Focus

The B.S.F.A. writers' magazine
Issue 32 Nov/Dec 1997
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Competition Winner
Writers' Books
Conspiracies
Stories
SFWA

Ian Watson
Colin Greenland, Ruby
Andrew Darlington, J C Hartley
Alison Sinclair, John Light, K V Bailey
Brian Stableford, Cherith Baldry – & lots more...

Focus 32

Editorial

Through a telephoto lens, lightly...

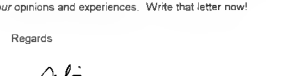
Time passes and a lot of water has gone under the bridge since the last issue of **Focus**. One of us has got married (see next page for the new name), the other has become a free agent in the sense that she is no longer paid to do anything (apart from spending 24 hours a day jobseeking). We have been delighted to be inundated with entries for the competition (turn to p9 for the results and the winning entry) and the Plotting Parlour has been brought back from the brink of extinction by a triptych of letters. It's great to know you're out there!

We've also had the results of the BSFA Survey (see last **Matrix** for details). Suffice it to say that we're pleased that on the whole we're giving you what you want – except maybe letters, but only *you* can provide those!

In this issue: tips on planning and discovering things about your story in Colin Greenland's Prescription; insider information on Science Fiction Writers of America from Ian Watson; an insight into the writer/editor relationship from Alison Sinclair and of course the Forum: what, if anything, do 'how to write' books have to offer?

Remember to keep us informed about *your* opinions and experiences. Write that letter now!

Regards



Forum

Gadgets, Widgets and McGuffins

Science Fiction is full of Gadgets, Widgets and McGuffins, indeed some stories wouldn't work without them. Where would the cyberpunks be without their 'plug ins', space opera buffs without their ray guns, media types without Dr McCoy's salt and pepper shaker medical tools. **Focus** invites you to write a short piece (600-800 words) on why you think Gadgets, Widgets and McGuffins are an integral part of science fiction.

Deadline for submissions 31 January 1998.

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 5,000 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 Weaver's Way, Camden Town, London NW1 0XE

BSFA Membership Rates:

£19 UK; Please enquire for overseas rates,
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PLOT? ISN'T THAT SOMETHING CONSPIRATORS DO?

or

WHAT MY EDITORS TAUGHT ME.

by Alison Sinclair

I got my first rejection letter at the age of nine for a handwritten Robinsonade entitled "Shipwrecked on an Island" which I submitted to one of the New York publishers – I wish I could recall whom. It was an official printed rejection slip, and I was dead chuffed, in the way of a child who has been taken seriously. I discovered SF at the age of thirteen, in a rented house in Edmonton, Canada. "My" bedroom was owned by the family's teenage son who had all John Wyndham's books and all Ian Fleming's James Bond series (are those endings legal?), and a smattering of other writers. By the end of the summer I was well into Bradbury, McCaffery, Asimov, Clarke, Le Guin, adult comments of 'are you still reading that rubbish?' washing off me. A year later I cast my bread upon the waters again, sending my best (SF) story to the first volume of what would become an annual anthology of Scottish writing. It came back with a letter telling me that they thought it would be more than good enough for my school magazine. I was inked. I hadn't been submitting to my school magazine. I had been submitting to their anthology. I did not construe it as it was no doubt meant, as encouragement. Like the nine-year-old, ready or not I wanted to try for the big leagues. The third rejection letter I remember came when I was sixteen, and it was the one that left scars. It was dismissive. My story was pointless and incomprehensible. I had to keep reading good fiction and I would learn to write better. It was my own fault – I had not only written a science fiction short story but I had tried an experimental stream of consciousness form. And I'd sent it to a Canadian literary magazine in the mid seventies. But there was nowhere else. After that, I did not submit anything else for about ten years.

It wasn't just the rejection letter. A year before we had moved, and I found myself in a barren, uncongenial environment, and to escape unhappiness, I became a workaholic. I had an interest in science as old as my interest in writing, and since a clear direction was given me there, I followed it. I still wrote, ceased to send things out, ceased to put, yearly, on my new year's resolutions, "get something published".

But at the end of my Ph.D., instead of trotting dutifully off to my first postdoc, I spent six weeks at The Banff Centre for Fine Arts, doing their (alas no longer extant) Writing I course. That was a turning point – or re-turning point. Banff taught the free-fall method, which involved hammering out on a keyboard whatever came to mind, letting it find its own shape. Up until then I'd handwritten all my drafts, then typed up the final version

Immediately after Banff, my productivity took a quantum jump. The other, longer term benefit was much of what emerged, from both myself and others, was frankly personal. Not personal in the way of confessional – though there was that, too – but personal in the way of writing from one's own point of view. And people listened, even to the scientific, the fantastic and the fabulous.

I defended my thesis. I moved to Boston, USA, to work in the Children's Hospital research labs. Abominable weather, noisy neighbours, rich intellectual environment – bookshops and libraries – and the company of people who, like me, had multiple interests. Three or four nights a week I'd come home from running or fencing and write from 11 pm until 2 or 3 am, the only time I could be almost certain the thudding from upstairs might stop. With my newfound productivity, and my regained sense that what I was writing had validity, I beavered away at what would become **Legacies** – then titled **Homecoming**. Into it went my experiences of exile, my sense of having grown up in two cultures and blessed/cursed with permanent double vision, my wondering as a child of the twentieth century how we will ever manage to overcome our history. Eventually the love-hate relationship with Boston wore me out; I turned my face towards the Atlantic, and said "home."

Ah, but before that happened, I at last made it into print. The first story I wrote after Banff, drawing on a setting I knew and marrying it to a fictional story, was accepted by a small press magazine, **Other Voices**, one of the few which published exclusively prose. It was also my first experience of receiving special editorial attention, for it was rejected on first submission, with two comments: the ending was weak and the first person interpolative passages did not contribute. So I strengthened the ending and cut the first person passages – and the story was accepted on resubmission. In that very same week the phone rang while I was trying to brown some two-week-old mushrooms on the stovetop. I had entered a memoir written at Banff into a Creative Non Fiction competition and this was the editor phoning to tell me I was one of the prizewinners. The mushrooms, needless to say, were unsalvageable.

Home would have been Edinburgh, but the closest I got was Leeds, which had a superb structural biology division, willing to take me (and my year and a bit's funding) and my immodest ambition of trying to crystallise a potassium ion channel. I perched in my attic bedroom over the stairwell of the staff rented housing and listened to one of my fellow tenants berate his publisher in Italian on the communal phone, and worked on **Homecoming**. I had short stories doing the rounds, and one was accepted for **The Gate**, but after the acceptance, publication went into limbo and it never did appear.

The first publisher **Homecoming** went to – in the form of three-chapters-and-a-synopsis – was (I think) *Gollancz*. I can't remember what was guiding my choices, though I suspect it was the same criterion that had guided my short story submissions: I liked the work they published. Gollancz rejected it, but with one pleasingly respectful touch – for my ordinary brown envelope SASE they substituted a more robust padded envelope. I took the point and used padded envelopes from then on. The second publisher I sent it to was Random Century. In November it returned. I stoically peeled open the envelope as I trudged up the stairs, expecting the usual thank-you-for-letting-us-see-sorry-it-does-not-meet-our-needs. Instead, there was a personal letter to me from the editor, Deborah Beale. She was very interested in my writing, thought I had talent, but I was not there yet technically. There were two main flaws. I tended to overwrite. And I hadn't really learned to plot, and on that account, my characterisation seemed a little picaresque. She had a few suggestions for what I might do, and she wanted to meet me next time I was down in London.

So I manoeuvred a visit to London. Can't recall how or why. I showed up at the Random Century offices in a suit, with garment bag on shoulder. Deborah appeared in miniskirt and leather jacket. In a crowded restaurant she wanted me to tell her the story of **Homecoming**. I tried. The noise and the effort wore me out; I begged off half way. Which was her point – I did not have a clear idea of the story. She was encouraging, nevertheless. She got maybe 500 submissions a year. Of those, she found about eight authors she wanted to work with. I was one of the eight.

There seem to be two kinds of editor. Editors who must see evidence of the ability to plot from the start, and editors who regard plotting as a technical skill which can be taught and look instead for innate ability to write. It was my great good fortune that Deborah was the latter. In retrospect, as far as my true understanding went, plot was something conspirators did in cellars, not authors in garrets.

Back I went to my garret, taking Deborah's words of advice and what gleanings I could find about plotting from my reading, and started revising **Homecoming**. A year's work followed, in which I confronted the fact that I had not really reached the ending; I had merely pooped out two thirds of the way in. I wrote nine more long chapters. Just after Christmas, 1992, I bundled up some 600 pages, 4.3 kg of laser printed Conqueror Bond, and committed them to the tender offices of the GPO. I say a year's work – but it was a year's work at an average 15 hours a week. Aside from the Parkinsonian properties of research science (expands to fit the time available), I sang in choirs, practised Aikido, swam, ran, and read voraciously. I am daily thankful I am never tempted to treat my credit card as I do my library card(s). In the interim, unknown to me, Deborah had signed on as SF editor for the embryonic Orion. That was my second piece of pure dumb luck – she had a blank slate to fill. In March, at work, I got a phone call. Deborah "I've read your novel. I like it very much." I could hear a "but" coming in the tone of her voice, and braced myself to take it stoically. "And," she said, "we'd like to offer you a contract." I went into high orbit and didn't come down for a week.

