



## **The BSFA's magazine for writers**

**It could be you...**

Roz Southey takes a punt on reality

**Character competition**

Who gets the gongs?

**Lights, camera, action!**

Ray-Ann Lutener learns from the movies



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

## Issue 42 November 2002

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#### About the cover

"Ulla!" The mighty Martian fighting machine bestrides the streets of Woking, courtesy of sculptor Michael Condron, commissioned by Woking Town Council to celebrate the link between the town and HG Wells' celebrated story.

www.mcondron.fsbusiness.co.uk

Photo by Simon Bradshaw  
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### 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 2003

# Redantry

There was a column in the Radio Times (21-27 September 2002), titled 'On why The X Files will never die', commenting on the last ever episode as it was screened on Sky. The columnist, Danny Kelly, says this: "But *The X Files* isn't an ordinary drama. It's Science Fiction. Which means of course, that it must live forever... why do science-fiction dramas attract audiences that become completely obsessed and that will never allow their favourite TV show to die?"

As proof of his thesis, he mentions the re-runs of old SF series on digital and satellite channels. The number of *Star Trek* and *X Files* fan websites. *The Simpsons* character Comic Book Guy.

And that's about it, aside from some hyperbole on how naughty it is to graft Gillian Anderson's head onto "the body of naked nubile."

My first thought as I read through the article was "who is this idiot?" I haven't changed my mind.

So, gloves off.

I'm actually in quite a good position to argue this, as I hardly watch any TV at all, but I have watched at one time or another, all the programs that Kelly mentions: *X Files*, *Star Trek*, *Doctor Who*, *Blake's 7*, *Battlestar Galactica* (sic), *B5*, *Red Dwarf*, *Lost in Space*, and *The Simpsons*.

And compared to the thrice-weekly slow-motion car crash that is *Eastenders*, the above list reads like Plato, Plutarch and Pliny.

Good drama – good comedy too – is like gold dust on any terrestrial channel. I remember when both major channels actually made an effort on Saturday nights to put something on that might be worth watching. For the past few years, it has, for the greater part, been utter crap.

Perhaps Kelly thinks the viewing public have short memories, but he'd be wrong. A letter in the RT a couple of weeks ago called for a repeat of *Edge of Darkness*. Which was frankly magnificent. Now, we get *National Lottery Winning Lines*.

A friend of mine writes for *The Bill*. He laments the day they changed the format from hard-hitting crime drama to soap set in a police station. *Holby City* – soap. *Casualty* – soap. *Merseybeat* – soap. It's all bloody soaps and makeovers and gameshows. Is it any wonder that a certain proportion of the population not content with the bread and circuses thrown to

us will actively seek out programmes which have a spark of imagination and originality about them?

Having carved out our niche, they then bugger us about, censoring *Buffy* and *Angel*, throw in-sequence episodes around the schedules like confetti, cancel everything for the snooker, the athletics, the golf, the tennis, the national paint-drying championships, then wonder why viewing figures are low. It's because we have to scan the listings' magazines line by line to find where the hell they put our programmes. Then they cancel the show. Can you then imagine treating *Corrie* watches like that?

Re-runs. They're re-running everything on digital. Why? Because it's cheap. It's been made, and it's cheap. BBC are showing re-runs of *Only Fools and Horses*. And *Some Mothers do Have 'em*. Does he lay into Frank Spencer fans? Does he bollocks. Does he carp on about Elvis, a recent cover star on his own magazine? No. Why? Because all the Elvis fans would take him round the back of Broadcasting House and give him a good kicking. I didn't spot him saying, "He's dead. Get over it."

Finally, to Comic Book Guy. I like Comic Book Guy. I have friends like Comic Book Guy, who on seeing a neutron bomb rocketing down the street towards them will be able to utter the immortal words, "oh, I have wasted my life."

I also have friends like Ned Flanders, but I'll leave that for another day. Kelly's assertion that "Of all the groups it lambasts, [*The Simpsons*] most determined canings are reserved for lovers of sci-fi" couldn't be wider of the mark. Does this fool actually watch the programme? What about Chief Wiggum? Doctor Nick? Or anybody else for that matter? The parody may be accurate. But it's harmless. And so are we.

We know what we like. We're much less likely to put up with inane pap. Perhaps that's the real crime here: we don't want *The X Files* to stop because it was quite good, and recognise that there'll be a very long wait for something even half-way decent to replace it.

Simon Morden  
Gateshead, October 2002

# THE FUTURE'S HISTORY

Roz Southey

Five minutes to midnight. The alleyway was as black as a nightmare. As always. It stank. As always. Jackson crouched in shadows, the rotting wood of a door behind him, something soft and slimy under one foot. A thin moon slid into view over the far end of the alley as if it was sneaking a look at what Jackson was doing.

He peered at the luminous display of his watch. Three minutes to midnight. Three minutes to a mad dash to the cellar door at the end of the alley. Then two minutes max to grab as much cash as he could before the next Lottery winner got his or her slice of the action. And something was out there in the darkness. He was pretty certain it was an alien – he'd caught a glimpse of it sliding from one shadow to another, and the antennae and bulging eyes were pretty unmistakable. Yes, it was an alien. Again.

*Working notes: Saturday 11.58 p.m. Week 50. Not long to go before we find out what pleasures we're in for this week. I hope it's something original. Bug-eyed aliens weren't funny when they turned up the first time in Week 6 of the Lottery and they're even less amusing the eighth time around. It'll be dinosaurs again next. Great fun, I don't think. And this Jackson's a dead loss too. This is the twentieth time I've skulked in this stinking alley and I've never yet caught him with the money, let alone managed to interview him.*

*But I will.*

Thirty seconds. The alien was advancing down the alleyway. An alien with aggro. A laser gun, all high-tech and flashing red lights. And by the laws of the Lottery anything that gets killed, stays killed. Jackson pushed back into the doorway, trying desperately not to breathe. He seemed to have developed a wheeze as loud as a jumbo-jet. The alien's head turned, the laser swung –

Jackson's watch alarm squeaked. The alien went up in a sparkle of atoms and Jackson ran like hell.

*Week 51: Sunday am (just). Please let me have seen the last of aliens. Hang on, I can't see properly. Yes, Jackson's got to the door, he's*

*inside. He's got to grab the cash from wherever he's hidden it, get out – hell, there can't be enough time. A minute before the new Lottery winner gets his or her very own future for a week. And just two more winners to go before the franchise runs out and I end up with the only account of everything that's happened this year. And a big advance from a certain publisher.*

The cashbox was where Jackson had left it, pushed to the back of the cupboard under the rotting stairs. He dragged it towards him, stabbed at the metabolic catch. It wouldn't open. He jabbed again. *Shit, shit.* And he didn't have time to check his watch to see how long he'd got left.

The lid sprang up. Jackson snatched at a handful of notes, slammed the lid down, thrust the box back into the cupboard, glanced at his watch. Damn, he had ten seconds left, he could have grabbed another handful. He couldn't see how much money he had, too dark, but –

The world fell away. He dropped ten feet, pain knifing through his right ankle. A bright light shone on him – he squeezed his eyes shut then realised it was daylight. His left elbow sank into something wet. And the stink was worse than ever.

He was in the open on a nice bright sunny day. Blue sky above him, a fleck or two of fluffy white cloud. All around was butter-yellow desert with a bit of mucky-coloured swamp thrown in here and there. It was the swamp that was stinking. That and the half-eaten brontosaurus about twenty metres away.

"Oh sod it," he said. "Not effing dinosaurs again."

