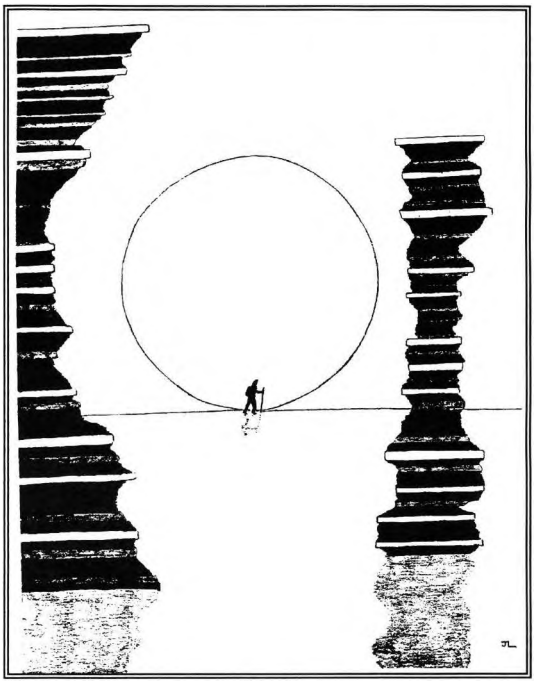
Focus

The B.S.F.A. writers' magazine
Issue 26 June/July 1994



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Editorial

Through a telephoto lens, lightly...

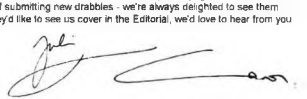
What is an editorial? This is something that we have been giving some thought to recently. What is the best use to put this piece of writing to? Should we use it to tell you what's in the magazine? But surely the magazine stands for itself? Or we could use it to impart our collective wisdom to you. The siamese twins speak! Oh dear. Alternatively, we could discuss the weather, the state of the country, the state of sf, the state of the publishing world.

It's a tricky question. Here we have this opportunity of addressing you, the readers, and we're unsure just what an Editorial should be for. We're sure it's a problem faced by many Editors before us (we've faced it before, ourselves, though we don't think the same solution is necessarily right for every type of zine). For now, we've just concentrated on putting together the best magazine we can!

Suffice it to say that we've had an excellent response to the last two issues, with hardly any complaints, so we must be doing something right! We are extremely lucky to have Carolyn Horn on the team; **Focus** is as much her handiwork as ours: it is her work that has given it the attractive, professional look that a number of you have commented on. This time, we had a massive response to the Forum debate; thanks must go to all the contributors. The response to the extended Drabble competition was also phenomenal. Our thanks have to go to Graham Joyce who did a sterling job in judging the competition. Congratulations, too, to the winner, and to the runners-up (see page 14). We will also be continuing to publish the entries in the next couple of issues. Don't let that put you off submitting new drabbles - we're always delighted to see them.

Hope you enjoy the magazine. Oh, and if anyone has any ideas about what they'd like to see us cover in the Editorial, we'd love to hear from you.

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.

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.

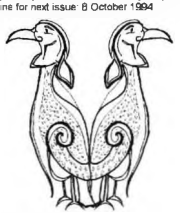
Cover art, illustrations and fillers are always welcome.

Forum

Putting ourselves into our stories, or, red aliens under the beds...

In the myths, snakes and dragons were transformed from symbols of wisdom and healing into evil monsters at around the same time that gods were usurping the goddesses' with whom such creatures were identified. Our beliefs, values and culture tend to come out - whether or not we're aware of it - in the stories we tell. We're not just talking about P.C. here, but about the way our imagination is limited by the things we take, culturally, for granted. We all write from our own background and experience, but sf has that additional layer or level of interpretation: like myth, it can both illuminate and disguise meaning. It is powerful. What should our attitude be to this power? Is it something we can or should control? Do sf writers in particular have a responsibility to take a wider perspective than, say, the mid-Atlantic, and if so, how? Whether you are a writer, an artist, or an editor **Focus** invites you to write (600-800 words) and give us your views on this thorny subject.

Deadline for next issue: 8 October 1994.



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Writing Fantasy and Horror
Brian Stableford
Part Two

Modern horror fiction has had no apologist as prestigious or as eloquent as Tolkien. Most of those attempting to analyse the artistry of the genre have usually been content to argue that the thrill of fear which an effective horror story imparts is, after all, a harmless form of arousal, a momentary intoxication which may be savoured for its own sake. Others have suggested that it is good for us occasionally to be brought into confrontation with our most deep-seated fears and anxieties, and that horror fiction reflects something ugly which lurks within us, reminding us of the virtuous necessity of keeping our antisocial impulses in check. Others have deployed the age-old argument about catharsis, but that has little to recommend it and would surely have been forgotten long ago had it not originated from such a prestigious source.

Such apologetic arguments as these can easily seem a trifle weak-kneed when brought face-to-face with the brutal question of what kind of pleasure people derive from horror fiction. It would be interesting to know -- but impossible to determine -- what fraction of the audience watching a slasher film is identifying with the victim, what fraction with the murderer, and what fraction is content to stand aside as fascinated voyeurs. But we must be careful not to over-simplify the range of alternatives; there are voyeurs and voyeurs. What one observer sees as stark tragedy, thus being moved to sympathetic tears, another may see as righteous wrath claiming legitimate revenge, thus being moved to exultant gloating. In a way, it is this very multiplicity of possible responses, and the consequent paradoxical admixture of emotions, which makes horror fiction so fascinating.

The chief difference between the central assumptions of fantasy and horror fiction seems to lie in the balance of power between good and evil. In fantasy fiction each side has its magical armies and magical armaments, and no matter how close the forces of evil come to victory, there is always some ultimate benign miracle waiting in the wings to be hauled on to the stage at the critical moment. In horror fiction, the forces of good frequently seem magically impotent; many classic horror stories painstakingly chronicle the destruction of hapless human beings overwhelmed by forces which they cannot begin to understand, let alone to combat. Fantasy stories usually avoid the apparatus of the Christian Mythos lest they should appear irreverent, but when they do make use of it the saints, the angels and even God Himself are on hand to take their part. Horror stories are, by contrast, ever eager to exploit whatever sincere religious beliefs their readers may retain but in horror stories Satan and his evil minions are far more in evidence than their virtuous counterparts, and the priestly magic of exorcism frequently fails to get to grips with the enormity of diabolical possession.

It has long been believed, of course, that horror stories serve an obvious moral function. Parents and priests alike have always considered terror a legitimate weapon in the quest to persuade their charges to be good, and there has always been an element of extreme overkill *in* their endeavours. No stipendiary magistrate or justice of the peace, confronted with Dante's Inferno, could possibly argue that the punishments there meted out to sinners are really appropriate to the magnitude of the sins which they have committed. Nor would most modern parents think it entirely reasonable to threaten disobedient children with the kinds of fate which feature in once-popular admonitory tales as Heinrich Hoffmann's **Struwwelpeter**. We are, of course, easily capable of similar over-reaction in the privacy of our imagination, but most of us would freely admit, once we have calmed down, that the person who has driven off after scratching our car, or held us up for an annoyingly long time in the post office queue, does not really deserve to die in hideous agony and roast in Hell for all eternity, despite what we felt at the time. In fact, one of the chief virtues of modern legal systems is that they are supposed to be calm enough and even-handed enough, not to let the temporary fury of moral indignation get out of hand; the fact that they sometimes fail is tragically reflected by the occasions when we are forced to look back with regret on the intemperate conviction and occasional execution of innocent persons.

There is probably an element of this kind of grotesquely-exaggerated revenge fantasy in the enjoyment of modern horror fiction -- it is certainly the case that horror writers of my acquaintance occasionally insert thinly-disguised caricatures of people they dislike into their novels with the sole purpose of disposing of them in some deliberately offhand and gruesome fashion. Nevertheless, it is impossible to argue that horror stories function mainly as admonitory fantasies which attempt to serve the cause of good by informing us what may happen to those who do evil. It is important to remember that the most horrific aspect of the nasty things which happen in most modern horror stories is precisely the fact that they happen to people who have committed no sin. As Henry James observed a century ago, an author can easily obtain that crucial extra turn of the horrific screw by unleashing the forces of evil upon innocent children, not merely to maim and kill them but also, and significantly, to *corrupt* them.

In order to scare us, horror stories work unrepentantly upon all our fears, our fears of illness and injury; our fear of pain and death; our fear of loss and bereavement. In order to scare us more effectively, horror stories try to get beneath the surface of all these fears, to strike deep into their very essence. Horror stories are avid to tell us that everything on which we depend in order to live from day to day -- not merely our social relationships, but the fundamental orderliness of reality -- might be taken away from us, bit by teasing bit, until nothing is left. The standards of decorum which constrained the genre in the past have nowadays been not merely abandoned, but calculatedly, callously and lasciviously violated. Everything we believe in, no matter whether it be a matter of religion or physics, is fair game to be brought under threat by a modern horror story; it is not simply that nothing is sacred, but rather that anything which might be considered sacred will for that very reason be assaulted most fiercely and utterly without scruple. That, after all, *is* what horror is: frightful contemplation of the most awful possibilities imaginable.

There is something peculiar about the notion of horror fiction as a genre, with legions of loyal followers who read it assiduously. It is not too difficult to understand why people might specialise in reading stories which have morally uplifting endings, because one can see that as participation in a kind of affirmatory ritual. Nor is it difficult to understand why people might specialise in literary puzzles which lead up to some kind of surprising revelation, or in stories which explore the potentially infinite range of future possibility. Fantasy and romance, detective fiction and science fiction all make perfect sense as species of fiction with which a reader might form a close and lasting relationship. But how can one get hooked on horror? Why is the experience of being horrified something which a reader -- or viewer -- may want to recapitulate, keenly enough for at least some readers and some viewers to seem addicted?

It is worth noting that this analysis of the ideological elements of the genre may be less helpful than it seems. The fact that science fiction and fantasy have fundamentally opposed ideologies does not prevent many readers from enjoying both, and enjoying them for much the same reasons. Horror is more frequently separated from fantasy and science fiction on bookshop shelves, but there is still a considerable overlap in the readership of all three genres: specialist bookshops and mail order dealers usually carry all three, and just as one can identify a hybrid sub-genre which is sometimes called science fantasy, so one can identify borderline sub-genres of horror-fantasy and horror-sf. To some extent, the appeal of horror fiction is the same as that of any other kind of imaginative fiction: that it presents a world different from ours, where one can take a holiday from the tedium and stifling consistency of everyday life, and perhaps recover a better sense of the surprising uniqueness of actuality. Not everyone goes on holiday to get a rest; some go in search of adventure, and some deliberately to take risks. The real world can seem very stressful and uncomfortably threatening enough to some of us, but there are those among us to whom it seems irredeemably safe and suffocatingly comfortable. The kind of search for stimulation which leads some individuals to bouts of drunkenness leads others to fiction which has the power to make their heart pound, and just as heavy drinkers require increasing doses of alcohol to intoxicate them, so long-time horror readers need increasingly gruesome prospects to contemplate. It is also worth noting in this context that the kind of fiction marketed under the thriller label has always taken aboard as much of the apparatus of contemporary horror stories as its own limits of plausibility will permit, and that there is a considerable grey area where crime fiction and horror fiction overlap.

Having said all that, though, there *are* horror purists just as there are science fiction purists and fantasy purists. There are horror connoisseurs, whose attachment to the genre is wholehearted and exclusive. These people are every bit as eccentric as obsessive connoisseurs in any other kind of field -- but no more eccentric than that. Their eccentricity, in fact, derives from their single-mindedness itself

rather than its object. To be a connoisseur at all requires a particular turn of mind which in the end becomes curiously detached from whatever objects of fascination are involved, and there is a sense in which it is the very alienness and peculiarity of a field of study which renders it fit for connoisseurship, and hence for eccentricity. The fact that so many other people find horror fiction discomfitting and perverse is a positive attraction to the would-be connoisseur. Even to have seen one celebrated video nasty invites attention from one's neighbours, to have seen them all commands it. As many life-style fantasists have discovered since the days when Alesteir Crowley first pioneered the pose, the ability to generate a frisson of outrage wherever one goes is a kind of social advantage which people who have few other social advantages may well find attractive.

The relevance of this last point to would-be writers of horror fiction is considerable. In spite of its high-profile best-sellers, horror fiction flourishes in the margins of the literary marketplace, in a world of specialist publishers and semiprofessional magazines which is inhabited mostly by insiders with cultish enthusiasms. It is difficult to practise being a horror writer without entering this rather odd literary demi-monde, or at least knowing something about it. There are very few opportunities to publish short horror stories in mass-market magazines, and this is a significant restriction, because horror fiction -- unlike fantasy -- functions very well in shorter lengths. The intensity of the best short horror stories is very difficult to sustain at novel length, which is why so many horror novels are really other kinds of novels into which horrific vignettes are strategically inserted.

