

Focus

The B.S.F.A. writers' magazine

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*****Red Aliens Under the Beds*****

*****Market Information*****

*****Expatriation*****

*****Research*****

*****Story*****

Gwyneth Jones

Stephen Baxter, Neal Asher

Nicola Griffith, Cherith Baldry

Colin Greenland, Mark Brandon

Tanya Brown, Nicholas Royle, Andrew Butler

John Madracki, Sandy Fleming - & lots more...

Editorial

Through a telephoto lens, lightly...



We're writing this in the aftermath of Christmas, and of a number of hardware and software troubles. Sadly, our production whizz, Carolyn Horn, has had to bow out due to ill health. Our thanks and best wishes go to her. This means the layout this time is *all our fault!* Carolyn's has been a tough act to follow.

The forum this issue looks at the writer's perspective: background, culture, values, and how these influence what - and how - we write...

We hope that you will enjoy this issue of *Focus* and will write and let us know if you don't! No seriously, we are looking for a lively letters column, so why not drop us a line and tell us what we've got right, or wrong in your opinion. Alternatively, if we're not including the articles you want to see, let us know what they are, or better yet write one yourself and send it to us.

Regards

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Artwork:

Front Cover:	Steve Jeffery
Page 2	John Light
Pages 3-4, 11-12, 16	Steve Jeffery
Pages 2, 3, 7, 9, 11-15	Julie Venner
Page 5	Mark Brandon
Page 8	Rev. Theola Belluse Devin
Pages 8, 10, 13	Ian Bell
Page 10	John Madracki (punslug)
Design	Carolyn Horn

Editors

Carol Ann Green - 5 Raglan Avenue, Raglan Street, HULL HU5 2JB
Julie Venner - 42 Walgrave Street, Newland Avenue, HULL HU5 2LT

Technical Support

Ian Bell

Production and Layout

Wise Child & Co.

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.

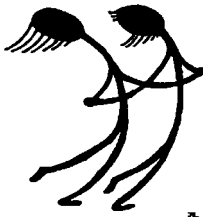
Cover art, illustrations and fillers are always welcome.

Forum

Research

How important is research to an sf writer? Do we really need to read books on anything from steam-powered engines, to how to make unleavened bread, in order to write an sf story or novel? And if we do, how do we go about it? What strategies should we adopt? Helen Gould starts the ball rolling with her article in this issue. *Focus* now invites you to contribute a short piece (600-800 words) to the Forum next issue, on Research. Tell us how important it is, advise us on your strategies, share tips with your fellow writers.

Deadline for next issue is 30 April 1995



Note: anyone interested in buying 'prints' of John Light's artwork (such as the cover illustration from issue 26 of *Focus*, or the illustration above), should send an s.a.e. for a catalogue to John at: Photon Prints, The Light House, 29 Longfield Road, Tring, Herts HP23 4DG, England.

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Expatriation - Nicola Griffith

Twice in the last month I have seen myself referred to in writing as an 'expat Brit writer.' It's true, but it disturbs me. I looked it up in the OED (not Websters, you note, or the American Heritage Dictionary).

In English, as in Latin, *ex-* in composition signifies... to remove, expel or relieve from as in *expatriate*...

Until I read this thing about being an expatriate, twice, I had not thought of having permanent residency over here as meaning 'ex' anything but as more of a plus. And it is, but in all the wrong ways. I am definitely 'ex' as far as the National Health Service goes: I've had to return my National Insurance card to the Central Register (how many of you out there knew there even was such a thing?) and can no longer pop to the doctor/dentist/optician free of charge when I'm over there visiting friends and family. (And it was free of charge for me: I was always signing on.) There again, the Inland Revenue still want their cut. So now I'm paying taxes on all my UK earnings with nothing to show for it at all... and I'm paying taxes over here. Also with nothing to show for it -- you don't get free health care here; and because I'm not a citizen, I can't vote for those congressional representatives who might be persuaded to institute free health care.

So, I'm an expatriate British SF writer. Suddenly I'm no longer a medium-sized fish in a small pond; I'm a small fish in a huge body of water where there are unknown currents and vicious undertows about. There was a certain comfort in being one of a double handful of 'promising young Interzone Brits' who were making it over here and over there. I had expected to be no longer young one day, of course; I had also expected to fulfill the promise and become -- oh, I don't know -- 'talented' instead; I imagined that I would gradually be identified for my novels instead of the half dozen stories I've had in *Interzone*... but never in my wildest dreams did I believe I would no longer be British.

Someone asked me the other day: do you use British or American spellings, and what about usage -- you know, *The pavement was the colour of mud* versus *the sidewalk was the color of mud*? I realised that what I do differs according to the length of the word. My short fiction tends to be written in first person, with a definite voice. As the voice isn't me, I don't mind it belonging to an American: I use US spellings and usage -- "Move your fat butt off that sidewalk, Hank" -- but not grammar (Americans react suspiciously to anything more complicated than a comma). At novel-length, though, I invest a great deal of myself emotionally. It would feel like a betrayal to not say, "Shift yer lazy ass off t'pavement..." assuming the book was set in, or the relevant character from, Yorkshire.

And though I don't specify the name of the city where my latest novel, *Slow River* is set, I'll let you and the other five thousand BSFA readers into a secret: it's in the north of England, where the economy



was once based on fishing, and the locals still argue about whether or not they live in Yorkshire. Anyone who has lived there for more than two hours (which could, occasionally, seem like a lifetime) will recognise the place instantly. I didn't name it because it is an unglamorous place, and while it remains anonymous I can change its history and geography to suit my plot and whim.

But even though I never name it, I hesitated to use that city. While the British seem willing to read about things American -- V. I. Warshawski in the grit and corruption of Chicago, Dorothy in Kansas (and not) -- Americans, generally are not disposed to read

about things British. Not unless they are *Olde Englishe*: Oxford, Stratford-on-Avon, nineteenth century London etc. etc. And while someone from Leeds might be happy to read about an underground, bar-hopping, on-the-edge net surfer in New York, how happy would they be to read about the UK equivalent: some scrounger on the dole in Preston who plays with his Atari and goes out for a pint. The ambience is different. Americans and their milieux are not inherently more exciting than Brits but readers on both sides of the Atlantic perceive them to be.

To the more cynical and *savoir faire* British, the US -- which is, after all, thousands of miles away -- is occasionally the repository of hopes and dreams and, well, faintly embarrassing and never-to-be-admitted *optmism*. Americans, of course, are still at the stage where everything they do is fascinating to themselves.

Americans still believe: in themselves, in others, in ideals. When I'm at a party over here and someone says, "What do you do?" and I say, "I write," they don't fold their arms, give me a sceptical look from under their brows and say, "Yeah, but have you had anything published, and how do you *really* earn your money?" No. Here they say, "Oh, cool. Where can I buy your stuff?" Americans want to believe in you; if they believe that you have achieved the American Dream of making something from the sweat of your brow (or brain), then it might be possible for them, too.

Belief is crucial to someone like me. When I sit down at my keyboard I can't afford any doubts about the validity of my chosen career. I have enough doubts about the quality of my work without wondering whether I should be even trying. Living here, amongst people who believe in *Art and Craft and Success* -- and see nothing mutually exclusive about the three -- I do indeed feel like an expatriate. I have shed the burden of other people's cynicism: I am removed from it. But like all expatriates, I miss much that I no longer have: the pubs, the humour and the public transport, to that extent, I feel exiled and expelled. I just wish there was some way I could be relieved of the taxes.

Dragon in the Flower

by

Neal Asher



A scream: chopped and diced into a billion pieces, rammed into underspace, sucked between shadow-stars. It is known, the scream, but quince never remember. For Cormac there was merely a flash of black and red, a Dante glimpse, and he was completing his thoughts far from where he began them.

...on mince and slices of quince which they ate with a runcible spoon. Is that right?

Times change: terms change. He was well aware of that as he fought to overcome the disorientation of mitter-lag.

Quince (Kwins) n. 3. Collective noun for mitter travellers.

And the runcible spoon flicks them across the galaxy... Hah! Myths rewritten. I'm a knight in shining armour only my hardware's on the inside.

Caught in the flaw of a jewel Cormac considered dragons.

Dragon. The only sentient autochthon of the planet Aster Colora. Considered by xenologists to once have been a mobile entity it is now

stationary. Its appearance is of four conjoined spheres. Each sphere is a kilometre in diameter.

Ten seconds and four hundred light years later his mind caught up with his body. The scream was lost in a twilight place. Echoes. He stepped from the shimmer of the cusp into alien light.

"Ian Cormac?"

"Yes."

And more...

The sky was metallic red, the land pink rock with black striations. The curve to horizon was different. He sneezed then breathed deeply. The air tasted salt, and silica dust coated his tongue. After a moment of deliberation he turned his attention to the speaker.

"I am Maria," said the girl whose hair was red with no white light to show him different. Cormac held out his hand to silence her as his breath gouted in the chill air like lung-blood. He continued to look around.

Wasteland: beautiful as rubies, scabrous as rust, dead as them both.

He gestured back at the bull's horns of skaidon technology from which he had stepped

"Few people come here," he observed

"Dragon set a limit of twenty thousand visitors a year"

"Solstan?"

"No, Colora," she said, annoyed

Cormac turned his unnerving silvery eyes upon her

"I required assistance, not impatience," he said, and waited

"Yes, Ambassador," she said grudgingly, rubbing her hand on a leather-sheathed hip

Maria Convalva Born on Aster Colora 2876 solstan, exobiologist attached to the Federation study team, ambitious, has connections with the Separatist movement, is rumoured to have been involved in the Jovan putsch

Cormac smiled bleakly and turned his attention to the iron slug of an antigravity car that had been left on hover nearby. He noted the rust streaks and the plates welded to its underside

Old

Such was always the way this far from Earth, things broke down, wore out, were infrequently replaced. He should consider himself lucky they had AGCs here at all

After a pause he said "Shall we go?"



As they slid above the desolation

Cormac accessed information more relevant to his task. There was no life here but for the human colony, the sentient Dragon, and the insentient Monitor (the latter two leviathans) nor had there been. There were no

fossils, chalk deposits, or life-based hydrocarbons. Nothing that raised the as yet unanswered questions: where was the ecology Dragon and Monitor had evolved from? Was it on Aster Colora?

