

The BSFA's magazine for writers



Dee Rimbaud. 639-a

Fiction from Paul Williams and Elizabeth Baxter
Neal Asher deconstructs political spin
D.I.Y. with Suzanne Elvidge
Juliet McKeena investigates the art of beginnings, middles and ends

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

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About the cover

'Catharsis' by Dee Ribaud

Dee's art can always be relied upon to challenge and illuminate. Sometimes dark and twisted, but never dull. He is open for commissions and has original works for sale at visionary.writernetwork.com and artist.writernetwork.com/

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:
1st September 2002

pedantry

"Any sufficiently advanced science is indistinguishable from magic." Thus sayeth our glorious President, and who am I to argue? But is the reverse argument also true?

Emmanuel College, Gateshead (I can see it from my bedroom window) is a City Technology College, funded by the Government but outside the usual strictures of the Local Education Authority and National Curriculum. It is oversubscribed (by three-to-one), has a pass rate of five or more A-C GCSEs in the high nineties, and scrupulously screens its intake to ensure an 'average' sample of the local population.

It is also a school that has an explicit (non-denominational) Christian ethos and has been in the news recently because it teaches Creationism alongside evolutionary theory.

I'm the first to admit that Creationism gets my goat. If anything in this world is going to have me shouting and raging and waving my hands around, it's this. It clearly gets Richard Dawkins' goat too: he's demanded that Ofsted inspectors go back and cast their steely gazes at the school's science department. The Bishop of Oxford says that Creationism "brings Christianity into disrepute", and evolution is accepted by both the Anglican and Catholic churches.

The school's Principle, Nigel McQuoid, says this: "Clearly schools are required to teach evolutionary theory. We agree that they should teach evolution as a theory and faith position. Again it is important to distinguish between evolutionary theory and the faith position of evolutionism. Clearly also schools should teach the creation theory as literally depicted in Genesis. This too is a faith position of which young people should be aware."

Added to this, there are rumours that staff are encouraged to suggest that text books are wrong when they suggest ages of millions or billions of years, since Creationism demands only thousands of years.

It is entirely possible that my own children will go to Emmanuel – the state secondary education system in Gateshead is dire in places and merely bearable in the rest. There is no doubting that the school gets the results that ought to be obtainable by all the others.

I am entirely satisfied that my scientific education does not collapse my religious beliefs, or vice versa. However, I do worry. And here's the rub: Creationism, even if it was true, is of no practical use. It is, to all intents and purposes, magic. It doesn't help to know that the world is only ten thousand years old when it has the appearance of being around for four and a half billion. It doesn't help explain the occurrence of valuable ores, or the behaviour and position of volcanoes. It won't save lives down mines or in earthquake zones. It won't even help us in our efforts to reverse the effects of global warming and environmental degradation. Creationism is, at heart, a theological argument, not a predictive scientific discipline. 'Apparent' geology would still have to taught alongside a strict interpretation of Genesis to derive any benefit from the stories the rocks beneath our feet tell us.

I shall invoke an older, wiser brother to end my column: the 14th century logician and Franciscan friar William of Occam. His razor still cuts clearly after seven centuries.



Simon Morden
Gateshead, March 2002

There were **no** entries for last issue's competition (you work-shy laggards), so I'll run it again. 500 words, come on, it's not rocket science...

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

Watching You Die

Paul Williams

On Friday he was sentenced to death. It did not come as a complete surprise, although he would have argued that the murder of a stranger as committed by Prisoner 251267 was far worse than the murder of a wife. But Judge Thompson was a woman and married to a man who had once been violent towards her, in the days before she learnt judo, so she sent Prisoner 251254 to the death cell. One day, this choice would be made by television viewers, like most of the other social decisions, but for now the judges retained their jobs. If it had been left for the people to decide he might have gained some sympathy.

Now that his life rested directly in the hands of the same people he expected to die sooner rather than later.

On Monday he was marched past the gallows where the man most disliked by the audience from the previous week was dangling. Opposite it was the plain white door that led directly into the condemned cell. He had seen hundreds make the short walk, usually from the comfort of his armchair with a cup of hot cocoa perched precariously between the knees of his freshly pressed trousers. Never had he felt sorry for any of them, even the women, until now.

The guards shoved him inside the cell. It was thirty five feet square with two bunk beds clinging to the white sterile walls. In the far corner was a very small room containing a toilet, wash-basin and basic shower cubicle. The ceiling was awash with cameras of various shapes and sizes. From below they resembled sinuous snakes and gargantuan crabs fighting for possession of the long, permanently shining lightbulb.

The other occupants looked up and each smiled in turn but he wasn't sure if they were greeting him or expressing relief because he could save them from death, for another week at least.

10188 wandered over and prodded his chest with a fat, hairy finger. "One week," she announced in harsh rancid tones.

He knew her real name, everyone in the

colony did. Mrs Maraxer had controlled the vice and drugs trade of the seventh district with an unassailable grip until one of the girls she owned gave evidence against her in court. The girl was now dead but security had kept the assassin away until after the trial was concluded.

Mrs Maraxer had survived fifteen weeks so far in the death cell. Nobody was sure how. Perhaps the audience were afraid that she would identify them, despite the anonymity of their vote, and ensure that they suffered the same fate as the unfortunate girl.

There was no such mystery about the survival of Prisoner 18166. She was young and vivacious with the welcome ability to captivate male viewers. When she undressed it was a slow and seductive process, incorporating much smiling and gesturing to the audience. Her favourite trick was to strip to her underwear then suddenly feign awareness of the cameras, blush and jump under a blanket from which the final garments would be flung out. Since the male population of the colony outnumbered the female population by two to one it was likely that 18166 could challenge Mrs Maraxer's longevity in the death cell. Nobody wanted a girl like that to hang. Except jealous wives: like Laura.

Once Laura had been young and moderately beautiful. He had considered himself fortunate to have his proposal accepted, just six weeks after the courtship ritual commenced. For a time happiness reigned supreme in his otherwise mundane life, giving him the impetus to work harder at the office and to smile at people whom he despised.

Then Laura changed. He wasn't sure why or when the transformation first took effect. She became less talkative, more resistant during the routine of sex and increasingly unwilling to perform the domestic tasks that were her duty. One day she punched him for no apparent reason, whilst he was shaving. The mark remained for days, like a cancer consuming his skin.

He made some discreet inquiries amongst the medical practitioners, asking what would happen if his wife was insane. Later this would be remembered and cited as evidence of a premeditated crime. Preparing the way for a justification of the deed, you could claim manslaughter if the victim was known to be mad. And manslaughter rarely earned the death nomination.

Every week the duty judge selected the worst of the criminals tried in that period and sent him or her to the death cell. It was a process which ensured that even petty offenders could face the ultimate penalty, if there were no major cases tried in that week or if the judge disliked them. Such arbitrary decisions theoretically acted as a deterrent. Yet crime rates were continually rising. Laura had often reminded him of that, when he went out alone at night.

"You might get attacked," she suggested, with a hint of hope in her voice.

