Focus

The B.S.F.A. writers' magazine
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Gadgets, Widgets & McGuffins*
Competition*
Milford '97*
Stories*

Stephen Baxter
Daniel O'Mahony
Colin Greenland, Ian Bell
Angela Shackleton Hill, Steve Sneyd
Steve Jeffery, Howard Watts – & lots more...

Focus 33

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Pages 3, 7, 14	Julie Venner
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Forum

Dialogue

Conversation is important in fiction, you can impart a lot about characters' place, circumstances by having two or more of your characters enter into a discussion. Dialogue is therefore important or is it? What do you think? Do you think that dialogue has an important part to play in your fiction writing, or do you believe it is an added extra, as a way of fleshing out your characters etc. Focus invites you to write a short piece, (600-800 words) on dialogue and its place in your writing.

Deadline for submissions: 31 August 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.

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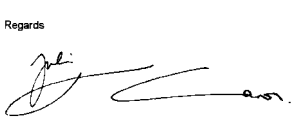
Editorial

Through a telephoto lens, lightly...

Quite a few people write to Focus asking for advice on how to get their novels published and asking if we can recommend agents, a few even believe we are able to publish their novel ourselves. It's getting harder and harder to know what to tell these people. The face of the UK publishing industry is changing so rapidly that it is difficult to keep up to date with who publishes what. Our advice at the moment, is to phone any publisher before sending your work to them to see if they accept science fiction before wasting your postage, though be warned, things can change that quickly that they may have stopped publishing it by the time they receive your manuscript. As to agents, unfortunately, we have no quick fix for that one, most agents take on established writers only, though some are willing to read from the slush pile, again the only advice we can offer here is to contact them and see if they take new writers. It may be a lot of hard work, but a little research into your market can pay dividends.

We're pleased to bring you the runner-up story in our competition from two issues ago: Daniel O'Mahony's story appears below. See elsewhere in the magazine for details of a new competition.

Regards



MAP OF THE HUMAN HEAD

by Daniel O'Mahony

"So, what can you see now?"

After three days Emma Grishkin had grown used to the shy leather creak of her companion's coat. It was restless on Marianne's back, swishing and bleating as she marched it through her paces. The sound, once irritating, had become reassuringly robust. Marianne wore it like a second skin, an ebony shell that itched over a frail, soft-mush body.

Grishkin looked to her, across the room. Marianne's head seemed small and unreal against the glazed morning light. Her skin was an ice-cream smear swelling out of the smooth obsidian of her back. The blonde hair that curled down the back of her head – eating into the dark coat – seemed fuller and yet also false. The hair, the coat, the unmilitary shuffle of her body, all these things made her pretty. Her face – her ghost-face – made her beautiful. The rag on her eyes was a tease.

Emma wanted to smother her, hold her, protect her as best she could. There was a cheeky dash of *eros* there, but also something maternal. *Upstart* maternal. Marianne was, she guessed, five years older than her, not that there were any sure means of telling.

"What do I see?" Marianne asked. The English words didn't come easily to her, though she never forced them. The syllables faded on her tongue, no more solid than her flesh. There was no hint of an accent. Grishkin envied her that, well aware that her own efforts made her sound like a comic bolshevik wandered loose from a lumière. A base command of English was one of the few things they shared.

"What do I see?" Marianne Fliess asked again. She moved across the triptych of the window, her shadow jerking through each new line of light. Emma watched from her chair, feigning languor pointlessly. Marianne was blind.

"I see a machines' graveyard, where each body is marked by a steel pillar taller than any cathedral spire. They are held in place by vaster cranes and scaffolds, waiting for some impossible giant to come by and sink them with a blow from a gargantuan mallet.

"On each marker there are names... no, not names, but odd brutal agglomerates of letters and numbers. I can't pronounce them. No one could possibly speak them. This other world, I see, this place..." She paused then, breathing to release the weight of the barbaric foreign tongue. "This is a world without names, but it's dying. The markers are rusting. There are birds nesting in them. They're decaying before me. You know, Grishkin, I don't think they can be pillars. Oh, heavens," she snorted, her face guttering red. "I think they're... Well, male members."

"How ghastly," Grishkin ventured with gentle irony.

"Somewhat more robust than the real thing," Marianne mumbled.

Grishkin pushed herself up out of her chair, setting her note-paper skittling across the carpet. Her quill she pushed into a dense fall of her hair, leaving it nesting alone with the flowers she'd snipped fresh from the garden that morning. Marianne, sensing movement, slipped into respectful silence.

Emma's dress was a limp shroud, a proud precursor to the *deca' chic* that Fliess had predicted for the early 1910s. Poor Marianne probably hated that future – no, hate was a sharper thing than her. Marianne's clothes were fussy, formal, uniform. They were items to be endured even as they scratched. Emma, as she moved, felt naked and unbound, one shoulder, one breast, one hard brown nipple, bared to the agreeable Vienna summer. Her legs moved in and out of twining strands of loose cloth, sometimes buried, sometimes thrilling against the warm air. The soles of her feet, her crush-shaped toes, brushed on the carpet. Marianne, if she could see, would have been quietly appalled.

She couldn't see. She knew it, and it made her uncomfortable. That lack of comfort brought them much closer.

Emma touched Marianne's face, turning it gently from the light. Marianne had a thin, high-boned skull and delicate skin, cut into two by the dark bandage. When they'd first met, Marianne had had a fine blonde fringe on her upper lip. It had gone now, shaved away in a ritual which Fliess subjected herself to once every twenty-nine days. Apparently this was something men did as well, though privately and with some shame.

Marianne's eyes were vestigial lumps under the fabric of the cloth. They had been burned out by mustard gas, Fliess had told her on the first night, on a muddy field somewhere in France, or perhaps Belgium, about twenty-five years hence. Another nightmare Emma felt compelled, beyond hesitancy, to believe.

Gnshkin let her hand drop, afraid to touch for too long, because some things were too fine and too warm to last.

"What's really out there?" Marianne asked. She was still blushing. Emma realised she was blushing too, her cheeks stinging with tension rather than pleasure. She banished the sudden dis-ease, glancing out through the window, past the garden and onto the world beyond.

"I believe," she said after a moment's reflection, "it's the Taj Mahal. Sometimes," she reflected, "I imagine I could live out my life in this room and watch the whole world wheel past the window. And I might," she added.

Marianne's expression was unreadable. That was one of the most intriguing things. Emma thought. She was indecipherable. She was alien.

"Do you know you have the moon behind your head?" Marianne asked softly, slipping into another vision. "Emma?"

Emma she had said.

"No," Emma replied. "No I didn't."

Notes towards a biography of Surgeon-Colonel, Marianne Fliess

Interview conducted by the author on the afternoon of 23rd June 1900, transcribed from memory by the author. Impertinent author's interpolations in [square parentheses].

She's asleep now, in the next room, her face burrowing into the pillow as if she's trying to smother herself. Her hair is a dynamite pattern blast in gold down the back of her gown, across her sheets. Her eyes are buried.

I wish she were awake. I would dearly like to discuss this in more detail. I think it shows so much of what goes on in her head, the little things she fears and loves.

I'm playing a little joke, dear reader. You, who will pick up the clean and gutted version of her history smeared on smooth cream flesh-pages and bound under stretched and stunk cow-skin, can you possibly picture me now?

You will want to.

In my right hand I have a glass of vile wine, squeezed from the balls of wretched dogs I'm sure. In my left hand, the quill scratching away at loose sheets resting on a stack of books. Behind me, the fire blazing, scoring the expanse of my back and the fatted under-side of my legs; the warmth on my face and front is gentler. In front of me, at my knees, an oriental-pattern ashtray stained with stubs of perfume-kissed French cigarettes, the dead flowers of my hair arrayed round it. I can taste the cigarettes and the sweat of the afternoon and the naked heat of the night is searing; this is not a moment to be alone.

But I am.

[Tell me about London.] London? [Yes, at the Swiss Embassy and with the detectives.] Oh; oh yes. [She has her bandage off. Her eyes stare constantly, though they seem in all other ways perfect, but this time the stare is real. She is summoning and re-shaping those untold, undone events from the base of her brain.] I wasn't ever a member of the London police, I was only liaising with Scotland Yard over the Whitechapel Murders. [Go on.] There was a diplomatic incident the year before, 1915, I think. With the Vatican, not the Swiss, but somehow we were singled out as neutral arbiter and observer, which is where I came in.