Dragon had immediately communicated with those first to arrive through the seed-ship runcible, and had been in continuous communications with the colony ever since, yet, little had been learnt about it

"Has Dragon given reasons for its request?"

"It was more of a demand than a request"

"Clarify that"

With her hand resting on the guide-ball of the AGC Maria glanced at him

"We have always been here on sufferance. It said, 'Send me an Ambassador'. There was not a request"

Cormac noted the bitterness. As a Separatist, he realised, this put her in an intolerable position. How could she campaign for political independence while Aster Colora could not rise above colony status?

The redland flowed under the rock of the AGC until at length Carlis, a spreading human fungus, came into view. Cormac booked into the Metrotel like any tourist. In his room he slumped on his bed and accessed Dragon/Human dialogue. Human politics were irrelevant in this case, which for Cormac, was a novelty

"You continue to evade our questions concerning yourself," asked a man only just holding out to his temper

"Yes, this is true," came the indifferent reply

"Yet for years you have had access to our information systems. You know our history, the level of our technology... You perhaps know more about the human race than any single member of it. Why will you not tell us about yourself? Surely, this is little to ask?"

"You are correct, I know more about you people than any single member of your kind"

"You have not answered my question"

"Yes I have"

"I do not understand"

"A very human trait"

"Please explain"

"The runcible has been developed to the stage where it is near perfect in function. Humankind can now step from star system to star system with ease. On Earth contra terrene power is about to be introduced. In the system of Cassius the first Dyson sphere is under construction. The matter for this project came from a planet of Jovan size demolished by a quark missile"

"Do you fear us?"

"Should I?"

"Many assume that this is the reason for your reticence"

"How old are you, Darson?"

"One hundred and seventy solstan"

"It is likely that you will live to be over eight hundred years old and then only to die of ennui"

"Perhaps. How old are you?"

"Do you represent your race, Darson?"

"In the sense..."

"No, you do not represent your race. I cannot sit in judgement on you. Send me an Ambassador."

After that the comlink had gone silent. Cormac opened his eyes and ran his fingers over the hard lump quartz at the back of his neck. He was tired, he had, after all, travelled a long way. He got off the bed and shed the clothes he had been wearing only a few hours earlier, personal time, in New York, and wondered, as always, with cold humour what the morning might bring. Of course he did not know whether it was day or night here, but such things he had dismissed as irrelevant long ago. He lived by personal time. It was the only way to stay sane

The morning brought Maria with an analysis from Darson: the Dragon open. Cormac read it over a breakfast of spiced eggs, honeyfish, and two pots of tea. Darson's conclusion was that Dragon was in human terms, insane. After reading it Cormac dressed in his shabby survival suit and placed in his rucksack the single device he might need. On his way out he consigned the report to the waste disposal. Shortly he was sliding above the redland, red, under a bloody sky

"What is your opinion of Darson?"

"He's a pompous old fan," Maria replied, and Cormac liked her for that

"He believes Dragon is psychotic"

"I am not qualified to judge"

Expressionlessly Cormac watched pink sleet slide off the frictionless screen of the AGC

"You are qualified to have an opinion"

Maria hesitated before replying. Cormac glanced at her and could see her discomfort. She was, he knew, trying to decide how to try and influence him and what opinion it would be best to own. He repressed a smile. She was in a difficult position. Instructions had preceded him, no unnecessary contact/straight to Dragon/the crux. He could see that she was unprepared

"The dialogue with Dragon is deceptively human. Darson seems to find it difficult to accept the alien"

Cormac chuckled. The AGC dipped as Maria glanced over at him quickly. Unable to find any way of applying leverage she had answered with the truth. He nodded to himself and looked ahead as she slowed the AGC and began to power it down. Before them lay The Junkyard, the tangible result of people's flouting of Dragon's rule of no machinery larger than a man within a two kilometre radius. Many people had died here. Maria put the AGC on hover. Cormac tapped the com on his belt as the door slid open

"I'll contact you when I want picking up," he said and stepped out into the snow

"Lizard," said Maria, as she turned the AGC back to Carlis

After reaching the line of smashed AGCs and hover scooters that marked the two kilometre boundary Cormac shouldered his rucksack and climbed a rusting bulk. Even through the snow the four conjoined spheres were visible, standing like vast storage tanks on a plain of broken rock. After a moment he clambered down the other side of the boundary, peeking in the wrecked AGC as he did so at the occupants: no one had bothered to retrieve. As his feet touched the ground, the ground moved

Pseudopods

He stood very still and waited, the taste of salt turning acid in his mouth. Five metres to one side of him the ground rippled and a thing like a metre wide cobra exploded into the air. Cormac dropped to avoid flying rock, rolled, looked up. It arched above him, a single crystalline blue eye where a cobra's mouth should have been. The ground tilted and another explosion followed. Then another. Cormac put his rucksack over his head as explosion followed explosion and he was pelted with shards of rock. Then it ceased, and he stood, in silence

Hydra would have been better

Arrayed and curved like the ribs of an immense snake's skeleton the pseudopods had become his honour guard. He walked down the spine

In the face of total disaster defiance is the only recourse. Crazy street-lamps they have here

Cormac allowed his mind to wander. Random access

Monitor. Insentient autochthon of the planet Aster Colora. It has the appearance of a Terran monitor lizard but is a kilometre long and

weighs an estimated four point five million tonnes. It is a silicon based life form with an alien physiognomy.

Dragon: Monitor. What connection?
Why does Dragon want an Ambassador?
Questions
Answers?
Damn!



The two kilometres unrolled and eventually Cormac came before the curving edifice of tegulate flesh in an amphitheatre of pseudopods. He noted, to one side, a piece of machinery that could have been the comlink for Dragon/Human dialogue. It was scrapped. He looked up at the pink and red-stippled sky, half cut by cloud-tangled flesh mountain, and he waited.

"Ambassador"

The voice came from the undershadows of the sphere, resonant but conversational.

"I am Cormac, yes."

"Names. All things can be named."

As of snow on granular snow a hissing issued from the undershadows. Cormac saw a swirl of movement then a monstrous head shot towards him propelled by a ribbed snake body. He stumbled back, fell. It rose above him, a pterosaur head with sapphire eyes.

"Are you afraid?"

Cormac choked back his immediate reply and said, "Should I be?" His tone betrayed nothing of what he felt.

The head lunged at him then jerked to a halt two metres above him. It smelt of cloves. Milky saliva dripped on him.

"Answer my question."

"Yes, I am afraid. Does that surprise you?"

"No."

The head moved up and away. Cormac stood and brushed himself off.

"I fail to see the purpose of that little scene," he said.

"You represent your race," Dragon replied, "and you can die." More than personal.

Cormac did not react to the implications but looked steadily into those sapphire eyes.

"Why did you send for an Ambassador?"

"Ah, you are human then."

"Of course."

"You do represent your race?"

"Such is my position, though I cannot speak for every individual." He emphasised 'individual'. Why? He did not know. It had almost been instinctive. The Dragon head swayed then switched, shaking off an accumulation of snow.

"On the back of your neck is an octagon of quartz," it said. "Running round the inside of your skull is a net of mycorrhizal fibre optics connected to etched-atoms processors, silicon synaptic interfaces, and an undospace transmitter. Evolution is a wonderful thing."

"How the hell!"

Quickly Cormac said, "They are the tools of my trade. I am human. I am a member of the races of homo sapiens, wise man, and a wise man will use what tools he can to make his tasks easier."

"I am glad you are sure of your integrity."

The head swayed to one side then looked back. The tegulate flesh of the Dragon's body bulged and quivered as if it were taking a breath. There was a liquid growling, then the tegulate skin parted like that of a rotten fruit. Unable to hide his reaction Cormac retched at the stench that wafted from the pink vagina of a cave that appeared before him. There were more liquid sounds driven by deep rhythmic pulses. Cormac watched in fascination as a jet of steaming amniotic ejected the fetal ball of a manthing wrapped in a caul. The caul burst open, spilling of the Dragon's juices. The manthing unfolded, a man, Cormac saw, in all but his Dragon skin and sapphire eyes.

"A little dramatic," he managed.

The man continued to move. It stood, showing no sign of imbalance. Again that sound. Something else born, a flattened ellipse. The man picked it up and stripped away its caul. Legs dropped down from underneath it. Cormac could hardly believe he was looking at a table. The man approached and placed the table between them.

"To be human is to be mortal," said Dragon. "Do you play chess?"

"Yes I."

Movement from the table; a bulging, bubbling, like sprouting mushrooms a Dragon chess set grew from its surfaces.

"Your move."

For a moment Cormac could think of nothing else to say or do. He reached down and took hold of a pawn. The thing writhed in his hand, bit him. He yelled and dropped it. On the board it slithered forwards to a tegulate square.

"There is always a price for power," said Dragon.

Cormac swore then, with his confusion growing, waited for his opponent's move.

"Why? What purpose? A megalomaniacal game or a test?"

He hoped for the latter.

As he thought he looked into his opponent's eyes. The Dragon man betrayed nothing, even when he suddenly moved and brought his fist down on Cormac's pawn. Cormac was taken aback.

"That is not in the rule book," he said, then damned himself for saying it. He knew what Dragon's reply would be.

"There are no rules here, just judgements."

Probing.

Cormac decided to react. He brought his fist down and crushed his opponent's king.

"Check," he said softly, and watched his opponent.

The Dragon man stared at the board for a moment then methodically began to crush every one of Cormac's pieces. White gore dribbled off the side of the table. Cormac turned towards the head.

"Surely by now you have enough insight into basic human reactions? You've been studying us for centuries," he said.

"Every human is an individual, as you so rightly indicated," observed Dragon.

Cormac was not sure that he had done any such thing. He turned back to his opponent.

"I do not like subjective games," he said, and knocked the table aside. The Dragon man went for him with frightening speed. The hands reaching for his throat he was able to knock aside, but he was knocked to the ground. The hands reached for his throat again. He regained his feet as his opponent did. The attack was still without finesse and this time without surprise and Cormac used his feet to counter it. The fight was over in seconds; the Dragon man gurgling on the snowy shale.

"Your second move was the wrong one."

"I won."

"That is not the issue."

"What is?"

"Morality."

"Hah, it is the winners who write history and it is the winners who invent morality. Existence is all the reason for existence any of us have unless you believe in gods. I think you set yourself up too high."

