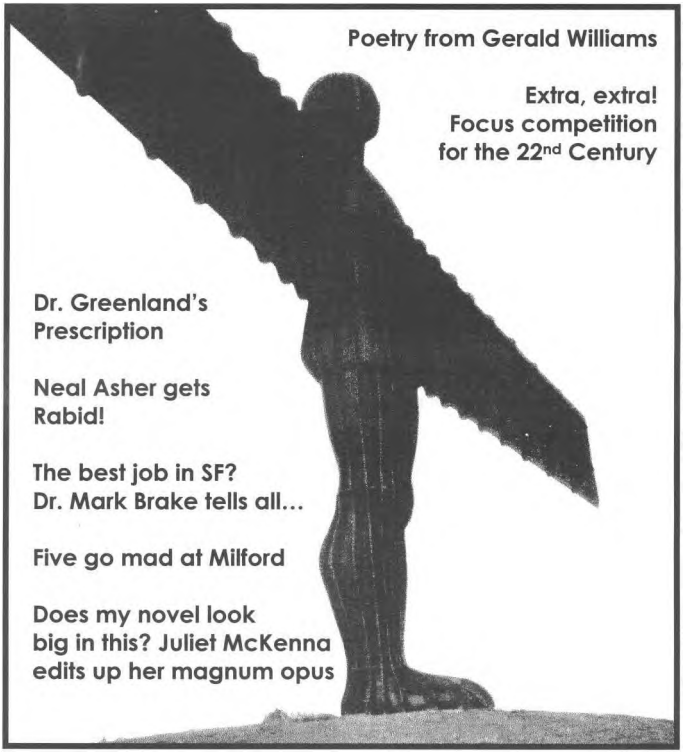
FOCUS

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



Poetry from Gerald Williams

Extra, extra!
Focus competition
for the 22nd Century

Dr. Greenland's
Prescription

Neal Asher gets
Rabid!

The best job in SF?
Dr. Mark Brake tells all...

Five go mad at Milford

Does my novel look
big in this? Juliet McKenna
edits up her magnum opus

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

Issue 37
May 2000

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http://members.aol.com/tamaranth

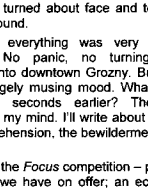
Pedantry

My first column wouldn't start properly if I didn't thank Carol Ann and Julie for handing me the editorship of a magazine in such good shape. Both will continue to be around as assistants and contributors, but I trust the BSFA carriage clocks are now sitting safely on their mantelpieces.

I got caught up in an armed siege a couple of weeks back. Let me explain. I'd gone into town (on a rare child-free foray) to meet a friend in a pub. I crossed the road from the station, and found myself wondering why there were, quite suddenly, three police cars in front of me. Not unusual for night-time Newcastle, I thought, and I started up the road to the pub. The same road which flak-jacketed policemen were now clearing. The final straw came when the automatic pistols appeared. I turned about face and took the very long route round.

Of course, everything was very benign and controlled. No panic, no turning downtown Newcastle into downtown Grozny. But it sent me into a strangely musing mood. What if... I'd got there thirty seconds earlier? The scenarios multiplied in my mind. I'll write about it some day, the incomprehension, the bewilderment, the twitch of fear.

Don't forget the *Focus* competition – page 15, and enjoy what we have on offer; an eclectic mix of inspiration to send you rushing to your notebook or keyboard.



Simon Morden
Gateshead, April 2000

About the cover

The Angel of the North is situated on the former site of the pit head baths at Eighton Banks colliery. Created by Antony Gormley and assembled on site in February 1998, it weighs 200 tonnes and has a wingspan of 54 metres. While the rest of the Angel is covered in a protective oxide layer, the feet are becoming deeply polished. People sit on them for a rest, or a photograph. Small children use them as a slide. That's the sort of detail writers need...

Submission guidelines

Non-fiction

Articles on all aspects of writing, publishing, editing, drawing, printing even, are always welcome. Length should be no more than 5000 words. Letters regarding *Focus* are also gratefully received. Please mark 'for publication'. I reserve the right to edit/shorten them.

Fiction and poetry

Focus needs high-quality fiction and poetry of 5000 words or less. Science fiction, fantasy, and psychological horror all taken. There's no payment, but you'll see your work grace the pages of this erstwhile magazine.

Art

Black and white only! *Focus* is always on the look-out for covers, illustrations and fillers. Good clean line-art works best.

Non-BSFA contributors get a complimentary copy of *Focus*.

How and where to submit

By post:

Text: double-spaced, single-sided A4, or on disk. I can convert most formats, but always include a .txt file in case.

Art: one illustration per page. Don't send originals – only photocopies. If you want to send a disk, you can. Again, I can read most formats.

If you want your work back, enclose an SAE with sufficient postage. If you don't, mark the work as disposable, and either enclose an SAE or a valid email address for a reply. I like covering letters.

By email:

Text: as part of the body text, please. No attachments.

Art: not by email! Put it on the web and send me the URL!

The address for postal submissions is:

Simon Morden
Focus
13 Egremont Drive
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NE9 5SE

The address for electronic submissions:

focus.editor@cableinet.co.uk

Queries regarding the suitability of submissions should also be directed to the above addresses. I'll be as prompt as a man with two kids under three can...

NEXT ISSUE DEADLINE: 1st September 2000

The gentle ticking of the clock
With every second passing by
The sands of time are metered out
And with every passing second
Each moment is lost forever

The young heart does not see
Shadows of its mortality
The dreaming spirit is not confined
By the concept of time
But rides the wheel of eternity

The keeper of time cannot be
Bargained with
No payment will slow or hasten
The pendulum which he swings
To gauge the span of life
Of light and darker things

But I would bargain dearly
The clock to slow its pace
To live again my youthful days
To lift the veil of shadows
My innocence to see more clearly
And never again fall from grace

When on reflection sees
Each moment wasted
In idleness
Another hour passes by
And in the blinking of an eye
The clock strikes and then
At once 'tis time to die

Gerald is qualified in business administration and IT, but has disabilities which make it difficult to find work. He turned to writing to find freedom of expression and to communicate with people all over the world. He likes to convey ideas and emotions through poetry. He is also working on his first novel.

Market news is a rapidly changing arena, and one for which the internet is ideally suited. I've picked out four that I visit regularly.