Good old Swiss neutrality. Even when the whole world is falling apart. I'm sorry, I sound bitter. [No, no, and even if you did –]

I'm not boring you? [No, Marianne, no. You have a wonderful warm voice.]

[Tell me about the murders.] They were attributed to a man calling himself Jack the Ripper, which turned out to be a newspaper editor playing a joke. A strange, black joke. It didn't seem funny at the time. [What does?] There were, I think, nine in all. Victims. Prostitutes. [Really?] Not really. Alleyway graffiti. Male clients only. It's just a word, I mean no offense. [None taken. I prefer *courtesan*.] Not this kind. They work their men beyond their stamina, sometimes beyond their means to recover. [That's a simple thing.] Sometimes to the point of death. [I imagine that's easy enough, if one is desperate.]

Everyone assumed the Ripper was a man. The mutilations to the faces of the victims. [Which were?] Their noses. The killer sliced them from their faces. [I think that it is possibly the most disgusting thing I've heard in my entire life.] It was thought that was an ineluctably male psychopathology. It was – not a thing that would ever have occurred to me and, as I say, I was only on attachment from the embassy.

[But you were the one who had the vision?] Yes. I was the one with the vision.

[Why don't you describe what you saw?]

I don't think I can. It wasn't a vision of the eyes or the normal senses. It came from some other channel: a surge or a discord of shapes and sounds and colours none of which I actually experienced. It was like uncovering a memory of a thing I should not know, or a hundred things.

[Can you describe any of it?]

I remembered – this was funny, it seemed funny at the time. It's lodged now in my head. There was an orang-utan in evening dress playing the harpsichord. Not very well. I think, but still playing. It had a doleful face – all apes do – but I think it was laughing.

I also remember candles. Fat stinking candles. They figured largely.

[And you saw the last murder?]

The only one we prevented, yes, but I don't recall it. The visions are like icicles on a furnace wall. One minute they're sparkling jewels and then they dribble away. Are those the right words? [Yes, those sound right.]

(A minor pause. She shuffles. I wish I could record that *shift* on this page, it said so much.)

[So who was it that was caught?] This is not to be written down or printed or disseminated in any way beyond this room, you understand.

[Yes, of course. I want to make you –

– Impossible! She's been a society icon for nearly twenty years. I've met her twice. My sisters stayed with her in the summer three years ago.] But it was her. There was no trial. She was allowed to suicide quietly. [But –] Don't throw any more numbers at me! [Don't shout, please –] They don't make the skin of this world any thicker! They don't make you any more real! [Marianne –]

I can see you. Sometimes, not with my eyes, but I can see you. You are a very beautiful woman, outside and in. I can see through your skin, through the gristle and the blood and the muscle, through the skull. I can see what you think and what you think of me and what you want of me. I can see you getting it too.

[Marianne, mon amie, mon amour –]

And don't use words, especially ones you don't understand.

One bare breast, no matter how perfect, does not amount to much for me when I can see the soft, dark tissues sucking under that bit. I can see what you contain and what contains you.

There is a moon behind your head, though it's waned since this morning. It's a bloody crescent. I've ridden under flags like that. She is, was and will be Jack the Ripper. I promise you.

The view from the window on the eighth morning was of New Amsterdam harbour on a clear day, crusted in glass. In Vienna, it was raining. Gnshkin suffocated by long days indoors, left Marianne alone and went out into the city.

She dressed anonymously, anticipating the danger of being caught alone and walking. Marianne was still sleeping in one of the spare bedrooms but Gnshkin had lured her senile Persian cat away to sleep at the foot of her own bed. De Rais had a single.

unblinking almond eye which flicked to match Emma's pace across the floor. There was a pit in his fur where the other eye had been. Emma sang to him as she dressed while he purred and spat and licked himself.

The rain improved the city. The drops spattered gently, catching the morning light as they fell. Vienna seemed to shine in Emma's eyes. Under the city lay the gloomy, unreal umbra of New Amsterdam, half-visible in the shadows that grew shorter as Grishkin wasted her morning. She visited the Exposition where the crystal lumière had been rebuilt after last year's fire. She visited the mechanical park, and sat a while in the shade of a steam-driven bronze tree that grew gradually but visibly while clockwork birds launched themselves from branch to branch singing with wire voices.

She spent a little time and a little money in the spirit bazaar, where the white-clad policemen made her feel no more, no less safe than ever, and the blacked-up Albanian actors failed to haggle with much enthusiasm. She moved then to the glass-walled café on the roof of Spengler's department store, where she discovered that the divide between barbarism and civilisation could be measured in the price of lemon tea.

Her accent amused everyone, though she was hardly the only exiled Muscovite in Austria in high summer. She expelled Marianne from her thoughts, in anticipation of renewal.

Crossing an artery canal, she caught a glimpse of the half-built statue in the bay of New Amsterdam harbour, its smooth marble finish cracking as stone weeds blossomed out of its granite core. Disturbed, she let her eyes fall in time to catch the barge passing under the bridge. It was a black slab floating, its cargo tacked under shabby canvas. Hunched and swollen at the rudder, the boatswoman was fixed on the water, paying no attention to the anonymous watcher on the bridge. The children on the canvas stared though – two grubby naked creatures with bloated stomachs and maggot-hungry eyes. Grishkin watched them until the boat was swallowed by the lip of the bridge.

She turned and found Marianne Fliess waiting for her. She was darker and more solid in the natural light of day than in the compressed architecture of Grishkin's home. This new intensity should have kept the rain off her but hadn't, her hair straggled across her face, sodden and heavy. As Emma moved closer she saw the bandage on Marianne's face darkening around the pits under her eyes. As she moved closer still she realised Marianne was weeping blood.

"You shouldn't be out," she said.

"Neither should you," Marianne replied evenly. "I've got a cab."

Inside it was drier, though flecks of rain dribbled though the rubber insulation round the windows and pooled on the upholstery. De Rais leapt into Emma's lap as she sat. Marianne was distant, her head inclined sightless towards the window. Grishkin cooed instead over her cat. De Rais bared his teeth with affection. The cab moved gently, the hoofsteps inaudible under the hum of the rain on the shell.

"Are you expecting any clients soon?" Marianne asked, not turning.

"Male clients?"

Marianne nodded.

"Only one," Grishkin admitted but smoothly, the guilt buried. "Next week. Madame Laval's eldest is getting married and she wants him blooded."

"I was thinking I could stay longer," Marianne replied after a pause, "but if it's not convenient . ."

Emma reached out to place a hand on Marianne's shoulder. The leather hummed under her hand, as though alive and resentful. "Stay," she said. "Please," she added. "I can't see a Laval taking up much of my time."

"Do you ever feel," Marianne asked, with measured slowness, "That you are hurting all these poor male animals? Not physically – in their heads?"

"It's not something that's ever occurred to me."

She expected Marianne to lapse into silence and was a little surprised when her companion began to speak in slow, haunted English. Emma leant back and listened. De Rais, ignored, dug his claws into Emma's lap.

"One of my most... repetitive visions," Marianne began. "Yes, *repetitive*. There's a war. That's not unusual. There's always a war. There's a war and I am part of an army of men, or I am a prisoner of this army. They move their captives around on the railways in cattle trucks and hold them in abattoir pens because there is nowhere else for them. it's a huge war, a total war.

"Sometimes when the prisoners are young women, beautiful women, the male soldiers are in a position to hurt them with their bodies. I don't know if this will make sense to you, but it's as if there's something unnaturally aggressive about these men. They don't weaken when they lie with women. *Lie*, that's a wrong sort of word. Do you understand?

"Sometimes it happens to me. Sometimes, I am too old or ugly or maimed by the war and I'm left alone. And sometimes, in my vision, I am one of the men and, when I do what I do, I have murderer's hands. I destroy these prisoners. It's like killing without the finish of death. Do you understand?"

Grishkin shook her head, though invisibly.

She stretched her hands a few more inches to take hold of Marianne's bandage. It came away cleanly. Fliess's eyes were swilling with blood, the frozen pupils barely visible as pin pricks under the red. On her eyelids and lashes, the blood was caked into a hard, brown husk.

Emma spat on the bandage and set to work on cleaning up the blood. Marianne didn't flinch once.

The diary of Emma Grishkin, entry for July 6th, 1900:

Well, so much for M. Laval.

I asked Marianne today if she kept a diary and she asked me what the point would be. I can't think.

Today was Liberation Day, of course, and with Laval suitably blooded and packed off back to his bride-to-be, I spent some evening time with Marianne. We watched the rockets display from the garden. De Rais was locked inside. Marianne is very protective of him.

