish up to him. Her lips so pale, fluttering gently like two delicate falling snowflakes, so far apart
He charges up to her. He stops above her
Snake raised
Hard, cold, sleek snake.
She is below him
He will give her the wonderful snake.
She touches him with her knife and his blood leaps playfully from his artery pouncing into her hair. He stands quietly watching her sink to the floor, the snake held tenderly in her insane hands, and he wonders at the brightness of his blood, the brightness in the room:

2

Away across the fields, there's a man running in the snow

Epistle to an Editor – by Terra Firma

First Draught of letter to accompany my manuscript

I wish this manuscript had won a competition, but it hasn't, nor have I for that matter – not one. If it had "The Star of my Sky" wouldn't be about to be flicked across the room by your well practised wrist to that nearly obscured heap in the corner of your office

Its arrival at your office was just my manuscripts's latest monthly visit to an editor picked at random from the publishing world, and, yet again, "The Star of my Sky" is about to find its way to The Pile, soon to be crushed by its brothers and sisters from other creative unknowns like myself. So pause just a moment, dear Editor. Don't let it happen again!

Oh dear, I am too late, you have already thrown it. Go on, knock over your coffee and ladder a stocking on the desk in an athletic leap to save "The Star of my Sky" from The Pile

It may be slush to you but those pages making an arc above your desk took three years to write and type using a manual typewriter. It was painful and I had to do it twice. It was written in hours snatched from other tasks and sleep, and during days spent in self doubt, needing, but not being able to afford, an analyst's couch.

If I tell you that each day my writing gets sharper, deeper and more poignant, you editors will tell me the market is shrinking, competition is acute, and I am an unmarketable phenomenon.

You've got it! I'm sorry about the stocking. You must be a most intelligent aesthete, with a gentle sensitivity, which, I'm sure, my masterpiece can thrill.

You've read the first three pages? You've made comments in the margin? It's full of clichés, bad spelling and poor grammar? You don't like the style or story line? The plot is weak? It gets a lot better. Look at chapter two. Please

What do you mean the plot has become over-complex with the introduction of twenty new characters in five pages? This is an epic. I might tell you. I take it all back. You are not an intelligent aesthete, you are a vindictive, cruel, wicked ignoramus

I'm sorry, I didn't mean that either. Surely, there must be a slot, a small forgotten gap in the market, "The Star in my Sky" can fill?

Don't finger through your list of polite rejections. I've already had: this type of book is not selling at the moment; this is not suitable for our present list; and we only commission the books we require

If you don't publish me soon I will have to get a job that will pay me money. People will call my writing, "a nice little hobby" so I can hear At least at present they say it behind my back. Do you realise a true literary artist will be lost to the world. My honesty, modesty and integrity only I will know about.

I even fantasise about being a best selling author attracting million pound plus advances. I could be another Kingsley Amis or C S Lewis with a little encouragement. OK, so what if last week I was going to create the greatest film script since Blade Runner, and the week before that I was going to be a great poet and playwright. Being a diverse genius is not a crime

No. Don't return the manuscript. I don't want to see it in the post again. Burn it, eat it, or put it on the compost heap. If its true magnificence is not to be recognised then its chemical constituents may be of more use to you

The final draught

Please find enclosed my manuscript, "The Love of my Life", for your consideration. A stamped addressed envelope is enclosed.

Geoff Ryman. Characters...

are one of the great Embarrassments of writing science fiction Characters are one of the main reasons why many otherwise imaginative people are allergic to SF.

Take for example Adam Mars-Jones In his review of the director's cut of **Blade Runner**, he called attention to the moment when one character says to another, "Have a better one," instead of "Have a nice day". For someone schooled in the SF tradition, that is a witty piece of speculation: a joke. For someone unschooled and unsympathetic, in this case Mars-Jones, it simply calls attention to the dependence of SF, not on the future, but on the past. It scuppered his belief in the film

You cannot tell stories without characters, and you cannot create characters except out of your own imagination, which uses the past for raw material. There are various strategies for coping with this dependency on the past.

You can give up trying. The story needs basic motivation to keep going, you preserve basic motivation modelled on your own understanding of human nature. You then strip the most jarring contemporary usages from the dialog. Your characters can end up sounding like something from 1940s Arabian Nights movies. They don't use any contractions, in case they sound like they were born in Brooklyn. Attempts at new or exotic slang replace the tang of actual dialogue. Your characters still sound like they were born in Brooklyn.

The danger is that no one knows what human nature is. Uncorrected by reference to real life, the hoariest clichés about what is eternal about people can form the basis of character – and your whole world. I remember a scene from some SF movie (one scene only, the rest has evaporated from memory) in which a male character finding himself in a future of bikinied, painted lovelies declares, "Ah yes, women are always interested in make up."

The Terry Pratchett option makes active use of this tension, turns anachronism back on itself. Your characters are *supposed* to be contemporary and recognizable, and the humour arises in part from that. You get to keep your neat ideas and make readers laugh at the same time. You aren't worried about being convincing. Because it works with the grain of SF, this is probably the most honest and cunning approach to the genre.

How cunning is **Always Coming Home**? **The Silmarillion**? **Canopus in Argos**? Some of the greatest SF and fantasy writers have also tried to do without individual, convincing characters. They imitate the one-dimensionality of epic literature. They read like primary sources or even works of scholarship. My God, can it be dull.

You might be a genius, of course, in which case the tremor of genius is an available option – to you. This is the ideal. An author is able to generate, all at once and all together, the look, the sound, the movements, the different cultural expectations, the different motivations of men, women, or new genders, new races, new species in a different future culture. These moments in SF are few and far between. In fact, I can't think of one. But then I haven't read **Riddley Walker**. It attempts to write as if from the future without translation. Translation is a core issue in SF, for both its characters and its worlds.

The only **Don Quixote** I have ever found actually funny was a BBC radio production, in which the Don was an addled toff, Sancho a bemused cockney, and the various characters along the roadway, Dickensian grotesques. Nothing else has so effectively, for me, caught the social and cultural tensions that made the original work funny.

Translated SF characters can be very alive, convincing in themselves, but are obviously drawn from something other than the future. At the risk of inflicting injury on myself, I would include Rolfa from **The Child Garden**.

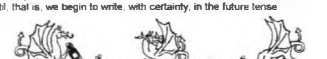
Rolfa has a very particular way of talking. "Flitting off to see some of my chums," she says. "We're going to a palace of amusement." Rolfa is essentially an upper class bag lady. She is dotty, mellifluous, her morale unconsciously buoyed up by inherited privilege. The way she speaks is partly based on a very upper class crone I met living in a shed in the Lake District. A rich eccentric 200 years from now will not talk like a dispossessed landowner of the 1970s. In the future, there will be different class and social markers, ones I don't yet know.

And, incidentally, even if I knew them, they would have no meaning for readers now. They would inspire neither recognition nor pleasure.

In other words, even if we did know the future, fiction about it would have to be translated. Rolfa might still end up sounding like an upper class bag lady. That's my excuse.

After all, it happened to **Don Quixote**. Most translation of fiction, however, does not rework a world. The difference in SF is that translation is often applied to an entire cultural framework. This undermines the illusion of futurality. "He gives water to the dead," says one of the Fremen, when Paul weeps after having killed a man in Dune. As well as saving Paul's life in a single verbal stroke, that sentence tells us much about the culture, such as the centrality of honour and of water. Unfortunately the culture, down even to the etymology of its word for oranges, is translated hook line and sinker from the Arabian peninsula Dune, as a picture of a future culture, is a complete failure. Nothing underlines that failure more than the enthusiasm it generates among Arabists. Herbert got his facts right.

In other words, the best of us do not know the future well enough to write about it. If Mars-Jones does not accept the ground rule that SF is invariably modelled on one past or another, then he is beyond reach. Until that is, we begin to write, with certainty, in the future tense.



Lisa Tuttle.

I've never sat down to "create a character". For me a story or novel begins with an idea, not a person, although, nearly always, as the story develops the character becomes more and more important. Yet the characters for me are inseparable from their stories. I can't imagine the situation I've heard some people talk about of having a character and looking for a story to "use" him in.

Just after starting to write this piece, I read a review of my most recent novel (**Lost Futures**) which described it as a "character study." On reflection, I can see that might be the case. Certainly the book is very intensely about one person: Clare Beckett, who leads a variety of lives. We're never out of her head; we see and understand the worlds of the story only as she experiences them. Without this single character the book could not exist; there would be no story, because the story, in this case, *is* the character. Yet the book began not with Clare but with an idea: what if someone could make contact through their dreams with other lives they might have lived under other circumstances, with their own alter egos who were every bit as real and individual as the first one? I wanted this to be a very small-scale individual, intimate use of the alternate history idea: instead of "What if the Nazis had won?" I wanted to begin with more personal questions, the things that loom large not in history books but in individual lives: What if I'd gone to study maths at University? What if I'd taken that trip to London? What if I'd been able to save my brother's life?

When I began to write Lost Futures I knew nothing at all about the character at the centre except that she was a woman with something in her past which she was unable to stop regretting and leave behind. I thought at first it might be the decision not to have children, or not to marry, but I'd written about a woman who meets the child she could have had in a short story, "No Regrets," and didn't want to cover that same ground. Nor did I want to write an entire book about some obsessive romantic mourning the guy who got away. No, the impetus had to be a death – a death she felt responsible for, one which she believed she could and should have prevented.

