

# FOCUS

## The BSFA's magazine for writers

**Go, for they call you**

Italianate mystery by Gregory Arena

**Diary of a Certain World**

David Rawson's man disappears...

**Jesus saves and takes half damage**

Juliet McKenna on the writing/gaming dilemma

**Character competition**

Make your creation stand out!





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

## Issue 40 November 2001

BSFA

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#### About the cover

One of the entrances to Groom  
Lake Airforce Base, Nevada –  
better known as Dreamland or  
Area 51. This is a close as you  
can get without being arrested.  
Groom Lake has the longest  
runway on the planet – I always  
thought these reverse-  
engineered UFOs could turn on  
a sixpence...

### 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/greyscale only!  
*Focus* is always on the look-out for  
covers, illustrations and fillers.  
Recent advances in digital printing  
mean that I can now do hi-res  
photos.

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

#### How and where to submit

Postal and email editorial  
addresses in the first column!

#### 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!

Queries regarding the suitability of  
submissions should also be  
directed to the editorial address.  
Please wait at least a month before  
querying submissions – I do have  
an increasingly busy life!

### NEXT ISSUE DEADLINE:

1<sup>st</sup> March 2002

# pedantry

So we now live in a world where passenger jets are not just terrorist targets, but weapons.

I've rewritten this editorial column repeatedly – only to come to the conclusion that I have nothing coherent to say about events on the 11<sup>th</sup> September.

I count myself fortunate that I was able to shield my children from the images that were wall-to-wall on that day at a time when the kiddies' programmes should have been on; timely intervention from a neighbour and my wife via mobile phone saw to that. My children will grow up to treat this event as history, and maybe wonder why the grown-ups looked haunted for a few weeks.

As I write, there are wars and rumours of wars. But Britain has been fighting its own terrorist war for thirty years. Spain has ETA, Russia the Chechens, and all over the globe there are a horrid number of abbreviations fighting governments legitimate and tyrannical, wanting one thing or another, freedom or oppression, liberation or enslavement.

For all its faults, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is a pretty tolerant place – tolerant as opposed to accepting, for toleration is a state where people with markedly differing (and sometimes mutually incompatible) views can co-exist peacefully. "Democracy," said Winston Churchill, "is the worst form of government. Except for all the others we've tried." In this country, we have the freedom to criticise, to protest, to write. We enjoy our freedom of speech without giving it much thought; only when someone threatens to take it away under one guise or other do we mutter.

The first casualty of war is Truth. I hope it's not going to be that way this time, if there is a war. Because what sets us apart is our ability to acknowledge the truth, both good and bad, about ourselves, to criticise ourselves, even to laugh at ourselves and make ourselves look stupid, weak or arrogant.

Despite everything, we are the good guys. We just have to remember to act like it.

Simon Morden  
Gateshead, October 2001

## "If the doors of perception were cleansed"

Steve Sneyd

no queue for once so on impulse  
I said let's go for it Elaine  
wasn't bothered but I insisted  
the time machine shuttle was  
an eyeblink really we were  
there like a dodgem car where  
no one bumped you smooth silent  
as that and Future World I was oh  
I can't describe it lovely not  
way out or surreal a bit like  
how I'd feared somewhere you'd  
make silly mistakes show yourself  
up look stupid small not a bit of  
it just like today only nicer and  
futuristic how it ought to be the  
best of home only better smoother  
cosier somehow if we didn't have  
to get back jobs to go to and  
Elaine's mum and the kids and anyway  
at future prices everything my  
only complaint so dear I'd've  
wanted to stay forever as it was  
though Elaine was getting fed up I  
knew I insisted we stay till very  
last shuttle back that's how just  
by accident I think I saw who runs  
it now oh now all night I feel  
itchy I'd wondered how whoever  
made it made it so perfectly to  
seem as if it was just made for  
and everyone else in the street  
who'd been before us says the same  
we were the last to go no kids to  
make us rush soon as it opened it  
seems to everyone made just for  
them just how they'd dreamed they'd  
like tomorrow to be made to be now  
all night I think awake though  
I've said nothing to Elaine who  
sleeps as always very well not  
wanting she goes mad if I do  
waking up by me how in the walls  
their ancestors are taking notes  
small scratchy tiny droppings  
on every word and breath and  
deed and thought of me Elaine and me  
to know just right just how to make  
up there our good clean perfect  
family individualised haven heaven-ready  
and promise to Elaine in sleep we will  
not ever go again until I know we will

Steve Sneyd is a genre poet and publisher of Hilltop Press books. Recently out is 'A word in your eye: an introduction to the graphic poem', available from Hilltop Press, 4 Nowell Place, Almondbury, Huddersfield HD5 8PB



*from Lindsay Jackson via email*

Neal Asher has again provoked someone to write in; he's doing a great job! I actually agree with him that sex and nudity has been over-censored. However, I disagree very strongly that censorship of violence should stop. I base both of these views partly upon my Psychology degree and partly on the book "Sex, Violence and the media" by Prof. Hans Eysenck, ca 1975.

This book reviewed a large number of the "really scientific studies ... of the effects of TV violence" which Neal writes are "impossible" because there is "no possible control group". He underestimates the ingenuity of Psychologists! Individual people's viewing history varies. Certainly those most likely to be affected adversely by violent imagery are less repelled by it, but the two different effects can be teased apart by careful experiment and analysis.

There are experimental studies in which

subjects were exposed to violent or sexual imagery and then questioned or tested in some way. The results confirmed what most psychological theories predicted: violent imagery encourages violent behaviour in some people. There are such strong theoretical grounds for this being true that it would be very odd if it did not.

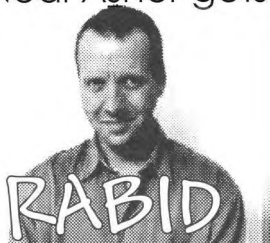
Neal's idea that violent imagery acts as a "safety valve" is based upon obsolete psychoanalytic theory. There is little evidence to support this, despite much research.

I disagree with Neal again where he writes "Those who are the spectators of violence are less inclined to take it up as a pastime - probably because they know what it really is." How is a popular violent film like, say "Seven" or "The Terminator" a "valuable learning resource" about the consequences of real-world violence? Low-intensity brutality like football violence, mugging, violence at the pub or in the family does not make for entertaining viewing!

We cannot "wrap everyone in cotton wool", but when did you last see an effective non-violent response to the threat of violence on TV or film? Ways of avoiding violence aren't as entertaining as violence itself.

Sadly the censors are becoming more tolerant of violence. We recently had both "Seven" and "Peeping Tom" on TV. Contrary to Neal's supposition, the censors seem to be doing themselves out of a job with no help from him.

## Neal Asher gets



### How it happens

I had considered running an article commenting on recent events, but I think there has been enough of sorrow, and quite probably, as I write this, a lot more to come. Instead, I'll tell my happy story:

When I first put pen to paper with the intent of producing fiction I had my dreams about the

future. I saw myself being wined and dined by publishers who were stunned and humble in the face of my sheer brilliance. The book I produced was a world shaker, it changed people's lives and brought them on their knees to the altar raised to the writing god Neal Asher. Then of course I woke up and it was time to go to work, which I did for twenty odd years and am still doing. Now though, there is light at the end of the tunnel and I don't think it's a train.

For each of the many years in which I have been writing seriously and have actually had something publishable I've been buying either the 'Writer's & Artist's Yearbook' or 'The Writer's Handbook'. Each time I would go through that year's copy and circle every science fiction publisher, and to each, one after the other, bang off a synopsis and sample chapters, blithe in my ignorance of the fact that my work would be one of the hundreds they received that month. I used the obverse side of the rejection letters that came back, to print out work I wanted to check through, or have someone else check through. I don't like to think how much I have spent on stamps and envelopes.

I've had my successes: short stories published, collections, novellas. In another article for this magazine I have detailed that ladder climb with someone standing on my fingers. It made depressing reading for then there had been no

happy ending. I digress, let me tell you how it happens.

During the summer I have a job which keeps me away from the processor: I cut grass, playing fields and the like, and relocate dogshit with my strimmer. During the winter I write all the time (and for those who say 'you're lucky' my answer is 'that's how I arranged it'). The winter before last, just before Christmas, I was writing away when there was a crash behind me. In the hall the coat rack had worked its raw plugs out and fallen, so I was feeling a bit spooked when the phone rang, and it took me a moment to gather my scattered senses. With a screwdriver in my hand I answered 'Uh?' when a rather well-spoken chap claimed to be the editorial director at Pan Macmillan. He went on to explain that he'd received my synopsis and sample chapters of Gridlinked and would rather like to see the rest. Still befuddled, I picked myself up off the floor and tried to say something about the website I had just set up (£150 phone bill that quarter). He misconstrued what I was trying to say with the happy upshot being that I emailed him Gridlinked five minutes later.