Would-be fantasy writers are in a very different position, because fantasy does not function well in short lengths. The extreme length of the typical contemporary fantasy novel is not merely a reflection of the magnitude of **The Lord of The Rings**, it is a testament to the sheer laboriousness of building a satisfactory eucatastrophe. To threaten a world with the possibility of destruction or horrific dissolution can be the work of a moment, securing a world as a very different matter. Casual miracles, even if they are permitted at some hypothetical metaphysical level, certainly do not work at a narrative level. It is a literary axiom of the fantasy genre that obtaining a eucatastrophe is hard work, and that the hard work in question must not only be done but seen to be done. It frequently transpires that three volumes is hardly enough to make a start.

The apprentice fantasy writer, therefore, will inevitably tend to produce episodes rather than fully-fledged stories, and it is by no means uncommon for a fantasy writer to make her -- or sometimes, his -- literary debut with the first volume of a numinous epic which might well keep her busy for the rest of her life. Nor is it uncommon -- quite the contrary -- for that first volume to be set rather late in the eventual chronology of the emergent Secondary World, so that the author's future explorations will delve further and further back into its past rather than developing its future. If extant examples can be assumed to be a reliable guide, it may be a good idea for assiduous fantasy world builders to get the last battle out of the way at the first opportunity -- that is to say, in the climatic volume of their first trilogy -- so that it becomes permanently available as a sort of eucatastrophic magnetic pole towards which all subsequently-written but chronologically-prior adventures will unerringly point.

Fantasy writing involves a creative freedom which is quite unique. Writers of mundane fiction -- and, for that matter, writers of horror fiction -- remain responsible to the world as it is, and must take on the task of describing it in such a way that it is recognisable and, ideally, convincing. Writers of science fiction ought ideally to construct a world which is intelligibly and convincingly extrapolated from the known world. Fantasy writers, however, have a licence to play fast and loose with matters of geography, natural history, and the power of mind over matter. Even so, they must take some sort of care to be convincing, and it is ironically true that the easiest way to be convincing is to build fantasy worlds whose relationship to known worlds is very close and highly detailed. Many fantasy writers try hard to make their worlds as faithful as possible to the believed-in worlds of particular cultures, past and present, and are prepared to do considerable anthropological research in order to achieve this end.

It is possible -- as many writers have demonstrated -- to get away with fantasy plots in which the magical interventions are entirely subservient to the requirements of the unfolding plot. In such stories, whatever the characters find it necessary to accomplish will suddenly and arbitrarily turn out to be practical. Most horror stories also rely on this kind of instant *deus ex machina* to restore normality once the characters have done their allotted quota of suffering. Nevertheless, the conscientious writer in either genre will generally try to avoid, or at least to conceal, such overly-convenient narrative devices. In a properly worked out story the means by which the conclusion is attained should be properly established in the imaginary world long before it is actually invoked.

The most familiar strategy used to perform this trick is to plant a magical object of considerable (and preferably carefully-specified) power which the characters must search out and obtain. One of the simplest ways of spinning out a fantasy plot is to plant a whole series of such objects, which have to be recovered one at a time, under variously difficult circumstances. The workability of this kind of plot is readily demonstrated by the appeal of role-playing games like Dungeons and Dragons, which operate on this basis, but the excitement of involvement with cut-and-paste scenarios of this kind does tend to be dependent on the reader or player's willingness not to stand back from the plot and examine it as a coherent whole. Many readers are prepared to immerse themselves in a story so completely that the only thing which is important to them is that what is happening at that precise moment in the plot should be exciting, but writers who wish to appeal to more thoughtful and sophisticated readers do need to pay more careful attention to the business of defining the limits of possibility and practicality which pertain to their particular imaginary world.

However paradoxical it may seem, the ability of a fantasy writer to construct a compelling and convincing plot often requires severe restrictions put upon the workability of magic, so that the characters must draw very heavily upon their purely human resources. In exactly the same way, the horror writer may find it politic to make his forces of evil work in relatively subtle ways, under conditions of some difficulty, and might find it profitable to ensure that their eventual banishment requires authentic ingenuity. When the task of writing fantasy or horror is taken seriously, and the work in question is intended to be taken seriously by its readers, the apparent creative freedom which stems from the workability of magic may be transmuted into a problematic creative responsibility.

If the plot of a fantasy or a horror story is to be truly suspenseful then the reader must be persuaded that supernatural deliverance is not always at hand, ever-ready to be invoked by some convenient incantation. If the conclusion of a fantasy or horror story is to be truly effective, whether it be the success or failure of the central characters' quests, the reader must be convinced that their human attributes must have made some crucial contribution to their salvation or damnation. The magic in such stories must remain intimately connected with matters of desire and matters of morality, or the plot will be devoid of any real meaning. True competence in these fields -- which are still capable of playing host to startling originality and writing as fine as any to be found in the best mundane fiction -- is to be found in the novelty and intricacy of the ways in which authors connect, blend and marry the natural to the supernatural, the human to the superhuman, the moral to the magical.

We should be prepared to remember and accept that we do not only live our lives in the external world of social relationships. Each of us lives, also, in the private arena of his or her own mind, amid thoughts and ambitions, hopes and fears, dreams and day-dreams. In that private world, natural law and social custom have little restrictive force, whatever can be imagined can be experienced. It would, I think, be both absurd and stupid for literary endeavour to ignore and avoid that inner world in its ministrations; the capabilities and the limitations of the imagination need to be explored, and they need to be explored as boldly, as cleverly, and as scrupulously as we can. There is not the slightest reason why anyone who aspires to set out on such a mission should feel the need to apologise for wanting to do it.

Fly Like a Butterfly, Soar Like a Brick - or When can I stop hitting myself with the hammer, doctor?

by Mary Gentle

The question about revision that is less easily answered is, When do you stop? Most of the other questions are easy. Yes, you should revise. There are occasions when the words go down like gold on the page, and you're frightened to alter a comma, on the *if it ain't broke for god's sake don't try to fix it* principle. These occasions are rare. You should revise for money, at editorial request, when the story isn't working. Sometimes. Probably. When do you stop?

This will depend at least partly on where your writing comes from in the first place. If you are primarily a visual writer, you will push the words around until they correspond to the picture. Specific details - *stippled brown freckles* - sharpened. If you are a verbal writer, you will fine down the words until they are exactly what your characters *mean* to say. Does she call her lovers "*Sweetheart*" or "*Sugar*", or by their last name?

In my case, I get a picture, or a rapid apprehension of an event, or, most probably, a first line. Getting the first line acts as the cork coming out of the bottle. **Rats and Gargoyles** begins with the line, "In the cathedral square, the crowd were hanging a pig." But now I come to look at the published version, it begins, "In the raucous Cathedral Square the crowd prepared to hang a pig." Somewhere in the fiddling process I obviously decided an adjective, no comma, and a change of tense got closer to the effect of High Weirdness I wanted.

That was in 1988, today, I think I prefer the first version again. This is known as Sod's Law of Revision.

We rewrite because it all means something. Every possible alternative word. All revision strives towards the absolute ideal of the story in question - but one's perception of it may be too muddy to achieve it. No revision is final - but sometimes you just have to put it down and go on to something else. Anything else. Make the tea. Hoover the cat. You could worry your life away trying to endlessly revise one story.

There are, however, two serious problems about judging whether and when to revise, and they are serious for two different reasons.

The first problem involves rewriting to editorial requirement when the editorial requirement appears to be censorship. Normally, there is a theory about editorial rewrites that goes as follows: a manuscript always requires some final twiddling, if an editor sees it 98% finished and requests changes, you then do what you were going to do anyway, and the editor (having seen you revise) is happy. You might think this happens - I couldn't possibly comment.

There will, if your editor is good, always be the point where they let you get away with this semi-colon here that you want, in exchange for that change of tense there that they want. No book is ever 100% perfect, or 100% complete.

A real problem arises when what is required is the censorship of words, scenes, or plot solutions purely because the editor doesn't think the readership will stomach them, or the distributors distribute them. We live in the real world: there is no easy answer to this one. At least one of my stories will appear differently in my book collection than to its short story existence, but it is quite possible that WHSmith would not have stood for "*motherfucker!*" as often as it appears in the original. I do not agree with the different standards of film tv, theatre, book, and magazine, as regards what one is allowed to show or print. But like everyone else, I want to be published. There is a point at which one says *no, not unless it's how I wrote it*. You get to decide that point for yourselves.

The other main problem is personal, technical, artistic. When a revision isn't a matter of words, or the odd scene put in or taken out, but a major change of structure. This is the one I get into when whatever I'm writing seriously sucks. I have prodded its vocabulary, altered the tense, stuck in an extra scene because I tell the reader needs to know *that* bit of information, or else *this* bit will make no sense - and it still sits there like a lump.

On occasion, major structural change just sorts the whole thing out. I wrote the first version of **Left to His Own Devices** in 1990. It ran to 36,000 words, and, apart from being one of the world's most awkward lengths to sell, it didn't work. A cheery tale of computers, Kit Marlowe, and Valentine and Casaubon from previous books. It left those two protagonists entirely untouched by its events. Fireproof. Dramatic tension? *What* dramatic tension? Then it dawned on me just what was happening between the two of them - one was in London and one in California and both were in trouble. I altered the structure to take account of it, and **Devices** works as a 60,000 word novel.

If you rewrite and things become clear as glass on the page, then revision is a good idea, but when you find yourself mentally plodding through porridge, you've blown it. I had a problem with **Ancient Light**, the sequel to **Golden Witchbreed**, which for a number of reasons took four years to produce. Constantly revising to keep up with what I thought was the book. I found it had begun to mutate into something else again - maybe the next book I would have written, two years after that start-date. Some of the best writing I have ever done is in the last 40,000 words of **Ancient Light**, but I doubt many readers plod through the porridge at the beginning of the novel and find out.

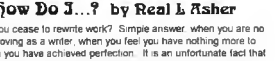
My rule since then is, don't revise beyond the point of George Washington's axe - if it's had two new shafts, and three new axe-heads, trust me, it is *not* George Washington's axe any more. Not as far as you're concerned. Ditch it and start again with something new. You'll be sick of what you're doing now anyway, and it won't get any better.

As for how many revisions it's proper to do, if you're using a word processor, you won't know anyway. 'First draft' is first printout, but rarely does anyone scroll through text on the way to the end of a scene without tweaking something.

In a way it's a non-question. You do enough revisions and rewrites that it feels right. When it feels right, you stop. Then you leave it. Then you go back and see if it still feels right. If it's bang on, and they want you to do something to it, you look at the cheque. If it's really right, tell them to stuff their cheque.

There may be another market. There may be a day five years on when you look at it and think, *yes, I should have changed it, they were right*. You may know, *no, it is still right*. All you can do, ultimately, is stick by your best judgement that you can make.

Five years later you will think something different, of course, but by then, Time will have revised you.



How Do I...? by Real L Asher

When do you cease to rewrite work? Simple answer: when you are no longer improving as a writer, when you feel you have nothing more to learn, when you have achieved perfection. It is an unfortunate fact that many writers do believe this of themselves. They are normally the ones who have achieved success, and are drunk on the adulation of those who think a past participle is something you'll find in a linear accelerator.

For me revision of a story partially ceases when I feel I have achieved a required effect, might well attain publication, and have more interest in the next project. But while it remains in my processor it is still subject to a critical eye. I don't believe there is such a thing as too much rewriting. You just reach the stage where you can't go any further with a piece and move on to the next. In the process you jettison the bad and keep the good. You decide, and you base your decision on what you are after. Publication? Rewrite for the market acting on feedback from editors and readers. Personal satisfaction? Don't kid yourself. For my novella for Club 199 I took a thirty thousand word story and extended it by ten thousand words to fit it within their parameters, and felt perfectly justified in doing so. As far as I am concerned good writers are often successful writers (though successful writers often degenerate into bad writers).

There is no quick-fix formula. It is obvious such a formula is profoundly wished for, as the sales of 'How To' books attest. When the questions are posed as to the extent and method of rewriting, the real question being asked is: how do I write well? The first step on the road for ninety percent of would-be-famous novelists is to learn how to use the English language. Get hold of books like **Fowlers Modern English Usage**, **Rogel's Thesaurus**, and perhaps a plain old **Mastering the English Language** - S H Burton. For many people the rewrite required is the one to turn their masterpiece into something intelligible. It was not until I joined some postal workshops that I found out just how bad it was possible for some writing to be. I also learnt that those writers who really try to get a handle on the language are also the ones who tell the best stories. Understanding the structure is all. You're not going to build a suspension bridge if you don't know how nuts and bolts go together. The rest is badly written soap opera.

