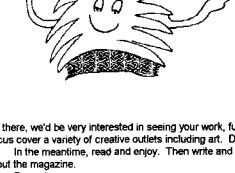
Focus

The B.S.F.A. writers' magazine
Issue 25 Dec/Jan 1994

Editorial



Through a telephoto lens, lightly...

Well, we made it. Our first issue of Focus (No 24) was a success. We'd like to thank all the people who wrote in to comment favourably on the zine, also to those people who mentioned to Carol Ann at Novacon that they'd enjoyed Focus. However, we'd like to encourage debate, so come on, inundate us with letters about this current issue.

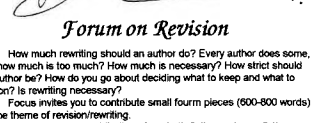
The Forum theme this time around is worldbuilding. Just how important is worldbuilding in science fiction? Several people on P6 offer their various wisdoms concerning this subject. Details of next issue's Forum are elsewhere in this magazine.

We would like to see more contributions on the fiction front, we've had some good stories in so far, but this time only one passed our scrutiny to be included. So, come on send us your stories, but be warned, we will only publish them if they are very good, Focus is no longer the repository for bad fiction.

One of the other things we'd like to see more of in Focus is artwork. If there are any artists out there, we'd be very interested in seeing your work, full page, half page and fillos are all needed. Also, what can Focus do for the artist? We'd like to see Focus cover a variety of creative outlets including art. Do you think there is a place for art in Focus? Write and let us know.

In the meantime, read and enjoy. Then write and tell us what you liked/didn't like about the magazine.

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.

Forum on Revision

How much rewriting should an author do? Every author does some, but how much is too much? How much is necessary? How strict should an author be? How do you go about deciding what to keep and what to jetison? Is rewriting necessary?

Focus invites you to contribute small fourm pieces (600-800 words) on the theme of revision/rewriting.

We'd like to see contributions from both fiction and non- fiction writers if possible. Also, any editors out there willing to put in their two penn'orth worth?

Deadline for next issue 30 April 1993

Drabble Competition

We've had only two responses so far to the drabble competition announced in the last issue. In view of this we judge the contest inquorate and therefore extend it for another issue: get writing (and sending) those drabbles, folks! Don't forget the prize of Colin Greenland's **Michael Moorcock: Death is no obstacle**. Entrants to date will of course be included.

For anyone who may be unsure, we quote below from David B. Wake's definition, from **Drabble II: a double century**:

a DRABBLE is a story of "*exactly* one hundred words: not a syllable more, not a letter less. In addition, up to fifteen words (title, subtitles and the like) are allowed. Hyphenated-words-will-be-argued-about."

A Drabble
by John Madracki

The placid fisher folk of Ankhorn, together with their neighbours, a tribe of gentle woodland hunters, had enjoyed a peaceful co-existence for many thousands of years.
It was only when an itinerant space-trader sought to unite them with a common tongue that their troubles began.
Using an English-French phrase-book as a guide and inspiration, the visitor soon found that he had bitten off more than he could chew.
The once reticent natives now angrily voiced their dissension and eventually found themselves embroiled in civil war.
They could just not accept that one man's meat is another man's poisson.

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Dr Greenland's Prescription

Elsewhere in this issue, lots of people give good advice on world-building. That's something I know nothing about, having never built a world. What I build is books.

The distinction, I always think, is between top-down creation and bottom-up creation: between writing from a divine altitude, knowing all about everything and how it fits together, and trying to present a world as people on the ground see it: something partly understood, partly assimilable, but wreathed in assumptions and memories, misinterpretations and dismals. Chaos, given shape by work, by consciousness. I don't build worlds. I try to sense them: their textures, their smells, their sudden vertiginous fractures.

* * *

Let's just look at environment.

Stairs climbed up and down within a shaft of glass. He came to them. Beyond them, the building was pierced by a greater shaft, a huge octagonal well of dusk. Dark shapes at the bottom were probably trees.

This is a character in a big building that's unfamiliar to him: Cal in the Library, in Gill Alderman's **The Archivist**. The scale, so vital in so much sf, is cleverly done. Any stairs go simultaneously up and down: putting in both at once makes there seem to be more of them. The false attribution of motion in climbed amplifies them further. Try replacing it with a commonplace *led* or *went*.

Then come adjectives, *greater* and *huge*, neither of which does anything much sensorily until both are cashed in by the word *trees*. (Try replacing that with *dustbins* and see what happens to the overall scale.)

* * *

How do we know the building is unfamiliar? Answer 1: the word *probably*. A habituee or an omniscient narrator would know what the shapes were. The word *probably* identifies what we're being told as the preconceptions of an individual mind. The purpose of the singularly banal and almost unnoticeable sentence *He came to them* is to put Cal in the paragraph ready to have these perceptions and assumptions assigned to him. The effect is to suggest a world that's both inside, being rationalised by Cal, and outside, not yet known to him.

The limits of knowledge are the beginning of realism.

* * *

Answer 2 is even sneakier, the proportion of indefinite articles to definite – three a's to two the's. *A huge octagonal well* is generic: it is nominated, it is being discovered or revealed for the first time. *The huge octagonal well* would be specific, denoted one that Cal has seen before, or (even more usefully) that is common knowledge – i.e. something we ourselves might be expected to know was there. Something that can be taken for granted, even though in fact we've never heard of it before.

Compare:

Daniel strode in silence the short cut through the field to the village, and stood in the bar of the King's Head and in the silence that had fallen ordered a Double Diamond.

(Shena Mackay, **Toddler on the Run**)

* * *

To be able to suggest to your reader that a completely imaginary environment is already familiar is a powerful inducement to conviction.

If you stood at the window in the studio at Mynnet and looked out towards the Low City, you felt that time was damned up and spreading out quietly all around you like a stagnant pond. The sky was the colour of zinc.

M. John Harrison, of course, in **In Viriconium**. The American copy editor who tried to take all the 'you's out of the descriptive sections in **Harm's Way**, presumably on the grounds that the construction is colloquial and therefore ungrammatical, or some other damn fool notion, was actually undermining a very important device by which Sophie Farthing, by implicating us in her account of the Hampstead Space Harbour or the Lunar nightmare market on the shores of Mare Crisium, effectively persuades us that these improbable locations are actual and known. We may be unlikely ever to feel that time is spreading all around us, quietly or otherwise, in Mynned or anywhere else, but that is of far less actual moment than the fact that Harrison's narrator credits us with the perception.

Sf is a set of directions given to a stranger.

* * *

The road was little more than a pair of wheel tracks beside the Mirk River. To either side were flats overgrown with rich green bandocks, each plant raising a single pale blue spire that flicked at passing insects. Along the river grew willows, alders, clumps of stately dark blue mater-plants.

(Jack Vance, **The Faceless Man**)

I took how *bandocks*, which we've never heard of, are identified for us not by explanation but by description; then see how *mater-plants*, equally unknown, are made acceptable by being bundled together with willows and alders, which we already know.

Seduce your reader's unfamiliarity, don't confront it. Assumptions are there for you to build on.

* * *

A useful source is travel writing. Where better to look for techniques to convey environments that are specifically and crucially not the reader's own?

Feeling pleasantly lonely, I wandered out on to Main Street. It had fallen into the deep, vacant sleep which each night possesses only American cities of a certain size. Nothing moves. You mistake leaves guttering on the sidewalks for rats.

(Jonathan Raban, **Old Glory**)

It's the same device as Harrison's – and note that switch of tense, hinged around *each night*, which suddenly claims commonality for Raban's highly individual and tendentious perception.

Hero and the Booby by Stephen Markley

As Hero Jacks turned into his access canyon off Twelve Oaks Park the public lights blazed into life and pierced the evening crud with shafts of manganese pink. A pair of roiling smog devils chased each other past Hero into the park and he looked to the sky, a vault of dust banks forty feet over his head. It wasn't noticeably darker but it must be dusk, all the same. The automatics were tuned to the rotation of the earth and never got it wrong. He hadn't realised Hamilton had kept him so long at the Promo-European Strip. But then Hamilton was able to make a big investment. He was entitled to a bit of extra attention.

The family fort loomed out of the smog, squatting at the end of the canyon like some great armoured toad, bristling with gun barrels. Hero caught the glint of surveillance devices as they tracked him down the canyon: picking up the reflection of the smog lights on his street armour. His stomach rumbled and his mouth filled with juices. Boy, he could eat three goat steaks this evening and come back for more. He felt like he'd earned it, too. Hero was approaching his fort's security portal when a figure reared up out of the rubbish drift at the end of the canyon.

Hero drew his pistol and shockstick. The figure stayed where it was, swaying slightly in two feet of rubbish. Long matted hair hid its face from him. Hero felt some fear at the thing's size until he realised it was just an effect of the layers and layers of plastic bags it had wrapped round itself. It took a step forward and began gabbling at him.

It was an obvious Booby.

Hero didn't like talking through his respirator and there was no reason he should with a Booby. He was just about to move it along with the shockstick when it raised its arm and aimed something at him.

Without thinking, Hero blasted the Booby on full automatic. Plastic flew in tatters from its chest and it pitched backwards into the rubbish drift.

Hero moved warily to the drift, gun at the ready. To his surprise, the Booby was still alive. It whimpered and crooned to itself with a strange inhuman sound. Hero could see now that its lower jaw receded dramatically. The hands too showed marked adaptation. They were mole-like, developed into long combs for sifting through rubbish. Must be a Booby from the *New Lives* project. It would've been pumped full of chromosome plasticizer and turned loose to carve out a niche for itself, enabled to make whatever individual adaptations it needed. Hero felt a surge of resentment. Okay, the Fathers of Mercy alleviated Booby suffering with their projects and helped stop them sponging off others, too, but that gave them no right to turn Boobys loose around Twelve Oaks Park.

When the creature saw him it started to speak in a high, wailing voice. Hero guessed it was female but it was hard to tell with Boobys. It moved its hands to reveal a small statuette, a pregant woman carved in redwood. Probably one of the Booby goddesses. The Booby lifted it to its mouth. Some sort of prayer, he supposed. But then he realised she was showing him that she'd gnawed it into shape. She'd probably wanted to trade it with him.

Hero felt moved to pity, but only so much. If someone wound up a Booby, it was nobody's fault but their own.

Hero put two shots into its head to spare it further suffering. He dragged the body clear of the rubbish so that Night Cops would see it and incinerate it.

Feeling unclean, he dabbed compulsively at his street armour as he walked back to his fort's security portal. He placed his ID plate against the first level ident and the portal slid open, allowing him into a small chamber lined with sensors. There was an almost imperceptible tremor through his feet as security devices scanned him. He felt a fresh glow of pride. It was state of the art stuff. The devices would examine over two hundred parameters, including such arcane as typical mineral content of spleen – tough to fake! – to define him with vanishingly small scope for error.

When red warning lights flashed at the top of the chamber, Hero assumed the devices had found something amiss in his physiology and were about to give him a diagnostic. Okay, okay, he thought resignedly, I've been hitting the carbohydrates a bit hard – so what?

"Sir, you are a potential intruder. I must warn you that if you persist in trying to gain entry your life will be forfeit. If you leave now, you stand a good chance of survival. If you are a Non-Person, otherwise known as a "Booby", please be aware that curfew falls in one hour. If you are abroad after that time the Night Cops will incinerate you. You have one minute to vacate the premises."

Hero laughed. "C'mon it's me. You surely can't have made a mistake."

"Assuredly, you are you, but you must leave these premises. You have no authority to be here."

Hero suddenly felt afraid. "Check me again. It's me, Hero Jacks, your owner."

"I have no need to check you again. You have no authority to be here. You have thirty seconds to-"

The voice died with an electronic croak. The speaker thumped and then Cherry's voice purred over it. "It's all right, darling. I've overridden it. The lock will accept you now."

Hero put his palm to the lockplate and the inner portal swung open. He sagged into the fort on trembling legs, feeling definitely crumpled. It really wasn't his evening.

Hero hung up his pistol and shockstick on the rack in the lobby and padded across the Persian carpet into the cloakroom. Two servitors followed him in and began stripping off his street armour.

"Massage!"

One of the servitors attached fleshtips to its delicate fingers and started kneading and rubbing Hero's shoulders, expertly easing out all the tensions of the day. Hero sighed with pleasure.

"Beethoven." He considered for a moment. "Violin Sonata in F Major." Hero could feel his blood pressure go down as the music swelled serenely into the room. A good soak in the jacuzzi and he felt human again.

The servitors dried Hero off and dressed him in his slouch shorts. He went into the lobby where Cherry ambushed him with a generous Martini. She beamed as he accepted the glass.

He thought her black negligee was a bit strong for that time of day but couldn't help approving all the same. "Very thoughtful of you darling, just what I need." He smiled and took a big swallow of the Martini. "Drink's good too."

She laughed and tossed her head. It was a habit she really ought to break, he thought. It looked twitchy when she wasn't wearing hair. She put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed.

"What sort of a day did you have, darling?"

"Well... the toughest bit was that I nearly didn't live through it. What the hell's wrong with that thing?" He jabbed a thumb at the portal.

She shrugged. "Some glitch, I suppose."

"*Glitch*? You don't get glitches in security you pay that sort of money for."