I told her something of my mother and of the events of the first Liberation Day and of the despair I felt when my father's huge hand had clasped round mine and he whispered of immortality into my ear. Marianne was dry, as she always is on personal matters. Under the cool surface she was sympathetic. She looks splendid in her new dressing gown.

I thought that now might be a good time to expound some of the doctrine I'd picked up at Ingolstadt, just to see if she would respond. It went down well. She let my fingers onto her head, into the thick of her hair. I touched her scalp and mapped the lump of her skull with the tips of my nails. She purrs like De Rais's little sister.

I told her something of the philosophers of the enlightenment.

"What is now realised," I told her, "is how much the model they constructed of the real world – which is not simply what is but everything that was and everything that will be, stretched like, ah..."

"... like soap-water across a frame?"

"Yes, exactly. They imagined that as a maze. The entirety of the world they saw as a fiendishly complex labyrinth. The world, then, is not a trap. It can at least be navigated."

"And you disagree?" Marianne hummed. *Lovely.*

"I think if the world is akin to the human skull."

"Outside or in?"

"Both. The brain size is not important. The thickness of the bone is only important in terms of the problem of meditating on our surroundings. The shape of the skull is the thing."

"Isn't that just another trap? Another maze?" Marianne wondered. A Screaming Mary exploded overhead, shattering the sky and turning the night of liberation into a brief but true Liberation Day.

"Maybe it is," I told her, making a pretence of carelessness. Perhaps I should have kissed her.

Marianne Fliess can remember a time when the snow was white and fell in the winter. There will still be snow like that, though not in this world for another thousand years. *Snow that can be played in.*

She is a man with coffee skin and a fuzz of grey, middle-aged beard. There is a long coat slung over her male shoulders, cape-like, its sleeves dangling uselessly. The weight slung at her hips is familiar for female and male alike. The watch in her pocket rattles irrecoverably as she walks. The hat she wears as a man keeps the heat from the smooth recession of her forehead.

The sun is fat and red, seeping out from behind the steel domes that grow from the distant dirt. Jagged metal shapes catch the glare. They rise behind her: they roar like bass angles, they throw themselves down onto the domes. Marianne is trying to shout at them: with her dusty man's lips and her man's voice, but she can hardly hear herself over the din.

I will have to tell Emma.

The diary of Emma Grishkin, supplemental entry for July 10th 1900

The real Liberation Day!

The bedclothes were a churned velvet landscape. Grishkin scattered her notes across it thoughtlessly. The words she had kept patiently in her head were not stained on the page and faded from her mind. They had become less real. All those ink strokes on the vellum were barely worth one of the whispered fragments still dying in her skull.

She squatted on the bed at the heart of the devastation. The notes spread around her, meaningless and unreadable in the sweltering gloom. She was cold despite the July heat, a drying sheen of sweat across the exposed surface of her skin. Marianne was a ghost in the bathroom, fussing on the far side of a paper-thin wall; her soft singing voice a radio hiss under the relentless gurgle of the shower. Emma felt vaguely irritated by the amount of time that Marianne seemed to spend in other rooms, leaving only shadows and memories to entertain her.

She picked up a piece of Marianne's life, squinted to read it. It was a brief paragraph describing one of her earliest memories, a stopped watch found in a drawer on the first Liberation Day: its glass face punched inwards, its hands like waved scars on the face of the moon, its bronzed shell scratched through years of service. Emma had a memory exactly like it.

She had no recollection of hearing this story from Marianne's lips. She glanced up the page to find the date. There was none.

Grishkin could smell Marianne on her fingers and taste Marianne on her tongue. It was a lush, sickly essence, not as gently sweet as she had been expecting, nor as tempered. Marianne was raw but still toothsome. She would not fade, like her memories. The teeth marks she had left on Emma's shoulder, the lipstick on her back, the fingerprints everywhere and intrusive, were indelible.

The euphoria was gone, replaced by a subtle melancholy of aftermath. Grishkin was still tired but doubted she would sleep; the dreamlike exhaustion of the night unsettled her, leaving her with a nagging sensation that she had been guided. Marianne, maybe, had been manoeuvring her not only on this night, in this room, but through all her nights and in all her rooms, teasing and drawing her gradually to this moment.

Grishkin put a French cigarette to her mouth and let it burn. The perfumed smoke was sterile and sterilising.

There were five stubs smouldering on the sheets when Marianne returned and two pages of her life were stained and charred by careless falling ash. She was led into the bedroom by a white metal stick that rapped a supportive path ahead of her. De Rais's single eye glinted half fearfully out of a flap in a basket swinging pendulous at the end of Marianne's free arm. Emma's hands had risen to hide her newly-vulnerable breasts as the door cracked open, then slipped down behind her back as Marianne made a distant smile. Her eyes, still blind to the real world, were disguised by smoked-glass spectacles.

She breathed again, choosing to sigh rather than speak.

"I've seen tomorrow's window," Marianne told her, a voice murmuring from far away. "Vienna is burning. Or sinking. Burning or sinking."

Emma breathed.

"I think I should leave now." Marianne's tone was wistful.

And Emma breathed.

After a time Grishkin got off the bed and shook the cramp and pins and needles from the back of her legs and the flats of her wrists. She left the bedroom and fanned through the many rooms of her house. Each was grey in the night, though by the time she reached the serving room half-sunk into the ground there was a leavening of dawn-light creeping between the curtains. Each room was empty, unhaunted by spectral activity.

She hadn't realised how cold it could become in her house. The draught that scythed across the floor of the servant's quarter seeped into her skin like an oblivion mouth biting into the warm. In the summer, she crossed her arms and shivered.

She found Marianne's coat slung over the back of a chair in the scullery. She hung back in the corner, her shoulder blades massaging the cool plaster of the wall, and watched it cautiously. It did nothing, of course. Being empty, it was dead. It needed a body to fuse it with life. She grew tired of looking and picked it up. The leather ruffled warm against her body. She crushed it into a bundle against her chest, leeching new strength from its skin.

It came over her shoulders smoothly, though it pinched at her neck and her elbows: it was tighter on her arms, but then it had been tight on Marianne. The lining was coarser than the slick leather and itched where it touched her body, she itched everywhere without complaint. The coat breathed with a shape inside it. The hem fell around her feet. Emma closed it, buttoned it tight, let it contain her.

The scullery was newly lit by the blood moon floating before her face: always there, suddenly revealed and full.

Marianne's cab was still standing outside, the dawn rising around it.

Grishkin hurried towards the door, a little – only a little – worried that it might pull away before she could reach the door, stranding her alone and helpless in her dying garden. But Marianne's coat whispered its reassurances, protecting her from the fears and the cruelties she had built up for herself. Wrapped in black, the cold would not touch her.

The cab's jaw snapped shut as she climbed inside. She took her seat opposite Marianne, who smiled kindly across the gap. Her expression was, as always, impenetrable.

"I've brought your coat back," Emma said.

"Thanks."

"Where are you heading?" she asked cautiously, though it wasn't needed. The coat told her. The weak smile that fractured Marianne's features told her.

"The same place as you," she said, and pulled back her head and hissed through bared teeth. Her eyes were blinking frantically under dark glass. Safe in her wonderful night-black coat, Grishkin could feel the weight of the world shifting back towards her and returned Marianne's smile.

De Rais shrugged in Marianne's arms.

After a moment the coach jerked and moved and drove them out of Vienna.

Behind them, the city burned.

Or maybe it sank.

Competition

Often looked at the cover of magazines and thought 'I could do better than that'? Well, here's your chance to prove it. Focus is running a competition to find the artwork for the front cover for our next issue (due out in the autumn). It must be in black and white and it must have a science fictional feel to it, other than that we leave it up to your imagination to run wild. Prizes will be something suitable and the winner will get to see their work on the front of our magazine. We look forward to seeing your artwork, deadline for the competition is **31 August 1998**

The (Widget), the (Wadget) and Boff
by Steve Jeffery

'**Focus** invites you to write a short piece [...] on why you think Gadgets, Widgets and McGuffins are an integral part of sf.'

It's a bit of a loaded question, really. "And when did you stop beating your wife?"

Do I think that Gadgets, Widgets and McGuffins *are* an integral part of sf? Do I even know what they are, exactly? Well, they're, err, wossitsname, aren't they, you know, like thingummy bobs?

