

# Focus

The B.S.F.A. writers' magazine issue 28

\*\* Knowing you're mad \*\*

\*\* Poetry Competition \*\*

\*\* Research Forum \*\*

\*\* Drabbles \*\*

\*\* Stories \*\*

\*\* Poems \*\*

Leigh Kennedy


John Brunner, Roy Gray

Keith Brooke, Cherith Baldry

Vincent De Souza, Colin Greenland

Stephen Baxter, Carol Severance, Steve Jeffery

Howard Watts, Justina Robson, David Murphy - & lots more...

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# Editorial

## Through a telephoto lens, lightly...

As the Forum this time points out, being a Writer can be a twenty four hour a day job. Whether you're walking the dog or doing the chores, you're either thinking about the latest project, or you're using the mundane act you're engaged in as research for the next project, or the one after that. This was brought home to us fairly recently, well in March actually, when we'd been out to a restaurant during a Writer's Workshop Weekend. We were walking home through the snowy rain, the writers

amongst us taking note of the way the rain was reflected in the headlights of passing vehicles, the way it fell on our skin, our hair, the non writers were huddled deep in their coats, faces grimaced shut against the elements, the only thought on their minds was to get out of the weather as soon as possible. We discussed this the next day in the workshop, and it brought home to us just how much our ordinary everyday lives can be used as research for our writings.

We hope you enjoy the Forum. There is a cross-mixture of views on research. Thanks go to all our contributors, keep those articles/stories/forum pieces flowing in, we need them to produce the magazine you're reading!

Regards

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## Editors

Carol Ann Green - 5 Raglan Avenue, Raglan Street, HULL HU8 2JB  
Julie Venner - 42 Walgrave Street, Newland Avenue, HULL HU8 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. We also require short pieces around 600-800 words for our Forum - see elsewhere in this issue for the subject of next issue's Forum.

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

Cover art, illustrations and fillers are always welcome

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## Forum

### Writer's Workshops

Love 'em or hate 'em, Focus wants to know your views on Writer's Workshops. Whether it be from the point of view of running them or attending them. Tell us your success stories, your horror stories. By Writer's Workshops we mean those run by Local Authorities, i.e. nightclasses; those run by professionals, i.e. Arvon, Hen House, Fen Farm, Clanon etc.; those run by post, i.e. Orbiter and Mercury groups; and those run by yourselves either in your own homes or at Conventions. We would like you to write a short piece for the Forum (between 600-800 words) on the advantages and disadvantages of taking part in Writer's Workshops, either as an attendee or as an organiser. Deadline for next issue is 31 October 1995.

## Colurastes



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## Research - by Steve Jeffery

Research, Carol says, as a topic for the next *Focus*. This comes wonderfully timed for me, having just picked up the latest request loan from the library this afternoon. I don't know where all this started, but it's become an end in itself, a continuing obsession with a particular slice of history and two main characters who have worked themselves into almost everything I get involved in.

I think the trail starts with John Crowley's *egypt*, some five years back. I was already familiar with Dr. John Dee, mathematician, astrologer and magus in the court of Elizabeth I. *egypt* starts off with a Prologue in Heaven, with Dee in conversation with angels in his scrying glass. This is the more occult side of Dee, which many historians prefer to sweep under the carpet as an embarrassing aberration of the man who wrote a detailed mathematical preface to Euclid's *Elements*. I am, however, fascinated with the notion of angels, so this already provided one link. Then Crowley introduces a second historical character, that of the Italian heretic monk, Giordano Bruno. Bruno is a fascinating character, a complete contradiction who paradoxically seems to be outside of his time - looking forward to the new geocentric universe of Copernicus and back to a lost 'Egyptian' magic - and at the same time completely embodying, like Dee, the curious Renaissance fusion of science and magic.

Tracking down Bruno further proves an equally strange exercise. Up to now I had never heard of the man. Now he starts to appear everywhere. I come across him again in Mary Gentle, as an aside in *The Architect of Desire*. Mary is similarly fascinated with this period of history, and the development of Renaissance Hermetic thought. He appears again, as a brief reference, in Russell Hoban's *The Medusa Frequency*. Who is he? Why are all these people dropping his name? Intrigued, I follow the trail back from Crowley to Frances Yates *The Art of Memory*, cited by Crowley as a major source. And here I find a whole area that I recognise from Crowley's 'White Crow' stories, and a trail that Crowley has been pursuing from *egypt* and *Little Big* to his recent *Love and Sleep*. This is the Memory Garden, the Palace or Theatre of Memory, a mnemonic key by which all things can be remembered and understood. Here are Gentle's 'King's Memories' who remember and witness all in a world where writing is a proscribed art. (Did Heinlein know this too, in his *Fair Witness*, in *Stranger in a Strange Land*?)

And from Yates, the trail leads back, through other figures like Ficino, Pico della Mirandola and the strange, arcane Art of Random Luil in the 12th century. Bruno stands as the culmination of centuries of Christian Cabalistic development which he brings to a magnificent, insanely complicated climax in the design of his Great Seal of Seals, the full understanding of which will unlock the Universe and Mind of God. And tips into heresy, for which he is burned on the Field of Flowers in 1600.

The trail leads out again, and grows deeper and more complex. Yates other works: *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* and *Lull and Bruno: Collected Essays and The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*. Like Crowley, I am absolutely indebted to Miss Yates, whose knowledge of Latin and Romance languages and access to original manuscripts far outstrips my own. And again we meet Dee, through Bruno's friendship with Elizabethan courtier Sir Philip Sidney, Dee's patron and pupil. From here to Peter French's biography of John Dee, and to Peter Ackroyd's disturbing historical fantasy *The House of Dr Dee*, in which the central character finds himself reading the same Peter French biography, and Bruno the madde priest of the sunne crops up yet again in passing. Dee's angels prove fascinating. We have come complete circle to the *egypt*'s 'The Prologue in Heaven'.

Something else. Dee's angels provided him with a code for their enigmatic messages, an Enochian alphabet which could be

manipulated to reveal all the names and stations of the thirty or more Princes of the Air. Which leads to Pat Zalewski's *Golden Dawn Enochian Magic* and another Crowley, the dark figure of Aleister - the self styled Mela Theron. The Great Beast 666. Aleister Crowley believed himself an amanuensis of Dee's collaborator Edward Kelley, his assistant in the angelic scrying experiments (only Kelley could actually see and converse with these angels. Dee could only wish, and record these conversations). Crowley even set out to repeat Dee's

experiments with his own assistant in the desert in North Africa. Dee, though, would have been profoundly shocked by his methods and objectives.

Time to put all this to work. Intrigued by the link, I wrote a short fantasy piece, 'A Scrying', that faced Dee and Crowley through the mediumship of Kelley and the scrying glass (that glass, or stone, turns up again in John Crowley's *Love and Sleep*, hidden in a secret drawer in a charitable Research Institute). I didn't feel happy with the first draft. There were too many links, too many unanswered questions. For a start, I didn't know enough about Crowley - Aleister, the notorious black magician. More research. This time the Oxford library system proved surprisingly unhelpful. Both books I requested on Crowley were deemed missing or unavailable. Colin Wilson's biography proved more helpful, filling in a

lot of the dates and places.

Bruno, I had already tried to pin down in an early article for our own Inception fanzine. I wrote the historical Dee into the fictional one from Peter Ackroyd's *House of Dr Dee* in a review of the latter for another fanzine, *Monas Hieroglyphica*, named after Dee's personal magical seal. I felt I was getting closer, but beginning to think I had entered a minefield. I could see why Yates had devoted almost an entire career to unpicking the tangled knot that tied Bruno and Dee firmly into the historical development of Renaissance Hermeticism, and one which took her on travels almost as extensive as her prey across major centres of European culture.

There is still a long way to go. You can't really understand Dee unless you understand his angels, and what they meant to him. For my purposes, I have seized on a further conceit, hinted at by the Enochian connection of the scrying experiments. In the Apocryphal Book of Enoch, there are angels, who are cast or descend down to live on Earth among humans and referred to variously as The Watchers or the Grigori. And in keeping both the older myths and the perverse rituals of Crowley, I have made them dark and terrible. But I feel I need to know more about them.

I start to wonder at this point which is the tail and which is the dog. Is the research for the story, or am I pursuing it for its own intricate fascination as an historical jigsaw puzzle, and the story becomes a justification for my indulgence? I'm no longer sure. But I'm having fun Research? Yeah, I do a bit now and then. But I can handle it. I can stop it anytime I want to. Can't I?

## Research: Some Suggestions by Cherith Baldry

Most research will fall into one of two categories: open-ended, where the writer is investigating a very wide area, or focused on trying to find the answer to a particular question. I started a project of the first type about eighteen months ago, learning more about the Arthurian world for what has turned out to be a novel and a series of linked short stories. I thought I knew how to do research already, but that was in a university context, now I hope I have a few tips to pass on to writers who don't have university back-up.

I already knew a certain amount about Arthurian romance, and I blithely wrote the first short story without doing any additional research at all, but I soon realised that I wouldn't get away with that for ever. I was serious about what I was doing. I would guess that most writers would be in a similar position at the start of a new project, it would be



unusual to want to write about something you were absolutely ignorant of.

The few Arthurian books I had gave me a start, and I've been gradually buying more - second-hand if I could manage it. I also visited the local libraries to see what they had. I found that by using the bibliographies of the books that were available I was quickly able to put together a reading list, unfortunately most of the books on it were not easily come by.

I realised again what I've always known: for serious research access to a good library is vital, and writers who are able to use a university library have a head start. My local library is quite helpful about ordering books for me, but this can be expensive if you want a lot of books. I was finally driven to trying the British Library.

I'd imagined that the staff would find me too frivolous to be given a pass, but no: they were extremely helpful. So I would suggest trying this to anyone who can get to London at all regularly. You need to explain why you want the books, and why they aren't available anywhere else, the staff will also recommend other sources if they exist. If you do get a pass, then playing with the computerised catalogues will expand your reading list even more.