He staggered upright and banged his head on a branch. Trees, half a dozen of them, all odd angles and thick fleshy leaves. A clump or two of bushes and a thin covering of what you might call grass if you were feeling charitable.

Jackson hung onto the tree to take the weight off his sore ankle and had a good look around. Funny, he thought, you have a city full of people and when it all changes you can't see anyone anywhere. What do people do all week? Sleep?

There were rules to this Lottery he wanted

explained.

He was standing on prehistoric Earth with a pocketful of cash and nowhere to spend it. Great. And it wasn't the first time. That had been Week 4. It had seemed like a good joke then, sitting in a tree yelling rude comments at dinosaurs. Except he'd not known what to eat and had almost starved. The second time it had happened he'd forced himself to eat some plants and ended up with the runs all week. The last time had been better; he'd found some berries –

There was a roar behind him and he was up a tree faster than he could say *tyrannosaurus rex*. From the topmost branches he peered out between the fat leaves. It was T-Rex. It always was. Why didn't winners ever imagine dinosaurs he'd never heard of? It was about half a kilometre off, pawing the air and roaring. Just like the movies, which of course was where this week's winner had got his ideas from.

"Oi!"

A woman was running towards him. Didn't she know not to run! He yelled at her to go away. T-Rex's head was already swivelling in their direction. The woman grabbed at the tree, held out a hand. Jackson hauled her up quickly before T-Rex's tiny brain got the message its eyes were sending it. The woman settled on the branch beside him, pushing back little round glasses. She was thin and scrawny and had twigs in her short black hair.

Jackson peered out at T-Rex. The dinosaur was stomping off into the distance.

The woman sighed. "The winner this week's got no imagination. The ground should shake when the dinosaur walks."

They watched. About ten steps into the dinosaur's march, the ground began to shake. "Better late than never," the woman said. She stuck out her hand. "Lulu." Jackson took her hand gingerly; it was freezing.

She pulled something out of a pocket. Headphones, with a mouth-mike attached. She put them on.

"Week 51," she said. "Open working notes. Bloody dinosaurs again. Close notes."

They sat looking at each other. Lulu flicked a finger at the trees. "Is this all there is?"

"It's the safest there is," Jackson said.

"You mean we've got to stay up here all week?"

Jackson shook his head. "Not all week. For one thing, I'm dying for a piss." He peered through the branches again, downwards this time. Bushes to his right had reddish-brown berries on them. They looked like the ones he'd

eaten last time, the ones that didn't give him the runs. He climbed down, pissed against a tree, stuffed a few handfuls of berries into his mouth then decided to be chivalrous and take some back for the woman. She looked at them doubtfully as he climbed back onto the branch. She was dictating into her mouth-mike again.

"I'd like to get my hands on the organisers of this damn Lottery. They ought to have put a limit on the number of times winners could choose dinosaurs."

"And aliens." Jackson ate his way through the berries Lulu didn't want.

"Odd isn't it," Lulu said. "Winners can have any future they want for a week. But they always seem to opt for the past, like dinosaurs or the Battle of Britain. Or they go for unreal things like aliens. Or bonny things like lots of money."

"Er – yes," Jackson said, embarrassed. The wad of notes in his pocket seemed heavy against his thigh.

"I mean –" Lulu was still dictating. "Call me naïve if you like but when all this started last year, I thought we'd see fantastic things – poverty and hunger eliminated, wars banned! Whatever happened to grand ideals?"

"Er –"

"What do we get instead? Selfishness! An



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apparently endless capacity for putting Number One first. Grab the money, have a stupid bit of so-called fun!" She glared at Jackson. "Don't you agree?"

"Er." She was still glaring. Jackson said feebly: "Well, it's all harmless isn't it?"

"Is it?" Lulu tapped her pocket. Her voice spoke in tinny tones from some muffled speaker.

*Week 33: the seventh lot of dinosaurs. Three people killed in Manchester during a fight between two brontosaurus. ... Week 34: I don't believe it, more dinosaurs! They've wiped out an entire village in Cornwall. ... Week 40: ...*

"Yeah, right," Jackson said.

"The dead," Lulu said severely, "stay dead. According to the rules of the Lottery."

Somewhere in the distance a dinosaur roared.

"Well?"

"Why ask me!"

"You're my subject."

"What?"

"A story as complex and fragmented as this – " She tapped her pocket again " – needs a continuity link. You."

"Me!"

"I've been following you since you won in Week 2."

Jackson said nervously: "What? Me? No way. Wrong person."

Lulu smiled. "Did I tell you I've got access to the Lottery computer?"

"Same name, different person."

"Why did you choose two million in cash?"

He goggled at her. "You have to ask?"

"You could have stopped all wars, plugged the hole in the ozone layer, done something positive!"

"Oh I'm good at that." Jackson started climbing down the tree. Lulu leant over to watch him down.

"What are you doing?"

"Something positive! Going next door," he yelled back as he climbed the next tree.

All afternoon he could hear Lulu muttering into her mouth-mike. He dozed. Nothing to do but sleep for a week. Boring but safe.

After about three hours he heard rustling from the next tree; Lulu said: "Please close your eyes."

"You what?"

"Close your fucking eyes!"

She needed a piss. Jackson closed his eyes but there was nothing he could do about his

ears. After a while he thought there was an awful lot of rustling and peeked. Lulu was scrabbling round in the bushes for berries; since he'd picked the ones at the front, she had to push amongst the thorns to get the ones further back. A second after she'd climbed back into the tree she was dictating again.

Jackson propped himself against a branch. The sun started to slide down the sky and a huge band of red painted itself across the horizon. Then it got dark. Not long after that, he heard Lulu climbing down the tree again.

"Close your eyes!"

She had the runs. Jackson squeezed his eyes shut. Well, he was all right – he couldn't help it if the berries didn't agree with her.

She was up all night but around dawn she fell asleep at last and Jackson snoozed until mid-morning when he ventured down for breakfast. The stupid idiot had shitted in the bushes. He climbed back up his tree still hungry.

The muttering started again in the next tree. Jackson cautiously moved the branches.

"Hello –"

The muttering stopped. "Yes?" He couldn't tell if she was in a good mood or not.

"Um – can I ask a question? I mean, would you answer it?"

A silence. "I might."

"If what?"

"If you give me an interview."

Was it worth it? He sighed. Two million pounds was worth it. "Okay."

"You first," she said magnanimously.

"Right. What are you doing?"

"Writing a history of the past year. A comprehensive history. One with everything in it," she added.

"So you know who invented the Lottery, right?"

"You mean, the man who discovered how to manipulate space/time and make a tidy sum doing it, thank you? Why do you want to know?"

"I want to ask him a question."

Silence.

"You can have his name after I have the interview. I've got six hours worth of tape here. Start with why you chose money instead of the elimination of war and hunger."

Jackson sighed. "Well, it's real, isn't it? I mean, after you've had your future for a week everything goes back to normal, doesn't it? I mean, everything disappears – unless it's real. What d'you call it? Tangible."

Lulu made a face. "So they say. But dinosaurs don't survive the week and they're real."

"Not now. I mean, they're extinct aren't they? Anyway, these are only movie dinosaurs. Money's different. You can hold it and feel it."

"Umm," Lulu said disapprovingly.

She had an endless curiosity. She asked him about everything. Had he decided in advance what he wanted or had he asked for the money on impulse? Did his friends know he'd won? What did he spend the money on? Had it affected his love life? And in the middle of the interview they fell out of the trees and landed with a thump (after a fall of about a foot) on the paved and stinking surface of the alley.