Umm. Yes, exactly. Time to reach for a dictionary. The paperback Oxford is absolutely no help, and Longmans is little better.

Gadget */ n* a small and often novel mechanical or electronic device esp on a piece of machinery, a contrivance

Widget */ n* **1** a gadget **2** an unnamed article considered for the purpose of hypothetical example

This is all a bit circular (see: Recursion), and smacks of linguistic handwaving for a part whose name you can't remember. They both are notably silent about mcguffin and it is left to the ***SFE*** to offer this more helpfully as a 1950s coinage by Hitchcock for "an object whose loss – or rumours of whose existence – triggers the cast of a thriller or detective film into searching for it, or fighting for it, or running away from it, but which in fact has no intrinsic meaning once the dust has settled." Bless you, Mr Clute – who goes on to observe that "McGuffin spoors are particularly noticeable in the second volume of trilogies."

My initial thought is to say, no, I don't think Gadgets, (Widgets) and McGuffins are, outside of film sf, or a particular type of sf that arises from, or degenerates into, a detective/thriller mcguffin chase, or the sfnal implication of a clever new device or idea (the Idea as Hero), are particularly integral to science fiction.

But hold on; haven't I just defined the entire genre in most people's eyes?

Time to look at some specifics, and I might as well start with the book I'm currently re-reading. Le Guin's ***The Dispossessed*** stands, for some, as the highwater mark of sf as political and social comment. Not much scope there, you would have thought, for a shoot-'em-up chase around the universe in search of a mysterious, dangerous, or missing something that marks works like Jack McDevitt's ***Engines of God***, Vernor Vinge's ***A Fire Upon the Deep***, the hunt for the 'Lazy Gun' in Banks's ***Use of Weapons***, or even ***Excession***. That latter also introduces a whole sub-genre of mcguffin sf commonly referred to as the BDO (Big Dumb Object – from a coinage generally attributed to Roz Kaveney), story, in which the purpose of the BDO is to mysteriously appear, be walked in on or around for much of the book, and then, just as mysteriously, disappear. It is supposed to invoke, for some, a sfnal sensawunda – for others, the tedium of wondering what it was all for. There are exceptions, but Banks's ***Excession*** might be read as a parody of the increasingly pointless sequels to ***Rama***.

But to go back to ***The Dispossessed***. Stripped of its ambiguous utopian social comment and contrast between the egalitarian, utilitarian Annares and the sexist, hedonistic Urras, ***The Dispossessed*** is, indeed, a mcguffin search – although it can be argued that the mcguffin itself, the theory for an instantaneous communication device, the ansible, is not entirely trivial, although the device itself plays no part in the plot.

Gadgets do abound in sf, although, until cyberpunk and a resurgence of 80s and 90s self styled "radical hard sf", the notion of the solely gadget-driven story seemed to be a legacy of the early Gernsback and Campbell led pulp sf. Most of them have been conveniently and thankfully forgotten, although a few have managed to secure their place in the canon. One such is the late Bob Shaw's invention of Slow Glass, which has even found a small audience outside the walls of sf (the novelist Iain Sinclair mentions it in a recent interview). Slow Glass, though, is notable for the use Shaw put it to in "Light of Other Days" where human tragedy, not the spiffy notion of a neat idea, forms the focus of the plot, although in the later fix-up ***Other Days, Other Eyes*** Shaw would apply it to sf crime detective uses.

And where would much of sf be without the use of one particular instance of cod-scientific handwaving, the FTL? Stuck in a very small solar system in an insignificant corner of the universe, or else reduced to a comparative crawl in multi-generation starships. Not that the latter constraint is a handicap to good, even exemplary sf, as shown by examples from Aldiss's ***Non-Stop*** to Wolfe's ***Book of the Long Sun***.

FTL, the ion drive, the stargate, the transporter, are all examples of a convenient, and near conventional, scientific gadget that allows the plot to happen, but is best not inquired into too closely in case, bearing in mind Clarke's dictum, "the magic goes away."

The mcguffin, then, is the interface between sf and the mystery chase-thriller, a genre to which a large proportion of sf, and indeed, much fiction, seems to aspire, although often at a more sedate pace in much of fantasy, given the necessity of running the quest over three or more volumes. In Fantasyland, mcguffins are often known as Plot Coupons, and take the form of lost rings, swords talismans and amulets, although sometimes they are not so much lost as deliberately mislaid.

Gadgets and widgets are the 'plug and play' tools of sf, perhaps more so than any other genre. They form part of the cultural furniture. Indeed, in some ways, they form part of the way we read, or recognise our reading of, sf, as in Delany's celebrated example "the door dilated" from Heinlein's ***Beyond This Horizon***. We read (sf), Delany argues, by a series of signs, and I would argue by a system of shorthand. Thus, when "Case took a deep breath and jacked into his deck", we are far more likely to be able to poise ourself to launch mentally after him into cyberspace than a non-sf reader who sees a sentence of ten words with almost no cultural reference points.

[1] I had a hard time trying to remember the correct title of this, and who it was by. I found it eventually by the simple expedient of reading the contents list of every one of my sf anthologies. So I'm going to test if your memory is better than mine, or your shelves better organised. A non-prize (unless Carol Ann and Julie have suitable ideas) for the correct answer.

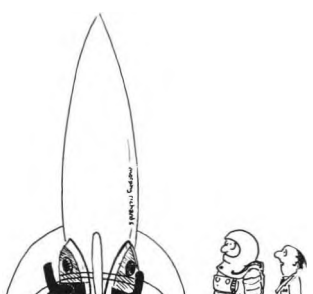
Why Gadgets Can Be Useful
by Riaz Hussain

Are gadgets really worth putting in our stories? It's a question which has been around ever since **The Time Machine** (and it has to be said, **Marvel** comics) first appeared on the scene.

Gadgets have always been abundantly used in Sci-fi and Fantasy. Sometimes to great effect. Other times very badly.

(The latter refers to an old B-Movie where the scaly-tailed creature from outer space went around sucking people up with a hosepipe and eventually did a number on itself. (Should 'ave bought a Hoover mate!))

Gadgets can be kind, cruel or just plain glamorous, but as writers from the fifties pointed out, they *must* have a purpose.



I found the idea in a copy of Analog.
I call it my 'iran drive'.

(Otherwise you end up with the *NASA-effect*: a $100 million dollar actionman doll nobody knows what to do with.)

They can especially help out when credibility in our stories may otherwise fail short. Take, for instance **Star Trek**. When beaming down somewhere, how does Captain Kirk and Co. know they aren't going to get cream-crackered because of any harmful effects lingering in the atmosphere including poisonous shrubs and magic-mushrooms?!

Answer: Spock says it's safe. (Sometimes he informs the Captain while they're *actually* on the surface which is cutting it a bit thin!). But how does he know? Yes... The good little Tri-corder tells him. The one he wafts about before him.

Short of Spock being psychic, the only other way this could be achieved is to send out a costly probe, wait around for the results, then second guess what the unknown atmosphere's composition is!

And that, for an episode of **Star Trek**, makes a very slow warp factor. The humble Tri-corder however - not to mention that other instrument Spock's usually glued to on the ship - cuts this short, giving us something approximating to plot integrity.

Not surprisingly, McCoy also uses gadget credibility. For example, he can't suddenly request an operating theatre right in the middle of a field, can he? Or on a golf course either! No. Instead, he pulls out his pen-like instrument and gives a nifty blast. Hmm. Very convenient!

Gadgets can also help visualise/explain certain concepts.

For instance: take the matter-dispersion theory in **The Fly**. Here, the concept of matter dispersed then re-arranged back into molecules again is made more tangible with the simple gadgetry of a transmitter and receiver.

Basically, here it goes in and there it comes out. Just think, it means you could send a burger anywhere without the need for a continuous physical buffer. So long as the other end had a receiver.

Another example is H. G. Wells's **Time Machine** helping us to visualise the concept of physical time travel. Just watch the dial go crazy as the years tumble off. (Or on.) Who can deny something is happening there?

But since time travel is supposed to be theoretically possible, this brings us to another point: science-fiction becoming science-fact.

As Leonard Nimoy said on a promo for **Generations**: "what is the **Star Trek** communicator if it isn't the cellular phone?" – in wide use today. In fact, it wouldn't be too surprising to find somebody somewhere trying out the matter-dispersion theory, for real.

The other beauty about gadgets is the added bonus of aiding characterisation. Even to the extent of being symbolical. Hence the Klingon's bits and bobs will always be bigger and more aggressive than anyone's else's. Why? 'Cause they're bloodythirsty so and so's...!

