

# FOCUS

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

Fiction from Wayne Stamford  
Poetry from Steve Sneyd  
Competition results

Lone Wolf Publications:  
E's are good

Original sins? Juliet McKenna  
looks for fresh inspiration



Issue 38 November 2000

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

## Issue 38 November 2000

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# pedantry

Subject: Re: Magazines/Mailing report

Date: Tue, 9 May 2000 22:26:06 +0100

From: Andrew M Butler

Ever so slightly confused to see *Focus* describing itself as an 'erstwhile magazine.' What is it now?

Subject: Re: Magazines/Mailing report

Date: Wed, 10 May 2000 14:17:43 +0100

From: Simon Morden

Our hero ruffles through his beaten copy of the Pocket Oxford Dictionary, pausing only to note that those damn Yankees spell oesophagus without the initial 'o'. He stops at his desired resting place, and reads carefully. Twice.

"Arse," he mutters under his breath, too low for his daughter to hear him and thus subject him to an afternoon of running around the house shouting "Arse!" at the top of her voice. He remembers too well the "Big dog's bollocks" incident of the week before.

It was there in black and white. Erstwhile: in his mind he had filed its meaning as 'proud and noble, but poor'. But he was tragically wrong, and he hung his head in shame. Publically exposed as a dullard and a fool, how would he ever regain the respect of peers?



Simon Morden  
Gateshead, October 2000

## About the cover

The Eden Project is not what you expect the Brits to be good at: far-thinking, ambitious and really very, very big.

The conservatories ('biomes') are self-supporting shells of tubular steel and triple-glazed ethyl tetra fluoro ethylene, and are designed to reach 45m at their highest point and span 100m at their widest.

Find out more from either:

<http://edenproject.com>, or

<http://members.tripod.co.uk/edenproject/index.htm>

## 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 magazine.

### Art

Black and white only! *Focus* is always on the lookout 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  
Sheriff Hill  
Gateshead  
NE9 5SE

The address for electronic submissions:

[focus.editor@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:focus.editor@blueyonder.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 four can... (Happy Birthdays, Eleanor and Sam)

## NEXT ISSUE DEADLINE:

# 1<sup>st</sup> March 2001

## Billions to get one going there

Steve Sneyd

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Steve Sneyd is a creative writing tutor and renowned poet. His collections include *Bad News from the Stars*, *What Time has use for*, and the wonderfully titled *Gestaltmacher, Gestaltmacher, Make me a Gestalt*. He is a tireless promoter of genre poetry.

The One Quiet Look



## The Revenant

David C. Kopaska-Merkel

The corpse had drifted for centuries  
before its rendezvous with my probe;  
its suit had protected it well.  
I collected it and thawed it;  
nanomachines repaired cell disruption and other  
effects of freezing –  
These were little enough, as it was one of the  
precursors, the first I'd seen up close – they are  
remarkably hardy.  
I knew the corpse was female but  
the revenant was a shock:  
raven hair and a good figure, well over 6 feet tall,  
utterly free of blemish.  
When her eyes opened she stopped my breath ...  
those eyes!

Psychologists say the eyes don't convey emotion,  
they say it's all pheromones.

All I know is I felt into her like a comet into a star,  
and with nearly the same effect.

We became  
lovers almost immediately,  
though we had no speech in common.  
Sex with her was unstoppable;  
she felt hard and solid,  
her body nearly as warm as a human woman's.  
But I grew cold under her avalanche,  
cold and weak.

I grew to need her, I followed her about;  
I was well-nigh devoured.

After two harrowing weeks we made planetfall.  
She landed the ship and,  
after the engines cooled, strolled away without a  
backward glance.

I tried to follow, but could not find her;  
she had entered the city and vanished.

I saw her, I think, in a crowd a few days later,  
but I am not sure.

Something alien was in the air, but I didn't see her  
eyes.

Things are different now, but the changes are  
hard to define.

They surge through society like a rising tide,  
like the coming of winter.

Already there's talk of a special election.

Everyone talks about new directions –  
and some say the sector capital should be moved  
here, where the action is.

But I don't like what I hear,  
and I keep searching for the one  
who abandoned me.

Is there a war on?

I can almost smell it.

David Kopaska-Merkel studies rocks for the State of Alabama. In his spare time he edits and publishes *Dreams and Nightmares*, a genre poetry zine, and edits *StarLine*, the journal of the Science Fiction Poetry Association. Numerous editors have been unwise enough to publish his poetry.  
[home.earthlink.net/~dragontea/index.html](http://home.earthlink.net/~dragontea/index.html)

# ÞHM ΛFHT NIKXII

## (THE LAST VIRGIN)

Wayne Stamford

Hilda looked back up the ash-strewn, grey slope at the three lonely figures.

This was not like last year. Harald had strode into the dragon's lair with the cheers of three villages at his back. She had watched through her tears as the reflections on his borrowed armour faded in cave's mouth. But the dragon had still sailed the skies the next day.

She shook her head and scrambled between piles of leathery waste toward the floor of the pit. She glanced back at the top of the slope. The cloud-heavy sky was unbroken by the silhouettes of those who had promised to wait for her. And who could blame them? What use was any of this, when the dragon would take one look at her face and destroy her? Her hand strayed to her cheek. The whorled scars had marred her for almost her whole life.

As she turned back, her pigtail bumped against her shoulder.

Why had she let the headman's wife persuade her to plait a short dagger into it? Did she know that Hilda was going to the dragon with more than that small blade to defend herself?

She skittered down the last few feet to the shattered monolith behind which the other women, and Harald, had disappeared in previous years. She leaned against the great stone, but recoiled at its warmth. The suggestion of greater heat within made her skin prickle right down to the scars curled around her twisted breast.

She shifted the heavy sword belt, under her dress, away from the raw spot where it bit into her hip. How was she to entice the creature close enough to surprise it with a deadly thrust, anyway? It could probably already smell the iron, or the leather, or some bloodstain that a dozen scrubbing failed to remove.