Firstly, *Inkspot*, which has more right than most to be in the Premier division of writers' sites. It deals with every kind of writing, but includes a healthy dose of speculative fiction. If you don't already get the weekly e-newsletter *Inklings*, you're missing out.

http://www.inkspot.com/

For up-to-the-second market news, the classified adverts can be found at:

http://192.41.39.106/classifieds/mkt.html

Callihoo is a writers' group based in Ohio, but with associates all over the world. Of particular interest is the newsletter, which details deadlines, new markets and competitions.

http://www.sff.net/people/Julia.West/CALLIHOO/index.htm

For those who prefer their stories spattered with blood and entrails, there's the horror and dark fiction-leaning *DarkEcho*, and its resplendent weekly e-newsletter of the same name. The market news tends to come in the newsletter, and it's a simple matter to subscribe.

http://www.darkecho.com

Finally, the mighty *Ralan Conley* and his stupendous speculative fiction market site. Ralan, who is based in Scandinavia, somehow seems to maintain a database of virtually every SF, fantasy and horror market in the English-speaking world. Updates are regular and accurate, with excellent links.

http://www.ralan.com/

On a personal note, does anyone know where the *Onomastikon* (Dictionary of Names) has gone? It was at http://www.fairacre.demon.co.uk/ but hasn't been seen for nigh-on nine months. I'm terrible at character names, and this was a real life-saver...

= Bowden Close Hotel, nr. Torquay

If there is one word that sums up Milford '99, one word which sums up the hard work, the company and the laughter, I think that word has to be 'Mrifk!'

This year, twelve science fiction writers gathered in Devon from all over the UK – a mix of ages and experience. The old, grizzled hands who had attended numerous Milfords in the past and who had novels and umpteen short stories to their names, and then there were the newcomers like myself. I felt a bit of a fraud as someone who had just one print sale to my name, but I needn't have worried as everyone was very friendly.

Each of us brought one or two pieces of work of a maximum of 15,000 words, which gave us 134,000 words of manuscripts to read through and comment on in six days. The pieces varied from a 2000-word short story to a 15,000-word extract from a novel and covered hard SF, fantasy and children's books between them.

After the introductory meal out on the Saturday night, the real work started on Sunday and the days soon settled into a steady pattern:

- Breakfast at 9am -- a very civilised hour for a hotel breakfast;
- Reading manuscripts in the morning, with coffee and biscuits at 11am;
- Lunch at 1pm – food seemed to play a fairly major role in the whole week!
- Workshopping of the four pieces for the day starting at 2pm;
- A short break for tea and cake at 3pm;
- Finishing the workshop at 6pm when the bar opened;
- Dinner served at 7pm.

The face-to-face workshop is the major reason for Milford. The opportunity to have 11 other published SF authors forced to read your prose and then comment in detail was a major incentive for me to attend. To someone else it might be a daunting experience, but all the criticism was constructive and I came away with a lot of practical ideas for improving both the stories I had taken. Analysing other people's work also gives you a good insight into your own writing and I felt the whole workshopping experience was invaluable.

Mind you, not all the advice in the workshop sessions was literary. While critiquing David Rain's novel extract, Gus Smith treated us to a blow-by-blow account of exactly how you immobilise a cow and then slaughter it. David took copious notes and I'm sure that the exact procedure will be appearing in his novel!

The evenings were spent in a variety of ways. One evening we tried out a storytelling boardgame that had been brought along and this soon devolved into the Milford variant, with a hard SF board and a fantasy board for two parallel stories. I don't think any of us will be using the resulting story of world domination by a wizard-scientist through the use of tea and hyperspace links, but who knows?

An extremely entertaining evening was spent with a mutual reading aloud of *The Eye of Argon*, which is reputedly the worst fantasy story ever written. It was certainly entertaining and made any criticism of your own work seem harmless in comparison. Certain words and phrases stayed with us through the rest of the week such as the above-mentioned 'Mrifk!' and 'yorkish clumps of hair' – a sight which was certainly seen at the breakfast table on several mornings.

The workload was heavy but bearable and I managed to keep up-to-date and still write 1000 words a day (much to the annoyance of the rest of the assembled writers when I foolishly announced this fact!). Friday was a day off and was spent at Buckfast Abbey and trekking over Dartmoor before we found a second hand bookshop in Totnes. I think the owner was a little puzzled by this group of a dozen people who packed her shop near to closing time and then bought up most of her stock of SF!

Milford '99 was a wonderful experience – the whole group worked extremely well together and it made a change to be able to spend the week discussing SF story lines and plot ideas and not to be considered weird. I came away feeling enthusiastic about writing again and determined to get those stories written and submitted. As Grignir, hero of *The Eye of Argon*, would say: "By Mrifk, I will be back next year!"


= The Class of '99

The Milford website can be found at : www.jeapes.ndirect.co.uk/milford/home.htm

Mike Lewis is 36 and started writing with the aim of getting published two years ago. Surprisingly, the second story he wrote sold! Unsurprisingly, two years on he is still waiting for that second sale and the rejections are mounting up! Still, there is always the novel - if he ever finishes it...

Round in Circles

Cardinal Cox

The Peterborough SF Writers' Circle was started in August 1993 by Helen Gould, as an off-shoot from the local SF club. The aim was to encourage and support local genre writers and to help give feedback. The city already had an existing writers' group which, although great for characterisation, dialogue etc., could not provide advice with the more specialised SF market.

Since its founding the Circle has organised several events: in April 1999, the Circle invited the loose small press affiliation, the Terrorscribes, to meet in the city. August saw the Circle mounting a display at the central library about the small press scene, as part of the Year of Reading.

We have produced two small collections of stories. 1995's included Jill Paddock, who had previously sold stories to the magazines *Skeleton Crew* and *Far Point*. The second in 1997 featured Simon Williams who had been published in *Visionary Tongue*. A third collection is planned for 2000.

On the non-fiction side, members have had reviews printed in *Vector*, *Prism* (the British Fantasy Society's newsletter), *SFX* and the local newspaper. We've also had interviews in *SFX* and a biographical introduction commissioned by Ash-Tree Press for a ghost story collection.

The Circle concentrates more on fiction, with poetry published most recently in *Handshake*, the *Dark Fantasy Newsletter*, *Dreamers on the Sea of Fate*, and *Brobdingnagian Times*; and stories in *Death's Door*, *Enigmatic Tales*, *Faunus* and *Fantasy and Fables*. The goal of having a novel accepted has so far eluded the Circle.