I left things for one month. I didn't want to be a pain and I have long taken the view that when you send something you forget about it and start work on something else. Towards the end of that month I was coming to the conclusion that what I had sent was, at 56,000 words, too short by today's standards. I emailed the publisher to this effect, saying I could extend Gridlinked and perhaps they would also like to look at The Skinner which is 80,000 words. Almost immediately I received a reader's report detailing the faults in the manuscript and saying precisely that – too short, but good. The publisher also suggested we should meet, and I took him up on that offer.

Three days until the meeting. In that time I worked very hard to increase Gridlinked by ten thousand words, for it is a fact that publishers, if they are going to take you on, want to know that you can produce. Reader, publisher, and myself, met in an Italian restaurant in The Strand, and a very long meeting it was. I took along anything I thought might advance my case: published novellas and collections, copies of reviews etc. The meeting moved, after a few hours, to a wine bar. After seven hours the reader took me to Liverpool Street as, without his assistance, I would have ended up sharing someone's sleeping bag on the underground. Despite my drunken stupor I did not forget that the publisher promised to come back to me with an offer.

The offer came one week later and I was more than pleased. The publisher had obviously noted down much of what I had said and studied my website. The contract would be for three books (Gridlinked, The Skinner, and The Line of Polity – follow-up to the first) for which I would receive staged payments. The first stage came when I signed the contract, and now it was time for me to

get on with some work.

Over the next couple of months the reality of what was happening was brought home to me time and again. Macmillan's publicity department got onto me with a form to fill in giving contacts and asking me to tick off what I was prepared to do. I was invited along with my wife, Caroline, to attend the 2kon in Glasgow. I was also called into London to pose in litter-choked alleys for a photographer called Jerry Bauer – a nice friendly chap who has photographed Dirk Bogard, Julie Christie, Sidney Sheldon, Marian Bradley. I felt I was entering the Twilight Zone when he mentioned photographing Robert Silverberg and after I had repeated the name went on to ask, "Do you know Bob?" Yeah, me and ten million other SF readers.

Never, ever believe that it is going to be easy once a big publisher takes you on. At that stage you really begin to work, and everything before has just been playing. I increased Gridlinked to 134,000 words (in a very short time), then waited with a razor poised over my wrist. It was gratifying to be told that they were surprised at the speed at which I had done this, worried that I had padded and produced a load of crap, and pleasantly surprised that the final result was better than the original. Note to writers extending work: you do not swell the story you have written with pointless dialogue and description, you extend the story, you develop plotlines. Had I padded this book I've no doubt it would have come right back in my face.

After this, Gridlinked came back to me copiously edited. I have to admit I was dismayed at the extent of this editing, but have since learnt that in my case it was pretty minor. I went through it all taking onboard what I thought right and discarding the rest. Through this process I discovered some bad habits I'd been getting into, and probably learnt more in that one month than in the preceding five years. The book was accepted and is now on the shelves in the book shops in the large format version.

Now I am at the enviable point of having had The Skinner accepted and am awaiting the cover for that. Time to sit back and bask in glory? No, now it's time for me to work very hard at The Line of Polity and make sure I produce something that cannot possibly be refused, because that can happen. You'd maybe think that with that first book taken by a major publisher that you've made it. Not so. You'd then think this the case with the second book. Guess again. The reality is that you have to 'make it' for every book. The reality for me as that I must continue to work hard. ... But then that is better than the reality many are facing in the world today.

The Skinner's cover is now available for viewing at Neal Asher Space, and very smart it looks too...

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

# Go, For They Call You

*Gregory Santo Arena*

... went to learn the gipsy-lore ...  
In hat of antique shape, and cloak of grey,  
The same the gipsies wore.'  
Mathew Arnold

Peter Sabbia slipped silently out of his flat. In one hand he held a spade and a small plastic bag. In the other the latchkey that he was turning slowly and silently.

If his neighbour lady Signora Brembilla heard him, he would be for the high jump. He tiptoed down the stairs to the close where his bicycle was. He slowly closed the heavy glass door of his poorly renovated old block of flats.

Then he silently glided over to his cycle where it was locked to a railing, unchained it without making a noise and inserted the spade and plastic bag in its boot – a closeable trug-like thing on the rear carrier.

He freewheeled the pushbike to the gate so silently that the only noise it made was the click-click of the rear hub.

As he quietly pulled the gate open he looked over his shoulder at Signora Brembilla's terrace.

"Where are you going so late at night?" Signora Brembilla asked him.

"Oh, nowhere really... I must fly. Bye."

He clanged the gate behind and pedalled off at a rare clip. He did not want her to know that he was going to the banks of a nearby gill to bury his hamster.

After four or five minutes Sabbia was at the gill. The sky was cloudless and a bright crescent moon was out. He had just turned into the path from its perpendicular starting point at the torrent's bridge that the road itself passed over.

He continued south along the path for about eighty metres. He hopped off his bike and looked furtively about. He put down the kickstand and opened the trug. He pulled out the spade and immediately got stuck in digging under a birch.

After two minutes he had finishing putting the little corpse of Edward Mirabelli into the tiny grave. Quickly covering it over he remembered when he had done the same thing with Mrs Millabanti, Edward's 'wife', a couple of months ago.

Actually, the entire long bank of the torrent was a hamster mausoleum: Moses and Zipporah, Dante and Beatrice, Petrarch and Laura, etc., etc.

He remembered that he would have to tell the

girl at the animal stall in the city centre that he would not be bringing her any more cubs. They had done a deal: his supply of baby hamsters from his terribly prolific love's young dream couples kept the stall well supplied and Sabbia's monthly twenty-thousand lire electricity bill paid.

Sabbia jumped on his cycle and was about to pedal off when he heard someone.

He started, at first from surprise and then embarrassment. Who but a loony would be burying a hamster at half ten at night? Evidently the person did not see Sabbia. At least she made no gestures as such. Sabbia had been able to make out that it was a woman because of the long hair and long skirt – of course it could be one of the zone's transsexual transvestites on the game.

Sabbia did not know what to do. If he made his presence known she would be frightened, think he was barmy for entombing a hamster – if she in actual fact had seen the ceremony – and almost certainly scream. If he remained hidden, she would probably soon go away and not scream. If the worst came to the proverbial worst and she did see him and scream, he would have not lost much. He opted to stay hidden.

She had opened a large hippy-like India bag and had taken out a spray can. At present she was shaking it. The metal bounce inside of it was rattling about. It sounded eerie in the amorphous, ill-lit and nearly moonless night.

Then paint hissed out. She started painting something on the narrow tarmac path. And then hastily finished when a cat waiting on the nearby bridge started hooting. A man's voice shouted something at her in Romany.

Of course, Sabbia thought. It was obvious she was a gipsy. Long skirt, long hair, the bangles on her wrists that had jangled whilst she had painted.

She responded back to the driver in their Romany gipsy language and then fled. She was soon at the Mercedes. It had been illuminated for a split-second by the interior light when the door had opened.

The Mercedes screeched off, probably to the nearby gipsy camp about five kilometres away.

Sabbia slowly approached the place where the drawing was. The small, shallow river gurgled as he tried to make it out in the darkness. It seemed complex. It reminded him of the flagstone artists who did chalk drawings on pavements and

piazas.

It was a silvery abstract design similar to those that young thugs painted on railway carriages. It was hard to see the details in the dark, but its principle feature was a thick line perpendicular to the tarmac path.

It was like a boundary.

A police car passed with lights and sirens going. Sabbia snapped out of his reverie and remembered that he had to be going home.

He fetched his cycle. Now that he had to pass the painted pavement, he lifted it up and leaped over the artwork careful not to step on the wet paint.

He slowly joined the road, on the look-out for gypsies.

Cycling home he wondered about the painting. He knew gypsies were wont to paint symbols near houses they wanted to intrude: one symbol might mean there was a dog, another that the houseowner always out.

"No, really Peter. I'd like you to have it," Matteo said. "I wanted to give it to someone, but I didn't know who. I was meant to give it to you."

Peter Sabbia reluctantly accepted the CD with inspirational music dedicated to a local saint who had died recently and who was about to be canonised.

Today Matteo was in multi. He was often about in his frock. Evidently he had been a hermit for about twenty years, but now painted a bit and restored frescoes in churches.

"I'm off then," finished Matteo. "I shouldn't want to miss my train. There's a pilgrimage to Father Franco's tomb today and—"

He hurried off to the nearby railway station leaving Sabbia to look at the CD whilst straddling his flash cycle.

Sabbia dismounted a moment, opened the trug and bunged in the CD in one well-practised movement, then remounted and continued on down the pavement towards home.

Sabbia soon rounded the corner where the pavement turned left under the railway it had been running along. He was accompanied by a rumbling train passing overhead.

Just on the other side of the bridge two Moroccans were negotiating a drug deal with a zonked heroin-addict wail who could barely stand on her own two feet. Sabbia free-wheeled by and wondered if the traffic lights would still be green.

He pulled up to the junction where a nine-year-old gypsy girl usually begged money from the cars stopped at the traffic lights. A couple of months ago he had given her a doll.

