Focus

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Focus 34

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Contributions to Focus are always welcome.

Fiction should be of a very good quality and no longer than 5,000 words. Please read a couple of issues first to see the kind of fiction we're publishing, before submitting. Poetry also welcome.

Articles about all aspects of writing are always needed, up to 5,000 words. Anything from the joys of having your first piece accepted, to the difficulties of the craft itself. Please contact the editors if you are unsure whether the article fits our remit.

Contributions should be submitted on A4 paper, double-spaced on one side of the paper only. Email contributions can be accepted, if compatible, please check on metaphor@enterprise.net first. 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

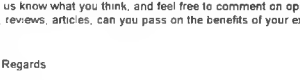
Through a telephoto lens, lightly...

Dialogue is a subject covered in every guide to writing fiction, but in sf and fantasy it sometimes repays even more careful and creative attention. If we avoid the temptation to use dialogue as a poor disguise for info-dumping, it offers us a wonderful opportunity to express more subtly just what is different about our particular sfnal world, if only in what the characters take for granted. In this issue Colin Greenland discusses the thorny subject of info-dumping, and dialogue is tackled in the Forum.

The decline in numbers of submissions to the Forum suggests a decline in interest (perhaps it has outlived its usefulness?) and we have decided to 'rest' the feature for the time being. If you disagree, do write and tell us – and stand by to send us your own contributions!

In fact, on any aspect of the magazine, let us know what you think, and feel free to comment on opinions and advice expressed in these pages. If you write fiction, reviews, articles, can you pass on the benefits of your experience to others?

Regards



The Small Press

Focus is going to be looking at the small press in a forthcoming issue. We will be looking at all aspects, from the writer's, editor's and publisher's point of view. The small press covers a multitude of publications, from fanzines to glossy magazines, many small presses publish books; some small presses are very prestigious, others known only to a few.

We want to explore at least some of the vast world of small press publications. We will be contacting some editors, writers and readers in the next few weeks, but if you'd like to become involved, please contact us at one of the editorial addresses. Also, we would like to run a few reviews of small press magazines. If you are interested in contributing reviews, again, please contact us at one of the editorial addresses. We hope that as many people as possible will contribute to this discussion. Given that a lot of people get their break into being a published writer in the small press, do you think the sf world takes it as seriously as it deserves?

We look forward as ever to hearing your views.

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**. We got no response to this last time around, so we are extending the deadline to **28 February 1999**.

Telegramme From The Queen

Pamela Stuart

The horde of half-naked, grubby youngsters fled shrieking up the beach. Everyone knew that the old man was quite incapable of giving chase, but teasing him until he howled with rage and shook impotent fists in fury was an accepted daily routine.

Today he had been even more fun than usual, with his drooling gibberish. He always rambled on about really weird things, but seemed to have no proper recollection of the important things like how many fish the boat had brought in, or who had managed to kill one of the dwindling number of conies for the pot.

Now as they fell panting onto the scrubby grass that fringed the beach Haras guffawed loudly before asking, "D'you think he really is a hundred years old?"

The others pondered. Several of them were not able to count beyond twenty, or less if they were missing any fingers or toes. "Maybe he could be ..." Doddy said thoughtfully, "I know he's lots older than my granda, and he's the oldest person I know, otherwise."

Mara spoke up rather timidly, "I don't think really we ought to tease him so much. He really is old, and maybe some of the queer things he talks about really are things he remembers," she broke off in confusion.

"How can it be stuff he remembers when it doesn't even make sense?" scoffed Marko. "A telgram from the Queen, anna birdy cake!" The others joined in the laughter.

"It could be something real," Mara persisted, "it could be something they had before the Problems." The others looked at her tolerantly. She had been born with a twisted leg, which automatically meant she would never be allowed to mate or breed, and when she turned out to have an exceptional power of memory whilst still very young, she had been transferred from the usual women's tasks of grubbing for roots and preparing whatever food the fishermen and hunters brought in, and instead sent as apprentice to old Horry, the tribe's official Rememberer. Usually she spent all her days in his hut, chanting the long lists of things they had to remember, just occasionally she was allowed a free day to mix with the other youngsters and rest her brain.

Now, as the others dashed away into the scrub, intent on foraging for anything edible, she limped slowly back to the row of wattle and daub huts that fringed the bay. She could see the old man still crouched on his heap of seaweed, futilely dribbling sand and shells through his age-crippled fingers. He would remain crouched there until sunset, when one of the women would haul him up the beach to the communal fire and dole out a grudging ration of whatever food they had. She felt that there was something here that she should know about, and just looking at the old decrepit figure brought home the fact that Horry was also an old man, by tribal reckoning, and she was the only other Rememberer they had.

Horry was crouched as usual in his dark and squalid hut, surrounded by the bits of knotted string and the lines of different-coloured stones he used to help his memory. One of the things they remembered was that once people had been able to make special marks that showed what they had to remember, and kept the stones or whatever the marks went on in special boxes called *puters*. She wished they still had things like that, remembering all the things the tribe needed to know took so many hours of reciting every day, to make sure it was still all there, and then new things happened, that had to be added. It must have been wonderful to have some way of making marks on a box and having it remember for you. She sighed heavily as she ducked into the low doorway, and Horry looked up in irritation in the middle of the list of families he was reciting.

"Horry," she began tentatively, "Is the old one really a hundred years old?"

He sighed deeply and put two new knots in the string he was holding before he answered. "Why do you come disturbing me?" he grumbled. "He probably is. His name goes back to before my name-line." He waved the long string with its many knots, each one placed to help his memory. "What does it matter?"

She wasn't even sure why it did matter, but somehow it did. She scraped her bare toes in the sand and seaweed cover on the floor as she answered awkwardly. "It's just that he keeps talking about the old days, from even before he can remember - telling us things his granfer told him, and part of it was that when someone got to be a hundred, they got a tel-e-gram," she enunciated as carefully as she could, "from the Queen, and a cake with candles on - and none of us know if those were real things, or if it's just more of his babbling!"

Horry glared at her in irritation, obviously itching to get back to his list before he lost more time. "A Queen," he gabbled rapidly, "was a big, big chief, or sometimes it was a King, or a President. Whichever it was, they got to boss all the big chiefs who bossed the small chiefs, and they bossed the clans in the villages, only they were called towns. Now go away and stop interrupting me!"

She held her ground. "I can't understand that now," she told him, "but I will go away and think about it until I do. Now tell me the other things the telegramme - and the cake and candles!"

He almost snarled at her, hating her for asking, and himself for not having anything clear in his memory. "A telegramme was some kind of message; a cake was something to eat; candles were sticks of stiff grease that burnt to give light, now go away!" This time she went.

On her way back along the beach, she paused for a moment at a judicious distance from the scrawny oldling, she was not afraid that his feeble stone-throwing efforts could harm her, but he was a formidable spitter, and she had no desire to receive a salvo of his filthy saliva, delivered with the speed and precision of a spitting-cobra. "When is your birthday then?" she asked, curiously, "this moon, this tide, do you know?"