So now you know how the English language works, have put a story together, and are looking at doing a rewrite. You have looked at the story objectively and made sure that the bunch of flowers is beautiful rather than are beautiful and your hero still has the same hair colour all the way

through How does it look subjectively? Where, for example, can you break the rules to the greatest effect? The best of writers are the ones who know how to do this Donaldson once managed a one-word sentence that had the skin on my back crawling The word was 'Kevin' No, not the spotty dickhead down the road Kevin Landwasser who performed the Ritual of Desecration I'm afraid no book on English is going to tell you how to achieve the same (though **The Critical Sense** by James Reeves comes mighty close) The only way to learn is through hard work, reading, and *listening* to criticism, though for the latter you must judge what is relevant There are no substitutes for these; just as there is no substitute for talent When you rewrite you must see the images and feel the effect of every word You have to decide what to discard and what to keep There are many sources you can tap to help you make these decisions But in the end they are your own

Prostituting the Muse? or, Rewriting on Request

Tanya Brown

The sort of rewriting I intend to discuss here is that which an editor (or similar figurehead) requests Presumably you're pretty happy with the piece if you've got as far as sending it to anyone Now you are being asked to change the ending, or the style, or drop one of the characters Is it worth it?

Bypassing the arguments for and against artistic compromise, the answer to that question depends on why you write Are you writing with the aim of being published, either for financial reasons or because you want to see your work in print? Or is it for Art's sake, and for your own enjoyment, with a potentially-saleable work being something of a by-product?

When you're writing for publication then the only obvious reason for refusing to rewrite - given that the editor will accept the story if it's rewritten to specification - is if you feel that the end result will damage your reputation

When however you're an 'amateur' it becomes a little more complicated It's difficult for a writer to read their own work objectively especially if its a recent piece or one that the writer feels particularly strongly about Part of an editor's role is to read objectively and to apply their market knowledge to a piece suggesting ways in which it can be made more saleable

A good editor will spot things that you've never noticed, simply because you've concentrated on other aspects of the story It may be something as minor as a phrase that doesn't sound right, or an overlooked cliche This sort of editorial input is basic criticism, and it should be heeded, even if you don't change the piece in line with the editor's suggestion After all, he or she is probably only picking up on what an alert reader would notice straight away

An editor can also help you revise a piece, improving the structure and whittling out the unnecessary "Working with Ellen (Datlow) on the revisions to 'Vengeance is Yours' taught me a great deal about writing" (Pat Cadigan, **Patterns**) The work becomes almost a collaboration between you, as the creator, and the editor as experienced refiner

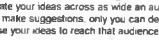
A request to change the style or content, however, is more serious If the editor has totally misinterpreted the piece, it may be wise to seek a second opinion from someone whose judgement you respect Hopefully this will confirm your suspicion that the editor is being dense If not, you're probably being over-obscure and a rewrite, bringing out the salient points, is in order If you're writing about a difficult subject in a difficult style one or the other might have to be simplified in order for the story to make sense

On the other hand the editor may simply not like the piece as it stands He or she may disagree with the idea behind it, or with the way in which you've used that idea If the piece is intended for a particular publication, the editor may suggest changes which will bring it closer to the theme or tone of that publication

Ideally, it will be possible to make any changes without altering the feel or theme of the piece Suzy McKee Charnas, in the afterword to 'Boobs (**Skin of the Soul**, ed Tuttle), writes "[Dozois] asked for a minor rewrite of the ending, something to take a little of the chill off He suggested a change that seemed appropriate to the feeling without doing serious violence to the story."

If the suggested changes can be made without losing the effect for which you've striven, then they should be made, if only to enable a wider audience to read your work and make its own judgement Maybe the feedback from readers will reinforce your own ideas of how the story should be; maybe it will echo your editor's views

Writing may be a solitary and pleasurable activity, but it's also a form of communication Part of being a writer is to grab the chance to communicate your ideas across as wide an audience as possible An editor may make suggestions, only you can decide how much to compromise your ideas to reach that audience



Revision

by Keith Brooke

Rewriting is where I relax and start to enjoy myself It's where I suddenly begin to feel in control of what I'm doing

The first stages of a new piece of work - the initial ideas, the sorting of elements I want to mix together, the fleshing out by research and Deep Thought, the inevitable delaying tactics - can take anything from half a day (very rarely a short story idea will be so hot it simply has to be *written*, the blanks and xx's in the ms to be filled out later - an example being 'Passion Play' from **Other Edens III**) to several months, and even years, with some stories sitting in the back of my mind, just waiting for the time when they will be written

The first draft is the most stressful bit, but also the most exhilarating When I've finally coaxed myself into sitting in front of the blank screen I have to do it, as fast as I can (up to six or seven thousand words in a very good day) I do this to keep the pace and energy and *momentum* as fresh as I can And also, I'll admit, to get it over with

A consequence of this mad rush through the first draft is the need for plenty of rewriting Hang on a minute and I'll check through my workbook A story as yet unsold 6,500 words long; first draft in a day, third draft printed out eight days later (submitted, but I came back to this story for another revision four months later) Another story, 'Westward' 4,700 words, first draft in a day, third draft ready after another eight days again A 53 000 word novel first draft over about 40 days revised working a lot harder than normal, in about two months, although again I'm going to have another go at it soon - I'm always looking to do better I could go on, but you get the picture revision usually takes at least twice as long as the first draft

What do I do? How do I rewrite? Well, the first stage is to do nothing at all, or rather to work on something completely different While I'm distracting myself in this way I find that I can find new angles on the first draft that's awaiting revision new ideas, problems that hadn't occurred to me, ways to improve it

When I've finished my first draft I'm usually left with two sets of notes: the long printout of background, characters, plot, etc, which I've been working from, and usually a single, scrawled side of A4 where I've written desperate messages to myself ('what car does xx drive?' 'get the officers' ranks consistent!' 'chk WWI pistol - Webley?' 'atmosphere-mood-*soundtrack*!') This interval before I rewrite furnishes me with a third set of notes, and I refer to them all as I work through the revision, crossing off points as they're dealt with (and making yet more notes as new problems and opportunities are noticed)

I try to get the large-scale structure right in my head before the first draft, so the revisions are *usually* on a smaller scale occasionally I'll realise that a chapter or two need inserting, but usually it's on the level of paragraphs, sentences, individual words

The answer to my question ('What do I do?') I go through it and well I rewrite it. Clumsy sentences, passages that aren't clear enough, bad spelling, grammar or punctuation all need improving Sometimes the order of events needs changing a little - usually within one or two chapters Sometimes I'll cut down on description to pick up the pace in a slow passage more often - because of the mad rush through the first draft - I'll actually insert the descriptions to slow it down a little My first drafts are always full of queries in brackets, reminding me to check things or gaps (marked by xx, yy, zz and so on) where I've not wanted to stop and find an appropriate name for a minor character or street or where I've discovered yet another gap in my knowledge All these things need attention So I work through the printout of my first draft until certain pages (usually the first and last) become so covered in scrawl that it's a job to read them; then I print out again and repeat the process And then I print out a clean copy and try to persuade someone else to read it for me Eventually I'll send it out to an editor and his or her response may persuade me to revise yet again

It's a slow process, but I've always been a perfectionist - I love the detail work, trying to get it absolutely *right* I know that I don't succeed, but it's what I always try for

Forget the text: what about the sub-text?

Jan Watson

Too much revising definitely was a bad idea in the case of that character in Camus' **The Plague** who spent years rewriting the first sentence of his intended novel in the belief that once he had the first sentence absolutely perfect then all subsequent sentences would follow inevitably.

Balance this, perhaps, against the remark of Samuel Johnson "If I write a particularly fine line, I strike it out."

Don't be so obsessional that nothing ever gets finished, but don't succumb to self-intoxication, either - the reader mightn't feel quite so intoxicated.

Write effervescently, revise warily. With practice the afflatus and the deflatus should come closer together. I never would dream of using a computer spell-checker or style-checker since I make up words and mutate words, and play games with syntax; but the necessary imaginative analogue of these bureaucratic instruments is to have a shit-detector running in one's own head.

Put a text in a drawer for six months, then take it out and re-read it, and it's visibly full of shit. The trick is to detect all the shit immediately on finishing the text, or preferably on-line whilst one is writing it (though I never detect it all right away in real-time).

Most of the shit is totally trivial, but in total it can result in a heap of cr let us dispense with this metaphor.

One has to alienate oneself immediately from the beloved text and view it as a stranger would. The author, as s(he) writes, knows exactly what is going on but the reader only has the words on the page to rely on. And how unreliable these words might be. English is a remarkably ambiguous language, or a remarkably flexible one, if one's boasting. Apart from the ability of any nouns and verbs and adjectives to interchange their roles in a muscular, slangy, and yet immediately comprehensible way, most words have diverse and often contradictory meanings, as well as wearing sundry auras of metaphorical nuances - different auras being evoked by differing contexts, capable of illuminating a text with rich resonances or alternatively contaminating it with subversive associations.

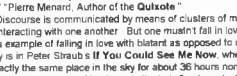
To take a crass example of mere ambiguity: "The woodpecker is a boring bird," said the ornithologist." Immediately the mind of the reader is tiresomely storing two alternative interpretations, one of these subversive soon to be discarded when the context collapses the wave-function. Most first drafts contain numerous such subversive ambiguities of a much more subtle and evasive kind.

Revision of the sub-text is quite as important as massaging the main text, if the aim isn't to write merely functional declarative prose but to achieve relevant resonances, the crosswise weft within the fabric.

Ultimately most words are disguised metaphors, and a complete text is a meta-metaphor.

This is why two authors setting out to write exactly the same story will produce two entirely different stories - which is the true meaning of Borges' "Pierre Menard, Author of the **Quixote**."

Discourse is communicated by means of clusters of metaphorical auras interacting with one another. But one mustn't fall in love with these. A gross example of falling in love with blatant as opposed to covert imagery is in Peter Straub's **If You Could See Me Now**, where the moon is in exactly the same place in the sky for about 36 hours non-stop. (To rephrase Sam Johnson: "If I write a particularly fine line, don't write it again ten pages later.") Inevitably one develops obsessional imagery and nuances in a text. Tame these tics and tune them, so that the reader doesn't wince and grimace but smiles or shudders appreciatively, though s(he) knows not why - except upon subtextual analysis, which is a different game than reading.



Focus on Revision

by Pam Baddeley

Revision is the hard part after the 'easy' part of the first draft. It differs according to what you are trying to revise, but whether it's a novel or a 1,000 word short story, it's never less than a teeth-grinding chore. But it has to be done to shape a flabby piece of writing into a firm one.

I've had two grisly revision chores lately. The first was a novel of about 70,000 words. I revised it 4 times (or was it 5 - I lost count in the end) over about a 4 month period, by the end of which I had been almost driven up the wall. The second was a short story for a competition that stipulated a 1,000 word limit. My approach with competitions is to write the story to its natural length and then worry about cutting it. That meant I had produced a story of around 1,300 words. I then had to lighten it up: it had a very small cast to begin with but out went the already sketchy characterisation of all but the main character and a few phrases I particularly admired.

That brings me to one of the unwritten rules of revision. If you have a turn of phrase, a sentence, a paragraph that seems particularly well written, look very keenly at it when you come to revise. It might turn out to be a bit of fine writing that would look very nice in a classroom exercise but doesn't actually add much to a piece of working (aka 'real') writing. (I won't digress further but as a survivor of writers' classes and courses, I could rant on for a few pages about the effect on a writer's soul of churning out interminable classroom exercises. Enough said!)

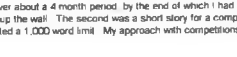
Another rule of revision is to put away anything you write as soon as you finish the first draft and leave it awhile before you revise it. Of course, you can't always manage this; for example, I was working to a tight competition deadline when I produced the story I mentioned. Having written the first draft in one sitting, I had to plough straight into the revision. But if you can put it away for a while, do. I think it is especially important with a longer work because, if you've been working on something like a novel, you are immersed in it and need to acquire distance before you can see it clearly.

When you get your story out of the drawer after its rest, read it through carefully. Consider whether particular words are necessary - I've already mentioned the nice turn of phrase but sometimes a long, educated' word can be replaced by something shorter and more ordinary that does the job better. And is there a tighter, more economical way to say something? A good way to develop these skills is to write for competitions: don't pin your hopes on winning, because, as I can testify, there are many disappointments along the way, but look on it as a means of honing your skill and learning to meet deadlines.

The hardest rule of revision is to know when to STOP. This is largely a matter of gut reaction but perhaps I can give some real-life examples to demonstrate that there is a place even for extremes. I've been writing and rewriting a very large fantasy novel since 1973 (intermittently - I worked on it solidly for the first two years only). The epic went through radical revisions during the first ten years - whole subplots and their characters were cut out - then stylistic ones for the next few was put on ice around 1985, then taken out a couple of years ago and revised again for the Goilancz/Radio 4 fantasy novel competition. I reckon it needs another rewrite before I can regard it as finished, one that will involve minor scene shuffling but probably concentrate more on style. This probably sounds like doing something to death - precisely the pitfall I'd like to warn against - so I should point out that the main reason is that I started it while still at school and my outlook and experience changed radically during that early period and have changed again in the years since so that the book has really needed to change with it.