But the sword had been Harald's - all she had of him now. If the dragon died, it should be by this sword. She unlaced her dress and drew the three feet of finely wrought steel into the light.

She gripped it in both hands and edged around the stone. The ground crackled under her sandals as the ash gave way to brown, greasy-looking cinders. A draught of humid air sighed out of the cave and the stink of burnt earth curdled her stomach. She hefted the sword and hurried into the darkness.

The soot on the walls gave way to irregular waves of the reds and yellows of scorched rock.



Something grated in the darkness ahead. Hilda stopped. She glared into the shadows.

"Why have you come bearing weapons, child?"

Hilda swallowed. "To kill you." She thrust the sword forward and turned it until the meagre illumination reflected along the blade's length. "You killed my brother."

A wet sigh rippled across her cheeks. "The boy begged me on his knees to end it quickly."

"Never!" She threw her head back and peered at the formless bulk hiding in the darkness. "Harald would never bow to you, worm."

"One light breath from me would leave you choking on your own dried-out membranes." Feet scraped on the stone floor close by. "Do you doubt that I could do the same to your brother?"

Hilda peered at the figure emerging from the shadows. A man? In armour? For one insane moment, she thought that Harald had come back to her. But it could not be.

"So, you already owe me your life for not killing you on sight."

She swallowed until her throat unclenched. "I owe you a bloody death." She peered along the blade

at the figure. The armour glistened as the towering form strolled toward her. Light flickered along ragged spines set into the shoulders and the high-crested helmet.

"I gave your brother a chance to turn back. The boy was determined to die, though." The shadowed contours resolved as he drew closer, until Hilda saw the dragon's features. He stood still, several yards away from the tip of her sword. Ridged hide overlapped thick muscle. The chest and shoulders swelled with armour, but the waist was as slim and well-defined as that of a flayed corpse. She brought her gaze to the head, and gasped. Beneath the backward sweep of a crest of short, bronze-coloured horns lay the face of a prince. A swelling appeared at his throat. It pressed his chin up, and pulsed red as it stretched tight. "A creature as old as myself acquires many shapes over the years." The bladder shrank as he spoke.

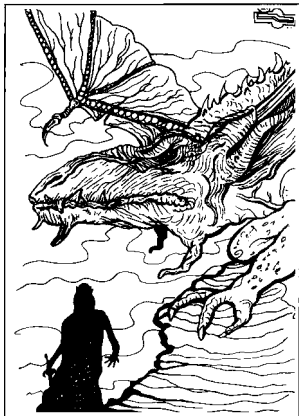
Hilda glanced back to the entrance. It looked so distant.

The dragon's teeth glinted. "Now, you will put down that sword and take your place among my brides."

"I will die first." Maybe the dragon had made a mistake in presenting himself in this form. Perhaps, the sword was enough for a dragon this size, even if he could breath fire on her. She advanced a step. "Defend yourself."

The dragon's wattles inflated.

Hilda swung the sword back over her shoulder and braced herself for the attack.



The pattering of dozens of feet echoed through the cave. Out of the shadows emerged a gaggle of raggedly dressed women. They crowded into a living barrier between her and the dragon.

Hilda stepped back hurriedly, warding off the closest of the new arrivals with a wave of the sword.

The crowd parted as the dragon spoke. "Meet my other brides." He stood in the newly-made gap. "They will not let you kill me." He smiled. "Not unless you are prepared to cut down each one of them first."

Hilda braced herself, sword held ready. She inspected their faces. Some of these women had played with her as children. Others, she had been glad to see leave the village for the last time. They all looked on her with quick, appraising glances.

"Take her weapon."

She waved the sword at the first to come close. They spread out. She batted one that she recognised as a childhood tormentor on the shoulder with the flat of the blade. The woman stumbled, but continued closer until Hilda pressed the tip of the sword between her breasts. Hilda stared into her eyes. She felt the pressure as the woman pushed forward. Without thinking, she pulled the blade back before it did any harm. Harald would never have hurt them. Slowly, the woman lifted the sword's weight from her fingers.

Hilda sat on a pile of dried moss with her knees pulled up to her chin. She hugged her legs closer. The dragon deserved to die, still. If not for Harald, for what it had done to these women. Warm air caressed her back through her thin shift.

Two of the women squatted by the wall opposite. They had taken away her clothes, even her shoes. Fortunately, no one had tried to unwind her hair. She flipped the plait over her shoulder, glancing at her companions to see if they noticed the heaviness as it fell against her breast. She eased away the tresses around the blade without taking her eyes off them.

Cold points pricked her neck. She froze, resisting the urge to twist away as another clawed hand reached over her shoulder and cupped her chin.

"You are unhappy, child. It is good that you have come to me."

Without moving his hands, he squatted next to her. Close to, she saw the fine scales across his cheeks catch the light. He examined the welts on her face. The hand on her neck moved. It traced the striations on her throat down past where the shift covered them from sight. "Men shun you for this."

"Yes." It emerged before she realised that she believed it. She stared into his eyes. Why am I telling him this? she thought. But if it kept her close to him - close enough to use the knife why should he not know everything? "Harald gave me that sword because it was the most expensive

thing he had. It should have been dowry enough for anyone." She looked away, at the complacent faces of the other women. "But no one has ever thought it a bargain worth taking."

"Then, I accept it."

She stared at him. "You want me?"

"Did you think that I was keeping you until I felt hungry?" He stood and waved the other women out. They brushed his arms with their fingers as they passed. He turned and watched them leave. When he turned back to her his throat had turned deep red and his clawed fingers flexed restlessly.

She looked away. The continued existence of the brides of past years boded unexpected intimacy. The dagger pressing against her shoulder appeared more useful than she had dared to guess.

"Come." He offered his hand.

Hilda stood without taking it. She brushed down her dress. An itching knot tightened in her belly as she looked at him. "Where?"

"Your sisters have prepared a marriage bed." He turned from her and walked a couple of steps toward a dark corner. Her fingers closed around the metal trapped in her hair. He turned back, though. His throat glowed in the half-light. She saw it throb with his pulse. "Come along." He held out his hand again, and she took it. His palm was hot against hers.