He glared at her with eyes still evilly bright beneath the fringes of filthy hair. He never bothered to wash himself in the scummy sea, as even the villagers occasionally did, and his stench was throat-grasping. "Hundred, I'll be," he chanted his litany, "hundred I'll be, and I'll get a telegramme from the Queen, and a cake with candles on. Four more high tides and then it'll be Monday, the fourth day in September, in the year of 2139, a hundred years since the atoms got away and everything broke down! It all happened the day I was born, my ma told me!" He cackled gleefully and rolled in the heap of seaweed, scratching his scabby chest.

Mara decided she would get no more sense from him than from Horry, and limped on towards the trees. She was lost in her own thoughts when a hand suddenly blocked her vision and the smell of sweet fruit reached her nostrils. Laughing, she batted away the hand and reached out to accept the fruit. It was Doddy of course. He often gave her fruit from his gathering, and spent time talking to her. If she had not been flawed physically, she supposed they would have been mates, but her blood was adjudged tainted so he could never be more than a friend. Now she knew he had come back to find her, to find out what she herself had found out from Horry. These two had always shared a sneaking sympathy for the old one, and a secret guilt about the constant jeers and taunts that were his lot.

"Did you find out anything?" he asked now. "Did Horry have any bits in his rememberings about him?"

"He said the old man could easily be a hundred, he was from before Horry's rememberings begin, but he couldn't really tell me much about the other things. He said the telegramme was a

message from some big chief far away, and the cake was something to eat, and the candles were sticks of grease you burned to give light." She paused, trying to make sense of what she had just repeated, and added "The old one says it is his birthday in four high-tides, and then a lot of queer stuff that had no meaning at all - but maybe it did in the old times," she added doubtfully.

"Why would anyone want to burn sticks of grease on top of food?" As usual Doddy fastened on the one point that seemed to refer to something within his scope of knowledge. They looked at each other silently as each pondered.

"Maybe you ate - whatever it was - in the dark, and the grease was burning to see by." Suggested Mara, doubtfully.

Doddy was scornful of that theory. "Why would he be sitting in the dark to eat in the first place, and if he wanted to see, why not eat by the camp-fire, or burn fish-oil in a bowl, with a wick, the way we always do?" he demanded. However they turned and twisted the few facts, they were still bemused by noon-time, and Mara had only a few hours more of her rest-day. In the end they agreed that Doddy should discuss the matter with the other youngsters when they came back to the village, and meanwhile, it was more sensible to spend the time swimming and berry-hunting.

Mara did find odd moments in the next two days to wonder what Doddy had told the others about their discussion, and to hope that if it really was the old one's birthday that they would leave off teasing him, just for a few hours, and maybe give him a bit of fruit that was not rotten, or a bigger portion of soup, or something. She should have remembered that Doddy not only worried at problems like a shark at an injured sea-thing, but was a great respecter of her special knowledge, while Haras, once a project was explained to him enough times, stuck with it to the end.

It was the fourth high-tide after Mara's conversation with the old man. The firelight leapt and flickered under the full moon on the beach. All the villagers were there, as usual, to share the meal of thin stew and charred tubers, but tonight the old one had been forcibly scrubbed by the women, given a clean loin-cloth and placed on a log close to the warmth of the blaze. He was still drooling and muttering, oblivious to all but his own disjointed memories, but all the others seemed on edge, and waiting.

Suddenly there was a crashing in the scrub beyond the village, and the sound of running feet. A youngster from the next village down the coast came dashing down the beach, to halt before the old man in a swirl of sand. In his hands he carried two items which he laid reverently at the old one's feet. One was a cleft stick with a scrap of beaten bark held in the split, covered with painting-marks in blue and red plant-dyes. The other was short wooden spear, impaling a roasted rat, its jaws grease-smeared and tied closed around a short lamp-wick.

"Happy birthday!" he gasped. "Here's your telegramme from the Queen!"

Forum

Say what? Dialogue in SF - Richard Salsbury

Is dialogue important in fiction? A good question, after all, any story can be told without resorting to dialogue at all - it's just a case of rephrasing. For example, a sentence like

"I want to go to the shops, Jane," he said.

can be replaced with

He told Jane he wanted to go to the shops.

Simple. So why should anyone want to choose the former over the latter? Both convey exactly the same information - that the male character is telling a character called Jane that he wishes to go to the shops.

The answer, I believe is twofold: (i) dialogue brings a sense of immediacy that can be lacking in narration, and (ii) it reveals things about the person who said it. Both of these help make the story more real for the reader, a quality worth its (metaphorical) weight in gold for fiction writers.

Dialogue is an example of that age old cliche *show, don't tell*. Rather than simply stating the facts, a writer can *demonstrate* what is happening in a way that is more dynamic and engaging than mere reportage. A line like this:

"God!" she said. "You call this coffee, Tom? I've drunk better tasting mud!"

would lose a lot of impact if it was written like this:

She blasphemed and asked Tom if he called this coffee She said she'd drunk better tasting mud.

The dialogue version also gives us a more vivid snapshot of the woman's mood and personality. If dialogue is consistently good, the reader can get to know characters without the writer ever having to go through the dry process of describing them.

* * *

So, what about dialogue specifically in science fiction?

The things that make good dialogue in mainstream fiction also apply, but in sf there is a greater scope for using speech imaginatively.

Sf is not always limited to human characters. Since aliens and machine intelligences will think differently to us, they will also speak differently. The same also applies to strange cultures - the slang spoken by teenagers in the future will not be identical to that spoken by teenagers in our own time (**A Clockwork Orange** being a case in point).

And yet, sf is often criticised for having weak dialogue.

"Well, as you know, Robertson, we created this phase modulated juxtaposition to make personal transport easier.

"That's right, Professor, and we'd have finished it months earlier if those goddam commies hadn't have bombed the lab back in June. They should have been rounded up and shot way back in the twentieth century."

This truly cringeworthy example highlights three danger areas. First, the characters would never need to say these things to each other - they are clearly speaking for the reader's benefit. Second, a case of the dreaded pseudo-scientific mumbo-jumbo has crept in. And finally, the characters seem to be here solely to act as a mouthpiece for the writer to state their political (or racial, or sexual) opinions. This is possible in any form of fiction, but seems to be particularly tempting to sf writers. A certain Mr Heinlein springs to mind.

Science fiction has the potential to put dialogue to better use than any other form of fiction, but it's up to the writer to do justice to those words that appear between the 66 and 99. Unfortunately, dialogue that is noticeably different to our own can

cause the story to lose pace or even coherence - I think **Ridley Walker** just about gets away with its corrupted English (it's certainly convincing and imaginative) but it makes for a challenging read.

Some of science fiction's notable innovations with dialogue include Alfred Bester's **The Demolished Man** (crossword style telepathic exchanges), Daniel Keyes' **Flowers for Algernon** (language changing as intelligence is artificially boosted), and Silverberg's **A Time of Changes** (where personal pronouns are forbidden).