One day she had followed him to the pub where he usually drank alone. It just so happened that there was a stag night taking place and the busty female stripper, whom ironically he considered ugly, picked him to assist with the ritual. Laura had watched some of it through the frosted glass window then retreated home.

She never let him forget it. The next time he went to the pub she followed again, and sat opposite him. Never speaking. If he moved, she moved in the same direction. When a girl entered she watched his eyes and frowned.

She forbade him his marital rights, something she was not legally entitled to do but only one man in the history of civilisation had ever been brave enough to sue on those grounds. Men didn't admit to failure, it was an unwritten but ubiquitous law.

And the ultimate failure was tied to a noose. It took an average of seven seconds to die, depending on how long you stood on the platform waiting for television commercials to finish, but the waiting period was a minimum of seven days.

The final occupant of the cell was 24120 who had killed a guard during a robbery. He was tall and muscular and appeared to be growing a beard although electric shavers were provided.

251254 routinely accepted the lack of names in this environment. After a while he would acclimatise and be able to perform the

essential natural functions in front of his cellmates and the audience.

It was rare for all the population to watch at exactly the same time but the prisoners needed to stay alert because they needed to impress as many people as possible. Anyone who snored or picked their nose or spilled their food was likely to be underneath the rope sooner rather than later. He remembered Laura watching the programme every night. Once two prisoners were making love and she had sat there with a look on her face that he could not decipher. Neither a smile or a grimace but something else. Something different and unwelcome. There was nothing more appealing to voyeurs than two strangers mating without financial or career incentives. Ironical that pornography was banned on mainstream television.

The girl was watching him. He smiled back, thinking of her stripteases and wondering if they were more enticing when viewed from within touching distance. Last week there had been a rapist on his bed. It was surprising that such an individual hadn't been tempted.

Or was it? These people weren't stereotypes but living, at least temporarily, beings. The rapist could have committed his crime because of drink or drugs or provocation. He could even have been innocent.

And even if he did rape one girl it didn't make him dangerous to all girls anymore than the robber was a danger to all security guards.

Mrs Maraxer saw him looking at the girl and said: "Classified goods, you scumbag."

The girl said, "I think she's jealous." Since she was already doomed it was possible for her to anger Mrs Maraxer, the only exception to the name rule, without fear.

The robber beckoned to the newcomer who crossed the room and shook the extended hand. "Be careful what you say and do," he advised. "Both of them want you to die."

"And you don't?"

He shrugged. "There was a time when you automatically got killed for murder. I knew that when I took a gun into the bank. If you take risks you've got to be prepared to face the penalty."

"Doesn't it scare you?"

He shook his head. Men never admitted to



fear.

"It's paranoia," said the robber. "The last guy panicked. He started apologising. They," he jerked a finger at the cameras, "love a confession. They also like breaking people down mentally before they're hung. The one who cracks is the one who dies."

That was true. The newcomer thought about all the people he had seen in the cell.

"And keep your secrets," added the robber. "When they know everything about you then you'll be discarded. If they think there's something still to be discovered then they'll wait until it gets discovered."

"Any other advice?"

The robber shrugged. "Never make excuses."

Laura had said that to him after the night with the stripper. The principle was sound. When you started making excuses you were admitting a mistake. The robber and Mrs Maraxer weren't acknowledging any failure. People admired success, even in the criminal world.

A guy who killed his wife and got caught straight away was not by any standards successful. His failure was in being caught. The audience would know that, some would have watched the trial. The others would now be reading newspapers in an effort to ascertain information. Most liked to think they were making an informed choice but really it

came down to which of the four prisoners was the least appealing in an aesthetic sense. Statistically men were more likely to be picked than women.

And murderers had a low survival rate. Yet there were variations. Old, ugly men and people who killed children knew their fate at the start of the week. For them there was no fear of waiting, just seven days to prepare themselves for death. Maybe that was better. A fixed sentence rather than a suspended one.

He looked in the plastic safety mirror. He was neither ugly nor old and his body remained strong; indeed he could even be considered handsome. The girl could see that.

And the stripper had gone to him, selecting him above all the other men in the bar. If he knew how he had subconsciously and unwittingly attracted her then he could use the same technique to hook the female viewers, just as the girl was succeeding in hooking the male ones. But that would condemn the robber.

And next week he would start as favourite to die before the next newcomer came.

He went back to Mrs Maraxer and said, "You can't survive forever."

She laughed. "I know more people than you've forgot. Have you any family?"

"No." Laura had never wanted children, never wanted to endure the pains of pregnancy. She told him this on the second day of their honeymoon. "Just you and me," she'd said. Even then she was jealous. Perhaps because she knew she wasn't good enough for him. Yes. He had to think positively.

"Friends then?" said Mrs Maraxer.

"A few."

"If I die before you then so do they."

She said it calmly yet convincingly. He knew that if his friends were watching they would believe her.

"Your tactics don't work here."

"They have so far."

"We all have different ways of surviving," said the girl. "You must develop your own."

"Maybe I don't want to survive." Don't show any fear.

"You think that you deserve to die for what you did?"

He chose his words carefully. "I think it's

going to happen. It's just a question of when."

The robber clapped his hands slowly. "That's the right spirit. Don't make any enemies here. We're all the same."

"I am nothing like you," said Mrs Maraxer.

The robber came across and poked the space between her breasts with a grubby finger. "You're going to dangle on a rope, just like me."

"I am invulnerable." She twisted her head to face the nearest camera, which obligingly moved downwards and paused above her lips. "Everybody knows that."

"Except Judge Thompson."

"If Judge Thompson was here now with a gun she would not dare pull the trigger."

"I would," said the robber.

"And I thought you only shot the innocent."

He turned away, unable to compose a quick response. Mocking laughter followed him as he crossed the room and sat on his bed, staring at the silent walls. It occurred to the newcomer that the cell was good preparation for eternity in a coffin.

They received food at five hour intervals. Trays containing hot and cold snacks were shoved one at a time through the small hatch in the bottom of the door. It only opened from the outside where it was secured by a bolt when not in use. "The food is quite good here," said Mrs Maraxer. "They like us to die looking healthy."

The newcomer also enjoyed the food; it was better than anything Laura had ever cooked. After his first meal he poured some water from the drinking tap into a plastic vessel and sipped slowly. No other liquids were available. If the drought affecting the south of the colony spread he wondered if this supply would be disconnected. They could hardly be classed as a priority.

Then the newcomer played cards with the girl whilst Mrs Maraxer watched television, although the only channel available was the film, and the robber listened to music through the provided set of headphones. The girl didn't want to do that.

"It's the same music over and over again. I get bored, need to do different things."

"Can't they change the tape?"

She looked surprised. "Anything new coming in can be contaminated, contain messages from outside. The tape was part of the original fittings."

"This cell's been here for twenty years."

"It's old music."

The cards were old as well, some of them crumbling as his fingers picked them up.

He lost the first two games then made his excuses and went into the toilet cubicle. It was time to bow to indignity. On the single shelf he noted several bottles of cleaning substances, which the cameras never focused on. He wondered if they were an easy way to commit suicide but decided that they would never have been allowed if they contained toxic substances.