"No higher than an executioner."

"You threaten again. Why? Do you have the power to carry out your threats? Do you think you are a god?"

"I do not threaten you."

"You seek to judge me then, to judge what I represent."

"In the system of Betelgeuse there is a physicist working on some of the later Skaidon formulae. I predict he will solve some of the problems he has set himself."

"And...?"

"Within the next century the human race will have the intergalactic runcible."

"What?"

The ground shook. A vast shadow blotted out half the sky. With his skin crawling Cormac turned, and there, making its ponderous gargantuan way across the rockscape he saw the Monitor, long as a city, its legs like tower blocks. Cormac watched it pass, knew its destination.

"Another threat?" he breathed. "What is it that you want?"

The head rose higher and looked in the direction that Monitor had gone.

"Go back to Cartis. When you have seen what you must see, return here."

Suddenly the head dropped down and was before Cormac. "I control Monitor, but you know that," it said, "I have the power, the power to destroy. Could it be that you know what I mean?"

"I know the substance of your threat. Your warning?" was

Cormac's reply. After a pause he looked down at the now unmoving Dragon man. Then he looked at his rucksack, back up at Dragon, shrugged and walked away.

Maria had been waiting for him at the two kilometre boundary. She was panicked, out of her depth.

"The whole city. Monitor."

Cormac silenced her and took her place in the driving seat of the AGC. Halfway back to Cartis she had calmed down enough to be coherent.

"Pseudopods broke through all round the city. I was outside when it happened. No one can escape and Monitor is heading in that direction. It has never done that before."

"Dragon controls Monitor."

"Why...?"

"Either it tests us or Darson is right."

"Thanks for the comfort."

Cartis was indeed ringed by pseudopods, but they parted to allow the AGC through. At the Metrolite Cormac used Maria's intentions. To get her to bed. For someone with his resources and knowledge of human nature it was easy; he had been an agent for Earth Central for four hundred years. He felt no remorse. She had been quite prepared to use him in any way she could for the Separatist movement. Lying on his bed he listened as the rumble of Monitor's arrival ceased, then he looked at the naked form lying beside him.

An affirmation of humanity?

The question was irrelevant. All waited on him.

He accessed the massive runcible information network and the optic in his head glowed.

On John Reston's world it was announced that Professor Gostenson and his team have at last solved the fourth Skaidon formula working with the Jedson AI at the University of.

Open ended runcibles: intergalactic travel.

How? How did Dragon know?

Careful not to wake Maria, Cormac got off the bed and went to the bathroom. Ritualistically he shaved, cleaned his teeth, and dressed. He then sat down and accessed the runcible comlink.

"Earth Central."

"Dragon intergalactic."

"Proven?"

"To my satisfaction."

With that he sent all he had learnt and surmised to the AI. It took less than a second.

"A test. Morality base evident," came the terse reply.

"Threat/warning?"

"Also."

"Obiliterate?"

"Not feasible. Obviously has knowledge of device."

"?"

"Part of the test."

"It is disposable then?"

"As me."

"Yes," said Cormac, out loud.

"Go back, react," returned the silent thought of the AI. Cormac closed his eyes and closed the access. Then, abruptly, he departed the Metrolite.

The honour guard remained and Cormac was soon back before Dragon. The manning was gone, the cave gone, the head a black silhouette against the red sky.

"Have you seen?" it asked.

"You can destroy Cartis."

The head turned.

"I mean, have you seen?"

Cormac squatted down next to the rucksack he had left.

"Yes," he said, "if we are judged and found wanting what happens?"

"You have been judged."

Cormac waited.

"I have been watching for twenty million of your years. I have seen every sparrow fall."

"Yes... that is enough time to come to a conclusion," said Cormac dryly. He knew, that even with that statement, Dragon was more than

same.

"You will live," Dragon said to him.

Cormac allowed the rigidity to leave him.

"Cartis... the Monitor... they were the final push, just to see..." he said, fully understanding now.

"Your AIs are extensions of your own minds as I am an extension of other minds. Had you destroyed me for the few petty threats of this day without regard or understanding of what I truly am everyone of your runcibles would have been turned inside out, converted into black holes."

Cormac reached across and opened his rucksack. From it he took an innocuous looking blue-grey cylinder of metal. With a thought he deactivated it, then he put it away again. A similar, if somewhat larger device, had been used in the system of Cassius to demolish a gas giant.

"Now?" he asked.

"Now you must leave and I must leave. Your kind will meet mine. My task is done."

"How will you leave?"

"I will not leave this planet."

And Cormac knew. He left Dragon, and on his way saw Monitor come and lay down at its side like a faithful dog. Once in the AGC he did not look back.

Left I turned into a pillar of salt.

A white sun rose over Aster Colors and hard black shadows were cast, like dice. Cormac later learnt it had been a contra terrene explosion beyond mere human abilities to generate and contain, as it had been contained, in a two kilometre radius.

It was Dragon's last message.

It was understood.



Quotes from Anon

Professionals built the Titanic, amateurs built the ark. (One for the geeneys.)

Thank you for sending me a copy of your book. I'll waste no time in reading it. (One for reviewers.)

A bachelor never makes the same mistake once. (No comment.)



Forum

The effect of political & etc. influences on sf writers

by Gwyneth Jones

Prejudices, influences and beliefs feature in our writing, in a rather complex way. The metaphor I think of is silk-screening - a concrete, mechanical process of which I have first hand experience. People who can think in computer programming could probably offer a higher-tech version of what I'm trying to say. My parents' opinions, the actual events of my childhood, the big world history of my times (and many more) - each screen is different. In the process of writing, something of each gets transferred to the text. The different screens overlay each other, and colour each other, according to the particular vagaries of my plot (eg. the influences of my university career might hardly appear in one book, but be very strong in another). The whole bundle, merged in places, distinct in others, is the finished effect.

In the course of my writing career, I've been a great fan of the deconstructionists. It seems obvious to me that a book is a cultural as well as a personal artefact. It contains - and can be persuaded to divulge - truths and secrets about the society in which it was created, confessions of which the writer is quite unconscious. The writer's own experience is naturally part of this palimpsest. When I re-read my early children's fiction now, I can see that I have revealed startling amounts of autobiographical information. You can find out from reading *Water in the Air* what we used to have for tea at my house, (and what we called our main meal!) how we talked to each other, how we arranged our furniture. I didn't mean to do any of that. And perhaps, for all I know, the books I'm writing now are far more interesting for the things I don't know I'm saying - than for my conscious attempts to write feminist, socialist, science fiction.

Science Fiction is called a genre of ideas. I used to take this very seriously. Plot and character in my books were highly specified, tied to the governing idea I was trying to put across. Recently, I decided to give up on this approach, and go for a more relaxed realism. I still find (for instance) that all my secondary characters - whenever the person s sex doesn't strictly matter - turn out to be women. I can't help myself. It's not just that I'm a feminist, deliberately, nowadays. I went to single sex schools, and my mother was the major breadwinner in our household. In my formative years, people just were women - except in special cases, and my writing reflects that. But it isn't that simple. My sister had roughly the same formative years, and she writes man-worshipping family values romances (Name of Rosamund Ridley. Piatkus. Check it out). It is not easy to disentangle the connections between our consciously held beliefs, our past experience, and the things we decide to write. Now that I know what happens to me, the moment I stop thinking about sex ratios, I have more sympathy for men who write with a predominantly male cast list. I accept that they're not doing it on purpose. But does the fact that so much happens without our conscious intervention mean we shouldn't express opinions at all? Nobody likes a didactic novelist.

Deconstruction is a trap, if it stops writers from trying to customise their fictional worlds. Look at it this way just because I can respond to rhythm without thinking about it (supposing I can), that doesn't mean I shouldn't learn to dance. Everything I am goes into my books. I don't leave my principles and my politics at the door, on the grounds that the world should be reflected just as it is, not as one thinks it ought to be. The process is not simple. There's a mass of positive feedback loops between a person's writing, their world, and their experience. But to quote from the *Focus* piece that introduced this forum: "Snakes and dragons were transformed from symbols of wisdom and healing (in Western Europe, nb) at around the same time that gods were usurping the goddesses. That trick was not achieved by even-handed neutrality on the part of the artistic community. Be your political self when you are writing, if you have a political self to be. If you have opinions, make them a part of the palimpsest of fiction-as-whole. If you don't influence the political colour of the endeavour, you can be sure that someone else will."

You know, you might as well give up now by Andrew III. Butler

Every so often you read something that makes you angry. In fact the temptation is to tear the offending volume into tiny pieces, jump on them and flush them down the toilet. To quote one such passage "we cannot read fantasy critically, in the light of our lives or our knowledge of the world. Fantasy, cannot, therefore, illuminate our own lives." This suggests that fantasy writers (and this includes writers of "so-called science fiction") cannot illuminate people's lives with their writing.

So we might as well give up now, as real life has nothing to do with fantasy.

This makes for a short forum, of course.

But to read a book which is realist might involve going back to the nineteenth century and learning French. And reading about coal-mining back then is obviously going to illuminate my life of word processors, ATM machines, supermarket bar-code readers, VCRs and day time tv more than reading an sf novel would. Isn't it? Somehow I doubt it.

Realism has more-or-less been defined as an objective representation of an external reality (with the more-or-less depending on the definition of "objective", "representation", "external" and "reality"). The fantastic could be defined as a misrepresentation, or even a subjective representation, in any case the external reality is (problematically) still there, if only in the coincidence of author, text and reader.

A couple of years ago I wrote a story which began with my shaky understanding of particle physics and posited the existence of dark particles or waves. (The origin of this was partially a half-remembered conversation in the back of a minibus. Maybe that minibus should be put in the story.) Obviously the physics is pretty fantastical, but I was using it mostly as a metaphor for the emotional state of my characters.

The setting is a bookshop, and this is obviously based on the many I have visited, with the layout distinctly based on one particular shop. (For the anagrammatically inclined I even called the shop *Hardiness*, this was lifted from a *Countdown* Conundrum.) But I hope that the details I have observed will feel valid for other readers who haven't been to this shop, but rather to *Stobbs* or *Waterstones* in Preston or wherever. More crucially I hope the emotions are recognizable.

