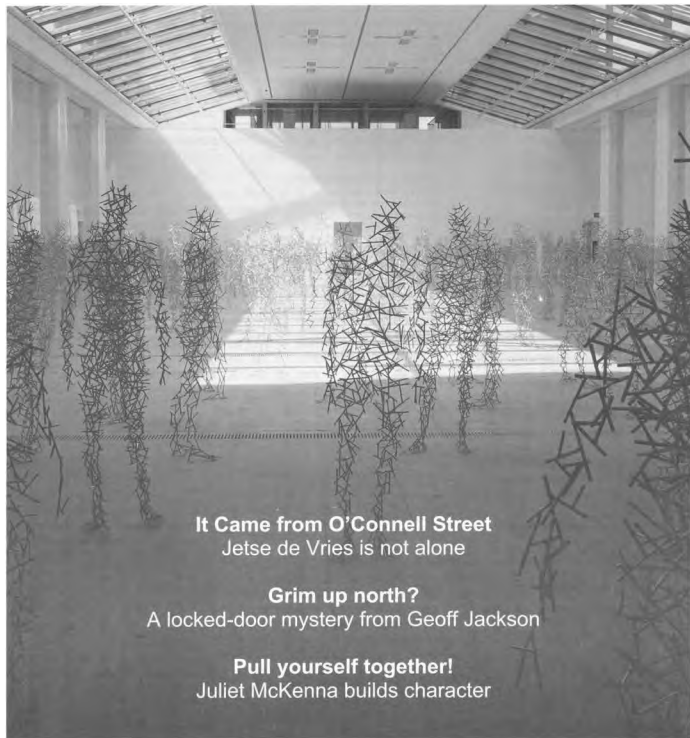




The BSFA's magazine for writers



It Came from O'Connell Street
Jetse de Vries is not alone

Grim up north?
A locked-door mystery from Geoff Jackson

Pull yourself together!
Juliet McKenna builds character



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

Issue 44 November 2003

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About the cover

"Too good for the north", says that Sewell bloke. I think not. Antony Gormley continues to make iconic art, here borrowing the forms of Tynesiders and creating a hall of contradictory sculptures. Solid, yet hollow: human-shaped but undeniably alien. The exhibition of Gormley's work ran over the summer at the north's best and brightest gallery, Baltic.

Click to www.balticmill.com for the latest news.

Thanks to Nina Byrne at the Baltic

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 March 2004

pedantry

There's been news recently about how SF isn't quite up to scratch – the literary equivalent of a mad granny locked in the attic who, despite alternately being beaten and ignored, refuses to do the decent thing and die.

Authors who ought to know better are saying "no, this isn't SF. No rocket ships or aliens in this. This is proper literature." Even previous Clarke Award winners... Ray Bradbury can be excused from thinking he's only ever written one SF novel (*Fahrenheit 451*) because he's happy to say all the others are fantasy, but what about the others? All those exponents of 'magical realism' for a start – Discworld is magical realism, dammit.

The rest of us know, of course, that SF is a broad church, and it encompasses far more than Dan Dare and *It Came From Outer Space*. Librarians the world over are shelving *Oryx and Crake* in the SF section because that's where it belongs.

Despite the temporary wobbles of the media industry, SF is in rude health. A recent Radio Times survey puts Doctor Who as the programme readers would most like to see brought back – overwhelmingly so by the under twenties. Hollywood continues its love affair with rocket ships and computers and things that go munch in the night. Focus receives submissions from all corners of the globe (and is proud to publish the very best wherever it comes from).

Whilst the Golden Age of fifties SF has been and gone, this post-modern borderless world is in itself science fiction. Who could possibly have imagined it then, that we now live in the future?

Simon Morden
Gateshead, September 2003

Racial birth

Andrew West

They took the fledgling generations from us.
The gaping loss and freezing horror is too much to think on.

Who in this late age would dam the bright streams of life and store the dark floods of dissent and discontent behind?
But they did.