After flushing the toilet he undressed and stepped into the shower. The water was tepid, rather than hot, but soothing. There was no soap, only a carton of shampoo which he lathered vigorously over his short black hair.

Then the door banged, and he recalled that there wasn't a lock. The girl stood there, looking at him with a grin that could have spelled embarrassment or even admiration.

He went to turn off the shower but she forestalled him with a upward jerk of her dainty hands.

"We can talk without being heard," she said.

"We'll be seen."

"That will add to the excitement."

"Excitement?" He felt his penis rising and made vain attempts to cover it with his hands.

"Don't be modest," she said. "I'm not interested in that, yet. I need to let them think that I'm still a virgin."

"Is that necessary?"

"Innocence is associated with purity."

"Are you saying that you're not pure?" It was a stupid question, he had never been fooled by the striptease routine but like most other men he'd wanted to believe.

"I fell in with the wrong crowd. I was naive and stupid but I enjoyed it." She smiled ruefully. "I enjoy sex. I need sex."

"So do I," he admitted. "But only in a relationship."

The smile changed to reflect amusement. "You're a traditionalist."

"I was married."

"Someone once told me that you could either have love or sex. Not both together."

"Maybe they were right."

She stretched out a hand and stroked his palm in short, sensual movements. "Maybe we can prove them wrong."

"What are you in for?"

He did know, but he had forgotten which presumably was her intention. Let the entire audience forget that this goddess was inside for a crime. Let them instead marvel at her beauty, until it rotted away after years of captivity and then perhaps they would feel only sympathy for what remained.

"Drugs," she said. "Security found six packets in my luggage."

Then she turned and left, leaving him admiring the delicate curves of her bottom encased in the obligatory prison denim.

The giant television screen on the far wall was no longer showing a film but a reflection of the robber staring at it.

"We get images and stories that relate to us," said the girl. "It tests our reactions."

"It's weird watching yourself," said the robber. "I suppose heaven is like this. Seeing images through a screen and being powerless to do anything about them."

"If there is a heaven you won't get there," advised Mrs Maraxer. "None of us will."

The newcomer didn't believe in an afterlife. He had once; before his mother died. Then the belief perished despite the priest's encouraging speech at her requiem.

Later that night he watched the girl having a shower. After each film the channel changed to their environment and stayed there for half an hour or so. Outside it was twenty four hour coverage on its own channel. Critics said it was boring, especially at night when all four prisoners slept but the television company argued convincingly for the entertainment value of the unpredictable. At any time there could be an argument or a fight or an attempted suicide. Or a pretty girl or handsome man washing themselves.

He didn't really want to watch but if he didn't and the cameras cut to him people might think that he was a homosexual. So his eyes were glued to the screen, comforted by the presence of the robber. Two lustful men. Only one could die this week.

"Nice arse," said his companion.

"She's not interested in you," said Mrs Maraxer.

"And I'm not interested in her."

"He is." She pointed at the newcomer. "By the end of the week they'll be in bed."

"Not advisable," remarked the robber. "Do anything to her and the men who worship her

will hate you."

"Maybe that's what she wants," said Mrs Maraxer. "She saves her life for a week and gets some fun into the bargain." She looked critically at the newcomer. "If it can be called fun."

"When was the last time you enjoyed yourself?" asked the robber.

"This morning, eight a.m. When the last guy got took out."

That night the newcomer couldn't sleep. He was petrified of snoring, afraid that the animalistic grunts would condemn him. But not sleeping had its dangers too. If he appeared restless then it would indicate a guilty conscience. Indicate weakness.

The others were already asleep. And emitting light snores. So he strived harder to join them and just when he thought he would forever stay awake sleep finally whisked him into a dream of gallows on which a beautiful, naked girl hung.

When he awoke there were semen stains on the sheets but he didn't know if it was fear of the rope or desire for the girl which had caused them. He had no recollection just as he would have no recollection when the rope snapped his neck.

At lunchtime on the second day came the results of an opinion poll from selected



viewers. If the death vote was today, who would you select?

Mrs Maraxer won, or lost depending on your point of view, with a majority of 36. "Never pay any attention to opinion polls," she advised.

Just before lunch on the third day came news of a tragedy.

The newcomer wasn't interested in the television pictures at first. Fires, especially in this season, were common. Only when the word 'arson' was mentioned did he pay attention. Arsonists were among the most despised criminals, prime fodder for the death cell. On this dry world fire was the ultimate enemy. Those who assisted it were irresponsible agents of evil.

The television screen showed a picture of huge orange flames blazing through the walls of an apartment block. An apartment block he had often walked past whilst envying the lifestyles of the residents.

Twenty two people had apparently been confirmed as dead. The newsreader was only interested in one and he kept repeating the name. "Judge Thompson. The woman who condemned Mrs Maraxer amongst others."

Mrs Maraxer was smiling.

"Friends," said the robber bitterly. "That's what it comes down to. Friends outside."

"I've got none," said the girl.

"People feel sorry for you," said the newcomer, keeping his voice deliberately neutral.

"If it is me," said the girl. "Will you make love to me on the night before?"

For the first time since his childhood, the man cried.

The night before was upon them before they realised it. They sat together on the floor in front of the television set. The tune began, with images of previous occupants flashing past in quick succession, followed by the upright gallows. Then they were there duplicates in exactly the same position with an unseen announcer spouting commentary over their tired heads. "Prisoner 10118 was the favourite earlier in the week. She seemed to have outlived her popularity. Yet the murder of Judge Thompson might have changed all your perceptions. Still want to condemn this lady, now you've seen what happens to the woman who did? So, are you brave enough to get rid of her? Or will you go for 251254? This guy killed his wife,

remember. Or is it to be 18166, the sweet little innocent who was smuggling drugs into our colony to destroy our loved ones? Or 24120, the ruthless robber who shot a guard? You've had a chance to look at these criminals over the past few days. If you've been sleeping or working, here's a few highlights."

They showed the images of the prisoners reacting to the fire, of the girl showering and the two men watching. Of the robber and Mrs Maraxer arguing. Of countless conversations, some of which the newcomer didn't even remember. The highlights lasted for thirty minutes. He watched each clip, thinking that each made him look worse and worse until finally he gave up and looked down at the floor.

"Now our choice selection of the bits you missed. When we fixed the shower last month, we wired it for sound. Didn't know that, did you prisoner 18166?"

The girl's face was ashen.

Her conversation with the newcomer was relayed and her lies exposed to the audience.

They knew now that she was not a virgin. They were reminded again that she was awaiting death for smuggling drugs.

"Does that change anyone's mind?" asked the announcer smugly. "Think about it during the break."

For five minutes they watched a sequence of commercials, mostly advertising household products. Then the logo of a noose curled back round the screen and it was like looking into a mirror again.

"Which one is it to be, folks? Vote now."

They had thirty seconds to decide. One vote per registered television user. Then the camera would show each face, with their number above and the percentage of the vote, in descending order. Thirty seconds.

A face filled the screen. 4%

Mrs Maraxer grinned. "Down on last week," she said.

20%.

He couldn't believe it. He was only aware of the girl shaking his hand and whispering something. Her hand was trembling.

30%.

The hand in his stopped trembling.