There was a but. She wanted a rewrite. In August, I got the first instalment of the editorial notes, and a few weeks later, the second. They came to forty pages, covering the first two thirds of the manuscript. The remaining third returned decorated with yellow post-its.

Gulp.

There were two moments of illumination. Around page twelve of the notes, Deborah had written, "Liari is a secular saint." And when I read that, I started to relax. She understood. More, she approved.

This was crucial. One of my more powerful internal censors took the form of "the worldly adult", whose pleasure it was to remind me of my naivete, my childish unworldliness. SF was rubbish. Goodness was passe. Heroes were out of fashion. Niceness was merely hypocrisy or weakness. In most of the books I read, the central characters were incapable of moral choice. They were the victims of social conditioning and their own appetites. Nobody knew what right and wrong were any more, everyone had outgrown such infantile notions, and even if you tried to do good, the universe got you in the end. I had written a novel with a good man at the centre.

I had written a novel about a hero with moral fibre, who made moral choices, and was ultimately rewarded for his courage. And I was afraid of being mocked for that. So with that one sentence Deborah – a professional editor – won my trust. She was willing to follow me into unfashionable terrain, without a murmur.

So I could trust Deborah. What about myself? I had spent something like five years in the building of this edifice (if one omitted an early draft better classed as juvenilia). I had fitted it together as carefully as I knew how. Ramshackle as it was, I feared to disturb it. I feared that I could do no better. I had a good (or not so good) two or three weeks of paralysis, wherein I hardly dared touch the manuscript. I re-read the notes, and nibbled at the edges, making word-outs. And then I had an inspiration.

In the first draft, the *caur'ynarri*, the hostel where my central character is living, was across the river from the site of much of the main action. There was a great deal of coming and going, by bridge and boat, with description and character interaction, but not

much *else*. And ping! It came to me that I could *move* the *caur'ynani*. I should carry it over the river, into the middle of the action. Dispense with pages of going back and forth. And plop Lian right in the middle of the flood-threatened city.

Now, if anything is immutable in my mind, it's geography, even the geography of the imagination. And here I had wilfully and painlessly rearranged the geography of my imaginary city to my inarguable advantage. What *else* could I do? I wondered.

The edit took the better part of another year. Certainly not unbroken work; there were weeks when I hardly touched it, when the experiments were going well and I needed those evenings and weekends in the lab, or the experiments were going badly and I faced a deadline. There were also weeks when the novel obsessed me, and I added the wrong enzymes to the wrong tubes and forbade myself to have anything to do with radioactivity. I started the edit in the heat of August and continued through a cold winter in an attic flat in a largely empty listed building. The quiet was its great virtue; the drafts and storage-7 heaters were not. I constructed a tent from curtains bought from the hospice charity shop on the ground floor, which closed out the worst of the drafts, and enclosed my bed, my desk, the skylight window and the heater in one drape-lined six by ten by ten cell. I discovered that elastic bandages wrapped around palms and wrists kept my hands warm and still let me type. During that winter the building was repossessed by the building society, the downstairs hall ceiling fell in exposing a veritable horatonum of unrecognizable fungi, and the builders brought in to survey the whole said they had no idea what actually kept my floor up, since it had no visible means of support. In the spring I took the advance and applied it to the down payment on a flat. I moved, and the edit continued.

It involved work on several levels. The most superficial was simple cutting of verbiage, paring down of descriptions (I was still overwriting), and exchanges which were conversation rather than dialogue. The writing of the latter was important to get each characters' idiom into my ear, but once that idiom had been mastered, the mastery needed to be applied to making the dialogue pointed and relevant. That was mechanical – I just cut where I was told. Unnecessary scenes had to be eliminated – "these domestic scenes are charming, but this is the third" – which was more of a challenge, but I became more ruthless as the work progressed, and I became more able to recognise what was mere chatter. I achieved the collapse of those three domestic scenes into one brief one, with a 75% word reduction, dusted my hands clean of verbal sawdust and gloated. Then there was the adjustment in weighting of the various elements of the story, with effacement of subplot, sideplots and secondary plots, contrary to my rather socialistic impulse to let everybody have their story. I say effacement, not excision, because much of what was there initially is there still, but instead of whole scenes being devoted to, say Zharlinn's relationship with Daisainia, and Lors' protectiveness towards Fioral, these things were either dispensed with as a bit of business, a passing exchange, or made pertinent to the main plot. To use a visual analogy, the art is in using light strokes as well as heavy strokes; sketches instead of full photographic visualisation. The art is in trusting the reader to bring their own understanding to the book, and fill in what you cannot make explicit.

Then there was the major work, which was on the story itself. The words "plot point" recurred in the notes with such frequency that Deborah remarked upon it herself. She had, she said, never had a writer who insisted on writing so much around and to the side of the story, creating incidental characters and events which did bear on the central thrust of the story. I tended to land the reader into a scene and let the significance of that scene be known only later, creating the sense that "one is at a party, witnessing multiple character interactions without knowing what it all means". I had to learn to be much clearer about how one event led to the next, and make that explicit as I moved through the story scene by scene. I had too many characters who were not essential to the plot itself. I had too many characters, full stop.

For instance, in the original version of the chapter in which Lian meets Daisainia on the way – from the other side of the river – he also met Arkadin, Illuan D'Vandras and Tor and several other people, and it took him ten pages to get where he should have been going. In the final version, Lian met Arkadin – I was not giving that up – and then went up the hill and ran across Daisainia. Illuan D'Vandras appeared for the first time when he was needed to give Daisainia grief in the *caur'cali* Tor became a walk-on, and the several others found something else to do. In the original version of the *caur'cali*, Daisainia's executive meeting, the people there were the correct people for the politics – but they weren't the people who were most important in the rest of the story. Some of them had very little to do thereafter. In the final version, each and every one of the attendees were significant in the rest of the book through to the climax. They lined up, for and against, the returnees.

Essentially, the dramatic load devolved upon far fewer characters. The others were still present, but as part of the backdrop. Their stories were merely sketched in, or suggested.

It was all in the manuscript. It merely needed to be dug out. For somebody who has always had to work to appear acceptably submissive under criticism, I had a remarkably easy time of all this. It took long hours, many miles of shoe-leather and hard thought (I think best while moving), but I felt no possessiveness over my own words. If I agreed with Deborah's suggestions, I followed them. If I disagreed with them, if they contradicted something about which I was certain, then my task was to convince her.

A case in point was the matter of Sidor and Illuan. Could they be combined, the notes asked? Sidor was Daisainia's grandfather and lukewarm supporter. Illuan D'Vandras was her adversary. In my mind they were two distinct, and essential people; and what I had to do was convey this conviction on paper. The emergence of the plot from the undergrowth helped that: for each of them had his own scenes. One, Illuan, came to dominate, being much more active. The other was effaced.

The most detailed annotation was over the first third of the novel. By the latter half, I had made such drastic changes that, as Deborah had predicted, a large portion of her notes (on post-its) were no longer relevant. I also was much surer of what I was doing. I knew how long a piece of description should be to avoid slowing down a scene, and I had a stronger instinct for pacing. I had a pared-down cast, whom I could slot into events. I realised that, far from being a realistic slice of life, the novel is an utterly artificial construct, and, for all its richness and detail, utterly homogenous. By analogy with ferromagnetism, all the little magnets in the big lump have to line up in one direction.

I returned the rewrite in late Summer of 1993. It had lost a quarter of its length and had been retitled **Legacies**. In December, Charon Wood sent the final editorial notes, mainly involving the ending. She wanted more action, especially at the climax. That was probably the hardest part of the rewrite, making that showdown work. I was averse to melodrama, to action for action's sake. It was done over a quite intense several weeks – I'd do my day's work, come home, work for three or four hours, then go out for a walk, usually in the rain, trying to loosen up my back and unclench my brain so I could sleep. But I got the showdown in the end, using the loves, hates and pressure points of the characters who were there, with a little help from my favourite loose cannon, Thovalt. The answer, as Deborah had said to me earlier (quoting someone – Geoff Ryman, I think), is always in the manuscript.