For me there was a definite rationale for setting the story in a particular locale, for telling it in one way rather than another; this was naturally based on my (subjective) perception of an external reality. And yet the fantastical elements, which equivocate so much with reality, nevertheless do mesh satisfactorily with the realism. I believe I illuminated my own life by writing the story, I can only hope that one day it will illuminate the lives of others.

Politics, Culture, Autobiography - What Responsibilities Have We?

by Justina Robson

A FEW PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS

In our semi-civilized world, the fictions of sf, fantasy and horror stand out as ecologies within which it is both possible and permissible to play around with a vast array of ideas without having to suffer the consequences of the development ourselves. However, one of the chief difficulties of analysing these different simulations is the manner in which we interpret the results. Because what is written can only be judged against the context of our own individual present what we think about any particular piece of work is dependent on everything which has gone to make up the collection of ideas which together form our Reality Models. Each one of us has a slightly different idea of what Reality is - politically, socially, practically and scientifically. Fiction in all its forms is what people make when they are testing out their own versions of Reality and comparing them with others, perhaps hoping that someone out there will confirm or be able to change what they think to give them better understanding (in an ideal case!). When we read fiction, particularly those which question Everything in the Reality Model by making up whole worlds, we are participating in a process of analysis and change. I think therefore that it is important not to abdicate responsibility in the face of a great power to influence others

SHOULD WE, SHOULDN'T WE?

Sf has a cultural tradition of its own which differs in the countries in which it is popular and depending on the purposes it is put to - entertainment, education, speculation - but because of its future settings it can't escape laying bare its ideologies. Particularly because it deals with technological change, which is interlinked with political power and social structure, it is obliged to inform us of all of those dimensions. Therefore an sf book can't help being a political statement, whether overt or not, whether dystopian or not, and that statement must always be read in contrast to the present day and to our own history since we have no other comparisons. Thus sf is always a comment on the present. By predicting which ideas survive and in what form it asks the reader to question their own ideas about the present day world and perhaps demands some kind of change in response to them. However, the vision of writers as architects of the future is little more than a dictator's pipe dream. You see, I think that ideas have lives of their own, like genes, and that it is as much the case that we use them to make ourselves as it is that they use us to propagate themselves. Perhaps that is too strong a case to make - Darwinism run riot - and it causes havoc with whole notions of authorship among other things. The point I want to make by mentioning this is, isn't it rather odd to be asking should we/shouldn't we in the first place? For one thing it presumes that we have massive influence and that we are responsible for the effects what we say might have on others. It begs the question Who is Responsible for Ideas? with the assumption that the idea and a resulting Action are directly connected without any workings in between. And they want me to discuss this in 600 words? You need a whole degree course. So I leave thinking about those problems to you, reader. THUNDERING ON

A writer is limited only by their willingness to understand, their ability to understand, and their own personal goals. You cannot write what you do not know. It appears at the moment that there is some suggestion that what we know in our sheltered, first world bit of life is not sufficient because it does not encompass all of the world's ills within its immediate scope. If it cannot see all it cannot say anything. But there are as many sides to an idea as there are people who hold it in their minds. Why should any one person's experience be devalued because it is not exhaustive? Who can say who the Ideal Narrator is to be? Will you write better about suffering if you are in actual pain? Must you be a victim of injustice to be a reliable witness to it? Do you have to be an alien to get a 'real' view of what humanity is or do you just have to be an astute observer, a quiet historian, one of life's note takers and speculators?

CONCLUSION

In the end it seems to me that if we have any particular responsibility it is to ourselves, personally. We must accept full responsibility for what we write and be prepared to explain and defend it to anyone who asks us.



Thinking Out of The Box by Stephen Baxter

Every story you write, sf or not, bears the imprint of your personality - your culture, your background, your prejudices and beliefs - on your material. You are, after all, deeply involved in every step of the creative process: from the gathering of your subject matter from the environment around you, through the formulation of ideas and shaping and selection of material, all the way through to the drafting and polishing of the actual text.

This imprinting is very apparent in writers from whom we ourselves are remote. My sixth novel is *The Time Ships*, a sequel to H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*. In Wells's original, you may remember, the Time Traveller visits, and is horrified by, the bleak, cannibalistic future of Eloi and Morlock. But what does he do, on his return to the comfortable 1890s? *What a treat it is to stick a fork into meat again!* And, having got some 'peptone in my arteries', he leads his guests out of the dining room, 'mingling the bell in passing'. So, after his horror at cannibalism, he tucks into a plate of meat: after viewing with dismay the long-term consequences of man's subjugation of his fellow man, he treats his own servants as if they are machines, mere extensions of the bell he rings.

Was Wells being ironic here? Some critics think so, to be fair, but I feel the language is so casual, the incidents so commonplace, that I side with those who argue that Wells here, for all his youthful genius,

was unable to step completely outside his own narrow cultural background. This mightn't have struck his contemporary readers, but it jars with us, who don't take meat-eating for granted, and few of whom have servants. *The Time Machine* is a wholly wonderful book, but is surely diminished by this lapse.

So what? Does it matter? Yes, I would answer. I feel we all, in sf, have a responsibility to try to think out of the box. Sf is, after all, supposed to be a literature of the different-from-the-here-and-now, aren't we required to make a strong effort to put ourselves in the minds of those alien or unsympathetic to our own point of view?

Yes, but there's little point if we don't mean it. Sf lends itself to a sort of cosmetic alien-ness, and too often our aliens are essentially ourselves in costume. In *Star Trek: The Next Generation* you'll find a Klingon on the bridge of the *Starship Enterprise*, but you won't find an Iraqi. Why? Because modern-day Iraqis are more truly alien to the creators of the show (and its sponsors, and its intended audience) than Klingons.

If you do stick, perhaps even deliberately, to your own narrow perspective, your work will suffer. Returning to Wells again, in the course of my research for *The Time Ships* I became aware of how Wells, as his career progressed, moved away (deliberately) from storytelling to proselytising. In the later books we still glimpse marvelous landscapes, but we are always in the uncomfortable companionship of Wells himself, who seems determined to ram home his moral at every turn. Wells's popularity - and his critical profile, and his sales - suffer, as a result.

On the other hand, the sfinal possibility of thinking out of the box is one of literature's most powerful features.

To take an antique example, think of the Houyhnhnms - the intelligent horses - in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. After his sojourn with the Houyhnhnms, who are possibly the first fully-realised aliens in sf (or pre-sf, depending on your definition) Gulliver returns to the England of his day, but considers it with a new, outsider's eye: he sees the savage Yahoo lurking beneath the mundane surface of the Englishman. I still remember the frisson of horror this dislocation evoked in me on first reading this passage.

At its best, sf lets us look at ourselves - our times, our culture - from outside, and enriches our world-view as a result.

You, the author, are a sort of filter through which your fiction must pass, on its way to the reader. This much is inevitable; you can't help it. The question is, does it matter? I argue that, yes, it does make a difference. If you stay inside your box for your whole creative life your work will suffer. On the other hand, those who have been strong-minded enough to think out of the box have created some of the most compelling sf.



Do SF Writers have any Responsibility At All? by David Piper

At the risk of disagreeing with everybody else: no, I don't think that SF writers have a special responsibility to take a wider perspective than their own culture. On the other hand, it is my firm belief that, today, EVERYBODY has such a responsibility.

We're not talking about a technical aspect of writing here, but what writing actually is or tries to be. Since every writer is an individual with a unique perspective and experience, what each seeks to communicate and why they do it will differ from person to person. Writing is, hopefully, a creative process in which the writer attempts to communicate with other persons his or her vision of reality. It is inevitable and unavoidable that such a vision of reality will be shaped and structured by the cultural perspectives of the writer.

Until fairly recently it was fine to be sexist, racist, speciesist, and normalist in one's communications, whether written or spoken. We had not realised how culturally exclusive our societies were and had always been. In the sixties many of us were thrilled to read uncritically about Galactic Empires ruled by WASP American men. But things are different now. It is not only that we have grown older or that we now have better technology and wordprocessors. Our whole way of looking at the world is slowly but surely changing. My belief is that a truly planetary consciousness is developing amongst us, partially as a result of our technology, and partially because the only way our species is

going to survive and become successful is with such a consciousness. And we care about the survival of the species as deeply as we do about personal survival, especially if we have children. Unlike all previous generations, those of us born since 1945, when the new age dropped down on Hiroshima, have known all our lives that the species could suddenly destroy itself from one moment to the next. It is no joke. The survival of the species really is at risk and, all over the world, consciously or unconsciously, people are responding to that risk as best they can.

Thus it is that circumstances themselves are forcing us to look outside our own culture and beyond our fear of the unknown to appreciate the perspective of the Other. This planet-wide process is still only just beginning but, I dare to think, is gathering momentum rapidly. As part of this process some people, quite correctly in my view, have urged us to consider our use of language. Prejudices are built into the language and the way we use it. However, the point isn't to tinker with the words. The only hope is to do away with the prejudices within you which your use of language will inevitably reflect. It isn't a responsibility of SF writers alone but of everybody. Of writers of any kind of fiction, of anybody who is creative, of anybody who has children and wishes the world to be a good place for them to live in. It is true that we live in an age in which new myths are required and new names are needed for the gods. It is true also that as writers, we have the privilege, if we wish, of participating in that process. But I don't think we have any special copyright on it. It is the work of everybody and for better or worse, our writing as always, will merely reflect the culture of which we are part. The fact is, however, that our culture is becoming a planetary culture and, therefore, in our writing we have the opportunity to give witness to this fact.



Show and Tell

by Nicholas Royle

One of the first rules learnt by aspiring writers is to show rather than tell. Show how character x absorbs the pressure from a particular situation rather than merely tell the reader that he does. Show how he confronts bereavement rather than tell us. Show us that bigotry is unacceptable, don't just tell us.

Not only is this approach more likely to produce a better read but it's more interesting, challenging and liberating for the writer. Steering clear, for the time being, of the term 'responsibility', it is often the writer's task, and pleasure, to show the reader something with which he is already familiar but to present it in a new light. In this case the writer is grateful for and indeed relying on the fact that people take things for granted. If that were not the case, we would lose the capacity to be surprised. Of course, we're forever told not to take things for granted,

but if we took nothing for granted we would find ourselves adrift on a sea of uncertainty.