By contrast, the four or five rewrites I've given my recent novel, taking a mere five months, were quite sufficient. It's a much shorter book both in length and scope and I felt it would suffer from any more reworking. Also, unlike the fantasy epic, it simply did not need radical changes in plotting and character - the book probably took about two years from start to finish (fitted around a full-time job) which was not long enough for my outlook on life to change very radically. Interestingly, it took much longer to produce the first draft than to do the rewrites but that was because, once I started the revision, I set myself a deadline to complete the book and neglected just about everything else to get it done. I think this is a useful incentive (if you have an understanding circle of family/friends) because the gruelling nature of the task can make you leave it in the drawer too long - I'm thinking especially of novels here.

The revision process is gruelling, I'm afraid - there's no escaping that. After the second or third rewrite you really start to wonder whether it is worth going through again but you have to believe it and persevere. In the case of my latest novel, the first rewrite concentrated on getting the plot mechanics consistent - making sure people were in the right place at the right time, that minor characters whose names I had changed part way through had been renamed all the way through, that timescales were consistent. Later rewrites were stylistic though every now and then I spotted a factual mistake that had slipped through, the more complex the story is, the more likely there will be continuity errors. Or they might just be things you changed your mind about during the first draft, like the character names I mentioned. The place to correct them is in the revision stage, not by stopping the flow and going back to sort them out in the first draft. Make a quick note if it reassures you that you won't forget them, but you'll still need to go through it with a fine tooth comb when you revise, for the changes you *haven't* noticed.



Focus revising/drafting (check)

Andrew M. Butler

"first thought - best thought" - Kerouac
"Throw up in the morning, clear up at noon"
Can't if you haven't
166 Sept 1966 JB on PKD FoF - DV

Drafting
Begin by getting something down. Anything. In the words of Jack Kerouac "First thought, best thought" But not everyone is so lucky or so clear in what they say. Check spellings (spell checkers are sometimes not enough) and grammar. Trim unnecessary adverbs. Keep an eye on semi-colon, sometimes 2 sentences would be better

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The Art of Drafting
I begin by writing something down. Anything. If you don't have nothing anything written then you can't revise it. Jack Kerouac may have argued "First thought, best thought", but his novels are carefully crafted.

I find it easier to work on paper than on screen so I do printout and correct/alter that. I then have to be careful to go back and correct the disc version. Starting with a clean copy, I then do the same again

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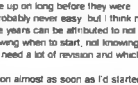
The Craft of Drafting
Jack Kerouac maybe have said "First thought, best thought", but I'm not that talented. But I do begin by writing something down, without this step it is obviously impossible to write anything. If this draft is in long hand then I'll transfer this to disc, with some alterations.

At this stage I do a print out. Probably I will have used a spell checker, but I've add used so many proper names that I can't be sure I haven't missed anything. " I make ammendments by hand and then type these onto disc. Occassionally I'll need to cut the piece and rearrange it. When this step is finished then I do the same again with a clean copy

"sentence structure/grammar

Draft Crafting by Andrew M. Butler
Jack Kerouac may have written, "First thought, best thought", but I'm not so talented. I do begin by writing something down, without this step it is impossible to write anything. If this draft is written in long hand then I'll type this up, with some alterations.

Probably I will use a spell checker, but I use so many proper names that I can't be sure that I haven't missed anything. I check grammar and sentence structure. At this stage I do a print out and make amendments by hand, these are then typed onto disc. Occasionally I'll need to cut the piece up and rearrange it. When this step is completed, then I print out a clean copy, and do the same again. I continue this process until I'm satisfied with the result.



Revision: Some Pitfalls for Beginners

by Sandy Fleming

As a novice I spent two or three years attempting short stories that took a long time to write and that I often gave up on long before they were finished. Starting out as a writer is probably never easy, but I think most of the time wasted in my unproductive years can be attributed to not understanding how to revise: not knowing when to start, not knowing when to stop, not knowing which bits need a lot of revision and which bits should be left alone.

At first I used to start my revision almost as soon as I'd started my story. No sooner had I typed a sentence at the screen than I'd be reading it and correcting it. On reaching the end of the paragraph I'd immediately review it and shuffle it around until satisfied. Later in the story I'd keep going back to earlier paragraphs, making updates to keep the whole thing logically consistent. As the story grew, so did the amount of revision to be done. In retrospect it's no wonder I could never reach the end of any but the shortest stories.

Sometimes, it seems, I never see the obvious until a suitable maxim comes to my attention. It was when I was reading James Thurber's fable 'The Sheep in Wolf's Clothing' that I came across this, the moral: *Don't get it right, get it written*. Then (I hasten to add, in the face of Thurber's cynicism), get it right.

Once I had discovered this principle I was able to complete stories before they went stale on me, but I still hadn't grasped what revision was all about. Given the first draft, I'd spend hours polishing the grammar, bringing out the poetry of the thing, and racking my brains for all the *mots justes*. The kind of stories I was producing read very prettily, but seemed dull and pointless compared to the grand ideas I was actually trying to express. The problem was, as I see now, that I was revising the *words* of the story without revising the *content*.

This situation didn't improve until one day I was reading David Lodge's novel **Small World**, in which I came across Morris Zapp telling Philip Swallow that *Everything should be relevant to the story*.

This got me working on content in the sense that I started cutting out everything I could from my stories. This was good when it came to deleting irrelevant paragraphs and sentences, but bad when I began cutting bits out of the sentences themselves until all the original spontaneity was lost.

Shakespeare said that *Brevity is the soul of wit*. But read any fiction by any good author (including Shakespeare himself) and I think you'll agree that while they avoid rambling on, they don't go so far as to meddle with beautifully spontaneous-sounding sentences just for the sake of brevity.

Somehow I got over my Barebones Brevity phase, and my stories began to sound more natural and were therefore more readable. Comments from editors suggested that the stories showed promise but lacked depth - characters were distant, locations were hard to visualise, ideas weren't fully explored.

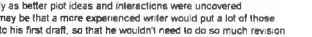
I already understood the importance of visualising and becoming involved with the people and situations in a story, but it seemed that something was still missing. Yet I was completely at a loss, when faced with a rejected story, as to how to revise it to add colour, depth and reader involvement. Finally (and I don't have a quote to go with this because I can't remember how I came across the idea), I started looking at my characters' descriptions and ideas, and asking myself *why* they were the way they were.

A lawbreaker in one of my stories at the moment has her hair dyed green: for example, but why? The real reason is that the real-life person I based her on had her hair dyed, not green but orange, but what about the fictional reasons?

Predictable reasons would be because it was the fashion or because her parents didn't like it. What about the surprising reasons? Because it's the colour most likely to confuse vidcam-id software? Suddenly I see her in a whole new light: she's someone who takes her outlaw status seriously. Perhaps the reason isn't all that plausible just yet, but this sort of thing still triggers a worthwhile train of thought.

Working through stories in this way enabled me to add a lot of interesting stuff to them, and I found that the story often changed drastically as better plot ideas and interactions were uncovered.

It may be that a more experienced writer would put a lot of those things into his first draft, so that he wouldn't need to do so much revision. However, I've noticed that successful writers often say that they are always rewriting, so I'm happy to go on the way I'm going, until the next hard lesson comes along.



False Notes

Revision and Rewriting - A few thoughts.

By Edward St Boniface

As a writer of weird fiction since 1988, I began my career without any hope of publication, and therefore concentrated solely on writing fiction which, as a critical reader, I knew I wanted to read myself. I did not reach that state of competence however until 1991, and it came only when having achieved a nucleus of work equivalent to a one-volume collection, I gathered in that material for the purpose of correlating - revising - it all.

My work consisted of several medium-length stories and a novella. The impetus for examining the tales as a whole and integrating some themes within them was dual. Firstly, I had learnt by much trial and error what I was capable of, and conserved my successes. I ruthlessly discarded a great deal of mediocre, derivative material, a kind of hangover I wanted to get out of my creative metabolism. Secondly, and just as important, I intended to type the greater part of my fiction into standard manuscript form. This I believe is a valuable catalyst in the process of revision, when time is given for a story to await its typesetting, the author continuing to experiment with other work and amplifying their talent.

With the completion of a novella in early 1990, and under pressure of other problems, I put away the body of my work so far, and it lay fallow for almost a year.

I resumed writing in 1991, and found that my ideas had coalesced to the point where I had assurance and a confident fluency. I had

grasped the elusive intangible symphonic quality in literature that was my own. After that things became easier, and the discords I had sensed in my work vanished. In effect, I knew how to order the orchestra around. I had authority. This is a crucial step for any practitioner of the literary art, and is wholly an interior thing. When it happens, you know it, because your instincts have overcome your uncertainty.

The typing process I then embarked on was not only the need to get the work into readable form, but a re-examination of the whole atmosphere and character of fiction I wanted to present. Over time, and with much effort, my techniques had become more sophisticated. I took out my previous work and reread it critically, doing a lot of preliminary editing. I found that in the act of translating my words into typescript, I spontaneously added, edited and rewrote substantial portions of earlier stones in my new, more mature style, which improved them many degrees.

Typed work has a sort of integrity that is difficult to undermine. I find myself unwilling to change or add to fully-typed fiction of my own, because to me the production of the formal manuscript represents a completion. Revisional and rewriting activity have already been done in the process of carving out that final version.

I find that it is best to walk away for a while after some light editorial weeding and marginal additions, returning after sufficient time has elapsed. I always feel a little possessive of the finished story, and don't want to interfere with it in any way. Of course, after I have forgotten the main parts and take it out again, the flaws are more readily apparent, more easily admitted. Rewriting and revising that which does not quite hit the mark or fully realise its potential is more obvious, and I can attack it dispassionately. Thereby, my work improves gradually.

Rewriting and revision have a key part, especially if time plays a role, for the perspective of ongoing experience then sublimates into the work and helps to refine the more raw parts of a story or novel along the writer's stylistic/thematic strengths.

Be Your Own Editor

By Peter Irving

Don't be afraid to edit.

Writers love words, and are enamoured of their own creations most of all. Every writer needs self-confidence to complete a story, but self-criticism is essential for improvement.

Editing is a challenge for any writer.

Get it writ, then get it right.

1. Omit needless words.

Strong writing is concise. Every word must fight for its place.

Qualifications defeat clarity:

almost, a lot, close to, maybe, many, nearly, quite a number.

The most overworked qualifier is very. Always seek a stronger word:

very large = huge; very tired = exhausted.

Similarly, cut unwanted hesitation. We all qualify our character's actions in first drafts; this reflects our hesitancy about the plot.

Lastly, replace minor repetition. Every writer favours certain phrases or words. In particular, first person narrative can suffer from excessive me/myself/I.

2. Use Strong Verbs.

A verb is a 'doing-word'. Putting power into verbs makes prose flow and stories move. Avoid use of the passive voice.

Passive: The target was missed by Robin.

Active: Robin missed the target.

The active voice is shorter and stronger.

he was pulling = he pulled; I was going = I went; they were losing = they lost.

One exception to action-packed verbs is *said* whose blandness makes it an invisible introduction to dialogue. Reserve its synonyms to enhance action.

Remember that shortness adds impact. This also applies directly to verbs.

Beware of using adverbs to enhance a weak verb. Adverbs leech strength. Many verb-adverb pairs can be replaced by a single verb:

ran swiftly = sprinted; Held me gently = cradled me.

3. Use strong nouns.

A noun identifies an object, person or place. Any vagueness weakens that mental picture.

A story lives when the reader's senses are involved. So, choose nouns which describe things that can be sensed, concrete not abstract descriptions.

Time, eternity, aggression are concepts. Seconds, darkness, pain are closer to experience, but still aren't concrete. However, we all know heartbeats, blackness and tears.

Good writing draws the reader's senses into every scene. Never tell them it's a nice day -- show them.

Sunlight slanted across the meadow. The warm hay offered its musk to the morning. A drowsy dragonfly hummed past.

4. Avoid clichés.

Laziness lets tired phrases creep into prose.

bottom line; calm before the storm; liquid refreshment; moving up the ladder.

Pry these from the narrative, but be gentler on dialogue. A deftly placed cliche can define character.

Use of language demonstrates the writer's skill. Be precise. A thesaurus is an essential reference. Sift the synonyms for the perfect choice, but don't make the reader reach for their dictionary. Select familiar but not overused words.

Make the choice that feels right.

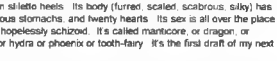
5. Learn when to break the rules.

Reread popular, modern authors. They follow these rules. Mostly.

A writer who sticks rigidly to any rule produces stilted prose; pedantic grammar kills dialogue, perfect syntax dilutes emphasis, volleys of short sentences stun the reader.

Don't endlessly repeat the same mistakes, but don't become obsessed with rules when writing. Tell your tale, then when you're happy with it, attack the telling.

Keep writing, keep learning.



Revision

by Jenny Jones

I have this monster. It has a thousand heads, some are savage with teeth and fiery breath, some coy and simpering like a Sindy Doll. Its legs are legion, striding in seven league boots or pattering like a millipede. Its feet leave dinosaur prints or trail off to end in vague atrophied spasms. Some balance on stiletto heels. Its body (furred, scaled, scabrous, silky) has multitudinous stomachs, and twenty hearts. Its sex is all over the place. Its nature hopelessly schizoid. It's called manticore, or dragon, or nebbish, or hydra or phoenix or tooth-fairy. It's the first draft of my next novel.