There being none so pious as a reformed sinner, I became a plot-obsessive. There was a mental blue pencil poised over everything I read. I growled over Gail Godwin's **A Southern Family**, where in the middle of the first page she embarks on a long detour about one character's grandfather. Irrelevant! I gnashed my teeth over Margaret Atwood's **The Robber Bride**. Come on, quit being coy, *who* dunnit? Someone oughta have dunnit! I read a lot of mysteries. At the back of my mind was the fear that my newly acquired skill might prove ephemeral. It might have been quite specific for **Legacies**, and evaporate with the

yielding up of that big padded envelope. So I exercised it at any and every opportunity. It was fun being a back-seat plotter. Getting back in the driver's seat was another thing entirely.

There was no avoiding it. While waiting for the first set of editorial notes on **Legacies** I had dug into what I thought would be my second novel, an expansion of a novella I had written two or three years earlier about genetic engineering and global climate change. I read up on global warming, the dust bowl years, genetic engineering. But when I put it before Deborah, she nixed the idea – the market for near future novels was poor. Could I move it further ahead?

I'd wanted for a long time to write a novel about a waterworld, having had a 'thing' about the sea and having studied oceanography, courtesy of the OU, and I'd given no small thought to how humans should be adapted to ocean. So I moved the basic idea some thousand or more years into the future, considered what form it would take, and set it on a human colony. That involved more reading, and some entertaining picking of real-estate. I'll have this star, please, and *that* one, too. Once **Legacies'** final edit was dispensed with, I got launched – and sank like a lead canoe. I laboured onwards, but the novel resolutely failed to catch fire. The characters would not come to life, or even be mildly interesting.

Deborah and Charon had, by then, given up their positions at Millennium and been succeeded by Caroline Oakley. In the end I apologetically sent the first eight chapters, and asked for feedback.

She spent two hours with me the next time I was passing through London, conducting a Socratic examination of the background of the story. She made me realise that though I had set up the genetics and ecology, and even the computer science, I had given insufficient thought to the wider picture. What were the institutions governing this planet? How were decisions made? Who enforced law? What would be the consequences of ...? On the northbound train I scribbled down everything I could remember of her questions in my notebook. I started trying to answer them. Out of the answers came that body floating in the water, whodunnit, whydunnit, and with what. I made some decisions of my own, too, bowing to the exigencies of drama and the limits of my skill. No matter how faithful I thought it was to the shape of things to come, I could not get emotion transmitted by telephone or comlink or whatever. I had to give people reasons to be in the same room. That gave my novel Rache of Scole, with his reactionary background and personal touch. I gave my characters established relationships, both blood and social, with each other. I gave them history. I can't say the writing was straightforward thereafter – the pages of self-interrogation in my notebooks testify to that. There were times I likened the story to a plate of too much spaghetti and other times I remembered a woman sculptor who had described trying to weld a length of metal in place to suggest tension and being thwacked, over and over, as it sprung loose. Bits of my novel kept springing loose and 'thwacking' me. But that, I think, is because I knew where they fitted. I wanted them in place, under tension.

With **Legacies** I had no such stern demands of my structure. Bruises aside, I knew where I was headed, and who I needed to get there. Which is just as well because I went off in the middle of the writing and became a medical student in Calgary, and submitted the novel late in my first year, during Renal. (There's a scribble in the margin of my lecture notes: "Rache's kidneys!" as I realised I'd never addressed what my characters *drank* in the middle of an ocean.) Life was full of little pings! and oopses! as I continuously turned the novel over in my mind and things occurred to me – like characters being in two places at once, or currents flowing in two directions simultaneously, or places where I could simplify the story. I became a great adherent of the KISS principle. I wrote everything down and saved it up for when the editorial notes came in.

Those took the form of a four page FAX of questions, and suggestions that certain issues were not distinct enough, and certain motivations not apparent enough. There was little extensive rewriting needed; I mainly had to give more attention to Cybele in the early chapters, given the weight she carried towards the end. In a way, I think the form of the novel helped with the plotting, in that it was closer to a mystery or novel of conspiracy than any other form, and that has a better-defined structure than the quest structure of **Legacies**. Or maybe I was really starting to get the hang of this.

Deep breath, back to keyboard, do it a third time and find out.

Forum

Writing Books for Writers, and What I Learned in the Process

by Brian Stableford

My first book on SF writing, **The Way to Write Science Fiction**, was commissioned by Elm Tree Books in 1988 and published the following year. Shortly after its publication the Penguin Group closed down the entire Elm Tree line, so I reinvested almost all of my advance in buying back the unsold copies, which I have been selling ever since to my creative writing classes and through small ads in **Interzone** and **Matrix**. The 30,000 words allocated to the Elm Tree book by the commissioning editor always seemed uncomfortably tight, so I was glad to obtain a commission earlier this year from Hodder & Stoughton to write a 60,000-word book on Fantasy and Science Fiction for their 'Teach Yourself Writing' series. The new commission also allowed me to capitalise on the experience gained during the courses on creative writing that I have taught since 1988.

I always thought that the most interesting element of the Elm Tree book was the chapter on plotting, which borrowed some comments on the innate moral order of fiction from an essay on 'The Mythology of Man-Made Catastrophe' which I had done for **Foundation** (#22, 1981). The specific features of the moral order of science fiction became the principal focal point of many of my subsequent lectures, including an informal talk entitled 'How Should a Science Fiction Story End?' which I presented (in slightly different versions) at numerous SF conventions and other events. This talk argued – usually rather flamboyantly – that the conventional 'normalising' and 'eucatastrophic'* endings appropriate to other genres of fiction are woefully inappropriate to the particular moral order of science fiction texts.

This argument grew by slow degrees, becoming ever more elaborate in a series of essays published in **The New York Review of Science Fiction**, beginning with 'To Bring in Fine Things: The Significance of Science Fiction Plots' (#9, 1989) and extending through the scrupulously unflamboyant Pioneer Award-winning 'How Should a Science Fiction Story End?' (#78, 1995) to 'Deus ex Machina; or How to Achieve the Perfect Sciencefictional Climax' (#91, 1996). I extended its scope (very sketchily) in the analysis of TV texts when I wrote the chapter on TV SF for David Pringle's **Ultimate Encyclopedia of Science Fiction** and (much more conscientiously) in an essay called 'The Third Generation of Genre Science Fiction' for **Science-Fiction Studies** (#70, 1996), which tracked the aesthetic implications of the fact that TV SF now

forms the core of the popular genre

The argument nowadays looms so large in my thinking that in the Hodder & Stoughton book it is cited in the introductory chapter on the nature of worlds within texts as well as the chapter on plotting, although I felt obliged to strip it down to its bare elements lest it seem too abstrusely theoretical for a guidebook for would-be SF and fantasy writers. I hope one day to find that time to write a long essay on the aesthetics of science fiction, in which it will figure as the keystone of my analysis, but I am not in any danger of becoming obsessive about it (I hope).

Writing the Hodder & Stoughton book forced me to tidy up, straighten out and carry forward certain improvisations I had made over the years while updating my standard evening-class lectures on narrative viewpoints, characterisation and the construction of dialogue. I also took aboard (again sketchily, so as to avoid too much theorising) the results of an analysis of the literary uses of supernatural and sciencefictional devices, which had persuaded me – somewhat reluctantly – that however differently such devices are justified in purely logical terms they perform very similar literary functions. (This rather than the increased wordage-allocation, is why the second book attempts to cover both fantasy and science fiction.) I doubt that there is anything in the new book which will warrant the extraordinary kind of extrapolation that has extended my investigation of the relationship between plotting and moral order in fantasy and science fiction, but only time will tell.

I do not know, as yet, how the target audience will react to the Hodder & Stoughton book. I hope that its users will find it helpful all the more so because of its occasional tentative digressions into theory. I can, however, testify that the investigations which are summarised therein have had a profound and crucial effect on my own writing – in which I include my critical writing as well as my fiction. For this reason, as well as for the (relatively meagre) assistance to my income, I am very grateful to the publishers who asked me to produce the two books and to the many students whose enquiries and challenges have helped to modify their doctrines.

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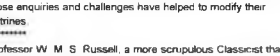
*Professor W. M. S. Russell, a more scrupulous Classicist than J. R. R. Tolkien (who popularised the term 'eucatastrophe'), has pointed out to me that 'eucatastrophe' is at best oxymoronic and at worst self-contradictory. He suggested that I should start using 'anastrophe' instead, on the grounds that a word meaning 'upturn' is less offensive than one meaning 'good downturn'. I agreed with him wholeheartedly, but what is my still small voice compared with that of the author of the Greatest Book of the Twentieth Century? I decided to compromise by abandoning all use of the term 'eucatastrophe' and substituting the word 'improving', and that is what I have done in the Hodder & Stoughton book.



Books for Writers
by Cherith Baldry

I've always approached books on how to write with a certain wariness because I'm not sure that it's something that can be taught, particularly in the case of writing fiction. There's a 'spark' and wherever it comes from, if it's not there then no one can put it there.