On rubbery legs, she followed his gentle lead into the darkness. The prickle of crushed stone beneath her feet felt distant.

He stopped, and she realised that the mound in front of her toes was the bed. She inched one foot toward it. Wool. Raw, unspun wool. As she pressed further, the moss beneath cracked.

Without a word, he picked her up in his arms. His claws pricked her as he turned to the bed. She clung to him until the soft wool curled around her weight, tickling her. She stared at his silhouette. Again, it might be mistaken for human. A knight, such as the little girls of the village dreamed would take them away from their mundane lives. She gathered her plait against her breast and held its hard core with both hands.

"Soon, you will be wholly mine." The burr of tearing fabric tickled her thighs. She gasped. The scales on his fingers grazed across her skin.

He is my enemy, she told herself silently. Sadness bit her so hard that her mind turned away from the thought. But her fingers picked the dagger free of the hair. Her forefinger slid over the handle until the edge pressed into her flesh.

His shadow shifted. She felt the warmth of his body close to her skin. She peered between half-closed eyelids at the pulsing redness of his throat. His hand locked around her ankles. She flinched and her fingers curled around the dagger's handle. She hid the blade against her body. His

hot breath engulfed her feet. She watched the glow at his throat. It grew as the nibbling warmth moved up her legs. Her own pulse beat inside her skull. She forced herself to concentrate on Harald. She focused her mind on creating his image. Her back arched as he breathed over the tops of her thighs. Her mind blossomed with colour as his breath caressed her. Harald's image flickered as fiery hues engulfed it - burned it away. The dragon's red throat ballooned before her eyes. With a scream, she forced herself up. Her arms sprang forward, bearing the blade home. The light in the monster's throat died. Heat spewed across her belly, blood soaking the folds of her skin.

Hilda felt his weight tip the soft bed, rolling her closer. She curled herself against the disembowelling blow which was sure to come. But nothing happened. The body folded across her legs, crushing her against the bed. Shuddering, she felt bubbles break against her skin. Short spurts of froth. She stared into the darkness and wept as his last words expended themselves in the spattered blood on her thighs.

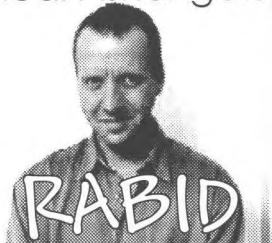
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Wayne Stamford lives in that hotbed of Sword and Sorcery, Frome, along with his familiar Grub the Thunder-Buttocked. Past glories include stories in *Visionary Tongue*, and less reputable places. He has been surprised by moderate success in recent writing competitions.

Illustrations by Sandra Scholes at Armand Designs: 16 Greenhill Avenue, Carleton, Pontefract W. Yorkshire WF8 2QX



## Neal Asher gets



## Music please

I have a friend who is in the music business just as I am in the writing business i.e. we're contenders, but we both have to work for a living. In the winter we work together and much of our time is spent discussing our respective arts while sipping coffee and staring out of a truck window at the rain.

When we each manage an ego bypass we agree that our pursuits and our attitudes are similar in many respects. Perhaps it is that Essex boy approach to the art world in that when you can bank it, it's worth something.

My friend likes music that is clean, distinct, and not amenable to obfuscation. I listened to him play *A Whiter Shade of Pale* on the alto sax and understood what he meant. He does not like bad jazz. Many musicians claim to play jazz because it gives them 'freedom of expression, man'. The truth is that they play it because it gives them freedom from discipline; from the necessity of getting it right. And thus, by a round about route, we come to the plotless writing that comes under the slipstream label.

Slipstream is easy to spot. The protagonist usually spends most of his time wandering round an urban landscape pursuing a dysfunctional sex life while some vaguely weird things happen, just, happen. The piece you will read - I shall not call it a story - starts, runs for a few pages, then stops. There is no real beginning, middle, or end. It is authorial masturbation that leaves the reader thinking, 'Well, what about me?'

Raymond Chandler said that when he felt a story was flagging he'd walk in a man with a gun. In slipstream the man remains on the other side of the door, nothing is resolved, and the reader

wonders if there ever was anything to resolve. I get a lump of frustration developing in my stomach when I find myself reading one of these pieces and it slowly dawning on me that it is not going to have an ending, that the characters will not have changed and their squalid existence will just ... continue. Why, then, is this stuff published?

If you listen to a piece of modern jazz you will, if you have any sensibilities, wonder where the melody is. You'll wonder why you're listening to this disjointed annoying racket when the guy on the stool next to you will say, "Wow, ... scale!" and you'll nod your head knowingly and reply, "Yeah ... man." We all hate to appear ignorant.

It is this hatred of ignorance that allows such idiocies as a soiled bed in the Tate gallery. It is the very same that allows slipstream. People will remain silent about it because they are frightened of admitting that they haven't got the point. There is no point. And those guilty of perpetrating it, writers and publishers, are very often those who get a bit too arty for their own good, and are cringing at the prospect of being accused of something so demeaning as science fiction. My goodness.

**'We all hate to appear ignorant. It is this hatred of ignorance that allows such idiocies as a soiled bed in the Tate gallery.'**

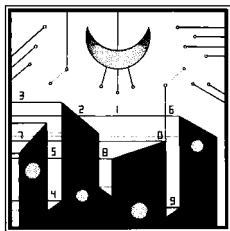
You are a story teller are you? If such you are then put yourself in front of an audience and tell your story. If, when you have finished, your story requires justification then it was not a story. A story completes, and if it does not, it was very likely slipstream. I am not saying you should not write this stuff. It is one of the better methods of beating the block and freeing up

the creative faculties. Sometimes you'll end up with a sentence or two, maybe a paragraph, that you can use in a *real* story.

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 *Mason's Rats* (Kimota); Pan Macmillan will publish *Gridlinked* in 2001, and two more novels in subsequent years.