To no extent is our imagination limited by the things we take for granted, as neither writers nor readers. Quite the reverse. It's a short step, however, from taking the odd thing for granted to becoming complacent. Clearly, we should continue to raise questions. What use is a writer unless he asks questions of his readers?

But there will always be a proportion, hopefully a small one, of the reading public who prefer not to be faced with questions. And far enough. Their lives may be filled with too many questions already to be able to enjoy facing them in fiction. Different readers want different things, which makes it very difficult to hold hard and fast views on the responsibility of the writer.

To be able to express yourself through writing fiction is a great freedom - and those who speak of it as a chore will find few in sympathy with them - and the ideas of freedom and responsibility are entirely in opposition to each other. Some writers do believe they have a responsibility to their readers, not to feed them jingoistic crap in the guise of science fiction, not to mislead them into believing in easy answers, but really the only responsibility any writer has is to himself.

If I allowed a bad story to be published - because, say, I knew the market in question was prepared to take anything with my name on it - my major crime would have been to ignore my responsibility to myself.

To address briefly the point that SF, like myth, can both illuminate and disguise meaning, my own writing is a constant balancing act between obscurity and overexplanation. The majority of SF likewise the greater part of any genre, including mainstream fiction, is crystal clear but says nothing of value. There is no meaning to illuminate or disguise. The interesting minority of writers who have something to say - in SF, an area in which I do not claim to be an expert, these include Ballard, Dick, Ian Banks, Chris Priest, Robert Holdstock, Chris Evans, Aldiss, Moorcock - must all wrestle with the problem of how clear they make their message. Literature is about communication of ideas and it becomes pointless if the ideas remain buried under a weight of technological detail or simply obscured by semantics. But to make something too obvious is to insult the reader. Working as a journalist for several years, I have been shocked and disappointed many times by how ready editors are to treat readers as idiots. I wonder, however, if I'm beginning to lose a little of my naivety.

It remains a writer's responsibility to write what he wants to write and, if he has anything to say, to try effectively to communicate the ideas to the readers. A more fruitful line of inquiry might ask what responsibility do publishers have to readers - for they are more guilty than writers of presiding over the slow and hopefully not irreversible cultural decline that is predominant in this country. The people responsible for publishing, say, Naomi Campbell, should have their heads bitten off. Just a thought.

With regard to the role of responsibility, one indisputable fact shines through all the confusion: it must remain the responsibility of people such as Clive Anderson to ask Jeffrey Archer 'Is there no beginning to your talent?'

Matching Slang

by John Madracki

Consider the following. "For heaven's sake Sharon, just grow up will you?" Now compare it to "Oh, Shaz, Gel real!" Identical sentiments they may be, but the dissimilar nature of their expression immediately conveys their being uttered by two completely different people.

In the first instance we are given the impression of an adult talking to a child - parent to daughter, teacher to pupil - while in the second, the girl is being addressed by someone in her peer group.

So, in less than a dozen words of monologue, two distinct scenes have also been created. All quite obvious perhaps - but the value of discriminating between modes of speech in dialogue in order to assist in characterisation and scene-setting is often underestimated, and sometimes even overlooked entirely.

Writers of radio drama have to be particularly astute in the practice of differentiating between individual speech patterns, and while the exponent of the written word, as opposed to that of the spoken one, may face fewer logistical problems, there are still lessons that need to be learned by both. It is really a question of just how accomplished a writer one strives to be.

The average novelist may be content to use "Jack said" and "Jill said" for every occasion - and there are certainly many successful radio dramatists who always fall back on "But look, Jack" and "That may be true, Jill" - and for the most part there is absolutely no reason



why these conventions should not be utilised. They can often be the best approach. However, there are times when, in order to identify the speaker, a little ingenuity is called for.

Imagine writing a play for radio and being faced with a scene that involves three women conversing at a class reunion. Having been at school together they would all be the same age and coming from the same part of the country would probably have similar accents - which rules out two ways by which the trio of characters could be differentiated by their voices alone. So, without them addressing each other by name every time they speak, how else could they be identified

just by their speech? Well, one of them could be given a lisp, another could have a nervous giggle - there are many tricks - but the best way would be to use the dialogue itself. One of them could see herself as refined and use twee euphemisms ("I must visit the little girls' room"). A second could be proud of her roots and overdo the dated colloquialisms of their region ("Ya girl big wassock!"). The third could just speak plainly.

Master the art of using appropriate slang and, even on the printed page, your characters will be instantly recognisable as soon as they open their mouths. Naturally, as in all things, moderation is the key to success. Far too often, colourful dialogue is applied like thick sauce, serving only to mask the author's true intent and cloy the reader's palate. Similarly, esoteric jargon - as in compulenspeak - can also prove alienating and is seldom a good idea.



TO ALL IN TENTS AND PORPOISES....

But there are other pitfalls. One is realism. Just how far should writers go in creating individual richness in the language of their characters, and how much should they pander to the facile mirroring of everyday patter? Television, that linguistic melting pot, is rapidly homogenising our sumptuous idioms into nothing more than a universal cant that has all the flavour of week-old porridge. The mass media not only reflects popular culture: it creates it. And populist drama is a particular culprit. In a recent edition of *Eastenders* (May 5), four (very) different characters all used the expression 'tell me about it' within the first twelve minutes of the show. Do people really talk like that? Is our personal vocabulary so lacking in individuality that we can only parrot the synthesised argot of mercenary scriptwriters? It can certainly sound that way.

Another problem with slang is time and place. Create an urban society where all the men are 'dudes', all the women are 'babes' and everyone, regardless of gender, are 'guys' and you could be anywhere in the western world during the last forty years. Have them eat 'snags' and you may imply Australia, pack them like demented sardines into 'raves' and you might indicate the present - but give them a 'pad' to live in and you're where? And when? Swinging London in the Sixties? Perhaps, but what about Paris? Frenchmen have used town houses for decades. And it doesn't take much to reduce 'pied-à-terre' to 'pad'.

So just how important are the words themselves? Audition' may sound like an age-old theatrical term, but it only goes back to the Thirties. I don't know what the girls who applied to join the chorus line

in the original staging of *The Boyfriend* did for the producer in order to gain employment - but it wasn't called 'audition'.

'Bimbo', on the other hand, appears to be a very modern word. But this is not so. This derogatory appellation was first coined by P G Wodehouse back in the Twenties, and was used as an epithet for certain types of men. In fact, I can remember having a 78rpm recording of a song, about a cute little boy, that was titled 'Bimbo'. 'Bimbo, Bimbo, where you going to go-ee-o?' (I came from a very musical family).

And, as any sf fan will tell you, we may have had 'robots' since 1921, thanks to Karel Capek, but they couldn't have been controlled by any machine called a 'computer' until the late Fifties.

Life can be a drag - at any time. And no more so than for the cowboys of the old American West. 'Drag' was the position taken by the unfortunate drover who had to bring up the rear of the herd, and one can imagine what an unenviable task that was. A real bummer. But haven't we been herding cattle the world over for centuries - so why should 'drag' be localised either spatially or temporally? Some of us don't just leave, we part, or split. The last two words have always been synonymous. The Bard once wrote 'Parting is such sweet sorrow'. Having to split can be such a drag, may not have the same Shakespearean ring to it, but there is no reason why it could not have been said in Elizabethan times - is there?

And what about some of those other examples of Sidespeak? Some, like 'bad' for 'good' were just old-fashioned reversed epithets. 'Wicked' - for anything superlative - has been around for ages. And 'yob' is just simple backslang, while 'tall', 'manly' and 'pash' are merely crude contractions. Some words, like 'gig' and 'cool' (although some like it hot!), despite having been popularised by the Beat Generation in the Fifties actually had their roots in the Jazz Age of three decades before.

Indeed, some words go even further back. 'Hip' for instance. This has its origins in the Victorian era and stems from the opium dens of the period. Patrons of these establishments generally found themselves with nothing more than a couple of planks, which were never quite flush, upon which to lie as they whiffed the 'lilled pipe' and as a result of many hours spent languishing thus would often find their hips had been severely indented. Repeated and prolonged sessions eventually led to their hips being permanently scarred by exposure to this groove and would brand them indelibly for being the dope fiends they were. And, yes, that's where 'groovy' or 'in the groove' as it was, comes from, too. The expression to 'score' speaks for itself.

Now this underworld patois would have been very familiar to the writers and poets of the time, and it is only a pity that certain turn of the century novelists chose to forego its use. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, for instance.

"I've examined the body, Holmes, and you were right. The fellow had obviously been in the groove for many years."

"Yes, Watson, and I'm sure his confederates are equally hip. If only we knew where he scored. I must give this some thought."

"Oh no, Holmes, not the violin. I swear, sharing rooms with you can be such a drag at times."



MAZE

This is a maze made of people and I know that it cannot be mapped. Shifting between others who are straight walls drifting aimlessly, I cannot find my way towards the stillness of the centre (at which centre something waits, and calls to me). Constantly changing the labyrinth forms and reforms around its heart. I imagine the maze as a spiral, like a galaxy, if that's so this untranslatable whispering must be interstellar noise. And at the core where suns collide where monsters lurk and taunt their prey a frightful silence. I realise suddenly that this is where I am.

Tanya Brown

Stepping Stones Sandy Fleming

They sailed small ships across the wide expanse
of tropic ocean - centuries ago,
all trusting to the sun and winds, and chance

In them we see the germ of our advance
when, loading fauna, cuttings, seeds to sow,
they sailed small ships across the wide expanse

Friends of the soul are winds and starbeams glance
with the shifting of the sail from bow to stern,
all trusting to the sun and winds, and chance

Discern the rhythms of the master dance
when the tales are buried this will show
they sailed small ships across the wide expanse

Rehearse that leap of faith while in the trance,
though some were lost, and died for all we know
all trusting to the sun and winds, and chance

To come where fierce Capella takes his stance
by Mauna Kea with its cap of snow
they sailed small ships across the wide expanse
all trusting to the sun and winds, and chance



It occurred to me as I was working on [the forum] that the complexity and difficulty of the questions raised in most FORUMs are beyond the scope of the word limit. Sure you can raise a lot more questions, but you can't begin to answer them in that space. I realise that we haven't got enough paper, money and lifetime to read ten full length essays on the subject each issue but part of me cringes each time we skate merrily over the surface of these deep, murky waters. If we have a real interest in confronting these questions head-on shouldn't we do more than the average Con-panel discussion and spend some effort reaching conclusions? I almost get the feeling that everyone is prepared, in a spirit of generosity and liberalism, to shrug and say that we can all make up our own minds. Isn't that just avoiding the issue?