* * *

In conclusion, I think that while dialogue might not be essential in sf, it is very important. Some writing advice has it that two-thirds (or a half, or three quarters) of a story should be dialogue. This "rule" should be taken with a large pinch of salt, and yet it prompts writers to think about what they've written, and to decide whether the balance of narrative to dialogue is appropriate.

In learning how to write, I've made some mistakes with my fiction, but one thing I've never been criticised for is having too much dialogue. As long as it's relevant, it's right.

Let the People Talk! - by Pamela Stuart

The importance of dialogue in a story was summed up once and for all by Lewis Carroll in the opening paragraph of **Alice's Adventures in Wonderland**. Alice was sitting beside her sister, feeling bored. She had peeped into the book her sister was reading, only to find it had neither pictures nor conversations. "'And what is the use of a book,' thought Alice, 'without pictures or conversations?'"

Unless it is the matter of text-books, which except in the case of "Eng. Lit." seldom lend themselves to dialogue, a book, or even a short story, without any direct speech is like a pudding without flavouring - nourishing, no doubt, but bland and unexciting!

My own early efforts at story-writing avoided dialogue as far as possible simply because it seemed so difficult to construct plausible conversations and put them into the characters' mouths. I think this was due to the fact that they were "efforts" while I was under tuition, ordered to write a certain number of words on a given theme, and to submit the plot-plan as well as the story. Those plot-plans were a dead weight holding down my imagination. For a time I managed to evade the issue by telling my stories in the first person, so that the whole thing was direct speech; but there were times when another character simply *had* to say something.

Whether dialogue adds to the credibility of the story, or comes across as unnecessary breaks in the flow, is often due to the way the speech is written. All that "John said", "Mary thought", at the end of each phrase can slow the whole thing down. Just putting each person's words on a new line and letting the pattern of speech and the actual words used, show which character is speaking goes faster, but seems to upset some slow readers who mentally verbalise each word. I well remember when I was a child, hearing my father complaining because there was a whole scene in the book he was reading (**Stamboul Train**) where there were "just a lot of bits of talk, and it doesn't tell you who is saying it!" He was completely at sea over it, whereas I found no difficulty when I read the book after he had put it down in disgust; the scene was in the dining-car of the train, and all the snatches of conversation were floating about in the air the way a fly-on-the-wall would have caught them.

It was not until many years later that one of my daughters brought the fact of verbalising or not, as you read, to my attention. Only then did I discover that unless some loud noise or other distraction disturbs my concentration, I only notice the actual *words* when I start reading; I hold the book, and the pages turn while the story unfolds like a film across my brain. This is probably why I was always accused as a child of saying "wheelbarrow, Manchester" whenever I got to a word I couldn't pronounce or understand; in actual fact, unless someone points to the word and asks "How do you pronounce that, and what does it mean?" it has simply flowed across my brain without disturbing the unfolding sequence of events!

After making this discovery, I scrapped those tedious plot-plans and awkwardly-constructed "conversations". Left to themselves stories unfold like films, and just have to be written down, while the characters talk naturally, when they feel like it, and I write down what they say. This leads to more editing later, when it is necessary to go over the whole thing, literally word for word, to tidy up their conversations and add any missing bits of the action, but the people certainly seem more *alive* when they can speak for themselves, and the style is lighter and far less pedantic than if the whole thing relied on only descriptions and paraphrased speeches.

Yes, dialogue is certainly a necessary part of fiction. Without it a story would be a barren thing.

Dr Greenland's Prescription

Everybody hates it when, in bad books or especially, it seems, in bad tv or movies, characters explain things to other characters who know them already.

'Our electoral system calls for a representative from each moon.'

'Let's try the computer. It has a record of every time a ship enters or leaves the station.'

'Was it not that same dragon, my lady, that devoured the husband sadly lost to you these eleven years?'

Still, there will be many things in your fantasy or sf story that we will need explained to us. They may well be things the characters already know. They may be the most obvious things in the world, to them; but we haven't been to their world. We don't know those things, because you've made them up.

Publishers' editors, especially, get exercised when they see anyone, even your narrator, holding up the action to explain the world it takes place in. "Don't hold up the action!" they say.

If you leave out that essential background information, they'll be just as quick to scribble on your manuscript: "Why is she doing this?? EXPLAIN."

Expository lump, it used to be called. *Infodump* is the hipper, cyber-friendly term.

A lot of the time, these infodumps are there for your own sake as much as ours.

You're writing a scene, and a question arises. A question of history, or a technicality: the recruitment of the palace guard, or the airlock protocols. Maybe it's something you haven't thought about until now. You find you have to write it all down as a way of explaining it to yourself.

Later, when you're further on, and you go back to read through all you've written, you notice the explanation sitting there on the page, like a Post-It note.

You can tell it from everything else because it's a different colour, and a different shape.

What it is, really, is a note to yourself.

Once you've spotted it sitting there, then you can see if you can peel it off and get rid of it.

You may well find that through the scenes that follow, some of the facts you've spelled out in your lump become clear anyway. There is a guild of beggars. The guild is an old one. It has reciprocal links with the Mutual Society of Yeggs, Thugs and Assassins, which is what the beggar is hinting about on the next page, and that's the reason the disguised warrior maiden is angry, or amused, or apprehensive.

There: you can now go back and peel off the infodump, or at least delete bits of it.

The smaller you can make it, the easier it will be to conceal, or to naturalize, which is the same thing.

Concealment.

"Don't hold up the action!" Not even for the facts.

So: put the facts *inside* the action.

Some of the characters make a journey. On the road - between the stars - even just on the way from one room to another. It's a transition. You start writing that section. You put a bit of landscape in, a bit of weather, a bit of wildlife.

Then what?

There is only so much you can say about the hum of the engines or the ceaseless beat of the hooves.

Now is a good time for some reflection by your viewpoint character, or some history from your narrator.

And of course, people going on journeys often keep journals.

That suggests the method of sneaky infodumping used most blatantly by writers such as Isaac Asimov and Frank Herbert: inserting extracts from fictitious memoirs or reference books.

It's true, they do hold up the action; but you can put them in natural breaks, between one chapter and the next, where the action's already suspended for a moment.

You can make a virtue of them too: these incidental morsels of corroboration. You are not the only authority for these events, this world. Sidelights thrown by quotations can give a hint of perspective to your paper universe.

Parodying the method in **The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy**, Douglas Adams contrived to take advantage of it too. From the title onwards, the existence of the **Guide**, and of the **Encyclopedia Galactica**, enables him to insert any amount of necessary background information, with an equal amount of freely associative comedy intermingled. Every item reinforces his theme that the universe is an absurd, chaotic place.

If the facts you need to convey are the *most* obvious things in the world, the characters won't talk about them because they won't need to. They probably won't even think about them, unless the plot calls them into question, or takes them away.