Meanwhile, James Bond's gadgetry will always be slick and smooth to reflect that trait in the character - especially pulling a fast one in the mid of a crises.

No wonder filmmakers/writers try out a huge combination of things to get that link right. The alternative may prove embarrassing. For example, if you gave Wonder Woman Rambo's machine gun and headband, doesn't it erode the sense of character? It may be fine for Xena (wham, bam, thank you pal!) but it still means Rambo having to make do with Wonder Woman's truth ring and tiara. Macho maniacs beware!

Gadget Stories by Stephen Baxter

My second professionally published story 'Something for Nothing' (**Interzone** 23, 1988; reprinted in **Traces**, HarperCollins, 1998) was pretty much a pure gadget story: that is, the properties of my imaginary gadget were the driving force of the story. But a good gadget story will achieve much more than an exploration of some squib of imaginary technology.

The idea for this story came from a fragment of pop science I came across, describing exotic properties of subatomic particles. During some particle interactions the law of conservation of mass can be broken – but very briefly, before the universe rights its books once more by recreating or destroying short-lived particles. It seemed to me that an advanced race might exploit this effect to build a miniature teleport device, in which a particle destroyed in one place reappears in another.

So my gadget was a microteleport: capable, unlike most sfnal teleporters, of beaming just a tiny amount of matter – say, a few grams a day.

To derive a story from this, I had to brainstorm what use such a gadget would be. One possibility, a little dull, was microsurgery. A more intriguing possibility was an extremely long-duration space mission. Surely even the most advanced and efficient craft would need some raw materials replenishment. I came up with a probe on a billion-year voyage, literally crossing the universe, the microteleport would enable it to scoop up tiny amounts of matter it would require for fuel, for repairing the evaporation of metal from the hull, etc.

Working outwards from the central notion, next I needed a story to tell, which means characters, conflict and climax.

I imagined the alien probe shooting past the Solar System (enroute to completing a million-year detour past the Galaxy's core), and a team of astronauts sent to rendezvous and investigate. The conflict came from their differing motivations, one might want to leave the ancient artefact to continue its course, another might want to haul it home to the Smithsonian, or profit from its technology – particularly the microteleport, for the essence of a gadget story is that the gadget should be at the heart of every aspect of the piece.

Especially the climax.

After some more brainstorming – in fact, adapting my earlier microsurgery notion – I found a way to use the teleport as a murder weapon, and I was able to work out a suitable climax, resolving the characters' conflict and exploring the gadget's properties to the full.

Other gadget stories of mine include 'The Xeelee Flower', 'More Than Time or Distance' and 'The Switch', all of which

appeared in **Vacuum Diagrams** (HarperCollins, 1997)

Gadget stories don't have to be lightweight. The gadget itself serves only as the seed and unifying principle for the story itself. And in the construction of the story, as usual, a writer's deeper concerns and interest will emerge.

Gadget stories, when told well, are pleasingly ingenious, and can have depth beyond their shallow origins. I'd recommend them as study aids to student writers because it's relatively simple to figure out where the core idea has come from and how the writer has put it to work.

Gadgets in SF - by Richard Salsbury

It's tempting to say that without gadgets science fiction wouldn't exist, but it's not quite true. SF stories can be founded purely on social or psychological issues, but more often than not technology of some kind is involved.

If you define a gadget as an object which exploits scientific principles to achieve some desired effect, then sf is chock full of the things. Many of these are now so familiar that they're taken for granted (spaceships, energy weapons, robots) and some exist only to provide the author with a neat way to skirt around plot problems (hyperspace, universal translators). These are valid ways to employ gadgets in sf, but the most interesting inventions are those which have an essential bearing on a story's plot. Broadly speaking, you can sort these into two categories, beneficial and detrimental, depending on what effect the technology has on the story's characters and on society at large.

Beneficial gadgets are those designed to help people by performing difficult or tedious tasks more efficiently. As a tool-using race, humankind has always been interested in finding new ways to solve problems. Nowhere was this more evident than in the golden age of the pulps, where no job was too difficult for our hero as long as he had the brains to invent a solution or the telephone number of a friendly scientist to help him out. Asimov's robots are examples of beneficial gadgets: technology harnessed for the good of the people who use them.

Detrimental gadgets, on the other hand, have an adverse effect on people, either accidentally or because they have been designed to do so. They are often used to show the reader how a technology might be applied in a dangerous or dehumanising way. In Mary Gentle's short story 'Human Waste' (**Interzone** #85), for example, the miraculous healing power of nanotechnology turns out to have some horrific social side effects.

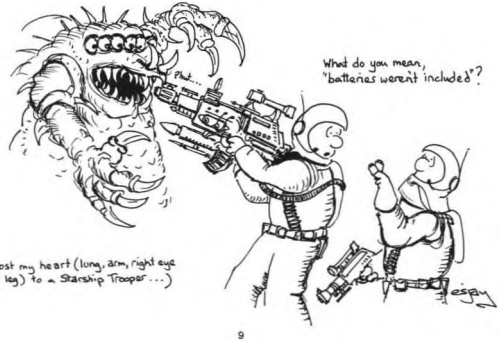
Writers do not, however, always take the view that an invention must be wholly good or bad. Stories that attempt to show both sides of the argument tend to be those concerning genetic engineering or medical issues rather than physical gadgetry, probably because these things have a more direct effect on human beings. Novels like **Beggars in Spain** and **Flowers for Algernon** enable readers to think seriously about the consequences of tomorrow's technology before it arrives. Although the predictions they make are almost certain to be inaccurate, they can help us get a better picture of the future and our place in it.

Gadgets can also be used to great effect symbolically. Here, they often work better than mundane objects because they are entirely invented by the writer and can therefore be tailored to the requirements of the story. The telescreens in Orwell's **Nineteen Eighty-Four** can be seen as symbols of the state's omnipresence. The monolith in **2001: A Space Odyssey** - which has suspiciously regular geometry and is older than the human race - represents non-terrestrial intelligence.

And gadgets can be funny, too. Because reality is such a malleable thing in sf, writers are free to use devices for comic effect in a way that non-genre authors would find outrageous. One of my favourites is Harry Harrison's Bloater Drive from **Bill, The Galactic Hero**. This reduces the binding energy of every atom in a spaceship, inflating it to such a huge size that it encompasses its destination. Then it shrinks the ship back down to normal size with the destination as the focal point.

But gadgets are at their most interesting when a story can't work without them. A good example is Bob Shaw's **Terminal Velocity**, in which the invention of the CG harness - a personal anti-gravity device - revolutionises transport in the 21st century. The protagonist, Robert Hasson, is a traffic cop, an ordinary enough occupation today, but one which becomes much more dangerous in a future where people fly from place to place rather than driving. The phobia Hasson develops - fear of falling - is a direct result of an experience in a CG harness. The rise in crime can also be attributed to it, because people feel impunity from the law while they are flying. In fact, every significant aspect of **Terminal Velocity** springs from the existence of the CG harness. It is the core of the book.

And gadgets don't get much more important than that.



DR GREENLAND'S PRESCRIPTION

This may take us a bit outside our normal territory in this column, but yesterday I had a fascinating conversation with my agent that I think might interest you. It started when she mentioned that she'd just regretfully returned 25 unsolicited manuscripts.

Regretfully, because she'd have much preferred it if they'd all been undiscovered geniuses just waiting for her to represent them; but also because so much of what people send her is simply not ready for publication.

I asked her what sort of advice she gives those people. Immediately she said:

"The same thing, always. The beginning needs more impact; the middle needs tightening up; the end needs more punch."

All our books tend to start off weak and diffuse, because we have to find our way into them. I'm sure I've said before that I make a habit of leaving the opening sentences until last. Then I go through the first chapter or two combing out bits of information that no longer need to be there, usually because they are going to become amply apparent later.

Something my agent often finds herself saying to authors, about second and third and especially sixteenth novels as much as about first novels, is: "Have you read this book? No? Then how do you expect anyone else to?"

Sometimes we're so absorbed in the writing that we forget to take the time to read it, from beginning to end, as if it were somebody else's book, seen for the first time.

Sometimes, my agent said yesterday, you can spot these faults as much from the look of the manuscript as from reading it.

She didn't just mean all that stuff about double-spacing and inch-wide margins. She meant, what are the proportions of the writing? Are there paragraphs that go on and on and on forever? Are there pages and pages of solid dialogue? Are there pages and pages of solid description, or recapitulation?