The morning was hotting up and the sky turning slate as the fresh, crisp breeze receded back towards the Pre-Alps where it had come from at sunrise.

Sabbia watched the gypsy girl weaving in and out between the cars with her little green plastic plate usually used for putting under pot plants. It was a standard part of the traps gypsies begging for money at crossroads used. The lights were about to change so she hurried towards the corner as the scaraboid flow of motor cars began droning more acutely.

The lights were green for Sabbia now so he slipped down the little ramp into the street to cross over to her side.

"Hallo, monkey," he said to her, popping up the ramp on the other side of the street.

She smiled and went round to the cycle's trug and opened it.

Turning round nearly backwards straddling the cycle, Sabbia saw that she was crestfallen. Her usual tuck was not there.

"Tomorrow," he said.

Then her mother, on the other side of the junction, started shouting. The girl closed the trug and came round to the front of the cycle to be chucked under the chin.

While the little girl's mother kept on with what had become a bit of Donnybrook, the little gypsy looked oddly at Sabbia, nearly eerily. The same feeling came to mind when gypsies intruded a flat in the city centre in the middle of the afternoon without being seen or heard by anyone.

It was all the more eerie since it was not a child's glance, but a glance that said *I know something about you. I know you saw a strange and secret gypsy ritual you should have not.*

How could she know, he thought as she ran to the middle of the junction, her mother in a rage and swearing in Romany.

Sabbia pedalled off, continuing along the pavement through the reeking car fumes. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the gypsy mother biff her daughter. He stopped and turned, then suddenly realised he could not do a thing about it.

It was eight in the evening and Sabbia was returning home. He had been feeling terribly spiky. His lessons had not gone well.

He kept on seeing the traveller slapping her daughter.

He told himself he should be careful. Tinkers are jealous of their children and some will batter them to keep them isolated from non-gypsies and the outside world.

In his mind's eye he kept on seeing two scenes: the mother slapping and then the precocious eyes of the little girl. *Mind*, they seemed to say. But Sabbia had only cottoned on now that this had been the afternoon's message.

He was passing where the gypsy girl begged on the home strait to his flat.

*Mind, mind, mind, mind* went through his head.

The traffic lights had gone green and he did

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not need to brake to go down the little handicap ramp. His wife had phoned him on his mobile telephone to ask him if had been him calling in the afternoon and ringing off without saying anything.

Probably gipsies checking flats and houses to see when people were out so they can intrude.

*Mind mind mind mind...*

His head seemed to burst. Looking groggily to his left he blurrily saw that a car was screaming towards him. As is common in Italy, the driver had not wanted to stop for the red light.

Sabbia squeezed home the brake levers. The brusque and immediate stop catapulted him to the ground whilst the maniac driver swerved slightly to avoid running him down, without so much as slowing down while screeching round the corner.

*Mind mind...* decrescendowed and faded away.

Sabbia picked himself up and then dusted himself down.

He picked up his cycle and looked it over. Nothing broken. He waited a moment for the traffic lights then crossed the street having checked very carefully for cars beforehand.

He soon passed the newsagent's and biffed the bell-push of his flat in order to signal his wife to bung the pasta in the boiling water on the cooker. It was time for lunch.

As he went to put his cycle away he wondered if his wife had telephoned the fertility clinic.

Peter Sabbia had just prepared some lessons and was now looking through some notes for a short story he was working on. He could not concentrate for toffee though. He had had a row with his wife that morning.

Thank goodness he had had the foresight not to sell his bedsitter in the block of flats next to their home. The bed sitter had become a surgery of sorts and in actuality was his bolthole.

The short story notes were all fuzzy: just babble.

His mobile phone rang.

Starting, he barked his knee against the desk. He left the cellphone where it rang away stuck in a little flower-design box stuffed with pens and pencils.

Whoever was phoning would ring off as soon as he answered. Just as the presumed same person did with his home phone and the bolthole phone. In sum, a beargarden. Not to mention this morning's barney about the fertility clinic. His wife had not phoned yet. It was nearly impossible to get an appointment and...

It seemed one day she wanted a baby and then the next day no... Last year he had spent more than twelve million lira to try and sort out his sterility -- half his yearly wages.

The bally mobile phone stopped.

Who on earth was ringing through on all three phones? It probably was not gipsies at this point.

Alessia. his goolie-crushing ex-girlfriend? She had done this same trick after their bust-up when he had first met Clara, his wife.

A cool summer breeze came in the open window bringing in the scent of washing hung from the block of flats opposite. He looked at his watch. Time to be off.

Sabbia gathered up a couple of books, his diary and pencilcase, checked if the answerphone was on, latched his flat door, and then bounded downstairs two steps at a time.

He unlocked his flash touring cycle from the railing at the bottom of the close and went towards metal gate.

He opened and then clanged the metal gate behind him and hopped onto the saddle whilst concentrating on the maniac Italian traffic.

Peddalling his chrome pushbike at a fair clip, a ton-up boy in a red Alfa-Romeo bombed by missing him by a foot. Sabbia was about to make his usual very vulgar gesture of defiance -- to say the driver was a cuckold, which was extremely offensive in Italy -- while curving into a sideturning when he froze.

He saw his ex-girlfriend screeching away.

What the devil?

Off she went. Sabbia watched her as she turned right at the traffic lights where the little gipsy girl begged.

This was strange, Sabbia thought.

Stranger yet was the fact that it seemed she had stopped to give something to the little Romany girl's mother before heading in what was more or less the direction of the gipsy camp.

Sabbia was headed in the same direction, but kept on telling himself not to overegg the pudding.

Don't have kittens. It was a coincidence. It was all a coincidence. The telephone calls ... the whole shooting match. Alessia did not really give something to the gipsy girl's mother, she was not really going towards the gipsy camp.

By the time Sabbia arrived at the outskirts of the city, which was now a mixture of fields, industrial estates and council flats, his breathing had returned to normal. He had conquered his anxiety and was now pedalling by a derelict villa adjacent to disused railway sidings.

It had not rained for three days and so the humidity was unbearable. Sabbia was dripping. The hills he was heading towards were capped by clouds which meant it would rain soon. The company where he was giving an English lesson was just in front of them.

He curved to the right to begin the wide curve going to the left. The stench of rubbish came to his nostrils accompanied by the odour of grilling kebabs both of which were interlaced with gipsy music blaring from loud speakers.

He was cycling through the gipsy camp.

Naked babies ran about. Dogs yapped insouciantly because of the heat and chased



languidly after his cycle. A breeze from the hills that announced a coming summer storm blew bits of litter about.

The camp itself was on the right and followed the curve of the road which in turn followed the curvatures of the gill adjacent to and behind the camp. It was the same gill that two miles downstream passed near Sabbia's flat where the hamster cemetery was.

The road was curving to the left now where there was the entrance to an open-air fruit and vegetable market and some portable toilets.

Sabbia braked to a screeching halt. His jaw hit the ground in disbelief.

He saw Alessia. She was standing beside her parked car just ahead on the right side of the road. What she was giving to a gipsy woman fell from her hand when she saw Sabbia. She then jumped in her car, her short soot-black air reflecting in the July sun whilst her tanned thighs glistened olive under her short, short skirt, and sped away.

Sabbia flew along the twenty yards to where the two had been. He arrived in an instant. The gipsy woman had fled as well.

Sabbia dismounted and then picked up the circular that lay on the ground. He stared at it incredulously. It was just an advert – with his name on. That is, it was his junk mail. Why the hell had Alessia snaffled his junk mail and brought it to a gipsy woman?

Trying to puzzle it out, he heard people approaching. He remembered that he was at the northern end of the camp where the gill curved yet again. This time to the right.

As the grumble of voices approached ever nearer, he noticed something hidden in the dark shadows of a leanhay constructed of odd bits and fragments as was all the gipsy bidonville.

It was a mannequin. Curious, Sabbia entered the shadows. The mannequin was of him. At least it seemed so.

It was straddling a cycle. Attached to the cycle were bits of paper: typescript pages which had somehow gone missing from his flat (his surname and page number typed in every top right-hand corner), other bits of junk mail, a school timetable. Their least common multiple was his name. Sabbia was about to investigate further.

*Mind mind mind mind*

Just as Sabbia's head was about to burst, he leaped to the left and a shotgun blast exploded three feet away.

He bounded out of the shadows, leaped on his bike and went off like the wind. *Mind mind* was still vaguely burning in his head as another two shotgun blasts sounded.

But they were far away.

That evening he arrived at his lesson in record time.

So this was what going crackers was. Balmy, potty, round the twist. Sabbia had finally got there. Ex-girlfriends making arcane pacts with gipsies, strange voices in his head, mannequins on bicycles. What could he do?

His wife would think him stark staring mad if he dared breathe a word of this codswallop. What could he do?

It was the morning after the gipsy ambush and he was off to school. He had argued with wife again.

He entered the street on his cycle and pedalled slowly chewing it all over. It had rained a bit last night so now the air was dry and blowsy. The sun was shining. And the bakery opposite was perfuming the neighbourhood with the scent of fresh bread.