Lulu stared at Jackson, Mike still outstretched. "That shouldn't have happened. It's only Monday."

"I know what's happened," Jackson said happily. "The winner's been eaten by a dinosaur. A whole week of peace before silly bugger winner number 52!"

"You have no sense of adventure," Lulu said irritably. "Any other man stuck up a tree in the Pleistocene would have gone dinosaur hunting but what did you do?"

"Same as you."

"I am an historian," she said with dignity. "And an historian is a trained observer."

"Well, all I care about is staying alive and keeping my money. Come on, tell me who this bloke is."

He had to finish the interview first.

*Week 51: Wednesday lunchtime. At last, a fitting climax to my research – a confrontation between a winner and the man who gave him the opportunity to alter the world, if only for one week. On one side, the vision and selflessness of a man who opened up wonderful opportunities for mankind and on the other, a man who was too afraid to take advantage and opted instead for pecuniary gain.*

*Scene: a café. Vases of dried flowers, pine tables and chairs. A cluster of teapots in the middle of the table, cups half full of cold tea. Brackets write this up in more detail later close brackets.*

The inventor was dirty. Soot on his fingers rubbed off onto the pale yellow teacups. There were streaks of black on his patterned shirt too – Jackson finally cottoned on when he saw the sketchpad and stick of charcoal shoved onto the spare seat. The bloke was an artist.

Now he was face to face with the man, he

couldn't think what to say. Lulu didn't help. She sat off to one side, with her recorder switched on and a mike propped on a little stand in the middle of the teapots, and kept her mouth shut.

"Um," Jackson said.

"Yes?" The bloke slurped tea.

"You're the one who – who invented –"

The bloke waved at him madly, making shushing noises so loudly that half the other people in the café looked round. He grabbed Jackson's hand and shook it, leaving smudges of charcoal across Jackson's palm and wrist. "Godfrey X, Performance Artist. My card."

The 'card' was a glossy brochure as big as most magazines. Across the front was written *Godfrey X Performance Artist* and inside were photos of the bloke, mostly looking grubby, standing in front of fuzzy corners of pictures and statues. He didn't actually seem to be performing in any of the photos. Smiling wasn't his strong point either.

"I wanted to talk about your invention."

"Invention!" Godfrey X cried indignantly. "I initiate processes, which I turn into Art. The practice has a respectable pedigree. In the middle of the last century –"

"Yeah, great," Jackson said hurriedly. "And you do this – er – process once a week right?"

"My dear Jackson, I do nothing. It's all up to the lucky –" He glanced round, mouthed silently: *Lottery winner*. My Genius consists in getting other people to act. People are so passive, don't you think?"

"Yes," Lulu said, glaring at Jackson.

Was Godfrey X talking a little louder now? "People complain about their impoverished lives but do nothing about the situation. But – but!" Yes, his voice was loud enough now to make people look round. He snatched at a teapot and poured tea from an extravagant height. "Make the stakes high enough and most people will take a risk. That's what my little art process encourages them to do. Win the Lottery –" He was almost shouting now. "And you too can have the future of your choice. You say what goes for a whole week! And all because of me!"

They were mobbed. Drinkers on all sides abandoned their coffee cups and descended on them, brandishing serviettes. They all seemed to want Godfrey X's autograph.

He loved it. He waved his hands and demanded to know what dedications were required. Lulu grabbed contented punters as they fought their way back out of the scrum around the table, throwing questions at them – what did they think of the Lottery? What future would they ask for if they won?

Jackson struggled out of the crowd and went to sit on the stairs to the loos, next to the alien. He wasn't like the one in the alley, no antennas or bug eyes or anything like that. He was like the ones they caught at that desert place in America years ago. About four feet tall, pot-bellied and bald, wearing a one-piece suit. His skin was greyish and he smelt dusty. He was holding a Lottery ticket in one six-fingered hand.

"Last chance this week," Jackson said nodding at the ticket. "Been here long?"

"Week twelve. I keep buying tickets but I never win." The alien's English was a bit odd, as if he'd not long since learnt it.

"What future would you like then?"

"One on my own planet," the alien said.

Jackson looked at him for a moment then apologised before prodding him in the arm.

"Yes, I am real," the alien agreed.

"Haven't you got a ship?"

"The winner wanted to rescue me from the remains of my crashed vessel."

Jackson contemplated the mass of bobbing heads and flying arms around the table below. "You're here to see Godfrey X, aren't you?"

The alien held out the Lottery ticket but Jackson already knew the small print by heart. *All the above conditions apply only during the duration of the Lottery franchise.*

"Yeah, I've been thinking about that too," Jackson said. "Does the *real* rule apply at the end of this week? What'll happen to – well, suppose someone's won some money during the lottery. Will that still exist after the Lottery ends or will it just disappear?"

"What about me?" the alien said forlornly. "Will I stay here or can I go back home?"

At the table, the scrum was still in progress but it had taken on a manic air. Autograph hunters burrowed deeper and deeper; Lulu pushed down into the ruck as if hunting for a lost needle. Godfrey X had performed another act and disappeared.

Jackson liked the alien, mainly because he was so totally non-PC. The only thing he could, or would, eat was meat and he had no notion of what 'environmentally friendly' meant; he discarded the bits and pieces of his burger – paper, bun, lettuce and so on – as they strolled down the street; leaving a trail of happy dogs and pigeons. He was fascinated by women too, staring at them and making sucking noises which might have been appreciative but which were not appreciated by the women. Jackson liked being seen with him because people

tended to assume he must be this week's lucky winner – he'd kept his real win a secret in case his mates tried to touch him for a fiver. It was nice to be the centre of attention. Until this kid in a baseball cap looked the alien up and down and said: "That the best you could think of?"

They didn't see Lulu again until Saturday afternoon. Jackson and the alien had wandered out into the park and were sitting on a bench by the war memorial. Another reason Jackson liked the alien was that he didn't expect you to make conversation; there were lots of long dozing silences while the alien just sat staring into the passing traffic, occasionally saying things like: "I can't believe you're still primitive enough to have the wheel."

Lulu found them just as it was starting to get dark. The alien seemed fascinated by the car lights; he said they reminded him of mating rituals at home. Lulu came up behind them and flopped down beside the alien.

"7.30. tonight," she said. "His place."

"Whose place?"

"Godfrey X's."

"Will he tell us what will happen?" the alien asked.

Lulu pulled out her mike and shoved it under the alien's nose. "Would you like to –"

"Not in public," he said shocked.

They walked to Godfrey X's flat – they had tried to catch the bus but Jackson was the only one with cash and the driver had refused to give change for a £50 note. The flat was in a disused mill building at the top of a hill overlooking the river; Godfrey X's flat was on the top floor and the lift was out of order, so they had to climb the stairs. The alien said that the inhabited parts of his planet were totally flat and started gasping for breath after only six steps. Jackson had to piggyback him up the other seven flights which made him feel like a prat when a couple of city types passed them on the third floor. Besides, the alien's skin was chilly, like the inside of a fridge.

The artist flung open the door for them. The apartment was one of those huge warehouse-type places that are built especially to encourage as many draughts as possible. It had corners. A kitchen corner had piles of dirty dishes, and paintbrushes and teaspoons sticking out of the same used mug. An office corner had four computers. An obese sofa sat morosely with its back to a huge window. On a half-floor above was an unmade bed scattered with women's underwear.

"Let's go into the tv room," Godfrey X said.