Throughout the first draft a lot of the decisions I make about characters are random, sloppy, not carefully thought out. I grab for details from the things around me, very often from my own past. My primary concern is to keep the story moving, so I give the main character a memory from my childhood: a book from my bedside table. But as the book goes on, as more things happen to her and she is required to respond, she becomes less and less like me. The childhood memories and the books she reads have to change to fit the individual she has become. The appropriate details come to me and begin to accrete in the second draft.

In a way, I write the story and the story writes the character. That's not exactly it, but it comes close to how I feel. Certainly, I've never felt that the characters "take over" at any point, but neither do I feel like the puppet master. I begin by making them up in a slap-dash, inefficient way, based on myself or people I have seen or know, but in the process of writing things down I discover which things are true and which are not, as the characters begin to emerge through the words. Gradually, as the words build up, so do the characters just as we learn to know people in the world around us by observing them and listening to what they say. It's a long, slow process, full of false starts and discarded manuscripts, but it's the only way I know how to create – or discover – a character.

Stephen Gallagher.

Characters in fiction? Wow, why don't we kick off with something *difficult* to talk about instead?

The fact of it is that this is probably the subtlest and least easy to define area in all of fiction writing. I'm not even sure I know what character is. I just started out with a few rudimentary principles which, as I gradually seemed to improve my grip, I came to realise had been completely wrong. As a result I still can't tell you what character is, but I can tell you what it isn't.

Details of appearance have nothing to do with it. General impressions yes – those are emotional perceptions, not physical details – but as for all that stuff about firm jawlines, strong mouths, blue-grey eyes with a faintly amused light in them ... all hooey. You're not supposed to be building the character on the page, you're building the character in the reader's mind. Or rather, you're not even doing that ... you're providing the triggers, and it's the reader who is doing the assembly work. The more you look down, the harder that will be. Isolating and identifying those triggers, that's the real work of character writing.

Quirks and tics (or characteristics, if you want to ennoble them) have nothing to do with it either. There's an old pulp-writer's trick of 'flagging' each character with some little feature that makes them instantly recognisable and distinguishable whenever they come into the story. I've a story in a copy of ASTOUNDING from the 40s which illustrates the practice in action and where the pulpster's usual art in disguising crude technique is absent. One character always fumes; another is invariably phlegmatic. It makes the whole thing a bit of a one note samba, but I suppose that at least it lets the plot move along.

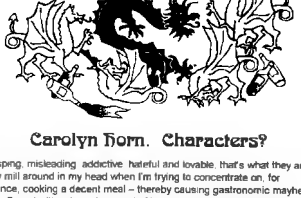
Nor is character the same as biography. Write out your characters' life stories and pin them around your walls if doing it helps you to visualise them, but don't go including it all in your narrative. It's like programme notes. Any interest that they have is outside the scope of the immediate drama and, if not directly relevant to dramatic point, they're a distraction. Thriller writers are especially bad at this, for some reason: they stop the plot to tell you about the various departments that their hero has worked for and the car bomb that conveniently removed his wife and made him so tough, brooding and bitter, and then they dust off their hands and get on with the cardboard puppet show. They treat character as something that you stick in somewhere as a tiresome duty, like having to pay a visit to a smelly old Aunt at Christmas.

Consider this instead: it's a funeral. It's the funeral of someone you've known for a long time and the chapel is crowded with a bunch of similarly close, long-time friends. The coffin lid's screwed down, so there's nothing to see. You've been asked to speak. Not for long, and it doesn't have to be Shakespeare, all you want to do is tell some simple little anecdote that will make the person live again for a moment in the minds of the audience. Something that will make them all smile and say that's right. I recognise that. That's utterly typical of the bugger.

Now, with that in mind, imagine being a total stranger walking in at the back. First there's the soothing, inspirational stuff that vicars always say on the assumption that it comforts the relatives. You stand at the back of the place and you hear what he says and, let's face it, he could be talking about anyone. But then it's the friends' turn.

And within a few minutes you, the stranger, are thinking; I can recognise that. I bet that's utterly typical of the bugger.

That's as near as I can get to pinning down character in fiction. Just don't ask me what it is, that's all.



Carolyn Horn. Characters?

Grasping, misleading, addictive, hateful and lovable, that's what they are. They mill around in my head when I'm trying to concentrate on, for instance, cooking a decent meal – thereby causing gastronomic mayhem.

Faced with yet another meal of burnt toast and boiled socks, my husband looks thoughtful and says: "Isn't it time you started another story?" He then trundles off to the pub for a pie.

The trouble with these guys, however, is that there are far more of them than I can possibly use. I have to grab hold of just a few and wrestle them onto the paper – and even after this selection process I am accused of having too many ideas! My accusers should try living inside my brain sometime.

I am surrounded by characters. My toaster has a piquant sense of humour, my chair has been grumbling for months about the extra weight I've put on, and my computer is in cahoots with its gremlins.

When it comes to stories, therefore, I simply have to dredge the back of my mind for the most appropriate character and bring it squealing to the front. I say "squealing" advisedly; they love to mess around in my psyche, but they hate being made to work. Which is why in my latest embryo novel, I had to go chasing them all through Shearweird Forest and the alleyways of Sleasford to find everybody. They were, of course, taking unfair advantage, because they knew the place far better than I did.

I suppose that all these people in my brain have germinated from experiences which moved me in some way – either to laughter or tears – or from unconscious observation of mannerisms and appearances. Which is why I can believe in my grumpy old chair and practical joker of a toaster. Their behaviour triggers deep memories of grumps and jokers.

So a story starts with me, hunched motionless beside the keyboard, like a stuffed duck. My glazed expression hides a feverish activity. I've got the germ of an idea for a story based on Virtual Reality, and on the way ordinary people will react to extraordinary happenings. I've got a theme of freedom vs domination. So who is going to volunteer to take part in this deep analysis of society?

A solemn-looking albino proboscis monkey steps forward. I grab hold of him (narrowly avoiding his bite), and fling him on to the page. I'm not sure yet what part he will play, but he's begun the flow. All the others peep out from their hiding places and realise that no-one equals obscurity; so within minutes I am fighting them off. "Me, me!" "No, me!" You really need an ancient walking tree!" "Huh, rubbish, it's a sanctimonious female vicar you want."

Once I've gathered in enough to set the whole story rolling, I call a halt. This is more difficult than it may seem, but I'll draw a veil over that part and over the accompanying bottle. The time has now come (when I've slept it off) to introduce myself properly to them. My first questions are: "What is your name? Why did you apply for this job? How do you get on with the idiot next to you?" From that I move on to other, more intimate details which I won't go into here. This is a family magazine after all.

Some characters are, of course, ready-made, all the ones who are covered by mythological treatises, for instance. This is where my avid reading comes in handy. Unfortunately they do insist on being rather different, after residence in my mind, from the orthodox views of them. They make the reasonable point that all those legends were written about them by people who had never met them.

Which brings me to the question – do characters 'take over' my story? Well, yes. They ran riot before it started; the whole process is a series of negotiations and strikes, arguments and piss-ups. It's a great party.

Graham Joyce
Writing Characters.

One of the critiques often levelled at SF/F and Horror fiction is weak characterisation. By weak characterisation I assume that critics mean the characters don't behave like real people, or that they are too grey, or they are insipid, or two-dimensional. True of a lot of genre fiction, unfortunately. Because much genre fiction is more concerned with the exigencies of plot (fantasy and horror particularly) or the exploration of some interesting premise (science fiction particularly) than with the artistry of the creation of character. This is a pity, but it separates sheep from goats. Good characterisation can improve a book from something which only entertains to something which informs us about the psychological nature of ourselves and other people.

Stop! I can hear a bit of waffle in the above. Let me start again. It's just occurred to me what we mean by character is that the population of our books should come alive and stand up on the page. The reason I've just arrested myself in my thinking is that it occurred to me that Charles Dickens and E M Forster – two of my favourite character writers – do it in an incredibly different way.

First consider Charles Dickens. Mr Micawber, Miss Havesham, Fagin, Bob Cratchett, Scrooge, Barkis ... endless lists of characters major and minor, once read never forgotten. Since you're reading this in Focus

how many SF books you've read over the last five years have characters you can still name and savour? Yes I know he writes caricature and he's lousy on female characters (women are usually saints or monsters) but it's the dazzling techniques that bear studying.

Forster is completely different. Where Dickens uses the brilliant pencilsketch, waking his characters up with hard energy, Forster uses techniques of painstaking assembly of individual psychology. The fully-rounded character. It's a painting, slowly and carefully put together.

Who is going to argue that either of these approaches is right or wrong? I'm saying the first thing to do is to be clear about what you are trying to achieve, otherwise our methods might be at odds with our talents.

On a more personal note, I think mimicry must help writers, even if your mimicry isn't very good: it trains observation of small but revealing traits and it improves your ear for dialogue. Some of Dickens' great characters are memorable not because of the way they behave, but purely because of how they speak. (*Barkis is willin'*.) Small traits are far more convincing than the colour of someone's eyes or the cut of someone's hair.

And since I've been granted permission to pontificate on the subject: I deplore the current vogue of naming everyone's wardrobe. I want to puke every time I see another reference to Armani suits and Gucci shoes. Yes, it shows their economic status blah blah, but it's a lazy substitute for real character writing, the aim of which is to offer a glimpse into someone's inner-life. It's an 80s thing, all presentation and no substance.

In my own writing I like to flatter myself that I go for the quick sketch, the bold pencil stroke around a character, rather than lots of descriptive details. Some readers have a problem with visualising and want to know eye and hair colour, height etc. But I think it's more revealing to describe a woman with hastily-applied mascara than to say her eyes are an exquisite shade of hazel. Or to say that a man has egg on his tie rather than to say he bought it from Yves St Laurant. I'll stop now. I'm starting to hear myself rant!