Other things the characters know equally well will be personal and particular to them: their lives, their viewpoints, their concerns, their obsessions. Some of those may well be on their minds, recurrently, constantly. And you can show what they are thinking, or some of it, if your narrator has access.

The trouble with that method is, we rarely think in facts. We think in pulses, with senses and memories and feelings and imaginings all mixed in.

Transcribed thoughts, if they're to come from believable and interesting minds, have to do a great deal more work than just filling in background information.

Because what's most obvious, in any situation, is what goes without saying, sometimes you can convey more by what you don't say than what you do.

The air was on.

That modest, monosyllabic sentence locates us straight away in an artificial environment where air is a utility. What's more, we already know that it's controlled by a mechanical, probably electrical, supply system.

Do you want to say any more? Do you need to?

Can your characters safely take the air supply for granted?

Are there occasions, after all, when your characters might, in fact, talk about the most obvious things in the world?

Perhaps a person will sometimes explain things to another person who knows them already.

When boasting.

When arguing, rhetorically, reminding someone of a basic fact.

Sarcastically, to someone who habitually forgets everything.

In front of a third person who doesn't know the facts, whom the first person wants to apprise of something the second person doesn't like to admit.

And so on. Let me suggest that most times in those bad books and tv shows, it is not the conversation that's wrong. It's the context.

Why are these people saying these things now? Is *that* obvious?

So tell me, Freeling. Tell me all over again what happened, why it went wrong, why we didn't think it would go wrong and how we can be *damn* sure it isn't going to go wrong again." (Frederik Pohl, **Man Plus**)

Colin Greenland answers your problems in a regular column in **Odyssey** magazine. Send them to: Plenty of Answers, **Odyssey**, 31 Shottsford, Wessex Gardens, London W2 5LG, or by email to **liz@gila.demon.co.uk**

Close Encounters of the Severn Kind

Philip Brown

It was the year 2000,
  And day gave way to night;
Above the Devil's Chimney
  A saucer dipped in flight.

It scanned the Golden Valley;
  It circled Chosen Hill;
It floated over Gloucester
  Where all seemed calm and still.

In search of hymns and floodlights,
  It came to earth and found
The gold and white cathedral
  Enclosed in sacred ground.

The aliens, emerging,
  Exhibited no fear,
Were clearly male and female
  And breathed our atmosphere.

Assured and diplomatic,
  They soon dispelled alarm
In slightly hesitant English
  Which held a certain charm.

The media quickly gathered
  In time for "News at Ten",
Complete with candid camera
  And investigative pen.

Some questions were perceptive:
  "Did you pass the speed of light
Or slow the ageing process
  In interstellar flight?" -

While others were more thoughtful:
  "You've flown across the years:
Can you resolve our longings
  And cure our mortal fears?"

In your angelic orbit
  You've knocked at heaven's gate:
Is there a God above us,
  Or are we ruled by fate?

And do we have some freedom,
  Or is this just a play,
A stage, where our five senses
  Speak lines we have to say?

Are echoes in the darkness
  The voices of the dead?
Or is there just a silence,
  Our life a severed thread?"

They smiled: "We came to ask you
  These questions - every one.
We hoped that you could answer - "
  The next day they were gone.

Describe the Miniature Soft Drum Set/Jazzman in Sudetown

- Andrew Darlington

HEARD VARIOUS GRAPEVINES
THAT THEY'VE ISOLATED A
PREVIOUSLY UNDISCOVERED
MICRO-ORGANIC HALLUCINOGENIC
FUNGUS WHICH THRIVES
ON THE PAGES OF OLD BOOKS

AND NOW DOPE-HEADS
BEGIN HANGING OUT AROUND
LIBRARY SHELVES SNORTING
PAGES - WOW! - GRADING
PULPS, RECYCLEDS, VELLUMS,
BINDINGS AND SPINES FOR
THEIR TOXIC PROPERTIES

STARTING OUT SCATID FOR E'S
ELIOT, EE CUMMINGS, ESCALATING
THEIR HABITS TO HARDCORE H,
HARDY, HOPKINS, INTO FULL-TERM
ADDICTION TO FORTIFIED
SCRATCH 'N' SNIFF TEXTS BY
COCTEAU, BURROUGHS AND HUXLEY

ME,
I CONTINUE TO INHALE PURE-CUT S,
AND BREATHE FLASHBACK HIGHS
OF SPIRALING NEBULAE WITH
STILL COLD PLANETARY VISIONS
BURNING STAR-SHOCK BRIGHT
BEHIND MY RETINA

THE CONNECTION
BETWEEN CATACLYSM AND
CREATIVE ENERGY, FROM
FIRST PAGE TO LAST

The Plotting Parlour

Katherine Roberts:

As a new member bombarded by not one, but *three* excellent magazines, I wondered which one I should write to. I settled on **Focus**, because after all I'm a wannabe writer. Besides, **Focus** is the thinnest, so I reckon you could do with the contribution. **[Thanks, Katherine, all contributions are very welcome!]** I'm only amazed it took me so long to track down the BSFA - I've been interested in sf since I was old enough to understand the science behind the stories, and my work has been appearing in the small press for the past five years, but it's taken me twenty years to find you. So I've some catching up to do. **[Welcome to the BSFA! We hope you enjoy your catching up, and the forthcoming Small Press feature in Focus]**

I really enjoyed Colin Greenland's article on his agent's view of unsolicited manuscripts. Now I know where I've been going wrong all these years! Nope, I don't smoke (what sf writer can afford to buy cigarettes?), but be assured the next MS I send out will be nicely perfumed. In fact, since scent is supposed to be one of the strongest triggers of memory, I'm working on a specially distilled "this novel is brilliant, buy it *now*" odour. Maybe if my MS smells exactly like the last package received from Iain Banks, for example? Would this get me into trouble with copyright, do you think? Or will I be free to market my "*Buy Me*" scent to other struggling writers? The whole idea is quite fascinating. Maybe this whole acceptance/rejection thing is connected to body odour? Some lingering smell from your fingers that impregnates the pages and subtly works on the editor's subconscious? Could even be a plot for a sf thriller there somewhere. **[What a fascinating idea, smell is supposed to be very evocative!]**

Angela Shackleton Hill's piece on Milford was interesting, too. I'd never even heard of Milford before reading this, in spite of living in Devon most of my life. As far as I was aware the only option for anyone remotely serious about learning to write sf is a mega-expensive trip to Clarion in the USA. Mind you, since Milford's invitation only, that's probably why I'm so ignorant - all will change when I've developed my new perfume, though, so watch out!

Milford has its own web page at:

www.jeapes.ndirect.co.uk/milford/index.html

More information about Clarion can be found at:

http://pilot.msu.edu/~ibs/clarion.workshop/workshopInfo.html

and for Clarion West at:

www.sff.net/clarionwest/CW-98.html

Thinking about Clarion and that it is so far away for a lot of people to even contemplate journeying there, but given the prestige writers and tutors who attend are given, do readers think there is a case for a Clarion style workshop to be held here in the UK? And if there is, would you be willing to attend it, as either a student or tutor? Or help in running one?