Competitions are approached as an impetus to produce work. Members have come runners-up twice in the Poet for Peterborough competition and joint first in a short story competition organised by the Friends of Arthur Machen.

The meetings are informal affairs, usually held on Sundays and consist of writing exercises, market news, feedback, etc. For lunch we all contribute towards the meal, adding a social element to the proceedings.

To contact the Writers' Circle, to exchange news, or find out about forthcoming meetings, write to Helen Gould at 28 Bathurst, Orton Goldhay, Peterborough, Cambridgeshire, or visit the Circles' website at: http://members.tripod.com/Pboro_SFWRITERSGROUP/

Children of Eternity, a collection of short stories, poetry and illustrations on the theme of immortality, will be the third anthology from the Peterborough SF writer's Circle. It should be available from August.

To do or not to do?

Chris Wood

To do or not to do? That was the question I asked myself when I found out that Liverpool University ran a ten-week evening course for SF writers. It really wasn't a question of being able to afford it: £32 for ten weeks. What concerned me was would it really help me to improve my writing?

My love affair with writing only began five years ago but I soon found out that there were two distinct schools of thought about creative writing. One was that it is impossible to teach a person to write; they either can or they can't. The other is that good tuition can make anyone into a passable writer. The answer, as is often the case, probably lies somewhere in between.

I'm chairperson of a flourishing writers' group with two national awards under its belt but I am the only one who writes SF. If I went on the course I would meet other people who read and write SF, and a tutor who was an author.

The course wasn't quite what I expected, a series of workshops with exercises and instant feedback; it was more a 'how to' course. How to use story, character and plot to create believability in an unreal situation, how to criticise and edit your own work, and if writing a long story, how to write character profiles and give your characters a life.

As well as being a published author, the tutor was also a publisher's reader and we were given a list of what is looked for in a novel or short story and what will make the story be rejected instantly - very useful stuff.

The last session gave us market information so that we know where to send our stories. At the end of the course I felt that I had got a lot for my £32.

If I have any criticism of the course, it was that the feedback from the assignments was slow and not detailed enough and there wasn't enough tutor/student interaction during the sessions. At the end of the course we had to produce a portfolio of five assignments. I had some feedback on mine at the last session but not all the students did and at the time of writing I'm still waiting for the promised return of my portfolio with detailed comments.

One of the most satisfying things about the course was that I learned what I was doing right. Positive reinforcement is the biggest motivator and morale booster next to actually having a story published. The ten weeks passed too quickly and I miss my Wednesday nights at Liverpool.

The course tutor for Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy is Jim Bennett. Contact Liverpool Centre for Continuing Education at 19 Abercromby Square, Liverpool L69 7ZG or call 0151-794 6900. There is also a website at http: //www.merseyworld.com/cce/ The course runs once in the autumn and once in the spring term.

Chris Wood is a BSFA Orbiter member. Her first published story *Bubbles in the Clearing* appeared in *Noesis #5*.

Neal Asher gets

Re-write

When do you cease to re-write work? Simple answer: when you are no longer improving as a writer, when you feel you have nothing more to learn, when you have achieved perfection. It is an unfortunate fact that some writers do believe this of themselves. They are normally the ones who have achieved success, and are drunk on the adulation of those who think a part participle is something you'll find in a linear accelerator.

For me revision of a story partially ceases when I feel I have achieved a required effect, might well attain publication, and have more interest in the next project. But while it remains in my processor it is still subject to a critical eye. I don't believe there is such a thing as too much re-writing. You just reach a stage where you can't go any further with a piece and move on to the next. In the process you jettison the bad and keep the good. You decide, and you base your decision on what you are after.

'For many people the re-write required is the one to turn their masterpiece into something intelligible.'

Publication? Re-write for the market acting on feedback from editors and readers. Personal satisfaction? Don't kid yourself. For my novella for Club 199 I took a thirty thousand word story and extended it by ten thousand words to fit it within their parameters, and felt perfectly justified in doing so. As far as I am concerned good writers are successful writers (though successful writers often degenerate into bad writers).

There is no quick-fix formula. It is obvious such a formula is profoundly wished for, as the sales of the 'How To' books attest. When the questions are posed as to the extent and method of re-writing the real question being asked is: how do I write well? The first step on the road for ninety percent of would-be-famous authors is to learn how to use the English language. Get hold of books like *Fowlers Modern English Usage*, *Roget's Thesaurus*, and perhaps a plain old *Mastering the English Language* by S.H. Burton.

For many people the re-write required is the one to turn their masterpiece into something intelligible. It was not until I joined some postal workshops that I found out just how bad it was possible for some writing to be. I also learnt that those writers who really try to get a handle on the language are also the ones who tell the best stories. Understanding the structure is all. You're not going to build a suspension bridge if you don't know how nuts and bolts go together. The rest is badly written soap-opera.

So now you know how the English language works, have put a story together, and are looking at doing a re-write. You have looked at the story objectively and made sure that the bunch of flowers *is* beautiful rather than *are* beautiful and your hero still has the same colour hair all the way through. How does it look subjectively? Where, for example, can you break the rules to greatest effect?

The best writers are the ones who know how to do this. Steven Donaldson once managed a one word sentence that had the skin on my back crawling (of course I'm aware that it is not pc to like Donaldson; he's too successful). The word was 'Kevin'. No, not the spotty dickhead down the road. Kevin Landswater who performed the Ritual of Desecration and whose spectre has just stepped through a door from the underworld. I'm afraid no English book is going to tell you how to achieve the same (though *The Critical Sense* by James Reeves comes mighty close).

The only way to learn is through hard work, reading, and *listening* to criticism, though for the latter you must judge what is relevant. There are no substitutes for these, just as there is no substitute for talent. When you re-write you must see the images and feel the effects of every word. You have to decide what to discard and what to keep. There are many sources you can tap to help you make these decisions. But in the end they are your own.

Neal Asher has been published in virtually every British SF magazine. He has had notable successes with *The Parasite* and *The Engineer* (both published by Tanjen), and has just signed to Pan Macmillan. His knack of leaving companies just before they go bankrupt is infamous...

http://website.lineone.net/~nealasher

Neal's provocative articles will appear regularly in *Focus* from now on. Bouquets and brickbats to the letters page.