I wouldn't like to see an end to FORUM at all. But, would anyone be interested in reading a more in-depth item each issue by ONE commissioned/volunteer author or critic? Perhaps on a question raised by the FORUM of the previous issue or based on a reading of a piece of work? Then we could really get to grips with what ails us. Just a thought.

[If there are people out there willing to do an in-depth article as Justina suggests, we would certainly be willing to look at it. What do you think? interested? intrigued? Write us and let us know.]



Sandy Fleming:

I would like to see another competition. I found it good exercise to write those drabbles a form I normally wouldn't bother with as no-one else I know would publish them. So how about a challenge to hone our skills in other areas? Ten-minute plays? (Could subsequently be performed at conventions?) Poetry? Light verse? Short screenplays?

[We'd like to see more competitions in Focus as well. Watch this space is about as much as we can say at the moment.]

Andrew J Fielding:

I thought I'd drop you a line concerning the last few issues of Focus magazine which as a wannabee writer was one of my main reasons



The Plotting Parlour

A good selection of letters this time around, our many thanks go to all who responded to the last issue. Like all editors, we like to receive feedback on our magazine, so write to us and let us know what you like/dislike, love/hate about Focus.

for joining the BSFA way back in early 93 (the other being for the Orbiter groups)

I knew not what to expect when my first BSFA mailing including issue 24 of Focus dropped through my letter box. As this was the first issue of Focus I had seen, I was unaware of the problems referred to in the editorial to this issue and elsewhere in the two issues since. However, I am very happy that they appear to have been overcome and that Focus has risen phoenix-like from the ashes.

I found the three Forums, on character, worldbuilding and revision to be very useful, thought-provoking and entertaining. How about a Forum on SCIENCE fiction - how to explain the workings of your hyperspace engines or your matter transmitter without ripping off technical phrases from last week's Star Trek and without giving away the fact that you have no scientific or technical knowledge whatsoever?

Overall, all three issues have been excellent. The fiction, as promised, is of a good quality. Interviews and articles are interesting and relevant to aspiring writers (or should that be authors? In fact when does a writer become an author?).

Is there any intention or scope to include market and competition information in future issues of Focus? After all, I think it unlikely that all Focus readers who are authors (aspiring or otherwise) are members of an Orbiter group, and consequently they would not see such news in the Trajectory newsletter.

Is there any possibility of the BSFA issuing its own fiction magazine? (I understand that there used to be such a beast in the deep dark past). Surely there is a wealth of talent in the Orbiter groups just waiting to be tapped. Perhaps it could publish (without payment, therefore keeping costs down), solely the work of Orbiter group members. I believe a great many aspiring Asimovs would welcome seeing their work in print, regardless of whether or not they received payment for it.

A couple of things have been puzzling me. The first one is probably quite obvious but I'm none too bright, so I'll risk making a fool of myself and ask anyway: does the title of your editorials 'Through a telephoto lens darkly' have any significance or actually MEAN something? Secondly, at the end of the letters on page 15 of issue 26 it says: WAHF Pam Baddeley, Sandy Fleming, Andrew Fielding, David Piper. What does it all mean?

Ciao

[A Forum on the use of science in science fiction is on our list for a future issue - thanks for the suggestion. Market information is a difficult one given the time between magazines, much of it would be out of date by the time Focus appeared; however, it is a factor we are very much aware of, and we have managed to include some in this issue (see p15). Ah, a fiction magazine... What do others think? Would there be a place in the BSFA for a fiction magazine? To explain the title of our editorial would be difficult. It came out of several things: current affairs (1992), book titles, and our own weird sense of humour! WAHF stands for We Also Heard From. This is used as a way of name-checking people who write to us, but because of space restrictions etc., we were unable to publish their letters.]

Andrew Butler:

John Madracki asks me "Why is *hoi polloi* tautological?" If he cares to check my original review he'll find that I wrote "Unfortunately succumbs to the tautology of 'the hoi polloi'." Leaving aside the inelegance of my verb (but, hey, I was right up against the deadline!) the important bits here are "the" and "hoi polloi". "Hoi polloi" is Latin for "the masses", hence to write "the hoi polloi" is to write "the masses". Careful writers avoid this tautology, personally I try to avoid the phrase altogether and use "the masses" or "the people in the street" instead.

John Madracki:

Thanks for Focus 26, and congratulations on yet another excellent issue. Not only is Focus now an entertaining and informative magazine in its own right but, with only six months between each issue, it also looks set to become the most frequent of the BSFA publications.

As someone who has always had problems with rewriting, I greatly appreciated the extensive Forum on the subject.

And may I just say, to Mary Gentle, that I also prefer your original opening line of *Rats and Gargoyles* to the one that was published. But I don't agree with your later point - regarding censorship - that there shouldn't be different standards for films, tv, books etc. There should. Accessibility is an important factor. After all, a young child, say, is far less likely to be subjected to the contents of a brief passage in a £20 hardback book (with no pictures) than it is to something shown on tv at 4pm on a Sunday afternoon.



But I digress. So, back to revision.

And I have to say that while all the contributors, taken singly, spoke much sense and offered many lips, as a group their advice was somewhat contradictory. For instance, Pam Baddeley found revision to be the hard part following the 'easy' part of the first draft, while for Keith Brooke it was the rewriting that was relaxing and enjoyable and the initial draft that was stressful. For myself, I find the whole process of writing - from beginning to end - a matter of great anxiety. On well, I suppose I shall just have to continue to muddle through. As always [That is one of the beauties of the Forum, it produces such diverse ideas on things. Proving that there isn't just one, right way of doing things - eds].

(Finally), further to the first ps in my last letter. Okay, I admit it. I got it slightly wrong. "Hoi polloi" isn't tautological. "The hoi polloi" is. What confused me was that I couldn't imagine using *hoi polloi* and not preceding it with 'the', without it sounding awkward, and the only reason one could have for doing so would be to give the impression of having had a classical education.

Tautology is a curious grammatical transgression, and its ubiquity results from being virtually impossible to avoid. In fact, if you look carefully at Fowler's lengthy definition of the term you will find an actual instance of tautology lurking therein. I leave it to you to find it.

But should they be avoided? Are they not now so common as to be an integral part of everyday language and as such, not only acceptable but even desirable. Here are some typical examples continues to remain: 'final completion', 'mutual agreement', 'reiterate again', 'adequate enough', 'close proximity', 'revert back'; sink down and of course all those 'together' links - 'join together', 'mix together' etc. How many of us, I wonder, can boast never to have used any of them.

And did you spot 'typical examples'?

Nevertheless, seeking them out can be amusing. Here is a game that can be played anywhere - from on the train to by the fireside. Each player is given a page from a popular magazine or newspaper and then, on the word 'go', proceeds to read it. The first one to detect a tautological phrase wins the first round. The reading, and the game, then continues. Each round should take, on average, around four minutes (there's another one for someone to spot!) Have fun.

WAHF Iain Banks, Brian Maycock.



Writing from a Sample Space of One by Sandy Fleming

"Write about human nature," says Faulkner, 'that's the only thing that doesn't date'.

Not an easy maxim for an sf writer to follow, especially when it comes to alien species, or even humans beyond the cutting edge of society. And many an sf writer must have felt a moment of panic, a slight weakening of the faith, on perceiving that most sf does go out of fashion in short order, while Austen, Dickens and the Brontës can still be found in any bookshop. What is it about ordinary human beings (in the sense that Heathcliff is ordinary compared to, say, H.G. Wells's remarkable time-traveller) that makes them hold lasting fascination for the majority of readers?

The answer, I think, lies in recognition. Someone writing in the 1890s would be foolish to assume that we, 100 years later, would still appreciate the significance that the colour mauve held for that decade. But let him write *Lady Windermere's Fan*, a play about alienation, human weakness and self-sacrifice, and it doesn't matter whether it is played in Victorian dress or modern, or whether the fan is a fan or a credit card, the themes still give a powerful sense of recognition.

All of which is a problem for the sf writer, whose bread and butter is the *jamaica vu*, who specialises in future societies, alien civilisations, unseen landscapes, and technologies as yet out of reach. By definition, these things are low in recognisability.

One way around the problem is to target the existing sf readership, who will be able to recognise many traditional sf themes and settings. But if too many writers depend on this, the whole genre could steer itself into a rut.

Another solution is to write a really fat novel, or a 'trilogy' of six or ten books, and many writers do this well. After the second or third book, the reader is beginning to recognise the strangest landscape and the oddest lifeforms as if he had just stepped out into his garden and said hello to the girl next door.

But what if you have this little gem of an idea, so weird, so outlandish, so important, even, that you don't want it swamped by a worldbuilding exercise? So you're going to write a short story or a short novel, and you have to get your recognition points from life instead of from a world of your own.

What I do in this case is to keep a big notebook in which I write for some time every day. I write about anything: old memories, or things that happened yesterday, interesting people or boring people, scenery that impressed me or depressed me: seascapes, dreamscapes, dream sequences, parties I enjoyed, parties I hated, parties I've been told about, I try to give it authenticity by being completely honest, although this means asking my householder not to read it.

Although I'm reduced to writing about everyday life here, for me it's the way to break away from pedestrianism, and to see things in a new light, while holding the attention of as many readers in time and space as possible. Because if we're taking our reader on a brief excursion into the truly woolly, we need to give him a firm rock to

stand on, a stock of material he can relate to, a basis for recognition And this is what my notebook is

Writing a paragraph or two about twins you have met may help you write convincingly about parallel worlds (genetically identical people can be as different as Cain and Abel) Or our attitude towards an ants' nest that we found in our garden may help us to understand the attitude of the first aliens to make contact with us (we don't take it for granted that they'd have to be evil to want to exterminate us)



Doctor Greenland's Prescription



The more you mention about a character, the more you bring them forward out of the background, beckoning to the reader's curiosity

- 1 in the cleaning a man was picking up a backpack
- 2 in the cleaning a man in khaki jungle gear was picking up a backpack
- 3 in the cleaning Tompkins was picking up his backpack
- 4 in the cleaning Mortimer Tompkins was picking up his backpack

The variations in these sentences are like tiny course corrections, directing your reader along significantly diverging lines of development

1 is background, a little piece that fills in some scenery or advances the plot half an inch 2 introduces someone we will see again. He may become a main character, or perhaps continue as a nameless incidental character, a porter, say, whose work helps to make the story possible 3 names him, incurring the obligation to mention him again by name, if only once. If you don't, we will worry about him. Who was Tompkins? Whatever happened to him?