Sabbia saw Matteo, his monk friend. Sabbia considered him fairly dotty so perhaps Matteo could be the one to help Sabbia, the sick dog over the stile.

Ten minutes later he had told Matteo all about the odd goings-on. At present, morning traffic whizzing by, he was waiting for the Sibylline response that would sort all his problems out whilst excepting Matteo's pre-Christmas quiz questions on the CD he had given him about a week before.

Matteo simply responded, "something very, very good is going to happen to you." Then he hived off.

"Christ above!" was all Sabbia could manage. Then he pedalled off towards his lesson.

Sabbia was flabbergasted. The scene with Matteo two minutes ago kept on going through his head. They had been there next to the pongy recycling bins. Sabbia (not loony) had emptied his soul (of things loony) to someone quite kind, generous, human and pleasant (but vaguely loony) and received a barmy response: 'Something very, very good is going to happen to you.' What? Would he win the Lottery?

It all circled about in his fuzzy head while he pedalled slowly and reflectively.

Let it go, he thought. You're under stress. Relax. Tomorrow things will take on perspective. Not to worry.

The little traveller was begging at the usual corner. Sabbia became exuberant. It is her. She holds the answers to all the mysteries deciding me against my sanity. Yes!

Do shut up, Sabbia told himself soberly.

The Gipsy girl had dropped her begging bowl and was dashing towards him. Her mother on the opposite corner was alarmed. Sabbia froze.

The little girl came to him, clutched the handlebar of Sabbia's bike and wanted to tell him something. She did not speak; she probably only knew two or three words in Italian. Her eyes

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spoke though.

Was it 'I am sorry about your pickle' they seemed to say? They were little pure fountains encircled by the shite that was her life of being forced to beg.

"It was you, wasn't it?" Sabbia implored. "You saved me from the car and the shotgun, right? You were speaking to me."

Her eyes seemed to say 'no' and show bewilderment at his question.

Her mother had arrived, pulled her away and knocked her about. As her mother dragged her away she fixed on Sabbia, her head turned.

'It wasn't me,' her eyes said. 'Who was speaking to you?' her eyes asked.

"Who, indeed?" Sabbia mumbled to himself now incredibly bewildered.

As the traffic lights changed the metallic cockroaches started buzzing and separated her and her mother from him.

Sabbia could not sleep. The tension and hypertension of the past week had finally caught him up. The week had been terrible. He was still fighting with his wife. He had been ratty with a student. He had never done that before. He had been feeling spiky for a week. It was as if he were hypersensitive. He could hear everything. Even the tick-tick of his neighbour's quartz alarm clock in the block of flats across the street. He had become an odd type of receiver, a tranny getting all types of various and sundry signals. He was constantly receiving metaphysical babble: a little girl's voice telling him 'mind...'

It was half eleven. His wife was sound asleep and snoring slightly. Sabbia was sleeping on the settee in the sitting room.

He could hear the pub on the ground floor closing. It was last orders.

"Blow it"

He got up, dressed and left the flat, his wife still snoring contentedly.

Ten minutes later he was walking along the lowland gill. It was his stamping ground when he needed to turn things over.

Sabbia tried to make sense of it all. It was impossible. All the events were inexplicable, but his permanent week-long sensation of being strung up continued to convince him that there was something magical and/or metaphysical in it all, but...

Rubbish.

He was trying to calm down now, but started thinking about all his hamsters: Anthony and Cleopatra, Mrs Millaband and Edward Mirabell, Renzo and Lucia... at least fifty or so plus offspring all buried here along the stream.

Feeling a bit calmer he started walking back towards the road. Sleep now seemed a somewhat inviting idea.

He pushed his cycle gently with his right hand. The chain went click click click whilst rustling noises started.

The wind he thought. But there was no wind. Then there were splashing noises.

Rummy.

Sabbia stopped at the bridge and was about to get on and go home.

There was something swimming in the gill going upstream – towards the gipsy camp.

Off he went at a score towards the camp trying to imagine what he would find when it emerged from the dark waters of the stream.

Ten minutes later he was approaching the tinker camp.

There was a huge Guy Fawkes bonfire at the north end of the camp where his voodoo mannequin was.

Common sense told him not to approach, but then the little girl voice came telling him to burn the idol.

Then he *knew* that if he burnt the idol he would be able to sleep. The voice did not become thunder as usual. Now it let him think, concentrate.

He slowed. The soot rising high in the air mixed with the stench of rubbish and chemical toilets.

Sabbia hopped off his cycle and hid it behind some boxes and crates next to the open-air market entrance. As he finished covering it over with a final flattened carton something touched his arm.

It was her. The little travelling person. She put her forefinger to her lips. Then Sabbia saw she was surrounded by four or five confederates. They were all Romany kids he seemed to have noticed in the neighbourhood.

He followed them as they had motioned him to. As they crossed the road and headed towards the stream Sabbia still heard the voice in his head ever so subtly.

Once at the stream Sabbia remembered why he had come. Seeing the strange form in the water reminded him.

He pointed, but the Romany children motioned him to silence and to move on.

On they went along the banks of the gill. Soon the enormous fire was above them at the top of the stream's bank. They carefully crawled up the bank unobserved to watch the bizarre happenings.

Sabbia's double was still there. To its left was the bonfire and on the other side was a life-sized Madonna – mother of Jesus, not pop star.

In front of the Hyde Park Corner scene of idols and Romas with Kalashnikovs was a table with a gipsy sorceress of sorts behind. The gipsy girl's mother. At present the little gipsy was watching

her mother expressionlessly.

On the table, a type of altar, there were a pair of cellular phones. Out of one he heard his wife's voice. Out of the other his recorded voice which was the answer phone at his bolthole surgery.

Clara must be hysterical, he thought.

Sabbia started examining the other bits on the table while the fire crackled away: an old bicycle pump and plastic water bottle pilfered from his cycle circa a month ago; letters from London editors judging from the vaguely perceptible postage stamps...

The Romany girl gave him a good nudge in the ribs. She pointed to the fire.

The voice in his head translated. He had to circle round the fire and then set the idol afire with a spill.

He hesitated but the voice started hammering.

The children stayed where they were and he started circling about.

As he crawled he heard the same rustling as he had heard along the gill near his flat.

He had no idea as how to get round to the idol, his voodoo mannequin. The silly cow sorceress was chanting now, whilst the fire illuminated the Madonna idol and all the flowers at its feet.

The voice pushed him on while the rustling became more intense and intermingled with splashing.

Suddenly there were shots and screaming. The gipsy toughs had started shooting at the ground and shouting whilst the witch shrieked at the top of her voice.

The entire alfresco gipsy temple was covered in Sabbia's resurrected hamsters. Every square inch of the place was squirming in them. Somehow they had been conjured up to help Sabbia and the Roma children.

Sabbia would have continued watching dumbfounded, but the little girl voice told him to set his idol on fire. Which he did while hamsters went up the trouser legs and down the shirts of the gipsy bully-boys. They howled and shot in the air.

Then the Sabbia idol exploded in flames and all the gipsies ran away terrified.

After several minutes when the bull's noon proceedings had calmed and the eerie theatre burnt down, Sabbia heard his wife. He quickly went to the mobile phone on the table.

"I'll be home in about half an hour," he said then rang off.

As the children were pulling him away he could still barely hear the little girl voice in his head. What she was saying was incomprehensible though.

Ten minutes later Sabbia was travelling down the gill in a rowing boat with the Romany kids. They had chucked his cycle in to it before having done the same with Sabbia.

They were propelling the boat along with poles

like Oxford freshers while Sabbia tried to puzzle things out.

The only thing he could suss out was that he was 'switched off'. The gipsy spell his ex-girlfriend had orchestrated had been broken. But whilst it had been active Sabbia was able not only to summon his departed hamster population but also perceive things. A bit like now. He could still somewhat understand the Romany children, but not like before. His super intuition/telepathy had nearly been switched off, but the plug had not been completely pulled out of the point yet.

He had the idea that the children were still accompanying him to do just that. Completely shut down the spell so the voice could no longer speak to him.

They had arrived at the bridge near his flat.

They quickly shoved him and his cycle out of the boat and brought him to the tarmac graffiti.

They made him walk over it back to front to how he had a week ago.

Sabbia cottoned on to the fact that it had been the trap which had ensnared him, then the little girl voice was gone.

The children scurried away to the boat, hastily waving good-bye.

Picking up his cycle from the tangle of weeds along the stream and pushing it up the bank to the tarmac path. Sabbia felt immensely sad and lonely. He was afraid he would never hear the little girl voice again.

He got on his bike and cycled home, turning things over in general and wondering why Matteo had said 'something good' was going to happen.

Smiling, Sabbia slowly and quietly turned the latchkey in the door. He had sorted out who the voice of the little girl in his head belonged to. He silently entered and locked the door without making a noise.