46%

The robber screamed.

"Justice will be done," said the announcer.

"Prisoner number 24120 will be hanged on Monday. The execution will be televised live, as always. The next occupant of the death cell will be 261309, sentenced for smuggling."

And so they had gained more time, the two of them. The robber collapsed onto his bed. Sometimes the selected one was violent to his fellow condemned, in which case he would be removed by security and kept in isolation for the weekend. Otherwise he stayed as a warning to them, a reminder that their sentence would soon be over.

What was the robber thinking now? Hatred? Regret? Fear? His feelings were unclear but next week they would be reincarnated into a different body. Perhaps his. Perhaps the girl's.

He held the girl close to him and hugged her.

"Will you make love to me now?" she said.

He wanted to say no because that was the correct, moral thing to do. But he sensed her great need, and his own, although that seemed strangely irrelevant. Moreover he recalled another girl asking the same question, a long time ago when life was simple and the future was happy.

"I don't even know your name," he

protested.

"Lorraine," she said. "Let's enjoy what little time we have together."

With that she walked across to her bed and lifted the covers. He followed, distracted three times. Firstly by the sound of the robber sobbing, secondly by the noise of the television music fading away, and thirdly by Mrs Maraxer's smiling face.

"I do appreciate good entertainment," she declared.

Paul Williams has had 25 short stories published, plus several poems and works of non-fiction. His life ambition is to be script editor of Doctor Who but prior to that is working as a full-time civil servant and part-time Ph.D. student.

Roderick Gladwish is an aerospace engineer living in Hampshire. An amateur artist who suddenly decided to put forward his work for publication in 2001, still doesn't quite know why. More of his work can be seen at: www.gladwishes.freemove.co.uk.

he RAGON AKER

Elizabeth Baxter

All the colour had leaked out of the land like the running colours on an artist's canvas, and night had fallen like a dark blanket when Melia finally persuaded me to put my work away. I found it hard to do, like pushing away a needy child. My half-finished Creature lay on the canvas, an image of conception waiting to be born. I went to bed that night and made love to Melia with a fierce intensity, feeding off the emotions I had strived to put into my creature all day.

At that time in my life Old Methuselah still sat on the throne, a good man in his way but not one for the finer arts. A big craggy bear of a man, he preferred hunting and drinking and dicing with his men. He did not care much for

my work but his son and heir, the quiet, thoughtful Prince Isiah was my biggest patron and so for his sake, the old king allowed me the space, time and freedom I needed to work my art. So I had retired to the mountains, to the lofty heights and snow-mantled peaks of Tintarel. It was a place of peace and beauty and as I lay in bed that night, Melia clamped warm and naked to my chest, I could hear the soft growl and hiss of the mountain breeze as it moved through the peaks above.

The sound of rain thrumming on the roof woke me early the next morning. I turned to look at Melia. Her ivory skin was so delicate, her red lips so full, her eyes so soft, so

peaceful in sleep. I almost touched her then, almost rolled over and took her in my arms, almost surrendered to my love for her. But then a deeper and more urgent need took me. I felt my Creature calling to me, its need for life greater than Melia's need for me and something within me answered that call. I left Melia sleeping and made my way down to my workshop.

My Creature lay on the canvas just as I had left it. It struck me that he was like a seed. All the ingredients for life were contained within his image. All he needed was air and light – in this case my paint and my emotion – to burst to life. His head lay fully formed and magnificent, huge silver eyes gleaming, red scales alight like fire. I took up my palette and mixed red ochre with burnt sienna and took my brush to his haunches. He formed so easily, my brush barely seeming to touch the canvas, I hardly seemed to have to think at all. I worked all morning only stopping once to snap at Melia when she came in to ask if I wanted a drink. I felt a faint twinge of guilt at the hurt look in her eyes but she knew never to interrupt when I was working. She knew!

I could feel discordance radiating from my Creature and with a frown I realised that the scales along his back were not quite right: they were too dark and did not reflect the light the way I wanted them to. I picked up my pallet again and mixed in a little yellow umber and gently worked it in until I was satisfied.

I worked all that day and the next, retiring every night to unleash my passion with Melia until she sighed and moaned. Every morning I rose before she did and spent all day with my Creature. It is hard to describe to someone who does not have the art, the feeling of exhilaration it gave me as he began to take shape. This one seemed to have a life of its own, more so than any of the others. He took shape in a way I had never imagined as though it was he that dictated how he would grow and not my brush at all. I became increasingly convinced that he was the one, the Creature I had been trying to create all these years. In the past my Creatures – all magnificent and wonderful in their own way – had not been quite as I had wanted them. While they lived they were the wonder of the known world, but they lived only a short time, they were only copies of life, an artist's impression and when the power that animated them failed, they fizzled away to nothing, leaving only the faintest of

impressions on the fabric of time. But this time it was different. I knew with a certainty that I was creating life.

Over the weeks and months my Creature developed as slowly as a child. It was a painstaking process. Layer upon layer of colour and detail, the veins in his neck, the hairs on his eyelids, but each time I touched my brush to his body I could feel the life in him growing until I sometimes felt he would tear himself from the canvas there and then. Towards the end I moved my easel outside so he would be close to the air for his quickening. It was on a calm evening and shadows on the snowy mountains were lengthening, almost a year since I had first put brush to canvas when I finally put my palette down and knew it was enough. I left him there, up on the mountain, knowing that my toil was almost over.

When I returned in the morning the canvas was bare, no trace of paint remained, as if my Creature had never been. My heart sang with joy. My Creature had torn free of the canvas of his birth, severed his umbilical cord of paint and charcoal and seized a life all his own. All the turmoil of emotion I had endured for the past year suddenly found release and I collapsed onto my back, panting and exhausted. It was then that I realised a drumming sound was filling the air, as if a thousand bellows all pumped at the same time.

My Creature shot out over the mountains, flying towards the sun. His vast bulk cast a huge shadow over the earth as he passed and the trees shook. I looked up in wonderment, amazed still at the majesty and beauty of the thing I had created. He trumpeted once to me, a deep and resonant "Taa-roo!", circled once and then was gone over the mountains. I watched him until he had dwindled to a speck in the distance and at last I knew a peace only an artist can feel when they see their work displayed for all the world to see.

Melia left me, of course. I think deep down I had always known she would, but that did not stop it being an icicle to the heart when it happened. I retired to our chamber one night to find her gone, no note, no word of explanation. I understand why she left, I just feel sad that while she was married to me, she was so lonely.

All the world marvelled in my Creature and my fame spread throughout the known world.

Focus#41

Prince Isiah, my patron, was so impressed that he rewarded me with more riches than I could have dreamed of. But when I was alone with him and he saw the look of loss in my eyes, he laid a hand on my shoulder and asked me if it was worth it. I could not answer him.

From that day to this it is a question I have asked myself a thousand times. Is it worth the loss of the love of your life – for that is what Melia was, although at the time I didn't know it – to give something great and wonderful to the whole world?

Most in this land would say yes and every time I walk down a street in the capital I am mobbed by people who want to touch me just so they can say they met the artist who created the Great Wyrms but none of that eases the pain of going home to a cold and empty house. Sometimes it gets too much for me and I find myself sitting by my fire staring

like a senile old man.