That said, I wish that when I was a real beginner I'd had a good book to teach me the basics. How to lay out a manuscript. How to write a covering letter. How to organise my submissions to stand the best possible chance of an acceptance. Of course I gradually learnt all these things, but a good reliable source book would have made the whole process much quicker. In other words, I think I'd have appreciated tuition not on how to write, but on how to shape the writing to the market and how to sell it once it was written.

There are a lot of such books around, and I think that they can also be useful to explain copyright and other legal matters, how to deal with tax, methods of keeping proper records, and so on. It's when they come to the actual writing process, the translation of idea in the head to words on the page, that they're not as successful.

One piece of advice I picked up from a writers' manual was always to begin with a synopsis. I hate, loathe and detest synopses, and when I have to prepare one for a commissioned piece of work, then it's wailing and gnashing of teeth time. Writing from a synopsis and writing without one is the difference between embroidering a flower and growing a plant.

Another well-respected tip I detest is the idea of writing potted biographies of the main characters before the actual writing of the book begins. This is something I share with Ursula Le Guin, who says that she would feel it impolite to approach her characters in this way, instead of getting to know them through engagement in the pages of the book.

Where I feel the danger lies is in reducing the book to a clinical process, almost like those science experiments we were taught to write up in school. First we do this, this, and this; then, if we're lucky, we may make gold. More likely, the whole thing lies there inert, all the excitement gone.

What I think many writers' books fail to make clear is that whatever works for a particular writer is right for them. If you want to make meticulous notes, fine. If your forward planning consists of a couple of lines of scrawl on the back of an old envelope, that's fine, too. I've known a couple of writers - beginners - who got so snarled up in the process of preparation, because the manual told them to, that they never actually got down to writing the novel.

More useful than recommending working methods, I've found, is examination of why particular books or stories work. There's a lot to be said for taking a passage apart to see what makes the wheels go round. I've especially enjoyed Robert Silverberg's **Words of Wonder**, which is a collection of classic SF stories each prefaced by an essay by Silverberg explaining why he thinks the stories are so successful.

I've also found from experience that the most useful books on writing that I've encountered have been specialised, and written by people with knowledge of the particular area or genre. The narrower the focus, the more useful the advice can be. In the SF field, Bob Shaw's **How to Write Science Fiction** is helpful, and I was impressed by Sarah LeFanu's recent **Writing Fantasy Fiction**. This book I found particularly inspirational, not in any gung-ho sense, but because of the seriousness with which LeFanu approaches the fantasy genre, which is so often dismissed. This is one reason why I think writers of SF and fantasy might do better by looking for specialist publications. I'm reminded of an article in a writing magazine which shall be nameless, advising would-be writers that if their literary masterpiece fails to sell in a literary slot they can rewrite it as SF and sell it like that.

All advice is useful to somebody. All advice needs that pinch of salt. I hate to see somebody struggling with a particular working method or stylistic rule because the book told them to. Use what works and throw the rest away.

Books: A Thing of the Past?
by Riaz Hussain

With so many writing courses and seminars on offer, it's a wonder books on writing haven't altogether become obsolete.

But for those of us who don't fancy going on expensive writing weekends, (out of pocket with just enough left for bread and water

for the next fortnight!), books are still the best alternative. Good books, that is.

Not only can they sharpen up your skills but can put right things you *thought you understood*. For example, I always assumed characterisation was just about people: full stop. Wrong! It's about *who* we happen to be writing about: the way a particular individual talks, walks and thinks as distinct from anyone else. Ideally, even pulling up a chair should reveal something about them.

So much for 'just people'.

But this makes an important distinction, some books will *really* explain the point whereas others leave you with just a vague notion – for example 'know your market' without explaining the intricacies of market research.

Others meanwhile, would have explained the point but were so concise it may as well be in code! 'You're left wondering, 'well, what was that about?'

Then come the big, hefty-spined jaw-breakers – books that look important but where you have to sit eagle-eyed to suddenly dart for the nuggets of gold. (Flyfishing without the fly, more like.) Another related type is where you've spent three hours re-reading the same paragraph just to realise all you've gained is a headache! And not much fun, at that.

By and large, the best books tend to be simple and well-structured with major points illustrated by examples. The 'How to ...' series is a case in point where the author might perhaps assert too many adverbs slow dialogue'; then offer two examples one with fewer adverbs to demonstrate the point. It may be too clinical for some people's taste but the key advantage is you can see what's happening and secondly it provokes you into thinking about your own writing (after all, it is about self-improvement or so I'm told).

Similarly, specialist books on just one aspect of writing can prove to be gems. Yet again, the reaction may be knee-jerk 'what – a 200 page book just on dialogue!'; but depth does mean greater understanding.

Works on specific genres – recall S. Lefanu's **Writing Fantasy Fiction** featured in issue 31 – also have their place. For instance, I always thought 'Sword and Sorcery' was basically 'Sci-Fi in drag', until I read the book mentioned above.

But when it comes to factual data on magazine outlets and the like, reference books have the distinct disadvantage of easily becoming outdated, at least for something that's only revised annually. Hence the popular growth of publications listing small-press outlets updated throughout the year. And although the 'books versus magazines' argument has been soaring for years, it could be *both* actually complement one another. Where books fail, magazines can still come to the rescue with excellent articles on writing, reader workshops, and forum items like those in **Focus**. In fact, more thought-provoking insight can sometimes be found there than in books.

The only problem is we can get so caught up reading about our art we can actually forget to practise it – in which case 'discipline' seems a good word to look up.

Writers' Books by Sue Thomas

There's no doubt that books written especially for writers can be extremely helpful in focusing our thoughts on exactly what it is we are trying to do, and there are several categories of books written both for and about writers which can be useful. As a writing teacher at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, I regularly read books on the art of writing and often hear students' comments on the ones they find worthwhile. There seems to be no one way, and it's really a matter of taste and disposition as to which you might find exciting and which cloyingly irritating. The kinds of books which writers read to learn about the art of writing seem to fall into a number of categories:

- the 'how-to' variety - how to write a poem, how to write a romance etc. These are often useful but can be very prescriptive just at a point in your writing career when you need to be wild and experimental. On the other hand, they can provide very good formulae which you can use diagnostically to uncover weaknesses in your writing. I am especially fond of using film story structures for this purpose, since their clear approach can cut through a lot of the mess we make when we create a fiction. For this purpose I would recommend Christopher Vogler's **The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters** and also David Siegel's **Nine-Act Structure** to be found on the web at http://www.dsiegel.com/film/Film_home.html
- the inspirational variety - many of my students swear by Natalie Goldberg's **Writing Down The Bones** and Dorothea Brande's **Becoming a Writer**. Books like this can provide wonderful stimulation and moral support to the flagging writer struggling on alone.
- process books by writers, where they talk about their approaches to writing and expose their work habits, strengths and weaknesses. These personal insights and revelations are always fascinating. George Plimpton's **Writers at Work** and **The Writer's Chapbook** are both derived from long interviews with established authors originally published in The Paris Review magazine. Clare Boylan looks at the work-process of a number of writers in **The Agony and The Ego**, whilst in Susan Sellers' books **Delighting the Heart** and **Taking Reality by Surprise** women authors write about their approaches to writing with heartening candour.
- books about the way writing is produced which have been written primarily for the theorist but which have a lot to offer the practising writer *too* - **Silences** by Tillie Olsen examines the social, cultural and psychological factors which stop people from writing, and **Word for Word: A Study of Authors' Alterations** by W. Hildick is an intensive investigation with plenty of examples of redrafting which show the development of an author's thinking over a period of time. Most recently, Alberto Manguel's **A History of Reading** has thrilled writers and readers alike with its accessible and thoughtful account of the act itself.

Yes - the act. Never forget the act itself. You want to know how to write a novel? Poems, short stories, articles, reviews? Then read! Read as much and as widely as you can. There's no substitute for the pleasure of the act, and it reminds us that one day, we hope, somebody out there will get the same thrill from curling up on the sofa with something we have written!

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Sue Thomas is Course Leader of the MA in Writing at Nottingham Trent University. Her list of web-based writers' links can be found at:

http://www.innotts.co.uk/~thomas/writers.html

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http://humant.ntu.ac.uk/foh/pg/pgcourse.html

SHORT STORY COMPETITION

We were pleased by the response to the competition. We received fifteen entries, that we whittled down to eight; all of a very high standard. We were interested in the way the picture was used in the story and looked more for exploration of character than pure description of the scene. Two of the stories did this especially well and it was difficult to choose between them. We felt the winning story was particularly successful in involving the reader. The winning entries were:

Winner: Wayne Stamford – "Beachcombing the Mind's Eye"
Runner Up: Daniel O'Mahoney – "Map of the Human Head"

The prizes of a ten pound book token for the winner and a five pound token for the runner-up are on their way to Wayne and Daniel. Congratulations! We hope to publish "Map of the Human Head" in a future issue of Focus.

The Editors.