"Peter!" his wife said, the light in their bedroom turning on. "Firstly: what were you getting up to when you telephoned?" she demanded.

Sabbia had arrived at the bedroom, sat down on the bed and started putting off his shoes.

"Secondly," she continued her brown curly hair bobbing about her face. "I'm pregnant."

"I know," Sabbia replied still smiling his Cheshire-cat grin. "It's a girl and I'll be hearing her voice again."

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Gregory Arena is 38 and lives in Bergamo in Northern Italy with his wife and baby daughter. He teaches English and goes cross-country skiing. Ages ago he took a degree in English. He's swanned round quite a bit: Southern California, London, Europe, Greece, and Africa. Now he's settled down in Italy and has published a fair amount of short stories and poems in Small Press publications.

# Diary of a Certain World

David Rawson

"A great many people disappear each year," said Afton, in the slow, measured way common to mystics and policemen.

"The people I've seen," said Tillotson, forcing his voice above the drone of the car, "those rootless people out on the streets. What if?.."

He stopped abruptly.

"What if some of them are like you?" asked Harbin.

He nodded.

There was a long pause.

"We must miss dozens," Afton added regretfully.

Tillotson though, had stopped listening. The sinuous, brightly lit highway had long since given way to something darker and wider. He was looking out again at the night sky - suffocating under its infinite possibilities.

The patient continued to pull absent-mindedly at the glove. The lightning really had welded it to the club.

Doctor Parker, the man who'd returned his patient's near nemesis to him, was stood at the end of his bed, pondering the even stranger aftermath to the incident.

"It's rather hard to figure out," he said diffidently, "the number on the card was wrong, and when we did get through to the college we couldn't find anyone who recognised your name."

Peter Tillotson looked up frowning.

"That's ridiculous. I've lectured in history there for eighteen years. You must have been put through to somewhere else."

The frown gave way to a weary shake of the head.

"They've probably changed all the numbers. I have been out for over three days after all," he said sarcastically.

The doctor still looked concerned. Tillotson narrowed his eyes a little.

"Well presumably you got through to my wife okay? The golf club has all my details - next of kin, etcetera."

Parker decided to sit down.

"That doesn't make sense either. They say that they've no record of you, even though you carried your own membership details in your wallet."

Tillotson tossed aside the instrument of his downfall and looked up at the heavens, but his display of annoyance masked his nagging anxiety. He told himself that it was at least possible that the hospital had gotten through to the wrong college and the club had mislaid the details of his membership.

"I always carry a little address book in my pocket," he said, looking about the room as if expecting to see it. "I don't of course have my wife or mother's numbers in it - people rarely write down such important ones - but you must have found it and tried some of them."

The doctor sighed.

"We've been through all of them, but nothing tallies. The number of a garage you'd written down was correct - the problem was they'd never heard of you."

Tillotson still had a headache and this wasn't making things any easier. He needed to lie down and rest, but he was too disturbed by what he'd been told. He wrote down his home number, along with those of his mother and brother, and gave them to Parker.

Ever since he'd come round some seven hours earlier, he'd experienced a feeling of disorientation. Initially he'd attributed it solely to the fact that it's not every day that one practices a few swings outside the clubhouse, only to wake up and find oneself in hospital. Now he wasn't so sure. Deep within his brain, a red light was flashing whose meaning he didn't know and perhaps didn't even want to.

Parker returned shaking his head.

"The hospital switchboard must be malfunctioning," said Tillotson, more out of frustration at his predicament, than an attempt at an explanation.

He sank back into his pillows.

"What I really don't understand is why Wendy hasn't been here? I've been missing nearly five days. She knew that I'd be at the club on Monday afternoon, and must have got in touch with them when I didn't return home."

Once, when he was a little boy, Tillotson had been separated from his mother on a shopping trip and he'd wandered around for what had seemed an eternity, trying to find her through a stream of tears. He never thought he'd ever again experience that sense of abandonment.

Parker didn't know what to say. He suspected

that there was far more to Tilotson than met the eye if, indeed, that was his true name. Perhaps he was some kind of confidence trickster who went under several assumed identities, but who'd been caught out by a bizarre twist of fate? Whatever, it was all beyond him and was doubtless best handled by the police, whom he intended getting in touch with very shortly.

"You just get some rest," he said smiling. "I'm sure there's a beautifully straightforward explanation for all this - though I can't for the life of me think what it might be at the moment. I'll see you later this evening."

Once the doctor had left, his patient got out of bed and hurriedly dressed. Though he felt sluggish and lightheaded he'd no obvious physical injury, and felt sure that he could make it into London from the hospital, for there was a railway station only a mile or so away.

Having scribbled a note apologising for his rudeness, he managed to make his way unobserved to a stairwell, after which it was plain sailing through to the hospital entrance.

He was only slightly acquainted with the locale, but couldn't shake off the feeling that there was something wrong. As yet, he couldn't put his finger on anything specific, but was relieved to find the station more or less where he'd remembered it. There was a newsagents at its entrance and that at least allowed him to confirm one thing. He could see for himself that only five days had indeed elapsed since he'd been struck by lightning. Earlier, it had occurred to him - quite idiotically, he now realised - that the reason all the phone numbers had been wrong, had been because he'd lain in a coma for a very long time and that the doctor had been dissembling so as to break the news to him more slowly.

This partial sense of relief though, was short-lived, for as he scrutinised the combined rail and underground map on the station platform, his unease about his surroundings returned. In amongst the usual names were a number of unfamiliar ones. For sure, if one looked at any map of London and its hinterland, one could always dredge up odd place names that one had never heard mentioned. This though was different. Besides, the colour of one of the underground lines didn't seem right.

He played with a new theory. What if he'd had some sort of partial stroke? After all, the brain was a delicate electrical organ - plug several thousand volts through it and the world was bound to appear a strange place for sometime after.

It still didn't explain all the wrong phone numbers though, but he put that to one side. The important thing was to get into London. His sister-in-law always held her meditation class at home on Friday afternoons. That was why he'd decided to go there from the hospital even though his home in Oxfordshire was somewhat closer. The way he rationalised it all to himself, was that his

sister-in-law was more likely to be 'holding the fort' than his wife and he could re-establish his lines of communication the quicker. He suppressed the more logical consideration, which would have been to have gone straight home.

The journey to his brother's house did nothing to allay his unease. Not that anything dreadful happened to him, it was just that certain things looked odd. As he travelled from the station in a taxi, he noticed that the road signs appeared to be a little bit different - as though the lettering on them had been changed to a different font. Half a mile from the house, in an area that was quite familiar to him, he was particularly bewildered to see how many of the shops had new names. He'd driven along the particular stretch of road only two months before: was it possible for so much to have changed in such a short period of time?

He wondered if his accident had radically altered his perception of the world, such that certain things had been rendered unfamiliar, whilst others he was merely noticing for the first time. It also occurred to him that he might have been injected with all sorts of things whilst he'd been unconscious, and the effects had yet to wear off. For a few moments, he chided himself for his irresponsible behaviour in leaving the hospital without permission.

The taxi turned into a familiar enough avenue, and Tilotson got the driver to stop a dozen or so trees down it. This was the way he always judged he was more or less outside his brother's house, for the area was so leafy that it was hard to see much of the individual houses until you were stood outside the front gate.

A brick gate post carried a plaque bearing the title 'The Old Pines', the name given to the house by its inter-war owners. As he got out of the cab, Tilotson could see a couple of unfamiliar cars parked in his brother's drive - doubtless vehicles belonging to members of his sister-in-law's class.

He paused for a few moments in the front garden. They must have had the place repainted in the last couple of months. The paintwork used to be dark blue and white, but now it was sky blue. Yet it didn't seem like new work. He put this shift in perception in the same pigeon-hole as the changing colour of the underground line. Clearly colour, amongst other things, was going to be a problem.

The door was opened by a young woman whom he took to be one of the class.

"Is Cathy in?" he asked, in as jaunty a tone as he could manage.

"I'm sorry," said the woman looking puzzled.

"Cathy Tilotson - if you could tell her that her brother-in-law's here."

An elderly woman hovered in the background.

"This man wants a lady named Cathy," said the younger one, looking over her shoulder.

The older woman took over.

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"I'm afraid that no one of that name lives here," she said, anxious to shut the door lest the caller prove troublesome.

"But my brother and wife do," said Tillotson. "This is the Old Pines, Claremont Avenue?" he asked, anxious to find out if he was going completely mad.

She nodded her head.

For a few moments, Tillotson stood looking nonplussed. Then he became aware that the young woman was waving a piece of paper. It was an electricity bill for the property, and it had the name of a stranger at the top of it.

There was no other Claremont Avenue in the borough.

Tillotson had this confirmed for him at a local hotel that night.

The next day he confirmed for himself that his own home had become occupied by strangers. The red light had been wired to that subliminal part of him that knew - that had known ever since he'd woken up.

As for all his friends and relatives, there was no sign of any of them - bar one old acquaintance whom he'd managed to track down, but who'd claimed never to have laid eyes on him before.