But then I will hear that strange trumpeting and when I go outside the red dragon is circling in the sky above me, the moonlight gleaming off his scales, his eyes alight like silver fire. And then I think, well: maybe.

Elizabeth Baxter is 23 and has just graduated from University with a degree in English, History and Archaeology, and hopes to go on to do a PhD eventually. She has travelled extensively around Australia and Europe, and is now busy trying to earn some money to pay off all her debts. She has been writing since she was a child, but this is the first story she submitted for publication. She is an Orbiter group member.

Orbiter Writer's Groups

Carol Ann Kerry Green

Are you a writer? Want to get more out of your writing? Want other people to see and comment on your writing? Then you may be interested in joining an orbiter group.

What's an orbiter? you ask. Well, these are postal writer's workshops, they consist of individual orbiter groups. Each group has five members, with one member chosen to be the co-ordinator of the group.

Each member of the group places a manuscript in the parcel, this can be a short story, or an extract from a longer piece of work. They then write constructive critical comments on the other manuscripts in the parcel by their fellow orbiters. Once done, they parcel it up and send it on its way to the next person on the list. In return they receive four constructive criticisms on their own manuscripts.

The parcels go round the group in varying times, but the average is ten to twelve weeks. It is important that each member does not hold on to the parcel for more than the agreed time, which is usually approx. two weeks. The co-ordinator is there to ensure that the parcels keep to their timetables, chase members up when parcels are not

received when they should have been, and keep a record of who's in the group.

However, be warned, being in an orbiter group can be hard work. If all you want is someone to read your stories and tell you how wonderful they are, then orbiter is not for you. If, on the other hand you'd like some comments on your work that can help you progress as a writer, then orbiter could be just the thing you are looking for. Some comments can be hard to take, you've slogged hard over that story and the other members of the group think that...!! Then you read their comments again and you think, maybe, just maybe they've got a point. That's the learning curve a good orbiter group can be.

Do they work? Well you'd have to find that one out for yourself. However, some ex-orbiter members are now published in the genre, Justina Robson, Alison Sinclair, and Cherith Baldry to name but a few.

Interested? Then contact the Orbiter Co-ordinator:

Carol Ann Kerry-Green
278 Victoria Avenue
Hull HU5 3DZ

email: metaphor@metaphor.karoo.co.uk

I look forward to hearing from you.

Deity of Choice

or Not Another Bloody Fantasy Trilogy

Juliet McKenna

One of the most enjoyable aspects of being a writer is going to conventions and visiting SF groups. Different places, different people, but one topic guaranteed to get fans mumbling into their beer is the whole vexed question of the Fantasy Trilogy – Good or Bad? Everyone has an opinion and quite often it's all fantasy trilogies are crap written because greedy publishers won't accept anything else. Quite a few cite umpteen rejection letters for their own masterwork as incontrovertible proof. I decided to investigate this and thanks to the wonders of email, I've contacted authors writing both SF and Fantasy as well as a range of booksellers, agents and editors, here and in the US. I'll be citing various authors but most of the editors and booksellers have preferred to remain anonymous, probably with an eye to their longer-term career prospects.

Why? That's the first question – why the fantasy trilogy? Is it just because of Tolkien? Why did Tolkien do it? Well, he was writing when novels in series were not particularly unusual. Tolkien arguably started the sword and sorcery genre but Evelyn Waugh's *Sword of Honour* was as a trilogy as well. Anthony Powell did a *Dance to the Music of Time* long before Robert Jordan started turning the Wheel of Time. Just because Tolkien did it first, doesn't mean he's responsible for everything that came after. But why do the trilogy and series forms persist in Fantasy, having largely vanished from general literature? One SF writer told me bluntly a trilogy is the fantasy writer's fashion statement. "Look at me, I've arrived, I've got a trilogy – and a cover quote saying 'comparable to Tolkien at this best'." Well, that's a generalisation and pretty harsh but unfortunately, we can all think of cases where it applies. But I can list plenty of exceptions, so that can't be the whole story.

Is it really down to publishers? Do editors look at manuscripts thinking 'never mind the quality, feel the width'? Back in the real world,

it's undeniable that publishing in a series has definite advantages for everyone concerned. A writer with a contract for a trilogy is guaranteed work and a minimum level of payment for the next few years and the publisher has key slots in his list filled. Not romantic but neither is paying the mortgage and authors do need to keep a roof over their heads. The publisher's marketing spend on a series gets far better value for money than boosting a standalone because promoting book 3 boosts sales of books 1 and 2. This almost certainly relates to the way novelists writing series or just in a repetitive format develop much higher profiles than ones who write single, often very different books. That's as true for John Grisham as it is for Terry Pratchett. Booksellers like to stock these books because they can be more certain of respectable sales. In the cold hard world of retailing, literary merit often plays second fiddle to meeting weekly targets.

This has a bearing on the other recurring debate about why there is so much fantasy when SF seems in decline. I'm don't want to go into that now; you can look out for Stan Nicholl's article about it but I suspect the way SF tends to standalones while fantasy has this tradition of series, is a factor here, simply in terms of the practicalities of sales and marketing and the business of growing an author's profile.

Since we're talking practicalities, let's talk paper and glue. People recommending Mary Gentle's *Ash* all warned me it's an unwieldy book for all that

it's a splendid read and to watch I didn't crack the spine. Philip Pullman's on record as saying in an ideal world His Dark Materials would have been one book but no publisher could countenance putting out such a big book in one volume. It would have cost so much for one thing. How many people would have risked their money, or the time to read it, especially when Philip wouldn't have published anything else for the previous however many years? But a lot of people picked up *Northern Lights* out of curiosity, risking their five quid or so and got hooked, happy to shell out for the hardback, when *The Amber Spyglass* came out last year. They knew they were going to get value for their money. That's surely playing fairer by



'In the cold hard world of retailing, literary merit often plays second fiddle to meeting weekly targets.'

the reader than putting out one huge tome on an all or nothing basis.

I don't subscribe to Sturgeon's Law that 90% of everything is crap but I think it's fair to say 90% of fantasy readers, may be even 95%, won't ever go to a convention, don't read genre magazines or reviews but they know what they like and they stick with it. These people buy books in series and trilogies because they know they're going to get more of the same and that's exactly what they want. That goes for fans of Tom Clancy just as much as for fans of Anne McCaffrey. It doesn't necessarily mean these are bad books, even if they're not the kind of books fans who want challenging, cutting edge stuff want to read. I don't think can you blame these books for the oft-lamented lack of those cutting edge challenges. I've never seen anything as a bookseller or a writer to support the theory that mediocre trilogies keeps the real geniuses out of print. Quite the contrary; I find editors prepared to admit off the record that a reliable cash cow like a long established series or a TV tie-in gives them the flexibility in their balance sheet to fund new writers and to support authors with a limited readership despite their literary merit or indeed possibly because of it.

Booksellers balance shelves full of sharecrop fiction to pay the rent against space claimed for esoteric titles for the devoted fan.