I don't plan, you see. I write synopses in order to sell things to publishers, but really my synopses are the deepest of all fictional deceits. I never stick to them. Writing to a synopsis would be like knowing who did it. Deadly. I write, just as I read, to find out what's going to happen next.

It's not entirely wild. I do have a couple of ground rules. I tend to know what kind of scene is going to end the thing (what kind of tall my monster has). So, the Jones recipe for writing fiction goes like this: start with the teeth, the clashing together of a blazing row, preferably. Then, go on to the most interesting thing you can imagine happening next (the heart? the eyes? the claws?). Continue like this, bearing in mind that it must be consistent with a) what has gone before and b) what you hope may happen in the end.

This is not irrelevant. Because by the time I reach the end, I know what kind of beast it is, and recognise its genus, although it is monstrous, diverse and out of balance. But now I know why I wrote it.

And that's when the real work takes place: the nine-to-five, stone cold sober, chained to a desk, work.

Pruning, clipping, adorning, gingering up, especially the bits I particularly like. Some scenes I rewrite twenty or thirty times. Not only does this take ages, because the plotting gets so complicated, but there is an additional neurosis of mine to do with the balance of sentences. Do the scales lie smoothly, does the blood flow with vigour? I can easily get obsessive about the shape of a phrase, the rhythm of words. I spend ages fretting about such things.

Very occasionally, perhaps once or twice in the course of a novel, I might write something that I know is all right. I never agonise about these strange episodes, they go straight into the final ms unchanged, in any detail. These are very much exceptions that prove the rule.

Usually, I still want to rewrite at proof stage. I find words I wish I'd changed in the final copy years later. It's an endless job, being a writer, and as far as I'm concerned, perfection is never attained. It plays hell with one's social life and the housework is never done.

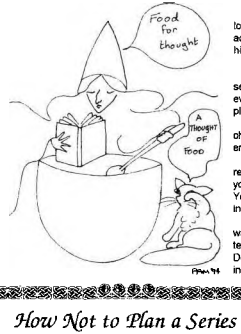
The secret comes in recognising what level of imperfection is tolerable and that you can only judge for yourself.

The monster is laughing.

It's out of control.

Inspiration?

by Terra Firma



What was lurking under the sandwich? A green giant from a tertiary dimension, a blob of algal slime derived by genetic mutation, or, perhaps, bacteria - an undiscovered disease waiting to be called after some professor who would be fascinated by the curious symptoms it would give its unsuspecting victims. No, it was just cheese and pickle as usual.

My fetid brain cells sweat deliriously looking for inspiration.

The question is: should I dress up in an insect suit and listen to early Bowie, or should I grip reality and draw from the depths of personal experience, such as washing up and pulling out weeds? Even city life has its uses, I suppose.

Oh yes, I've tried them all - even the bath method. Lying in soapy heaven glancing at my toe nails and fancying them half moons and flying saucers, I check out the black mould on the wall. Perhaps, squinting a bit, it looks like lost galaxies (in negative) to be found, travelled across and lost again. Hang on, hasn't some hitch-hiker guy done that before?

And that's the other problem: originality.

Pondering this I might dust a window sill and see bird worlds and horse characters outside. But even humble earth worms have been contorted into plots.

How about the lorries going past full of waste - oh no, the world could not cope with another environovel.

Oops. And before I forget: don't go remembering happy summer days in the garden, or you might catch yourself coming back up the path. You don't want to be caught in a time warp... caught in a time warp... caught in a time warp....

There's always computers, robots and space wars. Shall I weave a different tapestry of unflawed technology? Too scary!

Do you know what I really could do with for inspiration? A magic spell.

How Not to Plan a Series

by Cherith Baldry

"Any fool can write, but it takes a genius to get published," was what my university tutor told me, a long time ago. Looking back, I'm not sure I agree. It doesn't take genius, just hard work and perseverance, and maybe a slice of luck. It also helps if you know what you are doing.

By the time I left university, I had written two or three novels which I thought were good enough to submit for publication; looking back I can only give thanks that they were quite rightly and properly turned down. I was moving more definitely into wanting to write science fiction, and my husband badgered me into writing a novel for a competition run by Gollancz and the Sunday Times. This gave me valuable experience in writing to a deadline; the novel was finished and survived the preliminary weed-out in the competition, which gave me some encouragement. (I believe the eventual winner was Ian Watson.)

There were two significant things about this novel, as far as later events were concerned. First, although I hadn't designed it as a children's novel, the central character was aged fifteen. Second, there was a Christian, or at least, a spiritual element. The setting of the novel was an underground city, the development of a nuclear fall-out shelter, whose inhabitants survived by adopting a riddly controlled life-style. (I firmly believe this idea was more original then than it sounds now!) My main characters were a group of rebels who found they could not live within the limitations of the city, and the storyline described how they learnt to think independently and to form personal relationships. I discovered to my dismay that because of my own beliefs, if I was to write this story honestly, I had to include a spiritual development as part of their journey from being robots to being full human beings. The novel nearly fell apart at this point. I stuck at it, muttering over the typewriter, "Who do you think you are, C. S. Lewis?"

When the competition was over I had a go at getting this novel published; it came back with depressing regularity. Then my husband and I went to work in Africa; the novel went into store. By the time I came back to England, I had a baby.

The presence of the baby - and, eventually, his brother, - is not irrelevant, because it was at a mother and toddler group, among the soggy rusks and bits of Lego, that I met a proper writer. She was published by Scripture Union, and she offered to take my book to the children's fiction editor.

This it it, I thought. The breakthrough we all hope for. And at first all seemed to go well, because the editor sent the book back, saying that it was too long for the children's list, but if I could cut it down she would be prepared to consider it.

I cut it down. And she sent it back. But by now I had grasped two things: first, that what I had was a book for children or young adults, and secondly that it might be suitable for a specifically Christian publisher. So I got hold of the **Writers' and Artists' Yearbook**, dug out the address of Lion Publications, and sent the shorter, revised version on its travels once more.

They sent it back. This time they weren't interested in revisions, but they thought I might have what it takes, and, they said, they would be interested in seeing the next suitable book I might write. Good grief, I thought, I've had enough trouble writing one Christian book; do I have to start writing another one?

I really did not think I could do it. Then, standing outside Foyles' bookshop on the Charing Cross Road, I had an idea. Really a very good idea, and on the train going home I developed it into a plot outline. (So now when people ask me, "Where do you get your ideas from?" I say that I go and stand outside Foyles' bookshop...)

I wrote up this idea: a novel for children of about ten upwards, and called it **The Book and the Phoenix**. I was pleased with it. I knew it was a lot better than the first one, because now I knew what I was trying to do. I packed it up and sent it off to Lion.

They sent it back - with suggestions for revision. I revised it. They sent it back again, but the rejection came with an invitation to go to their offices and talk. During this discussion they told me the book was publishable, not now right for their list, they suggested I try Kingsway.

This time, Kingsway didn't send it back. **The Book and the Phoenix** was published in 1989, about three years after I wrote it. By then, I'd written the second in the series, **Hostage of the Sea**, which appeared in 1990. I'd had the plot of this second book in my mind for some time, but hadn't been able to write it until I realised it belonged in the same universe as **The Book and the Phoenix**. It was after **Hostage** was accepted that I thought I might have a series on my hands, and thankfully my editor agreed.

It looked as if the series was established; in fact, the third book, **The Carpenter's Apprentice**, and the fourth, **The Other Side of the Mountains**, were both written, when in the summer of 1990 Kingsway's principal warehouse in Carlisle was destroyed in a fire and the two books I already had in print were suddenly out of print, along with the work of a lot of other writers.

When something like this happens, you go into shock. I don't think I appreciated it then, but this could well have led to Kingsway's going out of business, and my having to start from scratch with another publisher. Fortunately, this didn't happen. Kingsway reorganised themselves, over the next year or so and their list was reprinted, and **The Carpenter's Apprentice** appeared in 1992.

Since then, I've been waiting for the fourth book to go through the press. A recent development has been Kingsway's going into partnership with a larger concern in the US. This has led to crisis. I'd discussed in very general terms with my editor the possibility of a 'prequel' (vile word!) to **The Book and The Phoenix**. In mid-February this year, he came on the phone. The US publisher wanted to launch my series over there in the autumn, starting with **Phoenix** and the prequel, which he evidently managed to sell to them in spite of the minor detail that I hadn't written it yet. Late February, March and the first half of April were rather frenetic, but at the time of writing I have got a rough draft and

I'm waiting to hear the verdict. Since they want to publish in August, it had better be good!

The setting of the novels is a group of planets known as the Six Worlds. Originally they were colonised from Earth, but due to events in their history they have lost contact with their home world, and have begun to develop in different directions. Retaining their level of technology has been difficult, and they have given priority to space travel and communication within the system, so as to retain their identity as a group. This scheme, which is fairly basic and straightforward, is flexible enough to provide a lot of possible settings and different levels of culture, so that the books in the series can be different from each other. Each book is self-contained; it's not necessary to read them in any particular order.

The Christian element in the books is something that needs a lot of thought. I dislike very much the sort of fiction which exists to put over the writer's 'message'; I think this devalues fiction and is fundamentally dishonest, particularly in something which is offered to children. So I'm not in the business of preaching disguised sermons. The thematic material reflects my own world-view, but it has to grow organically out of the characters and the story. Also, it has to be honest. It's all too easy to make exaggerated claims for a religious belief which are not borne out by everyday experience: or to treat God as a kind of rich uncle from Australia' who comes along at the end and sorts out all the problems. I know of books like this, but they're not the kind I want to write.

So far, then, there are five books, either published or in the press; I have a sixth planned out. How long the series will continue is uncertain: a lot will depend on the success of the imminent launch in the US. I'd like to continue as long as I can think of new ideas; I've learnt a lot from doing it and had a lot of fun.

The Scales From His Eyes

by John Light

It was hot beneath the cloudless yellow sky as Tariq Macintyre toiled across the immense flat plain of yellow consynth that was the spaceport of Beta Hydri Nine. Even through his thick-soled shoes the ground almost burnt his feet, and his wide-brimmed hat did little to shade his face from the fierce rays of Beta Hydri. His ancient uniform, bleached by many suns, hung a little loose on his gaunt frame, but there was no breeze to stir it.

His ears detected the distant rumble of a starship splitting the denser layer of the troposphere. It would be the weekly tourist class from Beta Pyxidis. The parking circle for that was several miles away across the consynth apron. He crossed a blue line designating the landing spot of the Beta Fornax express which had come and gone four days ago, and his eyes scanned the scarred consynth with the avid attention of the beachcomber and gutter urchin combined. The consynth was bare in all directions. No plant could gain a root-hold on it; even the burning energies of the starships could not crack nor crumble it, could do no more than discolour it and glaze its surface. But Tariq Macintyre searched neither for plants nor for shattered consynth.

A tell-tale glint caught his eye, and he deviated from his systematic quartering to step and pick up the starship scale, a small osmiridium plate, one of the millions that clad the hulls of the interstellar behemoths. He swung his satchel from his back to his side, unbuckled it, and slipped the plate inside, where it clinked against others already retrieved from the resting places of departed monsters.

He showed no emotion at his find, and if he had there was no one to see it. The space field was deserted. Over the straight line of the horizon, in distant parts of the spaceport, the gaunt beasts of burden that plied the lanes of space would be standing silent, awaiting the departure schedule. Some would know the attentions of the human specks that serviced them, and the minuscule machines that repaired and refurbished them.

He toiled on through the long afternoon and as a few orange clouds heralded evening the tall spire of the spaceport control tower peeped over the far horizon. A few more scales clinked in his bag, but he knew the number was down again. They must, he thought, have become more successful at securing them to the mighty hulls, as there was no diminution in arrivals or departures - that he would have registered immediately.

He worked on until the light began to dim, and then he stopped, unwilling to risk missing even one scale in the gloom.

Tariq set his satchel carefully on the ground, and unslinging his shoulder pack, placed it neatly next to it. From the pack he extracted a thermal tent, and deftly erected it. It was self-bracing, and the weight of himself and his remaining possessions would keep it anchored even if one of the gentle nocturnal breezes of Beta Hydri Nine should arise. He extracted a stove, and began to heat his evening meal.

#

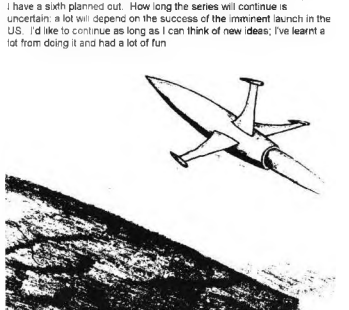
Far away across the consynth apron two men at the top of the control tower observed him through magnification monitors. Controller Chu was a veteran of many years' service on BH9, but Kalkov was new to the planet.