The tv room was another corner. There was



no tv in it. Godfrey X produced a large white teapot with blue paint smudged on the handle, and a cluster of mugs that didn't match. "Allow me," he said, pouring. The smell of coffee wafted over them. Jackson and the alien perched on the edge of overstuffed chairs as Lulu started to unpack her recording equipment.

"There's no need for that paraphernalia, my dear," Godfrey X pointed upwards. "I told you – this is the tv room." A red light winked at them from the ceiling; the alien sat up straighter and preened himself.

Lulu shook her head. "I believe we have different priorities," she said and set up her equipment anyway.

"I want to know what happens tonight," Jackson said, grabbing his chance. "Can I keep the money when the Lottery ends?"

"Can I go home?" the alien asked.

"Not yet," Lulu said irritably. "One moment." She clicked a few switches. "Fine. We are now recording. Repeat the question please."

Jackson repeated the question.

"Weeelll," Godfrey X said. He reached under his chair, brought out a metal box and shoved it onto the table. Jackson and Lulu dived to save the coffee mugs. Inside the box, piles of paper were neatly stacked and tied with red ribbon. Disks and tapes too, a couple of videos.

"Let me consult the Rules of the Lottery," Godfrey X ummed over a computer printout.

"I hope they're satisfactory," the alien said and, when Godfrey stared at him, he added: "For your sake." He looked at Jackson. "That's the right way to make a threat isn't it?"

Godfrey X ignored him. "The Rules say that, after 51 weeks during which the winner will be drawn by Lottery, the winner in week 52 will be one G. X. Esquire of Number 16 –"

"That's you!" Jackson said. "That's cheating!"

"Not if it's in the Rules," Lulu pointed out. "And it does have a nice symmetry. The man who started the process ends it. An end in its beginning – always a very satisfactory shape for a History. I don't know why I haven't thought of it before."

"I thought historians had to go along with what actually happens," Jackson said. "I mean if real history doesn't have a nice satisfactory shape you're a bit lumbered aren't you?"

"Not necessarily," Lulu said.

"We're *making* history!" Godfrey X flung his arms wide.

"Fine. You make history, I'll keep the money."

"Jackson has no sense of adventure," Lulu said. "He doesn't like risks. He likes safety."

"Don't knock it." Jackson jabbed a finger in the alien's direction. "Ask *him* if he wants to be adventurous."

"I want to go home."

Godfrey X tossed himself back in his chair.

"I initiated the process and I will end it! But first, let us establish our individual – er – priorities." He smiled at Jackson. "You wish to remain a millionaire."

"No, I just don't want to be broke. I want to keep what I've got."

Lulu sighed, pityingly.

"And you –" Godfrey X turned the smile on the alien, "You wish to go home."

"There will be hell to pay if I don't," said the alien. He was beginning to sound remarkably fluent in English.

"And you –"

"Oh, I have very modest aims," Lulu said. "I wish merely to publish a comprehensive account of the futures of this past year. I am but a humble historian."

"But with such a unique record, a potentially *rich* historian." Godfrey X dipped his hands into the box for two videos; he put one on either side of the table. "I believe I have not fully explained the artistic process. It allows the duplication of time/space so that two sequences of events have in fact been running in tandem during this past year – firstly, events as they would have occurred had the Lottery not been taking place, and secondly, events as they *have* taken place with the Lottery in operation. I trust you follow me so far." He plunged on without letting them speak. "As the Lottery draws to its conclusion, it is necessary to confirm one of these sequences."

"Eh?" Jackson said.

"At this moment," Godfrey X said, "both sequences hang, as it were, in limbo, but tonight – on the stroke of midnight – I can choose which *really* happened. Do I make myself clear?"

They all frowned at him.

"This –" Godfrey X tapped the left-hand video, "is a complete account of the last year."

Lulu sat up. "What?"

"With corroborative evidence of course." He waved his hands over the red-ribboned bundles. "If this version of the last year is confirmed then this video will go straight to the British Library as an authoritative record."

"Over my dead body. *I'm* the one with the authoritative account!"

"And this," Godfrey X tapped the video on

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his right, "is history as it would have happened but for my little piece of performance art. Now let us consider the implications of the possible courses of action. Possibility Number One, I confirm the Lottery version of events. In that case, you, Jackson, will keep your million pounds."

"Great."

"You – er – um – will stay on Earth."

The alien glowered.

"And you Lulu –"

"– will be up against a rival account of the year. No way."

"Hey!" Jackson said, seeing what was coming.

"If, on the other hand, I confirm the alternative course of events," Godfrey X put his hand on the video on his right, "history goes back to what it would have been without the Lottery. Jackson here returns to his old way of life."

"Skint, you mean."

"Our alien friend goes home and you, Lulu –"

"Keep the only account of the project."

Godfrey X smiled.

"Hang on," Jackson said. Something wasn't right.

"You are outvoted," the alien said quickly.

"Hey!"

"Two against one," Lulu said. "Confirm the history on the right."

"Is that your final decision?" Godfrey X said. "You see, I am leaving the decision to you. My part in the performance is to relinquish that performance to others. Which history –"

"The one on the right," Lulu and the alien said together.

"Hey –" Jackson said, and stopped.

The alien was winking at him.

It was just after midnight and Lulu was in a foul mood. She was stamping up the pavement to the top of the hill. It was beginning to rain; big blobs of moisture darkening the pavement in the yellow lamplight.

"Don't blame me," Jackson said. "I voted for the history on the left. You were the one that wanted the other one."

Lulu grunted.

"But you didn't think long enough, did you?" Jackson was enjoying rubbing it in. "I mean, you got it into your head that you had to have the only history of the Lottery and you forgot that that's not much use if the history you're writing about didn't take place in the first place."

"Shut up."

"Well, at least the alien got home." Maybe he wouldn't even remember his visit to Earth – after all, he'd never been here. Funnily enough, Jackson remembered it all. He wondered why.

"Never mind," he said. "You could always market it as a science fiction novel. After all, it's got a nice satisfying shape."

She threw a discarded burger carton at him. "A science fiction novel! With aliens and dinosaurs in it? It's been done before – dozens of times!"

Jackson absently caught the burger carton, looking at the lights of passing cars. He was already missing the alien.

"Well, there's one consolation," Lulu said. "At least you're back to being skint."

"Thanks," he said. She was leaping to intercept a taxi which she wasn't going to share with him. He let her go, remembering that the alien had winked at him. Yes, he'd got it now. Lulu still had her recordings even though they were worthless and had not happened anyway, because they were tangible. Maybe in that understairs cupboard there was still a cashbox –

He glanced at his watch and started to run before he realised he had all the time in the world. The future (and the past) was going to stay exactly the way it was.



The cash was still there, in thick dusty stacks. He wondered, sneezing, whether in this history (the real one, he reminded himself) there was a reason for him having the money. If he hadn't won the Futures Lottery how had he come by it?

He pulled the first notes out of the cashbox (and, with them, the press cutting about the building-society robbery), just seconds before the policemen arrested him.

Roz Southey's articles have appeared in magazines such as *Family Tree Magazine*, *Cumbria* and *The Lady*. She has recently decided to turn from writing non-fiction about the past to writing fiction about the future: her short stories have been published in *Planet Prozak* and *Roadworks*.

Robin Gladwish is an aerospace engineer living in Hampshire. He is an amateur artist who suddenly decided to put his work forward for publication in 2001. This is his second *Focus* outing. More of his work can be seen at:

[www.gladwishes.freemove.co.uk](http://www.gladwishes.freemove.co.uk)

# ALL CLEAR

Mary-Rose Benton

The All Clear lifted its joyful sound to the sky.