Gwyneth Jones
Characters and How They Grow

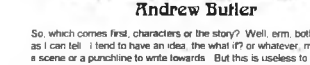
A lot of writers will tell you that synopses are bunk. Nobody really uses a synopsis, it's just a little device for getting a publisher to agree to finance your book. At best a synopsis is a kind of egg-tooth, that gives the book a start in life and is instantly discarded. I don't work like that. Any book of mine starts life as a story that I know well (not infrequently, a story filched from folklore, or some other kind of sacred text, or from the romantic fiction of a generation or two ago). Like any story worthy of the name, mine can be told as an anecdote: as gossip, in a few minutes. This is the story that I write down first. It becomes my synopsis. The sequence of events remains more or less fixed from that point, and so does the *dramatic action* of the characters. Their parts are set, they are puppets of a fixed storyline. As I've often explained to people, (and it fascinates me to look back and discover how far it is really true): I always know *what's* going to happen, but the *why* develops, and makes the difference between an anecdote and a novel. The same goes for characters. I always know what my characters have to do. I find out why by degrees. It's the process of working out motivation that feels right (no more technical term would be truthful) that makes my characters feel real to me (I can't speak for my readers).

People say that it is impossible to write a political novel with 'real people in it'. The characters merely express the political sentiments of the writer, they mouth tracts instead of engaging in real conversations, they act in stereotypical ways according to the book's partyline. I contest this. I'd point out that political opinions don't arise from nowhere. Real people in real life come to feel bitter about social injustice, resentful of sexual oppression, just the same as real people fall in love, get drunk, get angry, feel patriotic, get starry-eyed about the terraforming of Mars, or whatever I'd like to refer you to a book that's been an illumination to me: it's called **The Poetics Of Space** by Gaston Bachelard (the book I have is a translation: by Marie Holas, Beacon Press, Boston USA). It's about (among other things) referring supposedly 'abstract' thought to its human, physical origins. Bachelard points out simple things like: before anyone could formalise the idea of a sphere, there had to be a much vaguer, more blurry idea of roundness, in other words, intellectual ideas are not somehow intrinsically separate from ordinary human life. How could they be? There's no other ground they could come from. They have to be lived before they are formalised: why shouldn't they live in a story of mine?

I don't know. If this would work for anybody else but Bachelard gives me a sense of connection between the 'artificial' business of inventing a plot, and having puppets who do this and that to make the plot (whether or not it is making a political point) go forward – and the apparently contradictory activity of trying to depict characters who will seem like 'natural' people to the reader.

Another way of looking at it: my synopsis marks out my playing field: this is the arbitrary grid which – because it doesn't always hang together – forces me to develop my characters into more 'natural' complexity. I often find myself in an impasse – as who does not? – where it suddenly becomes obvious that such and such a sequence of events does not make sense. Why should she believe him when he tells her X..? If he had the sense of a flatworm he wouldn't go through that door. But she has to believe the unlikely tale, and he has to open the dreadful door, or my plot goes bust – and *I never change my plot* not for no one. (Well, hardly ever). So off I go, looping around, inventing little cutlpces of childhood trauma, quirks of obstinacy, whatever, to make the absurd into the necessary. Complexity is not randomness. But the imposition of a random set of rules (and my plot is to my characters as 'random' as any happenstance of your normal life: *they* don't know what's going on) is a good way to get an effect that mimics complexity.

I'm a low impact writer. I don't work things out, beyond the synopsis. I don't get things right first time, I don't (not often) wrestle in thought these days. I just write the thing over and over again, in the hope that accidentally I'll stumble over a satisfying solution (one of the solutions) to the puzzle. The same goes for characters. I don't invent them as people. I invent them as a set of actions – a particular shaped space within the structure of the story: *the sulky hero, the wise courtesan*. Then I go round and round that space, like one of those little plastic spirograph things, in my redrafting and gradually, magically, the reiteration of arbitrary looking lines becomes a pattern: a pattern that feels to me like a person. What it seems like to the reader, is the reader's business. I don't know about that.



Andrew Butler

So, which comes first, characters or the story? Well, erm, both, as far as I can tell. I tend to have an idea, the what if? or whatever, maybe even a scene or a punchline to write towards. But this is useless to me until I know my central character.

This is not to say that I need to be able to write this character from the inside, as an 'I'. I used to get bored writing stories in the first person. As I recall this was the result of some "How to Write" manual or other, where the author expressed displeasure at seeing the "upright pronoun" scattered across the page. (Whilst naively taking all this on board, I never asked why he was writing about personal experience in the first person). However I seem to have grown out of this fad, and find that I now write - if not in the first person - focalised through a major character. I worry about the first person still; when is the story being written?

So, a focal character. But which one? The novel **One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest** is written from the point of view of Chief Broom, a half Native American Indian, paranoid schizophrenic, who imagines green slime dripping from the walls, fog machines and a sinister conspiracy to take over America by something called the Combine. The style of the narration reflects his changing mental health. The movie – perhaps wisely – jettisons this, choosing to centre on McMurphy, as played by Jack Nicholson. Chief Broom is still there, but the audience does not know until part way through that Broom is shamming being deaf and dumb. If the novel were to be rewritten from the point of view of Nurse Ratched, it would be quite different again. Compare for example **The Wide Sargasso Sea** to **Jane Eyre**.

It is clear that the choice of a focal character is dependent on what you want to write. I find myself using a sort of displacement technique, where my narrator is talking about events happening to other characters telling their story – in fact the narrator is revealing more about herself or himself, in terms of prejudices, feelings and fears.

Once I've – if you will – identified my focal character, then the rest follows. I find myself following a particular "rhythm" of speech, of paragraphs, of scenes, which then governs the overall style of the story I am writing. If I'm blocked, I tend to find that I've chosen the wrong focal character. It also means that I find myself intensely annoyed by stones which change viewpoints in their final paragraph. It feels as if the rug has been pulled out from under my feet, that I've been cheated, that the author hasn't played fair.

But this still doesn't describe how I create my characters. To be honest, I don't know. I suppose most of them are dictated by the requirements of the story, together with a desire to avoid stereotypes if at all possible. These are usually filtered through the consciousness of my focal character. And how do I create her or him? I guess this comes from a particular obsession at the time of writing the story, which is usually linked to my original what if?; as I have written, both character and story evolve together and cannot be separated.

Writing about characters – Gillian Rooke

...It is a long time since I started a book, with fresh characters and I've almost forgotten what it's like. The characters I'm currently using were invented years ago. Of course they've changed. But I couldn't begin to say how! I suppose I've had characters for short stories, but the story always comes first. The character is just someone to tell the tale through. I think this is the way it should be for short stories. The story has to be more important than the character. For books? Optional! I should think. Everyone works in a different way. Hark at me with these clichés! I have been accused of cruelty to characters, because I just sweep on with the action and if they can't adapt they perish. I should really try to write a book about the world adapting to a character, perhaps that'll be the subject of my next book. Hmm. Though come to think of it I have already done that to a large extent, had one man create his world and put real people in it. But in a very SF sense. Should try it in a more serious novel.

I seldom get deeply involved with my characters. Only one, I based on a young man I was currently keen on. I am told it shows. So, characters are a problem for me because I am a very unemotional sort of person. I can get worked up about the idiocy that goes on in the world but I very seldom get worked up about individual people, in any way. It is difficult for me to focus on individuals other than as actors. I see their emotional response to situations, but from outside, like watching on a stage. I visualize my scenes very strongly. So much so that I often trip over myself trying to put the stage directions in without interfering with the dialogue.

I probably would not get very far, analysing how I develop characters. Shall I try analysing how you develop them? What does it say in the text books. Characters have to be based on someone, are all either autobiographical aspects of your own personality, or aspects of the personalities – or indeed out and out portraits – of people you know. Do you get friends saying "Am I in the book? Ooh" thumbing through. "Who am I?" Sickening isn't it? And they won't believe you when you tell them they're not in it! They've obviously read the textbook, or seen a lot of soaps.

The easiest, the most usual thing to do, is to write about Everyperson with a little of oneself thrown in, for the protagonist and one's friends or enemies for the other roles. There is an easy convention in most books that don't aspire to being The Great Novel that the hero should be immediately recognisable, and should do and like all the sort of things that everyone does and likes. There should of course be things about them that make them an 'interesting character', but these are always tacked onto a framework of normality, even when they don't fit very well.

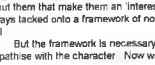
But the framework is necessary for enabling the audience to empathise with the character. Now we don't empathise with all the people we see around us. A large section will be 'our sort of people' but there will also be a large section who are not, whose viewpoints we will never be able to see, whose whole weltanschauung is as alien to us as a Martian's. What if we were to be given a book to read about such a character? Heavy reading! But why aren't there more books about such characters if there are many such characters and if some of them write? I think the answer is, that whatever weird ideas the author has, however much we might hate them if we met them, their character is going to be a very watered down, a 'normalised' version of themselves, because that is what happens in books. The character always turns out more normal than the author. I know mine are! Someone who is 'different' has to struggle very hard to create a character as different as themselves. In fiction there are not the glaring divisions that are found between people in real life. It isn't deliberate. It is just that in fiction one touches the myths that draw people together, the roots of common humanity.

