

# Focus

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

Issue 31

Mar/Apr 1997

ISSN 0144-560X



**\*\*Writing Fantasy Fiction\*\***

**\*\*Competition\*\***

**\*\*Stories\*\***

**\*\*Poetry\*\***

**\*\*Style\*\***

Sarah Lefanu

Leigh Kennedy, Ruby

John F. Haines, Riaz Hussain

D. Harrigon, Steve Sneyd, John Light

Andrew Darlington, Colin Greenland – & lots more...

# Focus 31

## Contents

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| Page 3  | Editorial: Through a telephoto lens, lightly ...  |
| Page 3  | Dr Greenland's Prescription   |
| Page 4  | Steve Sneyd, A lesson too late, Close lure round Vega   |
| Page 5  | Andrew Darlington, Beyond the contraverse intersection, Janet Barron, Virgin territory                  |
| Page 6  | John Light, Pavilion of time  |
| Page 8  | Forum: Style – by Leigh Kennedy, Martin Sketchley, Riaz Hussain, Howard Watts                           |
| Page 9  | The Plotting Parlour  |
| Page 10 | Andrew Darlington, Moonrise over Venus, Steve Sneyd, Heroes of the Nation; John F Haines, Fragmentation |
| Page 11 | Sarah Lefanu, On writing fantasy fiction  |
| Page 12 | D Harrison, Peace   |
| Page 14 | John Light, Space raiders   |
| Page 15 | Competition and the forum for next issue  |

## Artwork:

|               |                    |
|---------------|--------------------|
| Front Cover:  | John Light         |
| Page 7        | Ruby               |
| Pages 3, 8, 9 | Julie Venner       |
| Page 2        | Steve Jeffery      |
| Pages 5       | Dover Publications |
| Back Cover:   | Ruby               |
| Design:       | Carolyn Horn       |

## Editors

Carol Ann Green – Flat 3, 141 Princes Avenue, HULL HU5 3DL  
Julie Venner – 42 Walgrave Street, Newland Avenue, HULL HU5 2LT

Email: [metaphor@enterprise.net](mailto:metaphor@enterprise.net)

## Technical Support

Ian Bell

## Production and Layout

Wise Child & Co.

The opinions expressed are those of individual contributors and do not necessarily represent those of the B S F A.  
Individual copyrights are the property of the authors, artists and editors.

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



## Other BSFA Publications:

**Matrix** is the news magazine of the BSFA. Letters and enquiries to Chris Terran, 9 Beechwood Court, Back Beechwood Grove, Leeds. West Yorkshire, LS4 2HS

**Vector** is the critical journal of the BSFA. Letters and enquiries to Tony Cullen, 16 Weavers Way, Camden Town, London NW1 0XE

## BSFA Membership Rates:

£18 UK; £23.50 Europe; £23.50 (surface) elsewhere; £30 (airmail) elsewhere; £9 UK only for students, unwaged, retired - on receipt of a photocopy of suitable proof  
**Renewals and New Members:** Paul Billinger, 1 Long Row Close, Everdon, Daventry, Northants NN11 3BE

**USA enquiries:** Cy Chauvin, 14248 Wilfred Street, Detroit, M148213, USA

Printed by PDC Copyprint, 11 Jeffries Passage, Guildford, Surrey, GU1 4AP

**Focus** is published bi-annually by the **British Science Fiction Association** ©1997

The British Science Fiction Association Ltd – Company limited by Guarantee – Company no 921500 – Registered address – 60 Bournemouth Road, Folkestone, Kent, CT19 5AZ



# Editorial

## Through a telephoto lens, lightly...

This issue of *Focus* marks our 4th Anniversary and our 8th issue. We believe we've achieved a lot in those 8 issues: Forums on 'Writers' Workshops', 'Worldbuilding', 'Aliens', 'Style', 'Characters', etc.; fiction from authors such as John Light, Howard Watts, Chanté Bakdy, Caroline Dunford, etc.; competitions for poetry and drabbles (and a short story competition announced in this issue); non-fiction by Simon Ings, Brian Stableford, Sherwood

Smith, etc.; – and of course, our regular column by Colin Greenland: *Dr Greenland's Prescription*.

There is still more we would like to achieve with *Focus*, and we also need your help. What type of articles would you like to see in *Focus*? Would you be willing to write an article yourself? Any suggestions for Forum subjects you would like to read or write about?

Or do you think we're on the right tracks? Should we be publishing more/fewer fiction? Are we bringing you the things you want to see in *Focus*?

Eight issues is an achievement we are both proud of. We'd like to go on producing the magazine to the high standard we've set, but we need your help, your input. We look forward to hearing from you.

Regards

## Dr Greenland's Prescription

### Finishing

If you're the sort of writer who never finishes, you're the sort of writer who's never published.

There's nothing wrong with that. In fact, it's bloody marvellous. It frees you, entirely. You can write what you want, without consideration or constraint of any kind. You can write as naturally as a bird flies. The only danger is, the bird may fly away.

Every professional I know agrees: nothing makes you finish like a contract. A contract with a deadline on it.

So make one. Make the story a birthday present for someone you care about, someone who knows you're doing it and wants to read it.

That you can do at any point. Otherwise, finishing is a function of planning.

Yes, I know: you don't plan, you can't plan, if you plan the thing you'll never write it, you write it to find out what happens. You are one of the blessed, a true teller of tales, and a gift to your people. Your best work will have integrity and authority the rest of us can only grope towards.

The rest of us, by our different ways and means, plan.

Finishing can be helped by knowing where you're going. I always know what happens. I don't necessarily know

how

If you know any of what happens in the end, write that down first. Then go back and see what led up to it.

If you know exactly, in order, go away and write it, quick, before you forget it, before anything happens to make you change your mind.

If you're like me, what you know is actually more like a series of headlines: TABITHA ESCAPES FROM CAPELLAN SHIP. PRINCE SMORGASBORD SUSPECTS TREASON. VISITS ARMOURY. MYSTERY WITNESS REMEMBERS MURDER. Put them down in the order they happen.

Some of the headlines are definite, and self-explanatory. Some are vaguer, have only fragments of story clinging to them, or none. You decide which ones will make chapters, which are only scenes. Some of this is bound to change as you write it, as you discover a scene's unguessed significance, its connection to other events. Or, as so often transpires, its entire irrelevance.

Plan by being firm about what you know. Leave the rest

open.

Get used to thinking of stories and books as things that have been made.

How long is your favourite short story? Guess, then count the words. When you finish reading a book, decide how many words it was. Then check. Count a page, multiply by the number of pages.

You probably have an idea whether what you're going to write will be a short story or a 15-volume epic. If it's a short story how short? If it's a book, is it a *Picador*, slim and refined? Or a *Millennium*, chunky and long-lasting?

Finishing can be helped by knowing how far you've got to go.

How many locations were there in the last book you enjoyed? How many characters? How much dialogue? Do you want to write lots of dialogue, or hardly any?

Finishing can be helped by knowing how much you've got to do.

Finishing can be helped by knowing how long it might take. Look at *Death is No Obstacle* (It won't be in the library, but get them to find you one and borrow it.) Look at what Mike Moorcock says about planning by units.

How much can you write at a session? Not how much would you like to write, how much do you tell people you can write – how much can you comfortably, reliably do?

You can make that your unit

While I was writing **Other Voices**, I watched myself. Each day I counted what I'd done. I found I could do a thousand words a day, on a good day. So when I sat down to plan **Take Back Plenty**, I decided to do it in thousand-word chapters.