With the passing of time he also encountered more prosaic difficulties. None of his plastic cards were recognised by cash dispensing machines. The banks themselves were of no help, for none of them had heard of Peter Tillotson.

The logical thing would have been to have gone to the police, but his theory of the moment was that he was the victim of an enormous conspiracy whose ramifications rendered him beyond any form of legal assistance. Either that, or he was trapped within the architecture of some madness - a schizophrenic episode that rendered the world simultaneously detailed and logical, but unfamiliar and alienating.

Ten days after he'd left hospital, the police came to him. He was arrested breaking into what he believed was his own home, seeking saleable assets and the evidence that might have made sense of his predicament. From him they garnered his story and possession of certain things that he'd carried about his person: the cards with magnetic strips that babbled in an unexpected language, the whole paraphernalia that bespoke a life of counterfeiting - or something else.

Tillotson absconded with only the clothes he'd left hospital in, and with only two ideas: to subsist, and to find the one person who might recognise and hence validate him.

A week later, just before dusk, he walked out the front door of a minor publishing house in Central London. The company had dealt with

some of his work and it was possible they'd been overlooked in the conspiracy against him.

They hadn't.

Not that he really believed in such a thing. The conspiracy was some cozy mind game that he enveloped himself in to keep at bay still more terrifying thoughts. Still snigger were the considerations of his madness - or rather, his yearning for it. Madness implied a sanity that was out beyond and could be worked towards. He'd seen plenty of the mad as he'd walked the streets, and how he envied them, for they had their place in things, however wretched it was.

He felt very tired and sat down on the steps of the office block. Less than three weeks before, he'd been a man who'd avoided all the messy things in life, such as depression, failure and personal tragedy: a man who'd believed that despair was something that would only come to him when he was old and sick. But it had come early, at the age of forty-five.

He stared down the road, wondering what he would do next. For a few moments he considered suicide, but suicide was for those who rejected the world, whereas his whole programme had been to seek engagement with it. Besides, to kill oneself required a supreme act of will, whereas now even the idea of movement seemed fantastic to him. His mind was like a flat line on an oscilloscope.

But the line was about to be disturbed by a small blip.

Tillotson thought he recognised a car that was parked about fifty yards away. It seemed to contain several people. Not long ago the possibility that he was being followed would have induced panic in him, now though he was supremely calm. He even welcomed the attention; he was finally engaged with the world and the world was with him. He carried on staring at it in that bored interested way that cats have perfected.

Its engine started up and it pulled out from the kerb. Tillotson regained the power of movement - enough to induce him to stand up.

The car stopped opposite him. Perhaps the endgame had begun, he thought as if he was a spectator to someone else's fate.

A man got out the rear and addressed him.

"Professor Tillotson - if you'd get in the car please sir."

The man was in his early fifties and had about him the demeanour of the long serving policeman.

Tillotson was sat between him and a much younger, well-built man, who together with the driver appeared to constitute the 'heavies'. There was also a bearded man in the front passenger seat, who didn't look much like a policeman at all.

As the car pulled out the senior man introduced himself.

"Brian Afton," he said cordially, holding out his

hand, which Tillotson shook a little reluctantly.

Afton gestured at the bearded man.

"Doctor Jonathon Harbin. Doctor Harbin's attached to us as one of our scientific advisors." Tillotson shook hands with the man, who smiled, so he thought, like the last doctor he'd met.

"May I ask some questions?" asked Tillotson, determined to get in first before he was subjected to some long patter. The speeding car and the new sense of purpose - though what purpose he didn't know - had, for the moment, banished his fatigue and inertia.

"Of course," said Afton.

"I've two. The first you can prevaricate about if you wish, but the second will require a candid yes or no answer. Anything else and you can say goodbye to any co-operation from me."

"I'll try to satisfy you as best I can," said Afton.

"Good. Firstly, are you part of some intelligence outfit?"

"If you like sir."

"Secondly - do you or your paymasters have anything to do with the disappearance of my family and friends?"

"No," replied Afton, emphatically.

Tillotson trusted Afton. His replies had merely reinforced his first impression of him. Perhaps he'd been picked for this assignment because he looked like the friendly local copper rather than a spook, but one could agonise endlessly about another's integrity. In the end it all came down to instinct.

"I don't understand what interest I could be to people like yourselves," said Tillotson, shrugging. "I've never been involved in radical politics. I've brushed shoulders with a few interesting types at international conferences, but that's about it."

"It's nothing to do with what you've done, or for that matter not..."

Afton's voice trailed off. Tillotson had leant across him to get a better view out of the window. Harbin caught Afton's eye and the latter nodded.

"More unfamiliar things?" asked Afton, glancing out at the view from the elevated motorway, and then looking back at his charge.

"Those office blocks back there on the left - they shouldn't be there," said Tillotson. He straightened himself. "I drove this way less than a month ago - things aren't built that quickly."

His eyes darted between Afton and Harbin, who sat twisted round with his arm slung over the back of his seat. Afton, for his part, looked at the scientist, wondering which of them should begin.

It was the senior man who broke the silence.

"I'm afraid you've never driven along this road," he said, almost apologetically.

"Of course I have," said the historian, screwing his eyes up. "I'm pretty sure I'm not crazy - yet - and my memory hasn't been too affected by the

accident."

He looked first at Afton and then at Harbin.

"What's happened to me?" he asked, almost in a whisper.

"I'm a particle physicist by profession," said Harbin, pulling a packet of cigarettes from his pocket. "Traditionally, physics was concerned only with certainty, with absolutes. For you historians though, uncertainty has always been a part of the creed."

Harbin's lighter flared brightly in the growing darkness. For a few moments it was as though they were round a camp fire and the scientist was their shaman. It snapped shut and he continued.

"However, physicists also encounter uncertainty - especially at very high speeds and at very small scales. Predicting the behaviour of a sub-atomic particle is a matter of probability."

He leant forward still further. His demeanour now reminded Tillotson of that of a bright child on a long journey.

"This is the important bit," he said, jabbing his cigarette at the historian, "let's say we have a particle that's been produced as part of some sub-atomic event. It might spin off in one of two directions, but we've no way of predicting which course it will follow. What though, if we take a leap of the imagination and posit that both alternatives actually happen?"

"I don't follow," said Tillotson.

"That in one universe, the particle moves one way, and in an adjacent universe it goes the other." Tillotson rose a little from his seat, about to interrupt, but Harbin was fully into his stride.

"Just consider the import of such a conjecture - an ever ramifying and near infinite number of universes. There'll be one just like this, differing from it only in a single sub-atomic event, but there'll be others so alien as to be beyond our comprehension."

"Are you saying that I've somehow been pushed from my own domain into your own?" asked Tillotson, looking incredulous, but deep down knowing that only such a radical analysis of his position could begin to explain it.

"That's what we believe has happened," said Afton.

With that, Tillotson knew that regardless of whether or not he really was a freak of physics, he was now officially an alien, a displaced person.

"I don't see how you could possibly prove such an incredible hypothesis," he said, trying to keep calm, as though to impress upon them that he was the sane man surrounded by lunatics. For one last, unhelpful time, he wondered if he'd been secretly drugged and if the whole unfolding scenario was a particularly lucid and terrifying trip.

"We couldn't prove it - until the Americans got hold of a man named Malinowski," said Afton.

"Ma-lin-owski," said Harbin dreamily, as though

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he was less recounting a man's name and more remembering some magical destination.

Darkness had descended completely. The dazzling lights of oncoming vehicles and the glowing windows of office blocks combined to produce a vision of nowhereland. One might as well have been looking at downtown Tokyo or the Milky Way.

"Malinowski didn't jump as far as you sir," continued Afton, "his wife, family and friends were all waiting for him. The one problem was so was Malinowski himself."

"But that isn't a proof," said Tillotson quickly, "the man could have been an identical twin whose birth hadn't been recorded, and who later turned up in an attempt to steal his brother's identity."

"Quite so," said Afton nodding, "except that both men carried an identical series of scars and a burn that has happened a few days previously."

Tillotson shrugged.

"We've all heard stories of the so-called 'parallel lives' of twins."

"Except that the Malinowski from our universe already had an identical twin - one without the scars," said Harbin, grinning. "He was the man who clinched it. We had to dig deep to get the details out of the Americans, but you could be more valuable in the long run."

Harbin turned to wind down his window a little, and Tillotson felt a sudden cold blast on his face. For a few moments, he was detached from his predicament and filled with wonder at the thought that he might be breathing the air of another world.

Afton took up from his colleague.

"You see, being a historian you're special to us. Malinowski was a truck driver - he couldn't provide the detailed knowledge of the world he came from that you'll be able to give us." Harbin turned round again.

"We're rather hoping that for the next few years you'll be writing a history of your world for us. We want to know as much as you do about it. Not only about dates and events, people and places, but about its fossils and its fictions, its minerals and its myths."

Tillotson shook his head.

"But that's an entirely futile exercise - you've already said that there are a near infinite number of fantastic universes out there. Since anything can happen, what possible value can my account have?"