We crept and hid and whispered. A shroud of dullness over our sparkling thoughts and the new beauty of our bodies.

They split us up. I never again saw the welcoming brilliance of Lettie's mind and Lettie's eyes.

To be the same.

Who in this late age would channel the swift flow of evolution, which with the force of a lifetime's lifetimes could never be held to a single way?
But they did.

Over and under and around and trickling through, the vital fluids of birth seeped on towards the future.

And so we escaped, to Mars. We sold our homes, our work, our friends, everything to pay the price of going where no one else would go.

Forty of us are here, from four hundred at the centre. But there is no avid persecution. We all fight to live in the vast void of cold, dry lifelessness.
It is enough.

A delta will grow here, with a million tributaries of life to touch the hot stars, while the crumbling walls of Earth silt up its ancient ways, and its old hates.

Andy West has a degree in physics and works in marketing for a computer company, which has had product aboard the International Space Station. He has a passionate interest in evolution. He is currently seeking publication for his literary SF novel *The Clonir Flower*, from which *Racial Birth* is taken.

Dubious in Dublin

Jetse de Vries

"I am Manuel from Barcelona," I say as the alien corners me, "I know nothing."

It has taken on the shape of a tall, disdainful Englishman: a stalwart physique with impossibly long legs in a dark suit, a stretched face under a bowler hat and the piercing stare of mad eyes.

"That's what all you International Operators say," it answers, "but you have your ways to find out."

"International Operators?" I wonder, "Ways to find out?"

"Don't play dumb with me," it says. "I know you try to remain incognito."

"Do you know what international operators do, here in Dublin?"

"Of course I do. You solve important cases of espionage and sabotage, chase villains and save the world. Like your colleagues Mike Hammer and James Bond."

Uh-oh. The international operator thing I'm doing *aquí* is just being a helpdesk operator of a huge computer firm. My fluency in both Spanish and English and my scientific background make me an ideal candidate for this. But believe you me: I'm only taking on this drab job out of pure necessity. The alien here, though, has a different interpretation of my humble profession.

"What you read about James Bond and such, that's fiction, not fact."

"Fiction?" it says as a frown distorts its features even further, "What concept is that?"

"Stories, fairy tales, pulse-pounding narratives and ripping yarns. Things people tell each other for comfort, education or *elucidación* but mostly just for fun, *comprende?*"

"You mean one your primitive civilization's cumbersome ways of exchanging information. The signal to noise ratio is quite horrible."

I decide to leave it at that. Why make the alien any wiser while it isn't exactly forthcoming itself. God knows why it contacted me, of all people. Hardly have I entered my shared apartment in this charming city and there's this strange message saying someone wants to meet me urgently on the corner of some obscure street. Signed: 'Elder R. Itchpalm'.

I don't know anybody here, so it's probably no prank. It may even be dangerous, but I've always been too curious for my own good, anyway. So I go to this *plaza solitario* and up walks this apparition of a man mainly consisting of a long raincoat flapping in the wind and shadows. Even up close I cannot distinguish a face and the ongoing silence is as pervasive as the darkness in this ghostly person's folds.

"Mr. Itchpalm, I presume?" I improvise and offer my hand. My hand is ignored but out of the shadows an answer emerges.

"You are Mr. Hernandez?"

"Si."

Silence again. Just as I turn away this ghostly whisper forms straight into my brain, bypassing such obstacles as vocal chords, air and ears.

"Please, Mr. Hernandez, I have an unusual proposal."

"How unusual?" Now my interest is piqued.

"A device meant for me has been delivered to the wrong person. I want you to trace it for me."

"What device do you mean?"

"I cannot explain. Its functions are beyond the understanding of your backward civilisation."

"Backward? ¡Regresivo! Spain is an important member of the European Union, Mr. Itchpalm."

"I mean the civilisation of this planet as a whole. I am what you might consider an alien archeologist taking the opportunity of 'life' research into an ancient society."

"And my aunt Petunia is a leading string theorist."