Things that combine to produce a character

Physical appearance

She was tall, with raven black hair, eyes of the truest, rarest indigo, and a sardonic twist to her full, proud lips. Or would you rather we imagined her for ourselves? "With an effort, Giacomo got out of his chair" does much more for me than "Giacomo was fat" - let alone "He weighed 210 pounds", which I shall have forgotten by the end of the page.

Clothes

Choice, a means of self-expression? (Her much-patched shirt, his boots of snow white kid.) Or necessity, the only thing available? (Uniform spacesuits, the furs of the hunter-gatherer, the dun pyjamas of dystopia.)

Manner

How do they do things? Impatiently, distractedly, gleefully. How do they treat others? A character's manner can't simply be attributed. It emerges over time. We learn it, we get used to it.

Expressions, postures, gestures

She strutted, he slumped. What people do with their hands. As she considered his proposition Tabitha drummed her fingers on the table/ clasped her hands, steepling her index fingers/ picked her nose.

Mood

Introspective? excitable? active, passive?

Reactions

Are they easily angered? easily frightened? I often find a character's first reaction to events is alarm. Only on rewriting do I recognise that's actually *my* first reaction. I'm easily alarmed. I have to look a bit harder to find the character's reaction.

Dialogue

Not just the way your character speaks. The way others speak to her.

How do you address a robot? Do you say *please*?

"Who designed you?"

"Can you give me the name of your designer?"

"I need to know the name of your designer."

"Designer's name."

Well - which robot, where, in what culture, on what world? Who is it that's doing the addressing?

Answering those questions and building the answers into the way you write the incident is what makes it particular. Both the incident and the characters come alive in our imagination *as what they are*, rather than as items of furniture, useful or cumbersome.

In Jon Courtenay Grimwood's *redRobe*, Axl O'Higgins Borja is taken by the Colonel to see the Cardinal. In a waiting room full of petitioners, the loudspeaker calls Axl's name.

> The Colonel yanked Axl forward, and began to push his way down an aisle, treading on the feet of those who didn't move their boots fast enough. Axl tagged along behind him, staring back at anyone who looked at him.
>
> "Which one of you is Axl O'Higgins Borja?" The major-domo's smile was sympathetic, but he didn't look at the prisoner.
>
> Axl raised his chin. "That's me."
>
> "Okay. In you go."
>
> The Colonel stepped forward and the small man slid neatly in front of him, blocking the door. "Borja goes in," he said shortly.
>
> "But the man's my prisoner."
>
> Tiny slit pupils narrowed, memorising the Colonel's face. "Whose prisoner?"

By the end of the Colonel's five-word speech, we already know he is not going in with Axl.

What tells us that is the word *But*.

The Colonel is making an objection. He's protesting.

Those aren't ways of speaking to a subordinate. Especially not if you're a colonel.

But concedes the major-domo's authority (which is the Cardinal's authority in transmission). Had the Colonel said simply "The man's my prisoner", opposing his authority to the major-domo's, maybe he'd have won, after an argument, and got into the room. We suspect, though, that his chances were always slim. We suspect that because *he* suspects it. Colonels know that successful campaigns are not started by making concessions.

But compromises the Colonel. *But* sets the Colonel up for defeat. At the same time it invests the major-domo with power, just as the *tiny slit pupils* invest him with menace.

It's not only colonels and major-domos whose dialogue is coded for dominance.

What do we make of a character who begins every sentence with the word *I*?

They must be a great egotist, surely, putting themselves first at all times, giving everyone their opinion, asked or not, making everyone else a present of their own feelings.

Or is what they're actually displaying insecurity?

The true egotist doesn't need to say *I*.

Compare two utterances:

"I think you're doing very well."

"You're doing very well."

The first claims the right to judge. The second takes that right for granted.

The first may be supportive, encouraging, or merely patronising. The second defines. It dominates.

Which is the female, which the male? Which the human, which the alien, which the robot?

Here are three more:

"Wait here. I'm going to get the medikit."

"All right, I'll get the medikit."

"Oh. We haven't got the medikit."

The first is the speech of a superior to a subordinate. It's a declaration of an intention, which she couples with an instruction. By putting the instruction first, the superior demonstrates her superiority even more clearly. She puts the requirements of the situation before her subordinate's need for information.

The second is a proposal. This is an equal, offering to go; or it might be a subordinate, proposing an initiative to a superior and tacitly seeking her approval. Both assume the possibility that whoever they're addressing might counter them, in a way that the first example doesn't.

The third is a statement of a problem, which implies some limitation, notional or absolute, on the speaker's capacity to solve it. Perhaps it's an inferior asking for instructions; or an incapacitated equal; or a weary equal, or a lazy one, hoping that someone else will go.

If questions of superiority and inferiority aren't relevant, try thinking of your scene in terms of priority and advantage. Whose party is it anyway? Whose house is it in? Who's the hungriest, who's got the money, who's been here before, who knows what time the bus goes? Who's taking care of whom?

Colin Greenland has been writing his prescription for *Focus* since, well, always. This issue's column marks his retirement. Deep and abiding gratitude to Colin for giving his insights and wisdom for free in a world where paying for everything seems to be the rule.

Dr. Mark Brake is the course leader for the University of Glamorgan's B.Sc. in Science and Science Fiction. Since the course was announced, the global media have beaten a path to his door demanding to know: is this for real?

How did you persuade the Academic board that a degree in SF would be a viable idea?

For the last 3 or 4 academic years, we have been busy designing and delivering an innovative multidisciplinary astronomy joint-degree programme. The modules take a scientific, but also social, cultural and historical look at the development of astronomy and science through time. Indicative of the success we met using this approach was our Life in the Universe module. It was one of the first degree courses to look seriously at the search for extraterrestrial life and intelligence. In the wake of our development there has been much publicity on the growing interest in this area of exobiology and the discovery of exoplanetary systems. Our approach to teaching and learning is also intended to broaden the franchise both for science, and for higher education in general.

How many students have you got for the first year?

We have around 30 students studying on the science fiction modules, and around 50 or so following the astronomy and science courses. The male/female ratio is a healthy one, probably due, at least in part, to the approach we take of introducing the social and cultural aspects of astronomy and science. The cross-section of society we have on our courses is indicative of universities these days; much broader than in the

past. Ages range from 17 to 60!

Were you worried that you'd attract the wrong element - those fluent in Klingon, or someone who believes the X-files is really true?