When I came to write them, most of them grew. Some of them grew, shrank, turned sideways, inside out and upside down before I'd finished with them. But each time, I knew if I'd told the story that went with that headline, and if I had at least a thousand words, then I'd finished a chapter.

And I knew when I'd finished 68 of them, I'd have finished the book.

\*

Here's what I mean to try with the next one. It's something I heard Gwyneth Jones recommend on our Arvon Foundation course, as a way of getting from first idea to finished story.

Start by writing down your whole story as briefly as you can. (Like my headlines.)

Hitler won World War II and the Nazis are using subjugated races to terraform Mars. The camp commandant's daughter falls in love with a Jewish slave boy. Together they escape to Earth and bring down the Reich.



## A Lesson Too Late by Steve Sned

a thousand times we asked  
world-sized computer we found  
why  
throw all life here away  
a thousand times the answer  
Rephrase Rephrase at last bored  
Gurn our ship's adapted cat  
asked instead why don't you  
have pets anymore like humans  
I have them inside me  
the Megabrain whispered shaking  
orbits  
electrons to love and be  
loved purely that don't die  
inferior in our mortality we  
fly on to lower gods

as if we hadn't heard

Then start to expand it, keeping it whole. Fill in the gaps, put in the details: the names, the dates. Tell the story behind each sentence.

How did Gerda first notice Leo? Where was he? What was he doing? Who else was there? She fell in love with him because she saw him secretly taking air and water to a crippled woman hiding in a disused bunker. Gerda became jealous of the woman. The woman turned out to be a spy. Seeing Leo's struggle made Gerda strong.

Expand it and expand it until it's long enough.

Until it's finished.

Maybe this will involve going through it all five times; maybe fifty. With a word processor, you can do that. I do it anyway, rewriting, cutting, polishing, correcting mistakes I've made, changing things in chapter three that turn out to be askew because of some unexpected development in chapter thirteen. Then changing them again later.

Writing and rewriting in certainty that you're always on track, with the lines of communication clear from beginning to end; that sounds good to me.

## Close Lure Round Vega by Steve Sned

my prize of the war offers me  
nor food nor drink nor soft  
melody fitting her for love

but still come look now admire  
hung high out there among the 12-moons  
my creature see how she offers

little me size enough to  
suit my mind's reach, Freyon, see she  
could easy bear

between her thighs our whole-world  
lightsome burden as winged egg  
yours not a patch you gullible

chooser at the trophy-laking  
one who picked before me and yet  
the most you can say

you in the bone-rimmed eyes  
can stand upright  
or nearly, only slightly bent

under eyelid weight fool as  
it  
crucified

# Beyond the Contraverse Intersection/An Unnatural History of the Senses

by Andrew Darlington

the second sun  
goes west to east

blurring ugliness  
into poetry

lighting my skull  
with malignant energies

the contraverse world  
is lapping Earth to  
the point of merger,  
certainties collapsing  
in ghosts and shadows

my breathing is  
a flat dead sound

my tongue a flame  
that burns my mouth

we cross the trans-antarctican  
terminator from world to world at  
the exact point of intersection,  
following quivering new rivers  
above ghost rainforests  
solidifying bone-white  
with each mile, until  
deep beyond merger  
twin mirrored moons  
stand west and east,  
lighting my skull with  
compulsions that say  
truth is no longer flesh  
truth is the smell  
of fear and sex

we fly in flame  
my eyes are flame  
my tongue is flame

we descend by the  
planes of impossible pyramids in  
moon-pale webs of bile and mucus  
to walk in thorns, pierced at  
each touch, its inoculating acid  
feeding blood with fire scalding  
away nerve, tissue and senses  
shredding flakes of flesh  
until skeletal naked we  
blur into poetry to  
walk in dark orchids  
lost in rhapsodies  
of pain

as the second sun,  
going east to west  
fades



## VIRGIN TERRITORY.

BY JANET DARKON

So you want to be a novelist?

The team at Virgin Publishing have advice on making that break into print. Keenly aware, from the contents of the slush pile, that capable authors may be several stages away from a masterwork, they promote Branded Fiction as the answer. Hone those narrative skills while writing within a series, where the market is known to the last hundred, where sales are assured, and the hands in the bookstores are reaching for the familiar packaging regardless of author. Publisher Peter Darvill-Evans expounded these virtues at a talk 'From Sex to SF' given to the London meeting of the Women Writers' Network in October. He was chillingly direct on the chances of an author getting an original first novel into print. These events are few and far between, and he made the submission of a manuscript to a publisher sound more like an act of faith than sound strategy. Virgin's territory includes the Black Lace (erotica by women for women) imprint, and the New adventures of Doctor Who. This latter is going to be revamped as The New Adventures since they are about to lose the license to the Dr Who name. Virgin is not currently looking for new authors for the new adventures, but may do so when it becomes apparent whether consumer loyalty is to the series format or the Dr Who name. For those who have served their apprenticeship in whatever fashion, Virgin are looking for innovative masterworks for the Virgin Worlds imprint to be launched in 1997. They want the name to embody freshness, innovation and adventure and are looking for mainstream fantasy, SF, slipstream, psychological horror. Useful and extensive guidelines are available from Virgin Publishing Ltd, 332 Ladbroke Grove, London W10 5AH. Tel 0181-9687554. They invite a first approach by phone to commissioning editor Rebecca Levene to talk over ideas and may then ask you to submit material. The initial launch will promote two or three authors and Virgin anticipate publication at the rate of one novel every two or three months thereafter.



# Pavilion of Time

John Light

Stars exploded, planets burned, galaxies collapsed....

Estren left the pavilion and ran lightly through the woods, following a path worn by unknown feet. Dark leaves fell silently around her. Those that caught on her clothing were soon brushed away by the speed of her passage. The woodland floor was brown with leaves; no flowers grew there. Away from the track the darkness gathered between the trunks of the lichened trees and overhead the branches arched thickly to shut out the sky. Estren ran quickly through the gloom, ran and ran and ran....

Eath toiled slowly across the desert sands. Above him the sky was deep blue except where the sun burned a yellow hole. Eath adjusted his pack slightly and plodded on, the soft sands trickling over his boots at every footfall and cascading into the little hollows left by each step. The desert was bright yellow sun-dust but here and there amber rocks burst through the sand and pointed wind-carved spires at the cobalt sky.

The man had no idea where he was bound. For as long as he could remember he had been a wanderer, always searching for something knowing that when he found it he would recognise it. But as the sun blazed down and the desert stretched to the horizon in all directions he began to wonder if this might prove to be his last journey, if he might be destined to add the white sand of his bones to the yellow grains of weathered rock.

Galaxies collided, suns shrivelled, planets froze....

Sudren left the pavilion with its crumbling columns and set off through the woods, running lightly along a path that meandered between the twisted trees. At times it crossed glades and the warm sun briefly lit her passage before she plunged back into the arboreal gloom of the ancient forest. She ran quickly, ran and ran....

Soth worked his way steadily through the jungle, hacking at the burgeoning vegetation that sought to smother the trail, avoiding the pools of lurking water, brushing aside the creepers trailing from the great trees. Birds mocked and monkeys chattered but Soth ignored them. He was answering a different call, a summons he scarcely realised let alone understood. It urged him always northward in search of something. He wiped his brow with his arm and cut through another clump of vegetation.