Next; Andrew Darlington tells us that having his poem [Describe the Miniature Soft Drum Set/ Jazzman in Nudetown] **accepted for this issue of** Focus, **see p8 was like:**

A psycho boost of chemically induced proportions

Thanks, Andy, glad you're still enjoying the magazine!

Steve Sneyd writes:

Many thanks for new **Focus** - very flattered to get solo page!

Competition story very atmospheric use of multiverse, the ending a bit throwaway, to me, even within "convention" of that subgenre (off into three sunsets at once?)
Dr Greenland's particularly helpful... (I also like the way his agent plays the role of journalist's taxi driver - put the hard saying in someone else's mouth.) The double plus of (a) author doesn't seem to be lecturing reader (b) author comes across as reader's representative, enquiring on his/her behalf. An old "trick" but very well handled there. **[See P6 for Dr Greenland's Prescription for this issue on info dumping.]**

John Oram writes:

I wrote to you some time ago about the difficulties of non-fiction writers to get paid work. You replied that most small presses have review sections, and it should be possible to get published through these mediums. I have found, however, that most do not pay for reviews or for non-fiction articles.

At the time of writing, the editor of one magazine, who shall remain nameless, has two stamped SAEs and has still not bothered to reply. Editors just do not seem to be interested in new voices, except where fiction is concerned.

So where are new critics going to learn their craft? It is all very well being published in fanzines, etc., but in the end, payment

suggests that writing is valued. It gives a boost to a writer's confidence. I write reviews and articles for the BSFA, but in the end, I sometimes doubt my skill as a writer and critic, and wonder if I'm only good enough to fill a gap in the paper.

Unfortunately, John's letter arrived just after the deadline for the last issue of Focus and as such we were unable to include it there. John noticed that we hadn't published his letter and wrote again a couple of months later.

Some time ago, I wrote to you about the problems of non-fiction writers with particular reference to editors not replying even when sent SAEs.

I was feeling depressed at the time, and felt it was not working putting pen to paper, so to speak. Obviously, I can't just stop writing, but **Focus** didn't print my letter. Why? Is **Focus** *only* concerned with fiction? It should address the problems of *all* writers.

I (CAKG) wrote to John explaining that we weren't ignoring his previous letter, but we do have deadlines to keep to, and as both Julie and I edit Focus, in what seems to be an ever dwindling supply of "free time", it can be difficult to respond straight away.

John's letter does bring up several interesting points. The perennial problem of being paid for one's work, of being taken 'seriously' only if you can show hard cash for your writing. Editor's responses or lack of responses to your submissions. Plus a question as to our own brief.

Whether you consider yourself to be a "real" writer only after you've been paid, is, I think, a personal matter. For many, it's having people read their work, for others, it's seeing that work in print. As to editors not replying, even when you send them SAEs... A hard one this; I've now been on both sides of the equation, as a struggling writer trying to get noticed, and as an editor trying to find the time amongst work, family, education and other commitments to even look at submissions, never mind reply to them. Both Julie and I are hoping that some of these issues will be covered in the near future as we look at the Small Press in more detail. See P3 for further details on this.

As to Focus' role? Well, we are interested in all types of writing. We don't only publish fiction, we do publish non-fiction about writing; in fact although most submissions we get are fiction, the majority of what we publish is non-fiction. You are most welcome to submit an article on the problems of non-fiction publishing, John, though as you know we're not a paying market, so maybe that will put you off. In the meantime, we hope you enjoy the first part in a three part article on non-fiction writing by Andrew M. Butler (one of Vector's very own joint features editors) in this issue on P13.

ANOTHER OPTION...

ARCHIE LAKIT

Having read both Janet Barron's account of her Clarion experience, and Angela Shackleton Hill's revelations on Milford, I though I might put finger to keyboard to reveal yet another whetstone that writers can use to hone their craft.

But first, and I know you're just dying to hear this, how did I come to be a science fiction author (as yet unpublished I must add)? It all started with the World Science Fiction convention in Glasgow, my home town. My first and, so far, only Con. And, one of the best weekends in my entire life.

I had always dreamed of being a writer. I used to think up plots and work out dialogues in my head, but never actually got round to getting anything down on paper. So, it was with a great deal of interest that I wandered into a discussion, chaired by Lois McMaster Bujold, on the craft of writing. At the end of the session, Carol Ann Green did a quick promo for the BSFA and Orbiters. I wonder if Carol remembers the dashing young Scotsman that approached her after the meeting to sign on.

Within a couple of months I was part of an Orbiter. I can't begin to describe the excitement that I felt when the first parcel arrived with my work critiqued within. I really felt like a writer, especially as the others seemed to like my stuff. And the critiques! I had landed on my feet. Janet Barron was in my Orbiter. I was doubly blessed. I had the opportunity to read some of Janet's wonderful stories (if any publishers or agents are reading this, are you all blind or just stupid? Snap up Janet, and make some serious money from her work). Janet is also, well just superb at writing critiques. And so, with the help of my fellow orbitees, I began to improve.

After a year or so, I felt that I needed more in the way of incisive critiques. Janet suggested a group on CompuServe. I joined up with CompuServe, and fired off some general enquiries. A very nice lady, called Roberta Grant Flynn (Berta), responded and outlined the operation of the group, and the steps I should take to apply for membership. The group, **Science Fiction Work in Progress**, is primarily for published writers. Berta pointed out that they did, occasionally, admit the unpublished, if they came up to scratch. In order to be admitted, I had to jump through two hoops. First, I had to e-mail off one of my own stories for the admission panel to consider. Second, I had to write a three page crit of one of their stories. That put me in a state of total panic. I felt reasonably confident about doing the crit, but I felt terrified about sending off a, possibly, inadequate story. Which one? What sort of stuff do they like? In the end, I couldn't make my mind up. I sent two.

Then silence! For a couple of weeks, my e-mail was empty. Some days, I logged on several times in the vain hope that the longed for missive would be waiting for me. Then, at last, on the very morning that we were heading off to France for seven weeks, it came. They were letting me in, and it was unanimous. I was overjoyed. It was like getting an acceptance letter from a publisher. Well, maybe I exaggerate. If I ever do (no, say when I do, be positive) get a such a letter, I imagine that it might be just a wee bit better. Nevertheless, I got that rush you get when you realise that someone thinks your writing is good.

For the last year now I've been a member of the **Science Fiction Work in Progress** group in CompuServe's Science Fiction Literature Two forum. Right, that's the complicated bit. And it's been pure dead brilliant, by the way.

So, how does the group work? Well, we workshop each other on a rotational basis. Each writer gets the chance to upload a story every six weeks or so. The others in the group read the work and then produce a three page crit, and we're not talking double-spaced or sixteen point. The writer of the piece checks through the crits, and then posts a number of discussion threads in the Forum's message area. Following this, comes discussion day or D-day as it is known in the group. (yes one of us did actually have a D-day on June sixth this year). During D-day, everyone posts as many replies to the threads, and replies to the

replies as they can manage. Discussion day is a bit of a misnomer as it can last anything from three days to a week.