Not so much worried, but keen to the possibility and keen to educate students on differences between science and pseudoscience. As an example of our willingness to tackle such issues head on, we discuss the UFO controversy in our Life in the Universe module, Stonehenge during our study of the solar system, and generally teach issues relating to the tradition of the sceptical method, and the nature and philosophy of science in most of our science modules.

'Uncorroborated reports from our Learning Resources Centre suggest Literature majors are reading our SF titles rather than their own set texts!'

Have you submitted your reading list to the University library? Do they have shelves of William Gibson and H.G. Wells?

Yes, the library has a good stock of SF titles ranging from proto-SF through HG Wells and Vonnegut to Gibson, Noon, Sterling and Marshall-Smith. We also stock over 50 titles from the history of SF cinema, from *Metropolis* to *The Matrix*. Uncorroborated reports from our Learning Resources Centre suggest Literature majors are reading our SF titles rather than their own set texts!

In an interview for 'Wired', you said that you hoped to produce a graduate with a more critical edge to their thinking than the average B.Sc. Is this just in relation to their scientific faculties, or would you include the ethical and social dimensions to science?

I suppose you could say that the degree award primarily focuses on science, both historical and contemporary, as an integral part of culture. The vast majority of degree awards in science - and particularly 'pure science' - specialise exclusively in the science domain paying little regard to the context in which science is created, developed, practised and received. Our degree is an award about science as much as it is an award in science, since it encompasses the multifarious influences brought to bear on the continuous creation and consumption of science. In particular, the award uses a number of contrasting methodologies to explore the relationship between science, culture and society. The science fiction modules are, in one sense, an imaginative forum that focuses on this relationship. Our aim is to produce graduates who not only have a dynamic and pluralistic understanding of the nature and evolution of science, but can also critically develop and communicate ideas about science and its cultural context. Science fiction is the vehicle for our exploration of the relationship between science and culture. The award will provide the students with the conceptual and methodological frameworks necessary to achieve these aims. These frameworks will include science: its methodology, philosophy and sociology, and critical theories from media and cultural studies. And yes, in practise that means that our students will be encouraged to develop ideas relating to the ethical and social dimensions of science. A good example would be our modular course on stellar evolution. The curriculum deals with the development of one of the triumphs of 20th Century astronomy, the understanding of the life cycle of stars. But, in parallel to the lectures, they also attend a series of seminars on the development of the atom and hydrogen bombs. They find that, in many cases, the major players in both stories are the same scientists and physicists. It enables us to raise major issues relating to science and social change, and provides a social and scientific backdrop to our consideration of post-apocalyptic SF in our Utopian and Dystopian SF module which runs in the same semester!

In the unit 'Evolution of Science Fiction', you propose dominant themes that manifest themselves every decade or so. Is there a unifying theme emerging for the next decade, or have we entered a post-modern era of disparate voices?

For me as an astronomer, a major interest will be the question of whether, and in what way, the bleeding-edge research in exobiology will feed through into fiction. In the next decade, culminating in NASA's Terrestrial Planet Finder in around 2010, the search for earth-like planets will grow apace. It may be possible for the first time to take pictures of other worlds that have a very good chance of harbouring life. I'm not suggesting a unifying theme, but fictional issues relating to contact and the possibility of the cosmic uniqueness of planet Earth are two possibilities!

You seem to attach a great deal of significance to the cyberpunk genre? Is this because you felt that it could be the future, or because it provides a coherent investigation of science influencing society?

The aim of our Cyberscience module is to critically explore the changing perspective of science and technology on identity, intelligence, consciousness and life in the context of the SF

genre. So yes, we do feel it gives a superbly imaginative forum for discussions relating to science and definitions of life and identity. We hope to do this by presenting two contrasting critical strategies: Artificial Intelligence, its use and possibilities in SF, placed in the context of the development of computer science and the questions it raises on human intelligence and evolution, and the life sciences perspective, its use and reflections in SF, and questions of socio-biology, raised in an examination of evolving definitions of life featured in our Life in the Universe module.

Given the option, would you prefer to be biologically or electro-mechanically enhanced?

Well, I'm a cautious person in some ways. I think I'd have to see the detailed Which? report before I made up my mind on any sort of enhancement! If you pushed me on it, I'd have to go for biological enhancement, but if we're talking about some sort of *Spares* scenario, forget it!

If SF is a product of its environment, can it ever be said that society is affected by trends in SF?

I believe it does so in some very profound ways. Possibly the most powerful myth that has captured the public imagination in the latter half of the 20th Century is the myth of the existence of extraterrestrial life. The question of whether we are alone in the universe has of course fascinated and frightened us since the days of Lucretius, but only in recent times has it become such an obsession. And, of course, this is almost entirely a revolution of the imagination. Most of today's planet-hunters and SETI-searchers were raised on SF. Admittedly they provide much of the data to send our senses reeling, and fire our imaginations, but it seems we all have a need to believe and that need is greatly fuelled by the fictional speculations of SF. I think in general SF can act as a powerful forum and a vehicle for the political debate on science's social impact.

'Possibly the most powerful myth that has captured the public imagination in the latter half of the 20th Century is the myth of the existence of extraterrestrial life.'

There's been talk recently about the end of science - everything that can be known will soon be known. If it's true, would it also mean the end of science fiction?

One of the major contributors to this issue of the end of science was a staff writer on *Scientific American* by the name of John Horgan. He wrote a book in 1997 called *The End of Science* which suggested that we might be reaching the limits of knowledge, and be in the twilight of the scientific age. Well perhaps in some ways we have reached a watershed, but the public dissemination of these ideas is far from complete. Pseudoscience is rife, and SF certainly has much to write about. Besides, I think it was Tom Shippey who described SF as the literature of change. And since we'll always have flux, I think we'll have plenty scope for SF in the future.

'The aim of the degree is to produce graduates who can imaginatively communicate ideas in science, science fiction and the media. Future directions for graduates could include publishing, education, research, media and journalism.'

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A Century of Science Fiction...

C19th	ProtoSF and the development of the industrial age
1900-1909	Visions of a Promising Future
the 1910s	Europe at War & Revolution, and SF escapism
the 1920s	Post-war realism, an expanding cosmos and the rise of the robots
the 1930s	Fascism, the great depression and space opera
the 1940s	The atomic age and the rise of post-apocalyptic dystopian futures
the 1950s	McCarthyism & Stalinism: the enemy without and the arrival of the flying saucer
the 1960s	Dreams, Ideals and Worldviews
the 1970s	Gender roles, life in space beyond the Moon
the 1980s	Political reaction and the rise of cyberpunk
the 1990s	On the Brink of a new Millennium

How to be edited: a personal view

or

'I really like the book but do you think you could change the beginning, the end and make it half as long again overall?'