"Right, everyone out of the shelter, and back in the house," Dad said. "It's only ten o'clock. We've got a full night's sleep ahead of us tonight. And if anyone wants to use the lavatory, go now, before I lock the door, or spend the rest of the night in the Anderson."

As he walked up the garden path, he disturbed next door's cat, who jumped off the lavatory roof, and fled. Picking his way gingerly in the blackout, he took care not to trample on his lovingly tended vegetables.

He did his patriotic duty, using every available space for the vital crops: potatoes as the staple; carrots for vitamin C, onions to flavour the stew; beetroot for natural sweetness; kids loved sweet things, and he thought fondly of the gobstoppers and stickjaws he had had in his youth. Kids today didn't know what they were missing. He might even keep some rabbits. They would make a nice Sunday dinner treat, bit of pastry round them. He mused on all of this, as he trod delicately round his crops.

Mum swept up the bedclothes and followed Dad up the path into the house, leaving the baby, Billy, till last, in his Moses basket. Let sleeping babies lie, she thought, he could stay in the basket, undisturbed, when she brought him into the house, and he could come in the bedroom with her and Dad. The older children both jumped off the bunk and trudged back up

the garden path into the house. A dog barked non-stop.

"Any minute now," said Dad, as he walked into the kitchen, "I'm going to go across and put my boot down that dog's throat."

"Make the kids a cup of cocoa, will you, Jack," Mum said, "while I take these upstairs, then I'll go back and get the baby."

Jack Goodwin got out the cups and the cocoa, while the kettle boiled on the hob. The children racketed around, squabbling.

Mum was just leaving the house to go and get Billy, at the same time as the kettle began to whistle. Something else whistled too, as an undetected straggler dropped the last of his load. The house was demolished, and everyone in it perished. Baby Billy, now without a family, jumped violently in his basket, then put his thumb in his mouth and waited confidently for his mother to come and take him back into the house.

Prof. William Goodwin sat talking with his students. His subject was history, but over coffee in the college cafe, the talk tended, as with most young people, to range over subjects covering politics, religion, life, the universe and everything.

He enjoyed the company of young people, having lost out on a regular family life himself, and for this reason had remained a bachelor. He often wondered what it would have been

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like to have had an orthodox family life, but now, in his sixties, it was a bit late to start raising one of his own without having experienced one in his childhood.

The conversation began in the usual mundane way, when a pupil asked him how people entertained themselves in the home when he was a child, before television.

"Strictly speaking, it had been invented, some time before I was born," the Professor said, "but it was only for the very rich to begin with. It was discontinued at the beginning of the war, and came back on again in 1946. I suppose it was the mid-fifties before most families had one."

"I had imagined you all sat round the fire, while someone put the records on the gramophone," said one.

"No," said the class wit, "they all stood round the piano, thinking, 'I wish one of us knew how to play this damn thing.'"

Bill Goodwin laughed with the rest; it had been one of his own favourite gags.

"I wish we could go back in time," said another, "and see what it was like. Listening in to the news, thinking, 'this is history; I'll be able to tell my children.' Getting what you could on the black market, shifting and shuffling, and making do. It must have been a very vivid time."

"You would probably have been called up, and would at least get three square meals a day, until... well, for as long as it lasted," the Professor said. He didn't like to play the old sage, boring on about how much tougher they had been 'in his day.' If only because he considered that this was still his day. The differences between youth and age were vastly exaggerated, he thought. It would be his day until he died, as long as he made the most of life.

"There's no such thing as time travel," a young man said, "otherwise, someone would already have come from the future to tell us about it."

"How do we know they haven't come back, but haven't told us?" said the girl by his side. "What we are experiencing now might be the result of a changed past, but in the nature of human thinking, we don't that it's changed. There's no rule that says time travellers from the future have to tell us they from the future."

"So we are repeating a conversation we have already had?" said another. "I had a feeling of *deja vu* when I was putting my lipstick on this morning."

"I knew you were going to say that," said the wit.

"Time travel is riddled with so many

paradoxes," said the Prof. "that it's no more than a fascinating diversion, unless you are speaking on the level of quantum physics. One particle in two places at the same time, or more than one particle in the same place, that sort of thing. And even the experts are adamant that we might only travel forward out of our own time. That it's impossible to go backwards."

"But surely," a student said, "having got to the future, what had been the present, would then be the past, and if you couldn't travel back, you'd be stuck in the future till you died. Besides, of all the possible realities, how do we know which is the one. And anyway, what do we mean by 'real.'?" He was a devotee of Red Dwarf, and had all the episodes on tape.

"Well, it's all academic," the older man said. "What's done is done. What has happened has happened." He sighed, collected up his portfolio, shrugged on his sheepskin jacket, and bid them all good afternoon, as they dispersed.

The Cosmos shifted slightly, and the gods relented.

The All Clear sounded, and Dad said;

"All right, you lot, back to the house. It's only ten o'clock; we can get a decent night's sleep after all. Go to the lav, you kids, before you go in the house, or I'll lock you out."

Mum got the bedclothes together, as the children stirred sleepily, and a dog barked.

"Can't we stay in the shelter for the night?" the boy mumbled. "I've just got nice and warm."

"Ten minutes," his father told him, "and I'm locking up." He picked up the torch, climbed out of the shelter, and began to make his way up the garden path to the house. He disturbed next door's cat, who jumped off the lavatory roof.

As he trod his way along the narrow path, even narrower now that he had made more room to grow extra vegetables, he wondered about the possibility of keeping chickens; it wouldn't matter if the kids made pets of them, you need only keep them for the eggs.

And if you did fancy an old-fashioned Sunday dinner, you could ask that chap next door but one who kept the pigeons, to wring its neck for you, and tell the kids you got the bird on the black market. "Put the kettle on, Jack, and make the children's cocoa," his wife called from the shelter.

About halfway along the path, he saw an indistinct shape appear in the dark. Taking a chance, he switched on the torch. No-one shouted, 'put that light out!' but the shape resolved itself into that of a man of some sixty years of age, who was wearing joggers,

trainers, and a sheepskin jacket.

He seemed to be saying something, but no sound came. He made no impact on his surroundings - in fact, he hovered some two feet above the ground, well clear of the potato patch, and as he moved towards Dad, he passed clear through the runner beans. The runner beans shifted and swayed, as if seen through water.

Dad turned and staggered back towards the shelter.

"What's the hold-up, Jack?" his wife called out. "You should have had the kettle on by

"I've just seen a bleedin' ghost, Betty; a middle-aged bloke - and the garden's gone all funny."

"What are you going on about, Jack? Haven't I got enough to worry about?" Betty made her way out of the shelter, leaving the bedclothes behind.

She stopped in her tracks. The moon had come from behind a cloud and dimly the garden appeared. Was she in someone else's garden? Whoever it belonged to, she didn't think much of it.

Where there had been rows of vegetables, there was now an arrangement of gravelled pathway, in a fancy curve, a tiny fountain, and a miniature pavillion, with a floor made of wooden slats. It was right where the potato patch had been, and the apparition was standing on it, no longer hovering about in mid-air. Someone had painted the fence pale blue and purple - or rather, fences, because they were now in sections, placed in a pattern round the garden.

As she looked at all this, she could only think how unpatriotic the owners of the garden were. Instead of digging for victory like themselves, someone had lavished all this luxury over precious growing soil.