Galaxies faded, stars paled and planets died....

Westre carefully descended the decaying steps of the ruined pavilion and entered the wood. It was cool and dim beneath the trees and the path was easy to follow. She began to run, feeling the urgency of her quest. At times the path dipped into a bramble-choked dell then rose again steeply but Westre ran as though her feet had wings. If there had been anyone to see her they might have thought she danced rather than ran among the gnarled and time-wracked trees, so graceful was her flight.

Waezden strode easily across the grassy plain, tasting the fresh breeze. In the distance a herd of animals grazed but he ignored them and they seemed indifferent to him. A few birds flew high above his path and he turned his eyes up to the heavens where white clouds built fairy castles on misty islands afloat in the deep blue ocean of the sky. His heart was light and he savoured the feeling of purpose that had suddenly and for no discernible reason turned his feet away from the distant coast with its bustling cities, eastwards towards the unmapped region of the hinterland where the great grass plains ran on seemingly forever. As he walked he whistled.

Galaxies dissolved, stars disintegrated, planets crumbled....

Noresk picked her way round the piles of fallen masonry to the eroded steps of the pavilion. She went down them carefully and then walked purposefully to the edge of the large clearing in which the building stood. She came to a path, the fourth and last through the trees, and she began to run, steadily at first and then faster so that her hair and apparel streamed behind her. She ran and ran and ran....

Norn breasted a snow hill and halted. The wind howled across the barren icescape, driving clouds of ice dust before it, building and destroying snow dunes with the mindless fury that only the elements can command. The sun was red and low in the sky and Norn knew that night must come soon. He slid down the southern side of the ice ridge and headed towards the black smudge of the distant forest.

At last Estren came to the forest's edge. She stepped into the sunlight and faltered to a stop. The track she had been following went on towards the east, out across a plain covered in thin parched grass. The sun was hot and bright now that she was beyond the shadow of the trees. She shaded her eyes and squinted along the dusty path but there was no one to be seen; she was quite alone. Suddenly she felt tired and the sense of urgency that had sustained her headlong flight drained away. She turned and walked back among the trees. Here near the edge, ferns had invaded the forest floor and she chose a patch of soft young growth and lying down fell into a deep sleep.

She dreamed of galaxies screaming in the slow screams of dissolution, of stars shrieking as they span to destruction, of planets howling into oblivion. But gradually the chaos subsided, a feeling of comfort out of the darkness suffused her and she woke gently to find a man stroking her hair with slow soothing motions of his hand. As he saw her eyes open he smiled and Estren returned his smile.

Eath had survived the desert, had found hidden swamps in rocky enclaves where moisture condensed on freezing nights. He had come to the badlands which seemed good to him after the desert, and then so to the grasslands which overwhelmed him with their verdure. So at last he reached the forest edge and wandering and wondering among the trees of its margin he came upon the greatest wonder of all: the sleeping form of Estren. This was the tale he told her as they ate fruit and drank from a rivulet. As she listened Estren smiled and laughed but when he had finished she grew serious again, remembering the dream of the risen heavens.

"We must hurry," she said and jumped to her feet. "Why?" asked Eath but the woman made no answer. Instead she twirled and pirouetted back to the path where she turned west in the direction of the distant pavilion towards which she began to run. Eath followed her. Soon the man felt exhausted but the woman never slackened her pace so he gritted his teeth and kept going. At last the path emerged from the forest into a glade at the centre of which rose a once fair pavilion of white marble. Estren ran lightly up the steps into the space marked by four great pillars which had formerly supported a magnificent roof. She span round to face Eath who had halted uncertainly at the foot of the steps. She smiled to him yet he had the feeling that she hardly saw him, as though it was at all the world she smiled even though he was its sole representative.

Estren started to dance and Eath forgot all else, forgot hunger and thirst, fatigue and desire, immersed in the magic of movement.

Estren seemed tireless, seemed hardly to touch the stage on

which she performed. Eath thought there could be nothing more beautiful to behold in all the world and immediately realised he was wrong as the woman was joined by another. Sudren had returned and Eath was vaguely aware that he too was no longer alone; for Soth's journey had ended in his meeting with Sudren and he had followed her through the forest as Eath had followed Estren, and now he stood at the southern side of the pavilion. The two men watched entranced as the two women performed an intricate pas de deux. This, Eath realised, was even more lovely than Estren dancing alone; this surely must be the most enthralling spectacle in all the world, and certainly Soth would have agreed with him if either of them had had any disposition to speak.

Yet almost at once they would have had to admit that they were wrong for Westre emerged from the wood and joined her sisters beneath the ruined canopy of the crumbling pavilion in a

sparkling threesome. Waezden stood at the foot of the steps on the west side. And so in time Noreesk completed the company and the four dancers engaged in stately pavane. Music flowed through the pavilion and complemented their measure.

Eath, Soth, Waezden, and Norn watched their fair captors float before them and it seemed that the pavilion itself gained grace and strength from the dance, grew whole again, its white marble dazzled them with the brilliant reflection of a refulgent sun. The glade was suffused with the light of a new dawn, a new age.

+

At the far edge of the universe the dust and debris of ruined worlds and of stars destroyed, coalesced, grew warm, became hot, burst into incandescence. New stars were born, new planets condensed, new galaxies, and the cosmic dance began again.



## Style

### by Leigh Kennedy

About a dozen years ago, my weight dropped to below 9 stone for various reasons. Because I am 5'8" tall, for a time I was all elbows, knees and not much soft stuff except for my uncontrollable hair. It was then that the film of the opera, *Carmen*, appeared - a hot and sexy version with Plácido Domingo and Julia Migenes-Johnson.

Migenes-Johnson, voluptuous but without the heaviness that used to be required for sopranos, wore clothes in which some of her soft bits burst out, heaving and steaming, she was all curls and beiran cotton ruffles, a cinched waistline and naughty smiles.

My feelings divided into three parts about her. First, I thought that if I were a man, she would drive me as wild as Plácido had been driven. Second, vaguely and without much conviction, I thought perhaps she had an effect on me anyway. But the third notion was the strongest. And it was: I wished that I looked like that.

Shortly after seeing the film, I read an interview with Migenes-Johnson in which she told of her life-long torment of not being, well, 5'6" and weighing about 9 stone.

Nowadays (after two children and giving up smoking) I weigh about 10 stone and have an occasional twinge of voluptuousness but I'm still all elbows and knees under the extra pounds.

So what has this to do with writing style?

When a novice, I listened to the old saws about throwing out adjectives and paring sentences down to precision and neatness. This seemed natural and good advice to me and I practiced it on my own wobbly descriptions. It became my measure for a time as to how carefully others were writing. My role models in those early days of trying to write seriously (Le Guin probably the ultimate) wrote vividly but concisely. But, after years of self-imposed austerity, it dawned on me that not everyone wanted that particular advice and that some writers used piles of adjectives in an effective and interesting way. After a time, I began to enjoy this difference without reflexive criticism. By the time I read John Crowley's *Little, Big*, for example, I loved being lost in a lush wilderness of words.

But my writing style has always been on the lean side. The idea of writing something florid and embellished terrifies me. I won't work coming out of me any more than I can pretend to be a petite lady with a cleavage. I won't make any correlations as to body shape and prose style - it's probably coincidental in my case and my prose probably wouldn't grow to 14 stone.