At the moment, I'm the only non-North American in the group. Sometimes, I think they tolerate me just for the sake of making the group international. Hey, and I'd like some company. No, I haven't got mixed up with the lonely hearts Forum. The group is still trying to find another couple of members. More British representation would be welcomed by the group. We do have an entirely different perspective, and it enhances the group to have more diversity. For example, one of the writers has been putting together an anthropomorphic story in the States, even works like **Watership Down** are consigned to the teenage shelves. So, it helps this guy to hear that there are lots of people elsewhere in the world that find the idea of talking, thinking, emoting rabbits, dogs, bears, moles, and elderbernes quite acceptable.

If you've been looking for a new way to develop, then, maybe, **SFWIP** could be for you. One word of warning though: the groups standards are quite exacting. Since joining up, about a half-dozen other folk have been considered. Only one of those has been accepted. If you make a lot of newbie mistakes, like rapidly shifting POV's or adjectivitis, then you won't get in. If you've been published, then you stand a good chance, as your writing is obviously acceptable. And, if, like me, you are still waiting for that magic moment to come, then give it a whirl. You never know, it might be the step that begins to get those doors opened for you.

Oh, and one final note. You may be thinking, "CompuServe? That's the bunch that charge by the hour. Won't that be expensive?" Don't worry, I use a program called Virtual Access and I can handle all my e-mail, messages and file transfers in approximately two minutes or so per day. This works out at around a fiver a month.

If you want to know more about **Orbiter**, or to join a group, contact Carol Ann Kerry-Green, 278 Victoria Avenue, Hull, HU5 3DZ - SAEs are appreciated. There may not be a space immediately available; I try to reply to everyone to let them know what the situation is within a couple of weeks - though sometimes that can get stretched! Currently there are several groups ongoing, with the possibility of a new one being set up in the near future. If you are interested, let me know.

Another online workshop that might be more accessible is Critters, which can be found at **www.critique.org/users/critters**. Their introduction on their web page describes Critters "ultimate goal of ... [being that of helping] writers improve, not only by having their work dissected by other members, but also by learning to dissect their own work (by, of course, dissecting others). The value of the latter is often overlooked by beginning writers."

"It works something like this. Suppose you submit a short story or chapters of a novel. You email your manuscript (in the proper format), it gets put into a queue of stories, in about a month, when it bubbles to the top of the queue, it (and a batch of others) are emailed around to the members (or they can get them off the web page). Critiques are due within a week. Most pieces get 15-20 critiques."

Critters also requires its "members to submit critiques. Members are asked for roughly one critique a week, with some provision for vacations and such." This has worked phenomenally well."

If you don't have web access, and want to know more about Clanon you can contact them at: Lister Matheson, Director, Clanon '99, c/o Mary Sheridan,Clanon '99, Lyman Briggs School, E-185 Holmes Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48825-1107.

For Herself Alone

John Light

Sitting here in the sun I remember the first days, the days when I was young and Delina was young and this planet untouched. We were excited, full of enthusiasm, and a little afraid. Of course we were as safe as technology could make us but on a new world you could never be sure. Perhaps it was less a fear of physical danger than of psychological. After the teeming cities of Earth, the crowded transport ways, the clamour of so many other lives, to be left alone, just the two of us on a planet with no other human beings, no other life of any kind, was frightening.

We got used to it. There was plenty to do. The construction crew had built the domes, the reprocessing plants, the automatic mines, everything we needed to begin the task of terraforming. The bio-team had stocked the domes with plants brought from Earth but genetically engineered to suit the environment of Phane. Then they'd gone and left the two of us alone.

Of course it was what we wanted. We were newly married and had chosen to come to a pioneer planet because we both longed to have children, not just the one we might eventually be allowed to have on Earth if we were fortunate, but a really big family, two children, maybe three or even four! Only pioneers were grated this privilege and so we decided to apply and were overjoyed when we were accepted as suitable.

We worked hard in those early years, seeding the oceans with algae to produce oxygen and to provide the base of a food chain for fish and other aquatic life; planting the land with species specially bred to grow without oxygen but to produce it as a by-product of their metabolism.

Naturally we didn't work all the time. It had been impressed upon us that a regular routine of rest was necessary to maintain our mental health. In those days we couldn't of course sit outside as I do now but we could sunbathe inside the domes in sight of the greeny blue waves breaking on the silver sand. In my mind's eye I see Delina as she was then, young and beautiful, lying face down, browning her back, and then turning over, on her face that smile that never failed to arouse me, offering her body to my eyes, laughing at the effect she had on me.

We raised our family, two boys and two girls, which seemed so perfect we decided to have no more. Those were the best times, when they were small and we were everything to them. The base was supplied with all that was required for their early education and it was expected that by the time they needed more there would be other families here, a settlement with playgroups, nurseries, schools, and eventually a university.

But the years went by and we remained alone, just the six of us. We never found out why, it seemed to be something to do with politics - I don't know. Earth had grown so remote by then and we had become used to being by ourselves, to being the lords of a whole world.

However, the children grew up all too fast; they needed the companionship of others their own age.

Delina and I discussed the problem, we talked to the children about it, and finally we communicated with the project administrator on Earth. The outcome was that the children went back home to school as soon as they were old enough. They all did well and went on to universities. The cost of interstellar transport being so high they were unable to return to Phane for visits and of course we couldn't go to see them but we spoke often by instacom. They naturally found Earth a severe shock but they were young and adaptable and they adjusted, or so we thought.

Perhaps their adjustment was more apparent than real for all four of them after graduation applied for pioneer status and all were accorded it. So now they have worlds and families of their own. It surprises me that the government continues with the terraforming programme when it isn't following it up with large-scale settlement. I often wonder what will happen when I die. Will Phane be abandoned, left to develop how it will? Or will I be replaced by another pioneer family?

I miss Delina. It is five planetary years since she died and I buried her in the grove we had planted on the headland. We had agreed we wanted to be buried like people were in ancient times, something that's no longer possible on Earth. Even cremation has been discontinued because of thermal pollution. Chemical dissolution is the only permitted means of disposal and people keep the concentrated essences of their loved ones in vials or pour them into the sea on special funeral cruises. But I'm glad that I could bury Delina. I feel she isn't entirely lost to me; I go up to the headland and sit in the shade of the trees and I fancy I can hear her voice in the whispering of the breeze through the leaves.

I am not lonely, I have the birds and insects for company and everywhere is filled with memories. I am glad now that no-one else came, I like the solitude, it is part of the beauty of this world.

✿✿✿

I have just re-listened to those words - was it only a few days ago I began recording them? For what? For our children perhaps, so they would know that in these last years I was not unhappy, so that they would feel no guilt, for there is none. Or was it just as an excuse to speak out loud?