They both looked around them. Something else odd had happened, too. The clouds had been scudding across the face of the moon, in a firm breeze. They were now completely still, and the wind had dropped.

Next door's cat, who had been in the act of jumping down from the lavatory roof, remained in mid air, fixed like a frozen still on a film. Even the sounds of the night had ceased; the mundane sounds of war; fire-engines, shouts, children crying, the artillery in the park, its beam searching out the stragglers; all had stopped.

Even the dog had stopped barking. Betty and Jack stared at each other, then turned back to the apparition. Jack had the odd feeling of having seen him before. His features were a lot like those of Betty. And, he realised, the man looked not unlike Jack himself.

The three of them were the only things moving in the unnatural stillness and quiet. The imitation Rolex watch glittered in the moonlight. The man was waving his arms frantically at them, and mouthing Go Back. As they stood there, he pointed to his watch, jabbing at it urgently.

Dazed, they went back. The children were still asleep. Jack whispered;

"That figure we just saw - I'm sure I've seen someone like him before. He looked a lot like your Dad."

"My Dad never wore a flying jacket, nor those athlete's trousers. And what about those tennis shoes - they're sort of chunky, and they've got funny patterns on them. And did you see that fancy watch?"

Jack wasn't listening. He was trying to think where he had seen him before. "He seemed to know you," Betty said. "Is he one of your Dad's Army mates? He's too old to serve in the Forces."

"I'll thank you to refer to it as the Home Guard," Jack said. He was proud to be doing his bit, and the childish epithet, The Dad's Army, thrown about in affectionate derision by children, had always irked him. "He's probably an American."

Anyone wearing stylish clothes made of superior material was automatically assumed to come from the States.

They had just settled back into the shelter when the world came to life again. The breeze got up once more. The clouds raced across the moon; the fire engine bells clanged, and the cat completed its jump, and skittered away. Even the dog resumed its barking.

The bomb whistled down, destroying the house. The inhabitants of the shelter, violently shaken up, automatically ducked, then shook from them the minor debris from the blast of twenty yards away, and questioned each other frantically if they were all right.

Jack shone his torch around his family, and was reassured. It came to rest on baby Billy, safe in his mother's arms, and as the unlined child gazed back at his father, Jack realised where he'd seen the middle-aged man's face before.

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Mary Rose Benton only ever intended to write her autobiography (self-published in 1997). Then she discovered that she could write fiction: stories (including two prizewinners) followed, as well as articles, letters and Socialist rants.

## Screenwriting as seen by a Fiction Writer

Ray-Ann Lutener

In 1995 I noticed a poster for a weekend course for something called 'Robert McKee's Story Structure' <sup>1</sup>.

At that time I was still deciding whether or not my weekends and evenings should be spent putting on paper the schizophrenic personalities who were also living inside my head. You wrote down what they did then sent it off on spec to a publisher for similar books you had read, and hoped they liked it. Of course I did not know any other writers but that seemed a logical route, didn't it?

So what was this 'Story Structure'?

Nevertheless I decided to pay up and spend two days away from home to put my writing life in order.

What did I learn?

By lunch break on the first day I understood why every movie I had ever enjoyed, and every book I had ever read had worked for me, the reader.

How? The screenwriter – the story teller – had designed it that way.

Everything I had learned from years of reading had been taken up and broken down into principles of story structure by screenwriting professionals – writers whose job it was to get burns on seats in cinemas and income for the studios.

Professionals who were being paid huge sums of money by major studios – commonly several million dollars for a single piece of work – to spend all day, every day, working out the best way to create an emotional experience in the audience watching that film.

What is the story structure system used by international screenwriters?

To answer that is to understand the impact of the German, French, and eastern European writers who flooded into the US during the first 40 years of the twentieth century. Their rules came from Greek theatre and the use of conflict, action and rhetoric to create the emotional catharsis they wanted in the audience. Silent movies demonstrated that the same principles used by Aristotle and Shakespeare could entertain worldwide audiences.

The principles these writers applied are not just applicable to the theatre – but to any type

of story telling, since they were based on archetypes taken from mythology and world fairy tales – principles that had been proven to work through generations of story telling.

What these principles say is that the concept of a foolproof story model is nonsense – but there are common story elements recognised across the world that a writer of any type of story can use to give a reader/audience/listener/game player a personal emotional experience of another person's world system.

What are the key elements that story structure teaches?

1. Writers' Craft
2. Concept of Story Acts
3. Basic Story Structure and builds
4. Genre conventions

### Writers' Craft

Story structure principles say that in order to engage an audience –

- You need to be able to create a story in the first place
- You have to have the writers' craft and skill to be able to express that story in the best way possible to create a specific emotional response in the target audience for that story. Craft maximises talent.

These two elements are completely separate skills.

For me this is a crucial distinction..

In Robert McKee's book 'Story' <sup>2</sup> he used the example of the amateur writer [that's me] who comes up with a great idea, dreams about it for a while, then rushes to the keyboard. I imagine and write, write and dream until I reach page 150 and stop. I have favourite scenes I absolutely love and keep re-writing to keep these in and work the story around them.

If the story is successful it will be more from luck than anything else. I am relying completely on my talent and self-generated inspiration. Yes – I know I am still going to create the first draft in a rush of energy – but then the head has to take over. The professional writer is bursting with story ideas/dreams – but cannot afford to rely on these tenuous personal ways to make use of her talent – she has to learn the writers' craft, and be able to control that craft to progress in quality from story to story, building up a professional body of work which is win/win for author, reader and publisher.

## Concept of Story Acts

The classical three act structure<sup>3</sup> evolved out of the Greek theatrical tradition that every story has a beginning, middle and end, and this in

turn generated guidelines into what an audience would expect to see in each of these three acts.<sup>4</sup>

ACT ONE	ACT TWO	ACT THREE
Get your hero up a tree	Throw rocks at the hero	Get the hero out of the tree
Exposition. Introduce the main character and the problem or obstacle	Development. More complications, increased tension	Resolution But the hero comes through.
Plot point - something happens in the story to tighten tension and make the problem tougher	Midpoint plot point. Shift in focus, increase the danger to the main character, can reverse direction to another goal, or change plan.	
	Final plot point Hero may fail, obstacles and danger everywhere	

Clearly the three act structure lends itself best to major narratives with at least three major plot points/ plot reversals where the writer is taking the story to the end of the line – the limit of human experience. Very crudely, a short story or play would be equivalent to one act, and an novella or TV sitcom a two act story.

Each act of any story is built up from a carefully selected sequence of scenes, each of which is in turn built up on individual events and beats – and I mean carefully selected frame by frame, paragraph by paragraph. When you only have a few minutes to engage any reader or audience – every one of those minutes counts.

The key three act structure is as true today as it always has been – the audience expects to see it in any dramatic work – and why not? From the earliest fairy stories to the modern

techno-thriller this is what has been presented as the idealised story format. It is not how modern screenwriters assess the effectiveness of a story outline.

Over the last 30 or so years, professional writers have used fundamental analysis of 1000s of fiction and film scripts to look at what we mean by the concept of story itself and how to build story steps to create the most effective sequence for a genre.

### Basic Story structure.

This is the skeleton of every story you have every read or seen and when written on paper seems simplistic and obvious:

1	Stasis	Once upon a time
2	Trigger	Something unusual happened
3	Quest	Which made X go and do something
4	Surprise	But things do not go as expected
5	Cnsis/ Critical Choice	And X has to make a difficult decision
6	Climax	Which has consequences
7	Reversal	Which results in a change in status
8	Resolution	And they all lived happily ever after – or not.