I felt a keen envy when I read John Banville's marvellous novels *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler*. Here's a sentence chosen at random in which Banville describes the young Kepler watching a snail on a window: "Pressed in a lavish embrace upon the pane, the creature gave up its filled grey-green underparts to his gaze, while the head strained away from the glass, moving blindly from side to side, the horns weaving as if feeling out enormous forms in the air..."

Sexy stuff. Sometimes I wish I could write like that. But if's not my style. Why? Why don't I think the word "fried" when watching a snail when Banville obviously does? I don't really know.

Style springs from sincerity of vision. The reality is that if you don't feel at ease with the way you are writing, you're pretending to be a role that isn't for you. Perhaps you should shave your head and write on rough paper in candlelight with a pen that scratches the silence around you.

Or perhaps you should stick a rose between your teeth and have a go at dancing on a table.

## Style Gurus

### by Martin Sketchley

Any style we adopt when writing will surely be dictated by our aims and intended market. If we are to send our fiction to a small press magazine that publishes slipstream or surrealist work, then we can probably allow our use of language to be a little more adventurous than if we were hoping to market our work commercially. By the same token, we should certainly expect to have to tailor our work to make it easily accessible to a wide audience if we are hoping to meet the rather more conservative requirements of most publishing houses.

If you expect your novel to be in the 160 thousand word range when ready for submission, and a publisher then tells you that they can only consider manuscripts of between 100 and 130 thousand words, then that target will be easier to meet if, during the course of re-writing, you omit any words that can be replaced by punctuation. While this process will certainly help reduce the word count, it will also alter the feel of the piece as a whole, making it seem a little more curt. For myself, I would not consider such compliance a restriction on my creative freedom, but a necessity if I am to get my work published. The creative skill must surely lie in our ability to get the message across clearly, whatever restrictions might be placed upon us.

It could be argued - perhaps by people who would refer to themselves as 'artists' - that if we are to retain our integrity as writers we should not follow any rule regarding style, and even suggest that conformity of this nature should be actively avoided at all costs. It would be naive, however, not to accept that compromise will be required if we are to achieve any level of success. It is almost certain that when a publisher who claims to be in search of work that is 'fresh, innovative and ground-breaking' is faced with the choice of a risky, stylish proposal and a safer, more traditional one, they will opt for the latter as it will almost certainly reap the most profit. It is rare to find a publisher (if one can find a publisher at all) who is prepared to take the risk involved with work that threatens an accepted genre format, and even the (possibly) more understanding and broad-minded of small press editors will have to plough through so much drivel in search of work of a publishable quality that anyone who has been tempted to try something different will have to be convincing in the extreme.

If a writer does not feel that they have a distinctive voice, and is impelled to consciously develop a unique or recognisable style, then it should not be allowed to overshadow the content of the work. Perhaps the best tactic is to write as it comes out of your head, then make a more conscious effort to shift its perspective during the re-drafts.

It is also essential to read outside the genre in which you choose to write. If you write fantasy and only read novels by Terry Pratchett and David Gemmell, then it is inevitable that you will end up recycling certain ideas and methods, and however unconscious this may be, it will give your work a ring of familiarity when read by a potential publisher.

Having said all of the above, I feel that the best thing to do is trust your gut instinct and write what satisfies you, accepting that while it may take a little longer to place the work if it is in an unusual style, it will be more satisfying when you finally succeed.

## Finding Your Individuality

### by Riaz Hussain

Given that all writers possess an individual voice whether cultivated or not, could the same author write two very different books; ie. different in tone, content, and essentially, the writing style?





Logically, the answer points to yes. Hence the use of pen-names and pseudonyms by authors who either want to avoid, or feel they've become pigeon-holed into some particular fiction genre (Viv Mills & Boon with a cold, hard thriller never mix the same byline - or at least it's what the marketing men say.)

Thus, it indicates that to some extent, an author can stray from their own particular niche and subject area and still become a success. But what happens if they stray from their individual voice?

Sheer, mad lunacy, perhaps? Some, like Stephen King, have pulled it off. Others, meanwhile, have said it was a mistake, which in this context suggests 'write what you know,' really means sticking to your voice.

But how do we achieve that in the first place?

There seem to be two schools of thought. The first says avoid flowery, superficial writing and write as you *really* are. The second, (equally right but perhaps more realistic), says it depends on, a) whether we've found our particular voice, and, b) whether we're confident enough to use it.

Hence the 'should I reveal my true self or wear a floppy hat, coat and shades,' dilemma which may explain why many writers mimic, for example, Stephen King or Virginia Woolf (!) the appropriate genre withstanding.

Of course, this can give fuel to the accusation that a certain so and so has no style of their own and is simply copying somebody else.

However, there is an important compromise to be made in that until we achieve our own individuality, it may not be a bad idea latching on to a particular writer's style we admire and relate to.

For many, it's been the key to finding their own particular voice. For example, the prolific Ramsey Campbell achieved this (or is at least reputed to have), under the cloak of M. R. James.

Secondly, it's also a fact *everybody* is subconsciously influenced by *somebody* so there we are.

Even so, it's still interesting most established writers have found their particular voice not from the word go, but gradually, on a par with painters and sculptors who spend hours practicing their interpretation of the subject.

That also holds for a piece of writing where everything may be entirely fictional. In fact, it's been said our fictional characters may sound and act nothing like us yet they're still, in some way or form, an expression of ourselves.

Thus, an author is still selling something very real, their depiction of what is.

Given the same parameters, it's the reason why two people can go in to the same environment but come out with two, totally different experiences. Each may readily contradict the other, but in essence, each has their own reality.

Hence the importance of our own individual voice. It's what makes us original!



## Putting on the Style by Howard Watts

On the subject of style, for me, style is dictated purely by the individual's aim. I try to tell a story that will interest and entertain the reader. Therefore, style is something I don't have a lot of room for, especially if the piece has a maximum word limit. I know a few writers who forsake story telling (or plot) for style, using flowery descriptions to colour their text and hide their lack of story. Metaphors similes abound. Okay, if that's what they're aiming for. But after a few paragraphs I think the reader might be caught up with so many misleading images and ideas that their understanding of the story suffers. Good writers are able to mix the two. Brilliant writers, like a magician's slight of hand (analogy) make the reader think something is happening, while, in a seamless movement, produce a rabbit from the hat a few moments later. Deception. Very difficult. My main stylistic problem at the moment is viewpoint. It seems all the stones I want to tell are told by a character, telling another character a story. A story within a story. I need to examine my viewpoint and alter this limiting style.

Approach is another word for style. Approach is important in a short piece. I think the writer needs to know the story he/she is telling before they sit down to write. Otherwise during the writing process the danger is the text suffers from long pieces of stylistic folly, written to occupy the mind while it searches for the next plot movement. These bodies of text can be seen as metaphoric hurdles along the long and winding path to the end of the story, and only serve to slow down the pace. I'm guilty of this, and, your honour, guilty of falling in love with those hurdles and refusing to admit they need to be removed. That's the real danger for writers. My last three sentences prove the point! But, if those hurdles can be either removed or lowered during the re-write, then the pace will pick up. What the hell. Like all exercise, stylistic writing is great fun, but can take it out of you.

In a longer piece I think the writer can make room to exercise her/his stylistic muscles. The path is longer enabling the story and reader to catch their breath between hurdles placed wider apart. I finished a novel last year where I consciously placed a small stylistic body of text in every chapter. Longer pieces also allow the thoughts of a character to be written in a stylistic way, coaching the reader the way certain characters' minds work. This is characterisation at its deepest level.