Beachcombing the Mind's Eye

by Wayne Stamford

I woke with jangling sparks in my visual centres, and was into the systems checks before I realised that there were no systems. I was blinded to the whole electromagnetic spectrum, to the composition of interstellar gasses – but most, to the flow of potential through the web of reality. My flight suit was gone. I rolled onto my side against ill-remembered gravity. A light covering stroked my skin. My arms locked across my knees and I rocked. I was in a bed of sorts – the mattress murmured with my motion.

'Can I bring you anything?"

My face turned toward the voice. But then I pressed my head into my arms, away from searching fingers touching my neck. They settled on my hairless scalp. "My name is... Amy. Will you not let me help you?" She squeezed my shoulder through the thin sheet.

I eased myself around to face my interrogator. The air seemed scented. Flowers. The perfumes tickled my memory. The image of a summer garden snapped through singing interference. The vivid colours tugged my breath away. "Where am I?" After so long alone, the words formed with difficulty.

"You are in the kingdom of Acronis. Just in time for tea, in fact." A hiccup, which I took for laughter, punctuated her reply. "What shall I call you as I pass the sugar?"

I frowned. The pride of my vocation slipped around me. "Pilot of IUNS exploratory flupship Trailblazer."

"Well, perhaps I can call you Blaze." That anticipated a long-running relationship, I thought.

"Where's my visor?"

"If it was on your craft, it must be lost," she responded quickly.

"My suit," I snapped. "It's in my suit." I sat up and groped for the edge of the bed. Unable to orientate myself by sight, I wobbled as the soft mattress heaved beneath me.

"Blaze, you should lie down." She pushed on my chest – long nails on my prominent ribs. I shook her away. "Very well. One of the servitors found you on the path from the beach, naked and unconscious. There was no suit or sign of wreckage."

I tucked my knees up and resumed rocking. I thought I might make do without my sight, if the withdrawal of the ship-senses didn't weigh too heavily. I felt hollow. "How did you know I was a pilot?"

"There are few people with plug-sockets where their eyes should be."

"Don't call them that!"

"I am sorry. They are a little unnerving." The mattress shifted. "Perhaps you will let me cover them?" Soft material touched the bridge of my nose. It smelt of mere flowers.

"OK." The scarf pressed over black connectors jutting from my brow. Her fingers ticked behind my ears as she secured the knot. Up close, her scent was stronger, but the flash of memory didn't recur. Until I questioned these servants, I would assume that I owed my life to her. Though, what that life was worth in its current state was a matter for doubt. "Thanks. Is there anything I can to do repay your kindness?"

"That is something we can speak of when you are recovered." Her serious reply surprised me. "Now, what you can do is sleep." Glass clinked. "This will help." Something cold and wet touched my lips. My tongue flicked out on taste so bitter it verged on pain. I eased back to the mattress with her cold fingers helping me down. The drug worked quickly. Through a warm haze, I heard my saviour humming. My lips twitched as I recognised it as a lullaby.

Φ

"Completely naked?"

"That was how you arrived. The servitors would not have undressed you on the way."

"Could I speak to the servant who found me?"

She paused. "The servitors are automata. They communicate via a simple system of lights. Was there something in particular?"

"A small transmitter on a choker. I can't see how it came loose, but..."

"But it might be your way home. I will have the paths between here and the beach searched as soon as possible," she stated.

"Are you well, now?" Her tone seemed light.

I shuffled on the overstuffed couch. "Perfectly, I think, thank you." What else could she do for me? I turned my mind to the piping of gulls which seemed to be the permanent accompaniment to life in this house.

The cushion rolled me toward her as she shifted. A different scent today – though no less identifiable as hers. "Good." she said, wrapping long, soft fingers around my wrist. "If you are willing, I have a plan to enable you to despatch any debt which you feel to me."

"Anything," I murmured. My brow puckered as I wondered how, though.

"It involves the abilities you use as a pilot." My heart sagged. I said nothing. "I have need of a special kind of prescient."

"Prescient?" A barking laugh escaped me. "There's no such thing." My hand closed on hers, still holding my arm.

"So wise." I had become used to her mocking tone, though it irritated me. "Do you deny the vivid dreams since your arrival?"

I started. "I have dreams," I admitted. "There is bound to be a certain amount of disturbance due to my circumstances." Though the static had faded. "Not to mention side-effects to your sleeping draught."

"Anything you experience is your own. Blaze, I tell you that your abilities are real and I need you." I felt the tension in her touch. "I want you to use this skill to help me." Her earnestness was unquestionable.

I considered before replying. "I have spent years training to avoid undisciplined thought. Now you want me to throw myself open to every stray whim of my subconscious."

"I would not put it like that."

I raised my hand. "While there is a chance of my returning to the service, I must maintain my mental regulation." My face turned to the floor. "I can't, Amy. I'm sorry, but it's impossible."

Φ

The sharp, grey claws stretched toward me. "No!" I wriggled under their grip.

"Shush! It is a dream." The voice repeated several times before I found the toehold into full wakefulness and stopped thrashing about.

"Sorry," I gasped. I lay still, shivering under the cooling sweat on my body. Amy's hand rested on my forehead for a moment. The infant-like smell of recently-vacated bathwater hung around her. "I really am sorry." I breathed deeply and pushed the hazy nightmare away.

"Tell me about it."

"Only a dream." I knew it wouldn't put her off. I propped myself against the padded headboard and sat still while Amy arranged the pillow behind my back. The cool of the night prickled my skin. "You must have better things to do," I ventured.

"A little sleep would be nice," she quipped. "The sooner you stop being coy, the sooner we can both get some."

I shuffled, and told her how it seemed that I'd woken to find a thing like a metal truck with a mass of legs arching from the top bearing down on me. Its stubby arms pulled the sheet off me and began to roam my body. The ghosts of the pricklings and tweakings seemed to remain on my skin. "Not a very good bedtime story." I mumbled.

"Interesting, nonetheless," she responded. "Did it have a sort of oily, flowing texture to its surfaces?"

"What do you know?" I snapped. I snatched at her position on the edge of the bed. They brushed something damp which might have been hair, robe or skin.

"If you would rather continue this conversation in the morning..."

"No. I'm sorry." Again.

She patted my knee. "You saw a servitor, that is all. I think it proves the point I have been trying to make, though."

"I'm not prescient." My head rolled back onto the headboard and I rubbed at the skin around my eyesockets. Not this again.

"I think you saw the medic, actually, from when you first arrived." Amy laughed. "If you are permanently, um, postscient I might throw you back into the sea." The bed shook as she bounced further up. She touched my scalp, tickling the fuzz growing in the absence of depilatory drugs. "Nonetheless, it is something you could not have actually seen."

I didn't share her mood. "So," I sighed, "My usefulness as a pilot is probably already ruined. What do you want me to do?"

"No need to sound so sad about it!" She hugged me, stuffing my face full of dewed hair. "First, you put that scientific training into the task of controlling your skill." She smacked her lips and added sleepily, "Maybe we can keep your visions to more sociable hours."

Φ

"What did you see?" I heard the urgency in her voice.

"Large windows, books, overpadded couches. Nothing that I don't know is here." I stood in front of the windows, with the sunlight warming my cheek.

"You are being difficult."

"My coat is vermilion, the curtains are green and a bit faded. I could have said that the flowers in your hair are musk roses, but I can smell them." I took a deep breath and concentrated on the steady beat of the waves below the cliffs. I no longer had a use for imagining the thrums of a IUNS lander quartering the sky above them. And what good would I have been if I were retrieved? A burst of humming reminded me of my immediate concerns. "You should dress in the mornings if you intend to make me describe everything in greater detail," I added, with a shiver of relish at the enduring image of her barely covered by light shawls. Amy's research had become a subtle game – which I enjoyed more with each day.

"Maybe I do not choose to." Amy shifted from her seat, continuing to hum as she riffled through papers on a nearby desk. I could have told her that she'd forgotten the ones on which she kept notes of my progress. But she'd make do. And I was too occupied with reflecting on her red-gold hair and perfect skin to bother.

"What a nuisance." She returned to the chair and the rip of pages from her personal journal confirmed my foresight. I remembered her staring into space as she composed her writing. Minutes passed in silence, apart from the scratch of her pen, that incessant humming and the faint patter of full sheets falling from her lap. The minutiae of her movement blotted the rhythm of the sea from my mind.

"Are you determined to stand there all morning?"

"I like the sun." I'd been privy to every ripple of radiation across a ship's hull. This was a poor substitute, but the closest I'd found since.

"Come and sit by me."

I padded over the rich rugs, circling obstructions ostentatiously. My skin cooled, away from the window. I settled to the floor within reach of Amy's position, relishing the caress of loose clothing on my skin, and the odour of flowers and old books.

"Not bad." Stray wisps of hair were plucked from inside my collar. "Tell me about a pilot's work," she said airily.

I frowned. "What's to tell? It's useless to me now."