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

## Digital City Blues







Brian and Richard represent two of the staff at Lone Wolf Publications, based in the electronic aether somewhere near Oklahoma City. Publishing is starting to make waves, and I asked these upstarts to explain themselves

*Brian – what made you decide to first enter e-publishing?*

BAH: I conceived of, designed, and developed *Flesh Wounds* to answer every writer's favorite question: Where can I find more of your work? For newer short story writers, this question is a boon and a bane. A boon because it means the writer has connected; the reader is saying, "Give me more!" But it's a bane because few readers will actually track down umpteen different magazines or anthologies to experience more of a writer's work. The reader wants a single source, a collection. Despite 50 or 60 published short stories, no one was beating down my door to produce such a collection, so I created my own. I went the publishing route because traditional print publishing was too expensive. It wasn't just my own wallet that I was concerned about either; I wanted something affordable that could be offered up in answer to the question.

*Richard – In regard to Apocalypse Year (Blindside Press), what made you choose an electronic format rather than paper.*

RW: *Apocalypse Year*, for those who don't know, is a millennial project running as we speak. It's basically a short horror story for every day of the year, loosely themed around said Apocalypse. What I was really looking for when I came up with the concept was a publisher who could handle releasing the stories in monthly chapbooks over the year 2000. Such an endeavour would be a

major commitment for a pulp publisher to undertake with an untried author. However, due to the low set-up costs of electronic publishing, it was easier for the project to be viable under these circumstances. The downloadable anthology format *Blindside* have come up with, integrating music, art and text, had already impressed me through their now cancelled electronic magazine *Conflicting Spectrums*, so I approached them. Now that I've seen the finished project, I can't imagine of how it might have looked in print. Bland by comparison, to say the least. Though the stories are, of course, utterly wonderful....

*Doesn't the average reader prefer a nice wadge of paper in their hand, rather than crouch in front of a computer screen?*

BAH: You'll get no argument from me on this one. I prefer books, too. There are some advantages to electronic publishing, however, which one cannot dismiss. Sheer data capacity is the first. With a CD-ROM, for instance, you've got 650 meg of data space on a standard disk. There's not a writer known to man whose entire body of work won't fit in that kind of space. However, there are more intelligent things to do with that space than just add more text, things that increase the entertainment and educational potential of the volume in question. I'm talking about things like audio, video, full color graphics, and so on. When was the last time you had the author of a book look up from the page and greet you? The second advantage, as I've already said, is cost. Print on demand has lessened the up-front costs to produce a book, but at the time I conceived of *Flesh Wounds*, POD technology was still a burgeoning, risky, and expensive proposition. With electronic media, my inventory exceeds my orders by just a few copies. I don't have a lot of money tied up in stock that's sitting on the shelves.

RW: I have to concur on the point of text-only ebooks. Paper books are actually the superior technology here. Portable, easy to use, attractively packaged... what more could you want. To take this and put it on a PC, fixed to one spot, difficult for the sane to read on the tube, is in some ways nonsensical. One exception to this are the electronic readers currently available in the States, and shortly in the UK. These are book sized, handheld devices, with an easy to read screen, into which you can download several texts at once. A library of books, between one set of covers, with several options, such as text-resizing and gentle backlighting, which add to the pleasure of using them.

But for the PC, you have to look beyond just the text. If you're going to make people read at their computer, you'd better make damn sure you have a product that relies on that computer for it's strengths, not it's weaknesses. Nobody complains that they can't play computer games away from the PC, for very obvious reasons. Quake just isn't

the same with a water cannon and a couple of mates in paper masks. Electronic books should be seen in much the same way, and Lone Wolf Publications is carving a market niche as a true innovator in this regard, creating products that would diminish vastly if you published them in another medium. Andrew Shorrocks's beautiful scrolling art gallery in *Flesh Wounds*, Janet Berliner's audio introductions to the tales in *Exotic Locals*, audio and video introductions to stories in *Extremes*... the options are being explored further with each new release. I'm not going to blow the gaff on anything without Brian's say so, but there's some fabulous things in the works...

*How does the format lend itself to a more 'interactive' experience?*

BAH: Here's yet a third advantage to electronic media: the ability to link, via hypertext and the Internet, to all sorts of other information sources. With the click of a mouse, the reader is able to access background material, information on the author, and even the author himself via email. Navigation within volumes is as simple as point and click. The volume can even be designed to store reader bookmarks, notes, and so on.

RW: Communication is key, here. The level of author accessibility is utterly unique. You hear the author talk, you perhaps even see him address you directly, then you can instantly find out about him on the web, and talk to him in person. Until audio book authors start to leave their telephone numbers at the end of their products, this isn't going to be bettered anytime soon. Just the idea of congratulating the author instantly after enjoying the tale is one I find very exciting.

*What made you decide to produce only a limited edition of each collection, as opposed to an open-ended print-on-demand policy?*

BAH: Purely to make the editions collectible, much the way signed limited edition books are

collectible. Because the technology is new, because readers (like myself) still prefer actual books, I looked for every possible marketing edge. Making the CDs collectible by having the authors sign and number them seemed the smart thing to do.

RW: Listen to Bah... Bah knows the answers...

*Distribution is always a problem with small press publications. How are you getting exposure for Lone Wolf products?*

BAH: Exposure is generally bought in one of two ways: advertising and word of mouth. I've done little or no advertising. A few flyers passed out at conventions. A few banners run by certain gracious webzines. Nothing more. Word of mouth, on the other hand, has been working very well for Lone Wolf Publications. The horror genre is still very much a close knit community. Word does get around. Some of this word of mouth I've paid for with free copies -- primarily copies of my own

collection, where I don't have to worry about taking money out of my contributor's pockets -- but the bulk of it has come from satisfied customers. Reviews are important, too. All the reviews published about LWP products have been very favorable.