Writing. Call it what you like, interpret the word any way you like. Composition, document, manuscript, opus, prose, scrawl or scribble. At the end of the day, you the writer wants someone to read your work. The most difficult part of the process is removing yourself from your work. After writing, read the text as though it's the first time you've ever read it. Two weeks is about right for me. Then the reading part can see where the writing part has gone wrong. I tend to cater for myself. If I don't enjoy reading my finished work, then why should anyone else?

## The Plotting Parlour

Green Norman writes:

Yes, John Howard is honest, but he cannot possibly speak for all BSFA members! Please do not abolish Focus, I, for one, await its arrival with great interest - particularly as a member of an Orbit group.

Whilst John Howard is 'being honest', I think that Roy Gray is inaccurate in stating that there are 'plenty of opportunities 'out there' for writers of short fiction'. In the UK, we have only *Interzone*, which performs a noble role, but whose published stories I don't that often enjoy. I take *Interzone* largely to support the only professional sf magazine in the country.

I seldom write short fiction, but I know others who do and at times their short stories are better than those I have read in *Interzone* - that is, of course, a personal and maybe a minority opinion! There is no other UK outlet for my friends who write good sf short stories - often rejected by *Interzone*.

Maybe a BSFA fiction magazine is a debatable point and difficult from the organisational aspect - how do you avoid offending BSFA members if/when manuscripts are rejected? You have a short story 'Inside Clarissa' by David Weston in the issue 30 of *Focus*. Might I suggest, as an

experiment, that you consider publishing, say, three or four short stories in one issue of *Focus* and ask for reaction from the membership? It's possible that members might like to see what short fiction some of the general membership of the BSFA are producing

There are two issues here, Doreen, one the lack of professional markets in the UK, and yes, you are right, Interzone is the only professional market here, but there are many other markets available in the small press. Perhaps your friends and yourself are unaware of the burgeoning small press market – if so, perhaps you or one of your friends, would like to invest in a copy of *Zene* the small press guide published by Andy Cox, of TTA Press (5 Martins Lane, Wiltcham, Ely Cambs CB6 2LB). Try also Light's List, an annual small press listing, available from John Light at Photon Press (29 Longfield Road, Tring, Herts HP23 4DG) and the BBR and NSFA catalogues available from Chris Reed (PO Box 625, Sheffield S1 3GY). It is good practice to enclose an SAE when writing for information.

The other issue of more fiction in *Focus*: yes, we could put four or indeed more stories in each issue (we certainly get enough submissions), but where would that leave all the other things we like to put into each issue? The Forum for instance, Colin Greenland's piece, and articles like the one by Sarah Lefanu this issue. What do other readers think? Would you like to see more/fewer fiction in *Focus*? Comments to the usual addresses.

## MOONRISE OVER VENUS: AN ARTIST'S IMPRESSION/AFTER LEIGH BRACKETT

by Andrew Darlington

*we don't bury the dead on Venus  
the ground here won't hold them*

*when storms howl and gibber  
across rivers of fire and  
the sullen bursts and flow of the sea persuades all  
until even the mist is droplets of blood  
suspended,  
the ground runs  
in slow currents of  
slithers and ripples  
and nothing can settle,  
it's then the graves give  
up their restless dead, and*

*we don't bury the dead on Venus  
coffins float to the surface  
of a churning planet in dark  
and dripping drifts of flame  
full of eternal dread, but here*

*on Venus there is nothing to fight  
but rain, silence, and a mist that's  
a ceiling stain of sparks  
a cosmos of crimson stars*

## Heroes of the Nation by Steve Sneyd

aliens came  
cherry-pick our  
best brightest for fate of  
a lifetime – how we cheer their march  
plumed silvered starbright to door to  
Starwhere –  
are gone as smoke in wind; we soon  
forget, days demand of us  
more than their names  
long gone

## Fragmentation by John F Haines

The highway crumbled into dust,  
Buildings crashed round us with a roar,  
We left the car, a pile of rust –  
The highway crumbled into dust.  
Our final chance to flee was bust,  
Our hands were cold, our feet were  
sore.  
The highway crumbled into dust,  
Buildings crashed round us with a roar.

# On Writing Fantasy Fiction

## by Sarah Lefanu

During the 1980s, when I was working for The Women's Press, I had a rather snuffy attitude towards Fantasy. With a couple of obvious exceptions – Ursula Le Guin, Tanith Lee, for example – writers of fantasy seemed to me to be poor relations to the altogether smarter sassier writers of science fiction who I was keen to publish.

Since then I have learnt not just that the distinction between science fiction and fantasy is not always an easy one to make, but also that genre is neither the most important aspect of a story or novel nor indeed that it is a reliable indicator of the differences between contemporary writers. I have learnt this from editing a number of anthologies of new short fiction. Some of them (*God, Obsession and How Maxine Learned to Love her Legs and Other Tales of Growing Up*) have been anthologies of stories around a theme; I commissioned according to how I thought particular writers would be interested or inspired by the theme, irrespective of whether they were known as genre writers or not, and found that I was getting fantasy and sf stories from non-genre writers (Christopher Hope, Alan Gurganus, Adam Lively for example) and mainstream (if you'll excuse the shorthand) stories from fantasy/sf writers (Cherry Wilder, Hilary Bailey). Certainly this is one of the pleasures of editing anthologies: the pleasure of the unexpected that arises from the gap between your original conception and the finished book, which is of course much greater, because of the numbers of writers involved, than the gap, which itself is large enough in my experience, between conception and finished book in a book that you write yourself.

You learn as you write, and write as you learn it. Which is what happened while I was working on *Writing Fantasy Fiction*. Much of what I wanted to say could be said to people wanting to write any kind of fiction, but, as I discovered, fantasy is a land with its own traditions, its own customs and its own language, separate from but linked to that other land called science fiction.

When I was asked by Tesni Hollands at A & C Black if I would like to write a fantasy volume for their *Writing* series (which includes *Crime Fiction*, *Erotic Fiction*, *Writing for Children*, *Horror* and a range of others), I immediately said yes (bearing in mind Rule Number One: never turn down the chance of commissioned work). I thought that I would be able to draw heavily on my experience as an editor and as a teacher of creative writing, and indeed I did. I spend a lot of time exhorting my students: rewrite, rewrite, rewrite; don't stop until you are satisfied that every word you put on that page is exactly the word you want in exactly the place you want, and that what you have achieved with it is exactly what you wanted to achieve with it – and a bit more if you have wooed your muse sufficiently assiduously. This sort of advice is pertinent to writers of fantasy as it is to any writers.

OK. But I soon realised that fantasy cannot be treated in exactly the same way as you would any other form of fiction. For a start, aspiring writers of fantasy are in the extraordinarily privileged position of being part of a tradition that has its roots in the oldest forms of storytelling of all, myth, legend, folk and fairy tale. Secondly, along with privilege goes responsibility: although the fantasy writer has centuries of stories to draw upon, stories in poetry, drama and prose, the fantasy writer must at the same time create from scratch an entire world in which to recount their chosen story. Like their sisters and brothers toiling in the adjacent landscape of science fiction, fantasy writers are writing for readers who come to their work with no assumptions about the world they are being invited to enter.