As I worked I also found that I needed to do the other kind of research to find the answers to specific questions. For some of these I was able to ask people, rather than consulting books - details of medieval bee-keeping, for example, or what to do with a chapel that has been defiled by evil rites. Most people I find are happy to be consulted, and if they don't know the answer will give you another contact or recommend a book.

I also realised the importance of good reference books, and I'd recommend anyone to buy the best reference books you can afford if you expect to stay with the project for any length of time, going to the library just to check one piece of information is irritating and time-consuming.

One thing I found was that I had to write and research at the same time. With such a massive area as Arthurian romance, if I decided to finish the research first, I'd still be at it twenty years from now, and the actual writing would never happen. Some people may prefer to work differently, and it's important to find out what's best for you; at the same time, writers are very good at finding excuses for not writing, and doing research can be an excellent excuse.

The other thing I found happening quite often is that a lot of research gets boiled down into just one tiny detail in the finished story. There's a great temptation to use the product of your research in the wrong way - to unload all that fascinating info on medieval bees, instead of just one sentence describing what the bee-keeper was doing at the point when she entered the story. Really good research strengthens and clarifies the story but doesn't intrude on the reader. It's good discipline, but the discipline isn't only in doing it: it's in how it is used as well.

## On Research by Leigh Kennedy

Research for fiction works in two different ways for me - inspiring new ideas or helping a work in progress.

The new ideas aspect is the most fun but the most uncontrollable. Recently, a friend moved from outer London to Hastings and now is unhappy at having traded her huge public library for the more modest (though beautifully housed) Hastings Public Library. She has her degree in English Literature and teaches the same in adult education courses so her lament mainly centres on the lack of lit-crit and the newest novels.

Because we both love books, she complains and expects me to agree with her. I find it hard to explain to her that I love my library partly because it isn't a vast warehouse. A writer on the prowl for ideas should not have access to exactly the books required because this limits you to your own conscious requirements, eg "I need a book on hovercraft".

What a writer wants is to let ideas float up accidentally. For example, I went in for a book on geology and came out with a book on bats, too, which had caught my eye. A few days later, I wrote "Bats" (Women's Press Book of New Myth and Magic).

The first time I was ever in Blackwell's bookshop in Oxford, I was paralysed by choice and couldn't actually settle on anything to buy. Sometimes, it's better to go to a local bookshop and find, for example, a dusty copy of an overview of Greek tragedy or a travel book on Patagonia which no one else in town wants.

At the idea stage, a writer must be open to anything. Just as people are translated into characters, random ideas from reading,

listening and watching translate into stories. Using the above example, two things about Patagonia might inspire your setting: the Greek tragedy might give you a plot clue - and these are factors you might not have found in a deliberate search.

When the idea is established and you realise that you don't know enough to start or carry on, then that's the serious 'researching' aspect as most people see it. And that's when the local library does seem limited because it has no books on Jupiter or only one old biography of Darwin, etc. This can be frustrating if the story is rolling ahead in your mind and you can't keep up because you can't describe the gnomes or the place or whatever.

Once someone asked me if research ever 'spoiled' an idea for me. I was surprised at the question because quite the opposite is true. No research has spoiled a few attempts at stories which seemed to lose their way. As soon as I got to work reading rather dull things that I wouldn't normally read - but with the fictional framework to fit it into - scenes and bits of dialogue, new characters, story events would start springing to life.

Have you ever seen the films of the brief rainy season in some of the deserts of Africa? One day baked, cracked earth with half-dead animals creeping around and the next day flowers and prancing zebras? That's what it's like when the research is useful. I found this when looking up fallout shelters in 1950s USA for *Saint Hiroshima* and about language-bearing apes for "Her Furry Face".

Years ago, I had decided to write about longevity and after a bit of research the image of someone sentenced to live only a natural lifespan came out of that. But the idea didn't seem whole and I dropped the story after a poor first draft. Not long after, I tried writing a story about someone who made biogram crucifixes and natural history programmes after many animals had become extinct. I had a fat folder of research on holography and for a short period in my life, could discuss parallel beam-splitters and such. But that story came to nothing. Then one day, my husband was painting our bedroom door and had put the brass hooks on the floor. Our children, then two-year-olds, called them swans and sailed them on the carpet. A doing mother, I thought, "Aren't children's imaginations wonderful! What would the world be like without children's minds?" Something began ticking; the three strands pulled together into "Golden Swan" (*Interzone*, Jan 1994).

So, sometimes, research is not necessarily on paper!



## A Little About a Lot by Keith Brooke

If you meet enough writers you'll soon find at least one thing they have in common: writers know a little about a hell of a lot. Part of the reason behind this is simply that that's the kind of people writers tend to be: if you're not interested in the world about you then you're hardly likely to want to write about it. Odd news stories, half-hour arguments on a radio phone-in, people we meet, places we've passed through... we look, we listen, we take it all in. And one day we'll use some of it. Everything we do is research. Even the tragedies - the loss of someone close, a major illness - sick as it might seem, there's always a part of your mind that files these things away - the details, the emotional responses (Can I use it? How can I use it?). It's all research. But that's not much help, is it? How does a writer research? Well, she lives, she pays attention.

More specifically: How does a writer research? How does this writer research?

Another part of the reason why writers know a little about a lot is that we spend so much time writing of things about which we know very little.

No matter what they say, you can't just write from experience. That's fine if you've explored the Amazon - or perhaps more appropriately, if you've skipped a generation starship - but what about boring gis like me? I come from a safe, middle-class background, I live on a suburban housing estate, I read a lot. So if I want to write about - taking a current example - a world where the geology is so volatile there's a sea of semi-molten lava (yes, I've used this before, but this time it's a novel, I need to know far more about it) I have to educate myself. If I had the money I'd go visit a volcano, but I haven't, so instead I go to the library and read up on volcanism - not so much the geophysics as the gut reactions, what does it smell like? how close can you stand to the lava before your eyebrows singe, and how do you feel when you're standing so close?

When do I do this research?

Before I write a story or a novel, I have a pretty good idea about the kind of knowledge I'm going to require, so that's the time to do the bulk of the work. Even when I think I know a subject I try to do a bit of reading - I did a fair bit of geology at university, but it needed refreshing for my Burn Plain material; the details needed filling in.

The research always throws up new ideas, new trails to follow through the library shelves. For example, my reading on volcanoes drew my attention to soda lakes, one of the harshest environments on Earth; I read about them and pretty soon started to see ways I could use such an extreme environment to explore some of the themes of my novel. This serendipitous realisation added an entirely new dimension to one of my characters' travails and sparked off ideas and idea-lets which inspired and informed what would otherwise have been virtually unrelated passages, tens of thousands of words away from this one scene.

So most of the research takes place before the first word is typed. But as I work I'm continually making notes to myself - when the first draft is complete I have another list of gaps in my knowledge which require filling.

You don't use all this research, of course - not directly, at least. I have pages and pages of tightly packed notes for my current novel, but much of the information will never be mentioned in the final draft. Often, it's enough simply to know these things: the knowledge diffuses into your writing, so that the reader can sense that a lot has gone unsaid. At other times you have to help this process along by planting specific, often apparently minor, items of information into the smooth flow of your narrative. By mentioning in passing that a Mermaid Rose's flowers only last for a day, you pull off the conjuring trick of convincing the reader's subconscious that the writer - or the character - knows all about roses: that rose is suddenly *real*. (Obviously, if you're writing about the nature of the universe you need to know your subject in more depth, I'm talking here about the everyday things, the general fabric of the story which, ultimately, plays a central part in convincing the reader).

If there really are tricks of the writing trade, then this is one of them: the writer doesn't need to know about most things in depth - he only needs to know a few telling details. If the writer knows what something smells like, or feels like, then the reader believes he knows far more. The last reason writers know a little about a lot is that that's often all they need: the trick is knowing which little bits you need to know.



## Research and the SF Writer

by Carol Severance

Research is a way of life for me.

There is formal research - library visits, journeys through books and articles related to specific subjects, dips into journals and encyclopedias and the like. These tend to be the easiest to explain.

If someone notices me reading a *Scientific American* article on tropical disease vectors, I can nod sagely and say, "It's research for my next novel," and unless they're an epidemiologist, they'll likely wander quickly away.

If I get caught watching Oprah Winfrey on daytime television, however, or poking at the underside of a muddy rock, or staring at a crack in the wall... Well, that's a little harder to explain. These types of research are just as important - maybe even more important than the formal type, because library research can be done anytime the library is open. The information in books and magazines is safely recorded and not likely to disappear overnight. I can study the curious life-cycle of the schistosoma parasite today or tomorrow or next week without significantly altering the course of my writing career. (Unless I'm terribly late on a deadline! Or I've picked up one of the little bugs myself.)

But there may be only one chance to watch a baby gecko hatch in the narrow crack between the kitchen wall and the door sill. As for the rock, I may never again have the opportunity to stick my finger into that particular texture of mud and mildew and garden-slug slime. Turning over rocks is, or should be, a required activity for all science fiction writers.

And the television talk shows, taken in moderation, provide excellent opportunities to study regional and social differences - and body language! Notice how the lady in green crosses her legs away from the man she proclaims to adore. Watch how she smiles with her mouth, but never with her eyes. Do her restless fingers tap out

impatience, boredom, or fear of being discovered in some deceit? And is that a hole worn through the sole of that shiny, green shoe?

Television is a place to study exaggerated human actions and interactions. Restaurants and shopping malls, on the other hand, provide the counterpoint of reality. I listen shamelessly to other people's conversations, take note of their perfumes and other - not always pleasant - body odours, and watch how they walk and talk and touch one another.

And I talk to them, or rather I open conversations so that they will feel free to talk to me. Everyone has a story to tell, and while many personal tales are of only passing interest in themselves, the manner and form of the telling never fail to provide material for my own story-making mill.