Harbin became animated again.

"No, no.. I didn't say that anything could happen - though the possibilities are vast. Each world must have its physical laws that have to be obeyed, relating to chemistry, biology and whatever. And their societies must conform to certain patterns - hunter-gatherers, for instance, would hardly possess motor cars. So I expect

there are a lot of worlds out there that are very similar - the result of what one could call convergent evolution. And from what you've indicated, I don't think you've come from a world that's very much different at all."

"I see," said Tillotson, nodding slowly and narrowing his eyes, "you believe the knowledge I can impart will give the possessor the edge in understanding historical and political processes in this world."

"Exactly," said Harbin, "it's always said that history's a non-experimental science, but yourself and others - for we do have others - will give us windows on those 'what if' questions. In the long term, we hope to have enhanced predictive powers."

"So I'm little more than a low grade spy," said Tillotson acidly.

"I wouldn't say low grade," said Harbin.

"If what you say is true, something extraordinary has happened to myself and these other people, something to shed new light on the whole nature of existence. Yet all you can think to use it for is to gain some minute advantage in a game of political one-upmanship. We're proof of profound truths in the cosmological and spiritual realms. You've no private claim to us."

Afton cleared his throat.

"We could drive you to the offices of a national newspaper right now," he said quietly, "or even one of the leading scientific journals. But who'd believe your story? You barely believe what's happened yourself. You're a man who's had an accident and left hospital in an amnesiac, disturbed state. I'm sure you'll agree that your testimony would hardly be regarded as reliable."

Tillotson was about to speak, but Afton raised his hand and continued, with an ice cold edge to his voice that the historian hadn't heard before.

"You've no family and no friends except us. You've no social security number, you're not down on any electoral roll, there's no record of your birth. As I speak, one of my colleagues is probably erasing your name from the hospital's records. The medical staff who dealt with you along with all those other people you importuned, will have been told never to mention your name again. You don't exist - you never existed. We can do what we like to you and no one will ever know. We're all that separates you from oblivion."

Tillotson saw a motorway sign looming out of the darkness. They were on the road to Oxford. Perhaps he was being taken to some secret location near the city? Dully, he noticed that the road had a different designation. It was called the M40.

He leant forward, his chin nearly touching his chest. Like the lightning, something had suddenly hit him very hard.

"I'll never see my family again, will I?" he asked, barely able to speak.



"No," said Afton, softly.

They travelled some miles in silence before Afton spoke again.

"Imagine what it was like for Malinowski," he said, fixing Tiltotson in his gaze, "it's one thing to be lost and mourned by loved ones, but to be disowned by them - not even to be recognised. Imagine that."

"Even the slave could imagine those he cared about toiling in the heat of the same sun, sleeping under the same stars," said Tiltotson, overwhelmed by the full realisation of what had happened to him.

"We'll give you a new name - a completely new identity," said Afton, looking away from his charge, "we're experts at that. Peter Tiltotson is gone, but not forgotten by those who care. Yet Peter Tiltotson himself must forget - over the years ahead he must forget."

The car sped on and the man who carried a whole world in his head, knew that forgetfulness was the one luxury that neither he nor his new-found friends would ever permit.

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David Rawson is an archaeologist by trade; writing is a reminder that there's something even less remunerative than his job.

His work has appeared in *Pablo Lennis*, and is scheduled for *Enigma*, *Darkness Rising*, *Gentle Reader* and the UK's *Roadworks*.

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## Three facets of fantasy writing: My life as tabletop gamer, live role-player and novelist.

Juliet McKenna

I've read fantasy for far longer than I've been writing it and one thing that influences me when considering a new author is their acknowledgements. A book can have great artwork, a blurb that really gets a hook into me but if I read 'and thanks to all the Friday Night gamers' I'm likely to put it down. Some of the worst fantasy books I've read stem from someone having a really great time playing a table top game, and then writing it up, just as it happened. But writing gaming scenarios, both table top and live action was an essential part of my apprenticeship as a writer. How do these things tie together?

The people I gamed with wanted escapism with a bit of intellectual stimulation, which pretty much still sums up my approach now I'm writing fantasy novels. The longest campaign I ran kicked off with a kidnapped dwarven prime minister. A wildly assorted party identified the bad guy responsible and spent the next two and a half years going after him. I'd write up encounters every week; sometimes we'd have an evening of hack and

## Tell Stephen Baxter not to worry Stuart Carter

I was writing in the living room at my computer when a stranger softly entered. He was short for a man, though well-built, and his muscles seemed anchored in subtly different places.

"It's about the future," he whispered, and I froze.

He squeezed one of my hands gently between both of his, smiling, easily squatting down upon the floor before me. From there I saw into eyes full of flying cars and domed cities, the galaxy and humanity, days and millennia

"I came to tell you... everything turns out fine. It's wonderful."

And then, turning only to raise a single finger to his lips, he left.

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The majority of Stuart's life is spent working in the West End of London as a subtitler, living in East Dulwich as a husband and travelling between the two as a passenger. In the brief intervals between these roles he feeds the ideas he sometimes gets into his computer. He is not now, nor has he ever been, working on a novel.

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slay, sometimes I'd throw in a puzzle for the gang to thrash out over the Hobnobs. I'd write sessions where everyone could use their particular skills or magic items and every so often, I'd build a session round an individual, like a Buffy episode highlighting Xander while everyone else is off saving the world. We enjoyed ourselves immensely but there's no way I'll ever take that material and try making a novel out of it. We had a lot of laughs and some really edge-of-the-seat evenings, but what we didn't have in any particular sense was a plot.

Fantasy campaigns rarely need anything more complicated than some vague rationale keeping characters moving around the map. There'll be an overall story arc but the focus shifts depending on the monster of the week. In that sense, most fantasy campaigns have more in common with the X-Files than with a book. Novels on the other hand, do need plots. They need a beginning, a middle and an end and ideally, within the same set of covers. Just because Tolkien wrote a trilogy is not sufficient reason for every fantasy novelist to do the same. Novels don't necessarily need three volumes but characters in them do need three dimensions. Characterisation draws readers in, keeps readers concerned about that individual's fate. A warrior in a novel needs a

back-story underpinning the motivation sustaining him through trials and tribulations. All anyone gaming wants to know is the fighter's hit points and whether he's got his own magic sword. Characters in a novel need a good reason for being involved; just being in the same tavern as a bunch of people going off to fight a dragon simply doesn't cut it.

A novel needs to focus on that plot, something nigh impossible in a long running scenario. I've faced parties doing something entirely logical, which made me tuck everything I'd written for that session behind a blank sheet of paper and starting running the adventure off the cuff. A notorious random treasure incident in an underground complex springs to mind. The party found some small drums, which the players decided might bring the roof down. So everyone carefully stood at least 10 feet away while one character had a crack at them. But they were drums of panic, affecting people 10 feet or more away. I had the entire party racing in all directions, turning corners on random dice rolls, failing saving throws at every opportunity and two characters ended up dead. The adventure turned into a quest to recover the bodies, get them resurrected and then hunt some passing monsters who'd looted their magic items. All of which was fun to write, fun to play and would have totally derailed any tightly planned stratagem.

GMs trying to follow a specific, linear plot are scuppered time and again because gamers have this indefatigable talent for thinking themselves out of corners in some barmy yet entirely plausible way. A GM trying to stop them gets no thanks and anyway, what's the point? Gaming is interactive, not just an ego trip for the GM. If you want to present your singular vision in a form where people can't argue back, by all means try writing a novel, because it won't make a role-playing scenario. But don't take a taste for long diversions with you because fantasy novels really drag when writers get seduced into taking characters down sidetracks that don't really lead anywhere. As a writer, I pick up tips from all over the place. My kids have got *Snow White* on video and there's a documentary tacked on about the making of the film. It includes sequences cut because no matter how good they were technically, they didn't progress the plot and they didn't develop character. One such scene is when Snow White's cooked dinner and the dwarves sing their way through the meal; all very entertaining, bringing nothing new to the film and the reason I know to get editing when one of my readers sends back a draft with 'dwarves drinking soup' pencilled in the

margin.

All gaming systems have logical inconsistencies. When you're playing, you slide past them or the GM comes up with some spurious reasoning. You can't expect readers to do that. Gamers move fast, thinking about umpteen things simultaneously. Readers have time to think things through and spot the flaws. In a gaming scenario, you can ignore the implications of your party slaughtering things at will. You don't need to address the complications of elves living hundreds

of years or wondering what's to stop your 15<sup>th</sup> level wizard taking over the world, apart from some comparable wizard hexing him till he glows. Writing a book, you have to pin down that internal logic. Dice characterise tabletop gaming, the random roll and the random outcome. Are you going to decapitate the dragon with your first natural 20 or get a 1 and stab yourself in the foot? Gamers love the way a chance roll can turn events on their head. Readers of fantasy novels do not like random events sending the book off on an unheralded tangent or some wicked combination of luck resolving all the hero's problems. As far as I'm concerned, taking a gaming experience, writing it up and expecting to have a novel is a bit like telling someone about a fabulous party they weren't at.