As with the old canard about showing and telling, the point is not that any of these styles is necessarily wrong. The point is that, as readers, we appreciate and expect and need variation in the kind of information we're given, and the way we're given it.

A long conversation will benefit immensely from a little aeration in the form of description. Where are these people? What are their bodies and faces doing while they're talking?

And vice versa: a long description or commentary can grow very stale without a flash or two of something dramatic. A detailed stretch of landscape becomes much easier to assimilate if partway through your viewpoint character climbs on the wall and puts his hands in his pockets while he looks around at the rest of it.

Why do the middles of so many novels need tightening? I'm sure it's because it's hard to sustain pace through the long, lonely, tedious business of composition. Half-thoughts, wandering thoughts, indecisive gestures, all find their way in and need cutting out again.

When they hear the words pace or flow, a lot of people get the wrong idea.

It's not about having a lot of things happening quickly. Nor is it necessarily about having a lot of short sentences.

It's about ease of reading - which again is not to say simplicity of thought. Things don't have to be stupid or banal to be easy to read.

As much as anything, it's about how you direct and redirect the reader's attention. About not switching viewpoints too often or locations too soon.

You can do a lot of helpful work quite invisibly. Here's a small thought:

Secure the attention of your reader by announcing, in the opening words of a paragraph, what that paragraph's going to be about.

If it's about a character, about something they're doing or feeling or just about who they are, start by referring to them as directly as possible.

> Jo was over by the instrument panel.
>
> Ingrine the neophyte had never really had the chance to show what he could do.
>
> The man in the raincoat climbed on the wall. He put his hands in his pockets and looked around.

If it's about scenery, try not writing that tempting *Jo the neophyte examined her surroundings*. Go straight to *The trees were bare and blue* or *The floor was metal, coated with phosphorescent slime*.

If the paragraph is going to dip into memory, or explain something already established, try signalling that at the outset.

> Last time I had visited Atlantis, I had been surprised by the amount of new building work going on everywhere.

The virus had been the brainchild of a researcher called Stig.

And when you're finished with description or reminiscence and want to move the story on, why not announce unambiguously that that's what you're doing?

The next day we sighted the crash site.

We came upon the crash site sooner than even the Professor expected.

It was not until we actually reached the crash site that we understood what we were up against.

What did my agent mean, I wondered, when she said that her half-baked submissions lacked "punch" at the end? Surely not every book has to have a surprise ending, a twist in the tail?

She conceded the point. "More definition, then," she said. "I know there aren't proper stories in real life, and things don't have definite endings."

That, if you like, is why fiction must.

Think about the phrase poetic justice.

Fiction offers the satisfaction of closure. Life just continues, heedlessly, until death, which rarely satisfies anyone.

"One secret I will tell you," my agent declared, "and you may tell it to them. Nothing is quite so offputting as opening the Jiffy bag and pulling out a manuscript that stinks of cigarette smoke."

One of her clients, a heavy smoker, found an effective if rather drastic solution to that one. When he'd finished his manuscript, and before he sent it, he went through and sprayed every page with perfume.

Colin Greenland

Commemoration Day

by Howard Watts

My Grandfather always had a way of reassuring me when I was younger and couldn't cope with life, and I remember how he first helped me through the most difficult part of my childhood.

It was early winter. Commemoration Day bank holiday, and my parents and I were visiting Grandfather for the day. I was twelve years old and had just started the last stages of my schooling. I knew I was different, as I'd noticed the looks from the other pupils, the small groups in the corridors who huddled together as I approached, whispering behind cupped hands and giggling.

Grandfather had a small flat in a purpose built block on the edge of town. That's where they put immigrant families at the start - in grey concrete blocks piled on top of each other. Mother cooked dinner, and afterwards father helped her wash up. I sat in the lounge, idly skipping through a few net pages on his P. C., while my grandfather relaxed in the middle of his large couch. He had his eyes closed, and I thought he was sleeping as he usually did after one of his daughter's special Commemoration Day dinners, but he spoke to me in the quiet of the lounge as the sounds from the kitchen of clinking cutlery and saucepans and the hum from the P.C.'s cooling fan dominated the background. This was unusual, because he always helped my parents in the kitchen, complaining they didn't put things in the proper place.

"You're worried Julianna, aren't you? I noticed it earlier," he said without opening his eyes.

"No", I lied, the waver of my voice proving the fact to him.

He smiled and took a deep breath, his eyes still shut. "Okay, but there's something on your mind, I can tell. Let me guess."

"Okay," I answered, turning from the screen, "but you're only allowed three guesses."

I watched as he clasped his hands together and grinned. He still enjoyed a game at his age.

"Are you having trouble with your boyfriend?"

"No," I said. "I haven't got a boyfriend." the level tone of my voice proving to him I was telling the truth. "Two guesses left."

"You're finding your school work difficult?"

I giggled and clapped my hands together. "No, one guess left, grandfather." I was sure he wouldn't guess correctly, and I remember feeling a growing wave of relief rise up in me and ripple across my skin as I realised I wouldn't have to discuss my problem.

He sniffed a couple of times and furrowed his brow. "Mmm, now let's see."

"Hurry up, time's running out," I taunted.

He sat up slowly and when he had settled himself said, "You're being bullied at school, aren't you?"

My face dropped as my wave of relief retreated. I remained silent, which caused him to open his eyes and look over to me. He saw from my complexion he had guessed correctly, and this brought a smile to his thin chapped lips. He clapped his hands together once, mimicking me as best he could, then his face took on a serious look. He beckoned me to sit next to him on the couch.

"I was bullied when I was younger," he said. "Children your age are very perceptive in their innocence. They notice differences and exaggerate them. I was always taunted about my colour as a youngster, it used to upset me a lot, but it's all part of the difficult process of growing up. I don't expect you to fully understand that at your age, it's all so painful, I know. But you will when you are older, and you'll look back and say." Grandad was right.

He paused and bowed his head. "They taunt you because of your colour, don't they? Call you names to watch your reaction?"

I nodded and the pain and anger inside of me which appeared when they ridiculed me suddenly reappeared as I remembered. I hated the feeling, especially since I was sitting in the warm and comforting presence of my grandfather. I wanted to explode and my face flushed red with anger. He saw the pain on my face and placed a gnarled hand on my thin forearm, squeezing it slightly to reassure me.

"I spend most of my time with other immigrants' children," I mumbled. "We gather in groups in the playground and play our own games and sing our own songs. Some of the older boys keep an eye out for us, and make sure the older girls don't interfere with us. But they have their own friends too, and they're not always there. I get scared. Last week there was a fight between an immigrant and another boy. The immigrant told a girl who was laughing at us to go away. He pushed her to the ground and she went to her boyfriend. He came over and hit the immigrant boy and I ran."

"Listen Julianna, you're not an immigrant child anymore-"

"But that's what they call us."

"You're a citizen as much as they are, with rights as equal to theirs. That's the law. Over the years haven't they adapted our music, eaten in our restaurants, bought our fashions?. We're all part of one great multi-cultural community now. There are no more ethnic minorities."

"I know that, but they still call us, 'stain skins', or little emms."

"It will pass, I promise you. There are only very few adults in the world today who treat others differently because of the colour of their skin. You'll find most of the time they're only jealous because you are different or they have problems of their own they can't cope with and need to take it out on someone else. They only taunt you to turn your skin, but when you reach adulthood you'll be able to control it, and that day will change your life forever."

I looked up at him and I could feel my red face revert to its natural tone. I thought long and hard about what he had told me.

"Grandfather, was there a day which changed your life forever?"

He smiled and reached over to slowly stroke my hair.

"I'll tell you about the day that changed my life, the day I met your Grandmother. You've probably heard a version of this story told in school, but this is my own version, and remember, I was there the day everything changed. Wednesday the 28th of October 03. The very first Commemoration day. Forty years ago I was out walking late at night. I'd become restless, it seemed work was taking a turn for the worst and redundancy was looking as if it might rear its ugly head. I walked into town, not knowing where I was heading or who I was going to visit. Then, as I strolled down the leafy avenue where I used to live, I noticed a figure running up the hill towards me. My mind was too pre-occupied with my own problems to imagine what was troubling this stranger. For a moment I wondered if I was going to be attacked, but as the figure ran past I could see she was scared for some reason. That is when I heard the sirens and saw the police cars and ambulances speeding along the main road. I turned along, and as I turned into the main road I could see the fire illuminating the sky. People were running in every direction, shouting and crying, horns were blaring and the traffic had come to a standstill as there were large pieces of twisted metallic debris in the middle of the road. The fire was a few streets away, and I thought an airliner had crashed. I hurried towards the scene, god knows why, some strange instinct I still don't understand to this day urged me on. I met crowds running in the opposite direction, while others were standing in their doorways, wrapped in their dressing gowns, arms folded against the cold, watching the red in the sky as it picked out the contours of the clouds. Dogs barked, groups gathered, conversations sprang up between strangers, pubs emptied, their patrons still clinging to their glasses as they watched the chaos.