"Is she?"

"And Ireland becomes *fútbol Campeón del Mundo*."

"Unlikely, but in that crazy sport everything is possible."

"And *Don Quixote* beats the windmill."

"Given the right equipment, he can."

Madre de Dios, how *estúpido* can somebody be?

"I mean I don't believe you."

"Rest assured, dear human. I come from a distant constellation inhabited by — well, what's the best approximation — machine intelligences."

Now my interest is definitely piqued.

"I'm supposed to believe you on your word? How about some proof?"

"No problem. Please prepare yourself for some unexpected sights."

Then, in a dazzling sequence of shape-shifting extravaganza the alien changes into—

— A huge circus elephant riding a ridiculously small monocycle —

— Humphrey Bogart in a white suit leaning against a black piano just about to say —

— The large, shining black monolith from '2001, A Space Odyssey' —

— A blond temptress that would make Marilyn Monroe and Madonna feel like wallflowers at a prom —

— An abstract topological shape like a Calabi-Yau space constantly undergoing conifold transitions —

— before it turns back into its shadowy original appearance. Now my interest has definitely peaked.

"I trust this little demonstration suffices."

I can only nod *Sí, Señor* and close my jaw before cobwebs start to form.

"I cannot tell you the nature of this device. Nor can I tell you how it looks or what it does, as its operating principles are beyond your kind's understanding."

"Then how am I supposed to find it?"



"If somebody tries to tamper with it, strange things will happen. Very strange things indeed. Things that will trigger your profession's famous intuition."

That's clear, *muy bien*. Like explaining colours to the blind.

"That's a great help. Any more such superb tips?"

This gets an aggressive response: it becomes this warped John Cleese clone and corners me.

"In the wrong hands, the effects of the device can be quite dangerous. You *will* know, Mr. Hernandez."

To which my Manuel routine seems the natural reaction. After debunking our glorious storytelling lore it leaves.

"One last thing before you go, Mr. Machine Intelligence." I say to its retreating back, "How about the *quid pro quo*?"

"Just find the DFG, Mr. Hernandez," it signals right in my mind, "and you will be suitably rewarded."

¿Que? The DFG?

After a long working day of answering the stupidest questions, my mind is totally blank. A state of mind I hate, this being uncomfortably numb. I walk around aimlessly,

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trying to get my mind working again and — in the process — survey my new surroundings.

Not long ago, I was trying to finish my Ph.D. in physics at the *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona*, but failed. My teachers said I cannot focus, as my interest wavers and I try to tackle more than I can handle.

Still, I can't help it: I find a lot of things *muy fascinador*. So I dream and philosophise too much and neglect my studies. Inevitably, I run out of funds and have come to Dublin as an 'international operator': synonym for a helpdesk slave. *Muy bien*, I need the money and maybe a change of scene will do me good. Now I walk through Dublin town and my thoughts are roaming around as always.

At the Guinness brewery, burly workers are rolling aluminum barrels containing the precious liquid into waiting trucks. The loaded trucks leave through the gate and turn into James street. *De repente*, the tailgate of one truck drops down and an avalanche of Guinness kegs rolls onto the pavement.

Workers and bystanders immediately try to grab a barrel. Then the strangest things happen. Well-defined aluminium encasings blur into a fuzzy cloud of reflectiveness. Evading the cascade of bouncing barrels with

the grace of a *toreador*, I chase one barrel, but its behaviour is unfathomable. One moment it's here, the next it's there and while it seems to generally go in the direction it should go it's everywhere and nowhere at once. *¡imposible!*

No matter what secret ingredients they put in this famous Irish stout: *esto esta loco*. By lucky chance, I catch one such shifting keg. Gotcha, but keepya is an entirely different matter. I hold on tight to the aluminium barrel but its momentum changes like crazy, both in force and direction. It's like trying to hold a hollow cask in which an elastic yet very heavy ball bounces around like mad.