She stood on tiptoe and kissed his forehead. "There was a serviceman to look at it earlier. Something to do with that, I expect. Don't worry about it, darling, we'll get it fixed. But not now. For now, relax, enjoy." She kissed him on the lips.

"Okay," he said, mollified. He put an arm around her and led her into the lounge. He sat them down on the recliner opposite the picture window. Cherry had it set on Alpine Sunset and he was happy to leave it there. He drank in the blazing mountains. "It's been a pretty tough day if you really want to know – but constructive as hell. I sold two properties out on the Promo-European Strip. Enough commission to cover school fees for the boys."

"Wonderful, darling." Cherry hugged him and kissed him on the neck. "That reminds me," she said, her breath warm and moist on his skin. "There's a wonderful offer at Ednums on pistol ammo."

"Mmmm?" Hero said, puzzled by the connection Cherry had made.

She sat up straight, all lit up with enthusiasm. "Yes, we really ought to follow it up. It'd save us a terrific lot on a bulk buy."

"Okay, I'll look into it when I'm next in town." His stomach rumbled on cue. "Right now, let's have dinner."

Cherry looked crestfallen. "Darling, I'm so sorry but it's been such a weird day, I just didn't get around to cooking anything. I'll tell you what. There's a new restaurant on West Canyon; *Mimi's*. We could blow just a little of your commission on a big spread."

He thought of the Booby crumpled in the dirt outside the fort. "I really don't feel like going out again."

"I'll get them to send up a meal. To-Your-Portal-Service. Five percent discount for new customers."

Hero felt a flash of annoyance but he kept it out of his voice. "Really, darling, something simple."

"Okay, I'll whip a ready out of the hold."

In two minutes, Cherry came through with a steaming goulash. "Where's yours?" Hero asked.

"Oh," she made a dismissive motion with her hand. "I don't feel hungry right now."

Hero looked at her speculatively and then dug into his meal. "Mmm, delicious," he said.

"Yes, darling, it's a new range. What say, you order me a month's supply? I could have a break from cooking for a while."

Hero was flabbergasted. Cherry pulled her seat over to him and put her hand on his thigh. "Make time for other things, you know what I mean?" She grinned and squeezed his thigh. Hero swallowed his mouthful of goulash in shock.

"Okay, darling, set it up as you want. You run things around here, after all."

She beamed. "Right, but you'll have to order it."

"Why..."

She put a finger over his lips. "No questions and I'll have something really good for you later."

He studied Cherry. No, it couldn't be. He shook off his thoughts and tucked in to the goulash.

Cherry cracked a bottle of cognac after the meal and they relaxed with a glass each. Hero couldn't help noticing that she didn't drink any of hers.

"You know, Hero, that business could have been really nasty at the portal." She paused for effect. "Ever thought what would happen to me and the boys if you were killed?"

A pang of suspicion stabbed through Hero. "Why do you ask, Cherry?"

"I've been thinking that we could do with more insurance. It's not that we'd be poor with the cover we've got but you've got to think of the boys' future. I mean, Academy fees don't go down, do they?"

Hero's thoughts were spinning. He hoped it didn't show on his face. He and Cherry had been saving just recently, maybe even cutting corners here and there, but nowhere near enough to get on the Underconsuming Citizens Roll. "I see what you mean, angel. I'll have to think about that."

"Hero, dear, we need to act, not to think. As it happens, I've got a policy here which suits us down to the ground. Here, look, there's a discount if we go before the 30th. That's-"

"Tomorrow, Cherry. So I really ought to sign it today." He worked hard to keep his voice pleasant and neutral. "That's what you're saying, aren't you, Cherry?"

She laughed. "This evening will be plenty of time."

Jesus Christ! How could it have happened to them? Better to do a little last first, he thought, before I go off the deep end.

"Cherry... now the boys are away, I think it would be good for you to have a pet around the place, a nice kitten, say." Cherry loathed cats.

"Hero! You know how I feel about cats." There was a pause and her eyes became abstracted, as though she were consulting an inner business directory. "But it's very sweet of you. In fact, Tomlins have a special offer on Siamese kittens that make just wonderful pets. I'm sure it would be a good idea for me to put aside my prejudices and buy one of these fine animals."

A damn Sales Construct, all right.

Hero was thunderstruck. Some bastard had put him on the Underconsuming Citizens Roll, and then some Sales Agency had successfully tendered for the Roll – maybe one he had himself worked with – and right now its damned Sales Construct was taking up room in his very own fort. It was beyond belief.

Hero racked his brains for all that he knew about the law and protocol relating to Sales Constructs. There wasn't a lot. It had always been one of those things that happened to other people. Besides, the Government were constantly negotiating special promotions with different sectors of the economy. It was hard to keep up. There must have been a quota shift in his sector. He should keep up more, he decided. Be a good citizen. But he was a good citizen. Nose to the grindstone, good money is moving money and all that. Okay, they'd been skimping a bit here and there, lately, but didn't the Bureau of Trade

realise they'd consume, consume, consume, once they got that new fort on Delabeche Boulevard?

It just wasn't fair

That's why the security was messed up, he realised. They'd have scrambled it to get in. But what happened to Cherry? Had they hurt her? Would they be allowed to? Hero cursed his ignorance of the law. One thing he knew for sure, they could kiss goodbye to their new fort. Given the chance, the construct would gobble up their savings. An unexpected rage burned in him. This really was too much. A man's fort is his home, after all.

Just supposing he didn't go along with this, what then? The damn thing was an intruder like any other, wasn't it? That gave him some rights. If he got it out of the house, he could fix the security so it couldn't get back in. The question was, would that just get him into some deeper shit?

He'd have to take the chance.

But what about Cherry? He'd just have to hope they'd send her back once he'd got rid of this damn thing. If not, he'd face that problem when he came to it.

The Construct was watching him with concern.

"Very thoughtful all of a sudden, Hero. Can't face cats, huh?"

"It's not that, sweetheart." He looked past its shoulder to the armament rack in the lobby. Would the shockstick be enough? There wasn't any guarantee it would even affect a Construct. Better use the gun. The Construct turned to follow his gaze. It turned back and smiled a question at him.

He stood up and paced the floor a few times. "It's that I'm tired. On top of that, I'm pretty sure I left my Buspac at Transit. Silly of me. I hung it from the rack to tell it about some accounts and I must have left it there." It sounded terribly lame to him but the Construct appeared to accept it. "You wouldn't like to get it for me would you? I'd go myself, only I'm really tired."

The Construct frowned and went to his valise. She lifted up the Buspac by its strap. "It's right here, darling. You didn't take it today." It gave an uncertain laugh and looked at him significantly.

Hero tried to laugh, too, but it wouldn't come. He was getting pretty uptight now and was considering a straight dash to the armament rack. "I'm not myself, darling.... Tell you what. Let's liven things up. Let's go visiting."

"But you're tired," the Construct said suspiciously.

"Hah. Don't give in to it, I say. Let's go out and have some fun. It's what we both need. No need to put on your armour yet." He waved a hand at the lobby. "I've got to run some checks on my shockstick first. It was acting up, today."

He strode briskly towards the armament rack. He heard a whirr behind him and turned his head slightly. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the Construct blur into motion. The Construct was frighteningly fast but Hero had a good lead. He got his hand around the pistol butt before the Construct grabbed him round the waist. It pulled him from the rack and it was like being hauled by a crane. Hero turned and rammed the gun muzzle under the Construct's jaw.

The jaw bulked out, the chin grew square. Cherry's delicate features coarsened and flowed. The face of the Trade Master General turned to him, pressed hard against the gun. "This construct is the property of Bob Hills Direct Sales Agency and is carrying out its legitimate duties under article seven of the Stimulation of the Economy Act. You will be criminally liable for any damages and are already guilty of obstructing the Law." The face softened into Cherry's again and they looked at each other a long time in silence.

"I don't know about that," Hero said at last, "but if you don't let go of me, you'll be scraping your head off the ceiling."

The Construct let go of him. Hero straightened up and ordered the portal to open.

The bombproof doors hummed open behind him. He turned briefly and caught a flash of movement down in the access canyon. Boobys probably, or maybe Night Cops. The Construct would just have to take its chances.

He waved the gun at the Construct. "Okay, out!"

The Construct shook its head. A slow smile spread across its face. There was a scuffle behind Hero and he turned reflexively. It was like a locomotive bearing down on him. A locomotive with his face! Beyond, in the access canyon, another Cherry looked up at him.

It all flashed through his mind. They'd have turned up early in the day, the two of them, and got in posing as security maintenance people. Once inside, one of them would have transformed into a facsimile of himself and taken Cherry shopping. The other changed into Cherry and waited for him. They'd have set up the security to suit themselves. That's why it wouldn't work for him. It could only accept one Hero Jacks. Hero brought up the pistol fast and would have nailed the bastard, too, he was sure, except a shockstick touched the back of his neck and fried his brains.

* * *

Warm rain on his cheeks. Hero blinked his eyes and got a blurred view of Cherry's face over him illuminated by flickering light. Cherry began to cry harder when she saw he was conscious. Hero sat up and saw he was lying beside the rubbish drift. A small fire burned beside him. He reached out to Cherry. "You okay?"

She nodded.

Hero stood up, offered a hand to Cherry and pulled her to her feet. They hugged.

"I just didn't realise," she said. "I thought it was you."

He stroked her scalp and she pressed her face into his shoulder. "I made wrong moves too." It came as a flat statement, giving no sign of his self-dislike over the way he'd bungled things. He realised now that if he'd sat tight and let the Construct make its few sales the whole thing would have been over when they came back from shopping. He could clearly recall how fresh it was to him, that the duration of stay of Constructs was directly proportional to the level of Underspending.

"Where are they now?"

"Inside."

Far up the canyon, he could hear Night Cops at work. The crack of rifles. The screams of still-living Boobys as they were incinerated.

"We'd better go in ourselves." He took her hand and led her towards the security portal. It felt really weird to be outside without street armour. How the Boobys must feel. The thought unnerved him.

The first level portal was open. The Constructs had expected them. As soon as Hero stepped inside the chamber, the unit said, "Sir, you are a potential intruder. I must warn you." The message broke off and Hero's own voice came over the speaker, happy and confident.

"Mr and Mrs Jacks, there is a new enactment for citizens who risk recession for the community through selfish Underconsumption. This provides that citizens such as yourselves, who demonstrate severe sales resistance when given the opportunity to make good their Underconsumption, are to be declared Non-Persons and their place in society taken by healthier consuming units – ourselves." A bump and the speaker fell silent.

"I'm no Booby!" Hero screamed and smashed his fist into the sensor panel. The security system struck back. Energy jolted through the nerves of his arm and it dropped lifeless to his side.

"Assaults on the property of the Jacks will not be tolerated. You have twenty seconds to vacate the premises or forfeit your lives."

Hero held back from thumping the panel again. He took Cherry by the hand and led her out into the access canyon.

The screams were a lot louder now. Hero had to admit they made him afraid. To Cherry he said, "Come on, darling, we'll work something out with the Night Cops. After all, we're reasonable people."

Maps and Dragons
Cherith Baldry

J. R. R. Tolkien said that if you're writing a large and complex work such as **The Lord of the Rings**, you should always draw the map first, because if you leave it to the end, you'll never make it consistent.

He meant this advice literally, but we don't have to take it literally. There are many maps, not necessarily geographical. The map of your new world might be astrophysical, geophysical, political or social.

My maps are ordinarily social ones. In a lot of my writing I use a very loose future history scheme incorporating two distinct phases of Earth expansion into the galaxy. So the worlds I write about are Earthlike, populated by human beings. I shudder at the thought of the scientific knowledge required to create a significantly alien world, in the detail demanded by a novel, although I admire very much worlds such as these when I read about them.

The first thing I think about in sketching out a new world is what the political systems are, not that I'm a political writer, but so that I will know how different groups of people relate to each other. Who holds power? Who are the elite? Are there people oppressed because of their appearance, sex or beliefs? What is the relationship between the sexes? Are there social structures such as marriage and family, and if not, what structures replaced them? What are the relations between people at work, and what kinds of work are available? What religions operate, if any?

I like to know the answers to all these questions, and others, in broad outline for the whole of the world, and in tiny and sometimes obsessive detail for certain aspects of it. I also feel that if the creative process is working properly, finding these answers is more like discovery than invention.

Not all this material might be used in one particular story. I might not have a dish-washer as a character, but I need to know who washes the dishes. Maybe it will be used later. I have a terrible tendency to think in terms of series rather than one-offs. And I always feel a tension between the story, which is a created object, and the world, which is mine to explore. I can't imagine it would be possible to create a world no larger than a single story. Ernest Hemingway (not my favourite writer!) said that details which you know, but choose to leave out, strengthen your story; details which you don't know leave a hole.

At the same time, I like to have some flexibility in my worlds. Every detail, once decided, is a fixed point which fixes others, suggests some plot lines, but makes others impossible. I feel that if I knew everything about my society I might not want to write about it any more. At the edge of the map is a blank space; written on it, "Here be dragons." It's out at the edge that the excitement of discovery takes place.

The Rose Backwards
Jan McDonald

Being a mean old scrote, I collect small change – pennies, tuppences, five pees. When I have enough, I bag them and take them down to the bank to really make a cashier's day. I always manage to pass off a few foreign coins (We're talking definitions of 'mean' and 'scrote' beyond your experience.) among the sterling, mostly Irish, but the odd Canadian cent or lost pfennig or two. It gets taken in and exchanged. This, in reverse, is how I go about worldbuilding. I try to pass off a whole bagful of foreign doubtfuls by mixing them with a few genuine coins. Shucking off analogy, if I can get one observation accurate and believable, it salts a lot of stodge.