But what about the science? The bells and whistles and warp drives that make science fiction so much fun? How can a writer be sure she is getting the technical information right?

For the general material, I go back to the library and the books and the scientific journals. Then for specifics, I call on the professors at the local university, or others who have access to information I need to know - the power company for details of an electrical circuit, the volcano observatory for the temperature of fast-flowing pahoehoe lava, or the local dolphin research facility for any number of water-related things. Given the chance to expound on their favourite subject, researchers and teachers and even salespeople are inevitably generous with their time and information.

I once asked a University of Hawaii-Hilo astronomer which way the winds should blow in the great hurricane described in my novel *Reefsong*. Not only did he describe the technical workings of the storm, he also suggested I give the planet rings to light the night sky - and then told me of the eclipsing shadow that would travel across those rings each dusk to dawn. It was a powerful image that I did not recall ever having encountered in a science-fiction tale. A later question about names to a visiting Samoan playwright brought not only the references I needed, but an anecdotal story about the octopus-god Le Fe'e, who, together with the rings, eventually became the centerpiece for the entire novel.

Norman Spinrad once told me, "You can write anything you want to in science fiction, Carol, as long as you can make the reader believe it."

I remind myself of that every time I'm tempted to cut corners or hold back a bit because I don't know exactly how to portray a scene, an emotion or a scientific fact. Then I make myself go back out and look at the world again, touch and taste the textures of human existence, gather the stored knowledge of libraries and books and minds far more clever than my own - and turn over a few more rocks.

Research is never-ending, ever fascinating. For me, it's a way of life.



## The Tough Work of Research

by Stephen Baxter

I've heard people denigrate the value added by research in the gestation of science fiction - as if research is nothing more than a gloomy last resort to be used only when inspiration fails. I have to

disagree. For me, research is the key to everything; research suffuses every aspect of my working methods.

Some of my research is pretty heavyweight stuff. Research is essential for quality hard sf, and so some of my time is spent going through technical journals and textbooks. It's not easy: the best hard sf comes from the edge of current understanding, where there tend, unfortunately, to be no helpful popular overviews. And - naturally - the more recent papers are, the more they tend to disagree.

It helps to have access to a good science library: papers can be obtained through inter-library loan services, or, in some cases, on-line; but you can't browse that way, and browsing is important. You need to learn how to use indexes, like the Science Citation Index. And, if your topic is something to do with the physical sciences, understanding maths well enough to be able to ignore the equations is a bonus.

Academic research is very different to researching a science fiction novel. I should know: I have a yellowing PhD in acoustical engineering, as well as six published sf novels, to my name. In researching for sf, you aren't seeking completeness and depth; rather, you tend to browse, to use indexes heavily, to follow your nose. You're looking for the peculiar and interesting, and for material which will fit the fictional framework of the piece. As far as accuracy is concerned, the

objective is to assemble a reasonable consensus picture of a subject, thus avoiding any obvious boners in your text. And a key activity is looking for angles on how to transmit your findings, painlessly, to the reader.

But the heavy stuff isn't the limit of my research. In a sense I've turned my whole life into a kind of low-grade research exercise. I read voraciously - a lot of pop science stuff, as science and technology are the centre of gravity of my subject matter - but also a heavyweight newspaper, daily, from cover to cover. And histories, biographies, I watch tv - particularly documentaries - but the factual density is so low that I invariably have to do backup reading on anything that catches my attention. And all this input gets processed all the time. I keep cutting files, and notebooks with entries on anything that catches my attention usually with follow-up references.

What am I looking for? impossible to answer definitively anything that looks as if it might form the seed for a scene, a story, a character, a novel, anything that strikes me as interesting, or surprising, or ironic, or illuminating. For example I watched a David Attenborough feature on creatures that spend their entire lives in fast-flowing streams, and that later got spun into a story of humans stranded in a similar situation ('Downstream', *Interzone* 75). I read a management textbook with an analysis of the decline and fall of IBM, and I wondered if that might form the basis for an epic, multi-generation novel (one day, maybe). - and so on. Anything and everything.

I don't list fiction in the above, I read plenty, but I try to keep it in a different compartment of my mind. I don't see how fiction inspired by fiction can be fresh and original. I feel the need to get as close to the primary sources - that is, life - as possible. On the other hand I do try to keep up with what's happening. I want to be aware of the best of what's emerging - Stan Robinson's *Mars* books, for instance - and I think it's important to have a handle on which way the market is going.

Not all my notes get used, the ones which emerge in the fiction go through a mysterious, largely unconscious, process of sorting and selection. Ideas which survive have to appeal to me some time after they've first struck me, and they have to appear rich enough for me to be able to spin out a full plot from them.

For me research of one form or another is the heart of the writing process, the tough work which fleshes out inspiration into something solid enough to engage a reader.



## Getting it Right - by K. V. Bailey

Into whatever about research there comes a carry-over from what Andrew Butler wrote in his *Forum* piece in *Focus* 27. He said, of one of his stories: "Obviously the physics (of which he admits to 'a shaky understanding') is pretty fantastical, but I was using it mostly as a metaphor for the emotional state of my characters." Fair enough, providing there is consensus between him and his readers that the physics may be fantastical - as there has to be between author and reader whenever time-travel or an air spaceship is introduced. (The word 'warp' covers a multitude of liberties). And the more the focus is on character and psychological tensions, the more a 'fantastical' scientific invention may be acceptable. Conversely, the more the fictive scientific, physical or environmental circumstances do approximate to the actual, so that such conventions become superfluous, the more any technical discrepancies will dislodge at least

some readers' appreciation of the story's action, and even of any intended metaphorical correspondences between environment and characters. In such situations it is as well to try to get things right, and that is where research comes in.

All this can be exemplified from planetary fiction. A classic of that sub-genre is *A Voyage to Arcturus*. No one could suppose that David Lindsay had researched, or felt need to research the star known to astronomers as Alpha Bootis (not, as it is in the novel, a binary star). The mysterious voyage, at "a velocity approaching that of thought" and what happens on imaginary planet Tormance patiently serve the purposes of psychological and metaphysical allegory. Every feature of the novel, environmental and biological, carries symbolic freight, and from the first supernatural chapter readers must realise that the planetary element is there essentially to promote estrangement.

C S Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet* is to some extent a similar case, but his propulsion by solar radiation and his Martian canals and ecology were sufficiently realistic to provoke an attack by J B S Haldane on the score of scientific error. Lewis's response was that, true he was no scientist, but the Martians canals were there "not because I believe in them but because they are part of the popular tradition; the astrological character of the planets for the same reason". Historical popular tradition and mediaeval/renaissance astrology are areas which Lewis had researched, was an authority on, but his mixing of realism with symbolic fantasy was enough to raise the hackles of an empiricist who senses absence of research (there were other grounds of criticism also).

Kim Stanley Robinson takes realism much further, and his purposes are different. He is concerned with ecologies, with ideals and tensions among scientists, politicians and environmentalists. Mars is his chosen arena and, while there are likely metaphoric correspondences between terrain and person (as in *Red Mars* between Hiroko and her polar dome of ice), the terrain itself, its geology, the possibility of aquifers, the planet's atmosphere, rotation, gravity, etc have all been subjects of detailed research. The novel sequence would not be viable without it.

When a story needs research of that kind, and when it has been done well, the consistency resulting makes for confidence on the part of the reader. I recently read a review of a (non-fiction) book in which the reviewer (Rosemary Hill in the *TLS*) said "we may wonder if someone who refers to Calvary and Golgotha as two separate mountains is entirely to be trusted." It is surprising how a small slip, often due to inadequate research, can erode trust. In another context, I've remarked on how in a Connie Willis story (*Adaptation*), located in London, faulty research on Network South-east, and the solecism of a character's travelling from London 'up to Surrey can (for British readers) detract from the fiction's authenticity.

Since as reader and critic I am pulled up by such things, I try to avoid them whenever (rarely) I write fiction. Thus, a somewhat fantastic story (*Angel Cat*) was set realistically in 4th/5th century Alexandria, and, though the Pharos was not essential to the action, since everyone associates it with the Alexandria of those early AD centuries, surely it should be there in the port. But was it built at the time of my story? It went onto the research list. Yes, it was, by Ptolemy II, over 100 years before the story starts. Would any reader worry about such an accuracy or inaccuracy? Maybe no, maybe yes. Quite possibly the bit of research required to get it right sustained a reader's confidence, as it certainly did mine - and that last factor is for authors by no means unimportant.

**At least you know when you're deranged, demented, certifiable, neurotic, crazy, mad, crackers, bonkers, batty, nutty...**

by Roy Gray

I'm nearly old, a four decade reader of science fiction who wants to write. Typing long restricted this dream but word processing rescued me. Outwardly I'm a packaging technologist working for an international manufacturing group but inside lurks a writer and one day, maybe, an author.

Despite the technology I found I was a slow writer and a distinct lack of success made me slower still. By 1990 I was becalmed in an interminably long short story, desperate measures were required.

Fortuitously a mail shot from Keele University Adult Education arrived. Writing classes at £30 odd for 22 two hour sessions. A bargain? Could these be the spur I needed? Cheque in to find out.



The answer? Yes. Stubbornly refusing to do any homework which didn't fit in with my writing, but always producing something to read out in class, please the tutors, show willing or justly thirty quid, I wrote on. Three years later *Neutrino Cat* has been rejected ten times on two continents but gained the odd encouraging comments in the process.

The surprise was that the classes were so enjoyable. So much so that I also attended a few workshops. Every reading exercise produces gems and surprises from my fellows. One mild mannered neighbourly lady told a ferocious tale of a man who kept his mother's eyes in a jar.

Reminiscence, verse, science fiction, searing domestic drama with a painfully sad ring of truth, humour, whimsy, the range is tremendous. The entertainment value is often equally incredible

Why this enthusiasm?