Do they put that widget in their barrels too? But it can't be like this, a Tasmanian devil in overdrive. It simply defies gravity and inertia as if it's got laws of its own. I can't hold it and as it escapes my grip its momentum seems to stabilise whereas its position becomes one big blur.

The uncertainty principle in action. But that's impossible. It is perfectly valid for single particles, but on larger scales its effects equal out in a process of statistical distribution. The uncertainty of an everyday sized object is far too small to be noticed.

While my mind tries to analyse this weird behaviour, the bouncing barrels seem to settle down somewhat and people are able to hold on to them. Although initially they seem to do *el tango extraño* with the kegs, eventually the craziness fades; the barrels become inert containers of Guinness once more and are loaded back into the truck (although some bystanders have real trouble parting with them).

Everybody is just as puzzled as I am, and somehow I find myself discussing the wacky event in the nearest pub.

"Man, they're making it so good you get pissed just looking at it."

"It's the leprechauns. They still have powers."

"No, these barrels were for the Dutch market: they're incensed with pot."

My explanation is the most far-fetched of all, so I keep it to myself. While everybody's having a merry time *yo me pregunto*: an alien gadget on the loose. And didn't I see the truck's tailgate blurring, before it opened?

Mr. Machine Intelligence arranged another



meeting in a quiet, backyard cafe. Contrary to most Irish, he takes his time for lunch, *de gracias a Dios*. Some things go unnoticed, and that's all for the better. Today's appearance is that of a ridiculously moustached, black-haired character in a horrible white raincoat with matching sou'wester. However, without the fake French accent it just isn't complete.

I'm having my third cappuccino while his — still untouched — is on its way to become iced. This goes another way towards my little theory that Elder R. Itchpalm's disguises are in fact 3D-projections.

"What is it you don't understand, Mr. Hernandez?"

"Why you don't search for this device yourself. After all, you make a master of disguise look like a blundering novice."

"Because you — as a native — have a better clue as to what is abnormal. Also, for reasons I cannot disclose my action radius is severely limited. That's why I arranged this little rendezvous: I will give you my secret phone number. As soon as you have the slightest inkling that you are in the vicinity of the device you must call me immediately."

"Buena. Still, why me?"

"Listen, Manuel Hernandez. I chose you not only because you are an International Operator, but also because nobody here knows you."

"So?"

"The purity of my research would be violated if your people knew of an alien presence."

"But a lot of people already suspect as much."

"They are disregarded, ridiculed and disbelieved."

"But now I know."

"You are bound by your code of honour."

Bien. If this was actually said with the French accent I'm imagining I would have fallen under the table laughing. Talk about a cultural gap, this is more like a paradigmatic chasm. Is that really studying us? Anyway, back to business.

"How did you lose it in the first place?"

"That's the most puzzling part: I had it sent by the most reliable method available on this planet: by DHL."

Madre de Dios. Now I have to hold on with

both hands: does it really want me under the table?

"¿Que? DHL?" I manage to mutter.

"Guaranteed delivery within 24 hours, worldwide."

"That's just advertising crap."

"Advertising crap? This message did not excrete anything at all, certainly not faeces."

"What advertisements say is not strictly true," I try to explain, "they're slick mixtures of slogans, half-hearted promises and vague intentions. Half-truths, white lies, image-building campaigns that we call marketing."

Its stare becomes so blank it should be patented by an erasing company.

"Most ads make promises as misleading as they can get away with. They provide only the info that makes the product look good, try to glamorise it, hide its shortcomings. In short: they'll do everything short of actual lying."

"Lying?" it wonders, "What concept is that?"

Jesus, Maria and the Espiritus Sanctus. Forget paradigmatic chasm, we're talking parallel evolution here, at least, if it doesn't understand such a basic fact of life.

"Never mind, you've given me an important lead. Can you tell me the name and address you gave DHL?"

It does, adding it doesn't stay there anymore.

"*Ningun problema*, this should speed up things considerably."

"That's good. I trust you solve this case soon."