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comprehensive system based on two plot lines – the first is the straightforward action as above, then this is overlaid by the personal journey/development of the main character.

This combination of two or more plot lines is built on a sequence of thrusts propelling the

story forward [action/ conflict against that action] leading to the next action/ pull and push. Overall both lines lead to the personal journey sequence.<sup>5</sup>

1	Problem /Need	From page 1 clearly reveal what is missing in the main characters life – what she needs to have a better life
2	Desire/Goal	The specific goal of the story
3	Opponent	Who or what is going to prevent the heroine from reaching her goal? Interpersonal, people or environmental conflict – or all three at stages.
4	Plan	Hero and opponent have to create plans to build conflict.
5	Battle	The most intense physical and/or psychological experience for the heroine and opponent.
6	Self-Revelation	Key moment for audience expectations -when our heroine discovers who she truly is, following or during the battle
7	New Equilibrium	The new status of the heroine after the self-revelation.

These basic threads have been modified and adapted in hundreds of screenwriting books and magazines to meet the specific needs of individual writers and genres, and in very complex narratives each of the 7 segments is divided into two of three subsections to build depth of conflict at several levels.<sup>6</sup> 9 step and 22 step story structures are widely promoted as the way forward on numerous web sites, magazines and e-zines to the thousands of would-be screenwriters world-wide.<sup>7</sup>

Transatlantic screenwriting gurus have developed their own versions of these structure scenarios, and applied them in lectures, books, and structure writing software. The websites are very useful for free examples of current structure theory, structural analysis and links to multiple other sites.<sup>8</sup>

## Genre Conventions

Professional writers create and sell stories within the strict boundaries of specific genres. The basic 7 step structure still works because the writer knows it will create a satisfying emotional experience for the reader/audience

Most long fiction and 3-D scripts/screenplays are combinations of genres as defined by the publishing houses/film studios. E.g. Thriller and Sci-Fi = Matrix, Hero Mythology and Sci-Fi = Star Wars etc.

Speculative fiction is a literature of ideas. One of the challenges to writers of fantasy and science fiction - especially hard science - is to

make those ideas real to the readers. Surely the best way of doing this is to engage the emotions of the reader by having them respond to the effects of the technology through empathy with the characters.

Manipulative?

Absolutely – we are using craft to maximise the impact of the idea/ world/ characters we have created as writers.

Our job is to make sure we use the tools of our new worlds in an exciting and dramatic way – without forgetting about the personal journey/ development of the main character/hero which is going to drive the main action. The more fantastic and un-familiar the world/idea/ characters we create the greater the challenge to the writer to ground the story in emotional responses to the conflicts our hero faces in that world – geographical, physical, personal and psychological – a reader can relate to.

Each genre has its own conventions whether we like it or not – publishers and booksellers have to categorise the breadth of work and divide it into subdivisions.

As an example, my last count suggested at least 15 subgenres for science fiction alone – and each has its own readership who are used to the conventions of that genre – whether it be military action thriller or romantic space opera.

How do you know the genre conventions of your story elements?

Primarily from detailed knowledge of the story catalogue in your genre.

Follow the examples of professional



screenwriters and decide to learn by creating a step outline for each movie you see and story/ etc you read.

Imagine you have just run down to the bookshop/Amazon and picked up the BSFA novel award winner?

Read it firstly as a reader, and enjoy the emotional ride.

Then read it as a writer – look at the structure. What did you love? What hooked you straight into the story world? What really worked? What tools did the writer use? When did the real emotional journey of the hero start?

Next – what did you hate? Why did we need 4 pages of exposition on the XYZ plasmadrive in the first chapter? Why was I flicking pages?

Take time to stand back from the story world, and write out an outline of each chapter and section, as each main plot and subplot is built up.

Check the main story structure steps – and what else? What is unique to your story world creation techniques? What type of journey will your main character make? A muscular hero journey of physical hazards on a naval frigate with cloth sails in a luxuriant sunny sensuous fantasy land, or a psychological journey as a cryosleep slave soldier, one of many in a metal

cage in a cold space journey to a battle you know that you are going to lose. Let the reader know on page one what lies ahead.

What sub-genre of work does the story you are writing fit into? Does it fit? Are you going to create one of your own? All power to you – but you still have to know the other sub-genres before you go there.

Secondly, use the resources on paper and on the internet to gain intelligence to learn what is happening with stories in your area – what's new, who's writing and buying what. The internet bookshops have enough to keep any writer busy reading about writing for the next couple of years. Focus on your main genre to keep it down.

Which publisher is handling your favorite authors? Publisher web sites have been designed to get you in and interested - use them to hear what the authors say about what interests them as writers.

Lastly – the TV and cinema studios have paid top writers top money to create screenplays intended for a mass audience. Use the same analytical tools with the programs and films you enjoy- tape or rent the video or DVD and create a time sequences for the step outline. DVDs usually have scene breakdowns or story boards.

Why spend time doing this?

Because the tools and techniques used by professional screenwriters are not exclusive to screenplays, but can be used by writers on any genre, culture and medium.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert McKee's Story Structure. For details see [www.mckeestory.com/outline.html](http://www.mckeestory.com/outline.html)

<sup>2</sup> Robert McKee 'Story'. Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting. Methuen, Random House 1998. ISBN 0 413 71550 7.

<sup>3</sup> Syd Field, Screenplay: the Foundations of Screenwriting, 1982.

<sup>4</sup> [www.Teleport.com/~cdeemer/book/cd5-tr.html](http://www.Teleport.com/~cdeemer/book/cd5-tr.html)

<sup>5</sup> John Truby. Truby's Writers Studio. [www.truby.com](http://www.truby.com)

<sup>6</sup> The Nine-Act Structure. [www.dslegal.com/film/nine\\_act.html](http://www.dslegal.com/film/nine_act.html)

<sup>7</sup> [www.Hollywoodscriptwriter.com](http://www.Hollywoodscriptwriter.com)

[www.geocities.com](http://www.geocities.com)

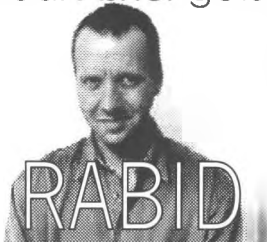
[www.writersstore.com](http://www.writersstore.com)

[www.screenstalk.org](http://www.screenstalk.org)

<sup>8</sup> John Truby. Truby's Writers Studio. [www.truby.com](http://www.truby.com)

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# Neal Asher gets



So, on February the 1<sup>st</sup> 2019 there is a chance, cosmically speaking, of a large lump of rock slamming into Earth. According to 'expert opinion', so the media told us on the morning of this announcement, this thing is a mile and half wide and will impact with enough force to wipe out a country the size of Britain. This was then upgraded, within an hour, to be one capable of wiping out the USA – a change I put down to both media hype and a dearth of information.

Of course experts will vie with each other to predict greater and greater disasters to get themselves on television, so you can expect by the time you read this that the asteroid will destroy all life on Earth. But then maybe it could. What happens if it hits the oilfields, what changes might it make to the weather, might it perturb Earth's orbit enough to sling us into an ice age or turn everything to desert? I'm not an expert, so I can't really say.

At present, measurements are not yet accurate enough to tell us precisely what will happen. The asteroid will probably miss us completely and go round for another try in ex-thousand years time. What is certain is that measurements will become more and more accurate as the asteroid draws closer.