Sooner or later, you find yourself saying, 'Well, you had to be there'.

Editors throughout the English speaking world are doubtless bracing themselves now that Wizards of the Coast have declared the AD&D world an 'open' system. I wouldn't try writing within it on a bet. How can you sustain any suspense using an established system where everyone knows how powerful the monsters are and what the key magic item you need to defeat them? You need surprises to hook the reader and to keep them turning the pages. Originality is essential if an editor or an agent's going to take a novel seriously. Many years ago, my first attempt at the definitive fantasy masterwork kept coming back from with variations on 'there's nothing to distinguish this from the six other perfectly competent fantasy novels that hit my desk every week'. The odds will be even worse when every second gamer is sending in a *Dragonlance* knock off.

So is tabletop gaming experience more hindrance than help if you want to write novels? No, I don't think that at all. Gaming experience is a huge help when it comes to bending rules without actually breaking them. All genre fiction has rules, be it fantasy, crime or city girl chick-lit. A writer can't



**Writing scenarios is a fantastic training ground for the imagination, especially writing for gamers who like detail.**

think 'if the rules don't say I can do this, then I can't' but rather 'if the rules don't say I can't do this, then I can try.' Gamers are devils for that kind of thing; as a writer, it'll spark that originality so essential to getting ahead of the competition. You can't get away with the logical inconsistencies of gaming systems in a novel but you can get some interesting plot ideas by exploring them. How are things like politics, science and religion affected when magic really does work? How do you stop wizards ruling the world? What kind of checks and balances do you need and what happens if something screws them up? See the Tales of Einarinn for further details.

Writing scenarios is a fantastic training ground for the imagination, especially writing for gamers who like detail. If you're up against players who pick away at anything that might be somehow turned to their advantage, you soon learn to tie up loose ends. After one experience of your gamers exploiting you mercilessly because they saw your cunning plot twist half an hour before the big monster hit, you start using lateral thinking to frustrate expectation, to play off people's assumptions. All those skills are central to believable plot development in a novel. Watching players working well together gives an excellent basis for writing interaction between characters that comes off the page as realistic.

Much of this applies equally well to Live Role Playing. LRP also puts people under rather more stress than tabletop gaming, getting them cold, wet and often really scared, giving you all the more experience to draw on for vivid scene setting. Fighting is totally different in LRP to tabletop gaming. You can't see what everyone else is up to when you're trying to stop an orc hacking your arms and legs off. Working out what magic to use in the dark and the rain with screaming goblins racing at you is a damn sight harder than when you're sitting in a lounge with your player's guide to hand. Traps and puzzles are a whole different ball game by guttering candlelight. Spend a winter night in an unheated scout hut and put on the same damp clothes that you took off before crawling into your sleeping bag, and you'll get pretty close to an authentic medieval peasant experience. In LRP people don't always agree about what to do and hyped up on adrenaline, they'll bloody well say so! Keep an ear open and you'll soon develop a knack for natural sounding dialogue.

Other things from my LRP days influence my writing. We established early on that a 6 or 7 fights with 1 or 2 talking encounters and 1 or 2 puzzles or traps made for a good evening's

adventure. Every character gets a chance to do their thing, no one spends too long getting cold or bored and the pace of the whole thing moves merrily along. I apply a similar balance of action to chat in my novels which is probably why it's been said I get more plot in one volume than some writers get into a trilogy. I take that as a compliment.

Live Role Playing scenarios have the same problems maintaining an on-going campaign as tabletop ones but in my considered opinion, individual sessions do best with a linear plot. Some people run 'free form' adventures which are basically an attempt to copy the table top pattern of random encounters dotted round a map. Ten or so groups of monsters set up in an area and adventurers go round seeing what they can find

out. There are all kinds of problems with this, not least the monsters get very bored sitting in a wood and after half an hour, given half an excuse, they'll attack random dog walkers. This approach also falls down when the referee expects the party to follow a particular course of reasoning and do encounters in an allegedly obvious pattern. I was once an imp in an adventure like this, disguised as a human, and my job was to talk the party into retrieving a bottle inside a magic circle. Years of fast-talking to baffle

players and refs alike makes me very persuasive and I got every party coming past me to help. What the adventurers didn't know was picking up the bottle released a demon as played by Steve who's six foot, seventeen stone and came charging out of a bush in full costume up to and including a two handed sword. Party after party froze, going 'whu?' and the ones Steve didn't kill, I stabbed in the back. That was the end of their adventure because no one had fancied talking to the boring-looking hermit on the other side of the wood who'd have warned them off.

It's an amusing story and it illustrates just how easy it is to kill adventurers, something common to tabletop and Live Action gaming. People dying because they've been really stupid or really unlucky is fair play but even then, I think that should happen as seldom as you can manage it. It's all just a game after all and the whole point in everyone having fun. You have far more control over a linear scenario where you devise an initial set up and then write each encounter so the next step is logical, but not too obvious, making the party to work together, using their wits to get the crucial piece of kit or information. You select monsters so combats are a real test without being a slaughter. You think through all the potential implications of whatever you're setting up and stick in diversions that stop people heading down the wrong track in an entirely logical and non-



**Don't give the hero  
any kind of break,  
just because he's the  
goodie**

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obvious manner. Ideally, your adventurers get to the last encounter on minimal hits, minimal magic, having used all their potions and convinced that they did it all by the skin of their teeth, making every decision along the way. Put all this together smoothly enough and your adventurers get caught up in the suspension of disbelief, never stopping to see just how you're pulling their strings.

All this experience feeds directly into how I plot and write novels, where you absolutely have to avoid digging yourself into plot holes or assuming your personal logic will make sense to everyone else. If things go awry in tabletop gaming, you can pull some figure out of the monster box and make things up as you go. In a live action scenario, the Ref's options are more limited but you can evade most cock-ups by talking fast enough to baffle brains with bullshit. As a writer, if you get so stuck you resort to the attack of the killer plot device, readers can just turn back the pages to find the bit that plainly contradicts whatever you're trying to get away with. For every reader who'll skate over the thin ice, two others will get drenched in the cold water of common sense, and never bother with anything else you write.

One of the great things I find about writing novels compared to live action scenarios is some bright spark can't scupper things half way with a cunning plan. However hard you work to avoid that as a LRP ref, it still happens and I've been the guilty party on occasion. In one of those non-linear scenarios, I was a wandering evil elf with a staff that could glue people to the floor, one spell, 'Ignite' and the ref told me to harass the adventurers. As far as I was concerned, the obvious tactic was to creep up, hide behind a

bush and rustle it. When a solitary adventurer came to investigate, because no matter how many horror films people watch, they always do this kind of thing on their own, I would stick whoever it was to the floor, set their clothes on fire and run away. I did so much damage the ref had to pull me out but as far as I am concerned, I was playing fair. When it comes to writing novels, that's the

mentality you have to adopt for your antagonists. You must see the world through their eyes and act accordingly. Don't give the hero any kind of break, just because he's the goodie. If the antagonist's obvious move causes your hero all kinds of problems, then your job as the writer is finding the solution. You can't just collar the elf, give her a bollocking and send her off for coffee.

So while some crucial things are common to table top gaming, live action adventures or fantasy novels, particularly the need for original ideas, a lot of what makes for good table top gaming does not make for good LRP and in turn does not make for a good read in a novel. Each form of fantasy writing has its own rules, its own strengths and weaknesses. Take heed of the differences and you can capitalise on the similarities.

Juliet McKenna's life combines writing and motherhood which is a lot easier now both her kids are in school. The Fourth Tale of Einarinn, The Warrior's Bond was published by Orbit on 4th October 2001. She is currently working on the fifth and final story of this sequence and has recently agreed a contract with Orbit for a new series which is giving her an excuse to buy even more interesting research books.

## postscript

Part of the joy of editing a magazine is the pain of laying it out. When people take the time and trouble to send you letters and articles, and stories and poems, they're all of uneven length and somehow muggins here has to try and jemmy it all in a seemingly seamless fashion.

This edition has no exception – as we all know, nature abhors a vacuum, and editors abhor white space. I've dropped two articles (one by me, so I show no favouritism), and all this despite the BSFA committee (all hail...) giving me an extra four pages to play with.

The number of submissions is up (and my filing system down). So, more quality fiction, more informative articles and more harassed editors to follow in the next issue.

## FOCUS COMPETITION

Following the stunning success of the Focus newspaper for 2101 – a new competition is announced. Prizes to be decided (but they'll be worth it, honest).

### Wanted – characters

Let's face it, characters often get lost in the whizz-bang look-what-gizmo-I've-dreamt-up plot of speculative fiction.

What I want is vignettes of characters; you don't have to tell a story in your sketch, but you have to make your people, aliens, robots or semi-sentient plants seem real enough to step off the page. 500 words maximum.

Submission details and deadline on page 2