It gets up, mysteriously pays the bill and walks off.

"By the way, Inspector Clouseau," I say to its retreating back while stifling a laugh, "next time leave out the pink tail."

During a lull in my shift I call DHL, haughtily mimicking a clerk of a really big computer company complaining about a delivery gone astray. After some indignant bluffing—that John Cleese accent does wonders—I get a list of addresses where it's most likely to be retraced. *Inmediatamente* after work I head into that neighbourhood.

Naturalmente — this being Ireland — it begins to rain. Not only that, soon the wind increases, the temperature drops and the

raindrops turn into hailstones: just when I arrive near the suspect addresses. Moving fast, I take cover in a bus shelter.

Across the street there's a small corridor between two flats. The extended rooftops almost touch each other and have—by some crazy coincidence—just enough space between each other to let single hailstones through, one by one. These hailstones bounce around at all possible angles on their way down.

To make things even stranger, there's this little footbridge halfway down between the two high-rise apartments where three slabs of concrete leave another two equidistant holes.

By a strange trick of light, the hailstones light up in the shadowy corridor between the two flats, making their trajectories eminently visible. Spellbound like a rat hypnotized by a snake, I cannot help but watch in awe.

On the bottom of the corridor, the hailstones gather in heaps exactly like that of an interference pattern: One big heap in the middle, then two smaller heaps next to it, then two even smaller heaps next to those, and so on. Like the double-slit experiment incredibly enlarged. How beautiful, I'm completely enchanted.

Then the penny of reality drops into my mesmerized brains: this is not possible. Single hailstones cannot interfere with themselves, let alone behave as waves. Straight beneath the openings of the footbridge there should be two large heaps of the same size, not this dubious interference pattern.

My mind is running in circles. The moment these become a downward spiral the hailstorm abates, the sky clears and the sun bursts through the dark clouds. In the corner of my eye I catch a fleeting glimpse of a sneering smile on a knowing face. Is it that guy on one of the balustrades? Just as I turn my head the figure disappears inside.

Nunca mente, I know what apartment it is. The address is on my list. I enter the flat and climb the stairs to the apartment, but nobody answers the door. I try the neighbours but they say that Mr. Wellspring has recently moved, where to nobody knows. *Mierda*. At such moments I wish I were nobody. Another puzzle richer and none the wiser I return home.

The following days — inasmuch as my spare time allows — I try to find the enigmatic Mr. Wellspring but he seems to have disappeared without a trace. Neither do I encounter other strange phenomena: the outer world seems to stay sane for the time being. Maybe I should've called my alien patron the minute I realized something strange was going on, but — *admitamos lo* — I was too entranced.

Then I get an SMS from Mr. Itchpalm saying he will see me urgently. I've hardly read it and there it comes, the next act in club masquerade. A little hermit with a shaggy beard and matching mismatched, shabby clothes. That look of benign idiocy while thinking it is oh-so-smart. Please, please, please don't tell me it has a cunning plan. Still, something doesn't mesh; the foulness isn't complete: the air around it is way too clean.

"Mr. Hernandez, you are taking too much time."

Alli vamos: now it's my cunning plan at fault.

"I had the villain almost nailed, he barely escaped."

"You do not need to catch the culprit, Mr. Hernandez, I will take care of that. You only have to alert me the minute you see something strange."

"¿Es todo? Leave out all the fun parts?"

"Perform all your wild car chases, gun-blazing break-ins and other pyrotechnical stunts in another assignment. We need to get that device, and we had better be fast!"

"You're getting quite charged up about this, aren't you, *mi amigo*?"

"Charged up! That's exactly what I'm not getting!"

Never expected this paragon of cold machine mind to get all heated up. *Obviamente*, it's said what it had to as it turns its—for lack of a better word—back to me and leaves.

"Hey, if you want to play Baldric," I scoff at the retreating gnome, "at least smell the part."