But now everything has changed. Yesterday I received a message from project headquarters. The settlement programme is to move to its second phase at last, after so many years. Twenty thousand colonists will arrive on Phane before year's end. The administrator assured me that it will mean no extra work for me, indeed he said I would now be able to retire! Someone else would take over responsibility for completing the terraforming. But that isn't the point, it isn't what I want, I want to be left alone. I don't want Phane spoilt.

✿✿✿

Listening again to the last entry I feel ashamed - the monumental selfishness that would reserve Phane for myself alone is unforgivable - can I excuse my attitude by pleading old age? I think not. But I will redeem my fault by welcoming the newcomers instead of resenting them. Together we will make Phane the most beautiful and friendly world in the whole community of mankind.

✿✿✿

Even now I have hardly the heart to resume this record. They came. I welcomed them. At first they were over-awed by the emptiness of Phane just as Delina and I had been. The construction crews had built homes for the new arrivals and I had got used to the cabins; they had a stark simplicity which was not unpleasing although I grieved for the trees that had been incinerated to clear space for them. Delina and I had planted those trees. At least they left the headland untouched after I told the Co-ordinator about Delina's grave. I shocked her, I know, because until then we had been getting on well and now there is a constraint between us.

The first few weeks were not as bad as I had once feared although not as happy as I'd come to hope. Still I told myself that once they came to know Phane the settlers would enjoy it as I did, would wander over the tree-clad hills that at first frightened them, would swim in the sea that terrified them, would learn to sit in the sun and taste the breeze.

It hasn't been like that. True they have grown used to Phane but familiarity has bred contempt. It sickens me to see the rubbish blowing along the beach or floating on the tide, to see tree branches broken, plants uprooted, to smell smoke and fumes in the air, to hear shouting and swearing, the roar and grind of motors. If only people would spread out a bit the effect would be diluted - or perhaps they would merely pollute a greater area - but for better or worse they huddle together. I am glad Delina did not live to see the worst of it, for in time the colony will spread, will infect the whole world.

I think of it and I am appalled and then I think that the same thing will happen on all those other worlds that humankind is taking, changing, invading, destroying. Of what use are so many humans, so many men, women and children? What is the point of this mindless expansion, this brutal colonisation the ever-increasing population?

✿✿✿

Today something happened, perhaps it makes some sort of sense. I don't know. It has confused me, caused me to ask different questions.

I was sitting in my garden in the sunshine trying to ignore the noises of the city that never cease. A small girl was wandering along the beach. I watched her. She seemed about three or four years old and I felt concerned about her, worried that no-one was looking after her. She danced a few steps on the sand then pitched forward and ran her hands through it. She lifted handfuls and let them trickle through her fingers.

At first she did not notice me but she saw the flowers in my garden and ran towards them. She saw me. I smiled, reassuringly I hoped.

"What are these?" she asked.

"Flowers."

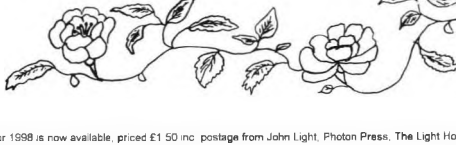
"What are they for?"

"They are - they are for themselves."

"But what do they do?"

"They make more flowers."

"They are pretty." She smiled and stroked a spray of white blooms. I watched her and thought how beautiful she was, how happy in her own existence. I had wondered: Why so many people? That was the wrong question. The real question was: Why this particular one? And the answer was: For herself alone.



Slicing the Hamburger: Some thoughts on writing non-fiction part one

Andrew M. Butler

[The critic] can be defined as the one that still has something to say when everything has been said, that can say about the work something else than that work' — Emmanual Levinas.

It has to be said that the writer of non-fiction has a hard life. The subject of their writing is all too likely to be hostile to what they have written, friends of the subject are likely to be defensive of him or her, and colleagues of the writer are likely to be dismissive to the critic's efforts. And that is if the critic is lucky. It's sometimes tempting to do something really unprofessional – such as getting something stupendously wrong in order to provoke someone into writing a response. For all too often, the criticism disappears into the void of landfill, and is never heard of again. All the critic's efforts come to nothing. O woe is them!

Sometimes you can see an author's point in being defensive. The noted poet William Ashbless spends at least a year, maybe many years, producing his magnum opus, which is a breakthrough in contemporary poetics and Joe Reviewer comes along and destroys the work with a couple of hundred well-chosen words. Perhaps Joe Reviewer is trying to make his reputation by such a demolition – the reviewer who dares to fail to see the Emperor's New Clothes. Perhaps he can have another go at another book next week. The poor old author has to start from scratch all over again, go back to putting quill to parchment or digit to keyboard. You can quite see why an author would choose not to read their reviewers.

Writers, when asked about their reviews, will often respond, 'The critic said something like: "including a couple of poems which (frankly) have not been common fare in fanzines for a lot longer than I can remember".' If you were to then go back to the review, you'd find that the critic said something *exactly* like that. A bad review can lodge itself in the mind long after that annoying little ditty 'Vindaloo' has been displaced by a later pop tune. I can still see this exact handwriting of one of my student's questionnaire ('He is unapproachable' [sic]) five years' on. Perhaps it's safer for an author to ignore all reviews.

But surely this is to miss the point. An author cannot exist without their readers. They exist to try and communicate with their public, and must show at least some interest in the message received by their readers – otherwise why do they first of all feel the urge to write and then go through the process of getting this writing published and therefore read? A critic – at least a worthy critic, a critic who is being honest in their work – is first and foremost a reader. I really don't believe that, whatever their private career agenda, the worthy critic can get around this. The critic is one who reads and who then attempts to communicate their understanding of what the author has been saying in their work – or perhaps trying to say. The critic also attempts to place that work in the great scheme of things, whether it be within the oeuvre of Ashbless, within science fiction or within literature as a whole.

If all authors were to dismiss all critics as irrelevant, then they would often dismiss their most attentive readers.

I propose to offer some thoughts on the nature of non-fiction, both in terms of reviews and articles. This of course risks tottering into a meta-article, as I reflect on what I'm doing in writing these articles which are (except for the bit about the banana sticking when it hits the wall) themselves non-fiction.

Hesitantly, in a gesture calculated to simulate humility for what seems like the boasting which begins in the next paragraph but one, I offer my qualifications (such as they are) for writing this article. There are clearly people who publish in the BSFA magazines (and elsewhere) who know more about the process of writing non-fiction (and phrases like 'since you were a glint in the milkman's eye' or 'more than you've had hot dinners' spring to mind here). But perhaps my own unique perspective can offer a few insights that they can't.

You probably know me best as one of the seemingly limitless number of people who work as editors on **Vector**. (If you are a writer who has only come across this copy of **Focus**, I really do suggest you check out the whole BSFA package, but then I'm biased). With Gary Dalkin, I'm responsible for commissioning and editing into submission around eighteen A4 pages (something around 21,000 words) of non-fiction every two months. We've edited professional authors who have won prizes for their work on several continents, and we've edited people whose submissions to **Vector** are their first non-fiction since school essays. All the way across the spectrum, we *have* edited, if only to save the authors from themselves. (For some authors, the only being worse than a critic, is an editor).