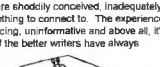
Characters – Justina Robson

People never act without motivation, an active one which they stand to gain by having, however a circular route they may seem to take. It is often argued that in SF the ideas are the most important element and that sacrifices can be tolerated in character for the sake of their clarity and impact. Some of the more popular SF novels appear to subscribe to this view and it is one of the long standing reasons why SF is not taken at all seriously by the looming crowds of the literary critics. It is a treatment that does nobody any favours, projecting futures in which there are no people and no human concerns and so one which is almost wholly irrelevant.

Character and plot are the same thing. Characters are not things which do the plot. The plot is a map of their progressions and regressions which are both inevitable and surprising in good writing. Any amount of interesting ideas are so much horseshit unless they are relevant to someone, unless they affect someone.

This is particularly important in SF as much of the ideas that are being articulated are complex and difficult, combined with the complications of non-existent scenarios. In SF all that we have to anchor us are the human characters (aliens and AIs being humans wearing peculiar anoraks). If the characters are shoddily conceived, inadequately gestated and stillborn then there is nothing to connect to. The experience of reading a book is alienating, distancing, uninformative and above all, it's as boring as hell. Fortunately most of the better writers have always known this...





Dr Greenland's Prescription

Lisa Tuttle is right: reading people on a page is pretty much like reading them in real life. You look for clues, cues. "When you meet a stranger, look at his shoes," advises Michael Stipe, and a thousand grandmothers. Clothes, expression, volume. Especially you listen to what they say.

"If the board can't understand that that cyborg is an insult to everyone working in this building," he said, "then I've nothing to say to them."

Writing characters, what you're doing is feeding readers those clues, paying them out one by one.

* * *

How does someone talk? What words do they use? People who say "486 palmtop with 30k" are offering one kind of clue, people who say "Are you comfy there?" are offering another.

"The next time he comes into my office asking for help, I shall ignore him. I shall completely ignore him."

Dialogue is crucial, whether you use a little or a lot, but unless your fiction tends towards the form of drama, it mustn't carry the whole weight. Characters who go about explaining themselves all the time are offering another kind of clue, and it may not be the impression you need them to give.

A speech is an action. It is something a character does, deliberately for effect or inadvertently, blurting something out. What they say helps define them. So does how they say it.

I don't just mean adverbs, though they are an important device. Go back to the first example, the bit about the cyborg, and put one of the following after he said: *heavily, rapidly, in an undertone.*

* * *

How does a character act? Think about it this way: every action comes complete and with motive and manner.

Motive is characterization. If you take a character's viewpoint, be it for a whole book or a single scene – if you let us understand them, whether they understand themselves or not – you can show motive by thought, a feeling, a memory, or any combination.

He was thinking about the Ganymede contract. He had no doubt at all he had been personally slighted.

* * *

Manner can be many different kinds of clue, different kinds of writing. It can be physical description:

His face was red, his chin tilted up. His glass was in his hand, though it had been empty for fifteen minutes. His eyes were still perfectly focused; in fact there was a look of glee in them.

(Steve Gallagher is right too, a little of this goes a long way.)

* * *

Manner can be motion:

He was on his way out of the door. But he could not turn and go without a gesture, to make his point.

Just as we latch on to discrepancies in real people, thinking of truth as some Freudian inner nature hidden by manners and customs and inhibitions, and revealed by inconsistencies – so too in fiction a good place to put the characterization is in that gap between intention and action, between. If you like, what someone says and what they do. "'If it's all right, everything's under control,' said Chris, dropping the teapot lid into the kettle." That man who's so incensed by the cyborg, if he did

declare his feelings in an undertone, is he really quite as bold as he wants us to think?

* * *

The manner of an action can even be a piece of landscape. This is Pentecost, head gardener at Gormenghast. He is outdoors in the early dawn:

Above Pentecost the cedars, like grant charcoal drawings, suddenly began to expose their structure, the layers of flat foliage rising ber above ber, their edges ribbed with sunrise

Pentecost turned his back upon the castle and made his way through the cedars, leaving in his wake upon the glittering blotches of the dew, black imprints of feet that turned inwards. As he walked it seemed that he was moving into the earth

(Mervyn Peake, **Titus Groan**)

This walk, which at this moment is pretty much all we know about him, almost turns him into a gnome, inturned feet suggesting inturned personality, dark against the emerging sunlight and the glitter of the dew, he turns *away from* the castle and the treetops, *towards* the earth.

* * *

As Peake's deliberate, elaborate style demonstrates, the impression a character makes on the reader is as much a matter of how you present them as how they act:

He toasted me triumphantly with his empty glass. I could see the smear of his fingerprints on it, the sticky half-circle where it had been in his mouth

"I think you're over-reacting," I said

There, we're likely to agree with the narrator. A hint of physical distaste distances us from the man with the glass: the glamour claimed by the adverb *triumphantly* is dismissed by the mean, banal details that follow.

* * *

Then you can go back to dialogue, to set the seal on the character as the scene closes:

"So be it!" he said, and off he went, shouldering his way through the crowd to the door.

Writing a first novel Sally-Ann Melia

I have no qualification for writing this article other than I have just finished my first 135,000 word, science fiction novel.

The common reaction I hear when I mention my writing is: 'Yes, I've always wanted to write a novel, too.' Even my closest friends and relatives seem to think there's nothing to it. So for all you would be novelists, here are some pearls of wisdom, produced, as you will have guessed, after two years of gut-wrenching toil.

Why write a novel? In fact, I set out to write a short story and 10,000 words later realised that the tale refused to be told in less than 6,000 words. Worse, I felt the urge to go back and add in some further detail. A full length novel beckoned.

Where do I get my ideas? I have read many texts on writing, including Michael Legat's **Writing for Pleasure and Profit** and Brian Stableford's **The Way to Write Science Fiction**. All suggest carrying a notebook to jot down ideas. This never worked for me, resulting in disjointed words and meaningless sentences. The best advice I heard came from an artist who spoke of 15 minute sketches he made whilst on holiday, on the train, waiting in the car, wherever... A brief sketch and a paragraph description, that's all it takes to conjure up the memory and the scene. It may not be a plot waiting to be written but it will add some colour to an otherwise dull passage.

Planning is also a good idea but not necessarily in the answer plan format taught in school. Judicious use of cutting and pasting stretched my initial 10,000 words into the first ten chapters. As the plot thickened, charts, skeleton calendars and timetables allowed me to ensure the correct action triggers were in place early in the narrative and helped to track my principal characters through a whirlwind of events.

As for the characters themselves, I loved my heros, eating, sleeping and breathing their everyday concerns. It was more difficult to overcome an instinctive dislike of the bad guys. Still, the reader needs to know! So I plunged into their heads to taste their motivations and personal histories. Flat, black characters took on new depth and breadth.

Busting worlds and describing fantastic locations has got to be the greatest joy of the science fiction genre and the principal reason you'd want to write sf. I believe if your tale could be written in Tudor England or pre world war II Japan, you'd be better accepting the constraints of those eras rather than write a science fiction novel just so your hero can zoom in to save the damsel in distress. Indeed, good sf is probably more restrictive than the real world; consider Charles Platt's words in *Interzone* 40: "When I want a dose of the sense of wonder that science fiction is famous for, I now turn to non-science fiction to find it." Satellite tv has beamed so much that is extraordinary into our front lounge, it is difficult to know where sf should be heading to go where no man has gone before.

Watertight plot, interesting characters and realistic new worlds all take time to research and develop. Time is also required to physically transpose the words onto paper. My 135,000 words cost me most of my leisure time over the last 18 months and like Brian Stableford I am the first to sing the praises of my partner. In retrospect, it seems less of an achievement, just to have written it all down. So, to the beginner a word of reassurance: yes, you'll get there, so pace yourself. It will pay off when you have to do revision.

You have just typed 'THE END'. You know there may be a few spelling mistakes. How long will it take to perfect the manuscript – a couple of hours, a weekend, six months? I believe I became a writer in the four months since December 1990 when I revisited my novel with a view to publication. I was no longer writing for me or for my characters; I was writing for the unknown reader.

The first step is to revise the plot. J R R Tolkien, on completing **The Lord of the Rings**, spoke of rewriting the entire book backwards. Indeed, you will know the broad conclusion to your novel from the start. How you get there is another matter. Consider how Tolkien introduced minor character Prince Faramir first in Rivendell then several times in **The Two Towers**, before he crucially meets Frodo at the start of **The Return of the King**.

Now cross-examine your characters. Are they all necessary? I trimmed a star cast of eight down to five to ease understanding and sharpen up the action. I also eliminated several minor characters, and made one or two people reappear. What about names? Barbarella may seem an ideal name to you, but what image would it conjure up for the reader?

Dialogue is it necessary? Whilst Arnold Schwarzenegger is probably an extreme case, the most memorable speech normally fits on the back of a postcard. Think of the carefully crafted chats in Douglas Adams' **Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy** – not a word too many and every line a quote!

Now to the nuts and bolts of your craft: grammar and spelling. Are you clear on the difference between besides/beside; then/than, lent/leant even its/it's? Do you know when to use '.'? I spelt embarrassed, recognised and meter incorrectly throughout my text and had close to 300 changes to make. Do you have any favourite words or adjectives? I found several nouns and adjectives appearing on every page, in every paragraph. With my thesaurus I thinned the repeated words out. I was also consistent in my incorrect grammar, with the same error reappearing with regular monotony throughout the text.

'Cut your darlings' is a phrase often quoted. My own weakness was an inclination towards lyrical prose that ran on and on for close to 500 words without punctuation. The worst part was I had worked for hours choosing adjectives and verbs to improve the sound of the phrase without realising it was totally incomprehensible. Adjectives had to come out, full stops had to go in. Ouch, that hurts!