What is in that world depends entirely upon the choice, whim, inspiration, desire of you, the writer. How on earth can you teach someone to embody in language their inspired choice, their

whimsical desire? What you can do, is to turn to other writers. And this is what I did. I started with the contemporary writers whose work I already knew and admired: Ursula Le Guin, Tanith Lee, Terry Pratchett. Then I worked outwards and backwards. I wanted to give examples of what I consider – of what I know – to be good writing so as to set, precisely, an example. And in my reading, and my writing about my reading, I discovered that those writers, the ones I was already familiar with as well as the ones I hadn't read before, were just as smart and sassy as the ones on the other side of the fence (when they weren't the same writers, that is).

Then I dug around to see what some of those writers had said about writing. What I found – from interviews, articles and essays, and when those were not available, in their replies to the questions I wrote and asked them – was that just about any aspect of writing you may care to think about had been considered in some depth by one or more of these writers. It seems to me that what writers have to say about writing is enormously helpful to a beginning writer. You don't have to agree with what they say, but you will be prompted to think about it. And if a writer is thinking about a particular aspect of the work of writing, then the chances are that they are thinking about it because the actual practice of writing has shown them it is worth thinking about.

So in *Writing Fantasy Fiction* I have quoted from a variety of practicing writers: Ramsey Campbell on his apprenticeship to other writers and finding his own voice; Colin Greenland on plotting; Brian Jacques on landscape; Gwyneth Jones and Lisa Tuttle on scariness; Terry Pratchett on rehearsing jokes; Tad Williams on the part played by the unconscious; Jane Yolen on stories old and new. And Ursula Le Guin on – on lots of things, but perhaps most importantly on the seriousness, and the truthfulness, of fantasy.

Of course there is a lot of bad writing in fantasy. But what is the point of dwelling on bad writing when what you are hoping to do is encourage good writing? I thought a warning to my potential readers would be enough: let them imagine, I thought, being the target of one of Dave Langford's critiques of bad fantasy, their not so well-chosen words and phrases, their characters' ridiculous names and eating habits providing healthy amusement for fans and readers up and down the land. I thought that might make a beginning writer think twice, or three times. Which would be no bad thing, but I didn't want to paralyse anyone with fear of failure.

On the contrary, what I wanted to do was demand a writer's best efforts, and to show that fantasy both as a traditional form and as a contemporary genre demands no less of its practitioners. Good writing: that's what we all want, isn't it, writers and readers alike? I mean writing that is sharp, exciting, energetic, clever and careful; writing that makes the reader laugh, and cry, and think.

Writing now in *Focus* I feel rather as if I am preaching to the converted: none of you need me to tell you that writing fantasy is an honourable and noble endeavour. But writers of fantasy suffer from the same prejudices from the general public as do writers of books for children, a widespread reaction is that these forms of writing are at once easy and not entirely serious, something you might do, something anyone might do, casually and for fun. It is hard, after the hours spent in lonely struggle at the desk, to have your work casually dismissed in this way (and if that is the response that fantasy writers and children's writers get, spare a thought for the poor oppressed children's fantasy writer). I hope that *Writing Fantasy Fiction* will offer support to beginning writers who feel that they are the only people in the world who believe in the worthwhile nature of what they are trying to achieve;

that it might strengthen their resolve to look the world in the eye and say, yes, that's right, fantasy, without blushing and shuffling their feet

The book developed as I was writing it (as books have a tendency to do) in two directions: into a practical and, I hope, helpful guide along the path towards publication, much of which would hold good for fiction writing of any kind, and, through reference to a range of writers of fantasy past and present, into a picture – partial, of course – of the rich pastures that, for any beginning writer, are there to nourish the imagination and offer inspiration and encouragement

I no longer think as I did some years ago that fantasy is science fiction's baby sister, fun to play with perhaps but not to be taken entirely seriously. I have come to believe through my reading and thinking for this book that contemporary fantasy is as

capable as science fiction is of offering ways of exploring the human condition in these swiftly-changing end-of-the-century days. It is up to the writers to ensure that this is what it does

Sarah Lefanu's **Writing Fantasy Fiction** is published by A & C Black at £8.99

**God: An Anthology of Fiction and Obsession** (both co-edited with Stephen Hayward) are published by Serpent's Tail at £9.99 and £8.99

**How Maxine Learned to Love Her Legs and Other Tales of Growing Up** is published by Aurora Metro at £8.95

Sarah Lefanu's sixth edited anthology of new fiction, **Sex, Drugs, Rock'n'Roll**, is forthcoming from Serpent's Tail in 1997

## Peace

by D. Harrington

If it had even looked human she would have shot it

It sat on the passenger seat and bled, thick and red from a hole in its side. The car door slammed shut behind. Outside in the night, the lights changed to green and the Ford crowding her tail flashed and blared impatiently. Jennifer Daily pulled away without thinking, her mind still reeling. Pistol in one hand pointed determinedly at the violator of her car, her eyes searched the vast empty night landscape slipping past, desperate for inspiration. The gun wasn't loaded. In an angry glare of lights and horn, the car behind roared past, leaving her completely alone, with it.

Barely out of the Great Victoria Desert it was a long highway stretching into rocky ground for nearly fifty kilometres until Kanowna. She would have to think of an excuse to turn or stop. Or be stuck with it.

The gun got tucked into the waistband of her jeans so she could change gear. It didn't appear particularly aggressive, just sat there bleeding pitifully, barely breathing. Or maybe it didn't need to breathe much.

Camping had been Tony's idea. When he was alive, they used to travel off to remote areas at least once a month, doing some crazy thing or other: abseiling, canoeing, bush walks, climbing. She still made the occasional trip. Now that he was gone they had lost most of their meaning – her life had lost most of its meaning – but there was still a certain joy to be felt in making a climb, or finishing a walk. Achieving more than she was want as a secretary. It was also her way of remembering his head lifted weakly, peering out into the night. The road unrolled beneath them; the wide open plains vanished into the dark, scant bush and scrub whipping past. "And what did you do then?" she could hear her friends asking. Then realised she would never tell them, never tell anyone that. What? What was this thing? Had an alien being (she almost laughed to think it) climbed into her car outside Kalgoorlie? Jen thought at first – from the baseball cap, jeans and check shirt – it was some outback thief or rapist, and she'd grabbed for her trusty revolver. But those eyes, those eyes that were peering intently into the dark night. Skin so pale and a broad, squat frame. Strong. She felt after the – empty – gun and let her hand rest on the handle.

"I would appreciate it," the accent was thickly foreign, sort of American sounding. Had it landed in the states before travelling down under? "If you could take the next left turn."

Jen pulled the gun and threatened. "I'm not making any turns, you understand? We're going to turn around and..." The eyes stared at the revolver. It seemed such a ridiculously small and useless weapon in the face of that stare. But it was bleeding, and something had made that hole in its side. Which told her it was not invulnerable. Small comfort.

"Please feel free," pain showed as it reached into the open glove box and dumped a box of ammunition into her lap, "to stop and load the pistol. I would still appreciate it if you could take the next turn. Left."

Damn thing could see in the dark. Her hand slowly dropped, and she tried a deprecatory gesture. "I probably couldn't have

shot you anyway," she lied. "Um, Tony made me learn how to use it. Insisted we take it on our camping trips. He got off on having a gun around, I think." She was inventing obsessions of her late lover to justify herself to an alien. This was too weird. "Guess I just never lost the habit."

"Tony is not with you on this trip."

"He died." It still hurt to say that. "Oh, nearly eighteen months ago, now. Car accident. One of the biggest causes of death in the world, car accidents."