I've also edited articles for academic journals (such as **Foundation** and **Renaissance Forum**), and have acted as a referee for a number of journals, deciding whether to further someone's career by publishing their article. In my day jobs, I've marked thousands of essays, and taught people to write clearly. I've reviewed for half a dozen or so publications; in my time I have reviewed novels, short stories, poetry, collections of articles, biographies and even a bibliography (you read *that* book all the way through). I've reviewed both friends and complete strangers with (I hope) equal partiality. I've written articles and websites, encyclopaedia entries and how-tos, and most significantly (stop me if you've heard this before) four years researching and writing a thesis on Philip K Dick. And I've been a writer of sorts myself – of fiction and poetry. Whilst much of this non-fiction writing has disappeared into the void, occasionally people have responded, if only to disagree with what I've said (see the letters columns in **Vector**). By my own logic, however, I shouldn't and can't reject my readers' opinions of what I've written even if (at least when they disagree with me) they are entirely wrong in their assessments.

Of course if I go on now to make a pronouncement on how to write non-fiction, someone is bound to point out the misuse of 'it's / its' in **Vector** 199, or any number of moments where I

break all the precepts that I'm about to outline. It's a risk I'm just going to have to take.

I'm of the opinion that non-fiction should be as well written as fiction. Of course, it's tempting to overwrite. Take the following extract from my review of **Slow Chocolate Autopsy**:

> Sometimes the page is too *noir*. Sometimes the text is too obscured: another ink tone would have lifted things into legibility unless we are meant to be kept in the dark at points. (We are – but which points?). And the same feeling as I got at reading Alan Moore's **Voice of the Night**: yes, ok, Northampton, why not, but – *still* – why? There's a whiff of the arbitrary – other incidents could be told, just as well as these. Norton is trapped in London, yes, but we can see New York or San Francisco (witness quotes from Weldon Kees – a suicide from the Golden Gate Bridge – and Gregory Corso) or Lawrence, Kansas. All times all places are one. (Paris Alexandria Vienna? Unreal city!)

Notice the hedging tone that creeps into 'unless we are meant to'. Notice the slipping from I (little ol' me) to we. Notice the oddly chatty tone of those yeses. And the sentence which starts with a conjunction. Notice the use of imperatives. But above all notice the references to other books (contextualising Dave McKean's work in faint relation to Alan Moore's) and the blithe assumption that Kees and Corso are names which are known to my readers (both are American poets, by the way) and that the reader will get the allusion to / quotation from T S Eliot's **The Waste Land**: '(Paris Alexandria Vienna? Unreal city!)'.

Having played the *J'Accuse* rôle, I should point out that it was a subtle ploy to suggest that anyone who recognised such a reference, would probably enjoy the book. Still, it risks the charge of the Imitative Fallacy of reviewing – the (almost) always to be resisted temptation to mimic or pastiche the style or format of the book under review.

(Whilst I'm looking back at this review, I should confess to the unfairness of the carping note at the start of this extract: 'Sometimes the page is too *noir*. Sometimes the text is too obscured; another ink tone would have lifted things into legibility'. I was sent a proof copy to review, which was indeed much darker and muddier than the published version. I saw this work of art too late to change the review.)

The review is a tad overwritten, but still readable enough. Compare it to this deathless prose, selected at random from my thesis:

> All the same, just as Horselover cannot abandon his search for God, and just as ethics cannot be totally divorced from theological questions raised in and by this novel, so Levinas always already returns to the concept of a God. In fact, despite the privileging of ethics over ontology which I have emphasized, Levinas always seems to presuppose a God in his ethics, albeit a god forever out of reach of the individual and limited in power. In his philosophical writings, Levinas is careful not to fixate upon the God of any particular religion – reserving this for his Talmudic exegesis.

It's all to easy to take an extract from academic writing, and poke fun at it – particularly when it is buried under the excreta of Byzantine terminology. It is, after all, writing for a particular in-crowd.

And thereby lies the first lesson: *know thy market*.

The chances are that the reader of **Vector** (or **Focus**, or **Matrix**) knows that Philip K. Dick is a writer best known for his science fiction. They may not know who Gregory Corso is, though the Beat aficionado will, and may need Dick explaining to him. A new writer being discussed perhaps needs such an introduction, but let's face it any writer discussed at length in **Vector**, **Matrix** or **Focus** ought to be a writer of sf, fantasy or a related genre. It's also probably likely that the readers of these magazines know what Hugo Awards are (although it doesn't hurt to explain it occasionally for the benefit of latecomers), even if they are hazy about the exact nature of the Bram Stoker or Golden Dagger Awards.

So in the above extract, I'm using a piece of jargon ('always already') which I've presupposed the reader is familiar with (I *think* it's a way of suggesting that something is always the case and has been since the beginning of time, as it were, if not more so) and my use of words like 'ethics' and 'ontology' is within a particular set of definition that the lay-person is not familiar with.

Part of the skill of the non-fiction writer is to know when such things need to be explained, and in explaining to do so in a clear and concise manner which does not patronise the reader. (I still cringe at one piece published in **Vector** – which received less editorial attention than it needed – where such explanations appeared more as a way of demonstrating the writer's knowledge than as a means of helping the reader).

The second precept is to *tell a story*. Every piece of criticism is in its own way a story. There's a body in the library and someone's responsible. **The Sparrow** needs explication and the critic – Holmes like – will unravel the mystery for the baffled reader. The work of non-fiction requires a beginning, a middle and an end – but unlike fiction, it really does have to be in that order. The classic tripartite structure is central to the game of writing an essay: begin by saying what you are going to say, say it, and then say what you've said. Answer the question, the whole question, and nothing but the question. A work of non-fiction, such as an article, probably does not have to be as stark as that, but the scene needs to be set or the problem established, and a conclusion needs to be drawn.

I've been telling a story here, beginning (after a prologue-like epigraph) with a popular prejudice against critics which I've attempted to undermine. I've introduced myself as a character, open to criticism, shown that I can survive it, and then sketched in my own background. Through demonstrating my own practice – itself open to criticism which I demonstrate – I show that the critic is not only a reader, but a writer. This self-reflexivity is of course foreshadowed in 'This of course risks tottering into a meta-article'. From description I've moved out to prescription, with the assumption that by now you are trusting me, and that I'm giving advice which would in itself be advice suitable for fiction writers: know the market, tell the story. With any luck, by now you are indeed seeing critics as writers, as creative, as saying more than the work they criticise (which brings back to my epigraph to some extent).

In my next article I will turn to looking at the skill of reviewing in closer detail, and in the final piece examine the art of article writing. Will I ever explain my title? Will I break one of my own rules? Do critics really read the books they review? Tune in, next time, and find out.

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