And so to print... It's all very well publishers disliking dot matrix printouts, but my finances don't stretch to a laser and my daisy-wheel takes three minutes per page. After installing margins, headers, footers and double spacing, 135,000 words fills 505 pages or close to 24 hours crunched over a whirling printer. Actually, this proved to be a blessing in disguise; I proof-read each page one last time, hot off the press, and found errors that had slipped through the previous checking process. In all, I spent 3 months, 12 type ribbons, 2 new daisy wheels and over 700 pages to print the entire manuscript.

The harshest blow was to realise that publishers would assess my masterpiece on the basis of sample chapters. Which chapters? Having spent two years writing a novel, I faced the fact that editors might not get any further than the synopsis. Need I say I sweated blood over those last 1,000 words? By the way, there're no guidelines as to the right way to write an outline. I wrote an extended back-of-the-book blurb and I've still got my fingers crossed!

I posted the sample chapter and synopsis today. I'm not unduly optimistic, and I also sent a SAE for return. In the end, I was glad to see it go. It has been an immense pleasure completing this first work and despite some of the harsh advice above, I offer my joy as encouragement to others toiling in anguished solitude. Whilst the revision will break your heart, what delight to feel the breath of your character on your neck. You turn to see him standing there, reading each word as it appears on the screen. Your eyes meet. With an embarrassed smile, you read your hero's accusation: 'why are you doing this to me?'

Science fiction is still held in contempt by critics who believe that the essence of literary art is characterisation, and by literary snobs of every other stripe. As with all genres, outsiders tend to judge sf by its worst examples rather than by its best, and it is easily parodied. Its apologists usually deploy arguments in its favour that these opponents do not consider relevant. The apologists say that an appreciation of sf helps to adapt people mentally to a fast-changing world, or that it allows us to explore the emotional consequences of implementing new technologies, or that it warns us against the awful dangers that the future holds, and thus helps us to avoid them. Arguments of this kind, however plausible, cut no ice with those who think that literature is or ought to be an end in itself and not an instrument of psychological or social adaptation.

You will be unsurprised to learn that I am on the side of the apologists. I want to argue that science fiction writing, although it is in some respects a difficult skill to cultivate, is a rewarding and valuable enterprise, because sf is capable of addressing certain moral questions which warrant careful consideration, but which cannot easily be accommodated by any other kind of fiction.

All stories are engaged with questions of morality, simply because a fictional world, whose rewards and punishments are distributed by a calculating author, cannot help but manifest a moral order that is conspicuously lacking in the real world. Different genres of fiction – by virtue of the specific apparatus of ideas, characters and settings that each deploys – tend to engage different questions of moral order, and engage them in different ways. Science fiction is capable of getting forthrightly to grips with certain problems in moral philosophy which other kinds of fiction can confront only with difficulty, if at all.

One of the most fundamental questions of moral philosophy is how a moral community ought to be defined. To which other entities do we owe moral consideration, and why? In their involvement with this question most stories are hamstrung by their attachment to mundane circumstance. Mundane fiction can ask whether animals have rights and it can present case studies relating to the welfare of the unborn, but it cannot do what moral philosophers have increasingly found themselves forced to do, which is to move beyond mundane examples and ask questions about hypothetical cases.

Fantastic fictions – and it is worth noting that most of the fables and parables produced in order to encapsulate the moral wisdom of preliterate cultures are fantasies featuring non-human characters – are far more flexible than mundane fictions. But magical fantasy, which typically addresses moral problems in a fabular or allegorical fashion, is still restricted by comparison with science fiction, whose vocabulary includes a wide spectrum of hypothetical entities, including sentient machines and alien beings.

The question of whether, or under what conditions, we would owe moral consideration to an alien or an android may seem to be lacking in everyday practical relevance, and of course it is – but if we are to work out a proper definition of what is moral and what is not, and to decide what it is that entitles other entities to moral consideration, then we must get to grips with such hypothetical issues. If we are properly to pose the question of what it is which determines whether another entity should or should not belong to our moral community, then we cannot do so without reference to scientifictional constructs like intelligent machines and alien beings. It is no surprise to find that modern exercises in moral philosophy are frequently rich in sciencefictional imagery, because the questions which they address demand it. I do not say simply that sf stories are useful in this regard, I say that they are necessary.

Another moral question – one of considerable importance in political philosophy – with which sf is uniquely fitted to deal, is the question of what we can or ought to mean by the word 'progress'. The tasks that confront the hero of a story are rarely of relevance to the hero alone. What we mean by 'hero', in fact – and there are female heroes as well as male ones – is someone whose virtuous activities are carried out on behalf of others, raising signposts in the direction of social well-being. A hero, in short, embodies some notion of progress. One can speak of progress in respect of the individual, the tribe or the nation, but nowadays the word usually refers to all humanity – the possibility of future improvement in the condition of the whole world. Although the hero of a story does not often accomplish a reconstruction on this sort of scale, his or her own endeavours may serve as a model for it, and as an affirmation of its possibility. We do not cheer for heroes because they achieve personal success, but because their exploits exemplify a kind of success that we desire collectively, and because we glimpse in a hero's actions the possibility of a better way of life for all.

Just as those philosophers who have tried to determine what it is that entitles an entity to inclusion in a moral community have been inexorably drawn to the deployment of hypothetical entities, so political philosophers who have tried to determine what projects human beings ought to undertake for their collective betterment have been inexorably drawn to the deployment of hypothetical societies – to the imagery of Utopia. At one time such discussions focused entirely on matters of political order and justice, but the idea of moral progress has in the last two hundred years become inextricably bound up with the idea of technological progress, and it is this relationship that makes sf so important as an instrument for the investigation of questions of progress.

The hypothetical societies of the future, and the heroes who embody their dynamic aspects, are impossible to reach through the media of mundane fiction and magical fantasy; only science fiction can confront the myriad hypothetical futures that are conceivable outgrowths of the present. For this reason, the moral questions implicit in the political task of steering the human world into a future replete with threats and opportunities – questions that have become desperately urgent in recent times because of the rapidly-accelerating pace of technological development – are routinely addressed in sf. What the heroes of sf do, whether their project is to save or destroy, or merely to survive within the societies in which they move, always has implications for the collective decisions real people must make about how to use the technologies which are emerging and evolving around them. There is no more urgent question facing the people of a world which is confronted by a host of possible catastrophes, than the question of how best to foster progress, how best to make use of the opportunities that the advancement of science will open up for us. Again, I do not say simply that sf stories are useful in this regard; I say that they are necessary.

I believe, passionately, that the time has come when people must be prepared to give up the dangerous illusion that the universe already has a set of built-in moral commandments. I think that we should now recognise that the bounds of our moral community and the proper direction of progress are decisions that we have to make, not discoveries that we may make by consulting the appropriate scriptures or stone tablets. In a fast-changing world – a world where further moral and technological progress is not merely possible but absolutely vital if we are to survive – we cannot afford the kind of moral tyranny that most religions are avid to impose upon us.

Not all religions are equally pernicious in terms of the extent to which they try to short-circuit moral debate, but insofar as religion has served as a generator of dogma and moral absolutism, the hijacking of moral philosophy by religion has been a terrible catastrophe – arguably the worst catastrophe in human history. Attempts to justify notions of good and evil by attaching them to the commandments of imaginary gods have certainly succeeded to some extent in holding moral anarchy at bay, but any apology for religion mounted on those grounds must also take into account the fact that wars of religion and crusades aimed at the extirpation of heresy have created suffering on a scale so frightful that it hardly bears contemplation.

There are, of course, many stories that have been written in order to support one religious dogma or another, and the scriptures of various religions are heavily seasoned with exemplary stories. All fiction, though, by its very nature, stands in a problematic relationship to religion, because religion's main line of defence against scepticism is an insistence on absolute truth. The idea of using fiction as an instrument of moral investigation does not fit in well with fundamentalist views – a fact luridly dramatised by the late Ayatollah Khomeini's response to Salman Rushdie's novel **The Satanic Verses**.

Science Fiction stands in a more problematic relationship to religion than other literary genres, not so much because individual sf stories present a rigorously secularised view of the universe – *that* ambition is, alas, very frequently compromised – but because when sf is viewed *as a genre* it cannot help but deny and defy the disease of faith. No matter how many individual sf writers may fall prey to that disease, becoming would-be prophets instead of speculators, sf taken as a whole will always declare that there is a multitude of possible futures, and that the past of actual history is one of a multitude of alternative histories-that-might-have-been.

Due to its multifariousness, sf is intrinsically antithetical to the kind of closed thinking that is enshrined in religious fundamentalism. The moral order of sf as a genre is logically incompatible with the kind of thinking that declares that there is only one proper path for the individual and humanity, and that adherents of other ways are blasphemers who should be put to death. This is a virtue, and it is a virtue which we desperately need in a world where religious and tribal intolerance generate war, terrorism, hatred and misery on a huge scale. For this reason too, I believe, sf that is conscientiously and skilfully done should be seen not merely as something intellectually respectable, but as something entirely admirable.

These are the reasons why I write science fiction, and why I think that what I do is worthwhile.

The Cost of Skills by Cherith Baldry

Andreas Harel was thankfully bringing his beginners' class to a close. He still found it difficult to think of himself as a teacher. For all the solemnity with which the five children gazed at him, he could not get rid of the impression that they found him funny.