In all the groups I joined the quality and creativity of the writing, impromptu exercises and home written, has been impressive, and even daunting. There's always someone who can produce rhyming verse on whatever subject the tutor sets

Writers often use their own experiences and sometimes can't disguise their emotional involvement in their subject. Unwittingly they play the roles turning readings into performances

I get an audience and for five years it was the only audience I had, other than a few terse and uncommunicative editors

Ditto for feedback

Another revelation. I enjoyed reading out my own work



Beyond the fun my writing improved, even the technical stuff written for work (Alright, it must have been really bad on this evidence)

For me 'success' remains elusive but I have two "highly commended" in a science writing competitions and have sold a rewritten version of one to an American magazine. So I am a published and paid writer. I haven't sold any fiction but I've had a good time trying. Without the classes I doubt that I would have continued

One cautionary note. A 24000 word novella languishes in my computer awaiting the final touches. Suppose I have an accident (euphemism) leaving Shirley's Adventure in Space in this limbo. Two year's effort unsubmitted, unseen and unread. This type of anxiety becomes obsessive. At this point the real worry is your sanity but it's too late

(originally published in New writings Magazine Autumn 1994)

[Roy has started the ball rolling - don't forget Focus needs you - send us your Forum pieces on 'Workshops']



## Needs Want as Needs Must

by David Murphy

Trains to Happiness depart once a lifetime, if you're lucky. The one Cynthia and I boarded was a real slow mover, and our destination was far, far away. First stop Divorce - two stops, actually, hers and mine.

Cynthia needed weeks to sort out her husband and her life. In the meantime I moved out to that cottage near Willer's Lake. Cynthia visited me a lot out there but I was often on my own. Sleep never came easy at Willer's - my mind was awash with Cynthia and with giving up my home, my wife, my job. The sleep that did come was fractured and full of dreams. Oftentimes I dreamed of Cynthia. Then other, deadlier, dreams slinked into my mind.

I dreamed of hands, pale and elongated. Hands that drew visions of ships, silver and sleek. I see them now, those thin and translucent hands, and those ships, flying in formation from sun to sun. That's when my mind started to act up.

Somewhere in the present-past I walk into a music store to make a purchase. Appropriate that it begins with a whirling piece of plastic. Everything whirls now. Time itself, no longer straight, circles like a hungry buzzard.

From the moment the laser picked up the first note I knew I had heard it before. Familiarity meant nothing at first - a song is a song, and there's little that hasn't been sung or played in some shape or form already. Funny that I could never recall hearing anything by that group before. A local rock guru had deemed it 'essential' in his weekly rock column. It is, was, a hobby of mine, building up a vinyl retrospective on CD.

Now, then, whenever it was that I first listened to it, I couldn't believe my ears. It wasn't just the digital rhythms clanging in my head, it was the lyrics. I knew them too. Familiarity is one thing - prior knowledge another. It was like kissing a corpse. Forty minutes of chords rattling around my brain, cracking open the seed cases of my memory, drums snaring, rolling me in familiarity, guitars smashing to pieces the certainty that I did not, could not, have heard their riffs before. Vocals ripped my mind with the speed of spurting blood. Words I knew so well I could have written them - without ever having heard them before. I looked out over the moonlit waters of Willer's Lake and slowly shook my head.

Alarm bells jangled two days later, or simultaneously, or before. The newspaper headline rang one bell, the reporter's opening phrases rang two, the main body of the report set off the whole damn shooting gallery. I had read of it a week or two previously, yet here was this newspaper describing it as if it had happened only yesterday, and then having the gall to say that it had happened only yesterday. But it's amazing how the mind digs up justification when none exists - a survival mechanism. I read somewhere once. That experience put me off reading, made me feel more like conversation. I phoned Cynthia.

Those who say Cynthia and I cheated don't know what they are talking about. Our paths simply crossed - no premeditation, no scheming, no setting out to have an affair. Soon we knew we were

made for each other. We knew because it's not easy living with someone you can't relate to any more - it makes you, forces you, to grow apart, develop new interests, have different friends, lead separate lives outside the home. Once the relationship reaches that festering stage it's amazing how you can put a barricade around your emotions and live for years with someone you should not be living with all along. That's what happened to me and Cynthia - we just met.

When Cynthia called round I dug out a bottle of wine. Before putting my hand on it I knew every word on the label. One glance confirmed that I must have studied it recently, though I had won it a year ago and had never looked at it since, or at least the part of me that knows what most of me is doing most of the time knew that I hadn't looked at it since. Then the small-talk started, which was like getting pissed before the bottle was opened. Cynthia's every word, breath, sigh, action, reaction, blink, gesture, leg-crossing, uncrossing, question, answer, snuffle (she had a cold - I knew that too, before she did), smile, clearing of throat, pulling of hemline over knee, taking out cigarette, hands clasping, uncupping, laugh, frown. It was like looking at a dove on a distant palm, then a razor-beaked vulture pecks at your eyes. Eventually Cynthia said something relevant - she said I looked a bit off colour.

I tried to tell her. The music she put down to misinformation, a re-release I had probably listened to way back at some stoned-out, boozed-out party - somehow it had curled up in a remote corner of the brain only to resurface years later. But I checked it out - it was a new release. The newspaper she reckoned was some kind of mental quantum leap. The human mind is a wonderful thing, she said. We all have powers we never use, she said. Sometimes eerie things happen, she said. She started to recall psychic experiences of her own - thankfully my pre-knowledge of her words and actions had switched off now, so I drank most of the wine and got pissed.

Morning comes to night, Cynthia gone, wine gone. In my head, knowledge, but of what? Memory is what never was, can never be. Time shifts a gear, engages, will slip, has re-engaged. Switch on the newscaster is a dinosaur already. I flick the volume wheel. Radio low, my spirit lower, I feel I do not belong. I leave Willer's Lake, drive into town. Streets are same. Buses turn the corner, number scrolls known. Pedestrians, cars, their colours predicted, their size, shape, approximate age, at once the past and future. No present now. Life is my private viewing box in an omniscient where everything is a re-run. I fight it with will, reason, logic. I think of how I started. The words of another song, there's someone in my head but it's not me. Getting hard now, to concentrate. I find the shrink, I lie on his couch, tell him it's not, is, me. His words soothe me, sleep me.

The light, yes. A low hum, yes. In the night, dream. Night's dream comes again. Door opening, stretcher, silver hovering. Shapes form humans. Yes, no, vaguely. Out the door on the trolley-stretcher thing. More lights, what pretty patterns they make on the

placid waters of Willer's Lake. Sky, ship, scalpel. I see those dreamlike hands again; they are pale and elongated, thin and translucent - the hands of a surgeon. They hover over my head. Stretch of skin, incision, cold, slit, scream. Forehead burning, chalk-scrapes shriek in my head. Something slithers on steel. Is it steel? Maybe, cold and clinical, certainly. Down, in. I see it slithering, feel it slithering, pushing me to one side. It snakes, slinks, sidles up inside my brain. Scalpel, ship, sky. Night, door, bedroom. Dream, sleep, wake.

It sleeps in my brain.

Books, books, books. I read, absorb, regurgitate, and spit out. Behind the shrink's wiry glasses, behind his miserable, money-grabbing eyes, I see paranoid schizophrenia. He is wrong - I hope and pray he is wrong. He pockets a gold watch paid for by a dozen hypnotic sessions, and looks at me with all the professional pity he can muster. I get in touch with groups who claim to have been contacted. Weirdos, weirdos one and all. My shelves become littered with abduction stories. Every night I dream of sleek ships hurtling through space and time.

...

The pressure, I guess, of so many changes in my life. One way of coping with pressure is to dream crazy dreams. That's what Cynthia put it down to, stress. Cutting myself off from my wife, quitting work, finding the new job, moving to the Lake, the waiting while Cynthia sorted out her side of things - it was all too much and had manifested itself in disrupted sleep patterns and nightmarish visions, that's what she said. Cynthia was always decisive and clear in her thinking. It was a trait I found attractive, but her quick-wittedness was tested somewhat when I told her my theory.

I got as far as the ship over the Lake and the alien presence in my head. I had wanted to tell her that aliens would not experiment with someone who leads a full and normal life - it would be too easy for friends or relatives to notice unusual shifts in behaviour. Better to scout around for someone going through profound changes - a loner, for instance, or someone living in a remote spot like Willer's. I had wanted to explain that by cutting myself off from my previous existence I was inadvertently myself a perfect target for alien experiments. Living alone, no longer with a network of friends or relatives to cross reference my odd personality with the emerging one, I was the ideal victim. It was logic, I said. Cold, clear, alien logic.

I never got beyond a sentence or two after that. In Cynthia's eyes I saw again the pitying look of the wiry-eyed shrink. In her face I saw doubt. I could never risk losing her. She was all I had.

I saw all she was and all she meant. Years of knowing flashed by, years that led to the night our hearts touched - the night we tore away the clothes of friendship and saw beneath a beauty rare and deep. Promise we piled upon promise, a channel we cut through the clogging mud of our lives, and nothing was ever the same. I saw her childhood, her youth, her dreams, her hopes, shattered by the shackles of other men. In her I saw a mirror, a mirror that told no lies. We vowed to change it all, to turn the world upside down, to begin again.

...

Letter of resignation, job application, lawyers, her things, my things, mediation yes, conciliation no, find a place, interview, this is my carving knife, this is yours, job offer, cut in salary, not much to live on, cut off in-laws, who gets the car, we can work it out, avoid mutual acquaintances, start from scratch, change of life, sort it out.

It's so simple.

...

I love to dream. I have never wanted to be me. Never. Not since looking out over my pram - it's such a long way down.

I remember it all.