Fiction tends to the minimal rather than the cinemascopic. The camera is indiscriminate; you pan it across and it picks up all before it. A writer must suggest by omission, picking out the few details that make it possible to fill in the background, like those pictures you see of the face of Jesus in a patch of melting snow or burned tortilla. The imagination fleshes out the bones of suggestion. A few genuine coins pass off a load of old pfennigs.

I find my coin of the realm is one particular, personal detail from a place I've been to which I can then manipulate. Like topological surfaces (geographical surfaces can survive a lot of twisting, bending and passing through themselves to get them into the desired shape. Because smell is the most powerful evoker of memory – I'm always running into places that smell exactly like the Pirates of the Caribbean, or Nairobi market – I try to build the future from the nose back. If I can suggest a particular smell – usually a Third-Worldian concoction of shit, diesel and freshly rained-on tarmac – the associations it evokes can be strong enough to hang an entire sense of place on.

Having said this, I'm here under false pretences. I write very little in the alien world milieu (the terraformed Mars of **Desolation Road** was an amalgam of India and Australia), but should I get round to it, I've set a few guidelines.

An alien world should be more than Kent or Kansas writ exceeding large, but be at least as geographically and ecologically diverse as Earth. While planetological givens like gravity, isolation, length of day/year and so forth will dominate the physical basis of otherworld, there is room within these limits for a multitude of climatic/ oceanographic/ environmental/ whatever variations. If chaos theory teaches us anything, it's that complexity can arise from the simplest systems, and if Darwin teaches us anything, it's that life extends to fit these complex niches and extend them. An alien world deserves to be more than just an exercise in backdrop painting, like Star Trek's planets full of polystyrene rocks and co-eds in cat-suits, or Dune with a lot of sand and about six hallucinogen-shitting worms.

One of my most important self-memos on this subject is that the aliens who inhabit these hand-built worlds will be as racially and culturally diverse as the aliens who inhabit this planet. They'll have different languages, colours, nations or states, social and cultural codes. Keep it complex. There is no reason why a planetful of sentient coral should be any less complex than our own, except authorial laziness, or chauvinism. And what does it smell like? Nature may love simplicity, but it hates simplification.

I find positing the landscapes of the near-future earth easier than creating an entire planet from B&Q self assembly units, by following a simple rule which many art directors of sci-fi movies seem to have forgotten: the future always contains the past. There is continuity. Much of the background of the near future will be little different from today, which leaves me free to concentrate on what is. This is the essence of the alien; the evocation of the sense of difference. To work from the nose backwards, alien worlds are all around us. Take a walk through your local Chinese/ Indo-Pakistani/Afro-Caribbean/Greek community, or even through the district of a different social class from your own, and you will find yourself in a place where language, the laws, the ways, the sights, sounds, smells, society, work to different principles from those you follow. J. G. Ballard said it right: Earth is an alien planet. The alien is in the difference, the difference is in the details. Big deep sniff now. Ahh... Pirates of the Caribbean.

Building New Worlds
Stephen Baxter

Dura woke with a start.

There was something wrong. The photons didn't smell right.

Those are the opening lines of my fourth novel, **Flux** (*). Not a bad opening – in 14 words we've met the main protagonist, we know that there are problems up ahead – and we know that we're in a new world. (How come she's smelling photons?)

But before Dura could open her eyes and take a look around, I'd had to build her world.

The world of **Flux** is the interior of the Star: a neutron star. The inhabitable Mantle is bounded above by the forests of the Crust and below by the deadly Quantum Sea; all around the primitive human encampments, lines of quantised vorticity – lethal and beautiful – stretch from Pole to Pole of the Star. Flux – the Star's magnetic field – shapes the lives of Dura's people.

And Dura is tiny – a hundred-thousandth the size of you or I...

The idea for **Flux** came from a throw-away scene in a story of mine five or six years old. Some neutron stars spin extraordinarily fast. What if a star rotated so fast that Earthlike gravity persisted at the equator? Could human beings actually survive down there?

This seemed too good a notion to waste, but to generate a novel I

needed to do some heavy research into what neutron stars are really like. And I mean heavy. I'm talking about getting access to a university library or similar and going through (at least) undergraduate texts and research journals, like (in my case) **The Astrophysics Journal**.

This may seem stunningly difficult. Well, no-one said it would be easy. And in my view, decent research into whatever world you're building – from nuclear physics, to daily life among the Eskimo, to the breeding habits of the sea squirt – is a sine qua non. Why? Three reasons: first, the alternative is to skimp – to give your work less than your best. Second, unless you put in some quality time at the leading edge of your subject – go beyond popularisation, or (worse) other people's fiction – you're not going to find anything new to write about anyhow.

Last, if you allow yourself to follow your nose, you never know what wonders you might turn up by accident.

In the case of *Flux* I found that my original naive idea couldn't be made to work. But by following my nose I did come up with an intriguing variant. There is a region within a neutron star – which I called the Mantle – filled with a superfluid of neutrons, and laced with vortex lines. An interesting place... so I decided to sculpt my race of analogue-humans to survive and prosper there.

That's when the detailed questions started.

Like how big is Dura? That's determined (as is your and my size) by the balance of forces governing her body. How can she see, and hear? Well, light diffuses only slowly in the Mantle, but sound waves travel extremely fast. Dura 'sees' sound, 'hears' heat, and 'smells' photons.

How does Dura get around? Well, she's floating about in the superfluid, but she can use induced currents in her body to 'Wave' across the Star's powerful magnetic field... And what a wonderful idea that seemed, she could fly across the Pole of the neutron star. Straight away this suggested images, fragments of scenes.

Yes, but what does Dura eat? Hmmm. To answer that we'll need some kind of ecosystem – and an equivalent of the carbon bond. Does she excrete? If so, what?

Dura visits a huge City at the South Pole. (Huge? At least a centimetre across.) Fine. If it's a real city, what do they use for currency? How does the economy work? What kind of government do they have?

...Oh. And what about sex? Dura's embedded in a superfluid. Presumably membranes rubbing against each other wouldn't be too effective...

When you're world-building, you have to re-invent everything, from the ground up. But there are two loopholes. One, you don't have to (in fact, shouldn't) explain it all. I think it's worth working it all out for yourself to ensure you have a consistent background, but pull into the text only what you think the reader will find interesting. (If it's an exotic enough world, this will be most of it.) Second, you don't have to work it all out in advance. None of my prior research focused my imagination half so well as the moment when Dura opened her eyes and took her first look around. Use the first draft as an adventure of exploration for yourself, remember you can fix any inconsistencies later.

Even when you've built your world you may still have basic fictional questions to answer. Like, how did your characters get there? (In *Flux*, the human beings (they're analogues of humans, anyway) were designed for life in the Mantle by progenitors called the Ur-humans.)

And – where is the conflict, to drive your plot? You may have constructed a world as beautiful and intricate as a watch, but unless somebody is hurting, you ain't got a plot. In *Flux* the conflict comes from a series of Glitches – starquakes. In a quest to save her people from the Glitches, Dura sets off on a journey taking her to the Pole City, to the ceiling-farms of the Crust – and, at last, into the heart of the Star, in search of the secrets of the Ur-humans.

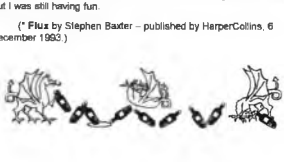
Here's the end of the sermon: the most important thing is to let your imagination run riot. It's your world, after all.

For instance, by the final couple of drafts of *Flux*, I felt I needed a way to present the exhilaration of skimming at speed through the *Flux* lines of my Star world. In the end (rather like Young Eisenstein) I decided there was only one possible solution -

Surfers.

Surfers in a neutron star? You can see that by the end, my world-building had taken me a long way from **The Astrophysical Journal**. But I was still having fun.

(* *Flux* by Stephen Baxter – published by HarperCollins, 6 December 1993.)



Building a World That Doesn't Fall Apart in Three Days

Storm Constantine

Having been asked on more than several occasions how much attention I pay to 'world-building' in my work, and what my thoughts are on the matter, I decided it was time I spoke (rambled?) about it, at length.

The concept of the Wraeththu series grew a lot of the characters, sprang fully-fledged from my imagination, and in my enthusiasm to narrate their history, I did not want to be side- tracked into working out every intricate detail of their world. To me, (as a first novelist), the trilogy was about people rather than places. I was impatient with sf/fantasy as a whole, and (then) considered a lot of the time (and pages) that went into evoking a holistic world tedious. I felt, on occasion, actually obstructive to the story's continuity. Because of the issues discussed in the Wraeththu trilogy, and the amount of work that had gone into the characters and their stories, I think I was lucky enough to get away with the lightly-sketched background.

However, I reserve the right to change my mind and can admit that I now feel the world-building aspect of writing an sf/fantasy novel is just as important as the plot and characterisation.

Since the initial 'rush' of getting my Wraeththu stories down on paper and into print (and it was a hectic, non-stop process), I've had time, in later novels, to investigate areas which previously had left me cold. Really, it began while I was researching for **Fulfilments**, a lot more work went into the world-building in that novel that in the previous two. Suddenly, I found myself becoming interested in describing the background to the world I was entering and cataloguing. After all, even with **Enchantments** and **Bewitchments** I myself had known all the background detail; I just hadn't wanted to write about it.

* * *

World building: how do I handle it now? I feel it is important for the author to know their imaginary worlds inside out, and to have as many notes on the subject as possible, even if a lot of material is never actually used in the novel itself. If a writer feels confident about the world they have created, literally 'at home' in it, then a sense of holism must naturally be present in the text. **Monstrous Regiment** was the first book where I really paid attention to the physical appearance and geography of the world I was creating, the planet Artemis. I wrote a kind of botanical and zoological study of Artemis, which I used as reference. However, with the benefit of hindsight, it is apparent to me that attention was taking on the sociological issues, too much research dedicated to the world itself, not enough to the people living on it! (Yes, well, it's history about how dissatisfied I was with that book. Nuff said.) The work I did was very useful when I was writing MR's (in my opinion, far superior) sequel, **Aleph**, though.

The preliminary work for **Hermetech** concerned much detail-thrashing as regards the politics of that world, the ecological and demographic situation. The rigorous editing on behalf of my editor, Caroline Oakley, my partner, Jay Summers and myself, resulted (I believe) in a wholly more convincing scenario. By the Goddess, was I glad to see the back of that novel when it was finally completed! I'd been thinking, talking, dreaming Hermetech non-stop for months during its final grooming; I'd become Hermetech-blind. Soon, I have the same process to look forward to with **Burying the Shadow**. I'm already taking deep breaths.

With **Shadow**, I again worked out the geography and topology of the world in which it's set, and much of the political history. The story is set on an alternate Earth. The black races, (called the Tappish and Deltans) for example are loosely based on the Ancient Egyptians and Sumerians in our world, the Taps and Deltans were the creators of civilisation itself and are now regarded as the most advanced cultures. Their empires have risen and fallen over the centuries, and the former occupation of neighbouring lands still exists – rather as Roman ruins exist in the UK. Now, they are more interested in philosophy, science and medicine than in land-grabbing. Although the time-scale corresponds roughly to the Renaissance, war has been eliminated completely from the Shadow world. I also worked out the economy of each country, although not much of this appears in the finished book. I thought it was important that each area should have its own language (or languages). It is all too easy to create a world in which the protagonist flits from pole to pole, conversing happily in a common tongue with every individual they meet. For convenience's sake, I must confess that my major characters tend to be multi-lingual, though!

I must agree with Steve (Jeffrey) concerning his remark about 'expository lumps'. Naming no names (lady-like behaviour see!) I was recently sent a chunk of novel by another (yet-unpublished) writer which seemed to consist entirely of info-dumps. The information was impressive, yes, but hardly intoxicating reading. I think that when writing (or reading) about technology, it is far more interesting (if not

manageable!) when gizmos are illustrated by characters in the book actually using them, rather than having the reader subjected to detailed, technical manual-like descriptions of gleaming hardware and its capabilities. An exercise: describe, without use of humans as props, any common or garden household utility and its function. Boring. But having a character watching tv, using a computer or even making themselves a drink, while furthering the story as regards plot, internalising or whatever draws the props into the narrative itself, making them virtually invisible to the reader, and certainly not intrusive on their reading pleasure.

[This is a slightly edited version of an article by Storm that appeared in the Storm Constantine Information Service magazine **Inception**, issue V in May/June 1991]

Worldbuilding
Sally-Ann Melia

Who needs Worlds? A starship with Infinite Improbability Drive, a medieval forest in the Midlands, a space station key to Earth's defences, ancient Macedonia, the Sol System in its entirety, and a fragile craft afloat in the flotsam and jetsam at the inner core of a star. All these and more have been the settings for Science Fiction and Fantasy novels.

So are you writing Fantasy, Science Fantasy, Science Fiction or Hard SF? Are you writing about possibilities on Earth and our Sol System? Are you describing a distant star, far planet complexes, alien civilisations? Know what you are writing and who you are writing for, then Worldbuilding evolves from a sketch on the back of a curry-stained napkin to two months entombed in the Science Section of the British library.