He had been trying to teach the group how to mindspeak. For all the Skilled, there was a barrier between the sensation of screaming into an empty cavern, and the swift means of communication, natural as breathing, that lay beyond. Two of his students had crossed that barrier, and Andreas was giving some exercises for the others to practise when he was brought up short by a great ache of love and longing surging into his mind, unbalancing him completely for the few seconds it took him to realise where the sensation was coming from.

"Viv?" he mindspoke, unable to stifle a note of amusement. Vivian, his telepathic Partner, had no idea of the power of his own mind.

"Steady, love. I've got a class in here."

"Oh, Andreas, I'm so sorry."

Vivian's voice was shaken; his emotions changing rapidly to dismay, and then fading, as he remembered to suppress their link.

"Doesn't matter," Andreas replied. *"I'll be up in a few minutes."* Recovering, he glared round at the class.

"And what have you got to snigger about?" he asked.

When he had dismissed them, he hurried back to the room he shared with Vivian. At the foot of the stairs, a voice halted him.

"Andreas."

For that voice, he would always stop and turn. Merissa Vair, director of the school at the White Lodge.

"How did the class go?" she asked him.

Andreas shuddered.

"Horrible."

Merissa permitted herself a faint smile.

"You'll get used to it. You were just as bad as that, if not worse. And now you're going to see Vivian?"

Andreas nodded. He knew what was coming.

"Remember what I said to you."

He might have chosen to forget, but there was no withstanding that imperious gaze.

"Yes, Merissa."

When Andreas finally reached their room, his Partner was still in bed, sitting up against a mound of pillows. His breakfast tray was on a table beside him. Andreas filched a roll, and sat down on the end of Vivian's bed. Vivian looked up at him, shyly welcoming.

"I'm sorry, Andreas," he repeated. "I... I just wanted you. I forgot."

"It's all right."

Andreas could not get over an inward, shaken feeling when he looked at Vivian, and saw him emerging, like a bright butterfly out of its cocoon, from the misery of his life before they met.

"If I've been good for anything," he thought quietly, "it's for that."

It was only four days since they had struggled into the White Lodge, with Vivian at the point of death. In his life before Andreas found him, he had been hideously abused, tormented in mind and body, and the journey to the White Lodge had taken the last of his strength. But Andreas knew he had been right to make the effort to get him here. There was nowhere else he knew of where Vivian would be safe, and would learn to use his abilities. He would never be alone again.

Andreas could scarcely believe yet that their Partnership was real, that Vivian was his, to care for, to protect. He felt that the least careless thought or word would spoil the brightness that had entered his life. That was what made him reluctant to broach what Merissa had told him to say. He knew Vivian would be disturbed, perhaps frightened, and yet there was no way of avoiding it.

"Viv," he began, and stopped.

Vivian said nothing, but Andreas felt a little questioning pulse through the link. He reached for Vivian's hand, and as he did so he noticed the marks of bruising, almost faded now, and a scar, still not properly healed, reaching form the wrist almost to the elbow. His stomach knotted when he wondered how Vivian might have got it.

"Does that still hurt?" he asked.

Vivian looked bewildered.

"Not – not really."

"Watch."

He laid his fingertips on the scar, not missing the slight flinching that Vivian tried to hide. He massaged gently; Vivian had his eyes on Andreas' face at first, and did not see what was happening.

"Watch," Andreas repeated.

The remains of the bruising had already vanished. The scar was fading, the puckered edges of flesh smoothing out and drawing together. Vivian tried to say something, all that came out was a low, inarticulate sound from his throat. He was rigid, staring.

"Don't be frightened," Andreas said.

At last it was over. The scar was gone; there was no sign that it had ever been there. Vivian let out a long, shaken breath.

"Andreas, how did you–"

"You did it," Andreas interrupted. Now that the first, and worst, hurdle was over, he could relax into a smile. "It's your healing Skill. Now that we're linked, I can use it too."

Vivian was silent for a long time. Andreas waited patiently. At last Vivian asked, "Do you mean I can do that?"

"That's what I'm teaching you."

Another silence. At last: "I want to try."

Andreas grinned with relief. Through all that Vivian had suffered, his mind had never completely succumbed; a little thing like this was not going to subdue it for long.

"All right," he said. "Listen. You can't heal yourself. At least, I never heard of a healer who could. The power has to go out of you to someone else. Or I can draw on it, the way I did just now."

Vivian listened carefully.

"But what do I have to do?"

"Look at this." He held out his hand. Two angry red lines were scored across the back of it. "I tangled with one of Merissa's wretched cats this morning. *Not* for demonstration purposes! See what you can do."

Vivian reached out, placed his fingertips very lightly on the scratches. His eyes, wide and intense, were fixed on Andreas. Through the link, Andreas could feel his agitation, and pity for his pain.

"Only a cat-scratch, love!" he said in mindspeech, and aloud, "Reach into yourself. *Want* it healed."

Vivian drew his fingers down the line of the scratches. Where they had passed, the hand was firm and whole again, unmarked except for a faint silvery line that faded rapidly. He shrank back, hands pressed to his mouth, fear surging over him now. Andreas leant forward and gripped his shoulders.

"It's all right. Steady, Viv. It's all right." He poured out reassurance through the link; gradually Vivian relaxed and sank back against his pillows, trembling a little.

"What... what will it do?" he asked.

"Well, there are limits. You can't regrow a missing limb. And nobody has managed to find a cure for death, not yet. But you can heal wounds, cure most diseases – and so can I, now we're Partnered. Merissa will teach us more. She's a healer herself. She just asked me to break it to you, she thought it would be a shock."

"She was right," Vivian murmured. He fell into silence, thinking deeply. Andreas watched him affectionately. The experience had tired him; it would be a long time before he recovered all his strength.

Thinking of that made Andreas remember that the scar he had healed was not the only one. Vivian must still be in some pain.

"Turn over and let me do your back," he suggested.

Hesitantly, Vivian obeyed; Andreas drew down the covers.

"You won't be cold?"

"No."

Andreas had been feeling pleased with himself, congratulating himself on a successful morning's work, and he was not prepared for a really close look at what had been done to Vivian. His back was laced with scars, some old, some more recent. There was still some bruising, and what looked like a burn mark across one shoulder. Andreas sat still, shaken to the depths; his hands lightly on Vivian's shoulders, unable to go on. Vivian, with his empathic Skill, could not be unconscious of Andreas' distress. He raised his head, and then turned, half sitting up. Suddenly they were clinging together. Andreas was beyond controlling his grief, and anger, and compassion.

"Oh, God, Viv, how did you bear it?"

He could feel Vivian's heightened distress, but along with it, the healing touch of his love.

"Andreas, don't," he murmured in mindspeech. *"Please. It's over. You took me away from it."*

"I'll kill anyone who touches you."

"No. No more pain. It's over."

Andreas drew back, they were both shaking, both close to tears.

"What on earth am I doing?" he said unevenly. "I'm supposed to be looking after you, not upsetting you like this. Come on, lie down; I'll get it right this time. Go to sleep if you want."

Vivian gave him a doubtful look. "Can you still...?"

"Yes. We're linked, Viv, we're Partners, nothing can stop us using each other's Skills. Lie down and rest. Merissa will tell me if she sees what I've done to you."

Vivian obeyed, smiling tremulously. Andreas, gritting his teeth this time at the sight of the scars, reached out for his Partner's healing Skill, and began.

❋

A few evenings later, the senior students were all in Merissa's sitting room. Hal had been playing the harp. Vivian, curled up on the cushioned settle, let out a long sigh.

"That was beautiful."

Hal grinned at him. "Teach you if you like."

Vivian's face was suddenly vibrant with delight. Andreas, watching him, felt an acute awareness that was almost pain. Vivian was stronger now, well enough to be up and dressed, in the cream-coloured woollen robe that all the students wore. His hair gleamed dark gold in the lamplight. He had been playing with one of the kittens, scion of the cat that had attacked Andreas, and the tiny creature had clawed its way up his front and attached itself under his chin like a furry brooch.

"Could I really?" he asked, then Andreas felt his delight suddenly falter.

"What's the matter?"

Vivian turned to him. He was reluctant, at first, to speak when everyone was listening to him. He looked faintly absurd; very young and earnest, ensnared by the cat.

"It hardly seems right – seeing that we're Skilled – to stay here and be happy, when there's such misery in the world."

You've seen your share of that, Andreas thought silently.

"You will not stay here forever."

Merissa's crisp voice came from the corner of the room. She was seated, straight-backed, on a chair at the edge of the light. She had all the authority of a dozen generations of aristocrats, and her own authority, which had nothing whatever to do with that.

"Your task at present is to get well and learn to use your Skills," she went on. "You will leave here eventually, you and Andreas, and find your place in the world." Her voice took on a warmer timbre that Andreas had never heard from her before Vivian came. "Meanwhile, accept your happiness."

Vivian smiled at her, his unquestioning love held out like a gift. "Ridiculous child," Merissa muttered. She rose and put out the lamps. "The evening was officially over, though some of the students would go on talking in their own rooms for hours yet. Hal put his harp away in its case. Everyone was beginning to move when there was a hurried tapping at the door. Merissa opened it; one of the younger students was there, dishevelled and barefoot, with a bed-gown pulled around him.

"Merissa–" he began, before she could ask him if he knew what time it was. "Merissa, there's a light in the sky, over Reed. A red light."

The group of students poured through the hall and out of the main door into the garden. To the north, the sky was suffused with an uneven, red glow.

"Fire," said Merissa.