"It is a terrible thing when someone dies before the love you have for them. The turning is just here."

The kernel of its sympathy budded, and twisted inside her. Jen started to say – well, inappropriate company for that sort of conversation. Instead she slowed, peering into the darkness. There had been no signposts. She had few options, and no idea of its intentions. Improving the odds would make her infinitely more comfortable, so she pulled over just in front of the junction, a dirt track winding away into scrubland. Not the sort of thing her car was designed for.

Carefully, gently, she opened the box of ammo, nervously pivoted the chamber out and began loading the pistol. There was only the sound of its rasping respiration. Any second now she was sure it would snatch the gun from her. She managed to load two before she had to take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Her hand went for a third. It didn't move, watching her. Just sat there, watching her.

She sat, one hand on a bullet, half-loaded gun in her lap and an alien dying in her Toyota.

"Look," Jen had to force the first word then the rest came tumbling. "I got to ask, but what the fuck are you?"

"I'm from outer space."

"Oh, no shit! I didn't think you were from Melbourne!"

Its body shook and trembled briefly. Was it going to die right there beside her? Then she realised it had laughed, quietly. Jen scratched the bullet and snapped it into the chamber and the next and the next.

"I'm a scientist." It paused and looked down, worried, as Jen finished loading and wheeled the chamber back in. "I have no idea where my world is in relation to this one, which one is home. My world is much like the Australian outback, very little fertile land, no trees worth speaking of, just lots of small bushes, hot and dry. I used to think we were a large and powerful people, until we found the device and I came to your world." It glanced across, had her attention. "We found a huge crystalline structure sealed away on an uncharted island, which was little more than a lump of rock. We investigated it, tried to decipher the writings. It was a device for moving things between planets."

Another car approached, the slow sweeping play of light gave a spooky, surreal feeling to the words.

"I think we must have been some star-faring civilisation's far outpost, which was abandoned. We are not a very technologically advanced people." It waved at the gun, Jen glanced down, then realised the approaching truck was slowing,

"nearly no hard metal on our world. We hadn't even considered there could be life on other planets, or that there were other planets. We never could decipher the writings entirely. Like a caveman trying to read a computer manual, we had no reference, had to reinvent their language."

The approaching ute had pulled in behind them; the driver was getting out. *He might help*, was Jen's first thought, though she had to admit to a growing curiosity. It pulled down its cap and turned away, like it was a sleeping man, nothing extraordinary showing. She would have to say, "This alien climbed into..." Jen had enough trouble saying it to herself. Could say he was a hijacker, she with the gun and ammunition in her lap – Jen panicked and swept it all into the door tray as the man tapped politely on her window.

"Hi there," he was in his late forties, skin like leather, "Ya broken down? I can... I can take ya back to Kalgoolie, if ya need a lift."

"No, thank you. We were just changing drivers. It's Tony's – dammit, first name that came to mind – turn to rest. I'm just waking myself up a bit."

"Oh. Well, if you're sure you're all right then..."

Idiot. She was not all right. Nothing was right. He was being too damn nice and suddenly she was more afraid of him, than of an alien being. Because she knew exactly what he was capable of. He stared at her with open lust and reluctantly made his way back to his truck. Jen wound up the window almost shaking with fury. She was being threatened by something not even from this planet, and some leatherneck couldn't get past thinking with his dick. Well, to give it credit, she was the one who'd been doing most of the threatening. It was polite, no menace or intimidation. The least she could do for this outsider, so far from home, all alone...

There was a thought.

"Are you here all by yourself?"

It turned back slowly, very weak, beginning to fade on her. "I would appreciate it if you could drive. Slowly please, the track is very bumpy."

The ute drove past. After a moment's consideration Jen rescued the gun and placed it on her lap. She shifted into first, took another deep breath and drove off into uncharted territory.

#

Anghi Kshgh had a mission. He was going to kill God. He and his brave hunters had entered the afterlife via the doorway to heaven. They had two days before the doorway would close and they would be unable to return. In effect, they would die.

It had taken some of that time to find God, and they had travelled for many of these strange quasi-days and quasi-nights that took place in heaven. Time wore on and Kshgh feared greatly that each of these short heaven-days represented one real day on his world, and they were already condemned. He had insisted that they complete their mission anyway.

After six short-days they had found God in his home and shot him. He fled and they lost him by the hard road in the dark. Anghi now stood one of his men waiting on the soft, ruffled track while he and the other waited in ambush along the road that led to God's home – the only place in heaven where they'd found the herbs capable of healing their kind.

Kshgh balked to remember that God had once been one of his kind. A friend of his. It was a terrible thing to watch his friend become a God. The new order declared that heaven was now theirs for the plundering. Many crossed to the afterlife and returned, proclaiming multitudinous wonders and horrors, much secret knowledge for the taking.

To have the knowledge of God is to become God.

War ensued with the followers of the old ways and those of his friend, the new King of Kings. God fled to heaven, but his believers knew he would return. He would bring them the head of his old friend, and with it he would bring peace to the world. In a blaze of light and rumble that sounded much like approaching thunder, God was coming. With his heart in his throat and hands uncertain on the bow, Kshgh prepared to meet his quarry.

#

There was a pale figure carrying a stick in the middle of the road. Beside Jen, the alien muttered something that sounded like 'kush-ga' and stared wildly round, eyes snapping back to her as she pulled up.

"Drive!" it screamed. "Go fast! Go, go!"

Two other figures flowed from cover on either side and an arrow punched through the passenger side window and slammed into her headrest. Jen jammed the car into first and floored the accelerator, but the wheels spun crazily on loose dust and gravel, the car inching forward slowly.

The figure on her side moved clear and closed, aiming for her face. She fired twice into its chest, shattering her side window. Two small holes splattered open and the figure toppled back into a fine red mist from the exit wounds. Opposite her the alien's window was struck, splintering, and struck again. She snatched back the impulse to fire blindly in that direction. The Toyota bounced as the bonnet was mounted, that one pulling a short arrow from the quiver on its back.

Traction, and the car began to pick up speed. In front of her, the pale figure loaded the bow precariously. The now running figure broke through and tried to ram an arrow into the alien. Jen violently twisted the wheel, bouncing the runner into scrub and tipping the other from its perch to fall under the tyres. Jen cried out as the Toyota jumped and bounded over. Something snapped loudly followed by an unearthly scream of pain.

Speeding away, the whole car shaking and juddering over the rough road, Jen shouted incoherently, overwhelmed to have escaped, her body locked rigidly into the car and mind in deep shock. Ragged breathing of both occupants slowed and the car eased down with it.

Pale figures and darkness and violence, the sound of breaking glass. The explosion of noise and metal and the smell of burning. A dark red mist. Jen almost pulled over to try and recover her battered senses, then remembered the possibility of pursuit and picked up again. The alien glanced across with an odd expression in its strange eyes. Almost like... fear?

"On my world," its voice was faint, almost lost in the noise of their journey, "w... women who show any tendency to violence are immediately expelled from the hearth. They are abnormal, insane. It is... considered a normal woman could never do such a thing."

Jen grunted in agreement. "Most guys on this world think..." she stopped. The alien looked bad. Adrenaline, fear, had bolstered it, but as that wore off, it started to look very bad indeed. "You okay?"

"Fff... Five kilo-me-metres," Jen could hardly hear it. "A hut. On the right. Rocks... behind some rocks."