To base a story in or around the Earth means accepting certain constraints. Existing history, basic structures, accepted standards, all must be incorporated. Yet this is where Science Fiction writers seem most at home. Some of the most famous SF novels are set in the near future, in our solar System. H. G. Wells and Jules Verne have been followed by Arthur C. Clarke, particularly his 2001 series, Carl Sagan (**Contact**); and Kim Stanley Robinson (Mars series). Even Michael Crichton's Jurassic Park fits into this category. Undaunted younger writers include Keith Brooke, Peter Hamilton and the speculative Hard SF of Stephen Baxter.

Not to be outdone, Fantasy writers have aggressively attacked what could be seen as restrictions of the known world. Robert Holdstock restricted himself to a wood in the Midlands to write the Mythago saga. David Gemmell looked to ancient Macedonia for his Black Prince series.

Near future Science Fiction has a seductive appeal to both reader and writer. It is a great help to the writer to be able to use well known place names, established time and space measures, basic geography and weather. Also familiar names, places and situations ease the reader into and through the text. This may explain why much near future SF is frequently bestseller fiction, and sometimes adapted into mega-dollar films. Yet this simplicity is deceptive. It requires both careful research and detailed thought. These novels are often written by preeminent scientists or science journalists. When near future Science Fiction fails it is truly awful. Look for thick layers of information slapped on over flimsy and poorly-researched backdrops. Look at the brash gaudy colours of old-fashioned ideas and obsolete technology. For near-future science fiction to work, you have to believe what you see is the real thing. A near future SF novel has to be finely balanced to feel like the world we know, or the way we feel it might evolve. This is all the more difficult when Berlin walls come and go. Climatic change is first postulated as deadly then denied. SETI (the NASA sponsored Search for Extraterrestrial Life Project) each day scans a different sector of the sky looking for that one message that will change our life-view forever.

Some tales are better told without the restrictive trappings of the commonplace, beyond the boundaries of the known world. Many readers look to books to escape their reality. Many writers only desire to create the new, the astonishing, the unusual.

World building a mythical and distant fantasy realm may appear to be but a sketch accompanying convincingly olde-English calligraphic text, this is an illusion. The line drawing a black on white map is but a start. The Fantasy writer may neglect details of planet's atmosphere, galactic coordinates, time frames and/or weather systems. His focus will be on a sense of wholeness. The essence of his tale will be based around a complex history. With two interpretations of this history by two sets of opposing characters. Their lives, their loves, their weaknesses and their bravery make the novel. In effect the map is the easy part of a fantasy tale. The country itself needs a soul and personality to convince. Great novels have been written this way. Starting with Tolkien passing through Gene Wolfe and up to today's Tad Williams, Storm Constantine and Simon Green.

If fantasy writers have fun, science fiction writers do it better. Building a distant Science Fiction galactic civilisation requires all of the above skills and more. The first stop is the Science Section of your local library where you research like billy-ho. What to research? Well everything really. From supernovas to space drives, from the power of gravity to the possibilities of carbon based biology. Now put the imagination into overdrive. Then there's the small question of pulling together a coherent past, present and future, not for anything as small as a country, a planet, or a planetary system, but for the Milky Way, the Local Group of Galaxies, the Andromeda Galaxy, even the entire Universe. The scope and excitement of such total creation has led to much brilliance. George Lucas's Star Wars, Anne McCaffrey's Dragonriders, Iain M. Banks's Culture.

The point to stress here is that Worldbuilding, or galaxy building from scratch is as hard as writing within the known structures of Earth and the Sol System. In creating their own world, the writer has to be as strict with themselves. The imaginary world should impose all the constraints and more than the real world. And if it isn't hard then you are doing something wrong. There's no easy formula, there never was. But hey who wants something easy? SF worldbuilding is a hell of a lot of fun! So Worldbuilding... Whether you write about the Earth, some distant SF empire or some magic kingdom of elves, whether you write in the past, today or at some time in the future... All require research, all require imagination, all require consistency. Just go with what you love. Do it with Passion. Respect your reader.

Quartos reviewed by Andrew Butler

Quartos announces itself as 'the bimonthly publication for creative writers', and attempts to cover poetry, fiction and non-fiction. SF gets mentioned only in passing, in the list of folios (the equivalent of the BSFA's Orbits and Cassandra's Mercuries), but much of the information it contains will be of interest to the genre writer.

As magazines vary greatly between issues, I should note that I have seen issues 37 and 38, which covered the period from September to December 1993. Both weigh in at twenty-eight A4 pages, and are produced using DTP technology. Whilst the typeface is always readable, it suffers from the blandness that all small press magazines suffer from. Line breaking with hyphens is erratic, and some of it has not been proofread. Does this matter? Well, when the title of the magazine is misspelt 'Quartoss' someone has slipped up.

The articles in **Quartos** break down into five broad categories:

News - of competitions, markets, courses, books and publishers. At first glance this would seem to have a home counties and London bias, but tucked away in the back of the magazine is Regional News. Certainly if you want details on competitions run by the Pro-Dog National Charity, Dog Watch or Areophagus Magazine this is the place to look.

The Mechanics of Writing - discussions on what editors are really after and whether you need an agent, on how to use the weather in fiction and clarity in poetry. By far the most interesting article was Barry Turner's 'I Quote, You Plagiarise: The Law of Copyright', but this is a reprint from the 1993 **Writer's Handbook**.

Authors' Experiences - Run-ins with publishers and life at workshops. The Making of a Novelist' by Rosemary Rogan was a precis of the autobiography of the same name by Margaret Thomson Davis which seems a bit of a cheat. A piece on novelist and publisher Richard Cox is billed as an interview on the cover, but lacks any direct quotations.

Fiction and Poetry - cynically space fillers, more generously a reminder of what the magazine is about. The poems, most of which are reprints, are not particularly arresting.

Words - opening bows, spoonerism, punctuation, in fact the sort of light hearted article which slips into national newspapers and is then played out in the letters columns. These pieces are geared to cataloguing examples not suggesting ways to come up with your own. The feature on Reverend Spooner, an old chestnut really, seems particularly inappropriate, as does an article on graphology. A piece on spelling miraculously escapes the curse of the typo, but unfortunately succumbs to the tautology of 'the hoi polloi'.

In conclusion then, I feel that this magazine would be of little or no use for the aspiring SF or Fantasy writer. However amateurs who are thinking of becoming freelance and don't wish to stick to one genre should check it out, as indeed should professionals who are on the lookout for new markets.

***Quartos** magazine is available from BCM-Writer, London, WC1N 3XX. One year subscription is £12.*

The Plotting Parlour

We've not had that many letters this time around, but hope that this will improve as time goes on; remember, this is your magazine. Without your input it won't work.

First, no editor can resist printing letters saying what a wonderful job they're doing; and Carol Ann and Julie are no exception!

John Bagness from Cumbria writes: "Congratulations to all concerned! I have nothing but praise for Issue 24 of **Focus**: its content, immaculate presentation and a generally upbeat feel.

"Struggling aspirant writers should have reason to be grateful for the 'pearls of wisdom' in the 'Forum on Characterisation'. Likewise, there was much food for thought in Sally-Ann Melia's account of the trials and tribulations of writing a first novel. We can only take heart from accounts of the experiences of those who have already trodden the stony path, so please keep including them."

Pam Baddeley from Farnborough writes that she "sympathise[s] with Sally-Ann Melia, having finished 3 novels now. . . . I understand the frustration of flogging yourself for months doing one revision after another. As for sample chapters, you get conflicting advice. I have sent out the first, last and one in the middle, with a reasonably detailed chapter breakdown but other people say send the first 3 or 4 and a recent experience showed that the publisher only read the first one anyway." I don't think there is a cut and dried way of doing this, many publishers have different ways of working.

Pam then goes on to talk about the fiction last issue. "I liked the relationships in **The Cost of Skills** but was puzzled about who had persecuted Vivian and whether the fire at the village was the result of attack by enemies. I think it reads as if it is part of a larger work or a series."

Peter Tennant from Thetford responds to last issue " Many thanks for the latest issue of **Focus**. I was one of the people who considered the magazine redundant. My feeling was that, as there are already plenty of 'how to' books and magazines for aspiring writers, the BSFA's limited resources would be better spent on providing an outlet for new fiction. The majority of the membership seem to have felt otherwise. So be it. Right or wrong we have a **Focus** and it seems to be in good hands.

"The new look **Focus** contains much I found of interest; a pleasing mixture of known writers and amateurs holding forth with wit and wisdom. It's well laid out too with an attractive use of illustrations, though I could've done with a few more larger drawings to break up the text. In parenthesis one thing that occurs to me is that if the BSFA's remit is to promote SF perhaps **Focus** should be aimed at all creative people, artists as well as writers." [See our editorial this issue, we are in agreement here Peter, we too would like to see a few more larger drawings – but we can only use what we've been sent.]

"The usually succinct Paul Kincaid slightly irritated me by belabouring the obvious. Reviews are all a matter of opinion; how could they be otherwise? The reader who wants 'something absolute' should forget about reviews and devote his time to more reasonable pursuits; a quest for the Holy Grail springs to mind as starters. I don't think any of us expect a definitive good/bad from reviewers, just generally reliable pointers as to what a book's about and how well it's written. We're not as demanding as Paul's hypothetical reader. I think the point Craig was making (and with which, a few exceptions aside, I do not agree) is that reviewers place the emphasis on themselves rather than the book. For some reviewers the book is just a whipping boy on which to demonstrate their own intelligence and political correctness. They are exceptions though and generally I'm happy with the standard of reviewing in the BSFA publications.

"On the fiction front I enjoyed **Senses** by Syd Foster for the lively style of the writing, but thought the storyline was too vague and weak. It suggested far more than was actually conveyed, but to little effect. At the end I was left wondering what that was all about. Syd's got a way with words, but he also got away with them as well. Cherith Baldry's **The Cost of Skills** was much better, a good piece of writing that could probably sell to a professional magazine if fine tuned slightly. Charactersation was at the story's heart. Cherith gave us real people with whom we could empathise and identify, suggesting so much with just a few words. I could've used more information though; who beat Vivian and why; how did the village come to burn. Cherith leaves us to assume too much. A minor point though; nothing to spoil my pleasure in this moving piece.

"Brian Stableford pleaded the case for SF with remarkable eloquence and rigorous logic. Literature cannot and should not be an end in itself. Good or bad books are written by people and about people. They are not self-referential, existing in some lofty ivory tower, but a reflection of the real world in which we all live and breathe. Even the lowliest hack work offers value judgements of some kind. SF is a tool for understanding our world and where it's going. The need for such a tool has never been greater."

The Last and Greatest Work of the Blind Poet
by Cherith Baldry

When rebels besieged his palace, the Emperor withdrew to the blind poet's tower. The poet loved the Emperor, for he could not see the cruelty time had etched in his face.

"The rebels will break in before morning," said the Emperor.

"Indeed," said the poet. "Then I must finish my poem."

Because the servants had fled, the Emperor took a quill and wrote what the poet dictated.

When the rebels broke in, they killed the poet, but the Emperor they impaled alive above his palace gates. Last of all, they set fire to the tower, and the poem was burnt.

And finally, **Justina Robson** from Leeds asks some very pertinent questions about whither **Focus**, writing and Science Fiction in general.

What's up Guy's. An Appeal for Clarification of What's Expected

"**Focus** is a repository of a lot of worthwhile and good information on how to write, donated by some of the BSFA's best brains and most practised exponents. It makes the job of writing a story or a novel sound quite easy, as though all you have to do is follow the instructions from beginning to end and voila! Literary genius. Unfortunately all of the advice is quite useless in this respect. That's because without learning for yourself, by practise, practise, practise it is not possible to appreciate it, by which time you could have said it yourself. So it puzzles me why so much time is devoted to explications of writing practices, whether individual and personal and so idiosyncratic or general. Those who know, know. Those who don't know can only find out by practice.

"The last Forum on Character seemed to me to be written by people who know, at least a bit, for people who know. There were few in depth explanations of why certain truisms of character handling were so eternal and binding and I am as guilty if not more so than the rest of failing to explain why I said what I said about it. For a novice writer what I said must read as though I'm just a single-minded dictator, exhorting. I don't think this is a useful effect. I wasn't sure how to pitch it. If you like, I'm quite capable of launching into extensive stylistic analysis of almost any aspect of creative writing because I spent years studying it, but then again, I don't think that even that is truly helpful in this instance where we are not trying to make an overtly critical arena.

"For instance, to fully demonstrate to a non-writer why certain devices of characterisation do not work and how books can fail because of their characters, it is necessary to take apart some poor sod's work and show, bit by bit, how the grisly thing was put together. That's criticism. I sensed a steering-away from this angle except in Geoff Ryman's contribution and wondered what the overall attitude to Forum was. Is there a separate section of **Focus** for outright cribcism that is deconstructing for the sake of arguing a point, (such as Why Justina Uses Too Many Participles), or are we too allergic to academic treatments to want to bother?