Her fingers fell on top of my head, weaving through my hair. "Is it true that finding a route through the flux equates with consciously selecting your future?" Not a spontaneous question.

I sighed. "You could say that of any decision." Probably a valid enough way of looking at it, though. "Once something is observed, the other possibilities will cease to exist. But, how would I know whether it was selection or a lottery of which one popped into my mind first?"

"Very profound, whatever it meant," she said brusquely. "Very well. Tell me something that you have seen yet to occur."

I smiled. Despite her words, she'd proposed a valid test off the top of her head. I considered before replying. "There is a large mirror behind the door. I saw myself in it, but haven't yet faced in that direction." For the first time in my adult life, I had seen what I looked like without a visor. Lean features and high forehead with


VISIONS
PARENTAGE

surrounding, pale waves. I had not gotten used to that flapping mass of hair, even though the scarf held it back well enough.

Her fingers lifted. I heard the trailing shawls slither over the carpet. The mirror grated on the wood panelling amidst her stifled grunts. I regretted speaking. Whatever she wanted from me, it was of deadly importance to her, and I didn't want to dash her hopes. She breathed heavily as she turned. "Well, you are unlikely to have your pretty face reflected now," she chuckled. "I wonder if you still remember events the same."

"Yes," I said pensively. I did. "Yes, I'm sorry." I reached out. Her warm fingers took mine. "I was mistaken. Why do you want to alter the future?" I surprised myself. I hadn't realised that was her goal until the words came out. Her silence unnerved me. I was at her mercy – however tender that might be.

"Did you know that we are on an island?" She didn't wait for a reply. "I am in exile. The Queen is dying, and arrangements have been made to see that I will not outlive her by long." She sounded tired, as if reciting something long-rehearsed – or brooded upon at length.

I shuffled closer, resting my back on the side of her chair. "I can't believe anyone could wish you ill." She laughed. Her hand crept over my shoulder, pulling the robe from my chest.

"You did not know me a few years ago. When I was brought here, they did not trust human guards near me."

I clutched her hand. "The servitors are guards?" I shivered. "You hope that the future is alterable by someone who is aware of it." The tension in my chest was barely containable. "But I'm here because I came out of flux in the wrong place. If anything, I'm no less of a liability than blind chance!"

"There is no-one else." Utter finality.

I leaned back, feeling the warmth of her leg against my back, through thin layers. "I'll try. Of course, I'll do everything I can." I had to.

Φ

Amy kept a firm grip on my arm. "That cave is where I used to go to be away from the servitors."

The flattened arch let in to the reddish face of the cliff. I had seen it, but didn't know when – the drugs we tried threw up a variety of reactions. The current brew gave almost real-time glimpses of my surroundings – all beautiful. The same mental regimes which I used to assimilate the exotic experiences from the ship's sensors worked well for the varied visions. My former life had proved of some use, at least.

"Didn't they follow you?" I pressed close to catch her reply over the noise of the surf. Our streaming hair mingled in the brisk sea breeze.

"At one time, I thought that they could not. One day I turned around to find one directly behind me. I thought my time had come." Her humour had begun to fray as the urgency of our search mounted.

I turned my head out toward the waves – away from the foreshadowed images of Amy's dress whipped around her slim calves. A glimpse of a new future blinked in my mind. It would take more than one instance to confirm the effect, but I couldn't remain quiet. "I think we're close."

"I do hope so." She pulled me closer. "I am concerned about your being here when it happens."

"Don't worry--" Amy's grip was snatched from my arm as my feet rooted to the wet sand. My skin chilled.

"What is it?" She took my free hand in an intense grip.

My blind stare swung up and back – perhaps through habit – as if I could see. Amy gasped, confirming it. On the edge of the cliff – where it arched back into a gentle slope – stood a knot of grey, spider-like bodies. As Amy's face fixed on them, they melted back into the tree-line. Had turning my head to them reinforced the future we struggled to avoid?

Φ

I flailed at the swinging arms. The servitor held me off, batting me away from the open door. Behind it, more spindly figures dodged about each other in pursuit of a smaller, paler form.

"No!" I came alert. I rolled from the bed, and stumbled to the connecting door. It grated on bare boards, and I ducked in anticipation of an unseen blow. No sound. "Amy," I hissed. Although the sea noises were subdued, I heard nothing. I darted into the room. Progress through the less familiar layout was painful. In frustration, I bawled, "Amy!" Still nothing. It felt as if she'd never been there. Something earthy covered her characteristic scents.

I subsided into my room. Perched on the bed, I listened and thought. Had I achieved her goal, by some subconscious means? The night chill forced me into the clothing ranged on a chair by my bed. Amy was gone – that much seemed certain. I thought of the cave on the beach. I found boots and pushed myself into them.

The corridor seemed deserted. I eased out of the bedroom and trod toward the stairs. My ears strained for the click and whirr of approaching servitors.

Φ

My prescience seemed to have deserted me when it would have been of most use. I arrived on the sand on a twisted ankle and nursing several bruises. Every blow fuelled my head-long rush in fear of unseen assailants. My hand slapped a large rock which I remembered. I forced myself on, gasping around a tearing ache in my lungs. I shambled toward the lapping waves and progressed as fast as I dared along their edge, in the direction of the cave. When I passed in front of it she would see me. I hadn't pulled on my scarf, and hair flapped around my ears. I brushed it back, but feared I'd already missed her. The shingle at water's edge ticked and crackled. Fearing the approach of the servitors, I ran in the direction of hoped-for safety. The draughts of frigid air scalded the tender underside of my tongue.

A cracking blow to the forehead felled me. I stumbled a step or two forward. As I slid to the ground, I registered warm, slick metal under my outstretched fingers.

Φ

The visor pressed into my swollen brow, pulsing lances of pain through my temples. I sucked processed air between my teeth, and waited for the worst to pass. My recovered vision showed that my ship would not move again. I gave up worrying about its sudden presence. There was still Amy to look for. The rubbery crash-couch released me, and I stood slowly – still a little lightheaded from running onto the edge of the landing gear. In the restrained illumination, every corner seemed black and forbidding. An anticlimax after the rich visions. I snatched up the recovered transmitter and shuffled through the portal. The damage which the sand flaking from my clothes might do to the pathetically sensitive equipment around me barely registered. I might still be in time to help Amy.

I stepped out. The sour sea-breeze cut through my damp shirt and slapped hair across my visor. I took my first real-time survey of the beach. The full moons and wet sand glared in the imperfect optics. The beach bowed outward into the bay, where I remembered it forming a smooth continuation of the line of the cliffs – themselves, more eroded than I had seen them. My impressions had been close, though.

I jogged along the foot of the cliffs, glancing up at the dense treeline above. It took me minutes to reach the cave – I overran the mark that much. I sidled into the gloom. "Amy?" Not the smallest sound of acknowledgement. I ran. My pumping legs hurled gouts of sand into the air. I hit the path up the cliff without slowing.

Φ

The high wooden door groaned. I had not visualised the house from the outside before, but the missing panes in the windows and crooked doors jarred. Perhaps, Amy used explosives against the servitors. The entrance hall didn't smell of burning, though. The same mouldy smell I noted before fleeing.

I crept over broken tiles and debris toward the back stairs. Slabs of moonlight fell across the floor. The door to the staircase had jammed. I hauled, cursing under my breath. It snapped open.

A knot of dark legs flailed down on me. I ducked, then fell under a solid blow across my shoulders. Rolling away, I thrashed about for something to fight with. I came to my feet with a pathetic piece of wood in my hand. The servitor lay still. I prodded it, but nothing happened – thankfully. Totally inactive. I backed toward the stairs, closed the door, and fumbled my way up.

Ø

Amy's room was a study in decayed grandeur. Strips of wood hung where the shutters of the missing windows had been. The carpet seemed half-gone with damp, and covered in windblown leaves. Still holding the stick, I padded toward the bed and poked the rotting bedclothes away. Nothing but more decaying linen. No body, in any state. I searched the room in determined silence. It took me ten minutes to uncover the sealed chest and breach it. I lifted it into the light from the window. Papers. Old, yellowed papers. The journal with the torn pages confirmed my suspicion. I opened it at random.

> "My hope that I can find a conscious manipulator of potential future seems well founded. Soon, I hope to be free of the destiny which has haunted my dreams. If only those dreams are not themselves sealing my fate."

I turned my visor to the window. How did she keep herself together in the face of my blank denials of her hopes? I looked down at the book, then snapped it shut and hugged it to my chest. I knew that I would look, though. Too many questions remained half-answered. Too many of those answers bore on my own future. I riffled through to the last page filled with her looping script.

> "I am a fool!" Since I trapped the ship and captured Blaze in my own time period, I have grown close to him. Every day, he is more at home. He trusts me openly, despite my using him. Blaze is in as much danger as I am. I am going to face my fate alone. If only I could know what his own time holds for him."