Much of this applies equally well to crime; the series detective is pretty much de rigueur these days. But the fact remains that the series format in big thick books is still more prevalent in fantasy than in any other genre. So what is it about fantasy writing that tends towards long books in sequences of threes, fives or however many? Three's an interesting number. How many fairy tales are variations on the woodcutter's three sons? How many riddles imprisoning damsels in distress come in sets of three? Fantasy is the modern inheritor of that folk tradition and not

only because so much material comes from myth. Chaz Brenchley, author of the Outremer series described fantasy as being fundamentally about change, citing those mythic elements where the final battle is not in fact the end, where the king is restored, but under a new dispensation. The thing about change is it keeps on happening and that's another engine driving fantasy towards sequels. John Whitbourn also touched on the mythic element as one of his concerns in

writing the Downs Lord Triptych. He's convinced a big book needs a big theme to justify it, to repay the reader for their commitment. Several other people came back to me with variations on the idea that a trilogy should be greater than the sum of its parts. A lot of trilogies fall short of this but that doesn't mean it's not worth an author trying. Where it does work, the reader gets something special.

Fantasy serves many of the same purposes as traditional story telling; holding up that magic mirror to real life, exploring questions of character and moral choice. Character takes time to develop in real life and so does describing the process in a book. Series give an author room to develop ideas, individuals and settings. The best fantasy worlds have a depth of culture, geography, society and getting all that across to the reader takes a lot

of pages. Once you've established a world, you want to explore your creation and writing in a series means you can try out new ideas and consequences without reinventing the wheel at the start of each book. By contrast, the consensus was that SF is primarily about ideas. Pursuing a single idea or variations on one central theme makes for far more linear narratives and shorter books. I find the questioning element of SF is always looking to the next step and the next, prompting a firm conclusion at the end of the story. In Justina Robson's *Silver Screen*, questions that are woven around the central thread of Artificial Intelligence drive the plot. Having said that, I enjoyed *Silver Screen* so much



'SF can't survive on fascinating ideas and paper-thin characterisation any more than fantasy can sustain richly developed individuals wandering round a cardboard set.'

because well-drawn characters were handling those ideas. SF can't survive on fascinating ideas and paper-thin characterisation any more than fantasy can sustain richly developed individuals wandering round a cardboard set.

John Whitbourn set out to write a trilogy with the Downs Lord books. Many writers have no intention of writing a series but perpetrate trilogy by accident. I had no master plan for any series when I wrote *The Thief's Gamble*. As far as I was concerned, that was a book complete in itself and finding a publisher for it was the summit of my ambition. When Orbit picked up *Thief* and offered me a two-book deal, the plot for *The Swordsman's Oath* grew naturally out of the central unanswered question from the first book. That was as far as I developed those ideas until that manuscript showed my editor I wasn't a one-book wonder. Offered a second contract, the obvious thing to do was pick up the most urgent issues outstanding from the stories I'd written so far. It so happened that gave me a three clear plot outlines. I was entirely surprised to realise I now had a five volume sequence, inadvertently tying myself into the five act narrative structure you'll find anywhere from Shakespeare to Star Trek.

It's not only fantasy writers who feel this pull. Ben Jeapes wrote *His Majesty's Starship* as a standalone novel showing humanity moving from a 2001 Clarkian milieu to a warp drive 'n' phasers. Finding himself with such an interesting scenario, he wants to write more books about it, enjoying the added fun of returning to established characters. Readers can be just as responsible as writers. It wasn't Colin Greenland's idea to write a trilogy about Tabitha Jute and it wasn't his publisher's or his agent's. He did it for all the readers who convinced him that *Take Back Plenty* was just a beginning that needed a middle and an end. The trilogy takes us back to that most basic of story forms.

So why do fantasy trilogies get so many people groaning? It's undeniable that even excellent stories can suffer when volumes come out at yearly intervals. I'm a huge fan of Robin Hobb but found the sea serpents in the

first book of *The Liveship Traders* a real distraction. They served little function in that part of the story, plainly just there to prefigure later events. That's a purely subjective view and I can't see how she could have done it differently but every reader probably finds things like that in any trilogy. As far as Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* goes, the law of diminishing returns kicked in for me personally a couple of volumes ago. I felt as if I was essentially reading three novels in parallel and struggling to recall characters and incidents from earlier books. My life's simply too busy to give the work the concentration it demands but that's my problem, not the genre's.

There are other undeniable factors why fantasy trilogies can be just plain bad. A supportive editor showing faith in an author with a three-book contract is on the side of the angels but the dark side still claims idle publishers less interested in the content of the book than the content of the tills, happy to accept the same old stuff with only the names changed to protect the guilty. One writer's space to explore is another lazy author's license to pad and ramble because it's far easier to overwrite than to keep a tight focus. The conscientious author striving to

give a trilogy that has added depth suffers and is shadowed by someone else wringing five volumes out of a threadbare tale that could be told in 100,000 words and then laughing all the way to the bank. Even diligent authors get stale if they can't resist temptation and publishers' blandishments and go back to the same well time and again until one day they find all that's left is mud. Always asked to return to the same thing is horribly limiting for an author. Anne Gay passed on a wonderful quote where LM Montgomery who wrote the *Anne of Green Gables* books, complains about being 'chained to Anne's chariot wheels'.

Conan Doyle threw Sherlock Holmes off the Reichenbach Falls but brought him back and the fans were responsible. The publisher persuaded Conan Doyle he had to do what people wanted and that's the flip side of the commercial considerations outlined earlier. Nowadays SF and Fantasy fans have unparalleled opportunities to make their voices heard. There are newsgroups, chat



'The sun is setting on the day of the trilogy'

rooms, forums like the SF Zone on LineOne. Eos, my US publisher runs an annual on-line convention and the British Fantasy Society have floated the possibility on-line events via their web site. There are awards and polls that anyone can vote in and fans shouldn't let the fact they can't hope to read all the not-so-very-short lists put them off. You can have your say on Amazon but don't waste your time posting snide comments about what you don't like. Say why you enjoyed something, encourage other people to give something new a try. If you have the chance to review in print, taking a positive rather than a negative stance is even more important, given how limited the column inches for genre fiction are.

Get involved and if you think too many bloody trilogies is a problem, you can be part of the solution. When readers start voting with their pocket books for standalones rather than the latest recycled Interminabilid, to borrow Terry Brooks's memorable coinage, then the bean counters will take notice. SF publishers launched websites far earlier than any other genre, knowing fans tend to be technically minded and booksellers are doing the same; Ottakar's have Outland, Waterstones used to have Frontiers. Yes it's about advertising but it's about market research as well and they take notice of intelligent feedback. Some badly thought out rant will prompt an editor to wonder why only jerks know how to lick a stamp, or these days, send an email but a positive response tells the publisher what they're doing right and encourages more of the same.

Make yourselves heard and you'll accelerate a trend that everyone I contacted identified, on all sides of the business. The sun is setting on the day of the trilogy, it seems. Part of this is fashion, the trilogy is so last century, been there, done that. Agents and writers who reckon pretty much any story could be sold as a trilogy ten or even five years ago, tell me that really doesn't apply any more. Editors protest they've always valued a good story first and foremost and some overblown turgid trilogy never stood a

better chance of publication than a mediocre standalone. These days, I'm inclined to believe them, on the strength of things like Mary Gentle's *Ash*. What got that published was the quality of the work, rising well above whatever commercial reasons saw it published as 4 parts in the US and as one volume here.