"Personally, I think that in the past our beloved SF, along with Fantasy, has suffered from a lack of criticism; not of its ideas, which are so vital and interesting – they are debated endlessly – but of its stylistic structures. Why choose the novel form? Why do this, why do that? Why have we stopped experimenting so extensively with format, style and language (since the stalling of Cyberpunk)? Why do so many great ideas

get written up so appallingly badly by people who can't be bothered to construct a decent story or manage a realistic everyday human encounter? I'm forced to admit that I cannot bear to waste time in reading a lot of SF because it is so monumentally un-engaging writing that i don't care how good its ideas are. My blood boils when indifferent writers are hailed as greats when they only thought of a good idea. I feel very strongly that, despite my own love of language and contempt for those who seem to enjoy wasting all of its uses through laziness and ignorance. In the end SF will always be viewed as second rate by the wider reading public because of its pervasive illiteracy.

"Does it matter? Is this a writer's magazine? Can I tell you exactly why Anne Rice is such compelling stuff by analysis? Yes. It's in the style. Crudely put, an Anne Rice book reads all the way through just like the dirty bits in everyone else's books, no matter what she's writing about. That and a whole excess of verbal forms for pace.

"I don't see how any of us can improve without critical debate (necessitating painful humility). At the moment Focus seems to fight a bit shy of this, perhaps out of everyone's understandable desire to be generous and kind to one another – after all, if we don't stick together we haven't got anyone. In the past I always found criticism to be wholly negative – I experienced it as that, as an attack, and it can be like that. But don't we owe it to ourselves to lay it on the line? How about a column every issue in which some worthy classic is debunked and shredded, like in the Books bit of the Sunday Times which last week explained why the Brontes were crap? And we don't have to stick to dead people either. Or on the positive side, why not a My Favourite Bit Of... where someone can explain why an excerpt was so great for them. I'd be glad to do something on the stylistic side but only if You've Lot are interested in frothing at the mouth for a good bit of argument by correspondence. How about a Devil's Advocate kind of thing such as – I contend that SF is suffering from an excess of male domination and is unrepresentative of any kind of realistic human future situation because of its neglect of female experiences (linguistic and every other way)? And we could go on from there.

And for anyone who doesn't think that style is really all and that content can carry the day I have only this to say. YOU ARE WRONG (And that goes double for the other way around.)"

A lot to think about there, write to us and give us your views, on these points and what you think Focus should be providing for the writer.

Writing Fantasy and Horror.

Brian Stableford

[Last issue we ran an article by Brian on writing Science Fiction, this time we have Part One of an article on Writing Fantasy and Horror. We decided to split the article due to it being too long to fit in this issue, and we didn't want to cut anything out. Part Two will appear next issue (June 1994).]

Fantastic fiction is nowadays commonly thought to be inherently inferior to realistic fiction. The three genres of fantastic fiction recognised by publishers – science fiction, horror and fantasy – are considered to belong to the realm of popular culture rather than the arena of high art. This is a relatively recent attitude; before the emergence of the novel in the late eighteenth century the idea that literary work could – let alone should – attempt to simulate the course of everyday life would have seemed strange. It was taken for granted that the writer's most significant tools included fabulation, allegory, and the recapitulation of themes from Classical mythology. Nor did the realistic novel acquire its position of cultural centrality without a struggle: the early champions of literary realism were stoutly opposed by the Romantic Movement, many of whose members attempted to conserve literary interest in the exotic and the supernatural.

The realistic novel quickly spawned a fantastic counterpart in the Gothic novel, which used the persuasiveness of narrative prose to the end of constructing scary tales replete with all manner of horrors, and such novels hugely popular in their day, but they soon came to be considered vulgar and silly. Repetition rendered their key scenes impotent, and by the time Victoria ascended the throne their day was done. The Victorian era saw a steady decline in belief in the supernatural, which cast severe doubts upon the workability of magic, the reality of ghosts and the literalness of the Biblical miracles. Fantastic fiction, like actual belief in the supernatural, came to seem to many people to be a childish thing which ought not to be taken as seriously as more adult fare. Many poets maintained their interest in Classical and folkloristic themes, but they de-emphasised the supernatural elements in their work, and poetry itself became increasingly marginalised.

That supernatural fiction retained any respectability at all in Britain during Victoria's reign was largely due to Charles Dickens, who played a vital role in popularising the idea of "Christmas Books", tacitly arguing that it was entirely reasonable for the stern standards of realism to be relaxed once a year so that people could have fun with tales of goblins and ghosts, even though everyone knew perfectly well that such things didn't exist. By virtue of this kind of convention, the English ghost story managed to maintain certain aspirations to gentility well into the twentieth century. A similar argument also gave a valuable licence to writers for children, who were graciously allowed to traffic in nonsense for the sake of innocent amusement.

The argument that the fantastic could be permitted limited literary scope on the grounds that it was only innocent fun was, of course, deceitful. Dickens' Christmas stories were actually fierce moral allegories in humorous disguise, as were the fairy tales produced – ostensibly for children – by such writers as George MacDonald and Oscar Wilde. Even Lewis Carroll's supposed nonsense was beneath its glittering surface, far more subversive that most of its readers dreamed.

The present situation of fantastic fiction is in some ways closely akin to the state of affairs which pertained in Victorian times, but in other ways it is strikingly different. On the one hand, supernatural fiction is still in a position of having to offer excuses for its very existence; the excuse which is most commonly offered is that it is all just harmless fun; and that excuse serves mainly to deflect attention from the real nature and import of fantastic fictions. On the other hand, fantastic stories of all kinds are now more popular than ever before, and fantastic motifs are increasingly being reabsorbed into the so-called literary mainstream, perhaps to the extent that the realistic novel may soon be in danger of losing its long-held position of aesthetic privilege.

The contemporary state of affairs is rather surprising, given that neither of the two genres of supernatural fiction – fantasy and horror – was extensively used as a marketing label before 1970, and most publishers regarded the genres as commercially moribund. This changed dramatically in the wake of the astonishing success of the paperback editions of J. R. R. Tolkien's **The Lord of the Rings**, and the spectacular revival of the horror film, aided by a new battery of special effects. Since 1970, fantasy writers like Stephen R. Donaldson, Marion Zimmer Bradley and David Eddings, and horror writers like Stephen King, Clive Barker and Dean R. Koontz, have found a place among the best-selling writers in the world.

This revitalisation of supernatural fiction is a very interesting phenomenon, which cries out for more detailed explanation – all the more so because the adherents of both genres still run the risk of social stigmatization. Fantasy writers and readers are frequently held to be guilty of the sin of "escapism", while horror writers and readers are likely to be accused of being "sick".

The relative disreputability of the fantasy genres is reflected in the fact that although there is far more money to be made writing fantasy and horror than out of science fiction, there are far more writers' workshops specialising in science fiction than in fantasy or horror. In the case of fantasy this seems to be connected with a widespread view that because fantasy, unlike sf, has no logical restrictions, it has no particular craftsmanship to be taught – that it is, to borrow a phrase from Gregory Benford, like playing tennis without the net. In the case of horror, it seems to be the result of profound doubts about the propriety of writing such stories at all. Nevertheless, it does make perfect sense for writers interested in these genres to make a close study of the nature of contemporary work which is being done, and to raise questions about the problems of method which arise therefrom.

Most of the stories which are nowadays written for publication under the fantasy label belong to a sub-class which J. R. R. Tolkien, in his classic essay "On Fairy-Stories" describes as Secondary World fantasies. These are stories set in imaginary worlds whose spatial and temporal connection with the real world are frankly mysterious, but whose nature and contents are intelligibly related to it. Lin Carter, who became the most ardent champion of adult fantasy in the world of American publishing after the success of **The Lord of the Rings**, argues in his book **Imaginary Worlds** that Secondary World stories constitute the hard core of the fantasy genre.

The "purest" fantasy, for Tolkien and Carter, consists of stories set entirely within a Secondary World. In many stories of a closely related kind, however, the characters must move from our mundane world into the Secondary World, and may move repeatedly back and forth across the boundary between the two. Any reasonable definition of fantasy must obviously accommodate these works. A broader definition,

though, must also take in stories in which a part of the mundane world is briefly infected or transformed by a limited incursion from a Secondary World, even if the Secondary World is not formally allotted a space of its own. Such incursions are frequently likened to (or "explained" as) dreams and hallucinations; many actual examples are concerned with the displacement from a hypothetical Secondary World of a single magical character or object. Horror stories typically deal with similar disruptions of the normal course of worldly affairs, but in horror stories the intrusions are necessarily threatening, where the effect of the temporary incursion is at least partly enlivening or life-enhancing then the work is usually better classified as a fantasy.

Carter alleges in **Imaginary Worlds** that what differentiates Secondary Worlds from the mundane one can be adequately summed up in a single word: magic. This serves well enough as a point of definition, but there are certain other characteristics in which Secondary Worlds tend to resemble our own world in fundamental ways – in terms of the composition of their atmosphere and the force of gravity – but the details of their geography may be different, and their flora and fauna are usually augmented by an assortment of creatures borrowed from ancient mythologies. They are usually technologically primitive, and their social organization is likely to be feudal, supported by some notion of the divine right of kings.

Secondary Worlds of this general kind are essentially composite versions of the kind of world in which our remote ancestors believed that they lived. Other Secondary Worlds whose existence is either featured or implied by fantasy stories tend to be worlds which our ancestors believed to exist in parallel with our own: the Underworld, the Land of Faeire, the Land of Dreams. Fantasy sometimes uses imaginary worlds which are idiosyncratically bizarre, but even its strangest settings tend to be allegorical or satirical transformations of the real world. The central feature of the great majority of fantasy worlds is that they are licensed to contain things which our ancestors once believed in, but which we no longer do. For this reason, fantasy often seems nostalgic, and is often redolent with sentimental regret for lost illusions.

The commonly-held notion that fantasy is essentially "childish" tacitly assumes that our remote and ignorant ancestors believed in the efficacy of magic because they were simple-minded, and that only people who are similarly simple-minded can take stories about magic seriously. People who think like this reason from this supposition to the conclusion that we might generously allow children to believe in magic until they are old enough to "know better" – but that modern adults ought to have "grown out of" such silly fancies. The first tacit assumption on which this line of argument is based is highly dubious; the second is clearly ridiculous.

It is a grotesque misunderstanding to assume that in order to read and enjoy fantastic fiction one must be prepared to believe in the actual workability of magic. Most commentators on the genre follow Coleridge in referring to what is actually required as a temporary and limited "willing suspension of disbelief", but Tolkien goes further than this, characterising the contact between writer and reader in more positive terms, as a demand for a distinct species of "Secondary Belief". Using this observation as a prelude to explanation, Tolkien opens the way to a more sensible discussion of the psychological utility of fantasy.

Tolkien refers to three functions of fantasy, which he calls Recovery, Escape and Consolation. It is an essential part of this thesis that fantasy is the natural partner of reason, neither "insulting" nor undermining it, and that our sense of what is necessarily has as its logical counterpart a sense of that which is not. He argues that the ability to take up a fantastic viewpoint for the sake of comparison helps us to put real things in a better perspective, what we "recover" in fantasy is a clearer sight than we normally employ in viewing the world, because it is a less narrow sight – a sight which does not take the limitations of everyday experience too much for granted.

This argument asserts that we cannot see reality clearly enough if we are trapped within it, and that it is only when we can perform the imaginative trick of moving outside the actual that we can properly appreciate its bounds. Seen from this viewpoint, offering fantasies to children is not at all a matter of granting them temporary licence to believe absurdities. It is instead an entirely appropriate means of helping them to arrive at a sensible distinction of what is real and the unreal.

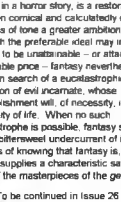
The function of Escape is seen by Tolkien in much the same light as the function of Recovery. He asserts unhesitatingly that the escapism of fantasy is to be evaluated as if it were the escape of a prisoner rather than the desertion of a soldier; it is in his view a liberation, not a moral failure. He might be adjudged to be going further than he needs to at this point, because one could equally well argue that the best analogy is actually with a short vacation – that literary escape is merely a refreshing holiday from the stresses and strains of confrontation with stubborn and frustrating reality. But Tolkien wants to build a more ambitious case, because he wants to argue that imaginary travel broadens the mind in a particularly profound sense. Tolkien proposes that if it is to be genuinely rewarding, the escapism of Fantasy cannot be content simply with drawing the reader away from the oppression of actuality; he argues that it ought to lead towards some kind of goal. This is where the third function of fantasy – that of Consolation – emerges.

Tolkien calls the consolatory goal which he believes a fantasy story should have a "eucatastrophe". By this he means a climactic affirmation of both joy and right: pleasure allayed with moral confidence. This does not mean that fantasy cannot or ought not to be tragic, but it does mean that in Tolkien's view fantasy ought not to be despairing; as science fiction and horror fiction sometimes are, according to this argument, the work of fantasy is essentially committed to the cause of moral rearmament.

There is nothing surprising in Tolkien's allegation that there is an intimate alliance between fantasy fiction and moral rearmament. Moral fables and parables are usually fantastic in kind, and the intimate involvement of morality and fantasy is already implicit in the idea of magic itself. In preliterate societies where belief in magic is still sustained, there is always an intrinsic connection between magic and morality. Magical explanations and magical practices are invoked on precisely those occasions when the real world fails to measure up to the ideal. The hunter in search of meat makes magic against the possibility of failure, but he may fail if he has broken a taboo. The crop-grower makes magic to bring the rain which he needs, and magic to fertilise the soil, but if the tribal ancestors have been offended by the wickedness of their children the rain will not come and the soil will bear fruit. The medicine-man makes magic to fight illness and oppose the evil of witches who would bring all manner of misfortunes upon the tribe. Magic is an expression of desire; it is the attempt to create, at least in the imagination, a world where the human will is the master of fate, and its failure is always linked with some kind of moral failure. Desire unrestrained by moral responsibility is evil, and magic without moral responsibility is black magic. Institutionalised magical practises are intimately bound up with the question of whether the practitioners truly deserve to succeed in their endeavours.