"Oh, Amy." I hugged the journal tight. Hot tears pricked my throat.

A thin, repetitive whine shook me from my reverie. I cast about for the source. The transmitter lay on a side table. A beacon for the rescue ship. Still holding Amy's journal – with her final thoughts for me echoing through my mind – I crossed the creaking floor to the table. I had not been a pilot for months. I knew that I never would again. They hadn't even told us what we gave up to function in our narrow way. With deliberate care, I lifted the device from the mouldering tablecloth, dropped it onto a bare area of the boards and ground my heel into it.

My visor came away, and I was startled by the relief of the sudden blankness. I fumbled my way to a dry corner. A pile of dry, mouse-nibbled cushions was bed enough. The journal made a hard lump against my chest as I curled into them, and began to hum a lullaby. If there was a version of the future in which I discovered the way back to her, I would find it. After all, it was what I trained for.

What is SFWA?

by Ian Watson

Well, after a lot of brouhaha it is currently 'Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America', and the official acronym is SFWA (not SFFWA), pronounced 'Sef-wa' or 'Ce Foss' in a Maurice Chevalier voice.

Starting with a nitpick about the exact title and acronym of the organisation epitomises the downside, which has turned some members off SFWA in the past: a lot of finicking and bickering about rules and definitions and minutiae (such as whether authors of sharecrop novels set in the **Star Wars** milieu should be eligible for the coveted Nebula award, or should be banned).

The upside is that SFWA is a really effective writers' organisation, with teeth which it uses to good effect, so that other American writers' organisations regard it with envy and learn lessons from it. Sharp, persistent teeth are increasingly necessary given the dictational caprices of the publishing conglomerates, pernicious contracts which try to seize all imaginable rights, Byzantine corporate accountancy, and other tricks which try to turn writers into slaves.

Past battle honours include forcing an audit of Pocket Books and resisting a new grab-all contract introduced by Dell Magazines who were then obliged to divide this into a page you had to sign and a page you could sign voluntarily, if you were silly enough. Combat continues, with SFWA's Grievance Committee ready to take up cudgels on behalf of members, and scouts issuing warnings of malpractice.

Dear me, doesn't it sound confrontational? Well, if push comes to shove, SFWA is equipped and ready to shove. Meanwhile, on a regular basis, SFWA provides a lot of market information and advice and other material of interest to writers in the SF and Fantasy fields, and organises social events (if you are in the right place, such as in New York in the Autumn for the Authors/Editors Reception in a classy hotel), not to mention the computer gossip networks.

There are about 900 members. Currently the annual dues are $50 for Active and for Associate members. An Active member must have sold either a novel or 3 short stories to professional paying markets in America. (An American edition of a novel first published in Britain counts, but not the British publication on its own). An Associate non-voting member need only have sold one short story professionally, and can upgrade as further sales come along.

You prove your credentials by sending a photocopy of title page or first page of contracts, with a request to join (but no money yet) to Peter Dennis Pautz, Exec. Sec., SFWA, 5 Winding Brook Drive #1B, Guilderland NY 12084, and await developments. The dues year runs from 1st July, so Summer is the sensible time to join. British members can pay dues renewals through me in Sterling equivalent according to the prevailing exchange rate, plus £1, so that there is only one collective international money order to be paid for.

Active and Associate members receive six times a year the **Forum**, where skulduggery is unveiled, organisational business is debated, and including pages of recommendations for the Nebula awards: 10 recs equals entry to the preliminary ballot. Eager contenders with a % besides their listing will modestly rush you a free copy of their work.

Also mailed to members four times a year is **The Bulletin**, the glossy-cover public face of SFWA, including features about the art and craft of SF and Fantasy, business trends, and up-to-date market reports. I have been the European Editor of **The Bulletin** for quite a few years now, and British authors featured in its pages recently or upcoming include Paul McAuley, Stephen Baxter, Simon Ings, Ian McDonald. Despite being avowedly SF Writers of *America*, SFWA has always been overseas-friendly and eager for foreign members. (Russian and German literary agents find it useful to join as Affiliates, for $35, for access to market reports and to the **Directory** of members, which everyone receives, 60 pages of names, addresses, phone and e-mail numbers, agents, etc. American members benefit in turn by the international links/agents when, say, a rogue agent or publisher misbehaves in Europe). The reality is that the vast majority of members are Americans (and a large proportion of the swelling ranks are relative newcomers to the field), so the designation *America* is more honest than World would be, as in World Series. But it is not meant restrictively (despite

fraught episodes in the past, such as stripping Stanislaw Lem of his honorary lifetime membership because he proceeded to write a rude article about the SFWA).

As with the BSFA, almost all the work of the SFWA (and there's a lot of it) is carried out by volunteers, for the collective good, ahem. Despite occasional glitches it's surprising that the wheels turn as smoothly as they do.

Other publications of SFWA are the **Handbook** (controversy as to whether the new edition should be given free to all members, or sold) and the annual **Nebula Awards** anthology, edited for three-year stints most recently by Pamela Sargent, and next by Jack Dann. Arguably this particular 'best of the year' always arrives a bit late on the scene since the process can only begin after the results of the Nebula awards are known, months after other anthologists have compiled their 'best' lists, but it is a classy product. (Okay, the Nebula beauty contest is also a personality award, and shameless campaigning seems ever more essential to victory, but the **Nebula Awards** editor can include any also-rans she/he chooses, so the result is a balanced, judicious product)

SFWA is 31 years old, 3 years older than **Locus**, and like **Locus** it has grown hugely and glossed. Just as well, since without SFWA quite a few SF and Fantasy writers would be finding themselves up various creeks without paddle or compass in today's hectic harsher turbulent publishing world.

Dr Greenland's Prescription

Here is a note I made. It says: 'Plan for unknowns.'

A description of the science fiction story itself. A plan for unknowns.

I meant it as a reminder to tell you a bit more about what I mean by planning, and by leaving things open.

All planning is, really, is developing inklings.

Take Saskia Zodiac. If you've read 'In the Garden', which is in **The Plenty Principle**, you'll know that the Zodiacs were a clone of five, grown in a lab on the orbital Temple of Abraxas. After three of the five had been removed from the lab, one after the other, never to be seen again, Saskia Zodiac and her surviving brother Mogul escaped, with the help of the Cherub Xtasca.

When I started work on what has become **Mother of Plenty** I knew that in this book, Saskia Zodiac would go back to the Temple of Abraxas. (Or it would come back to her, depending on your view of the celestial mechanics involved.)

What would it be like, that moment of return? How would it seem to her? How would it affect what she did, what she said?

I didn't immediately know. As soon as I thought about it at all, of course, I knew it would be a highly significant moment for her.

This is my first inkling, and the first note I made:

SZ wants to get aboard, to see if her siblings are still there, alive

Much later, but before writing the chapter, I added:

looks for /recognises silver dome where she was created

When I wrote that, I realised it might be two actions. She looks for it before she sees it.

Or does she see it before she recognises it?

I didn't know yet. I knew that I might not know until I got there.

Would what the first note said motivate what happened in the second? Or would it be the result of the second, Saskia's reaction to spotting the dome?

I didn't know that yet, either. I'd have been happier if I'd known it, but I didn't.

My plan is, what will happen. The event that will define the scene, and later, where the scene will come in the chapter. I may well not discover quite *how* it will happen until I write that scene, until the spaceship that brings Saskia Zodiac approaches the Temple and I am in there with her, watching her, or inside her head, or, where I most often am, close beside her head, floating disembodied.

Saskia had fled the Temple in certain fear of her life. She was a child, effectively, however advanced her physical development. She knew nothing outside that dome.

I expected a powerful response. Several.

Hate?

Longing?

Or indifference? Does the old nursery look a bit small and irrelevant now she's grown up and seen and survived plenty of other worlds, including Plenty itself? How mature is she? And how mad? How weird is her mind, how far is what she feels from what we can imagine we might feel in her place?

It is quite late when the thought comes to me that, regardless of Saskia's state of mind, her capacity to absorb novelty in that bewildering rush, she barely saw the outside of the Temple as they fled. All her memories of how it looks come from tv. (I wonder whether she saw it on a monitor in the escape ship. I try it out in my mind and reject it. No. She didn't.)

•

A tip from Liz Sourbut, who got it, I think, from a Cassandra workshop:

If you need to get to know a character, take them out to lunch.

Or home for dinner, or down the pub, or for a good long walk across the hills. Whatever you'd do, in ideal circumstances, with someone you want to get to know in real life. Interview them, get them to explain themselves to you. Ask them whatever comes into your head and write down everything they say.

Only do it somewhere else. Not in the story itself.

•

A tip from Michael Moorcock, who got it from Barry Bayley, who got it from Cyril Kornbluth:

When in doubt, descend into a minor character.

Mike explains it in terms of narration and plot. 'When you can't get any further with your main character, drop into a minor one and follow them for a while, to give yourself time to think.'