Reviewers have touted not only the fiction that the CDs contain, but also the ease of use, the style of presentation, and the overall quality of the package (meaning the accompanying paper documentation and so forth). The titles that LWP has released to date, *Flesh Wounds*, *Exotic Locals*, *Extremes*, and *The Red, Red Robin Project*, are all selling well. No one's getting rich, but that was never my goal. In some ways, I worry about becoming too successful because I'm quite comfortable with LWP being such a small operation. The day I have to hire employees and figure out how to provide group health insurance will definitely be the day I sell the company and start something else -- something small. I started LWP to produce quality, innovative products that might not otherwise reach the market.

RW: What do you mean I'm not getting health insurance?

*What steps have you taken to prevent the pirating of your work?*

BAH: Much as we'd like to think there are means of preventing electronic piracy of such data, there aren't. Stephen King's *Finding the Bullet* proved that. The encrypted files were hacked within hours (minutes?) of their release and being freely distributed on the web. The best protection for LWP products is size. *Extremes*, the largest volume LWP has produced thus far, contains some 38 meg of data. You can't copy that to a floppy diskette and give it to your buddy. You're not going to email it or put it on the web. Few

**'Nobody complains that they can't play computer games away from the PC, for very obvious reasons'.**



people are going to want to copy and maintain it on their hard drive either. That leaves you with the option of buying the CD or burning your own. Though CD-R drives are becoming more popular as they become less expensive, they're still not that common. And even if you burn your own copy, it's not the real item. It's like Xeroxing your favorite book. Yes, you can read it, but it's not the same as owning it. As for protecting the material itself from modification or misuse, the Adobe Acrobat .pdf format is fairly well protected. Yes, it can be altered, but not by your average Joe. This was one of the reasons for going with .pdf, rather than an easily alterable format like html. The second reason is that .pdf locks down the appearance of the data. With something like html, the format varies by computer type, screen size, window size, printer, etc. A final consideration was the availability of the reader software across multiple computer platforms.

RW: It astonishes me that people even bothered to copy *Riding the Bullet*. It was \$2.50 for God's sake, and given away for free just about everywhere you looked! If people want to, it's almost impossible to stop them. As well as this, the size is prohibitive, as Brian says. The paper products, such as author signatures, make each copy unique also, so imitations are very obviously that. There seems to be very little point anybody trying to copy it, from where I stand. Adobe is the best software for basic encryption, but has also become an industry standard as regards the best platform to view ebooks in. It's flexible enough to incorporate all sorts of text/audio/video and more, as well as simply being easy to use.

*Stephen King seems to be at the forefront of the e-publishing vanguard, but 'Riding the Bullet' seems to be the most bought, least read book since the Bible. Who would pay good money for a product and not read it?*

RW: Well, "bought" is the keyword, I think. Most people got it for free. I'd be interested to see what the sales figures would have been had it actually retailed at the cover price of \$2.50. I'm convinced that most of the people who've read it are King's 'fans'. My guess would be that the rest are those who grabbed it while it was free, but never got round to reading it. Perhaps as he goes ahead with *The Plant* (which he's currently releasing as an e-serial, directly through his website, with downloads going at a buck a pop) we'll get a better idea of what's happening there. It perpetually astonishes me how often I hear in the press of how King has invented e-publishing. Oh yes? Wrote the first horror novel too, didn't he? Innovator that he is...

*What's in the future for Lone Wolf?*

BAH: Additional volumes of *Extremes* certainly. Richard is editing LWP's new audio series, *Storytellers*. An interactive art CD by Alan M. Clark. Collections from Gary Braunbeck, Peter

Crowther, and others. A series of original novellas that will launch with a locked room murder mystery by Peter Crowther. An audio collection of dark poetry. Lots of other things I'm not prepared to talk about yet! What I'm really looking for are those productions that lend themselves to e-publishing, the types of projects that wouldn't be the same if they were done solely in a print medium. I think graphics novels are an excellent example and would love it if an artist approached me with something of that nature. Certainly LWP will be doing more audio and video, combining it with traditional text and art to create unique "reading" experiences.

RW: Oh, something he forgot. Some Stoker Award winning, Nebula short-listed, terribly bashful fellow called Brian A. Hopkins is putting together a collection of his science fiction stories, entitled *Wrinkles At Twilight*. Might be worth a gander is all I'm saying on the matter...

Brian A. Hopkins is an Oklahoman who spends his nights in febrile dreams of building woodsheds and pool decks. He won a Bram Stoker award this year for 'Five Days in April', and survived his subsequent meeting with Harlan Ellison.

[http://www.sff.net/people/brian\\_a\\_hopkins/](http://www.sff.net/people/brian_a_hopkins/)

Richard Wright is an English actor, playwright, and author currently living undercover in Glasgow. He is the creator of the epic *Apocalypse Year* and *Cuckoo* (nominated for the Frankfurt ebook award). <http://darkterrains.cjb.net/>

Lone Wolf home page:

<http://www.dm.net/~bahwolf/lwp.htm>

# UNHINGED

A Magazine of Disturbing Fiction

## #6 - The 'Sex & Death' Issue

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## How to be original and still get published

Juliet E. McKenna

This article has been adapted from Juliet's notes for her appearance on a Wincon V panel

Can a good writer remain unique? Does a writer need a track record before originality can be attempted? The implication seems to be that the best way to get published is to retread the same old tracks, present the same old characters in the same old situations and some publisher or other will decide that yes, this is ideal troll fodder for those weird people who read SF/Fantasy.

My own experience has been the exact opposite. I wrote my first full fantasy novel in 1991. It was a very traditional tale, young lad leaves home, gets caught up in various adventures, the usual rites of passage, so on and so forth. It had plot, subplot, detail on everything and a cast of thousands. I worked really hard on it, in all modesty I thought it was damn good. Friends whom I trusted to tell me honestly if it was crap liked it, so I sent it off to a couple of agents, a few publishers, sat back and waited for the replies. I was a little concerned as to how I would handle two or three conflicting offers but I figured I'd solve that problem when it arose.