Juliet E. McKenna

This isn't exactly what Tim Holman, my editor, said the first time we 'did lunch', but in essence, that's what it boiled down to. We were discussing his potential offer to publish the manuscript that eventually became *The Thief's Gamble*. How does the aspiring fantasy writer react in such circumstances?

Obviously, I could have said 'No', and resolved to defend every dot and comma of my masterpiece. In the event, I smiled brightly, swallowed hard and said something to the effect that I'd be happy to discuss reasonable revisions. Why did I do that? Was I prepared to do anything to see myself in print? No, but digging my heels in then would have probably stopped my writing career in its tracks, and not only because that potential offer to publish would have most likely evaporated. I agreed because while I knew I had a good manuscript, I still believed it could be better.

I'd worked hard to take my original idea and turn it into an original, fast-paced adventure which I'd then sent round a carefully selected group of friends for reading and comment. These were pals I could trust to tell me unhesitatingly what they thought was weak, unconvincing or just plain badly written. They did so, sometimes with more enthusiasm that was necessarily welcome, and I rewrote extensively. This is the beginning of the editing process and the more work you do at this point, the better your chances of finding an agent or editor who will be willing to commit their limited time to helping you through the final revisions. As a rule, no matter how brilliant your idea, it'll go no further than the slush pile if your manuscript is going to need months of work to turn it into a commercial proposition.

By the time I submitted my manuscript, my own creativity was nigh on exhausted and both I and my readers were at a standstill, unable to see the wood for the trees after so many different drafts and discussions. What the manuscript needed was a completely fresh eye and this is what my editor had. Did Tim just issue a list of alterations and corrections? If he had, I would certainly have dug in my heels. This was my story, my world; no one knew it better than I did and no one was going to tell me I'd got it wrong. No one did; Tim identified areas needing work and then he left it up to me to find ways around the problems he identified. This is going to be clearer if I give a few concrete examples from *The Thief's Gamble*, but the aim of this article is not to sneakily sell a few more copies, so feel free to find a pal or library to borrow a copy from if you need to.

Background information was a concern, or rather the lack of it. The original manuscript was solely Livak's narrative and there are definite limitations to writing in the first person. When you only have that one viewpoint, it is extremely difficult to find ways for your characters to convey information about their world and society, without ending up with conversations along the lines of 'Captain, we're in orbit around Planet Zog.' 'Thank you, Number One. That's Planet Zog where all the women have green teeth and ambitions to establish an intergalactic dental plan?' 'That's the one, Captain.' I'd managed to avoid this kind of thing, having had early drafts back with notes in the margin like 'Why are these people having this conversation; they both already know this?' This meant there were plenty of references to the countries, the history and cultural aspects of Einarinn, but there was precious little to flesh this out. The first person style meant the book started fast and furious but that demanded sacrifices in scene setting and background. The tale made it clear that wizards were ultimately behind everything but none appeared until the very end. In order to write the book, I knew exactly who everyone was and why they were doing things but unless I was going to print my phone number in the book so readers could ring up and ask questions, they didn't have much chance of finding these things out from the manuscript.

'No matter how brilliant your idea, it'll go no further than the slush pile if your manuscript is going to need months of work...'

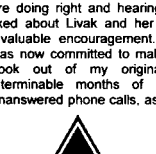
Another concern was the ending. It was very abrupt; Livak was on a boat looking out at the water. This was largely because I had run out of inspiration and was almost at the point of 'and I woke up and it was all a dream'. Wizards deliver the final resolution and I had to admit there was some truth in the comment one pal scribbled on his draft; 'attack of the killer plot device'. I argued this wasn't so, because Darni, the character instigating the rescue, had been well established earlier and when he leaves the main action, it's for entirely justifiable reasons. 'Ah yes,' says Tim, 'that's something else I'm not entirely happy with. I keep expecting him to reappear as I read on which is distracting.' He wasn't the only person to

have raised this. I personally didn't consider it a problem but realising I was in a minority of one, I thought I had better listen to the majority.

I wasn't about to let this become a book written by committee but I knew I had to consider other viewpoints. Tim's interpretation of the book was highly illuminating since he did not have my background knowledge of the world and characters. Nor did he have the familiarity with me and the way I think that enabled my friends to make some necessary leaps of logic and understanding. He was the closest I had so far to the reader who picks up the book in a shop and decides whether or not to buy it on the basis of a quick flick through. An editor also has a professional overview of the market, what is being written, what is being successful and where trends in fantasy writing might be leading. Again, I wasn't about to start writing to some ten-point plan constructed for instant success but if I was hoping to make a career out of writing, I knew I had to see my work in that wider context.

These were the major issues of content. There were also concerns over structure and as I've said, length. I found this highly ironic, since my first attempt at a fantasy blockbuster, as written ten or so years ago, had done the rounds of publishers and editors and while each had turned it down for different and I now know entirely justifiable reasons, one thing they had all agreed on was the excessive length. I'd been determined to avoid the same mistake and had brought the Livak manuscript in at just under 100,000 words. Which, as Tim pointed out, was very short for a fantasy novel, which generally start at 120,000 words and go up from there. Could I make it longer?

So at the end of this lunch, I had a long list of things I needed to revise before my manuscript could be published. It sounds like a grim experience but it wasn't. One of the other functions of an editor is to tell the author what they are doing right and hearing what he particularly liked about Livak and her adventures gave me invaluable encouragement. I felt someone else was now committed to making the best possible book out of my original manuscript. After interminable months of rejection letters and unanswered phone calls, as I sent the manuscript round agents and publishers, I had begun to wonder if I was just beating my head against a brick wall and wouldn't it be nice to stop? I left that lunch seeing events and characters from new angles, seeing the wood again rather than being encircled by impenetrable trees.



Some dismiss the ancient runes of Einarinn as superstition; others think they hold hidden wisdom.