Magic does not, in fact, work – but that does not mean that it is useless to those societies which practise and believe in it. The real utility of magic does not lie in the pratical arena of human endeavour but in the theatre of the psyche; but it does have a real utility, and that is why it is wrong to regard belief in magic as though it were simply a silly mistake. Institutionalised magic builds confidence and morale, its operations are of purely symbolic value, but it nevertheless opposes defeatism and despair, and conserves hope. Magic – or some psychological substitute – is vital to all human endeavour at a causal level, because confidence may be a necessary condition of success, and despair is generally a guarantee of failure. In all societies where belief in magic is sustained (and ours has by no means been entirely purged of such ways of thinking) forms of magical practice and magical belief are defined by moral priorities, heavily dependent upon notions of reward and punishment. It could not be otherwise. Even where magic is denied any kind of primary belief, it may still function through the medium of secondary belief; that is why fantasy can and does still flourish as a form of fiction even in thoroughly rationalised societies; one might even argue that such societies need fantastic fictions more than societies which still license belief in fantastic reality.

In all supernatural fiction, matters of morality are crucially at stake. Good and evil are in the balance, and the question at issue is whether and how the characters will be delivered from an evil which is very often made incarnate as a force or an individual. Horror fiction tends to emphasize the threat of evil incarnate, and to build suspense upon the question of whether deliverance from that threat is possible: a happy ending, in a horror story, is a restoration of normality. Fantasy, although it is often comical and calculatedly quaint, conceals beneath its relative lightness of tone a greater ambition: in fantasy, normality is not enough. Although the preferable ideal may in the end turn out to be unattainable – or attainable only at a terrible price – fantasy nevertheless moves in search of a eucatastrophic demolition of evil incarnate, whose accomplishment will, of necessity, improve the quality of life. When no such eucatastrophe is possible, fantasy stories carry a bittersweet undercurrent of irony. The sadness of knowing that fantasy is, after all, fantasy supplies a characteristic savour to many of the masterpieces of the genre.



[To be continued in Issue 26 of **Focus**.]

Should Writers Teach Writing?

by Sue Thomas

Recent years have seen a huge growth in the number of writers' groups throughout Britain. This expansion is partly the by-product of social and economic changes resulting in more leisure for some and increasing unemployment for others, but for many people writing, for whatever reason, has provided a route into self-expression, to finding a voice and speaking out, and a way into the making of art. As to the number of published authors who have emerged from the groups - well frankly that's completely irrelevant. The best, most powerful and committed authors have always written because they want to, need to, have to... and certainly not in the pursuit of fame and fortune. They probably didn't attend creative writing groups either, although it's true to say that many have ended up teaching them.

SF fans were keen workshoppers long before the spread of creative writing groups. Many, if not the majority, of well-known SF writers started by sharing and discussing their work, and the UK is laced with a network far more powerful than ley-lines - yes, I'm talking about Orbiter and Mercury postal workshops.

We know that workshopping is helpful, but can writing really be *taught*?

Recently I finished the writing of an eighty-page resource pack for Creative Writing Tutors. It took nearly a year to complete because I kept stopping and starting, haunted by the fact that most of the time I didn't really believe in what I was doing.

At times it seemed utterly crass to think that this beloved act could be prostituted in this way. But then again, I myself started writing seriously after taking a Creative Writing option as part of my degree course, and began my novel **Correspondence** as a direct result of attending a highly enjoyable Arvon week taught by Lisa Tuttle and Iain Banks.

Now I'm back at university, only this time teaching the course I once attended as a student, and also putting together a Master's degree in Writing. Over the last few years I've supported myself and two daughters by teaching writing in a wide range of settings including Rampton Hospital, the Arvon Foundation, and numerous libraries and schools around the country.

So here I am, a fairly successful product of the system - but still I have my doubts.

I've come to one conclusion, however. I passionately believe that although creativity itself probably can't be taught, it can certainly be released, encouraged, nurtured and valued, and it's this process which gives me the most pleasure. Last year, for example, one of my undergraduate students took pains to make sure I understood that he had no imagination whatsoever. He was embarrassed by it, but adamant that nothing could help him, and so the challenge to prove him wrong was, naturally, irresistible. And of course he soon found himself amazed at the flights of fancy he was starting to experience, and I in turn felt highly rewarded by the way in which he'd begun to perceive the world around him in a much more sensitive and alert fashion.

Because most of the time that's all it takes. "Open your eyes," says the tutor. "Smell, taste and touch the world - and then write about what you find." What could be easier?

In fact, I have to confess that I rather enjoy turning other people on to the power of their own imaginations. I like to think I'm initiating them into the sensual underworld of creativity, helping them to become magicians, teaching them how to pull characters out of thin air, how to hypnotise their readers by manipulating their emotions, how to transport them to every known and unknown landscape.

But the question still remains - is a professional writer the best person to take on the task of midwifing other people's creativity? After all, writers tend to be peculiarly solitary characters who feel most at ease when there's a solid sheet of paper between them and the rest of the world. Should we really expect them to step out, unprotected, into the harsh light of the classroom? For myself, although teaching is enjoyable, sometimes it can be the most enormous strain. There are times when I experience utter scepticism about the work I do, and no more so than when my own creative ideas melt away before my eyes because I don't have sufficient time or energy to capture and explore them for myself. Sometimes, oh horror, they even end up as writing exercises for the class rather than novels.

One way to deal with this is for both students and tutor to accept that the part of you which is the Writing Tutor is a different person to you the Writer. Keep the Writer at home, and don't expose it to the harsh light of the classroom. Don't allow it to be forced to explain or defend itself in public, don't allow it to answer complicated personal questions about motive, inspiration, or disappointment. Keep it well away from prying eyes.

It's vital, too, to remember to devote regular time to the things that feed you as a writer - good music, favourite authors, a special landscape, congenial people, solitude. These are not treats, they are an essential part of your creative life.

Another pitfall involves the fact that for most of us teaching writing brings in more money than our own publications. I know quite a few writers who've been seduced by the riches of twelve quid an hour, some of whom took the poisoned chalice and disappeared into a black hole, never to be heard of again, unless mentioned in book dedications by grateful proteges.

But it's also a two-way process - my students learn from me and I in turn learn from them. We make new discoveries together, and respond to them in our individual ways.

And so when I leave my writing-desk and enter the classroom I know that no matter how disparate and solitary we writers may be, we all hold in common the simple desire to invent, create and translate our separate experience into a form that someone else will appreciate and understand - whether we're professionals or beginners, novelists or poets, writers of SF or romance - we're all much the same. If you scratch us, do we not run upstairs to our bedrooms and write it all down as possible future story material?

Writing Your First Novel by John Madracki

So you want to write a novel?

Well, why not?

They say everyone has a book inside them - and you couldn't make a worse job of committing it to print than many 'professionals' I could name.

Advice on how to actually construct your first novel is already freely available - see your local library - but what is often neglected in these guidelines is the basic preparation required by those who are starting from scratch.

Here are seven 'Golden Rules' for laying that all-important groundwork.

1. A Place to Work

We have all heard of the bestselling blockbusters that were secretly written at the kitchen table - but don't you believe it. This is nothing more than promotional hype. Everyone knows that the kitchen is the busiest and most public area in the home - and you may just as well attempt to compose your deathless prose in the middle of Piccadilly Circus. Peace and quiet is essential. Perhaps you are fortunate enough to have a spare room which you can soundproof. If not, then consider the loft. If it doesn't appear to be immediately suitable to your needs then embark upon its conversion. And then, of course, there is that other haven of solitude - the garden shed. If you don't have one, then build one. No one said you wouldn't have to get your hands dirty.

2. Have the Right Materials

"A bad workman will always blame his tools." This may be true - but even the most accomplished craftsman would have cause to complain if not properly equipped. It doesn't really matter if your book is to be produced with a hi-tech word processor, on a battered old typewriter, or even scribbled into a clutch of 'silvine' exercise books - there is a host

of paraphernalia that should be forever at your fingertips. Everything from sticks of hardened paste and staplers to coloured pencils and various erasers. Your local stationer will be more than happy to furnish you with a comprehensive list of all your required purchases.

Don't underestimate the importance of reference books. You may think that a large dictionary, a thesaurus and a good encyclopaedia will be adequate, but this is a very short-sighted view. What about a dictionary of synthetic chemical compounds, a guide to the flora and fauna of South-East Asia and a copy of the Manhattan phonebook? You just never know what vital piece of information may suddenly present itself for verification. Your local bookseller will be as helpful as the stationer. Count on it.

And don't forget the 'incentives'.

Surround yourself with photos of your loved ones, framed rejection slips (don't get mad, get even) and the latest household bills (preferably the red ones).

3) Caffeine:

Invest in a 20-cup coffee maker. It will be in constant use. You don't like coffee? Then acquire the taste.

4 Nicotine:

Make sure there are numerous ash-trays within easy reach. You don't smoke? Develop the habit!

5) Perfect Your Pacing:

Practise for at least four hours a day. 80% of all writing takes place in the brain; learn to match your physical movements to your thought processes. Some people prefer to pace up and down - others find a circular path to be more conducive. And remember to try both clockwise and counter-clockwise pacing. Decide which suits you best.

6) Almost there:

Buy every 'How-to' book on novel-writing there is. Study them closely. Then ignore everything you've been told. If these authors could write successful novels then they wouldn't be wasting their time encouraging competition. Remember those who can, do; those who can't, teach.

7) The Moment Has Arrived:

The blank page/screen awaits.

Now you don't need me to tell you just how crucial your opening line is. It has to be the most powerful sentence in the entire book. But don't panic. Think about it. Find something to occupy your hands while you cogitate. Maybe the bathroom needs a fresh coat of paint. And have you inspected the guttering lately?

After all, it's probably taken you several years to get this far - so what difference will a few more weeks make?

The Future: Disguising the Real. Simon Ings

This year's EasterCon was hosted in St Helier, Jersy. Because I work curious hours to earn my keep, I arrived at the overspill hotel during my thirtieth hour of wakefulness. I lay on the bed and watched afternoon T.V. All I remember was one advertisement which seemed to go on forever.

"If you use plastic bags, then you need the super-sealer!" the actor said, in the usual excited tones, but having established that the super-sealer sealed plastic bags, he didn't know how to stop. "The super-sealer, an extraordinary sealing device for plastic bags!" he exclaimed. I went to the bathroom and splashed cold water over my face. I came back and he was saying, "any plastic bag can be sealed with the super-sealer!" I put the kettle on and, in a final desperate bid for attention, he offered me two super-sealers for the price of one. "one for the car and one for the home!" The advert didn't seem to end; it just trailed off into some rambling monologue about garden centres. I couldn't work out whether it was an advertisement or not.

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None of us need write about the future: it is already here. It arrived during the nineteen fifties and, like Gorey's **Doubtful Guest**, it has shown no intention of going away.

The Modern has nothing to do with contemporaneity – but rather with the speed of change. A Modern society is one which is aware of its own modernity. Because we live in a Modern society, we often make the mistake of thinking our condition is the norm. It isn't. Modernity is specific to certain times and places. We see which societies were Modern by the works they produced. Shakespeare, for example, has no concept of the Modern; Chaucer, on the other hand, has.

At its most intense, a Modern society becomes so difficult, so complex, so amorphous and at the same time so intractably intricate, that the writer is bound to choose to follow one of three paths.

The first, is to try and prevent the Modern: the phrase is Arthur Clarke's. Clarke seeks to prevent the future by drawing it into the purview of the present. Like Tristram Shandy's father, he tries to elucidate for us a world grown incomprehensible. But the world changes too fast for him, (and for Asimov, and indeed for all the good doctors of SF's early days), and we too have failed our tutelage, have proved too keen to worship the magical artefacts he sought to explain, and so the test proves hopeless. But a doomed stand is nevertheless a stand, and in Arthur Clarke it is redeemed by a self-reflexive irony quite missing from those dreadful Gregs and Bruces who claim (what an outrage!) to be his heirs.

The second, is to ignore Modernity entirely. This is by far the most productive solution, giving rise to much (most?) worthwhile work this century: from **The Waves to Pincher Martin** to **Camp Concentration** (this, while set in a modern future is not about that future; indeed, most of the best work within sf ignores the Modern condition precisely by its being set in a future sufficiently distant that it lies on the other side of the Modern period).

For those poor bitches who can't stop scratching that itch, the Modern, there is a third option: to embrace the Modern. Since about the time of the invention of the novel until about 1940, realism was the most successful means of embracing the fast pace of contemporary change. The range of realist techniques is vast, and writers of whatever persuasion ignore them at their peril. Nevertheless, current realist writers – Ellis, say, and Amis and Brodkey and... the list is as endless as it is prestigious – while they succeed on most other levels (indeed, I have chosen these three writers in particular precisely because they are good writers) conspicuously fail to engage in the political and economic processes of the present time. Realist novels used to be politically conscious, but there has been marked falling off, in favour, by and large of mere liberal piss-take.