"I rounded a corner and the heat hit me. At first it looked as though the whole street had been demolished, just short of the park. Only the next day did I discover almost a third of the town had been lost. There were blackened corpses lying in the road, burning cars, twisted lamp poles, clouds of steam from burst water mains, and people's belongings scattered everywhere. Then I noticed the ship protruding from the ruined houses. Its hull shone, illuminating the scene as it reflected the light from the fire at its base, and like a huge curved mirror, elongated images of destruction and death danced across its surface. But somehow to me it seemed strangely beautiful, even tranquil amid the chaos and the flames, as if it was at rest and had served its purpose. I froze and stared at it, oblivious to all the commotion around me, until a fireman shook me and told me to get back and stay at the park, where emergency services tended the wounded and covered the dead. I came to my senses and took one last look. Then I saw the people running from the wreckage, some with their clothes alight. That is when I first saw her. She staggered towards me clutching her left arm. I ran to her and helped her into the park. At first I didn't take any notice of her red skin, for mine had been illuminated by the fire also. It was only when I reached the park and we were beneath the artificial lights, that I noticed her skin remained red. I thought she had burns, and called for a nurse, but then I saw her skin change colour to pink. I looked at her and she gave a weak smile, I tried to help her over to an ambulance, but she told me she was alright. That's when her accent and her features struck me. She was subtly different to a human being. Her bone structure, the formation of her muscles around her frame and joints. I looked at her hand as she took it from mine and remember feeling the texture of her skin as our fingers parted. It was unusual, glassy, as if it had been polished to a high sheen." He paused for a few moments, then added. "She was such a beautiful woman."

"And that was grandmother?"

He nodded and said with a hint of sorrow in his voice. "That was your grandmother, the very first time we met."

I looked at my hands and they too had grown smooth, their colour altering to a calm turquoise with tiny white ripples of security and trust coursing up my arms, as my feelings and emotions had levelled out by his reassuring words.

"You're very much like her, Jukanna. I've seen her colours in you on many occasions. They only taunt you to watch your calm colours change. That's when they know they've got you. Don't worry, your hereditary gift will enrich your life, as much as meeting your grandmother enriched mine. It is the person you are which makes you important to others. Yes, you are special, remember that, but especially remember all those who lost their lives, each and every October the 29th from now on."

Mother and Father joined us in the living room after our conversation. I found out after Grandfather died they had been listening to us from the kitchen. Thinking back, I realise why Grandfather kept his eyes closed when he questioned me. He didn't want the changing colour of my skin to answer his questions for him. He simply wanted to talk to his granddaughter, without being reminded of his dearly departed wife.

Milford 1997

by Angela Shackleton Hill

No sooner do I finish reading Janet Barron's excellent **Matrix** article on Clanon than I receive a letter from Carol Ann Kerry-Green saying, "You were at Milford '97. Write me an article on it for **Focus**." Gulp. I think; because I know that I can imbue it with none of the glamour hinted at in Janet's piece. Milford is an altogether more laid-back affair than Clanon. No transatlantic flights to obscure American airports, no tornado alerts, no drop-dead famous authors (except for treasurer, David Langford, who doesn't attend anyway); merely a slightly clapped-out Devonshire hotel, a stunning coastline and an interesting daytrip to a maltings-cum-brewery. But, what the hell. It's a way of getting my name back in print.

What is Milford?

This is a question that I asked myself with increasingly panic-stricken regularity between applying to attend in spring '97 and attending in October. Before applying, I knew this much from its current chair, Liz Holliday: that it is a week-long conference for SF and Fantasy writers and has been an (almost) annual event since 1972. It is intended to be a gathering of equals in that the applicants have to have been published but it is in no way meant to be elitist. As the official bumph says: "invitations [to attend] are extended to authors who may have sold only a single story as well as to those who only dimly recall what rejection slips look like."

But that didn't really tell me what I needed to know. As the man said, some of us are more equal than others and I was very afraid that it would be largely attended by luminaries whose merest operational parameters I am not worthy to calculate. Moreover, I was worried that it would turn out to be a week-long workshop. Having always been a total hermit in my writing habits, I don't get

on with up-front, get-your-ass-in-gear nature of workshops. So no Clarion for me, I think. There were darker reasons for my angst too. To explain these I need to tell you a little bit about myself.

Back in prehysterical times, when I was an undergraduate at the start of the 1980s, I wrote a cross-genre SF/Fantasy novel which I submitted for publication in 1982. To my astonishment, it was accepted by the first publisher I sent it to (George Allen and Unwin as was) and appeared in hardback in 1984. Had I been more experienced, I might have recognised the warning signs: a general lack of publicity, no reviews that I was aware of, almost non-existent sales, but I was thrilled that it had been accepted and I really thought that it was going to be my stepping stone to SF authordom. It wasn't. A year or so later I received a letter from the publisher telling me that my contract was terminated and that they weren't going to publish the sequel they had asked me to write. I was devastated and, as a consequence, suffered complete and total writer's block for the next ten years. There's an article in that alone.

But that's not what this is about. I was telling you why I was frightened of going to Milford.

The point is that, very belatedly, in 1995, I discovered SF conventions and the BSFA. At the same time, I became ill and had to take a long period of sick leave. For some time previously I had been thinking about writing again and now was my opportunity. I got out the old MS and looked it over. It was truly awful. I will never understand why it was accepted for publication and, in truth, I am angry that it was. But the ideas are good. So, with that and the encouragement of a couple of really famous authors' whom I spoke with at Intersection (my first convention) I started to rewrite. I was still starting six months later when I first met Liz Holliday and a year after that when I ran into her again. Because, you see, I still had writer's block.

Let's face it. I was more than a decade older than I was when writing the first time round, in significant ways more mature (for which, read cynical), hyper-critical, generally lacking in faith, hope and self-esteem, and so terrified of getting it wrong again that, very often, I couldn't get the words at all down on the page. On top of this, I had no source of feedback. I did not know any other writers and still don't know any who live close by, a major difficulty since I don't have email or Internet access. Many times I have been on the verge of torching everything, except that I can't. There is always the need to try yet again. I think it was a combination of sympathy and recognition of my plight that led Liz Holliday to invite me to Milford '97 on the strength of one bad novel published thirteen years ago. But I have to tell you that I felt like a fraud too. As it turned out, I needn't have worried at all.

Because Milford isn't like that. For starters, it isn't a workshop. There are no teachers and students, no exercises, no being put on the spot and told to produce so many words on this subject by noon tomorrow or else. It is more like an extended meeting of a writer's group. Those attending are asked to bring with them one or two pieces of unpublished writing, totalling about 15,000 words, which will be critiqued over the following week by each of the other writers attending. A timetable is drawn up to allow three or four pieces to be critiqued per day. Reading is carried out in the morning, usually in private, then the group breaks for lunch before commencing the afternoon's critiquing session: the process, of which is controlled very tightly by the chair. Where necessary, critiquing carried on into the evening but, more often than not, individuals are able to down tools and socialise once dinner is over or disappear to get a head start on the next day's reading. I know that some people found it difficult to keep up with the reading but this was not a problem that I shared and I found it both exhilarating and illuminating to have so many different styles, subject matters and levels of competence to comment on. I made the discovery, very belatedly, that critiquing other peoples' work gives you new and valuable perspectives on your own writing and on your strengths and weaknesses as a writer. I also discovered that most writers are terminally insecure; not just me. Now why didn't I guess that this would be the case?