4 presents a main character, making his first appearance. He will require dialogue, and a share of the spotlight

The corollary: if a character turns out not to be part of the foreground of the story, go back and cut out all that introduction where you told us the fascinating details of their eye-catching clothes, their unhappy love-life, their brilliant record collection

Because in sf every sentence points outwards as well as inwards, constructing not only the story but also the universe in which the story takes place, every word, every phrase is potentially charged

The more specific you make something, the more we will expect it to have consequences, or to be an element that reveals the plot or the world

The other day, as I waited to board a train, a group of five young women passed me, one after the other, quite close to. Each of them was chewing gum

In a mundane story, this detail would be trivial - a random observation, revealing nothing except perhaps the women's social milieu, if only by elimination. They are not on their way to Ascot, for example

In an sf story, the detail may be a clue to something far more momentous. The experienced sf reader is alert as a paranoid to signs, connections, conspiracies. In this future, the world is dominated by an interplanetary confection cartel! Our heroine, a newcomer to the city, thinks the street cleaner in the gutter is sweeping up fallen leaves, but there are no trees here, no shrubs or flowerbeds. Watching him idly as

The feelings engendered as you drive to work in a gale and reports start to come through on the radio of drivers being killed by falling trees, can be transmuted into the feelings of an astronaut ploughing through an asteroid field (is he scared, is he thrilled? What did you feel?)

Every few months I go through the notebook and map some of my sf ideas onto suitable passages, or sometimes I rewrite a passage in sf terms and see what ideas it gives me. This is the raw material for my stories

her conversation continues, she sees the cleaner moving closer. A shiny scrap escapes his broom, caught by a stray breeze, whirling up into the air. She realises the deflatus is a heap of colourful sweet papers. But by then she is talking of something else

If the reader is alerted and not rewarded, frustration soon sets in. Even the expert reader may not recognise this frustration has a structural cause. They will feel it as an emotion - disappointment, becoming resentment, feeding hostility. Baffled, the author thinks: why must critics be so aggressive? As often as not, that is why. An imaginative investment has been coaxed from them and not satisfactorily repaid. The story, as transaction, as device, does not work. The manufacturer is blamed, loudly

Because in sf every sentence points outwards as well as inwards, constructing not only the story but also the universe in which the story takes place, sentences may be produced that are meaningful only in the context of the story. You can find examples of these everywhere. Chris Priest's *Inverted World* famously begins: 'I had reached the age of six hundred and fifty miles.' In my story 'The Traveller', Isa is in her father's laboratory. She has been looking, as she often does through the window in the cabinet of his matter transmitter. My father was now complete, she observes

Other sf sentences construct conditions that are simply different from our own, less familiar. The mechanic tossed her spanner into the air. It floated up and, slowly, down. The verb floated suggesting buoyancy, and the adverb slowly imply the reduction in gravity. After such a sentence it will not be necessary to specify that gravity is weak, or even to refer to it again for another few paragraphs. The gravity has already been weakened, not by tedious explanation but by grammar

A danger with the creation of unfamiliar conditions in sf is the way the implications of an altered grammar can become insistent, even definitive. This is what Samuel Delany was talking about when he coined his famous examples of surreptitious sf sentences: *He turned on his left side* and *Her world exploded*. Metaphors in our world, literally events, possibly, in the imaginary universe of the story. The effect is insidious. Translating *Take Back Plenty* into Danish, Ellen Pedersen pointed out the unwisdom of using one of my favourite words, *hover*, to mean linger irresolutely or attend hopefully, in a low-g environment where people literally do. I regret the fact that on Mars Tabitha Jute is concerned with two different things called *crystal*, one a drug, the other a part for her ship. In reality many different things have the same names; but in sf a coincidence like that can cause a hesitation in reading that weakens the fabric of the illusory universe



Research Helen Claire Gould



Once the idea for a story is there, some research may be necessary, initially to discover whether the idea is viable, later to flesh out details. There's nothing quite like that little kick you get when you know you're onto something, unless it's the process of building up several ideas into a story. As a side benefit, research can sometimes start off ideas for further stories

So what is research? The word comes from Old French *researcher*, to seek or search again, and means the systematic investigation of a subject to establish facts or collect information. That may include finding out about volcanoes, witchcraft, or medieval weaponry or reading other people's fiction on the same subject. The

mythology of vampirism is a case in point. Part of the writer's job is suspension of disbelief and research helps your ideas hang together and form a credible end product

How can you go about researching your novel or short story will depend on you and the way you work, but you must decide what you need to find out. You may prefer to research before writing or during. By the time you have a synopsis, you'll probably have a very good idea of the research you need to do. If you've already written a couple of sample chapters, your research needs will be that much clearer. If you keep a notebook or computer file specifically for

research your answers can be recorded as necessary and will be easily accessible.

In both business and writing, people are as much a resource as time and money are. They can provide time and money-saving little snippets of information, though be prepared to check their information. It's best to ask a real expert, or you could end up inheriting someone else's confusion or wrong information. Treat your sources with respect. If you make an appointment to talk to someone, keep it or let them know if you need to change the arrangements. Apart from anything else, it's good public relations. If you need to ask for help again and are unreliable they may be unwilling to talk to you again.

Tailor your approach to each person you speak to, but don't be afraid to ask for help. Most people feel incredibly flattered if asked to make even the most minor contribution to your novel, perceiving themselves to be in a position of power. I've only ever had one less helpful reaction to a request for information, when I was speaking to a rape crisis counsellor, researching for a character who had been raped. Her attitude (not unreasonably) was "get off the line, there are people who need to call me." But a colleague of hers was super, so it probably depends who you get.

Obvious sources are libraries, videos, films and museums. TV programmes may contain very little information at all, their factual content depends on the director's aims and target audience. Some books and magazines have similar drawbacks.

Libraries now offer services such as on-line computer searches for information on specific topics, requesting books and periodicals. You may still have to pay for some of these services, but borrowing books is of course cheaper than buying them. Travel agencies or the travel sections of libraries are cheaper than going abroad if part of your novel is set in another country. Visiting speakers at clubs and evening class tutors are other possible sources of information. Some local colleges have their own libraries for students. Maps, available in local reference libraries, may be helpful. Constructing my own diary of events has proved invaluable for working out the sequence of events in a novel. Although you'll undoubtedly set aside special times to visit the library or watch a tv programme on your special subject, your mind will probably work overtime. You never stop being



a writer or gathering facts. This can be a little inconvenient in the middle of a dinner party.

Science Line provides help on specific questions on physics and astronomy, biology, genetics, and medicine, geology, chemistry and suchlike. The staff work on a rota, so if the specialist you need to speak to isn't available, your question will be noted and answered as soon as possible. A question which needs a more detailed answer is passed to a panel of experts. The line is opened from 1.00 p.m. till 7.00 p.m. every weekday, and calls are charged at local rate. Call **0345-600-444**.

Your action plan.

1. Plan what you need to find out in general, then plan what you need to ask in particular. Write down your questions to avoid forgetting them, and of course, the answers. If using the phone this is particularly important. Treat it as you would market research. In a sense, that's just what it is.

2. When making notes of questions or answers, express yourself clearly and unambiguously so as not to waste time stumbling over questions or puzzling over what you meant by a particular phrase. It helps if your writing is legible as well!

3. Don't get nervous if you're using the phone. You have nothing to lose, except a few pence for the call, and possibly a lot to gain.

4. Once you have the information, consider how you can best use it.

Of course, research has pitfalls and disadvantages.

There's always the temptation to make the reader suffer for your art by including too much information. It's hard work, expensive on books, magazines, the phone or car, and above all it costs in terms of your precious writing time. It may not be appropriate for every type of fiction. What use you make of the information is of course up to you, you may even choose to ignore it in the interests of the needs of your story.

But its advantages make it money and time well spent. Apart from helping the credibility of your work, particularly when designing alien worlds or civilisations, methodical research helps create a disciplined approach to writing in general. Framing clear questions clarifies ideas and their expression. And that's part of what good writing is about.



More Than Just a Non-Stick Frying Pan a dialogue by John Madracki



Intensive research by NASA into the feasibility of interstellar exploration inevitably led to the science of cryogenics progressing to the stage where 'suspended animation' became a viable proposition. Corporate businesses were quick to recognise the commercial possibilities of these developments, and exploited them fully. I.C.E. - Imperial Cryogenic Enterprises - was no exception.

A door opens and someone enters.

"Good morning, Mr Kay. Sorry to keep you waiting. Please, take a seat. Right, well, I've been through all the paperwork and I can see no reason why we should not draw up the final contract today. I trust you are satisfied with all the details of the procedure? The safety aspects, in particular, must have been a primary concern."

"Oh yes, I'm quite happy about that. I've visited one of your establishments, talked to the staff and..."

"...and found them to be fully qualified. Quite. All our operatives have had the most exhaustive training in monitoring techniques and their credentials are impeccable. Believe me, there is far less risk involved in undergoing S.I.C. - that's Synthetically Induced Coma - than there is in crossing the road."

"I'm sure. Although, I still have a little difficulty taking it all in - that it is actually possible."

"Well, I assure you, it is. After all, it has been a dream of Man for aeons. It was just a case of waiting for the technology to arrive. Right then, if you have no more questions we'll get down to the nuts and bolts of your contract. Now, I see you've opted for Plan Nine..."

"That's right."

"A popular choice. And you have selected January 14 on which to commence the S.I.C. programme."

"It's my wife's birthday."

"How thoughtful. So, on that date Mrs Kay will present herself to the nearest I.C.E. Station where she will be placed into a Deep

Sleep Mode. Thenceforth to be resuscitated twice each year. For three weeks in July and a fortnight in December. Is that correct?"

"Exactly so."