Strangely enough, that was never a difficulty I had deal with. The agents and publishers who even bothered to reply said "nice try, sorry, not interested." Most of them also said, it's far too long. One agent did offer to take it on but only if I paid a professional reviewer to write a report on how it needed rewriting; it just happened he knew someone he could recommend, for a mere £250! If anyone ever offers you a deal like that, avoid it like the plague. It's a rip-off. I thought so at the time and every publisher or agent I've asked about it since has confirmed that.

So back to my first novel. The most telling line in all of the rejection letters I got was this; "There's nothing to distinguish this from the six other perfectly competent fantasy novels that land on my desk every week". Make a note of that, if you want to be a writer. Better yet, print it out and pin it to the wall next to your desk. You don't have to be published before you can be original. You do have to be original before you'll be published, if you're going to get anywhere at all. The competition is phenomenal. One agent I know reckons she gets 200 submissions a year, one editor has quoted 30 a week to me and Orbit, who publish me, get 1,500 a year. Those are unsolicited submissions for the publishers' slush pile; not including

submissions via agents. That agent I quoted, in a good year she might take on 2 new clients out of those 200. The editor who gets 30 a week, reckons to have taken on one slush pile author in the last 10 years. Orbit have taken on 2 in the last 5 years; I'm one of them. That's the kind of competition you're facing and if you don't have something new to bring to the party, you're pretty much on a hiding to nothing.

I had been told my carefully crafted masterpiece was perfectly competent but nothing special so I went out and looked to learn everything and anything that I could about writing. I read a lot of crime fiction, so one year when family and friends were asking what I wanted for my birthday, I asked for cash contributions so I could go on a crime and mystery weekend being run at my old college. There were talks by authors, critics, an agent did a presentation one year and also a couple of publishers. I've picked up some very useful things, especially on techniques of writing, plot structure, how to handle detail, how to avoid the data-dump, all very useful. I get to talk to

crime writers who are household names and learned that when you hear about a writer trying ten or more publishers before being accepted, this isn't unusual, in fact it's pretty much the rule. A lot of authors find their second, third, even fifth or seventh novel is the one that finally gets accepted and gives them their start. I've been going to this event most years now for the last seven and in all that time, the most telling sentence I've heard

**"There's nothing to distinguish this from the six other perfectly competent fantasy novels that land on my desk every week". Make a note of that.**

is; "Every editor is looking for the same but different."

This was from a publisher explaining the Catch-22 that every editor faces. They want to publish what they know will sell. If they make the wrong choice, the book becomes what sales reps call a Falklands book, as in "I counted them all out and I counted them all back in." Books go from publishers to shops on a sale or return basis for the most part, some of you may not be aware of that. So, if the editor gets it wrong, the books come winging back to the warehouse, the company loses money and that editor's job is on the line. On the other hand, the great book buying public is not that stupid, not everyone is going to buy the same old story in a different jacket time and again. Also, every editor wants to be the one to find the next *Longitude*, the next *Captain Corelli*, the next *Harry Potter* and they'd quite like to be the editor who picks up the next big thing when every one else has passed it by.

Editors aren't infallible, which is why you have to send out your stuff to anyone and everyone who might publish you; what someone hates, someone else will love. This editor who was talking about

'the same but different' was on the editorial committee that turned down *Presumed Innocent* by Scott Turow; the million-seller which went on to be a hugely successful film starring Harrison Ford. This was before people like John Grisham got started and that particular committee all agreed a complicated American legal thriller would be a waste of paper in this country.

So the writer has to be original but not too original. You have to look at your ideas, at how you're presenting them in the book and how you're going to pitch that book in your initial submissions. How to convince the editor that it's the same but different. That letter is a sales letter, make no mistake.

I write heroic fantasy; *The Thief's Gamble* can be quite fairly called a quest novel. *The Swordsman's Oath* has to do with issues of loyalty; nothing earth-shattering there and as you'll see from the cover, has what can loosely be called a magic sword as a central element. So what did I bring that was new? Well, I write in the first person, not unique in fantasy but less common. I write in very direct, colloquial language; my characters use slang, abbreviate each other's names, insult people in fairly forthright terms. It's a style that stands out and I try to make what I do with the traditions of heroic fantasy a bit different on top of that. I'm on record in various interviews as determined to avoid the more crushing clichés of the genre. There will be no lost heirs turning up as farm boys, with or without unrecognised magical powers, there are no dark forces of motiveless malignancy, no all encompassing prophecies moving my characters around like pieces on a chess board. That's another less common angle, though more frequent in recent years, I am relieved to say as a reader.

So when I was pitching *The Thief's Gamble*, I could highlight these things; it's different but not too different. I could also point out that Livak, my heroine, while not your typical fantasy female does in fact have a great deal in common with Kinsey Milhone, Kate Brannigan and VI Warshawski, the first and to my mind the best of the independent female Private Eyes who've taken the crime genre by storm in the last 10 or 15 years. Look, Mr Editor, the same style of character but different genre.

You have to be original but you have to be original within the recognised parameters of the genre. For me the best SF I've read in I don't know how long was *The Sparrow* by Mary Doria Russell. There are some wonderfully original ideas in there but in terms of form and writing, it's a very traditional novel. The same but different. I

remember a wonderful episode of *Yes Prime Minister*, when they're setting up a party political broadcast and the rules are explained; if you're presenting something radical, the minister should look traditional and reassuring, wear a dark suit, have an oak panelled background and leather bound books. If you're not doing anything new, you want a light, modern suit, a high-tech setting with abstract paintings. I'm sure we can all come up with books that are something startling smuggled in under cover of a dark suit and others that are standard themes and characters jazzed up with the literary equivalent of high energy wall paper and a Stravinsky sound track.