Why is 'realism' as that approach is fostered in (rather good) courses such as the Creative Writing MA in East Anglia, writing itself into such a curious, timeless backwater? Why does writing about the present seem so outdated? It is not because it has become decadent, or less stringently 'realistic' according to its own terms; but rather because the real world cannot be described by realism as it is traditionally conceived.

#

Back around February of this year there was an article in the **Independent** about how a chemicals company in the US had taken out a patent on a range of crops, genetically engineered to withstand a certain class of defoliant. That very same company was the world's leading producer of the defoliant.

In a world in which items like this do not even make the front page – In a world chock full of such paranoid possibilities as the above item engenders – literary realism is not fluid enough to cope. Realism does not convey enough information in a short enough space. It is bad at speculation; in an age that is powered by speculation. It is bad at balancing numerous world-views in a world that has become infinitely re-interpretable.

Science fiction has in good measure those very qualities which the realistic novel lacks. That does not alter the fact that it may have any structural or stylistic weaknesses. It does not mean that SF is 'better' than realism in any but the narrow sense that it can handle political and social correlations more easily. What it does do, is suggest an appropriate and valuable niche for the genre to occupy.

Let's go back to our super-sealer salesman. A splendid bit of note-taking that, though I say it myself. Realists could do a lot with him. They could make him a joke, a fiend, make him a motif –

But they could not use hyperbole to identify his moral place in the current economic system (**The Space Merchants**), nor could they easily capture his iconographic power (**Flow my Tears, the Policeman Said**), nor elucidate the visceral power of his image over his merely corporeal audience (**Bug Jack Barron**); most important, they cannot find in his type a precisely argued premise of a future that might already be here – in a neighbouring city maybe, or the next country, in LA, or Tokyo, Rio or Odessa.

And that is what sf is for, for all its faults (most of them inexcusable); to write about a modern world as it is, and not according to a set of conventions which, at least for the precise business of representing the Modern, has begun to falter.

Not all of us want to write about the Modern; nor need we. But those of us who do, do not need to build a future. What we called the future is already here: every individual carries a version of it around in their heads, their own unique, startling, valid visions actually disguise their relevance by putting in obvious lies and silly dates. Why do we do that?

I guess no-one apart from the chosen few – Pynchon maybe, and Dick, and lately Ballard – dares admit that these fractured futures are all we have: that the present is dead.

Simon Ings is currently working on the development of an sf feature film and is writing a sequel to his first novel, **Hothead**. He does not own a super-sealer.

Aiming for the Moon
by Diana Wynne Jones

There is one bizarre and creepy fact about my books which never gets onto the backs of jackets or into reviews – that is that they come true. This usually happens after I have written them. For instance, I now live in the house in **The Ogre Downstairs**. When I wrote the book, I was living in Oxford in a house that was the reverse of that one in every way – for instance, it had a flat roof that was soluble in water – and I had no thoughts of moving to Bristol where I now live. Sometimes, however, the book comes true while I am actually writing it, and this can be quite upsetting. **Fire and Hemlock** was one of those. One of the many things that happened while I was writing it was that an eccentric bachelor friend from Sussex University, who stayed with us while he was lecturing in Bristol, insisted on my driving him to some stone circles in our neighbourhood. There, he began having mystic experiences, while I kept getting hung up astride the electric fences that cross-crossed the site. My outcries, he said, were disturbing the vibes, so he sent me to the local pub to wait for him. As soon as I got there, the landlady and the other customers began talking about these same stone circles, and related the local story about their origin. This story is called 'The Wicked Wedding' the bride, who is an evil woman, chooses a young man to marry, but at the wedding, the devil comes, kills the young bridegroom and marries the lady himself. This is the story behind **Fire and Hemlock** and, believe it or not, I had never heard it before – I thought I had made it up. Well, after various other strange experiences, my eccentric friend went back to Sussex and I finished the book. I then started, immediately, to **write Archer's Goon**. Just picked up a fresh block of paper and began. Now those of you who have read this book will know that it hinges on a man called Quentin Sykes discovering a newborn baby abandoned in the snow. I had just started the second draft of this book when my eccentric Sussex friend went for a walk in the middle of a winter's night and discovered an abandoned baby. He found it a very moving experience – but I felt acutely responsible. It is all very well my books coming true on *me* – it is a risk I take – but when this starts rubbing off on other people it is no joke. The trouble is, a book demands that certain incidents are present in it and to deny this is to spoil the book. So I thought deeply about the matter. And though I realised I could do nothing about parts of my books coming true – that really is beyond my control – there are things very much in my control over which I also feel a very strong sense of responsibility indeed. It is this sense of responsibility that I want to talk about.

Soon after **Archer's Goon** was published I was invited to a fantasy convention in London. Here I was approached by a prolific and original writer of adult fantasy – a Canadian called Charles de Lint – who told me that he would not be writing the books he did had he not read my books when he was an adolescent. I was stunned – he has the most stunning blue eyes! – not only by the eyes but simply by that fact. It was hard to handle. Something I wrote had got so deeply into someone else's imagination as to become part of his adult personality and to influence his career. I wasn't actually able to look at this matter calmly until last year when my American publishers sent me Charles de Lint's latest book as a gift. This book had a postscript in which he declared that this particular book would not have been written had he not chanced to read, as a child, that chapter of **The Wind in the Willows** called "The Piper at the Gates of Dawn".

Now that I could handle. I knew what he meant because I could say exactly the *same* about almost everything I had written. When I was about 7, my mother read me **The Wind in the Willows** at bedtime. I wasn't sure I liked it because Toad kept being the wrong size. But when she came to that particular chapter, she turned it over in a hunk and went on to the one after that. "Why are you missing that one out?" I asked. "Because it's very silly and pointless – and you wouldn't understand it anyway," she said, and went on reading about Toad. I was consumed with a feeling that she had missed out a very important piece of the story. I peeped at the title – "The Piper at the Gates of Dawn" seemed suggestive of magic beyond my experience, and totally haunting. After a week or so, I was so convinced this chapter was important that I sneaked the book when my mother was busy and, with tremendous guilt but quite compulsively, read the chapter. You couldn't say it was part of the main story, but *it was* important because what was in that chapter matched its title – numinous and strange and sad and urgent and very dangerous and utterly beautiful and *safe* all at the same time: so much so, that it has remained with me all these years as an ideal of what fantasy should do. Everything I have written is in some way a feeble echo of that chapter.

But the fact that another writer felt the same really brought it home to me – that people were liable to read what I wrote at the most impressionable times of their lives, and that this might actually determine the kind of people they grew up to be. To my relief, I realised that I *had* known this all along, deep down, but not really *believed* it before. And it was even more of a relief to me to see that from the moment I first started to write for children and young adults, I had proceeded as if I *did* know it. But at this earlier stage, it was mostly as if I knew that this position of extreme responsibility was enormously open to abuse – if you're going to influence someone that much, you have to be enormously *careful* – and so I mostly put it to myself in terms of what I *shouldn't* do. So we'll start with the negative, and then turn to the positive.

One thing I realised at the outset was that this was a branch of writing entirely dominated by adults. It must be the only one in which a writer *cannot* address his/her audience directly. In order to say something to readers of fifteen and under, I (who am an adult) must first speak to an *agent* (who is adult), then a publisher (who is another adult), a reviewer (who is an adult whose brain hurts), a bookseller (again an adult), and if I make it through this barrage, then the book is usually bought by teachers, parents and librarians, all of whom are adults, too. All these people have preconceptions about what should be in this book – preconceptions brought about by their own early reading and their upbringing – and they are going to, quite inevitably, exercise an unprecedented degree of censorship over this book. Now there is a strong plus side to this: this phalanx of adults is going to insist on high quality. They are not going to let me, or any writer, get away with shoddy, unclear language, or a story that does not make sense, nor the whimsical changes of size that so worried me about Toad. Rather more importantly on the plus side, is that what I write, just *because* it has to speak to adults too, is going to be written on two levels at least – maybe more. This is something I shall come back to. For the moment, I want to look at the minus side.

The minus side is that many adults are going to make all sorts of insanely wrong assumptions about what should go into a good book for young readers. When I first started writing, many of these assumptions were elevated into rules – nay *laws*! – which you broke at your peril. I broke most of them very deliberately, because they were truly absurd. For instance, all adults in your story had to be godlike and above reproach. This applied particularly to parents. The ideal was Daddy in Arthur Ransome's books, who is offstage mostly but occasionally sends godlike telegrams. "Don't be duffers". The only adults allowed to have faults were Baddies, and they had to be killed at the end of the book even if all they had done was purloin the family silver. Now the absurdity here is that, just as children's books are adult-oriented, so are children themselves. On my rough reckoning, most children spend two-thirds of their waking hours dealing with parents at home and teachers at school – and only spend the remaining third of their time in that ideal world of the old-type children's book, entirely composed of other children. And as everyone knows, adults are by no means flawless – especially if they happen to be divorcing – and children have to deal with a lot of that. So I put adults in my books who behaved like real people do (and didn't get killed for it). This worried publishers. Even worse, I also allowed these adults in the story to perceive that strange things were happening to the children and – worse! – to become involved in the strange things too. You wouldn't believe how many publishers turned down **The Ogre Downstairs** for that reason. I admit this is an extreme case, since the Ogre does nearly get murdered, twice, by magical means. But what *really* bothered the publishers was not that. It was that the Ogre got *involved*. Adults were supposed to be sacrosanct.

This ties in with the next unwritten law from those days. I had a number of books turned down at that time because I didn't say what ages the children in them were. This was another deliberate flouting of rules. You were supposed to *say*. My most obvious reason for not saying was that you feel a fool, if you are a mature twelve, if you discover you have been identifying with a character who turns out to be five years old. But there is a more important, hidden reason, which comes out if you consider the situation in C. S. Lewis's **Narnia** books. Lewis doesn't say what ages his children are either, but there comes a point where Peter and Susan, the two elder ones, are unable to enter Narnia because they are too old. Susan is specifically stated to have begun – horrors! – wearing makeup and thinking of boys. But, oddly enough, four adults *are* able to enter Narnia. These are two outright villains and two industrious working-people. Nobody else gets to Narnia unless they are dead. Now, I know Lewis was certainly

thinking in religious terms – no one shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven unless they become as a little child – but the land of Narnia is, in spite of being an allegory of heaven, to most readers pre-eminently the vivid land of the imagination. So what Lewis has ended up implying is that only young children, criminals and the uneducated working class can be allowed to exercise their imaginations. I think this has come about because, as well as thinking of Narnia as heaven, Lewis supposed himself to be keeping the rule that adults are not to be involved in children's books. But because he was gifted with penetrating intuition, he has in fact uncovered the basis for both the first rule and the second which is that no one past puberty should have anything to do with fantasy.

In other words, after the age of fourteen at the most, you have to close down one very large area of your brain.

Put like this, the notion seems absurd, but it is still very much alive, unfortunately. I think everything I write is basically devoted to saying it is nonsense to believe you have to close yourself down like this, but there are quite a large number of adults who believe you have to, and earnestly devote a lot of effort to preparing children for what they regard as this inevitable shut-down.

To take an early example: around the time I wrote **The Ogre Downstairs**, my eldest son was given John Masefield's **Box of Delights**. He read it at a sitting and then said that it would have been his all-time marvellous book – to him it had all the things I found in 'The Piper at the Gates of Dawn' – except that at the end everything turned out to have been only a dream. He was utterly disgusted. He said it was cheating – and still says so more than twenty years later. And he is quite right. Masefield gives you a feast of the imagination with one hand and takes it away with the other. He says: Now as an adult I have to make sure you know that none of this stuff is *real*. Ordinary life is what you're in for, my child, and that is dull. Prepare to close down that part of you that enjoyed this story.

This base trick is now out of date. I'm glad to say, but it has been superceded by another that is worse. This trick is played by the school of thought that identifies a child's problem – this child is of the wrong race, has a physical disability, has violent parents, or is the victim of poverty, and so on – and then writes a book in the most detailed and factual terms about a child with this problem. And then, *gives it to the child with this problem to read*. I call this the white-of-egg approach. If it's nasty it has to be good for you (bearing in mind that most kids hate white of egg). There are two implications to this mistaken approach, both of them equally dreadful. The first implication is that only unhappiness is real. Think about this – can this be true? The second implication is that you should face up to this unhappiness *like a man* – facing problems is supposed to be an adult thing to do – and the problems will disappear. Well, of course they don't. I know this from personal experience. I had a miserable childhood – so miserable that I like to think that nowadays we'd be identified as the victims of abuse and put in care – though I doubt this because we were supposed to come from what is called 'a Good Home'. Now, I have an American friend who knows my background, and she is always giving me autobiographies of black ladies whose early lives, as far as I can bear to read of them, were probably as awful as mine. She thinks this will 'help' me. But I can't bear to read the things. I start to shake and to weep, and lie awake many nights after reliving things I'm helpless to do anything about. This is the crux of the mistake. Children are *helpless* – helpless *before* problems that are superimposed on them either by birth or by society. It does not help anyone to be forced yet again into a situation in which they are impotent. And I know no sane adult who would force *themself* into such a situation – yet people do seem to think this is how to force children into adulthood. What no one seems to notice is that children can't wait to grow up.