"Which will unburden you of the bulk of your matrimonial responsibilities and leave you free to pursue your own destiny with all the latitude of a virtual batchelor. The only difference being that you will continue to have the benefit of a seemingly ageless young wife on tap - so to speak - with whom to share your Summer vacations and Christmasses. However, legally speaking, you will both remain husband and wife for the duration of the programme - and all that entails. So any other relationships you may wish to enter into must be broached with that in mind. But, Mr Kay, I'm quite sure you will always do the proper thing - given the circumstances."

"Oh, I will, I will."

"Well, I think that's about it. So, if you and Mrs Kay will come round to the office tomorrow and co-sign the contract..."

"We'll be here. Bright and early."

"I can assume, then, that your wife is still as keen as you are?"

"Oh yes. In fact, the whole thing was her idea in the first place."

...

A phone rings, and someone picks up the receiver.

"Hello? Maureen? This is Jennifer. You'll never guess what I've been told. That you're going to be a frozen fish finger - you know, do that SIC thingy. Isn't that the craziest?"

"Oh, but it's true! We sign the contract tomorrow."

"You can't be serious! Have you any idea what this -"

"Of course! I've given it plenty of thought, and I'd be a fool to pass up this opportunity."

"But - listen -"

"No, Jennifer, you listen! I have every faith in the process and their safeguards are more than adequate. So, what am I really letting myself in for? Well, I'll tell you. It may not be the whole immortality pie but it is a fair-sized slice. I'm twenty-eight years old now, and by using S.I.C. I can pass the next half of the century and still be only thirty-three, still young, still with my looks and a wealthy widow to boot. Who could resist that?"

"I don't know. It sounds -"

"Think about it. I know Paul and I haven't been married for all that long - and I love him very much - but the honeymoon is over and, well, a woman has to look to her future. In fifty years' time Paul will be either dead or in his eighties. I don't want to be either of those. So what is the price I have to pay to avoid them both? A dreamless, ageless sleep - broken only by a succession of Summer holidays and Christmas celebrations. Five years of non-stop pleasure. I think I can just about stand it, especially when weighed against the rewards I imagine! The challenge of leaping into the future - it's like having a personal, one-way Time Machine! Oh, I know there can be no guarantee of what I will find when I get there - no one can promise life in the mid 21st Century will be any better than it is now - but I doubt if it could be any worse. And don't forget - I will be waking up every six months, so I can keep an eye on how things are going. And just consider the momentous changes and advances I'll witness, maybe even partake in. I could even marry again, and come to a similar arrangement with my second husband. That way I could make it into the 22nd Century - and still be under forty."

"Yes, I'm glad you've mentioned Paul."

"Oh, don't worry about him. He's as eager as I am. Probably has visions of getting drunk every night, and ploughing his way through one lover after another."

"And you think he won't?"

"I'm damned sure he will! But that will only be in the beginning. The novelty will soon wear off, and then he'll be pining for our next meeting. Anyway, he'll be too busy working to play around that much. S.I.C. doesn't come cheap - there will be the annual payments to keep up the insurance premiums to meet and the index-linked trust fund that he's obliged to maintain for me. Believe me, I shall be more than comfortable with that alone. And it's all stipulated in the iron-clad contract that only I can break."

"Paul could overwork himself. He could die before his time."

"He'll do that anyway. But before that he's going to get the life he wants - and I'm going to get what I want. It's a liberation for both of us. True equality."

"Well, Maureen, you certainly sound excited about it."

"Excited? I'm thrilled to bits. Roll on January!"

Another phone rings, and someone else picks up the receiver.

"Good evening. Mrs Carter? This is Emily Stanhope - from I.C.E. We note that you and your husband have just celebrated your son, Simon's third birthday. Did he enjoy himself? I'm sure you all did. Three years old is such a perfect age. What a pity they have to grow up so fast. Of course, it doesn't have to be like that. In fact, you could enjoy Simon, as he is now, for many years to come. Why don't I arrange for one of our representatives to call round one evening and -"

I.C.E.

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The market news below is mainly concerned with small press British Magazines, that we thought people might not be aware of. It is sketchy in places, as it is taken from a variety of sources, but remember, all it needs is a polite query and most important of all, an SAE, in order to obtain submission details, and often guidelines as well.

Market Information:

PANURGE is the only British magazine which devotes itself exclusively to new fiction by new talents. It is one of the few magazines that responds individually to every writer who submits their work. No one ever gets a form rejection slip! Subscriptions available at £10 from Panurge, Crooked Holme Farm Cottage, Brampton, Cumbria, CA8 2AT. No details on submissions, but worth dropping the editor a line.

IOTA is a quarterly selection of recent poetry edited by David Holiday welcomes poems in any style and on any subject, though, obviously, the longer a poem is, the harder it is to fit it in. The only payment we are able to make for publication is a brace of complimentary copies and we trust, the pleasure of being in good company. Available from 67 Hardy Crescent, Chesterfield, Derbyshire S41 0EB for £1.50 current issue, £1 back number or £6 subscription. **THREADS** is a new quarterly, 56-Page magazine of Science Fiction Fantasy & Horror fiction. It is primarily a platform for new writers. To receive a copy of **Threads** send a cheque or postal order for £1.95 made out to Lynsoft or G Lynas to First Rung Publications, 32 Inn Avenue, Saltburn, Cleveland TS12 1QH. SAE should accompany any queries or submissions.

SUBSTANCE: NATURE SF & FANTASY £10 awarded to the author of the best story in each issue. All other contributors receiving a complimentary copy of the issue their story appears in. Writers guidelines are available, SAE for these to Paul Beardsley, 16 Blenheim Gardens, Denville, Havant, Hants PO9 2PN. Subscriptions: £2.50 sample issue, £9 for 4. Cheques payable to Neville Barnes at: 65 Conbar Avenue, Rustington, W Sussex BN16 3LZ.

PREMONITIONS Short stories, science fictional-horror and genre poetry (no supernatural fantasy tales or verse). Original stories of 1,000 to 5,000 words but longer and shorter works will be considered

Poetry of any form/style/length (no limericks!) on SF-horror themes. No payment, but contributors copy. All correspondence to Premonitions, SA Publishing, 13 Hazely Combe, Arretton, Isle of Wight PO30 3AJ.

BEYOND Parallel Universe Publications, 130 Union Street, Oswaldtwistle, Lancs. BB5 3DR. First issue out 1 March 1995, price £2.50.

PSYCHOTROPE A new horror magazine. Issue 1 out now features 10 tales of obsession, mad love, dark psychology and the subconscious. £2.10 single issue, £7.50 four issues. To Mark Beech, 23 St Georges Road, Leamington Spa CV31 3AY. **THE THIRD ALTERNATIVE** is a unique mix of quality fiction, poetry, art and opinion. Committed to breaking new ground, the magazine transcends genres such as science fiction, fantasy and horror, exploring the 'slipstream'. Write in the first instance to The Third Alternative, 5 Martins Lane, Ely, Cambs. SB6 2LB. Sample copies can be purchased for £2.50 from the same address. Welcomes submissions.

RACONTEUR A quarterly book-style publication available in Smiths etc. Stories chosen through competition with entry fee, good rates of payment. Not exclusively SF but includes it. Preferred length 2,000 - 5,000 words. Details, closing dates and forms from Rancoteur Magazine Story Competition, 4/8 Peartree Street, London EC1V 3SB.



Not a market as such, but

ZENE (Originally entitled **THE WORD**) The comprehensive listing of Small Press publications: Poetry, Fiction, Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror, Non-Fiction, Anthologies, etc. Each entry will include detailed guidelines for potential contributors, e.g. price, frequency, payment, addresses, reading windows etc. and will include articles and reviews by leading Small Press writers, artists, editors and publishers. Sounds like this one could be a necessity. Sample issue £1.95, four issue subscription £7 from Zene, 5 Martins Lane, Witcham, Ely, Cambs. CB6 2LB.

Meandest Memories

I remember Armstrong's small step and I remember smiling in what I hoped was a supercilious way at the machinery and the stiffened flag, stage props for a slow, clumsy ballet. How many millions of good US bucks had that little piece of kit cost? How much sweat, how many calculations, how much time? While down below people starved, fought, died and hurt. Yet I admit to an emotion, a misting of the eye, a tightening of the throat, perhaps through sense of wonder but, undeniably, mostly through pride, that caused my hands to tremble as they gripped the binoculars.

Laurence Day

Bad Deal

The demon grinned

"Your lover's hand?" he asked

"Yes," I responded, "and no tricks. It's to be attached to the rest of her."

And I must say he kept his bargain

I lost weight and became attractive

June's boyfriend died in a crash

She then moved in next door, and here, where it is isolated and men are rare, I was the only choice

We married in the Spring and the honeymoon was fun

I can see her now as she laughed and threw back her head. It was quite a shock when it landed on the grass behind her.

Alan Kitch



Mantis

"Will you give many sons?" She smiled to herself, wondering how she could devour her mate when her mouth was so small! The body was otherwise comfortable. She lay back on the bed and wriggled her hips.

The male was intoxicated. He struggled with his trousers clumsily. "You fucking whore!" he growled, torn between desire and fear.

"When she saw his penis, she laughed aloud. 'I think I'm going to enjoy this planet,'" she said.

In time she became fat with devouring. She gave birth many times. When they left, few males survived. Then women ruled, and there was peace.

David Piper

A Few Good Reasons

You proudly flaunt your accomplishments. Your sprawling cities and intense industries. You glorify in your skills at extracting treasures from within your planet. You have tamed its wildernesses, domesticating flora and fauna alike.

These achievements are your atrocities.

Your crude constructs spread like a canker across the Earth. A world you mercilessly rape and pilage, poisoning the land, seas and air. Your domestication of terrestrial life destroys anything you consider superfluous or undesirable. Your governments condone and surreptitiously foster xenophobia in the guise of national pride.

Need you really query the failure of your petition to join our Galactic Community?

Andrew J. Fielding

The Final Course

It emerged unseen in the middle of the night and began to eat my furniture. I could hear it outside the door.

I crept out of bed, dressed silently and left my house never to return.

It found me a year later, working in a factory packing boxes. I heard it inside the high walls, demolishing the building. I managed to finish my shift, then caught the first train out of town. From the window I watched the buildings disappearing one by one.

I'm just standing in the rain now. Waiting for it. Listening for that sound.

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

Brian Maycock