That first kiss, first slap, first smoke, the schoolyard fight, skinnydipping, masturbation, the Brady Bunch, gulf, fear, pleasure, Cynthia, protest marching, Santa outside my window, autumn fruits, snowball fights, the sunsets of Java, suffering, people I hate, people I love, Cynthia, harmony, pain, Mexico, Sunday service, Daddy please don't, jetlag, loneliness, Cynthia, raindrops, Mummy in the bath, the Dakota Building, work, behind the fire escape, Jamie's face pockmarked with sores, death, politics...

...I re-run it again, live it again, do it again. No memories left; can't tell the difference between pain and panacea. Seepage drains my brain. Myself returns. I will call Cynthia. Must tell her again that there's another presence in my head. Tell her all this time; how it wheedles into my mind, how it sees the future, has lived the present, will love the past. Yes I will call Cynthia.

She walked in.

"Gordon you look drea- Why are you looking at me li-"

I see her new, untouched, unseen. Memory mounts reality. I push, pull, rip. Summer frock tears easily. What, exactly, is summer? I do not, will not, care. Must find out, must examine, must... Hand on mouth, will not scream. Seed of a different reality, a new dimension, can, must, needs. Cross universes. Infiltrates, will colonise, has crossed.

...

Cynthia smiles. I can tell from her voice. Voice is everything. The world is a voice in my ear, Cynthia's voice. I lift the phone not knowing what to say. I had never phoned her without reason, without excuse, but loneliness is a great motivator. I could stand it no longer. Alone too, as I knew she would be, she lifted her receiver on the other side of town and at once drew near. Knowing not what to say, we spoke for more than an hour. Nothing serious, nothing overt - we were both too vulnerable, especially Cynthia - her marriage was painful, she didn't want to get hurt again.

Darkness claimed the room. Visions faded and my touch surrendered to the body hug of an easy chair. Smell and taste ceased to be. All my senses went to my ears where her voice filled me. Her gentle lips, her sweet tongue, reached down miles of cable and licked and sucked and probed me to the quick. In past my lobes she went, down to my brain, my heart, my... Yet our conversation was pure as only that of true lovers can be. After ninety minutes on the phone I finally risked telling her that I loved her, that I had to see her. No, she said, it's not time. Yes, I said, it is, and I dove on squealing tyres down all the highways of the world, and they all led to her front door.

I loved Cynthia then. That was the night we lived hands on hands, hearts on hearts, promises on promises. I loved her eagerly for her sweetness, her sensitivity, her sense of humour, her willingness to always tell the truth as she saw it, to go out of her way to help people, to see the other point of view, her wholeness, her spontaneity, her belief in what was morally right, her sensuality, her strength in adversity, her belief in other people's excellence, her friendship, her bossiness, her hopes, her solidarity with the downtrodden, her ability to see through dishonesty, her...

...I saw her wince, I saw her weep, I saw her bleed. I could do nothing to stop myself and from somewhere inside my head I watched helplessly as my brute body crushed between us all trust, belief, hope and love. The finest thing I had found in my life - the only thing to focus the future, justify the past, give foundation to the present - I took it between my fingers and crumpled it like worthless garbage and threw it in the gutter. I wanted to shut my eyes to the horror, but they would not shut. I wanted to close my ears to Cynthia's pleas, and they would not close. I wanted to die, but my body would not lie down. I betrayed her, defied her, and though my actions were beyond my control, my conscience was not. Like an onlooker at the gates of Hell, I felt my heart squeezed and constricted by such grief that I could find no way of expressing myself, no way of countenancing my loss.

She lies on bed, crying. Console with tenderness, yes, tenderness. Push to one side, up on feet, sobbing, grabbing scraps of clothing. She looks at me in - disbelief? anger? hatred? Not quite. Memory fastforwards, rewinds. Instantaneous playback. Hurt! Yes, hurt! Shame, too. Let Gordon back in.

"Cynthia...daring..."

...she goes, door slamming behind her. Careful must.

I feel them slipping now, hours, minutes, seconds. They stiffen in my memory, shifting, sliding, becoming what never were before. Time goes limp. Loops and spirals, no longer linear, no longer Einsteinian. Why? Everything knowable is known. Live, re-live, die. I must die. Pretence, all is. New workplace I must go to. Act, respond, react. All normal, normal is. Shave, shower, dress neatly, eat properly. Mind in overdrive: hyperbrain hell. Species must survive. Survival all. New, reborn. There is no time. In dimensions far away there is no time. Beyond stars and galaxies and nebular clouds there is nothing but black holes. A black hole eats my brain. Memory stretches, elongates, gets sucked in. How can a head so overcrowded be so empty, so drained? Everything plays back at different speeds, different times, different places, until finally all is exhausted. Eject, reject. Nothing is. Everything is, but I am fading. Consciousness is, was once, never.

Absorb, inhale, soak up, infiltrate, engage, take in, colonise, suck in, receive, imbibe, draw in, decode, swallow, embrace, penetrate, implant.

But no Cynthia, mistake that.

Learn, learn, learn.



# The Plotting Parlour

John Madracki's article 'Matching Slang' in the last issue of Focus brought the following letter from:-

John Brunner:

I don't believe I know John Madracki. I find much of his advice sensible and worthwhile, but I am compelled in my office as elderly ex-chairman of BSFA to utter a stern warning against sharing his uncritical acceptance of folk etymology. If you don't know the term look it up.

"Bimbo" was coined by P. G. Wodehouse? Pray consult Wentworth & Flexner's *Dictionary of American Slang* for a meaning dating back to 1837, a punch or blow. Wodehouse may have borrowed an existing word, but (despite differences of application) he certainly didn't coin it. Its probable origin lies, like that of so many borderline criminal terms such as shiv, in Romany. One of the things that makes me most annoyed about the Academic Establishment is their refusal to admit the influence of other languages on English. Romany furnished almost all the "thieves' cant" that gave rise to much modern slang and you, the readers, very likely use some of the terms we gained from it. After all, it too is Indo-European.

It may also be noted that in one of the few comics I was allowed to read as a child, in 1940, the strip running across the bottom of the centre spread featured a circus act with a dog called Bimbo.

"Nuff said on that subject. But I fear Mr Madracki does not have access to a library like mine (I mean the books I own). He may well say robots were not controlled by a computer until the 50's, but computers existed in science fiction long before they did in real life because of the name borrowed from real life - it designated a job! Does he not know that before typewriters were machines, they were people? So were computers, a fact I exploited in a story I published back in 1989. He is almost certainly wrong about drag, as well, why go searching in America's West when in Britain a drag has so long been a way of slowing down the progress of a cart or boat? And why do you think 'drag' means female dress, had it not been for long skirts?

I could explain a few more of his egregious errors (some forgivable, some sheerly ignorant - and I doubt he could so accurately append that adverbial termination where it belongs!) but I lack time. I must content myself with correcting his most obvious mistakes.

Hip, to start with, did not "have its origins" where he claims, any more than did "in the groove". All this garbage about gaps between the floorboards of opium dens is superficially convincing but in the upshot it's worthless rubbish.

For a degree of accuracy, I must refer him and you to the question that no one bothered to pose until recently, when a slave-owner bought an African off the boat, how did they communicate? They didn't offer language lessons on the Middle Passage!

The answer was found by David Dalby. They used Wolof. This was the counterpart of the Mediterranean *lingua franca* (and if you're interested I can tell you where to locate a wall-painting like a comic strip about the Crusades with the text in that now vanished language). When slave-buyers dealt with the sellers - most of whom were North African Moslems, by the way - they communicated in Wolof, and words from it consequently entered US English.

'Hip', Mr Madracki, is African, like okay. So is 'cat'. In Wolof, *hipcat* means 'man with his eyes open'. This is such a widespread African compliment that even Rider Haggard used it for Allan Quatermain's Zulu nickname, Macumazahn. It also explains why black Americans refer to other members of the group as 'cat'. And okay derives from the African *waw-kay*, by all means, certainly.

As to groove, grooving and groovy: Mr Madracki, sir, I can only refer you to Augustus De Morgan who used the term last century in *A Budget of Paradoxes* about a man who "simply didn't groove"; Rudyard Kipling, who in *The House Surgeon* spoke of someone as "groovy", which I had to gloss as equaling to having a one-track mind (in my collection of Kipling's fantasy stories, published by Tor); and the relevant entries in the *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* which I find to be one of the most useful of my reference books. Also as soon as records became widespread... But that's another matter. The point is:

Pray do not automatically assume that all that you have been told is true, not that all you have guessed at is right.

Despondently,  
John Brunner.



The *contresens* between John Madracki and Andrew Butler over the use of the phrase 'hoi polloi' as opposed to 'the hoi polloi' has provoked the following riposte.  
Justina Robson:

A LINGUIST (EX) BLEATS...

I write, having very lately read issue 27, to bring down the full weight of my exasperation upon the correspondence between Andrew Butler and John Madracki:

My point is this: if you are going to get up on your high horse, dear Mr Butler, correcting the word usage of others, then make sure you aren't facing the arse end. As any classically educated *fulle kno hoi polloi* (οἱ πολλοὶ) is Greek, not Latin. Latin only uses a definite article in very rare circumstances, such as enthusiastic vocative exhortations and not always then, whilst Greek always uses an article of some kind. Furthermore, since few people these days know this or any other fact about classical languages, it is not an error in English to say 'the hoi polloi' since *hoi polloi* has been adopted into the language as a single unit loan phrase. The fact that 'the hoi' is a syntactic error (not a tautology; a tautology involves different words, not mere repetitions) technically speaking is generally viewed as an acceptable oversight since without *hoi polloi* is even less likely to be understood. As with most loan phrases, the unit itself is not expected to adhere to foreign syntactic rules. Whether it is an error or not is an arguable point and your stance depends on what you consider 'correct' language use to be; either adherence to grammars laid out in the last century or whatever bakes your cake. There is no right answer to this and whilst it has been debated (by great pedants throughout history) whole languages have arisen, flourished, bred promiscuously, gotten (old Eng. usage) good agents, reinvented themselves more times than Madonna and gone on to become movers and shakers the world over.