Back in the hall, she took control, instructing Mari, Hal's twin and his Partner, to stay with the younger students and find bedding and hot food for the villagers who would be homeless; sending the other seniors and the older students for boots and cloaks ready to set out for Reed. On his way to obey her, Andreas grasped Vivian's hands. "You stay here and help Mari."

Vivian's eyes were wide and troubled. "But Andreas, if I can heal, I ought to go with you."

"You're not strong enough."

Merissa came up then, and thrust a pair of boots at Vivian. "See if these fit. Andreas, find him a spare cloak."

"He's not strong enough to go," Andreas repeated.

Merissa had not waited to hear his objections. Vivian stood looking up at him, mutely distressed. Andreas could feel his pain. His Partner was incapable of defying him, but he knew, unquestionably, where he belonged.

"All right," Andreas said roughly. "We all do what Merissa tells us. Wait there for me."

He ran off upstairs to the bedroom. When he returned with the cloaks, Merissa's group was ready by the door. They set out, down the path which led to the river Lythe, and then upstream to the village. Snow was thick on the ground, and more was falling in large soft flakes. Apart from their movement, the night was utterly quiet.

Reed was set in the angle where the Bourne Water met the Lythe. It was not long before they could hear crackle of flame and see sparks being whirled up into the sky. As they drew closer, it seemed as if the whole village was ablaze. They could hear shouting, and see black figures darting about against a background of flame.

Andreas started forward, only to find Merissa beside him, grabbing at his arm.

"No – stay back. You and Vivian, and the other healers. Don't risk yourselves. You'll be needed soon."

Her order made sense. Andreas was glad enough to stay with Vivian, two younger students who had healing Skills, and Merissa herself, while Hal led the others closer to the fire. He watched, imagining that he could feel the same pain and terror that the villagers must be feeling now.

Then he realised, looking at Vivian, that his feelings were not imagination. Vivian, with his empathic Skill, was experiencing it all directly. Vivian realised it at the same moment, and abruptly Andreas' sensations faded as he suppressed the link.

"Don't," Andreas said. "Let me share it with you."

Vivian shook his head obstinately. His eyes were haunted. Andreas put his arms round him, sheltering him under his cloak, and Vivian clung to him.

"Some of them are trapped," he whispered.

He began to cry quietly. Andreas tried to suppress his own helpless anger. No empath should be forced into enduring this, especially someone untrained like Vivian. Then he felt Vivian convulse against him, clutching at him, and for all his efforts to hold it back, a low, anguished cry was torn out of him. At the same instant, with a roar and a swirl of sparks, the roof of one of the nearby houses fell in.

Andreas held Vivian, trying to pour strength and comfort through the link, almost too bemused to respond to Merissa tugging him by the arm. She was pointing to a clear space a little way away, where the villagers and the White Lodge people were bringing the injured. More pain, more fear; but at least now there was something useful they could do.

Andreas lost count of how long they worked. He drew on Vivian's healing Skill, sustaining his Partner so that he could keep going long after his own strength would have failed. His hands moved over burns, firming and shaping. He closed wounds from falling timbers. He cleared smoke from straining lungs. When the injured could walk they were guided back to the White Lodge, while the rest of the villagers and the students fought the fire. Andreas was besmused by noise and glare and darkness, by sparks and snow flurrying together, and the bitter cold.

He stopped at last and looked around him. The fire was dying. And smoke rolled around him. He stood in the middle of an expanse of trampled snow. Not far away, Vivian was crouched over one last shrouded shape, unmoving in the mud. Andreas spoke in mindspeech.

"Vivian – don't–"

Vivian looked up at him as he approached. "He's not dead." His voice was a rough whisper. "I can't... help me."

Andreas dropped to the ground beside him, putting an arm round his shoulders, adding his own strength. In the huddled shape before them he felt a faint quickening.

"He won't die," he said. "Hold on, Viv, just a little."

He felt someone else reinforcing their efforts, and looked up to see Merissa. She looked bedraggled, haggard with weariness, and yet she had not lost a scrap of her authority. She turned, and called, and Hal and some of the others appeared, with a litter to carry the man back to the White Lodge.

"All right," Merissa said. "He'll do. You two can go home now."

Andreas turned to help Vivian to his feet. His Partner reached out to him, and all at once the barrier that he had kept in place all night, shielding Andreas from the horror that he had been enduring, gave way. A great wave of fatigue, and suffering, and pity washed over Andreas, blotting out everything. When his head cleared, it was to see Vivian, with a faint sigh, crumple to the ground beside him.

❋

Andreas and Merissa stood by the bed and looked down at Vivian sleeping.

"There's nothing to worry about," Merissa said. "He needs rest, that's all."

Andreas, still gaunt and filthy from the fight to save the fire victims, looked sombre.

"He felt everything they felt," he said. "The dying, the injured – all of it."

"No one ever said that being Skilled was easy."

The sombre look deepened into pain. "I should have been able to protect him." He was conscious of Merissa's eyes on him, and looked up to meet that uncompromisingly direct stare.

"Andreas, you treat Vivian like a precious glass bowl that will shatter if you take your eyes off it." Her lips compressed; she might have been hiding a smile. "He's not. He's strong. I don't mean physically, but in the mind, and the spirit, where it matters. You heard what he said tonight, before all this started. He wants to give himself. He'll spend himself, pour out everything he has. Your job is going to be making him understand when he has to stop. Not easy, but you should have known that when you linked with him."

"I did," Andreas responded, and added, anguish invading his voice, "He was protecting me."

"Yes, and you have to let him."

She bent over, gave the quilt a parting twitch, and moved away

"I must go down and speak to Man. I suggest you get to bed yourself. No classes tomorrow."

She was gone. Andreas stood looking down at Vivian for several minutes, and then stripped off his mud-soaked clothes and went to the bathing room. When he came back, Vivian was stirring. He looked ruffled and vulnerable, the violet-blue eyes still blurred with sleep.

"Andreas?" he mindspoke softly. "Is everyone all right?"

"Yes." Andreas came to sit beside him on the bed. He meant at first to be reassuring, and then opted for the truth. "At least, all our people. There are four villagers dead -- but you know that don't you?"

Vivian nodded, with a little frown of pain.

"Most of the others are bedded down here somewhere," Andreas went on. "They'll live, though there's still healing work to do." He watched Vivian's face, heart torn at its gravity, until his Partner murmured:

"I was stupid. I thought it was all easy -- safe. It's not, is it -- even here?"

"No, it's not."

"I'm glad we're together."

A faint sigh; the heavy eyelids closing, one hand stretched out in a gesture interrupted by encroaching sleep. Andreas covered it with his own.

"So am I," he said.

The Art of Reading a Review by Paul Kincaid

In 1990, Craig Marnock wrote to **Vector** complaining that of 20 reviews in one issue, 13 had made excessive use of "I". "Most of the reviewers," he said, "appear to be under the impression that the review section is a mirror in which to view themselves."

Are the reviewers at fault? Or is Marnock misreading the reviews?

The problem arises because the reviewer and the reader are aware of two mutually conflicting elements of reviewing. The reader requires an objective assessment of the book. The reviewer realises that any judgement she makes must be, in the last analysis, subjective. So the reviewer compensates by littering the text of the review with "I", "me", "we", and the reader finds that the definitive statement about the book has been undermined.

You see, making an objective statement about a book is an awesome responsibility. It implies that you are in touch with some sort of truth, that what you say is writ in words of stone and will echo down the ages. Until someone comes along and says: you got it wrong.

So the reviewer puts up signposts throughout the text which say I'm not really sure of my own opinion here, but this is what I think, or what I think I think. The personal pronoun is wielded like a shield so that if anyone should criticise the critic, the reviewer can duck behind it and say, it's only my view, you're entitled to make of the book what you will.

But that's not what the reader wants to read. She is after something absolute: this book is good, or this book is bad. Somebody waffling around, saying well I think this book is so-so, but you may not agree, is no use to man nor beast. It certainly doesn't tell her if she should go out and spend a fortune on the trade paperback.

So the canny reader might simply skip over every personal pronoun that litters the text. In 90% of cases that might serve well enough, since in the great majority of instances they serve no purpose other than as a shield for the reviewer. Yet in the remaining 10% of cases they are much more useful than that. They serve as a provider of authority which allows the reader to judge the review more accurately, and so get a better perspective on the book.

"I thought his previous books were crap." provides a reasonable sounding-board of the reviewer's taste. Whether you agree or disagree with the assessment, at least it lets you know where you stand when considering her opinions of the book in question.

Not that there aren't better ways of doing this. "His previous books touched upon..." may sound more authoritative (the passive voice, the convolutions of impersonality, always do tend to sound more authoritative) but all the reviewer is really saying is: "This is my reading of the earlier books..." As with formulations like "He explores such themes as...", the reviewer may be providing a genuinely authoritative reading of the author's work, but authority springs from the evidence she presents to support the point, not from the way she phrases it.

"I thought his previous novels were crap." does not, after all, help you very much if you have never read anything else by the author in question. But "I thought his previous novels were crap because..." allows you to sift through chapter and verse enough to make up your own mind. There is no need to eschew the personal pronoun, then, in order to produce an authoritative review, and in a short review the "I" may be genuinely useful in providing a pointer to such authority.

It can also be useful in providing a warning note. "I know the author and..." may sound as if it is adding authority to the judgement. It isn't. It is inflating the reviewer's ego, positioning her as a member of an elite, a confidante of the famous; and it is warning the reader that these judgements, far from being authoritative, may be suspect. After all, if the reviewer feels called upon to draw attention to her own friendship with the author, can one trust that she will really be willing to draw attention to all the faults in that book? You may pick up some unusual insight on the book from such a review, but it is unlikely that you will get a clear-eyed and impartial assessment.