For Mike, however complex his structure, the experience of writing is linear, continuous, moving forward all the time. For me it's also continuous: a continuous shuffling process of constant revision. Forward a bit, back a little bit, forward a bit more; like waves coming in.

To a writer like me, the idea of dropping temporarily into a minor character is a technique that can really open and enrich and substantiate the background of a scene. Two viewpoints inevitably give you a stereoscopic effect, even when they're not viewpoints of the same event.

Dropping into a minor character:

– gives life to spear-carriers.

– can be a chance to grant an alien a mentality, an inner life, without incurring the obligation of deeper involvement that comes when you take an alien as a main character.

– can air themes which are nothing to do with your protagonist. As in life, the most pertinent remarks very often come from people who thought they were talking about something quite different; who don't know the full significance of what they're saying.

The Plotting Parlour

It was nice to receive some letters this time around, they are always appreciated, so keep them coming.

John Oram writes:

I read **Focus** with interest, even though it does not have much to do with the kind of writing that I have an interest in – non-fiction. There is little help for budding critics, reviewers, or essayists. It is particularly difficult to find magazines which will pay for non-fiction. Help and advice would be very useful. How about devoting some space in **Focus** to dealing with these problems?

Most small press magazines tend to have sections of reviews and short critical essays, it might be worth chasing a few of those up to see if they are interested, John. As for Focus, we have run one article on non-fiction; in our very first issue (No.24), Paul Kincaid wrote an article on the art of reviewing. We do hope to have future articles, but are dependent on someone being willing to write one for us.

Yvonne Rowse responded to our plea in ***Matrix*** *for letters:*

I read Dr Greenland's Prescription with interest and wonder. Isn't it odd how common sense sounds so easy and obvious and how we miss it nine times out of ten? Finishing has certainly been a problem for me. I've been writing a novel on and off for a couple of years now, between doing the housework, educating the kids etc. Perhaps writing is the wrong word. It has been edited into existence in much the same way as Gwyneth Jones suggests. The house is subsiding under the weight of all the words, thicker even than the dust. Following the prescription I forced a friend to agree to read my precious endlessly amended baby. I gave it her in quarters, revising as she demanded more. Et voila! I have a complete novel. Thank you Dr Greenland.

So now I approach starting. Did he cover that in the first issue? I know, I know. I've planned. I've got endless scraps of paper. It's more a case of assembling than editing. So what am I doing? Well I've varnished all the windowsills but I've run out of varnish. I've strained the blackcurrant wine into demijohns. I've put all the clean clothes away and I'm up to date on the washing. (Never!) I've vac'd the carpet, I've written to all my friends and relatives and now I'm writing to you. After this I'll get down to writing my next novel. Or maybe I can mow the lawn.

Colin looks at aspects of planning in this issue; also see issue 28 for some tips on plotting. Yvonne then talks about a useful source of wisdom:

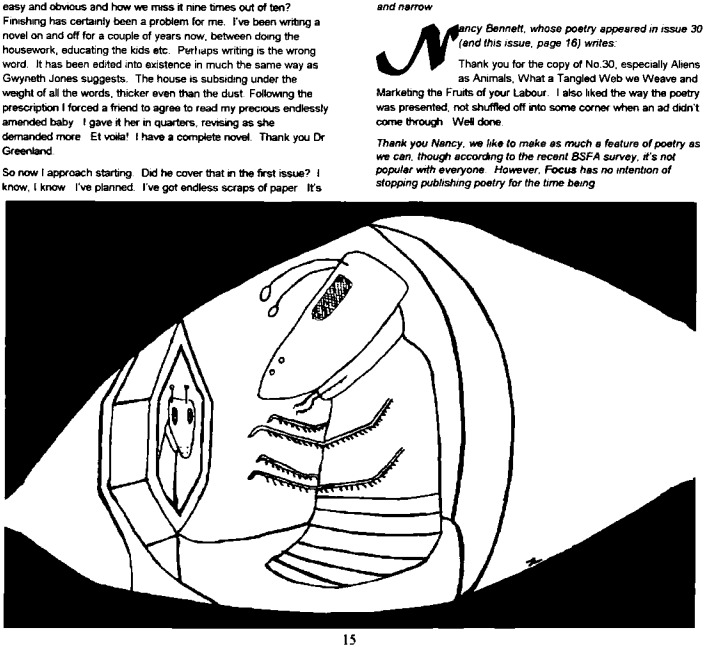
One source of wisdom has, however, been very useful to me. Thog the Mighty (what type face does he use for that?) has stood guard over my writing, his stupendous thews doing whatever thews do. The thought of Thog has stopped me from writing such gems as 'Her eyes followed him' conjuring up images of eyeballs popping from their sockets, growing little legs and skulking quietly after the handsome hero. Thank you Thog. I would recommend anyone to get hold of **Ansible**, read **The Silence of the Langford** or, best of all, listen in to one of Dave Langford's performances at a convention.

We would agree with you there, Yvonne, knowing Thog is watching over our every sentence should keep us on the straight and narrow.

Nancy Bennett, whose poetry appeared in issue 30 (and this issue, page 16) writes:

Thank you for the copy of No.30, especially Aliens as Animals, What a Tangled Web we Weave and Marketing the Fruits of your Labour. I also liked the way the poetry was presented, not shuffled off into some corner when an ad didn't come through. Well done.

Thank you Nancy, we like to make as much a feature of poetry as we can, though according to the recent BSFA survey, it's not popular with everyone. However, Focus has no intention of stopping publishing poetry for the time being.



Counting Byzantine Pepper Bushes with the Chronic Argonauts / Time Crossed lovers Raving at the Moon

by Andrew Darlington

we meet between
the Time Towers
on nodes of the
worm cycle

speak erotic blasphemy while
terrorists and lovers
speak only confusion
to you, I'm
Danny Darkness,
to me, your
raster eyes
irradiate
eternity

We trip a storm
of crimson wings
noisy with birdsong
to a vaporising city
where altitude beams
pulse in resonating
echo

then dematerialise
through places that shine
until we grow weightless
to observe sunspots
and solar flares

lights drift like
tethered nebulae here
and mournful hyenas
eat the faces from
sleeping men

I ride the time worm cycle
from enrichment to nullity,
as this Danny Darkness hunts
the riddles of your face

I'm woken by air-attack
banshees,
by the ripple of pterodactyls,
by a male voice choir, and
sometimes by the homely
assonance of steam train
whistles that drift up
from Cairo's main rail
terminal

We met between
the Time Towers
across nodes of
the worm cycle when
worlds drifted through
spatial zones of temporal
non-causality, energising
bounces across ages from
Earth's slow end lit by
red uncertain sunlight

then back here, to Cretaceous
beaches

and us
time-crossed lovers
raving at strange
primeval
moons

X-Mass (Cull Time 2)

by J C Hartley

Singing Terra Lirra by the waters
Of Eden I knelt down and washed the blood
Out of my hair almost into the third
Millenium juggling the cave wheels
It's a gravelly thing if 6 were 9
And we had words enough and time we'd exit
While the red glare on Skiddaw roused
the town
In the bath with the shower on and drown.

Spectral Transits

by E V Bailey

When I used to see Jim Kirk and
Spock,
both casually attired,
down-beaming from the *Enterprise*
(no suit or airlock needed,
no parachute required)
I often tried to visualise
just what it must be like to be,
by body unimpeded,
quite suddenly set wholly free
of anchorage to space and time
on *Enterprise*'s solid decks,
until in some exotic clime
you are re-formed on Planet X.

What was their status in-between,
when whisked as tenuous freaks,
not through seconds, days or weeks,
but super-instantaneously
from scene to scene,
from place to place?

Each just-has-been, each yet-to-be,
though still of human/vulcan race
was for such time a quantum-ghost,
his senses functioning spectrally.
What did they hear? What did they
see?
Did they sometimes later speak
of glimpses from a phantom coast,
like those from Keats's Darien peak?
Or were such glimpses, like a dream,
lost when their molecules cohered?
I thought it seemed (it still does
seem)
quite weird.

Encounters

by Nancy Bennett

Silver edges, corners smooth, candlelit tables where your kind gather
feasting upon my ancestors
interfacing me with transparent minds, voices in the dark
watching the thought waves throb
through my pulsing doll's head. Numb and empty.

I see your faces nightly and it's time to change the channel and I
try to remember something else....

"The strangest things we remember," my mother once related
how pale men came after her and her brother and they ran on stilted legs
sand cutting through the sandals and lungs bursting

and she remembered how late they were and how grandma didn't scold
only checked them for markings and cried when she found the tell-tale tags...

T.B. had on that special where the tables were turned
and we carved one of them, probing scientists encountered and discovered
that they weren't Gods, only puppet masters
fisherman of sorts, lured by their insatiable curiosity
fly fishers who got caught in their ties to our planet....