Tautologies per se are becoming more common, unfortunately. Using them, in my opinion as a nit-picking and probably under-read postgrad, linguist, serves only to display the writer's carelessness and ignorance (I would certainly and without doubt never use one over under any circumstances even if it does mean that I am living in a neglected backwater of biased bigotry). The question isn't so much 'should' we avoid them as 'can we even spot them?' Many of those that John selects to draw to our attention are now so widespread that they must be considered single units in their own right - compound nouns, adjectives and verbs. This gluing together of words of close or similar meaning happens in all languages all of the time and is part of the process of language maintenance and shift. It can't be stopped since the users dictate the structure of a language (the better to convey their meaning with) and not the other way around as traditional grammarians would have it. Although these phrases may sound odd to some of us today, tomorrow we'll hardly notice them since they will have become the norm. Those of us who liked English the way it was with one meaning per word and every word in its place will just have to keep 'phoning Radio 4 to complain about the loss of subtlety, the shocking lack of vocabulary mastered by the masses and the disgusting amount of American English slang flowing into the mouths of our young people as if through a trans-Atlantic effluent pipe: repeat *ad nauseam*.

~~~~~

Now on a slightly different note, other responses to Focus 27.

John Madracki:

FORUM: Stephen Baxter. For the record, I am one of those who have always held that Wells was being deliberately ironic when he used those key phrases at the close of *The Time Machine*. Even if he wasn't aware of it at the time. There have been occasions when I have been congratulated on a particular pun, or a subtle touch of irony, only to find that I had written them without knowing it. The result of coincidence? Maybe. Maybe not. To what extent does the subconsciousness of a writer affect his work? Can 'automatic writing' be a very real component in the creative process? A topic for a future FORUM, perhaps.

DRABBLE: A very mixed bag indeed. Does David Piper, I wonder, really believe that a world ruled by women would be any more peaceful than the one we have now - a world ruled by men who are ruled by women. Alan Kitch came up with a marvellous closing line - but there was no logic to the sequence leading up to it. If her head fell off then her hand didn't stay attached to the rest of her. So the Devil simply broke his word. Andrew J Fielding's was too didactic, as was Lawrence Day's. Brian Maycock's was far more telling. But the best by far was Tanya Brown's 'Maze', and shows just how effective this form of writing can be.

**LETTERS:** As much as I would appreciate in-depth articles from single writers, as suggested by Justina Robson, I would hate to lose the rich variety of views and opinions we now get with FORUM. If we can't have both then I vote we leave things as they are. [There was no suggestion last issue that the Forum would be dropped if in-depth articles were published. We would like to do both. However, so far no-one has taken us up on the possibility of producing an in-depth article on any aspect of writing SF & F.]

The Forum on Science in SF, proposed by Andrew J. Fielding, sounds an excellent idea and I look forward to participating in it.

Through a Telephoto Lens Darkly. I have always assumed that this was a (modernized) pun on that much plagiarized phrase, 'Through a Glass Darkly'. This was originally the title of a tale by Sheridan le Fanu. But was that its first appearance? I've always felt there was a Shakespearean ring to it. Does anybody know? [See below... Eds.]

A little quiz. How many book titles can you think of that were taken from works by Shakespeare? 'Something Wicked This Way Comes' immediately springs to mind.

I'm glad Sandy Fleming has brought up the subject of further competitions in *Focus*. The Drabble one seemed to be a great success. As I'm sure Sandy will agree. [See elsewhere in this issue for details of the latest competition.]

And still with Sandy. What significance did the colour mauve have in the 1890s? I bet it was sexual.

Finally, does anyone else agree that an interval of 6 months between each issue of *Focus* is far too long for such an excellent magazine? I move it becomes quarterly.



#### Howard Watts:

As a new member to the BSFA I was very excited when my first issue of *Focus* landed on my doormat. There are some very interesting comments and ideas expressed in the magazine, and I find it more accessible, and not as high and mighty as magazines such as

**INTERZONE** It's a pity it's published bi-annually though! [Always nice to know we are so appreciated! Seriously though, we're not sure that we as editors could cope with more than two issues a year. We would need a lot more material than we get now, and I'm not sure how that would work out, as we wouldn't want our standards to drop.]

#### Michael Jelley:

I would like to add my support to A. J. Fielding's BSFA magazine idea. With over 8 Orbiter groups, I am sure there is enough good fiction produced to adequately pad out such a magazine.

To be more than 'just' another sci-fi mag, though, the BSFA to me would have to be somehow different. Perhaps that difference could be some sort of weighting in favour of those who haven't published much elsewhere. (What other magazine doesn't have names who pop up again and again?)

The advantage of this policy would be a publishing 'stepping stone' for wannabe writers. A chance also to read a more diverse 'vision of the future' for sci-fi fans.

Would this policy result in sub-standard fiction being published? Maybe, if the magazine were produced frequently. Maybe not if it were an 'Annual Best of'.



#### Andrew J. Fielding:

Another excellent issue with much valuable advice and information. John Madrack's 'Matching Slang' has certainly rang bells and given me something to think about. Keep up the good work. This brings me on to the drabbles featured on the back page, or actually to my 'A Few Good Reasons'. I hate to suggest this, but was this a mistake? I was expecting to see the drabble 'Deja Vu' that I entered in your drabble competition a few issues back. Did you perhaps get the two mixed up or did you just decide the latter was better than the former? I'm just curious, that's all. Are you still planning to publish 'Deja Vu' in a future issue?

Please don't take this as a complaint in any form whatsoever. To see something of mine in print for the first time is such a major ego boost that I'm still on cloud nine. Many thanks.

[We still have quite a few drabbles, including Andrew's 'Deja Vu' from the drabble competition, some are published elsewhere in this issue. However, don't let that put you off submitting more, we're always pleased to see them.]

#### Andy Mills:

Nicola Griffith's use of the city of H'II (*Focus* 27) is curiously like that of Stephen Gallagher's. Whereas she talks about using it,

unnamed, in a book called *Slow River*, the city (and more especially the coastland further east) makes an anonymous appearance in Gallagher's *Down River*. Again unnamed, both H'II and C't't'ng'h'm feature in the earlier *Chimera*. However, I suspect that Stephen Gallagher's memories of the city are pleasanter than those of Nicola Griffith.

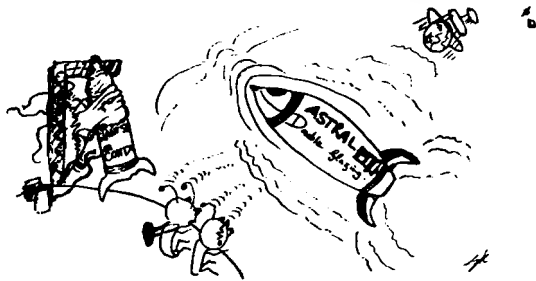
[Which just goes to prove that there's something in the belief that Hull is the 'nave of the Universe'!]

#### Cherith Baldry:

I enjoyed *Focus* very much, though perhaps someone ought to tell Andrew Butler that *hop polloi* is Greek! While in nitpicking mode, if you really want to know the origin of your editorial title, look up 1 *Corinthians* 13 v 12 ["For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known."] (I'm probably the 105th person to tell you this!)

There seemed to be quite a lot about the use of language in this *Focus*, one way and another. I always enjoy Colin Greenland's piece, and I thought this one was particularly subtle. It's the sort of thing I try to do myself, but who can say how successfully?

[Funny how everything turns out to have come from either Shakespeare or the Bible, isn't it? Origins: yes, but the reference was to a work - or do we mean works? - of fantasy...]



# Think With the Wise, But Talk With the Vulgar

by Howard Watts

The two travellers were thirsty. They had walked a good seventeen miles that morning and the midday sun above them shot unbroken beams of fire, urging them to find shelter. Anton stopped and squinted into the distance.

"Look Senerack, is that a public house?"

Senerack, a good deal younger and blessed with better eyesight than his companion, put down the canoe he carried and shielded his eyes with both hands.

"Yes Anton, I believe you're correct. The structure is not a dwelling. It is larger and has square sides, as you described earlier. It must be a building for people to gather in. Shall I investigate further?"

The old man gratefully sat down against the dried up river bank, easing his heavy rucksack into the atomic dust beside him. He wiped his brow with his handkerchief then closed his eyes to the sweltering world. The boy respected the old man's silence and waited for his reply.

"They may be of the other kind, Senerack, be careful and quick. Remember - few words are best, for thirst and heat can deliver a man to his enemy."

The young student of the book regarded his mentor with blurred vision. The brightness of the outside had highlighted his threadbare appearance, he seemed much older than when they had started their journey a few weeks before, but even now he quoted the book precisely, executing every syllable perfectly, with only a slight croak to his voice. He wondered how he himself looked, and longed for the rainy season and his christening, but that was many days away and the book had told him that time is one of the three great physicians, the others being nature and patience. Something told him he had been betrayed by all three. Nature had sent this accursed yellow orb to hinder their journey, slowing their pace against the short time they had to complete their task. And patience, he had his own theory for that virtue which had left his dry and dusty body earlier that morning.

Patience was for men with nothing to do, but wait for nothing. He knew he could not change his fate, even if he wanted to. Faith in the book was all he needed.

"I shall return soon Anton, rest a while." With that, Senerack trudged up the hill towards the group of shimmering buildings hanging in the distance, leaving small clouds of dust billowing behind him.

Anton turned and watched his student, and wished he had his energy of youth. Senerack, for all his seventeen years, was the most promising of his students. His ability to learn quickly and remember his lessons impressed him. He had adapted to the outside perfectly. His tall, thin and muscular frame had quickly become bronzed by Sol, and his hair had faded with long yellow streaks. Anton was sure he had made the right choice. After his death Senerack would continue his work and would learn he could never return to his family and friends on the inside, the rain would see to that. The book would tame the people that lived upon the land, until it was safe for everyone to venture outside.