The hefty three volume novels of the 18th century flourished when reading was the privilege of the leisured classes and they sank beneath the populist fiction of Charles

Dickens and his pals when busy people in the 19th century wanted their entertainment in manageable chunks. Not a lot has changed. Market research is telling publishers and booksellers how hectic our modern lives are and I don't think it's any coincidence that we're seeing a rise in series of related books linked by an ongoing chronology, where each story has a beginning, a middle and an end inside the same set of covers. These days, that's what people want rather than a hero hanging off a cliff and waiting a year for the next volume to rescue him. That's what I aim to write and while I'd like to claim it's due to my astute market analysis and innate genius, it's got rather more to do with the fact that I grew up reading Larry Niven's *Tales of Known Space*, Fritz Leiber's *Fafhrd* and the Grey

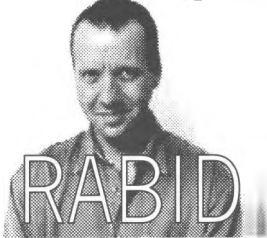
Mouser books, and later on writers like David Gemmell. There's always been that strand within the fantasy genre and the pendulum's coming back again, after swinging so far towards the trilogy.



'Get involved and if you think too many bloody trilogies is a problem, you can be part of the solution.'

Juliet McKenna's life combines writing and motherhood in differing proportions depending on whether it's term time or holidays. She is currently enjoying the novelty of not being stressed about her deadline, having just sent *The Assassin's Edge* into Orbit (that's her publisher). The fifth and final tale of the Einarinn sequence, this is due out in September 2002. By then Juliet will be well into writing the first story of her new series, *The Aldabreshin Compass*.

Neal Asher gets



The events of last September were horrible, but I will not grope for hyperbole since that has already been done to excess. Anyone, of the Western world, who was not stunned by this terrorism, was either in a coma or utterly without empathy. But now that we are less stunned, and the images of aeroplanes crashing into tower blocks are now cynically being used to decorate T-shirts, it might be useful to step back and take a look at the language, the rhetoric, that was used, and the hypocrisy and self-regard it reveals. For a writer, if he is to be any good at his job, must learn from something like this.

News reporters were the most immediate guilty parties. Obviously they were shocked by the story they were telling, but their tendency to stray from pathos to bathos and make outrageous assertions was inexcusable. Apparently the world has been changed forever by these events – something that will come as a surprise to anyone who lived through the blitz, Lockerby, Dunblain and numerous others, (the only differences being of definition, rather than of final physical result). However, the reporters were not so shocked as to forget to remind us of who they were, or to burble on at length to acquire more screen-time for themselves. We also got plenty of the usual "I am going to stick to my script even though you have just answered the question I am about to ask", the "Let's go to our reporter at the scene who knows less than we know here, but what-the-hell", and the eternally insensitive and idiotic "Tell me how you feel about having had your husband incinerated?"

Politicians found this a wonderful time for their usual two-faced rhetoric, but the present

lot, with their political correctness and tendency to blame victim rather than criminal, experienced some difficulties. Our Prime Minister carefully called what happened 'mass' or 'global' terrorism, to make it distinct from normal pub bomb variety, or the kind in which a soldier has the back of his head blown out, (for which you are provided with a get-out-of-gaol-free card and your organisation is given political weight), before running to President Bush's heel with his tail wagging. The opposition were quick to follow his lead, knowing that the zeitgeist would not allow them to point out how the government had been crippling the armed services it was now sending into action, and was a soft-touch for home-grown terrorists. Other world leaders damned the atrocity and also pledged undying support (entailing plenty of bombast but no bombs), which we knew they'd renege on in a month or so, as they did.

Our politicians and media came out of this whole farrago lower than my original low estimation of them (When Julia Roberts in 'Pretty Woman' said, "Slippery little suckers" she wasn't referring to the snails she was attempting to eat, but to the MPs and BBC execs she'd just spotted at a nearby table). It is unsurprising how few people bother to vote at elections. And it is unsurprising how many people are purchasing satellite systems in search of something worth watching on television. During events like this, I am always reminded of an illuminating class for English language I once attended. We were asked to read an article about the same events in papers with opposing political leanings, and to compare them. Do this and you begin to see just how much the English language can be bent to a particular agenda. Keep this sort of thing in mind and you become painfully aware of the bullshit the media is throwing at you every day.

The Skinner is now available at a bookshop near you. The cover for Gridlinked has been nominated for a BSFA award – so when you've finished reading it, you can stick it on your wall.

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

Self publishing

A seminar from Greenbelt 2000

Suzanne Elvidge

Why self publish?

It's hard to get a book published through a publisher. Publishers want you to use agents, and agents want you to have published a book, so you can prove that there's money to be made out of your writing. It's a Catch-22 situation: if, however, you can show a potential publisher or agent that your work sells, it can put you in a significantly stronger position.

By self-publishing, you also get a lot more control; how the book looks and feels is entirely up to you. There are obviously good points and bad points to this – there might be no-one to tell you that you're making an expensive mistake. You can make a bigger profit – there are no middlemen. You know precisely how much each copy cost and how much you should sell it for. But it is entirely at your own risk. You may not even break even, and be left with a pile of unsold stock.

It's very satisfying to take a project from inception through to marketing and selling. The only person you can blame if it fails is yourself, and if it succeeds, all the plaudits are yours.

But you have to be fully committed to the task. Self-publishing takes time, effort and money.

What do I need?

The front cover

The front cover should look good. Spend time on it – it's the one of the first things people notice. Before you start the design process, look at other books, see what you like. Find books that are similar to yours and note the key features; a poetry book will have an entirely different layout to a novel. Keep it simple; it's more likely to look professional. This goes for the page layout too.

Title

Short or long, it has to be memorable. Search an online bookshop to find out if it's been previously used. Whilst it's not necessarily a bar to using it again, you should be careful not to cause confusion, and some titles are copyrighted.

Front matter

If you pick a recent book off your bookshelf

and have a look inside, you'll see that there's a title page (the name of the book, and perhaps the author's name). On the reverse of this is the copyright page, which carries the publication date, publisher and printer contact details, copyright information, credits for any cover artwork, and the ISBN number. Before the meat of the book, you might want to put an acknowledgements page, and if it's a poetry or short story collection, a table of contents.

Introduction

You might like to include an introduction, but who will write this? Yourself, or could you persuade somebody famous to do it for you? Public figures, other writers, performers and musicians can be very generous with their time, if your project catches their eye. If you succeed, credit them on the cover, on the marketing material, mention them every time you perform a public reading – make the most of it.

Something to put in it

It goes without saying that whatever you publish, you should write it well. The text must be spell checked and proof-read thoroughly. Ask someone else to help; you will have read the text so often you won't know what it says any more.