"Okay, okay. You just rest now. Take it easy, you just take it easy and I'll get you there." And she thought she sounded very much as Tony might have done. Had he been there. Had he been alive. "Don't worry, now. We'll be okay."

#

The roaring chariot vanished beyond the curve in the road. Kshgh killed the injured hunter. He spent some time gathering wood for a respectable pyre, burned the bodies, then buried them deep. They had died in heaven. Kshgh could not begin to fathom the implications. Through the tears in his eyes he watched the first light break over their graves and all around him the land was red. He could only think of blood. Theirs and that he would shed, for them now as much as for his people. The blood of God filtered the sun and set a crimson wash into the sky. His quarry would be waiting for him in the house of God, because they used to be friends. He was coming, but there would be no parley. The dawn was breathtaking, beautiful, and picked out the road for him to follow.

#

Jen woke slowly, a confusion of memories. A white blob pressed her into the mattress, heavy weight. A shredding dream of crimson fog, like blood, and the bed was suddenly Kevin's a guy at work she'd gone out with once or twice. God, she hadn't got drunk and actually slept with him, had she?

The revulsion that thought conjured shocked her into rousing, and the droopy paleness resolved into a waking white alien mass. A marginally better sight than Kevin.

It silenced her question and she remembered that she had stopped not long after the ambush, so guessed the reason. Almost unconsciously Jen reached for her gun, disturbed at how quickly that had become instinctive, how quickly she had come to accept this impossible situation.

The alien ushered her off the bed and began rearranging the pillows, indicating a spot for Jen behind the door. There were books of every kind all over the place, a large make-up kit with a pair of mirror-shades on top and the weirdest collection of junk she'd seen since her father's tool shed. Two televisions with the backs ripped off. The wan morning light moulded the debris into the walls, turning the thin planks into bulging balustrades.

And through those thin walls she caught the sound of tentative footsteps, circling the shed.

Furtively the door was jiggled, and opened a fraction. Panic began to rise, Jen desperately tried to shake herself awake. She was not ready. A kick flung the door wide and an arrow flew in, thudding into the fluffed up bedclothes. Jen yelled, swung out and brought up the gun.

"Don't shoot!" the alien screamed. Her alien. She hadn't intended to shoot. The one outside froze in her sights, arrow half out of its quiver. She had no idea what she was going to do. She prayed it would not move, her mind fuzzy, hand tight, her whole body bracing to explode. It looked tense, angry, white knuckles on the bow. White everywhere.

Tony always knew what to do. Her finger could just twitch; all that was in her mind was that red mist of blood. Hers said that Kshgha word followed by a string of gibberish. The gun was so heavy. Just one small twitch and she could put it down. The one outside screamed and flung its bow - Jen couldn't shoot - to the ground in defeat, and the gun went off. Hers tried to shove the arm away, too late, calling out something in its alien tongue. Dawn sunlight filtered through a red spray. Her alien sobbed as its attacker folded, rushed and gathered the fallen foe in its arms, but could not raise it because of its own wound.

Jen was shaking. They were having a whispered conversation as the other faded slowly. Jen could not stop shaking. Arms waved, fists beat on flesh, blood was coughed. Silence.

The other blinked pathetically on the ground, unable to move. Barely breathing. And Jen still could not stop shaking.

Her finger eased from the trigger.

Hers stared for some time into the dawn, body slumped, dejected. Finally it said something in English, then turned and shuffled to the shelves, painfully rummaging through the junk.

"What did you say?" she asked, snapped back to herself.

The figure paused in its activity and gave her a dark look. "I said, I am leaving. I will be returning to my world." It continued to search.

"Wait a minute," confusion pulled her this way and that, an excess of emotion. "You told me last night they all thought you were some sort of god and they'd kill you if you went back."

"Yes." It looked very tired. "But I will go back. I thought by leaving I would prevent much suffering; war. But we are divided now on many issues, on my world. During the five, or your years,

I have been away it has become a religious thing, not a science thing." It rose, arms full. "God will return and throw out the false prophets who are using his name in an unholy war for their own ends." It gave her a half-amused look, and her throat went tight. "You know the sort of thing us gods are supposed to do."

Jen sat on the bed, jaw locked, thinking over all it had said, all that had happened. The alien dumped its armful in a nearby empty box, and Jen was shocked to see about ten sticks of explosive.

"You're going to destroy the gate!"

It glanced at her, didn't bother to reply. Its eyes went to its companion, dying in the dirt, then travelled over her face to a metal box on one shelf, which was retrieved and presented to her. "I want you to take this. It should help pay for the car."

A struggle played over its inhuman features. Jen's throat tightened again, eyes stinging. She wanted someone to hold, wanted Tony. But Tony was not there, and never would be again.

"I am so very tired," it said. "On my world it is now entering the long night. Each night and day lasts about eight of yours. I am hovering on the edge of a sort of mini-hibernation." It paused, staring long at the white companion. "I... I don't blame you for..."

#

Angh Kshgh watched his friend and the demon weep in each others arms, tears flowing freely as his life faded. It was strange that a demon could cry, something that he'd never imagined.

They came out and carried him to the roaring chariot, the demon returning for a wooden box, which was placed at his friends feet, and again for a metal one which was tucked into a recess. The rumbling began and the sky moved past.

If it could cry, perhaps it was not a demon. If his companions had died here, perhaps this was not heaven. The conclusion was one Kshgh had been coming to almost from the moment he'd arrived. If this was not heaven, his friend was not a god.

They had assumed God would not want to return to any mortal plain where he was in danger of dying. His friend would return and destroy the gate that had caused so much of his world's pain.

If this was not heaven, his companions had gone to a better place after all. Perhaps he would. He would never see the plains of his homeland again, but perhaps he could go to heaven. The gods could take pity on his wandering soul.

Ah, ah, yes.

Here came the light.

The bright, bright light.

#

It was a singularly unspectacular sight. She left them in a spot in the desert indistinguishable from any other, and drove to a 'safe distance'. Then they just weren't there any more.

A while later, neither was Jennifer Daily.

## Space Raiders by John Light

Space raiders, space raiders,  
Computer invaders.  
First zap them and trap them  
Then in a dungeon clap them.

There's an enemy blip,  
Through your guard it might slip.  
So wham it and blam it,  
With all missiles slam it.

They'll knock you right out  
Before you can shout,  
So hoot them and shoot them,  
Right off your screen boot them.

# COMPETITION

Ruby has drawn us this wonderful picture (see over). Can't you feel it drawing you into it? Why is the woman at the window blindfolded? is she a prisoner? does she suffer from an eye condition? What is the woman in the chair writing? important documents that could save her country from war? or a love poem? Is there something magical going on here?

So many questions from one drawing. **Focus** invites you to write a short story based on what you see in the picture. Entries should be no longer than 5000 words in length, be in normal manuscript format (i.e. double spaced on one side of the paper only) and your name(s) should appear on your manuscript. **Deadline for the competition is 30 June 1997.**

Prizes of a book-token will be awarded to the winner and runners-up.

# FORUM

This time around, **Focus** invites you to let us know what you think about *Writers' Books*. What experience have you had of these, have you found them helpful, or a hindrance? Have you been involved in producing such a book? If so can you tell us of your experiences (as Sarah Lefanu does in this issue)? What do you think are the good parts and the bad parts of books for writers. Should there be specialist books for Science Fiction and Fantasy writers? Let us know your thoughts on this subject for the Forum in 600 - 800 words. **Deadline for next issue 30 June 1997.**