What I found was thinking about solutions to one problem led me to ideas that helped with other issues and as everything came together, additional benefits to the book as a whole became apparent. To get across background and scene setting, we decided to open each chapter with extracts from 'learned tomes'. This got me thinking about books, records, archives and having wizards searching for lost knowledge as well as lost artefacts. That idea didn't really go anywhere so I set it to one side. Thinking about how I might make the book longer, I realised there was no point in just trying to pad out what I already had; I'd sacrificed the advantages of a more measured third person narrative for the immediacy of first person and just stringing things out would leave me with the worst of both worlds. So I needed a distinct sub-plot. There were immediately obvious threads to tie up; the machinations of the wizards in the background and what had happened to Darni when he left the group Livak was travelling with. As I wove those together, I also went back to the notion of wizards looking for knowledge and came up with Casuel, whose misadventures in the second-hand book trade help form the final novel.

'An editor has a professional overview of the market, what is being written, what is being successful ...'

Other advantages soon appeared. Putting the sub-plot in the third person made an effective contrast to Livak's tale and meant I could take advantages of that style in terms of scene setting and description. Making Casuel a complete contrast to Livak shone new light on her as a character. One of the things I'd enjoyed about writing fantasy was taking a sideways glance at some of the more tired clichés, so making Casuel a wizard so far removed from the selfless wisdom of Gandalf and his ilk served all manner of purposes. Introducing Casuel's interaction with Planir and the other wizards enabled me to bring out their role more fully, introducing ideas on the responsibility and limits of wizardly power. This all added depth and had the reader seeing Livak's adventures with the benefit of knowledge she didn't necessarily share.

This wasn't a smooth or seamless process, however it may read in summary. We discussed five alternatives for conveying background information before opting for chapter introductions. Initially Casuel travelled alone but this meant a lot of solitary musing, which became hard work to write and to read. He needed someone to interact with and so Allin was created. From her beginnings as a device to enable Casuel to talk out loud, she became a minor character in her own right, a female contrast to Livak, a means of conveying information about wizardry, the role

of women, some history and all manner of other things. Allin's own personal development through the book also shows up Casuel's lack of self-awareness nicely. The editor was posing the questions; it was up to me to find the answers and we'd talk through their implications for the rest of the book. It's not the editor's job to turn a promising manuscript into a finished novel, that's the author's responsibility, but a good editor can help with ideas. When I was struggling with the ending, Tim suggested taking Livak full circle; back to the friend she'd been waiting to meet in the opening chapter. I tried this and found it worked well. Other suggestions I considered and discarded; for instance, opening the book with the scene that introduces Planir the Archmage. A convincing case can be made for giving the reader this advance knowledge to colour their reactions to Livak's adventures. In the final analysis however, I was convinced that starting the book with wizards would make it a book about wizards, in some intangible sense and I definitely wanted it to be a book about Livak. This taught me something else about the editing process; when I had no strong feelings either way about a change but other people did, it was no skin off my nose to find a compromise I was happy with. Then, when I did dig my heels in, I could expect my decisions to be respected, because it was clear I wasn't just being stubborn.

There was other minor tinkering to be done and once it was all finished, I heaved a huge sigh of relief. This lasted until I got the manuscript back from copyediting. My first thought was someone had gone mad with a pencil! Telling myself not to panic, I went to make a coffee and read a few articles and notes I had about being copy-edited.

These reminded me that this is about far more than making sure all the commas and full stops are in the right places.

My discussions to this point had been with the commissioning editor. I was now dealing with Lisa Rogers, desk-editor at Orbit, who was my liaison with the copy editor. I rang her to establish what the ground rules were regarding these changes. I was relieved to learn all alterations were only suggestions; I could veto any of them. With that assurance, I started reading, not in my initial defensive mood, but trying to understand why the copy editor was making these suggestions. I found changes that definitely improved the prose, in the way sentences and paragraphs were structured. I opted to accept and to learn from these amendments. Others, especially speech patterns, just proved the copy-editor and I came from different parts of the country and here I generally restored my original text. Where, in a very few instances, the copy editor had made more extensive alternations, I looked hard to see why. I reasoned that if the copy editor had missed my point, the chances were other readers would as well. In most cases, I rewrote the passages myself. Lisa also raised some concerns of her own, in terms of structure and content and more revisions were made as a result.

'I heaved a huge sigh of relief. This lasted until I got the manuscript back from copyediting.'

By the time I finished squinting over the page proofs and *The Thief's Gamble* was sent off into production, three assorted editors had had their say, from their various view points. The book had come a long way from the original Livak manuscript and I am extremely happy with the final result as now published. I certainly don't feel my writing was compromised in any way by the editing process. Overall, the editorial contributions shone new light on my work, helping me to significantly improve this novel in particular and my writing skills in general.

So have I learned everything I need to? Did *The Swordsman's Oath* go straight from my computer to the typesetter? Not at all. There was nowhere near the same amount of work to be done but we went through all the same stages and as it was a different book, different issues cropped up. Getting the opening to that second novel right caused more than a little anguish but because everyone's ultimate aim was improving the story, we were able to reach an amicable agreement. I immediately put the new lessons learned into practise as I started *The Gambler's Fortune*. At the time of writing, we are at the initial editing stage with this, the third Tale of Einarinn. This time I recognised when I had reached the end of my inspiration and was just going round and round in circles. Editorial input at this stage is what will give me the fresh ideas and encouragement to find that extra polish which will make all the difference to my ultimate satisfaction with the final novel and to the readers' enjoyment.

Juliet McKenna studied Classics at St. Hilda's, Oxford, and returns every year for their Crime and Mystery weekends. The third Tale of Einarinn, *The Gambler's Fortune*, is due soon from Orbit. She also knows Aikido, so be polite.

Juliet's website can be found at:
http://dspace.dial.pipex.com/juliet.e.mckenna

COMPETITON

What will life be like at the start of the 22nd Century? *Focus* invites you to collectively create a newspaper, dateline 11th February 2101.

As well as hard-hitting news articles from this world and beyond, we'll need economics reports, environmental and technological news, reviews of the latest e-books and vid-casts, and maybe even some politics. Sport, religion, food and drink, whatever. The sky is no longer the limit...

No serious paper is without its photojournalists: if you can supply an image to go with your story, all the better.

Where would we be without adverts? Suffering from memory loss? You need the new Pentium X implants. Never forget anything ever again!

If I receive enough copy, I'll make it into a four-page pull-out in the middle of *Focus*. There will be prizes for the best submissions, and the deadline is 1st September 2000. Send to the usual addresses by the usual methods (see page 3).

Share and enjoy!