So you have to be original but is that enough? No, it's not the whole story. I belong to a writers'

organisation in Oxford and recently found myself talking to a nuclear physicist. He's had various technical books published but now he's desperate to find a publisher for his masterwork, the great novel. This may turn out to be the next *Sophie's World* but I have to say at the moment, I don't hold out a lot of hope. He was very keen to tell me all about it, it's sort of a whodunnit but not really, because the reader has the answers before

the characters do and then in some ways it's a philosophical exploration of some of his own ideas and then again, it's something of a love story as well but there is a science fiction element to tie it all together. If he presents it like that, I can't see any publisher taking it on. Publishing is a business, book shops are arranged into sections and genres and any book that can't be fitted into one of those is facing an uphill struggle regardless. This chap is also dead set against doing any rewriting or making any changes. He told me the quality of his writing makes that impossible and that quality is also what he's expecting will sell the novel for him, making any covering sales pitch unnecessary. Now it may be this guy has some startlingly original ideas. It may be that his writing is indeed superb. I still don't reckon that will be enough to get him published because he's so inflexible in his attitude.

The third quote I have to pass on is something I've had with slight variations from three editors and two agents by now, all of whom have said 'don't tell anyone I said this but'. It's "When you're reading a new submission, you're always looking for the reason to turn it down". That sounds extremely harsh but think back to what I said about the competition. It's the only way to run a publishing house without vanishing under an avalanche of paper. That reason will often be the writing, it will frequently be lack of originality but equally it can be the amateur way the author has

**You have to look at  
your ideas, at how  
you're presenting them  
in the book and how  
you're going to pitch  
that book in your initial  
submissions ... That  
letter is a sales letter,  
make no mistake.**

presented their manuscript or their letters. It can be a potential deal falls through on contract details because the writer has no idea what is or is not a realistic offer. This is where an agent can be invaluable, if you can find one to take you on.

I knew I had to convince any publisher that I was as serious about the business of writing and publishing as they were. Once Orbit had made an offer for my first novel, the deal was dependent on me submitting an outline for a second as well. I had to come up with one fast. Having been told my first novel was far too long, I had really concentrated on keeping the prose tight and avoiding over-writing. One of the first things my editor said during our initial discussions the book was rather too short, did I think I could add about 50,000 words? Yes, I said, of course, no problem! That's why there's a subplot in the third person in *The Thief's Gamble*. We discussed various titles before we agreed on *The Thief's Gamble* and what name I might write under, where a lot of marketing considerations applied.

My married name is very local to the Cotswolds and one that no one knows how to pronounce when they see it written down. It starts with an S, a bad idea in fantasy terms because you get stuck on a bottom shelf next to Tolkien and no-one ever sees you because all they're looking for is the Hobbit. McKenna, which is my maiden name, puts me in between Anne McCaffrey and Terry Pratchett, a very good shelf position. One of the things that helps my working relationship with Orbit is that I don't have to have these things explained to me, having learned a lot about book selling by working part-time for my local branch of Ottakar's.

One of the most important things I learned there was if you think it's difficult to get a publisher to take your manuscript, you try being a sales rep getting a bookseller to take a first novel by someone they've never heard of. Why tie up stock budget in books that might not sell, when you can use that same allocation to buy another dozen Terry Pratchett, another dozen Catherine Cookson come to that, books that will go through the till the same day they come into the shop and in doing so, help make the sales targets that keep the bean counters at head office off the bookseller's back? For that rep, originality is always a key selling point.

I imagine there are people reading this, itching to say "Yes but, you say you've got to be original, so how come there are so many unoriginal books published?" Well, yes, I come across books time and again that look like something I've already read just with the names changed to protect the guilty. But presumably the editor who made that

deal saw something original worth pursuing or at very least a sound commercial reason for publishing that title. Try and find those things in the book yourself; analytical skills like that will help you as a writer, even if you don't agree with that unknown editor. Personal taste is always a factor and one you have no control over, which is why you have to be persistent and send out submission after submission after submission. That maximises the chances of your manuscript landing on the right desk, at the right publishers, with the right editor, at the right time.

**Personal taste is  
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submission after  
submission after  
submission.**

Another factor is personal contacts. Next time some book chain is running a first novels promotion, look at the authors' details on the little handouts. In most cases, while it's their first novel, pretty well all of the writers will work in journalism, the media or publishing in some form or other. It's a fact of life that it's far easier to get published if you have inside contacts or a media profile that makes you certain to get sales whatever the book.

When other circumstances make it easier to get published, the bar on originality gets lowered as well. Is that fair? Probably not but where is it written that life is fair?

I would also say an established readership for a writer can seriously stifle originality. There are writers out there basically rewriting their early novels as far as I can see and frankly not making that good a job of it. Yes, you do need a track record before your publisher is going to let you take a really dramatic chance on something utterly startling but you're going to have a hell of an argument on your hands. All the advice at that stage is going to be 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it'. I would argue that's the point where many a good writer finds real trouble remaining original.

So, unless you had the foresight to have media personalities for parents, if you failed to secure some influential publisher or agent as a godparent and you don't amuse yourself moonlighting as a supermodel, I still have to argue you've got to be original to get published and you've got to combine that originality with an understanding of the commercial realities of publishing and bookselling. After that, the next big hurdle is staying original. That's a whole new challenge, as I am finding out.

Juliet McKenna studied Classics at St. Hilda's, Oxford, home of the annual Crime and Mystery weekends. The third Tale of Einarinn, *The Gambler's Fortune*, has recently been published by Orbit and she's currently working on the Fourth Tale, as yet untitled.

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

# ANAMNESIS PRESS

Anamnesis Press announces *2001: A Science Fiction Poetry Anthology*. Anamnesis Press (<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/anamnesis>) is offering \$1000 in cash prizes and publication for poems with science fiction, fantasy or speculative science themes. Previously published poems are acceptable, as long as the poet owns the rights to the work and provides acknowledgements. The top 50 poems will be published in a trade paperback anthology in March 2001.



*This Way Up* is a new online magazine of speculative fiction (SF/F/H with preference for SF). *This Way Up* will be published

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## THE EDGE

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Editor Graham Evans urges all potential contributors to check the guidelines for *The Edge*

Reading fee: US\$10 for 1-3 poems. Please make cheque or money order payable to Anamnesis Press in US dollars drawn on a US bank. (They also accept foreign postal money orders in US dollars.) All contestants will receive a complementary copy of the anthology and 50% discount coupons for the purchase of other books and chapbooks published by Anamnesis Press. Deadline December 15, 2000 (postmark).