The buildings soon became solid as he drew nearer. The first was indeed a public house, rising high out of the dust over the few curved dwellings which sat in its shade. It was many years old by Senerack's estimation. The walls were pale, bleached by constant exposure to the sun. Crumbling plaster here and there revealed wounds of broken brick, scars of age and neglect. Around these scars the plaster cracked, weaving lines which crawled around the building like wrinkles on an old man's face. From inside Senerack could hear music and drunken laughter. He approached the building with caution, despite Anton's advice, and peered in through a broken window. Before his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness of the interior his nose twitched with the smell of alcohol. The stale sweetness filled his lungs, his mouth felt as dry as the river-bed they had walked along and his eyes widened as he noticed that inside were many people, drinking from large clay mugs. He turned and ran back down the dusty river-bed to the old man.

"Anton! Anton!" He gasped trying to catch his breath. "You were correct, it is a public house, and there is an abundance of refreshment. There are people drinking ..."

Anton held up a hand signaling silence.



"The people, are they of the book Senerack?"

He realised his mistake.

"There was no time, besides they didn't speak, they were laughing, Anton, laughing with all their hearts."

The old man stared accusingly at his student, his gaze one of disappointment. Senerack, for the first time in many days, regarded the face of his tutor and was reminded of the walls of the public house. Scars and wrinkles. The old man spoke.

"What does the book tell us of time? Subject 171 lesson 9, repeat the words."

The young man mentally scanned the pages for the correct recital. When he was sure he had found the quote the old man referred to, he spoke.

"He that has time, has life?"

Anton smiled and the walls crumbled.

"Correct. Help me up, I shall lead."



The odour of stale alcohol greeted them as Anton opened the door. He scanned the room with an expert eye then quickly turned to Senerack as the barman noticed them.

"This place is a slaughterhouse of the truth, a rock under which the lizards of life crawl. I will speak for us." The boy nodded and followed Anton to the bar.

The barman stood a head and a half taller than the old man and commanded a frame of double that of his pupil. His face was a red balloon, bloated and ready to pop, his skin a mottled over-ripe rotting fruit, stained from many rainy seasons. He sniffed loudly and snarled at the thirsty pair.

"Mugs are five coins, or equal trade in food. No free mugs, even for an old wreck of a man like you." Senerack wanted to jump across the bar and strangle the barman for his lack of respect, but Anton shot him a glance to keep quiet.

"Two mugs, the best you have."

Senerack could not believe his ears. Today all his senses had been stimulated, for Anton spoke with a threatening edge to his voice, a command rather than a request. He completed the illusion by holding the barman's stare until he turned to the casks behind him. He whispered to his pupil.

"Give me ten coins from the purse please, Senerack." He passed the coins to him and Anton dropped them in a puddle on top of the bar as the landlord produced two full mugs. The landlord checked the coins with the few remaining teeth his jaws held, then, satisfied with their quality, gave a single slow nod to the old man. The two companions turned to survey the public house. Every table had occupants, either sitting at or slumped over. They were not of the book. In the far corner to their right, three musicians fought together to hold a melody which several drunken men and women attempted to dance to. The onlookers who could still see and hear, clapped along to the display, but most of them were far too drunk and out of time, creating an effect like a constant slow applause. Anton noticed a lone drunk slumped across a table behind the dancers. He led a bemused Senerack through the lolling bodies to the table, removed his back pack and sat beside him.

The young man could wait no longer and gulped his refreshment until Anton noticed and pulled the drink away.

"Slowly, the alcohol will take effect quickly if you drink like that. Sip your ale and enjoy. Like this." Senerack watched as the old man slowly lifted the mug to his chapped lips. He let the drink touch, then parted them letting the ale seep in. He closed his eyes as the chilled liquid cooled his throat. Senerack copied him and frowned.

"Your voice Anton. It was different when you spoke to the barman. It was full of anger and aggression, that is not the way of the book. You have broken a lesson."

Anton shook his head and took another sip.

"You are young Senerack, that is one reason I chose you to join me on this journey."

The old man thought for a moment.

"Subject 172 lesson 5. He who does not travel, will not know the value of man. The lessons are only invisible words on a blank page, until they are experienced. That's when they transform themselves into lessons learnt and written by your own hand." He returned to his ale. The student was about to speak but was interrupted by a groan from the drunk at their table. He sat up and regarded the two travellers.

"Who spoke of lessons?" he asked in a slur, "Who breaks the written law?"

His words were highlighted by the halt of the music as the injured melody drifted off to die amongst the rotting rafters of the ale house. Three of the dancers, two women and a man sat opposite the group at their table. The man, dirty, with short greasy hair, spoke through rotting teeth and chapped lips.

"Ignore this idiot, he speaks of lessons when he has broken every one. This murderer is the bastard son of all the lessons. He has turned and twisted them to his own advantage all his life."

The drunk pulled a knife from his boot and held its shining edge in his chair, his eyes wide.

The drunk spat words at his accuser, his eyes filling with tears.

"You lie! I lived by the lessons at first but they betrayed me! I taught them, many times, to the children of my village. But the lessons are like you Becker, evil. How many men, like the lessons, have you killed?"

Becker slowly pulled the knife away from his throat, and the drunk dropped it on the table with a silver clatter, sobbing. He answered in a whisper, "More men than you father, many more than you, but only for your protection. Only to keep you alive to realise your mistake. The lessons are wrong, they teach only lies."

He turned to Anton who had been watching the display with interest. "What do you say stranger?"

"You're right, the lessons, even the subjects are lies. They speak of truths which could never be. The truth is plain and simple, as a sharp blade like this one." Anton picked up the knife the drunk had dropped and held it to Senerack's throat, watching Becker. The young boy felt his stomach tighten and his breath leave his body. Had Anton gone mad in the heat?

Slowly Becker smiled. Then his smile turned to laughter.

"You would kill this boy?"

"If it would benefit me, yes."

"Perhaps it will old man." Becker pulled his own knife from his belt and held it to Anton's throat, but Anton showed no fear.

"It would give me pleasure to see this, if, as you say, the lessons lie. Your belief will be judged by his death by your hand. Your lie and failure to end his life, will end your own."

Anton stared at the murderer, Becker, and felt Senerack's fear beside him. The three musicians walked past the table to continue their music. The music startled and Becker waited.

"Well, old man, what will it be?"

Senerack felt the blade press tightly against his neck and a small trickle of blood ran down his neck.

The two women sitting either side of Becker, bored by the display they had seen a hundred times before stood up and started to dance to the music. The younger of the two bent down and spoke to Becker.

"Dance with us husband, the music will calm you." The other woman joined her counterpart.

"Yes, dance with us, leave this old man and boy, they are not a threat to you, or our village." The two women swayed onto the dance floor

leaving the four men alone. Becker noticed the blood on Senerack's neck.

"Leave the boy, your words are the truth and the lessons lie." He stood up and placed his knife back into its sheath.

"You're both lucky today. My wives have saved you, for their pleasure is more important than my own."

When Becker was out of sight Anton placed the knife on the table.

"I am sorry Senerack, truly sorry, but when the effect speaks, the tongue need not."

Senerack wiped the blood from his neck with his sleeve. "It is alright Anton, the wound will soon heal and the scar will remind me, but in the end it was the maidens who saved both of us. A new lesson reminds us, age and wedlock tames man and beast, and that beast has two wives." Anton smiled, squeezing the boy's shoulder.

"Good! Your first lesson, write it down."

Becker's father looked up at the two travellers as Senerack removed his own copy of the book from his back-pack and scribbled down the lesson.

"So, you did lie, you do believe in the lessons."

"Yes," replied Anton in a whisper, "They are the truth."

The drunk clutched Anton's sleeve tightly with both hands.

"Teach me, show me the truth again, let the lessons of the book cleanse my soul."

Anton reached into his back-pack and pulled out a book from a pile of many and handed it to the drunk.

"Here is the book, the truth which hides in all of us. The truth most of us choose to ignore."

The drunk cried openly as he held the lessons, the law in his hands.

"Thank you, I will change my village again, they will listen to me."

Anton smiled and finished his drink.

"We must leave now, we have a long journey ahead of us and many villages to show the book to." He stood up and turned to his pupil.

"Come along Senerack, it is time for us to leave."

Senerack gulped down the remainder of his ale, replaced his book and joined his tutor who weaved between the dancing bodies towards the door.

Outside the sun was not as bright as earlier and Senerack noticed a fresh look on Anton's face. He seemed pleased, another converted to the book.

"Tell me Anton," Senerack asked as they rejoined the river-bed,

"Why did you change your speech in the ale house? You were rough, and eager for confrontation."

Anton looked up to the sky and smiled, noticing the dark clouds gathering above.

"Subject 282, lesson 65. Think with the wise, but talk with the vulgar."

As the old man finished his sentence the first few drops of rain fell. Senerack lowered the canoe and faced the sky, enjoying a sensation he had never experienced before.

"So, Senerack, the day has come," commented Anton with a touch of sorrow to his voice. "You have found your first lesson, and have been christened on the same day. Sit on the river bank with me. When the water touches our feet, we will travel in my canoe."

The man, Senerack, joined his mentor sitting at the river bank.

Anton's words, however, were lost to him as he listened to the rain, soaking into the thirsty river-bed.

Inside the ale house the drunk was distracted from the book by the downpour clattering on the roof above. He staggered to the window and watched as the two travellers lowered the canoe into the river. Silently he breathed a thank you as he watched them paddle away then returned to his book. It was similar to the book his father had given him when he was a child. Similar to the book Becker had burnt as a young man when he had passed it on to him. The pages were pure white throughout, blank, all four hundred and fifty of them, without a single written word.