The TTA Literary Prizes

The TTA Literary Prizes will operate under the auspices of TTA Press, who reserve the right to cancel them at any time subject to full refund of entry fees. The TTA editorial staff will take no part in the judging procedure. The competition will not be restricted to the type of material that appears in *The Third Alternative* magazine and entries are not being considered for publication in that magazine. Peter Tennant will act as the Prize Administrator.

Prizes

There will a first prize of £1,000, a runner up prize of £500 and five second runner up prizes of £100 each.

Eligibility Criteria

There is no official entry form, and writers may enter as often as they wish provided each individual story is accompanied by an entry fee of £5/US$8. Cheques (including dollar checks), postal orders, etc should be made payable to "The TTA Literary Prizes".

Stories will be considered within the categories of Science Fiction, Horror, Fantasy, Slipstream and Cross-Genre fiction.

Entries must be no longer than 6,000 words in length and must be original work in English which has not been previously published. Entries must not be under consideration for any other competitions, under consideration for publication or currently awaiting publication.

Stories must be typed double spaced on single sheets of A4 paper. The title page must carry the entrant's name, address and a contact telephone number and/or email address. The title of the story must appear on each subsequent page, but no other author details must be shown. Pages must be clearly numbered.

Entries should be sent to the Prize Administrator at 9 Henry Cross Close, Shipdham, Thetford, Norfolk IP25 7LQ, Great Britain, and must be received by the closing date of 31 December 2000. Proof of posting will not be declared proof of receipt.

Manuscripts cannot be returned, so please retain a copy for your records. Stories should be accompanied by a stamped self-addressed postcard if acknowledgement of safe receipt is required (postcard plus International Reply Coupon in the case of entries from overseas).

Entries failing to comply with these criteria will not be considered.

Judging Procedure

A shortlist of stories will be forwarded by the Prize Administrator to an independent panel of judges who will make the final decision. The membership of the judging panel will be confirmed at a later date, but it is envisaged the panel will consist of a professional author, a publisher's representative and a literary agent. The judges' decisions are final and TTA Press will not enter into any discussion regarding them.

Winners

Details of the winning entries will be announced in the March 2001 issue of *The Third Alternative* magazine, published on the TTA website and elsewhere. A full list of winners can also be obtained by sending a stamped self-addressed envelope to the editorial address: TTA Press, 5 Martins Lane, Witcham, Ely, Cambs CB6 2LB, Great Britain (email: ttapress@aol.com; website: www.tta-press.freewire.co.uk).

TTA Press are the publishers of the magazines *The Third Alternative*, *Crimewave* and *Zene*. For more details of these publications please visit our website (address as above).

Manchester Literary & Philosophical Society Millennium Literary Prize

Short story (approx 5000 words) to reflect life and times in the 20th or 21st century, or spanning both. A poem (special theme) can also be entered. One entry per competitor. Close date 30 June 2000.

A prize, unstated, will be awarded and winners will be published in The Manchester Literary & Philosophical Society's *Memoirs*.

Entries to Mrs Heather Bradshaw, Administrative Secretary, Manchester Literary & Philosophical Society. More details and entry form from her at:

man.litphil@virgin.net

(Thanks to Roy Gray for this last lead...)

From Dr. John R. Davies, Lancaster

Re: Getting from A to B – your article on interstellar reaction drives omitted two recent developments that are a little less 'blue sky' than some you mentioned. Both have been described in *New Scientist* recently.

Mini-magnetic plasma propulsion (M2P2) – plasma of ionised helium is produced in a constricted magnetic field around the spacecraft. An electric current in the plasma produces a reaction against the solar wind, just as a current in the coils of an electric motor produces a force. The craft needs to carry a supply of helium, or other gas to form the plasma. Like a light sail, efficiency falls off as it moves away from the sun, but much less difficult to construct than a many kilometre-wide sail. *(Fantastic Voyage, New Scientist 4/9/99 p26)*

Microwave thrusters – Instead of 'burning' a fuel in an oxidiser and throwing the ashes out as a reaction mass, the propellant of a rocket may be headed by microwaves, exactly as in a microwave oven. '... less fuel than a chemical rocket, but three to five times as much thrust as an ion drive at the same power levels.." Almost any gas may be used as propellant, powered by solar or nuclear energy. *(Riding the wave, New Scientist 6/11/99 p21)*

Could this be used as a halfway house towards a Bussard ramjet, using interstellar hydrogen as a reaction mass, as you describe?

See also Hall effect thrusters. *(New Scientist 21/11/98 p22)*

Many thanks to Dr. Davies for pointing out these glaring omissions. You now have no excuse.

From Dave Langford via email

Since my *8000 Plus* article on copyright appeared in 1987, the American situation has changed for the better. The USA adopted the Berne copyright convention, and all texts created privately after 1st April 1989 have automatic US copyright protection without need for a formal copyright notice. By the way, the disconnected bit of text about Borland's software licence at the end of the column was there because the magazine liked to jazz up the page with a relevant or not so relevant bit of information in a box.

Due to editorial confusion, Dave didn't get to see a proof of his article before publication. Apologies, and thanks for the update.

From Cardinal Cox, Peterborough

With regards copyright, where does the law stand on characters? Kim Newman has used other people's characters in his *Anno Dracula* books in supporting roles while I would guess that the original works they come from are still in copyright. Alan Moore has similarly used classic characters in his recent *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, but here in central roles. Also, how about using real people in stories? I believe in America your face is sort of copyrighted to you, so how about yourself as a character in a book? I (and my band) have been mentioned in a few novels and don't mind in the least. Hell, I'm hoping to be a villain some time, since I've already been a corpse, but would I have to ask permission to put President Kennedy or Charles Manson in a story?

Does anyone know the definitive answers to these questions? I'm aware that the Harry Potter books are being dragged through the U.S. courts over the character of Muggles, and it would be a service to all if we can avoid that sort of expense. Real, dead people can't sue you for libel, but that's as far as my knowledge goes...

postscript

Well, that's it... it was kind of scary, really. I've never edited a magazine before, playing with other people's words. I've been fortunate to only have had to solicit two of the articles herein, and some moderate arm-twisting in just one of those (sorry Chris). Easy in some respects, difficult in others – but everyone involved has been generous with their time and energy.

Thanks go to Carol Ann and Julie, and the rest of the BSFA committee for advice before, during and after the event. They're just a bunch of people who love SF like you do, and who are willing to discuss the finer points of font size and margins into the small hours.

Also to my wife, who's put up with me disappearing into the study more than is entirely natural.

Till November – see you then.