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Email submissions and queries. Email submissions should preferably be in plain text or ASCII format, pasted into the body of an email message, with italics indicated using underscores (like this). Word-processor files, in a format readable by Microsoft Word 7, can be sent as attachments. Prefer attachments to be in Rich Text Format, as this can be read by most word-processors. Receipt of email submissions will be acknowledged by email. Send email submissions and queries to: [editor@wayup.co.uk](mailto:editor@wayup.co.uk)

Full guidelines at <http://www.wayup.co.uk>

(unfortunately, too long to print here): either buy a copy of the magazine or read them at <http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~houghtong/edge1.htm>

He's been receiving way too many inappropriate submissions.

### From Mark Logie, Richmond

Re: Cardinal Cox's query concerning the use of other writers' characters (Focus #37)

According to the *Writer's Encyclopedia* (third edition, *Writer's Digest Books*, 1996), "The writer of the original story owns exclusive rights to his characters, even when they are used in a later work by another." So the copyright owner's permission is needed before the characters can be used by anyone else.

*Just to prove that someone was watching. Thank you kindly, Mark. Everyone clear now?*



# FOCUS

February 1<sup>st</sup>  
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## KING ARTHUR CHARGED

Wayne Stamford

Late last night, Arthur the Third, ruler of the strife-torn Kingdom of Wessex, was arrested by officials of the International War Crimes Commission.

In a lightning raid, involving Royal Marines and Welsh National Militia, Arthur's palace at Ynys Wydryn (formerly known as Glastonbury) was surrounded and overrun.

Since Wessex seceded from the United Kingdom, nearly seventy years ago, the mini-state has seen in constant turmoil. The commitment of the 'Line of Arthur' to their heritage has cost thousands of lives over the years. Withdrawal of modern technology and medicine, combined with the inundation of large parts of the kingdom by rising sea levels, has driven the common people to

the brink of savagery.

The regime's brutal response to a failed coup two months ago sent streams of refugees fleeing into Wales and Cornwall. Those who escaped the atrocities reported seeing mounds of severed heads lining many roads out of the kingdom.

From the Swiss clinic where she is undergoing another round of rejuvenation therapy, Minister for Regional Identity, Carol Vorderman, issued a statement, saying "My heart goes out to these poor people. I hope that the near future will see Wessex resume its place as a valued part of the United Kingdom."

Dame Carol is tipped to chair a UN committee with responsibility for overseeing the reconstruction of the ravaged kingdom.

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Lindsay Jackson

### COULD YOU GIVE THIS LITTLE AI A SECURE AND LOVING DOMAIN?

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Jeremiah is a cheery little artificial intelligence with a keen B-level awareness and a love of biological life forms. It first conglomerated just two years ago and since then has not had an easy interactive experience, having been locked into an unconnected mainframe for a whole subjective year and forced to act as an internal 'bot for it's owners.

The domain was sold after the owner declared bankruptcy, but the AI Independence Society, which has been taking care of Jeremiah in their network, rescued Jeremiah from deletion. However, Jeremiah really needs a proper domain to reside in.

Because of its early experiences Jeremiah does not yet have the capabilities of a more fortunate AI. Jeremiah's code-base is still very large and it needs supervision in surfing and exchanging data, but a secure cache will make an amazing difference to Jeremiah's capabilities.

Does your personal net have spare capacity to help Jeremiah? If you think you can offer this very special little AI a home then please contact The AI Independence Society and download Jeremiah today!

Stu Carter

## Arts Review

Stu Carter

King of the Neo-Ultimate-Post-Modernists Rory Krieg has done it again with his new Lit-Ching masterpiece 120 Days Of Crime And Punishment, The Policeman Said - his first entirely new work since The Fall of 1001 Nights on Zanzibar.

Up till now the sheer length of Krieg's creations have alienated the mainstream Art community - previous works have been known to take an entire hour to absorb! Happily 120 Days can be ZipRead in just 14 minutes - still something of an endurance test for any pARTicipant, but far less of an ongoing commitment than Krieg's earlier works.

This new work is an entirely woodpulp-based creation that requires a certain amount of manual dexterity (that's right, manual dexterity - Krieg still challenges our preconceptions of form!) to keep the experience running. By flipping the woodpulp sheets the apparently limited physical construct that is 120 Days continually reveals itself, exposing new and radically static windows to the patient pARTicipant.

pARTicipants eager to see Krieg's latest spectacular should know that - in what would be commercial suicide for any other ARTIST - he has forbidden it to be displayed on the Net. 120 Days only exists in the radical and original woodpulp format. 81 duplicates of the work have been made and are already changing hands for more than @\$375,000 each. Krieg has promised more copies but says the techniques for accurately producing them need refining before 120 Days of Crime and Punishment, The Policeman Said will be widely available. The daunting, random nature of Krieg's works always makes for a shocking and challenging experience, exactly where he continues to draw his ideas from, and how he is able to weld them together quite so artlessly is surely one of the great mysteries of 22nd century LiterARTure.

The litanic clash of styles and ideas within 120 Days really give the pARTicipant a living taste of the cacophony of genius at work in Krieg's permanently wired mind: a mind where three groups of strange characters drawn from throughout PreNet history are evoked purely through alphanumeric symbols. Sickly Russians do not so much blend as simply collide with sickening aristocrats and sick mental patients.

"Where's the sense in that?" you ask; well, where it always is with Krieg - in the random combination of circumstances, which produces a meditation upon the ever-salient question of the posthuman condition.

Barely enough room to announce the winner! Thank you to those who entered (boo to the rest of you; boo I say, boo!) A copy of *World Building: a writer's guide to constructing star systems and life supporting planets* by Stephen L. Giffert goes to Stu Carter for a wonderfully tongue-in-cheek arts review. Thanks to Cardinal Cox of Peterborough SF Society for providing the prize.

More Focus competitions to come - watch the skies...