He stared at the pages and the lessons came flooding back like the rain outside.



## ❖ Dr Greenland's Prescription ❖

### Plotting is like sex

Plotting is about desire and satisfaction, anticipation and release. You have to arouse your reader's desire to know what happens, to unravel the mystery, to see good triumph. You have to sustain it, keep it warm, feed it, just a little bit, not too much at a time, as your story goes on. That's called suspense. It can raise desire to a frenzy in which case you are in a good position to bring off a wonderful climax.

Plotting isn't like sex, because you can go back and adjust it afterwards. Whether you plan your story beforehand or not, if the climax turns out to be the revelation that the mad professor's anti-gravity device actually works, you must go back and silently delete all those flying cars buzzing around the city on page one.

If you want to reveal something, you need to hide it properly first.

Of course, 'properly' does not mean so completely we are totally unprepared for it. If you don't mention the anti-gravity device before the last chapter, expect people to complain about your *deus ex machina*, your contrived ending the resolution that comes from outside the plot. In fact, all endings are contrived. Those endings called contrived by disappointed readers are endings contrived inadequately.



Take a tip from the crime writers. When you've got your resolution whatever it is, go back and plant the clues. Tiny ones at first, the merest caresses to make your reader's imagination start to tingle.

If the climax turns out to be the revelation that the mysterious virus ravaging the colony is actually adapting the survivors for life on the planet, you can go back to the hospital scene where nothing much is happening yet except medics standing around spouting bits of your research at each other, and you can put in, underfoot, an inquisitive three-year-old convalescent picking up a purple beetle and eating it. He can be the offspring of the least pleasant characters, those obsequious political appointees, who now shrink and wave their arms and accuse the medics of negligence. All of which directs our attention straight into the foreground, the main plot, where the grown-ups are.

Later, when we've forgotten all about the toddler, your protagonist (hurry to some more urgent business, of course) can notice, with a thoughtful frown, that he's come to no harm. Maybe he's even doing better than his contemporaries in the creche.



Contrivance, and the art of rewriting. Consider Kate

In chapter one Kate is hired to advise on programming continuity at the thrilling new Virtual Reality theme park. Her background doesn't really qualify her and isn't there something sinister about the programming supervisor and his attentions to her? But all the detail of the real stuff you can do in there with the goggles and the full-body suit and all is really fascinating, and you write a lot of that.

Then in chapter five Kate suddenly takes off for Mars to look for her long-lost mother. You find you've said everything you had to say about Virtual Reality, and you've got to get her to Mars for the next bit of the story, so there she is, hurrying on to the spaceship, pausing only to gasp a few breathless sentences about her mother disappearing on a

Mars expedition years before.

And somehow the plot never returns to the theme park, or the sinister supervisor, or the reason Kate got the job in the first place. Instead it ends with a wonderful climactic reunion in the middle of a battle with the Evil Empire, on Mars.

Now (after a break) you get into your mighty authorial time machine, and you set off to go back and fix things.

For instance

And that bry pink dot in the viewer there, that was Mars. Kate had, as she always did the tug at her heart. Mars.

No. She had a job to do.

That, inserted early in chapter two, creates a mystery about Mars. It introduces Kate's desire to go there. That simple phrase as *she always did* makes the desire exist *already* - suddenly it's something the character brings with her, not something you have to waste words equipping her with.

More the desire is thwarted, by the word *No*. Which makes us start to want Kate to go to Mars. Or to fear she may risk everything on a fool's errand to Mars, or whatever, depending on how the story goes.

In fact, that little insert makes it bloody obvious and inevitable that the whole point of the story will be Kate on Mars.

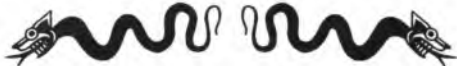
Never promise what you're not going to deliver. When you've found out what it is you're actually delivering, go right back and start entering, from as early as possible, those tiny, sneaky little promises to deliver it.

Then you can fix Kate's background. Make the fascinating VR job the thing she has to give up to

seek her heart's desire. Unmask the supervisor's intentions before she leaves, since he's never going to reappear - is he a recruiter for a ghastly cult, or just a dirty old man? - giving Kate another reason to head for Mars, to flee his unwelcome attentions. Take out the mystery about the reason for her employment, because that's not the point of the story any more.

Unless Kate's been given the job (and the supervisor a secret agent definitely) by the Evil Empire, on purpose to keep her away from Mars and the *Awful Truth*.

There. Suddenly your muddled, wobbly plot is trim and direct and all lined up for the glorious climax.



## Machinehead And The Vehicle Haven

by Vincent M. De Souza

Vehicles would arrive in friction sectors,  
Their wheels rotating on track and gridline,  
To the circuits built on highway platforms;  
The steel models moved on parabolic curves,  
With the pause and surge of tuned combustion.  
They were slab bulks of elegant transport,  
Speed sculptures, frames of bold corrosion;  
Electronic guides would programme routes  
To the phase and burn of an equinox sun.  
The sky would darken with toxins of fuel,  
Till engines stalled on the smoke horizon.

*Machinehead approved of the energy artifice,  
The culture of travellers in ritual jams;  
He observed the self controlled machines:  
The advance of racers in full momentum,  
The repair cabs driven by servile man.*

### Brief Encounter

by Brian Maycock

The alien race sent out  
a transmitted plea:  
Help us, our world is dying.

Message received  
here on Earth  
millions complained or re-tuned.

The interference soon passed.

## A Paedophile Lapse on The Communication Highway

by Vincent M. De Souza

Your children are enchanting computer records,  
Their characters grow when fed with codings,  
I stroke them with the cursor, pressing delete.



## The Experiment Debate

by Vincent M. De Souza

The Ancestor says that trees  
Must be saved  
On latitudes of sacred ground.

*(Machinehead can see a forest  
Replaced by a matrix of wires,  
An outpost made of synthetic steel).*

The Ancestor tries to ration his oil,  
To filter the river's putrid sheen.

*(Machinehead floats in  
The sulphurous swell,  
Machinehead is amazed  
By a thermonuclear sea).*

The Ancestor wishes  
To extend the survival  
Of some endangered species.

*(Machinehead has found  
The fossils of wolf and dandelion;  
Machinehead knows the adventure of  
death,  
The danger of too many genes).*

The Ancestor has burned a hole  
in the shield of nearest sky.

*(Machinehead breathes an acid  
spray,  
He fills his lungs  
With the clouds of argon.  
Machinehead knows  
Of Jesus and The Beanstalk,  
The lightless nebula,  
The fortune in a systems fall).*

## The Creature in the Swamp

by Rik Gammack

A splash spreads ripples on dark water.  
Below, an old one stirs, then seeks the  
surface with quickening strokes.  
Primitive lungs painfully gulp air.

It regards its surroundings. The  
remembered desert is now a jungle  
teeming with life. Many are descendants  
of its siblings who struggled from the  
water long ago.

Perhaps now is the time to join them.

It watches further and sees each  
niche in the new world filled with  
specially adapted life. Its own ancient  
form promises only a precarious  
existence on the edge of failure.  
It sinks indolently back to the familiar  
mud. Evolution can wait.

## Evolution

by David Piper

"Organic creatures, your days are  
numbered!" said the alien after gliding  
out of its starship. It was six metres tall  
and its voice crackled from a grill low  
down on its metallic flanks. Red and  
green lights flashed and winked all over  
its upper parts.

"Welcome to our planet!" said the  
man, smiling nervously. "I am the  
President of the United States."

The alien laughed harshly. The  
President screamed and fell to the  
ground.

The generals did not hesitate: they  
fired a selection of weapons - but the  
computers mutinied.

Since then, organic life has been  
enslaved. We are happy now.

## Deja Vu

by Andrew J. Fielding

The Space Corps pilot skilfully guided  
the lander to the virgin surface. A  
strangely familiar old man met him as he  
exited the airlock.

"All time and events here are  
cyclical," he rasped.

The surprised pilot noticed that he  
wore an old Space Corps uniform. The  
pilot was even more surprised when he  
produced a lasgun and stole the lander,  
leaving him stranded and alone.

Years passed.

One day a lander gently settled to  
the earth nearby. He strode across and  
met the pilot. A distant memory  
surfaced, echoed in his own words. "All  
time and events here are cyclical."

## Crusade

by Peter Irving

"The blessing of the Holy Trinity be  
yours!"

The priest's benediction echoed  
over the serried ranks of soldiers.  
Armoured troops marched across the  
canal, boarding their craft. The packed  
crowds cheered.

Our machines of war shone as the  
invasion fleet loaded. They would  
launch at dusk.

We had overlooked nothing in our  
planning. The smallest thing had been  
considered. nothing could go wrong.

The fleet would speed to victory.  
Our heathen enemy would be swept  
aside as the triads landed. The Rule of  
Three would spread.

A wild ululation split the Martian  
night as the first cylinder blasted  
Earthwards.

"Uuuuuuuuuuu!"

## The Sword of Rama

by David Piper

Sweating and tired, he stumbled into the  
tomb. He took a photograph of a wall-  
sculpture, wondering where his wife was.  
He looked at his watch: still forty minutes  
before the coach left. An irresistible  
urge drove him into the fourth chamber.  
The Sword of Rama was there,  
embedded in stone. It called him.  
Effortlessly, he wielded it above his  
head.

"At last I am free!" said a deep  
voice from his mouth. "This puny body  
shall lead me to my beloved battlefield!"

With a roar of bloodlust, Rama led  
the man out - to his wife, the bus, and  
the battlefield.

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Competition

Prizes

*Focus* challenges you to submit up to 3 poems of no more than 40 lines each, on any element or angle of *The Fantastic*. The competition will be judged by the author and poet *Storm Constantine* and the winner will receive a signed copy of her poetry collection *Colurastes*. There will be a runners-up prize of her *Elemental Tale*. Entries should always be accompanied by an s.a.e. and sent to either of the *Focus* addresses by 31st October 1995; mark your envelope 'Poetry Competition'.



Competition

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Prizes

Competition