Then there was the atmosphere. I've been told that this varies from Milford to Milford but, at Milford '97, it was excellent. I had arrived half a day late and somewhat worried in that, instead of the requisite one or two pieces of writing, I had only managed to bring one and that only 5,500 words long. But there were no slapped wrists and, in fact, as the pressure increased over the week and we had more and more reading to do, we all became grateful for the shorter pieces and grew a little fractious when presented with something 20,000 words long to get through by lunchtime. No one grilled me as to why I hadn't arrived the night before and, as I glanced round casually over coffee and came to realise that there wasn't a single famous face to be seen, I realised that maybe I wasn't going to be slaughtered and that maybe everything was going to be All Right. This proved to be true and the pleasure of the experience was magnified by the discovery that some of the faces I hadn't recognised belonged to very experienced and well-respected writers like Cherith Baldry and tipped-to-be-big-sometime-soon writers like Charlie Stross. Many of us were first-timers to Milford; a happy accident which meant that nearly everyone was a stranger to everyone else so had to make an equal effort at making friends. Moreover, we were a sickeningly nice bunch. No one's ego outmassed their talent. No one got a kick out of piling withering but unhelpful scorn on other people's work. No one took more than mild umbrage at criticism of their own work and, above all, everyone endeavored to be both kind *and* professional. Any deficiencies in critiquing ability were honest deficiencies and, by and large, the standard was good. In addition, everyone seemed to want to be helpful. This mattered to me, given my fragile state, which brings me back to what I said before about writers' block, lack of faith, isolation and lack of feedback.

I am very conscious that the nature of this article, my reaction to Milford, is very much coloured by past experience. It would probably be very different in tone were it being written by one of the more steadily successful writers who attended, though I think we would all agree that it was a useful and enjoyable experience. But this is my personal response and this is what it did for me. Attending Milford was like finding a door into another world. Suddenly, all the things I had lacked were there. I can put them under one heading: informed reaction. It's what every writer needs. But, more than this, it has given me a degree of hope. To my absolute amazement and utter relief, people liked my writing. In fact, some of them liked it a lot. Of course there were criticisms; but these either tallied with my own or were, in a sense, irrelevant to the sort of book I am writing. The net reaction was positive and this simple fact has done me a power of good. I am no longer quite so cripplingly lacking in faith, hope and self-esteem; though I still have the writer's block to defeat.

Milford has also left me feeling less isolated. I am still a solitary creature, and apart from an Orbiter (to which I haven't yet contributed), I haven't joined a writers' group and I still don't know any local writers. But I now know that, should I want it, there are a dozen or so Milfordites out there who would probably be only too happy to give advice, do a bit of reading, provide some feedback when things get tough. A couple have even offered. On the other hand, I am acutely aware that I would not be in this lucky position if I hadn't met Liz Holliday and she hadn't been kind enough to ignore my thirteen year break from writing and end my isolation for me. Thanks Liz. You see, it never occurred to me that it was possible for writers to network. I wish I'd known it a decade ago. And, if there's anyone out there who doesn't yet know it, learn it now. That's about it. I feel, in parting, that I'm sounding a bit heavy and that I should end on a lighter note. So let me point out that Milford '97 was a highly successful social event. Where else could I have shared in a cold that went round all thirteen inmates then came back to me? Where else could I have learned that Stuart Falconer plays a mean mandolin, that Julian Flood and I have a mutual acquaintance who is nothing to do with SF or writing, that Charlie and me are writing the *same book* only from totally different perspectives, that there are some hoteliers in Devon who don't understand the value and sustaining qualities of good malt whisky,

that one can actually have fun playing games like Blind Date, that Ben Jeapes could write a killer version of **Moby Dick** in the style of Irvine Welsh? Or was it **Trainspotting** in the style of Beatrix Potter? I could go on but I won't. Suffice it to say, I had a great time. And, even though I haven't come away and written reams in the aftermath, at least I now feel that I *could* write reams, and that for me, can only be considered an improvement.

The Plotting Parlour

Richard Salsbury

You asked for opinions in the editorial of issue 32 (through a telephoto lens, lightly, indeed!), so I'll throw in my twopenceworth. The fiction and poetry are not generally to my liking, but I don't think you should get rid of them - since this is a magazine about writing, it seems a shame not to give a few examples of it. What I really would find useful is in-depth analyses printed side-by-side with the fiction, either written by the author of the piece or by an independent writer. I realise that not all contributors would want this (it could be made optional) but it would be extremely useful to see how the story has been constructed and why it works (or doesn't).

My favourite parts of **Focus** are non-fiction. Dr Greenland's Prescription, the Forum, and the other occasional articles like Ian Watson's 'What is SFWA?'. I'm keen to see as much practical information for writers as possible - there are plenty of books out there on writing, but sf requires the use of different techniques and approaches. I see **Focus** as a means of providing those things that can't generally be found in your average 'How to' book.

James Lecky

I thought that the recent BSFA poll had some interesting things to say about **Focus**. Although I haven't seen a copy of the magazine yet (having only been a BSFA member for a couple of months) I couldn't help but think that a few of the more disparaging comments had totally missed the mark. *'... not interested in amateur writers or aspiring professionals' ... 'why publish first fumbles...'?* Surely these comments were made by people who enjoy and cherish science fiction so where then do they suggest that the professionals of the future should come from - cloned from the DNA of L. Ron Hubbard? Vat grown with specialist 'sf writing' genes so that they emerge as fully formed and individual stylists? Or perhaps all science fiction in the future will be written by self-aware AI computers (The A.C.C.2001, perchance?) thus totally eliminating the need for 'first fumbles'? Just a thought.

While I profess a ready bias against the kind of fanzine fiction that has the subtitle - A episode of the **Next Generation** where Picard meets Scully, Mulder and the fifth Doctor - I also believe that some of the most exciting and innovative writing in both British and US speculative fiction is currently emerging from the small press. (**The Third Alternative**, **Freezer Burn** and **Nasty Piece of Work** to name but three) and attitudes such as those expressed in the BSFA poll can only serve to harm the growth of sf and hasten its decline into bland corporate mush.

James Lecky (second letter)

Basically, I still stand behind my previous comments on **Focus**. It is good to see a writers magazine aimed squarely at science fiction and fantasy rather than the usual **Writers Weakly** *(sic)* publications that are filled to the brim with such useful articles as 'Correct Posture For the Working Writer' or 'How I Turned My Rejection Slips Into An Attractive Duvet Cover'.

The article by Alison Sinclair was a useful insight into the workings of the editorial mind and Colin Greenland's Prescription provided some food for thought although it did rather presuppose that every story should be written in the third rather than first person (whither the techniques of Modernism?).

'What is the SFWA?' put us all to shame. It seems that our colonial cousins understand the economics of writing much better than we do in the Old World where it would appear that 'art for arts sake' is still the order of the day and if something is 'populist' then it is automatically worthless. British writers would do well to learn a lesson from the SFWA, or perhaps the legacy of Thatcherism whereby anything that even remotely smacks of a Trade Union is treated with distrust, still lurks deeply within us all. (Hands up if you're a Lefty, comrade).

The Forum discussion on Writers' books was interesting enough in its own way but drew little by the way of conclusion (although it provided a nice plug for Brian Stableford's new book) - I suppose what it really said was that you have to discover these things for yourself - a bit like the writing process really.

A couple of minor gripes though. At sixteen pages the magazine was a tad skinny and considering the bi-annual schedule a few more pages would be nice. Similarly there wasn't enough fiction or poetry for my tastes, what there was was good ('Beachcombing the Mind's Eye' was a little gem in many ways, especially considering its genesis) but more would have been better.

All in all, **Focus** is a useful tool that is, thankfully, unpatronising to the would-be (and even practising) writer.

Daniel O'Mahony

Despite - or perhaps because of its infrequency, I find myself treasuring **Focus** particularly out of the BSFA publications. I'm looking forward to the next issue already.

John Boyd (via email)

Recently I wrote (email) to Elizabeth Billinger saying, amongst other things, how much I'd enjoyed **Focus** (issue 32) as this was the first issue I'd seen and thought it worthwhile and sensible (whatever) with some interesting pieces, especially the article on Clarion [*actually this was in our sister-magazine* ***Matrix***]. Forum and 'Plot...' were pretty informative, too.

Holiday for a lifetime
by Steve Sneyd

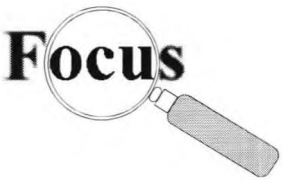
could grow
to love here air
breathable even makes
me drunk

dawn gives me fierce
hangover sleeping in
such atmosphere must mend
portal
soon now

build a new calendar
replace one smashed when told
me stuck
here a year even dare use locater
which star

whatever world
circles with me aboard
which worse forever far out or
Sol-near

en route
no ship goes but
my crazed carrier to
dream-land


Focus