"What's he doing?" he asked.

"He's camping for the night," answered Chu. "Before first light he'll be up and having his breakfast so that as soon as the sun rises he can resume his search."

"He's a 'ridium scale scavenger?"

Chu nodded.



I haven't seen one of those for years. I thought the last ones had given up long ago, when they first started to bring in the seamless hull transports."

"We're a bit behind the times here. BH9 is a backwater, and we've still a high proportion of scale ships plying the local spaceways."

"But there can't be much of a market for the scales now."

"None at all. Any substantial loss of scales, and it's cheaper to scrap the ship and replace it with one of the newer breed."

"Why does he carry on, then?"

"Because he doesn't know."

"Doesn't know? How come?"

"Sit down, and I'll try to explain."

There were no scheduled landings or take-offs that night, and Chu and Kalkov were on duty only in case of an emergency - a remote possibility. Nevertheless, Chu was a stickler for the regulations. He would not risk the million to one chance striking and both of them being drunk. So the drink they shared was non-alcoholic, although otherwise indistinguishable from Beta beer.

"Tariq Macintyre was born on Earth."

"It still happens," grinned Kalkov.

"Of course, but not many Earth-born become spacers. However, Macintyre did, and he had a long career of no particular distinction. Then he had the misfortune to sign on for a trip in a Carina Combine ship, just before they went broke. He ended up stranded here. By the time the legal tangle was sorted out, and the crew was released from their contracts, Macintyre had just slipped over the normal retirement age. No legitimate ship would risk hiring an over-age spacer, and there were so many out-of-work personnel at the time that even shady outfits could pick and choose. So he was stuck."

Chu sipped his beer and stared out at the stars emerging in the darkening sky.

"He's determined to get back to Earth," he resumed. "Unable to work a passage, he decided to earn one. He bid for a thirty year concession for osmiridium scale collection from the apron."

"Thirty years! But if Macintyre had already reached retirement age, another thirty years would take him to eighty!"

"I think he hopes he won't need that long! I talked to him about it once. He calculated the length of time it should take at the galactic average for scale shedding, and then allowed a fifty percent margin. It

took all his severance pay to purchase the concession, but he reckoned to resell any unexpired time when he'd collected sufficient scales."

"How long ago was that?"

"Ten years."

Kalkov did a rough calculation, and came to the conclusion that Macintyre was probably only halfway there.

"He'll never make it." he said "not now."

"No."

"Doesn't he realise that?"

Chu shook his head.

"No one's had the heart to tell him that the scale ships are being phased out, that this is one of the last remaining planets served by them."

"But surely the plummeting price of second-hand scales must have alerted him?"

"He hasn't been selling what he's collected. He figured the only way to beat inflation was to leave conversion of his stock into currency until the last moment. He has to sell a few scales to keep himself in provisions, but Leclerc who owns the Port Stores exchanges them at a ridiculous rate, because he feels sorry for the old fellow."

"So he's no idea that his collection is worthless?"

"None at all."

"Somebody ought to tell him."

"Why? He's got a dream that keeps him going. How many other people are that lucky? Shatter his dream and how would he survive?"

"But eventually he'll calculate he's got enough, and try to sell them. What then?"

"The scale ships will stop coming long before then, unless he has a windfall. The truth will dawn on him gradually. Perhaps he'll adjust."

#

During the night it rained. The wind rose and drove the drops against Tariq's tent, but he slept warm and snug, dreaming of Earth.

#

Two days later Macintyre was in the Port Stores buying provisions. His purchasing complete, he sat at one of the tables that turned the store into the cafe-cum-bar that was the only meeting place in the vicinity of the spaceport. Before him he set the one luxury he allowed himself, a small cup of piping hot chocolate. It was a monthly treat, the promise of which helped him through the difficult times when hope dimmed. He sipped the thick sweet liquid, before opening his satchel and taking out the accumulation of osmridium scales. He began to count them into piles of ten.

He'd almost finished, when an off-worlder came into the store and ordered a beer. Leclerc served him and exchanged the time of day observing he was not just an off-worlder, but a tourist into the bargain. There weren't so many of those visiting BHG. Usually they were tight enough with their money, otherwise they'd be on one of the more fashionable planets, but you never could tell. Sometimes a spender with a fancy for backward worlds would make it to Beta Hydri Nine and even a few sales to such a one could more than make up for the impoverishment of his local patrons.

The tourist turned to observe Tariq Macintyre who was the only other customer in the establishment.

"Say!" he exclaimed. "Are those ship scales you've got there?"

Macintyre looked up. Silently he nodded.

"Pretty things! I could take a few home for the kids. How much?"

Macintyre stared at him for a long moment, and then spoke briefly. "They aren't for sale."

"A five for the lot - a silly offer, but I quite fancy them."

The scavenger stood up. He carefully replaced the scales in his satchel.

"Think I'm a fool?" he asked, and turning, strode out of the bar.

Leclerc had watched this exchange intently. Now he came out from behind the counter. Five had been a generous offer, although less than the foolish rate he allowed Tariq.

"What was the matter with him?" asked the tourist.

"Beta Hydri Nine is an odd place," answered Leclerc, "and those of us who live here are odd people, that's all." Tariq Macintyre has his own reasons for not accepting your offer. I'd take it as a personal favour if you'd not mention it to him again, should you see him. If you want ship scales, I can let you have a few at the price you mentioned, but only on the strict understanding that you don't tell Macintyre."

The tourist shrugged helplessly.

"I don't understand, but I certainly don't want to upset anyone."

#

Tariq Macintyre stomped through the cold darkness towards the cabin he'd built from starship scrap. As he walked he muttered to himself.

"Stupid tourists. What do they know? Think they can cheat me? Think I'm a fool, just because I don't wear smart clothes? I know how much scales are worth, probably more than that by now. Prices always go up; never down. What do tourists know about such things?" He kept up the monologue all the way home, shutting out the nightmare that haunted him, the possibility that a trade slump might shave the price of ship scales, and prolong his exile by a year or even more. When first he'd begun to collect, he'd scanned the screen at Leclerc's whenever he went there, to check the price of scrap scales, cheered by increases, depressed by the occasional dip. After one such he'd got drunk, using precious scales to buy the liquor, and had been unable to collect for nine days. Then the price rose again, and he cursed himself for wasting time and scales. After that he never looked at a screen again, knew nothing of what was happening outside his own tiny world. Leclerc was the only other human being he ever spoke to willingly, and their conversation was limited to civilities, and the transaction of scales for necessities.

The metal door of the cabin squeaked as Tariq opened it. He pressed the button of a permaglobe salvaged from a crashed liner, and the interior of his home was lit by the golden yellow of the lamp. He put down his satchel, and barred the door. Stretching up, he slid back a small metal plate in the ceiling, then stretched out on the bunk that was the only furniture. He lay motionless, staring at the patch of sky he'd uncovered. After a time, a star moved into the square, and he let out a long sigh. That star was his goal, his destination. Five more standard years and two hundred and seventy-six local days, and he would allow himself to check the value of his stock. At the average inflation rate prevailing over the first few years, that was the soonest at which he could have reached his target.

#

In the control tower Chu and Kalkov were again on duty together.

"I saw Macintyre again yesterday," said Kalkov for the want of any other conversation.

"Still searching?" asked Chu, knowing the answer.

Kalkov nodded. "It's such a waste of effort," he sighed. "Someone should tell him it's no use. There's still time for him to make a new life here, on Beta Hydri Nine. It isn't right that a man should expend his energies in futile endeavour."

"Isn't it? Is your life any better directed?"

"What do you mean?"

"What's your aim in life?"

"Well, the same as most people's, I suppose."

"Which is?"

Kalkov thought for a while. There was, after all, no hurry, and if the question were taken seriously it was not an easy one to answer. It was one he'd not thought about for a long time - deliberately? Probably not, he'd just been too busy. But here on BHG, remote backwater of the Terran Economic Community, there was nothing to be busy about. There was time to consider the larger questions, indeed, sooner or later it became impossible to avoid them. So, what was his purpose in life? Ultimately, that is. A family? Yes, that would be part of it, a wife and some children, a home by a gentle sea beneath a sky that filled with stars at night, and... He was uncomfortably aware that there would have to be something else, some essential item without which the rest would make no sense. But he had no idea what that something was, he'd never had any idea. That was why he'd taken to the spaceways - he'd thought that out there he would find the missing ingredient. So far he had not.

"Well?" enquired Chu gently.

"Huh?"

"You've been silent a long time," smiled the other. "Can't you remember what you're looking for?"

"It isn't a case of not remembering," replied Kalkov, somewhat irritably. "I don't really know, I've never known. I just know I'm looking for something, and I'll recognise it when I come across it."

"Of course. All of us who take to space are looking for something. Macintyre knows what he's seeking - in that he's a step ahead of most of us."

"But he can't find it," objected Kalkov. "As I said, it's a futile quest."

"And perhaps your search is futile, too."

"Maybe, but I don't know that it is."

"Nor does Macintyre."

"So someone should tell him."

"And if someone were to tell you your quest is futile?"

Kalkov was silent.

"Are you a happy man?" Chu asked.

"I get by."

"And if you knew that there was no more to life than that which you already know and feel is insufficient?"

"No one could know that for sure."

"You mean you wouldn't believe anyone who told you it was."

"No. I wouldn't believe them."

"I doubt whether Macintyre would believe anyone who told him that his goal was unattainable."

"But they could give reasons They could show it was true "

"And Macintyre would find a reason to disbelieve them. He'd have to, otherwise he'd have nothing to hold onto "

"And you think we're all in the same ship? All headed for the same destination as the scavenger? Nowhere! It's all a delusion!"

"I don't know the answer to that But I do know I wouldn't try to destroy Macintyre's dream "

#

It was night and the Store was closed Leclerc relaxed in front of the screen, watching the news, as he did most nights It was like a story to him, the relation of events so distant in space, and so far removed in developmental time from his own life that they had no impact on him He dozed Perhaps he dreamed. Waking with a start he thought he'd heard something important His attention was caught by the screen, but it was only a report of a new system being opened to exploitation

#

In the control tower Chu and Kalkov were playing chess They'd entered the game with a Rook each and Chu's Bishop against Kalkov's Knight Chu had four pawns on his King's side against Kalkov's three, but the latter had three on the Queen's wing against Chu's two, so he felt his Knight gave him a slight edge being able to reach any square on the board, while Chu's Bishop was confined to the white

The alarm went

It was not loud, but it startled the two men Chu jumped up and spoke to the monitors

"Immediate report!"

"Interstellar distress signal," came the reply "Further information will not be available until the ship is within light-speed contact distance."

Chu sank back in his seat "I've never handled an emergency before." He stared at Kalkov "I hope we get it right, and I hope it's nothing really serious The services here are pretty primitive."

"Lucky you insisted we stayed sober," replied Kalkov "We'd better check the systems."

Two standard hours later, there was a further message

"Interstellar Trader Summit Class Star Ship Nanga Parbat reporting main drive oscillations Request permission for emergency landing and repair if possible."

"Controller Chu granting permission, but warning Captain I T Nanga Parbat that this is a primitive port Large scale repairs are out of the question Suggest you seek alternative planet-fall if at all possible."

"Captain I T Nanga Parbat to Controller Chu Main drive increasingly erratic No choice but to land."

When it came, the ship came fast Auto fire trucks raged the port area, and ambulances and other services stood by But the pilot brought the stricken Nanga Parbat down without major disintegration the anticipated fire did not break out, and the only injuries from the heavier than usual impact were minor The main result of the jolt was a cascade of heat-loosened osmiridium plates that formed a circular heap around the ship

Surveying the scene in the morning, Chu shook his head.

"That's one ship that will never fly again See that crack? I checked its construction date It's over a hundred years old No one is going to refit a ship that old."

"Look at those scales," answered Kalkov "When Macintyre sees those he'll think his fortune's been made."