Impartial, not objective. Which may bring us to the nub of the matter. For is the use of the personal pronoun, the injection of the reviewer into her review, an expression of partiality? When you are reading a review you must constantly question whether the views expressed refer to the book in question or to some broader matter of the reviewer's taste. And in making herself an integral part of the review, will the reviewer be able to keep the two separate? Well, yes. Or, at least, as much as she would have been able to do in an impersonal review. "I hate space opera but I like this example." is as clear an expression of impartiality as we might hope for. Of course, you can't necessarily take the reviewer's protestations as gospel, but her clues are much more subtle than the use of the personal pronoun or not.

Again, you rely mostly on the evidence amassed. Consider yourself a juror listening to the lawyer/critic's submissions. The lawyer might resort to personal anecdote, have a chatty style, refer constantly to "I", "you", "me", or the lawyer might be building a vast, impersonal edifice: in either case it is the evidence used to support her case which will make you decide one way or the other. Only the lawyer who presents no evidence whatsoever is going to lose her case.

So the trick of reading a review is not to worry too much whether the reviewer is saying "I" or "me" or what have you all over the place, but to read what she says between these words? More or less, though there are exceptions. There are always exceptions, however much evidence one might pile up impartially any review in the end comes down to an expression of taste, and where taste is concerned there is nothing absolute. Essentially a reviewer is doing two things: the first is providing a personal but impartial assessment of a book. If the "I"s and "me"s mean that the review is all about the reviewer and says nothing about the book then something has gone drastically wrong somewhere. But you can assess a book and provide the evidence to support your view whether writing personally or impersonally. The trick, as reader, is to sort out what is the evidence, decide whether it supports the claim, and then use it as a basis to arrive at your own judgement.

The other thing a reviewer is doing is writing a piece of literature. It may be only a few hundred words, but it still should inform, entertain and convey ideas. When you're reading a review, therefore, it is perfectly legitimate to howl with outrage if the pronouns get between you and what is being said. It simply means that the reviewer is failing in her duty as a writer. It is, for instance, inexcusable for a critic to decry a writer's prose if her own use of words would make a primary pupil blush with shame. But again it doesn't mean that pronouns should be outlawed: our language has them because they're useful, if used properly. And would you really want every review to be written in an impersonal, passive voice? The direct statement implied by the use of the pronoun can be much more forceful. And in a short review the reviewer needs to be as direct and as economical with the language as possible, at least if she is to allow room for the supporting evidence alongside her critical judgement.

News from the Inner Solar System by David Piper

"After the catastrophic loss of the ozone layer, our poor Home Planet has suffered further troubles," said the news reporter cheerfully. "Observers have indicated that approximately 500,000 dinosaurs have suddenly appeared in what remains of California. They have built elaborate settlements and obviously possess sophisticated technologies. They are two-legged and are estimated to reach five metres in height. They appear to find the climate congenial and spend hours sunbathing. In communications with Lunar City (having learnt English extraordinarily rapidly) they claimed to have travelled from Earth's distant past and demanded our immediate obedience!!!!"

We laughed foolishly, little realising our peril.

The Cassandra Experience - by Stuart Falconer

I wasn't sure what I had let myself in for. On the one hand it sounded like a good idea to attend a writers' workshop, meet other writers and spend a couple of days throwing ideas around. On the other hand I had heard strange stories about what happened at sessions like this. In the notes for one of the Dangerous Visions series, Harlan Ellison had recounted – with what seemed malicious glee – how he liked to browbeat and insult Clarion students into producing their best work. Was this normal? Was this the only known way of turning wanabees into real writers, and could I survive if it was?

On the other hand, this was Cassandra and not Clarion, and the meeting would last a weekend, not six weeks. As further reassurance, I had been exchanging letters with Bernard Smith – Cassandra's founding chairman – for a couple of years, and he sounded humane, cheerful and encouraging, so I was probably safe enough. In the event, it turned out to be even better than I had hoped.

Everyone had submitted a story a few weeks previously. These were photocopied, circulated and read carefully. For a day and a half we sat round a long table and went over the stories in detail – led by our guest Garry Kilworth – commenting, discussing, recommending. I was mildly astonished to find people taking my ideas seriously much of the time. My mistakes were dragged out into the open, blushing as was only right and proper, but there was no hint of the pillory or the thumbscrew.

I came away from the meeting feeling first relieved, then refreshed, invigorated and more determined than ever that I was going to apply myself to the craft of writing. Then a curious thing happened. The first piece of writing I did after that meeting, little voices spoke in my ear reminding me of those discussions. What would X have said about this bit of plot? Would Y have called that development crucial or clichéd? In short, I was learning how to stand back from my writing. I was a convert to workshopping, and I remain so now, almost seven years later.

So what is Cassandra? How did it start? What does it do? Will it work for everyone?

Cassandra began in the early 1980s with a group of enthusiasts in the Northampton area who used to meet to discuss their writing, and who wanted to launched a new science fiction magazine. Acting on a suggestion from John Brunner, they decided that it should have two functions. First, it would serve as a platform for new writers. In those days there were very few small press magazines dealing with speculative fiction – **Interzone**, our only professional magazine, was comparatively new, and still tending towards the strange and experimental. The BSFA's own fiction magazine – **Tangent** – had folded acrimoniously a few years earlier. There was a need for a simply produced magazine to promote emerging talent.

Its other task was to act as a workshop, a forum for discussing work in progress. The magazine appeared and the idea spread. More people joined. In 1984 Bernard Smith wrote an article for **Focus** in which he set out the aims of the organisation. This was the first time I had heard of it, and I was immediately attracted. (I had only just joined the BSFA, and since my main activity was writing, **Focus** was the magazine that most interested me. Here, in the first copy of **Focus** I saw, was news of a science fiction writers' group, exactly what I wanted.) I wrote to Bernard straight away and began reading the **Cassandra Anthology**, as the magazine was called. I became a member soon afterwards.

With its increased membership, the group could become more sophisticated. Annual workshop weekends began with professional writers as guests, and members coming from all over the country. Other publications were launched. Work by Cassandra members began to appear in print, out there in the big wide world. (On two separate occasions, half the fiction in an issue of **Interzone** was written by Cassandra members. Iz's editors were unaware of this at the time.)

By 1987 the group had produced fourteen issues of the anthology, three issues of the poetry magazine **Starwine**, and a tape of poetry with an accompaniment of specially composed electronic music called **Wind on Water**. There was a collection of essays on various aspects of writing entitled **Dreamscape**. An anthology of writing for children – **Crystal Egg** – was in preparation. Unfortunately, our printing arrangements collapsed at this point. All the publications had to be either shelved or dropped. Our activities were scaled down, but the group kept going. About this time we began to operate circulating postal workshops, known collectively as **Mercury**, conceived as the sincerest form of flattery to the BSFA's Orbiter groups. There are two running even as I write: one general and one for women only. There have been others in the past that specialised in things like play scripts. One, in true SF style, used word processor discs instead of boring old paper.

The membership has also changed. Of the dozen or so people who sat round that table in a Northampton hotel back in 1986, I am the only one who is still involved with the group. I am now the fourth person to take the chair as coordinator after Bernard Smith, Simon Ings, and Sharon Hall, and I hope to be able to go on doing it so long as I am needed. Workshopping in general, and Cassandra in particular, is one of those ideas that doesn't go away.

So here we are, more than ten years after our foundation. What does the organisation stand for? I would say that we have two aims. First, we act as a self-help group for writers of all types of speculative and imaginative fiction, sharing the information and experience we have accumulated over the years. Secondly, we hope to provide a sense of community, which the lonely task of writing sometimes lacks.

How do we try to achieve this? The main workshop activity at the moment is Mercury, which I have already mentioned. From Mercury you get critical assessment of your work, and the chance to learn to criticise by reading other people's early drafts. Other less formal arrangements are strung together occasionally to deal with a single piece of work. We may, one day, hold workshop meetings in the old style, though none are planned at the time of writing. Then there is our magazine pool. One of the best ways of finding out what the market needs is to read the magazines. Some are easier to get hold of than others. Members who come across the more obscure ones can make them available for others to borrow from the pool. The main method of communication within the group is the monthly newsletter I edit. It includes market information, news of writing courses, reviews of books that might be of interest to writers, and news of the members themselves.

So membership of Cassandra will be beneficial to all who aspire to write science fiction or fantasy, right? Wrong. I make no special claims for our group or its methods. When I look at the work I was producing before I became involved, my first reaction is to cringe. I had been bashing away for ten years or more and had got almost nowhere. Perhaps I could have improved my technique and gained in confidence working on my own, but I doubt it. However, there is no guarantee the workshop process will help everyone. Some writers don't need it. Others will find it a distraction. Writers' working methods are as various as the writers themselves, and there is no single way forward.

The other claim we do not make is to teach people to write. There are teachers among the membership, and one member lectures on writing as part of an adult education project, but as a group we do not teach writing. You might learn to write through workshopping, but that depends on how much work the individual is prepared to put in. I would say that what you get out of it will be in proportion to what you put in.

Anything else? Membership costs £7.50 a year. You can contact our membership secretary Martyn Taylor at 14 Natal Road, Cambridge, CB1 3NS. New members receive Martyn's special kit of market information, and general guidelines on submission layouts. If you want to ask me about something I have failed to cover here, drop me a line at 70 Willow Way, Ponteland, Northumberland, NE20 9RG. As with many similar organizations, stamped, addressed envelopes are always welcome.