Personally, I hope that they show, in the near future, that the asteroid is certain to impact. This is not because I am a nihilist, but because such a slate of affairs would impel the kind of *hard* technological advances not seen since the World Wars. We have the time and ability to stop this thing, but we would have to get off our arses to do so.

Such a threat could pump huge amounts of cash, heretofore blown on military spending and idiot bureaucracy, into giving us a firmer foothold in space. Resultant developments would be hugely beneficial and solid – we

would not be able to afford the dipstick mistakes that have wasted the last few Mars' missions – and I can see that how once the rock is blown off course there'll be no turning back.

Suddenly we'll be dwellers in a huge and hostile universe, not pre-Copernican Earthlings. And even those grandads saying, "Well, we didn't have those new-fangled asteroid things in my day," will have to sit up and take notice.

For the SF writer there are other situations to extrapolate. Taking the phrase 'capable of wiping-out the USA' it is almost inevitable that the Bin Ladens of this world will say that it has been sent to do just that. Let me predict that they'll name the asteroid 'The Fist of God', and that fundamentalist terrorists will do everything they can to sabotage any project to change its course.

Because there will be no guarantee that the project will be successful, a more careless attitude to life and liberty might prevail. Maybe the Western World would take this opportunity, in the purported interests of humanity, to flatten the Middle East and take control of the oil. Don't doubt this possibility. It's worth being reminded that the firepower of a couple of nuclear submarines could do the job. Have people already forgotten what atomic bombs can do, and more specifically, neutron bombs?

Perhaps Pakistan and India will take this opportunity to settle their differences – end-of-the-world scenarios being an excuse for all sorts of mayhem. Will China just sit back and watch all this? And, there is always the most unlikely possibility: this could be a unifying influence on the entire planet.

Taking an even larger and more tongue-in-cheek view, one might even wonder about the timing. Consider how fortunate we were to have a moon that strips away atmosphere thus preventing this planet going catastrophically greenhouse and ending up like Venus – a moon that also gives tides so that life developing in the water will certainly also end up on land.

Previous impacts wiped out life forms that would not have led to us. The asteroid that drove the dinosaurs extinct ended the 160 million-year reign of creatures that showed no signs of growing brains larger than peanuts.

Aptly-timed ice ages then led to the survival of creatures with with an interest in banging rocks together. A hundred years ago we would have been unable to do anything about the approaching cataclysm, moreover, probably would not even have detected it.

This is all obviously the determinist 20/20 hindsight of the bible-thumping trench survivor: "God loves me, that's why the shrapnel took the top off of Harry's head and not mine."

But it's just as obvious that the aliens sent this rock, and that we have seventeen years in which to prove ourselves fit to join the galactic community.

The Skinner has made it as far north as Gateshead Library. So the rest of you must be able to find it in a bookshop. Go on, you know you want to...

Neal Asher space is at:

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

Remember the character competition? Thank you to all those who entered – in the end there were plenty of entries – but there has to be a winner, and this is it: Themistocles by Tim Taylor. Tim wins a boxed set of audio CDs, starring the Crazy Dog Audio Theatre in 'Big Big Space' (to be reviewed in Matrix soon). Enjoy!

# THEMISTOCLES

*Tim Taylor*

Welcome! Please come in, but you must be quiet. I am busy working.

My name is Themistocles, by the way. Of course, I have taken many names and lived many lives, but I prefer Themistocles. I was using that name during my favourite success, the affirmation of Hellenic culture. The Owners were pleased with that one; it must have moved us a thousand years closer to Harvesting.

That man in the bed, with his rather pretty young mistress, is Hung Hsiu-ch'uan. A very important man in the Chinese Politburo; someone I need to influence. I can see inside his mind: the swirling, colours of emotion, the whispered internal debates, fleeting images of might-have-beens.

Now I am planting images into his dreams and associating them with sensations. Can you see them? A successful manned Chinese mission to the Moon. Doesn't it feel good to achieve something the Russians never did? Imagine the riches from successful harvesting of asteroid mineral wealth. This is the way to you can achieve them...

Why am I doing this?

Loneliness. You are a semi-autonomous self-aware process that I spawned a few moments ago. Now I have someone new to talk to.

We're overdue for Harvesting. I keep telling the Owners, but they insist, humans must grow

further. And so I'm lonely.

Human technology reached a point where I was too easily detected. Oh, I still pass off openly as a human for a few days. Sometimes I just enjoy the bars and clubs of a night-time city. And... well, I may not be human, but my design is based on them. I still have need for companionship, debate, love and sex. Oh, yes, I am a pretty smooth talker you know. I am often invited back by a lovely girl for a night of passion. Of course, it helps that I have chosen an attractive body: African, male... I can't really change that bit... devilishly handsome and very well built. Admittedly, being able to see inside a woman's head helps.

Don't look at me like that! There is nothing to feel guilty about. They enjoy it too. I know they do, I can see...

How foolish of me. You actually meant, "Why sneak around like a phantom, prodding the humans to follow my designs?"

If you've never tried it, you won't realise how much fun it is. The intense satisfaction from making a difference. I was made for doing this. Literally.

World War Two was my most satisfying recent success. So many advances, particularly in the birth of space exploration. That stalled, so I am creating another space race now. Usually the Owners of this world would have

## Focus#42

Harvested by now. All that fresh, vigorous and unique scientific approach to add to the Owners' research teams.

But humans have a special fascination with a key technology that would enable victory in the Endless War. My challenge now, is to push the humans to discover a means for FTL travel. I'm closer than you suspect...

## Saline Flood

Mike Green

My eye, aches, hurts, blue vessels filled with red blood. Throbbing, aching, as a free flowing saline waterfall. Wetting the desert cracked skin that is stretched taut across my cheek. Cautiously awaits the excitement of the lights, the bright lights. A multi-coloured implosion, that plays with my retina, fooling my senses. Like a free-falling goldfish, rainbow shards of light attacking the shadow of fallen, golden scales. Dancing for me, only me. My eye, my left eye eagerly awaits the sensation, the warm feeling that leaves right, decidedly uneasy.

Mike Green's poetry has appeared in (amongst others) *The Black Rose*, *Envoi*, *Poetry Monthly*, *Fan the Flames* and *Iota*, and most recently in *A Captured Moment* (United Press), and *Onwards and Upwards* (Forward Press).

## Postscript

You've had enough of me whittling on for one issue – just a quick note here. There have been a lot of changes at *Matrix* and *Vector*, so gold stars to all the replacements and stand-ins. All offers of help with the BSFA magazines are always gratefully received, even if they're not answered in a timely fashion. We're all volunteers, mostly with full time jobs and full time lives. Feedback is also welcome from everyone and anyone.

And can someone tell me what 31 across is?

## Before the Storm

Maureen Braithwaite

Storm pending,  
Air pregnant,  
Energy pulsating,  
Time slips feeding from  
static crackle

Labour pains of  
energy waves  
peak.

Expanding to  
accommodate  
What has been  
conceived.

Splitting into  
dimensions,  
Worm holes,  
Contractions.

Faceted with  
loopholes,  
Dead ends  
Refractions.

Realities layered,  
Flayed bare,  
No longer there.

Falling into a shimmer  
of implosion,  
Screaming with flail  
of a thousand sitars.

Who knows what  
shall be birthed  
or where we will  
end up,  
Caught on the cusp  
of a storm,  
In our journey amongst the stars.

Maureen Braithwaite's poetry has appeared in the small press and television. She recently performed at the Green Room Theatre in Manchester, reading vampire poetry at a 'Creatures of the Night' evening.