#

Tariq Macintyre heard the thunder of the dying ship in his sleep and woke early He heated water drank his tea and ate two wafers of bread He checked his pack and hefted it on his back He slung his satchel over his shoulder and as dawn broke he set off across the consynth

About midday he spied the first scale, picked it up and slipped it into his satchel Straightening up he shielded his eyes against the blazing white sun and scanned the smooth surface of the field in all directions He could see nothing to mar the flat prospect Setting down his pack, he paced out fifty strides and once more searched the consynth with his eyes He saw nothing of interest Judging the distance to his pack he stepped out the eighth part of a circle and scanned again It was on the fifth arc that he spied the faint blip for which he had been searching He set down his satchel, returned to his pack and lifted it once more onto his back Retracing his steps he picked up the satchel, and walked briskly to the scale he'd spotted, and so continued in a line his experience of the featureless plain told him was straight As he'd hoped he came on another scale, a third, then a small scattering He stared intently at the horizon where the burnished consynth met the saffron sky Directly in line with his present course, he saw the tiny black stump of the control tower, its spike invisible in the glare Tinier still, so small as to be almost indistinguishable, was a dot It could only be a ship He resumed his march, gathering scales in ones or twos, a harvest richer than he'd had for years, yet his face showed no elation

By late afternoon, as the sun descended one side of the deepening sky, and a thin breeze began to cool the plain, his satchel was full and he'd begun to stuff the pockets of his pack with scales When they too were full, he extracted a sack from his jacket and began to fill that Around and above the sky darkened to orange and then blood-red

Evening had pushed the shadows of the control tower and the ruined ship to many times the length of the objects themselves before Tariq Macintyre reached them He saw the dark pools of the scale-fall while he was still some distance away, and he trembled with hope and uncertainty as he made the final approach When he could no longer doubt the magnitude of the find he stopped stock still, breathing deeply, calming the excitement that threatened to overthrow his reason

He stood for a long time just gazing Eventually he began to estimate the number there might be in the heaps, but it was too difficult An idea struck him and he looked up at the dark bulk of the hull towering above him. It was stripped almost bare He knew how many plates a Summit Class carried, and he could no longer doubt that the piles of scales around the crumpled landing gear were all he needed to raise his fare home

#

When Leclerc heard about the ship, and realised what it meant in terms of scales, he suddenly remembered what his subconscious had absorbed from the newscast He searched the memory until he found it : problems with seamless ships There had been losses; there had always been the occasional loss of interstellar transports, but the fact could no longer be concealed that the new seamless ships had a higher rate of loss than the old The reason was known, but the problems would take time to correct. Leclerc checked more recent newscasts Panic transfer of bookings to remaining scale-ships had already produced a chaotic backlog of journeys Leclerc smiled to himself as the inevitable corollary followed - urgent refitting of moth-balled spaceships was already underway For that scales would be needed and Macintyre must have the biggest collection of them in the known Universe - his dream would come true after all

Dr Greenland's Prescription

'Show don't tell.'

It's the first advice professional writers give beginners, or each other, for that matter. 'Show, don't tell' as if it were a universal law. Beware of it! Treat it with great suspicion, just as you would any other universal law. Whole stories, by R.A. Lafferty, or Jorge Luis Borges, or T.H. White, are exercises in pure Telling. Any story that has a first person narrator, for example, is - ostensibly - wholly Told.

Still, don't reject the advice outright. Reality just happens to be more complicated than Show/Tell. Black/White - especially in that little peculiar specialized corner of reality known as *science fiction*.

* * *

What they're really saying, those sage advisors, is this: There are two principal narrative modes. This bit of your story, *for whatever reason*, is in the wrong one.

The reason may be hard to identify - easier, certainly, for the critic, looking at the work afterwards and from the outside, than for you in the middle of it, reaching to put the story outside you. Maybe what you're telling - It had been twenty-five years since the Martians had first arrived on Earth' - has come too soon after your energetic, enthralling opening and slowed the pace right down. Maybe it's not too soon for a bit of background, but you've simply misjudged it and gone on too long, disgruntling the reader who's waiting impatiently to hear What Happened Next. Or maybe what you're telling, in the manner of a historian with all the facts at your disposal, removed from the lather and tears of the action, is something simply crucial to the life and vitality of your story - something that needs to be conveyed in drama, description, sensory evocation, and all the other modes the sages lump together under that single word Show.

Beware also the pluperfect!

* * *

Two narrative modes. Some fiction is pure Show.

Lucas and Zar-battu-zakigal halted with the black Rat where steps came down from street-level. The bone-packed vaults stretched away into the distance. In far corners there was shadow, where the

gas-lighting failed. Dry bone-dust caught in the back of Lucas's throat, and there was a scent: sweet and subtle, of decay.

Zar-hettu-zakgal huffed on her hands to warm them. She appeared sanguine, but her tail coiled limply about her feet.

(Mary Gentle, **Rats and Gargoyles**)

We are given nothing about these characters or their environment that would not be apparent to an onlooker amongst them. All other information must be conveyed by what they do and say together, by action and interaction. The virtue of the mode is immediacy. We can share this world, though it seems to be one where rats walk with humans, and characters can have both hands and tails. The mode lets you say how things feel, but not what they mean.

* * *

Other fiction is, just as purely, Tell.

The Red Planet was no longer quite so red, though the process of greening it had barely begun. Concentrating on the problems of survival, the colonists (they hated the word, and were already saying proudly: 'We Martians') had little energy left over for art or science. But the lightning flash of genius strikes where it will, and the greatest theoretical physicist of the century was born under the bubble-domes of Port Lowell.

(Arthur C. Clarke, **The Hammer of God**)

Here everything is mediated to us, by an omniscient narrator untrammelled by time. We have no access at all to the experience of the Martians, only commentary on it, and that in the most general terms. The virtue of this mode is authority. We cannot share the world, but we can learn it, though it is just as non-existent as Gentle's Port Lowell, an imaginary place, acquires architecture and babies, and 'We Martians' a literally meaningless phrase, is granted meaning, even a hint of humour or poignancy. Telling, a distinctively science fictional mode, one might think, lets you say only what happens, not how it feels.

* * *

Showing is close-up. Telling is long shot. Showing is intimate but narrow. Telling is remote, but the scale can be enormous.

* * *

Showing and Telling. Try sequencing from one to the other. You can go down, from Tell to Show, to release sensation from data, like Paul McAuley in **Red Dust**.

One of Cho Jefeng's failed experiments had been the creation of animals that under Mars's low gravity had grown bigger than any creature that had ever lived on the Earth. But the archiosaurs had not been able to adapt to the changing climate of Mars: ice mice and other small mammals had feasted on their eggs, and within a century they had died out.

The skull was half sunken in sand, tilted sideways like a bony galleon beached on a dry seabed. Lee camped in the half-buried circle of an eye socket.

* * *

Or you can go up from Show to Tell, pulling back from vivid detail to dry commentary in search of wisdom or pathos, as the mysterious narrator of **Take Back Plenty** does.

The radio snarled and chattered with alarms, alerts, recriminations and citations, but the Alice Liddell was away, gone to take her chances on the high seas of space.

How romantic it sounds. It was anything but, of course, at the time. Such glamour as the memory of the little barge may have for me for any of us, these days, is mere nostalgia.

More Than They Bargained for
Sandy Fleming

My auntie Sidney and her friend went bargain-hunting
Afterwards they rested by the town fountain

Amongst their bargains was a jumbo box of
Jellox, that stuff restaurants make jelly with, one crystal
To the gallon

Julie gathered up the bags as Sidney tipped the
box into the fountain

The streets became an advancing mass of kiwi
jelly *en couleur caca d'oie*. Police cordoned off the
town, horns blared, shoppers panicked, children ate
themselves sick, fire engines screamed

Sidney and Julie were still laughing when they
were arrested. The vidcams had spotted them

That's why you can't buy Jellox any more.

Untitled ("Two Jehovah's...)
John Madracki

Two Jehovah's Witnesses called this morning
They took one look at me and shut the
door in my face

I went into the kitchen and made myself
some coffee. The radio listened with interest as I
hummed the tune of a popular song.

The telephone rang in the living room.

I picked up the receiver and a voice said,
"Yes? What do you want?"

When the clock on the wall asked me
what time it was I decided to go back to bed.

I dressed hurriedly and lay there until I
awoke.

And that is when the dream began again.

Drabble Competition

We are grateful to Graham Joyce for kindly agreeing to judge the drabbles. We have had many more entries since our plea in Issue 25 - all of them of high quality - so it has been no mean task to give consideration to them all, and choose a winner. Below, Graham explains his criteria for judging, and announces the winner and runners up.

"I enjoyed doing this. The Drabble has evolved from a kind of game to an art-form in its own right. One of the most interesting things about it is how it always produces a tight result. In itself it's a good antidote exercise to overwriting.

On to submissions. There wasn't a single weak entry amongst them and I had to decide on some specific criteria to pick a winner. A number of the crabbles centered on a pun or a punchline rather than a narrative: so even though they were cleverly-wrought I put those aside. Others beautifully encapsulated well-known SF ideas: but in the interests of originality I put those aside. Finally, anything with a self-consciously 'literary' note got eliminated.

This left me with four, all seductive in different ways. These were 'Head in the Clouds', 'Two Jehovahs...', 'The Last and Greatest Work of the Blind Poet' and 'More Than They Bargained for'. I liked all of these very much. Beyond criteria now, I plumped for 'More Than They Bargained for'."

Sandy Fleming will shortly be receiving the prize of Colin Greenland's **Michael Moorcock: Death is No Obstacle** (kindly donated by the author) through the post. We regret that there are no prizes available for runners-up - unless you count publication in **Focus**! Cherith Baldry's The Last and Greatest Work of the Blind Poet' has, of course, already appeared in issue 25. The winning entry, and the other two commended drabbles appear here. Thanks to all for taking part and giving us such a good read. Other entries will be making an appearance in future issues. Although there are no more prizes, we hope that won't stop you submitting more of your well-cut darlings.

Head in the Clouds
Sandy Fleming

I saw an old movie about scientists creating
dinosaurs.

The dinosaurs were fenced in. A carnivore
escapes, wreaking havoc. They'd never have
believed our solution: tame dinosaurs.

They'd be surprised how we solved the food
and respiration problems, too, with exovenous
absorption and diaphragm implants.

Dinosaurs are still rare, but one memorable
day when going down the street with my cousin
and his father, some Travellers came leading a
velociraptor to drink at the fountain.

Further on my uncle said, "Did you see the
dinosaur?" As if we'd miss a *velociraptor*
megalomaximus traipsing by.

My cousin looked around. "What dinosaur?"

The Plotting Parlour

Letters of comment on articles published in Focus are always welcome.

Peter Tennant:

"Many thanks for **Focus** No 25 which built on the solid ground of your previous issue. It's good to see the magazine become such a worthwhile member of the BSFA's line up. You seem to have given Focus a much needed sense of direction and in such a short space of time too.

World building is something that's always seemed like horrendously hard work to me, though I'm frequently gratified by the efforts of those who undertake the arduous task. Interesting as your contributors' comments were they only confirmed this impression. I am on the side of Justina Robson in feeling that SF writers should pay more attention to style and spend less time trumpeting their marvellous ideas. Not so much sensawunda as sense of pace.

Hero and the Booby by Stephen Marley was a good story, confirming your contention that Focus is not to be a dumping ground for third rate stories. It developed well, had some convincing characters and spelled out the perils of rampant consumerism in a most effective manner. My only real

problem was with the names. Hero didn't ring true and as for Booby... I kept thinking of Mr Blobby. You can imagine how that made me feel. My suspicion is that the names were chosen just for the title.

Brian Stableford gives us a fascinating and informative article on the fantastic in literature, the second part of which I await before commenting, other than to say his contention 'Magic does not, in fact, work' will undoubtedly ruffle some feathers.

Diana Wynne Jones makes a heartfelt plea for giving imagination its proper due, not just in fiction but in life itself. Taken to its logical conclusion her argument comes close to equating imagination with thought itself, a position some philosophers might care to consider. Reading Diana's piece I was reminded of the section in Louis Aragon's surrealist classic **Paris Peasant** called 'Imagination's Discourse on Himself':- 'Upright citizens will launch indignant protests against this indefensible activity, this epidemic anarchy with its aim of rescuing each person from mankind's common lot and creating for him an individual paradise.' Aragon was writing about surrealism, but in terms that could just as easily be applied to fantasy literature, and perhaps with more justice now that surrealism has been defused and perverted to advertising ploys. We need imagination and that's the bottom line."

Peter Irving:

"I've been writing seriously for two-three years and find the articles in **Focus** very useful. They present topics at a level I can absorb and use. Please resist the urge to include lengthy fiction: many other outlets cater for such material.

Several magazines also offer general writing advice, so 'Fori' targeted on SF/Fantasy/Horror would be most useful: near-future technologies, the rules of magic, the psychology of horror, etc."

John Madracki:

"First of all may I say how impressed I was with Rev. Theola Devin's cover artwork - it was both amusing and sharply edged; and, as the magazine arrived on Christmas Eve, it could not have been better timed.

I have yet to attempt worldbuilding but I'm sure that when I do get round to it I shall approach the project with much trepidation - there is clearly a lot more to it than meets the eye and it will be a task to undertake only after a good deal of preparation. The pointers were appreciated.

But probably my favourite article was the one by Diana Wynne Jones, and her view on Fantasy, and on Imagination, included many with which I would readily concur.

It may be coincidence but I too had **Wind in the Willows** read to me as a very young child, although in my case it was the entire book; and no sooner had we got to the end of it than I would demand that we start again from the beginning. There is no doubt that "The Piper at the Gates of Dawn" was crucial in shaping my taste for the 'fantastic' and I was gratified to learn that I was not alone in being so affected by it. I had hitherto known of only one other person who also found this short section of the book so inspirational - and that was Syd Barret. Indeed, he named his band's (The Pink Floyd) debut album in honour of this chapter.