The third dreadful mistake seems to stem from people not noticing this fact. This is the prepare-them-for-real-life-by-using-a-fantasy approach. There are lots of this kind of book. We used to call them Goddy Books when we were children. But books get used in schools too. When my youngest son was ten he had this teacher – I forget her name: she was always known as Fanny Craddock – and she taught everything out of **Wind in the Willows**. *Everything*. They did Toad burns and Mole stones and the Wild Wood for Art – apparently she even contrived to teach history, geography and social studies out of the book, but don't ask me how! The poor kids couldn't get away from **The Wind in The Willows** – significantly, however, they never once got taught 'The Piper at the Gates of Dawn'. And after a whole year, they were sick of it. So I suggested that they had a party to relieve their feelings and offered to supply a large effigy of this Fanny. We roped the effigy to a chair and provided a large basket of windfall apples to throw at it. It was the most successful party I ever gave. Practically the whole class turned up, and they pelted that effigy, screaming abuse at Fanny. They went on until all the apples were pulp and enjoyed it so much they *almost* forgot to eat the food. They broke the chair, but they didn't make much impression on the effigy.

This seems to me symbolic. You don't make much impression on people who are determined to *use* a book this way. I wish I could think of a way of avoiding it with my own books. Only last year I was proudly shown a passage of **Drowned Ammet** set in an examination paper. I apologised profusely to that class. What saddens me about this, and about my youngest son's experience, is that none of these children are going to want to look at those books again. No one in my son's class is going to read that suppressed chapter, 'The Piper at the Gates of Dawn'.

Which brings me back to my mother's censoring of that chapter for me. Why did she do this? Well, a year or so after the Fanny-party, my mother confessed to me that at the age of nine or so, she was addicted to fairy stories. You could buy little paper books of them for a penny, she said, and she bought a whole stack and buried herself in them, avidly. And her father caught her reading them. He not only took them away. He burnt them. Ceremonially, with disgust and loathing. They were not true, he said, not real, and were therefore harming her mind. And he forbade her ever to read such things again. So she didn't. For the rest of her life. Toad she could allow herself, because he was obvious whimsy and kept changing size, but not the chapter that takes you deep into the archetypes of the imagination. She does read my books, but only because she knows I nearly always put actual, living people into them, and she likes to spot the ones she knows. And she's always asking me why I don't write *real* books.

This grandfather of mine died long before I was born: or I would have had a few things to say to him. Among the first things I would have said is that his belief that reading things that are not true damages your mind – what I call the Don Quixote Fallacy – was held by far too many people in the first half of this century, and I do not think this is unconnected with the fact that we had two world wars during that time. Certainly my impression is that this burning of books has caused my mother to be one of the most unhappy and maladjusted people I know. And it does bring you hard up against the *responsibility* adults have – if only because it shows you what a truly lasting impression can be made on a child.

But this Don Quixote Fallacy is not dead. It is alive and well and living in Britain. Recently I was reading for the Whitbread Prize and I came upon no less than five books purveying this notion in an even more advanced form than my grandfather's. On the face of it they were child-with-a-problem books. There was this young person who was the wrong colour, or disabled, or with divorcing parents and so on, and each of these kids tried to offset their troubles by imagining some vivid, or better, or more exciting life. This was usually a world in which they had splendid adventures. Then halfway through the book it became clear that the child who had invented this world was not able to tell which bit of life was physically real and which was only in their mind. In other words, imagining things had driven this young person mad.

This struck me as such an appallingly irresponsible threat to hold over impressionable people that I tried to find out who these writers were. Two of them seemed to be teachers who were annoyed that their pupils were addicted to computer games, and the rest were social workers who seemed to be equating fantasy with drug-abuse. Possibly they weren't quite aware of what they were saying. But the fact is that by making this threat – imagination drives you mad – they were closing off for their impressionable readers the most important route to sanity. The source of this threat seems to lie in a grand combination of all the mistakes I have mentioned so far: that the only reality is dull and unpleasant, that young people must be prepared to confront this and this only, and that the only way to do this is to close down the imagination after puberty. To these, they have added a further error – that what a person has in their head does not exist in everyday life.

Now let's turn to positives.

For a start, the only way we can *have* everyday life is inside our heads. We do quite a good job of convincing ourselves there is us in there and the world out there, but the fact is we get the out-there by sensory input which then comes to the brain to be processed. Along with everything else, figures that need adding or multiplying, how to write that important letter, what was the title of that book now? who wrote that lovely song on the radio? must phone Mother, how do I deal with Smith? my shoes are killing me, and just look at this crisis in the newspaper! And masses more. You could reasonably say that most of us have the whole world in our heads. In order to cope with this flood of stuff, we have to have the ability to think alongside it, on a sort of different waveband. Hey, these figures add up to my telephone number – hell, I'm overdrawn! What if I write the letter back to front, starting with the hard bit? That book title will come to me if I just forget about it. The song sounded Scottish. What if I wait and let Mother phone me – no peace for a month if I do that. What if I tell Smith to go to hell? What if I take my shoes off under the table? What if the newspaper got its facts wrong?

You'll notice that this band of thoughts begins to fill with 'what-ifs' This what-if is a sign that your imagination is working. At this level, your imagination is your ability to solve problems. It takes a situation with a missing bit and then goes what if we try this until it supplies what's missing. It can do this in a small way -- Okay, I'll kick these darn shoes off' -- or it can run through to the very highest levels of speculation, where it can expand beyond accepted ideas and envisage completely new shapes for the future. Even at a fairly mundane level, the imagination is the growing-point of the mind -- what if I shook off this stupid fear of Mother's nagging and simply told her I was busy? If your mother is like mine, this might strike you as a fantasy. And yet this is just what all advances are in origin -- fantasies -- until someone makes them into reality. Aeroplanes have existed in fantasy ever since the story of Daedalus; Arthur C. Clarke invented communication satellites as part of a fantasy; a thermos flask figures in several Celtic tales as one of the miraculous treasures of Britain. And so on. The ability to fantasise is the most precious one we have. Because it solves problems it has tremendous survival value. And -- fortunately -- it is built into us so that, unless mistaken adults inhibit us, we all have to do it.

One of the signs of it *necessarily* built-in faculty is that you enjoy doing it. Like eating, or sex. We all play with ideas. Children of course do it all the time, but even the most adult of businessmen in the most boring meeting will say "let's play with a few figures here," or "let's play around with this idea for a bit," -- and this is the right way to talk about it, because it helps if your imagination is exercised with a lot of pleasure and in a great deal of hope. Then your what-ifs go with a verve and you're really likely to get somewhere. When the missing bit is found it is often accompanied with wonder and enormous delight. *Eureka!* I always see Archimedes bounding about and punching the air like a soccer player who has just scored a goal, and dripping all over the street.

People probably thought Archimedes was insane, but actually what this element of play and delight is doing is keeping you sane. To go back to the stream of consciousness for a second: you're smiling inside your face at Smith's expression if you were to tell him to go to hell, even while your imagination is also warning you this would be most unwise -- you can envisage Smith bringing a lawsuit -- but still it's a lovely thought and it makes you feel much better. It's hard to tell if the lovely thought is a joke or a fantasy -- and in fact jokes and fantasy are very closely connected. Both are ways of keeping your mind cool enough and clear enough to deal with a difficult situation.

When I write, I find that when I am dealing with a difficult situation -- particularly the kind of difficulty I mentioned earlier that is imposed from an outside source and before which children are mostly helpless -- I nearly always make it funny. By this I do *not* mean *unserious*. To take an example from **Black Maria**. Aunt Maria, the lady in the title, is a monstrous old lady who uses her age and infirmity to manipulate everyone around her. Worse than this, she plays on people's guilt in order to force them into very narrow traditional roles according to their sex -- certain things are 'women's work' or 'men's business' only -- and towards the end of the book she frankly admits to boring people on purpose, getting them so dazed with tedium that their minds are not able to work. In other words, Aunt Maria is in the business of closing down the imagination for her own ends. She eventually closes down the boy, Chris, into an animal -- and there is a hilarious episode when Chris tries to get his revenge by inviting Aunt Maria's polite tea-party in wolf form. I gave little whinnies of laughter while I was writing this, and I still find it funny, but it is serious all the same. Because Chris has been closed down, rendered a wild animal, you could say that Aunt Maria has driven Chris into becoming a delinquent by her treatment of him.

I venture to say that more important things can be conveyed like this, playfully, while people laugh, than by any other means. Even if you don't take it in on one level, you do on another.

I do want to convey something when I write. I don't want to teach or preach. But I want to convey, *responsibly*, the experience you have when your mind is working as it should -- and this means working very hard usually, though you're too busy to notice it, opening up new ideas with wonder and pleasure. Of course it helps if I am, myself, working at the same sort of pitch. And generally I do. I sit there, in the best chair, scribbling away, forgetting to eat, being a nuisance to my family, and occasionally annoying them acutely by bellowing with laughter and falling out of my chair. Most of my books get written at such a fever pitch that it puzzles me afterwards how I thought of this or that idea. For instance, while I was writing this, my husband was reading a book called **Hexwood** which I have just finished, and he chuckled appreciatively at a remark one of the characters made. I looked up and said, "*He* said that, not me -- *I'd* never have thought of saying that." It was almost as if the book had been writing itself.

That's probably as it should be, if I am even to *start* to catch the way the mind works. In some ways, a fantasy should be like a dream, where the mind is working hard, but not in your *conscious* control. And I think this is partly the source of John Masefield's mistake in **The Box of Delights**. He had all the elements of a dream: there, and forgot that it should, ultimately, be in his conscious control. A dream after all seldom has a plot, like a story has -- and in this kind of writing the *story* is all important. No one -- particularly children -- is going to forgive you if you don't tell a story, first and foremost. I love telling stories. Finding out what happens next. And the bit where it all starts to come together at the end is the most marvellous thing I know. The conscious control generally comes in at the next stage, the second draft, where I work long and hard at making sure the story hangs together logically on all its levels. Part of my responsibility, which is reinforced by the number of adults connected with writing for children, is not to turn out shoddy work.

But there is an odd fact: the logic of a story and the way its plot leads, is not the same as the logic of a particular book. Each book has its own personality and its own drive -- which often leads in surprising directions -- and that personality has to develop in the first page or so. If it doesn't, then I know I am not ready to write that book, or that book is not ready to be written -- it feels like both ways -- and I put it away. When the personality does develop it actually dictates the style -- the language -- in which the book is written and this is one of the things I am most at pains to get quite right in the second draft. It is something like trying to convey the exact atmosphere of a dream: if you get me -- we've all had dreams in which the events don't add up to the feeling the dream gave us.

The really difficult thing is that the book has to give that feeling.

But the main way in which a fantasy resembles a dream is that it works on more than one level -- just as the brain does. I've already talked about the way the humour is liable to operate on two levels, one laughable, one very serious. Now I want to add in everything from the deep-down semi-conscious level, where your brain mostly talks in symbols, right up to the surface story-level -- and if possible everything else in between. This is where all the adults necessarily associated with children's books are a great help. They practically ensure that I write on more than one level, because it's only fair that I give them something to interest them as I go along -- and they are going to *know* a lot more than children, and I can count on that. This does children no harm at all. I agree here with T. H. White in **The Sword in the Stone**, when he claims it is actually good for children to encounter matters that seem above their heads. It gives them something to aim for.

Something to aim for is really what all this is about. This is where the adults who make the mistakes I talked about earlier truly are mistaken. They know -- or assume -- that being adult is very dreary because the world never gives you more than half of what you aim for. What they forget is that aiming for the moon and getting halfway there gets you further than if you just aim for the roof and only get halfway upstairs. People's achievements in life depend quite startlingly much on what they *expect* to achieve -- on what they *aim* for. Now all children know they can achieve adulthood. All they have to do is wait. They need something more than this to aim for.

I find this something more comes mostly from myths and folktales. When I write at fever pitch, I find my story usually pulls them in whether I intend them to be there or not. Well, they are the earliest forms of fantasy. The beauty of these tales is that they come to pieces like Leggo, and each of the pieces has shape and meaning on its own, so you can have a fleeting glance at Hercules here, base this section on Puss in Boots there, or take Cinderella and put her bodily in the centre of the story there. A further beauty is that in such stones you find all the troubles and problems of this modern age -- any single one you care to name -- but archetypal, timeless and distanced, so that you can walk around them and examine them without feeling helpless. This is where fantasy performs the same function as joking, but on a deeper level, and solves your problems while keeping you sane. It is no accident that the majority of folktales at least have a happy ending. Most of them are very deep-level blueprints of how to aim for the moon. The happy ending does not only give you gratification as you read it -- it gives you to hope that, just maybe, a fortunate outcome could be possible. Your brain likes that. It is built to *want* a solution.

I prefer to have happy endings when I write -- though my books do not always allow me them -- on the grounds that it *is* better to aim at the moon. I would like to think that some day I shall write the perfect fantasy that acts like a dream on many levels at once and conveys the experience of the brain working joyfully flat out -- *and* is a sort of blueprint of how things should be. But you know how it is with aiming for the moon. I don't get there. Each time I think: Damn it! That's not it either! It's quite a good book but it doesn't do what I'd hoped.' But then I think that quite possibly somebody is going to read it and get influenced for the rest of their life. And, as I said at the beginning, I feel a tremendous sense of responsibility. And I think to that person, All right: some day I'm going to get it right for you. Promise.