Layout is very important. Make sure that it looks good on the page. Put one poem to a page, or start each new story or new chapter on a new page. Importantly, you should find a nice, clean, clear font – and stick with it.

If you can, use a DTP package rather than just a word-processor; this will help you with design and layout. But a word processor will do. Otherwise, find a printer who can typeset it for you.

A back cover

The back cover copy is probably the thing that *actually* sells the book. This is your chance to summarise the book briefly, clearly, concisely, and most of all – eye-catching and excitingly. You could send some rough copies out for reviews, in the hope that someone gives you a quote that you can use. You can also include a brief notes about the authors/editors/cover artist.

ISBN

Contact the UK ISBN Agency, Woolmead House West, Bear Lane, Farnham GU9 7LG Tel: 01252 742590 (9.00am to 5.00pm) email: isbn@whitaker.co.uk . The website is www.whitaker.co.uk/isbn.htm

This service used to be free, but now a charge is made – check with the agency as to your requirements. Put the ISBN on the copyright page, and on the lower right hand corner of the back cover, 9-12 point font. Use a new ISBN for each book.

A printer

Find a good one; ask, search on the Internet, look through the Yellow Pages. Send emails/letters for quotes. See who is quickest, or asks the right kind of questions. Check whether they have done books before. Ask lots of questions no matter how basic or stupid – if they are good, they will be patient and help you out.

Go for good quality paper coated paper for poetry books or books with a lot of photos or pictures; this avoids text and images showing through too much. This is not so much of an issue for story books, so ask the printer's advice. Length affects the type of binding; whether it's stapled, sewn or perfect (glue) bound. Again, the printer should be able to advise you on this.

If the printer can take your book electronically, find out what file and media format they accept.

If they want camera-ready copy (CRC) try to get access to the best laser printer you can and use very good quality paper. However, submitting digitally will probably make a huge difference in final print quality.

Alternatively, print it yourself. Get good quality paper, get it photocopied, and bind it yourself (either with staples, or go the whole hog and go on a bookbinding course; contact your local adult education college).

Do not use vanity presses; they are a rip-off.

Marketing

This really should be planned either as soon as you start, or even before. Think about where you can sell it: local book shops, Zshops (Amazon.co.uk), through your own website, at performances... You could place adverts in magazines, but aim for specialist magazines to target your audience. Try and get something in your local paper or on your local radio station; they are normally desperate for good copy. Once printed, send your book out for review. You should be talking about it constantly, and get other people to talk about it, too. Be prepared to sell it to anyone and everyone you know, and at any time. Carry copies with you and if someone shows interest, make a sale there and then.

Suzanne Elvidge is a medical writer by trade, and runs the Greenbelt Creative Arts strand every year. She has previously published poetry anthologies and collections. The Greenbelt Arts festival is August 24-26 at Cheltenham Racecourse. Details from www.greenbelt.co.uk

Manuscript submission: the one true way

Simon Morden

Comrades, it has come to my attention that foul Capitalist propaganda has been spreading distress amongst the workers in the word-mines. Counter-revolutionaries are apparently insisting that there are many ways in which to submit a manuscript to a magazine, agent or publisher; that it doesn't matter that you don't use A4 paper, that it doesn't matter if you don't use black ink, or enclose return postage. To these so-called free marketeers, off to the gulags with you. Brothers and sisters, gather round, and I shall tell you the Glorious Standard Format, as approved by the Fourth International.

The covering letter

Your address
your email address (if you have one)
your phone number (optional)

The name and
address of who you're
sending this to...

The date

Dear Editor/John/Miss Smith,

Please find enclosed a short story for your consideration. The story is called *Focus: the next generation*, and is 3000 words long.

(Either)

The manuscript is disposable, and I have enclosed an SAE for your reply.

(or)

I have enclosed an SAE for the return of the manuscript.

(Insert brief biographical notes here – if you've been previously published).

Yours sincerely,
Kilgore Trout.

Modify accordingly if you're submitting a three-chapters-and-synopsis to a book publisher.

Do not say what the story is about in your letter (over and above whether it is a mystery or fantasy or whatever). Editors take this as a sure sign, rightly or wrongly, that the story will be awful.

Neither should you include threats of vengeance if the editor rejects your work, or special inducements to encourage them. You'd be surprised...

The manuscript

The manuscript itself should be printed single-sided on white A4, using black ink. No coloured paper. No funny inks. The font (a serif font like Times New Roman or Baskerville) should be large enough to read - 12 pt is normal. Set line spacing to double. If you have a typed manuscript, make sure it is legible at each and every stage - use a fresh ribbon.

Some editors like to have the author's name address and word count on the first page of the manuscript as well. This means that your story will start half way down the first page, just under the title.

If you can manage it, set the page header to show your name, the story title and the page number. If the pages become separated or misordered, this helps immensely. Your story may end with the legend 'The End', especially if the end of your story is at the bottom of a page.

Leave the body text left-justified (i.e. with a ragged right margin). Indent each paragraph by a suitable amount (1.27cm or ½ in, whichever your fancy) *except* the first paragraph in a section. Exhaustive surveys have shown that these are not indented.

You are free to use italics for emphasis, or perhaps bold, or perhaps capitals. These should be used sparingly, or the editor will assume you are mad. Don't change fonts. Leave the typesetting and layout to the printers; your job is telling the story.

Having printed out your magnum opus, paperclip it together, or if too bulky, leave loose-leaf. Don't use staples, binder twine or glue. Please don't.

Getting it in the post

Find an envelope large enough to take the manuscript without straining. A4 envelopes should be used - for larger submissions, you

can get envelopes with gussets, or use giant-sized jiffy bags. Write the address on the front in bold, printed letters. Minimise the risk of getting it delayed/stuck in the dead letter office by writing legibly.

If the manuscript is disposable, write or print your name and address on a smaller envelope (I use DLs), and stick sufficient return postage on it. If you want your manuscript back, put in another envelope the same size as the one you are using to send it.

Do not seal the envelope up. Go through this checklist:

- ✓ Is this the right story going to the right place?
- ✓ Does my covering letter cover this story?
- ✓ Have I signed the letter?
- ✓ Have I marked the manuscript as disposable or do I want it returned?
- ✓ Have I enclosed the right sized envelope for my reply?

Ho to the Post Office - if you're wanting the manuscript back, then you'll need two lots of however much it costs you to send it. Stick those stamps on (not forgetting the SAE), and seal the envelope. Unless you're at a main Post Office where the post boxes have nice wide slots, ask the teller to pop it in the sack for you. A standard post box doesn't take A4 without a bit of pushing.

Remember Tanya Brown's experiences with Parcel Force (Focus#39). Make very sure that it is going Royal Mail.

That should cover most eventualities; any variations will be in a specific market's published guidelines, which you read religiously. Don't you?

You may consider that all this is a bit of a faff - trust me, it's not, for two important reasons. Firstly, editors are looking for reasons to reject a manuscript. Don't give them any other reason than they don't want what you've written. Secondly, and allied to the first, is that a double-spaced, clean, black ink on white paper manuscript is so much easier to read than any of the alternatives. Writers of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your contracts...

Blimey, if you don't know who I am by now...