All in all, **Focus** 25 was an excellent issue, and I am already looking forward to number 26. Rewriting has always been a particular thorn in my side - I just never know when to stop - and I shall welcome some practical advice on the subject.

PS Why is 'no political tautological? (Andrew Butler, p8). It beats me. PPS And, is Rev. Theola Devin a pseudonymous anagram? It sounds like one."

Keith Brooke:

"First: thanks for getting **Focus** off the ground again - it was the main reason I joined the BSFA 7 or 8 years ago, yet I've only ever seen a handful of issues. Not only have you got it off the ground: it looks pretty good, reads well, has a mix of contributors. Well done!

I enjoyed a lot of what I read - particularly Colin Greenland's piece, and the Forum. Also, I was a bit intrigued by Justina Robson's negativity; the 'why bother writing about writing' bit. If she wants an answer, just look a few pages later at Sue Thomas' eloquent description about the worth of teaching writing!

From my own perspective, I've always been fascinated by the methods and motivations of other writers. To draw a parallel: as part of a course I'm currently attending at the local college I have to learn several different computing packages. Certainly, the only real way to learn to use, for example, a database, is to sit down and construct one, input all the data and then find your way around and modify the finished thing, but it would be a great deal more disconcerting if I hadn't already read about and been shown how other people would tackle a similar problem. Apart from the practical aspect - the tips and rules, to be taken as seriously as you like - there's the sense of community: there are other people out there trying to do the same kind of thing! I love the sense of identification when I discover that someone else does things in a similar way to me, the sense of curiosity when I learn that they do it in a way I couldn't possibly do myself. I don't know about you, but I don't run into too many sf writers in Outer Gloucestershire: it's through the magazines, and by writing to and speaking to distant friends that I'm able to remind myself that it's not really such an eccentric thing to do: sitting down and writing about distant planets, or near futures, or all those things that 'normal' people might think just a trifle odd."

WAHF: Pam Baddeley; Sandy Fleming; Andrew Fielding; David Piper

Editing the Stars: An Interview with Jane Johnson

by Sebastian Cook

In the War-lands of Rhruhydddahl the fair-folk of Arghorien join battle with the evil hoards of Gzxoiuxz. If only real life were so simple! In the world of publishing the struggle is not between good and bad, but between art and profit. For the writer and the accountant, taking sides is easy. They sit in opposing camps, sharpen their metaphorical falchions and deride each other as mercenary or naive. But somewhere in the middle, caught between the indefinable and the irresistible, sits the editor - more powerful than either, but responsible to both.

In British SF the greatest such figure is Jane Johnson. In mid '93 she became editorial director of HarperCollins' new SF/F imprint giving her control of the largest genre list in Britain. Her "dragon's hoard" includes such writers as Asimov, Clarke, Eddings, Piers Anthony, Stephen Donaldson, Brian Aldiss, Kim Stanley Robinson and of course J. R. R. Tolkien.

But if high editorship does have its ordeals, the fact is not reflected in the effervescent atmosphere of Miss Johnson's office at HCPHQ.

"As an already obsessed child of nine," - she wrote in her introduction to last year's list - "I would have been delighted to imagine the future I now inhabit."

And in the marble-pillared splendour of her office (no, not really!), Miss Johnson has the air of one perpetually enchanted by her fortunes.

But like all the best fantasy heroes, it was as much the hand of Fate as the pursuit of high-adventure that led Jane to her glory. Albeit Fate, in the guise of her next door neighbour...

"She was PA to the editorial Director at Unwin," she explains. "She was leaving, so I went along for an interview.

"I couldn't type, I had no shorthand, I had no secretarial skills at all and I lied through my teeth and was really rather horrified when I got the job. I was caught between feeling incredibly excited about getting into publishing and absolutely terrified because I knew that I couldn't type or take shorthand. The first thing I did was rearrange my office so that I was facing the door and I didn't get caught with my fingers stuck between the typewriter keys! My boss must have seen immediately how completely hopeless I was as a secretary. But I think you can make up for a great deal if you've got a certain amount of initiative and common sense."

Apparently Jane's enthusiasm for genre fiction also made up for a great deal.

"I think within six months I was actually running the fantasy list, because they were so understaffed and it was such a boon to them to have somebody who actually enjoyed that area and was happy to take it on. It was just perfect - a wonderful conjunction of planets! But it was quite an odyssey from there to here."

An odyssey indeed. From unskilled secretary in a small and ailing publishing house, to overlord of the most extensive SF and fantasy list in Britain. Today Jane's responsibilities reach somewhat beyond hammering out memos at 4wpm. Specifically, they include -

"Absolutely everything from start to finish! Acquisition of titles, planning of the list, financial planning, involvement in the sales and marketing; liaising with the authors. And a lot of input into the covers as well. I do believe you're usually the only person in a publishing company who read the books in question! You should have as much input into all the different aspects of the production of that book as possible."

Covers are a prime example of where the dual quests for art and profit may clash. The author and the reader expect an accurate reflection of content but in reality cover-art is primarily advertisement, not illustration. Somehow, both interests must be reconciled.

"It is a tight-rope." Jane admits. "You do have to reflect the book because I think it's very important that you don't mislead the readers. I know that I have been extremely unhappy with books I've bought on the strength of the cover and found out that it's a complete misrepresentation of the content. I think the only way to sell an author is to sell them for what they are and so it is a tight-rope between trying to do that and actually doing it within the guide lines laid down by the industry itself."

Easier said than done?

"The industry is very conservative in the way that it views books. It regards them in very specific pigeon-holes. It is very frustrating sometimes, but you have to learn the rules of the game before you can transgress them."

The birth of the new SF and F imprint has to be good news for the genre. But HarperCollins has been publishing SF for years - why was it decided to establish a separate list now?

"Well, it's complicated by this corporate structure, corporate politics and all this sort of thing. Grafton obviously had a very strong science fiction list for quite a long time. And then the Unwin list became part of Grafton, then this year [1993] they amalgamated Grafton with Fontana to make a single paperback list. So obviously it's huge! And what I really didn't want to happen was that all the science fiction and fantasy get dropped to the bottom of the pile. So it's been a case of working out how to market and sell the books more effectively. I just wanted a way for the sales-reps to be able to represent it and for us to get a dedicated marketing budget so that we could really look after the books as a whole. Otherwise they'd get a raw deal - everything gets spent on the big names like Geoffrey Archer and Barbara Taylor Bradford and you don't get anything left in the pot at the end of the day."

Especially encouraging is that within the mighty ranks of established authors in the new imprint may be found some newer names. HarperCollins "TNG" includes the likes of Stephen Baxter, whose reputation has been growing since the highly acclaimed **Raft**, and Nicola Griffith whose debut novel **Ammonite** was recently short-listed for the Arthur C. Clarke Award. Dare the world believe there is a conscious policy to promote new writers?

"Absolutely. I think it's really vital. It's always been my major contention that the life-blood of future publishing has to be new writers. And I've always believed in publishing a writer then building them up rather than sort of doing a couple of books and then discarding them because they're not coming up to expectations suddenly from nowhere!"

Isn't it a risky business?

"It is and it's a difficult business to pursue in a corporate structure, because everything is judged on that year's sales figures and it can be difficult to argue on a long-term basis. But I think it's absolutely vital and I believe it's very important to publish British writers, because it's always been an American dominated genre and there are some really fine voices coming out of young British fiction writing. I think it is our duty as publishers to encourage new talent."

And altruism aside -

"You can't rest on your laurels forever. Authors die!"

Happily this belief reaches beyond the confines of Jane's office.

"We've just started the American side - HarperCollins U.S. has just taken on John Silversack from Warner. So what we're trying to do to a large extent is to buy new writers and publish them together in the English language right the way across the world. I think it has to be a much more effective way of publishing."

Naturally, when it comes to conscribing new writers there is no shortage of hopeful candidates -

"We get an enormous number of submissions - I mean a really phenomenal quantity of stuff coming through. And you can't take on as many as you'd like to and actually you'd be wrong to do so because you couldn't look after them as well as you might if you just pick the few that you can really nurture and build up."

But faced with such a staggering tower of master-piece and mediocrity how do Olympians select their favoured few. Or - to put it another way - who gets the breaks... and why?

"That's a very good question! You're looking for a distinctive voice. It isn't even a matter of competency actually, it is having your eye caught by something that strikes you as original and has something to say. And I'm certainly no enemy to doing a lot of work on a manuscript if it needs to be done. I'd much rather do that than take something that is perfectly competent and would sell, but there's no real passion or interest in it."

A stupid question perhaps, but is there any way to spot a best-seller?

"If there was a way of doing it, we'd all be rich publishers. You can obviously see where certain books fall into line, but I've never been a great supporter of third rate copies. You can imagine how much Tolkienesque fantasy I get through since we've published Tolkien here! And it becomes more and more formulaic and less and less vital and original."

With the numerous mergers, buy-outs and gobblings of recent years, publishing companies have grown progressively larger and fewer. Many people believe the trend is a threat to a broad and varied genre. Jane, who was with Unwin Hyman when it was consumed by HarperCollins four years ago sees it as a sorry necessity.

"I'm very fond of small working units. I think the best way of actually publishing anything is to keep control of what you're doing and so be able to maintain enthusiasm throughout the company. And it's much more difficult to do that within a big structure.

"But having said that, I know that Unwin Hyman would have gone down anyway if they hadn't been bought up - small publishers can't cope with this sort of recession. Overheads are too high and their clout in the market is not strong enough to get them stocked. And so it has become a necessity of the modern market."

But necessity or not, the growing prevalence of commercialism undoubtedly has its dangers.

"As far as the genre's concerned, I think the pressures can be damaging in that you get more and more dictates from the market place direct. What book shops have done in the recession is demand more of the same material that is successful for them. And the danger of responding purely to market forces is that you water down the entire genre by producing copies all the time.

"But in fact I do believe that what is different will sell in the end, because people will find it interesting."

Also symptomatic of the financial pressures is the controversy in recent years of paperback first editions. It is a debate in which such words as 'standards' and 'accessibility' are bandied hotly from opposing sides. Jane's view is sympathetic.

"It is a difficult subject and I do understand when authors are disappointed that you originate them in paperback. But the market is changing very distinctly away from the hardback. I mean I can't even remember the last time I bought a hardback - fifteen pounds is a lot of money! It makes a lot more sense to do a paperback which reaches a lot more people and even though you only get one bite at the cherry you have more chance of making a mark.

"So I am in favour of paperback originals, I think it's the way forward."

But she admits there are problems -

"It has been a fight, because the major newspapers still don't review as many paperbacks as they ought to, given that it's definitely the weight of the market and what most people read. I mean I wish they'd start reviewing science fiction full stop! That's one of my major frustrations in life - actually getting anything reviewed at all!"

Given the popularity of the SF and fantasy genre, it certainly is extraordinary how little is reviewed beyond the specialist press. Or conversely - given how little SF and fantasy is reviewed, perhaps it is its popularity that is so extraordinary. So what does sell books if not review space?

"Well I have to say I think it's a bit of self-fulfilling prophecy! A publisher spends a lot of money on a book that they want to sell a lot of copies of. A bookseller sees them doing that, they support it, they display it in huge quantities. People see it immediately they walk into a book shop and think "Ooh, that must be a good book, I'll buy that." It gets onto the best-sellers list and that reinforces the entire process. It's just a circular argument in the end. And most of the time the interesting books don't get the money spent on them. But with really good books, I think word of mouth always gets around in the end - especially in science fiction because it's a readership that talks to itself a lot and it's a very educated readership as far as the genre's concerned. People know what's good and they know what isn't good and that is what distinguishes science fiction and fantasy readers from the rest who just don't have that critical faculty and don't have the breadth of reading."

As genre fans we all know what sad and sorry cases we are. Whilst the sane-minded folk bravely confront the real world, we in the Anorak Club waste our lives reading about ray-guns and robots or Zongo the Wizard and them funny pixie-type things". Right?

So finally, does Jane Johnson believe science fiction and fantasy can possibly have any real literary value?

"Yes, I *really* do. I think actually a lot of it is at least as well written as any form of popular fiction. I think the better end of science fiction and contemporary fantasy is just as well written as any form of literary fiction. And it is sheer snobbery on the part of the literary establishment to ignore it in the way that they always have. You deal with it on a personal level day to day in this job and the prejudice you come up against is really quite extraordinary. People have never read it and they're prejudiced - that's what gets me! I don't mind people having an opinion when they've tried it. But they just say "Ooh no, I don't want to read about rockets and swords and things like that."

"You just want to gather up a pile of books and say "Right, go away, read these and then come back and tell me what you think." Because you know that if you made them read the books, they would change their minds. They might not *like* it, but they'd have to admit there's a considerable amount of powerful imagination at work.

"There is an awful lot of rubbish in there as well, it has to be said! But I still think it's a literature of ideas when it's done properly. And it is a literature of philosophy. You can't read David Zindell without realising there is just so much more out there than you thought there was - and that sort of mind-expanding fiction *has* to be a good thing!"