Mr. Machine Intelligence, pah. At least anger and despair are common in our parallel evolution. The rest must be quite disparate. That is, could our computers evolve so far that they could encompass Artificial Intelligence? But that would be too much like

an extension of already known technologies and this piece of alien superiority insists that it is something *todo diferente*.

Only thing I can come up with is a quantum computer. Our efforts at creating that are so far plainly pathetic. In various labs we've been able to get some quantum bits (qubits) working, but nowhere can we get a significant large number of those qubits working together like bits in a normal computer. Nobody can overcome the problem of decoherence: random noise from stray particles collapsing the preciously created superposition of states—that if enough qubits can function in concert—might give a quantum computer its incredible capacities.

Then there's Roger Penrose's conjecture in *The Emperor's New Mind*, stating that quantum processes in our brain's microtubules are essential ingredients for our consciousness and creativity. This statement is very controversial but if he's right it means that all our efforts at creating Artificial Intelligence with normal computers are doomed. So what if Mr. Machine Intelligence is an AI running on a quantum computer: how does it keep decoherence at bay?

Un momento, what's all this shouting and running good for? Impossible for a man to think in this pandemonium. These people behaving like hell breaking loose. All come running from around that corner: let's see what the fuss is all about.

Madre de Dios: reality's coming apart at the seams. Objects jump through solid walls without leaving a hole. Cars and lampposts are dissolving in a cloud of probability. The bedrock of existence disappears as if the rug of fundamentality has been pulled away. Parts of the street, the surrounding buildings, even the clear blue sky: they dissolve into a frothing frenzy that is almost impossible to look at, like the blind spot of your eyes. The fabric of reality going wild, fluctuating so violently that all conventional notions like up and down, left and right, back and forth, even before and after go down the drain. Causality, space/time and ubiquity all unravel as the extra dimensions of the Planck scale unfold, simultaneously making perfect sense and no sense at all.

No living matter can survive such madness. *Rapido*, call the number while my mobile phone still works. The phone at the other end rings, let's hope the cavalry arrives

soon. *Alli*, an SMS: "On my way." Meanwhile, I can't stop watching the chaos unfurl as my mind goes into overdrive.

Like quantum phenomena writ large. Quantum tunneling, the uncertainty principle, interference patterns, particle/wave duality and eventually the quantum foam at the smallest scale overwhelming all. But that's impossible. Random interference from straying particles collapses a superposition of states. This process of decoherence stops any strange quantum processes from manifesting on an everyday scale.

Momentito: if decoherence is — by some unknown means — suppressed then quantum phenomena can appear on a larger scale. What did Mr. Machine Intelligence say: find the DFG? Like Decoherence Filter Gadget? Or Decoherence Field Generator? Or was it DFC? Decoherence Filter Charge?

Now simply add two and two: if Elder R. Itchpalm is an AI running on a quantum computer it needs that decoherence suppresser in order to keep the quantum computer functioning. Without it the AI-software will stop running. No wonder it was getting so wired up: without a fresh charge of — decoherence filter, suppressing field or



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whatever — it becomes literally brain-dead! It also explains its limited action radius: it was saving energy.

In the meantime, in the center of the reality-stretching fury there is a brief flurry of concentrated activity, almost lost in the surrounding madness. *El próximo segundo*, consensual reality reasserts itself and the world becomes recognizable once more.

While the terrified crowd lets out a collective sigh of relief I'm approached — *de una dirección diferente* — by the next vaudevillian of the anarchy theater. Intense eyes beneath black-rimmed glasses, bushy brows and moustache, a taxing expression on its face. The weary head looking for the next victim as its sneering mouth casually blows smoke rings. How that's possible without the telltale cigar it's not holding... well... details.

"Well done, Mr. Hernandez. I have retained the device."

"*De nada*. What about Mr. Wellspring?"

"Mr. Wellspring was a lower order unit: a minor nuisance, trying to steal what it cannot develop."

"*Bueno*. Now that you've breached the subject: in return for my services some information about technological discoveries not yet done..."

"Sorry, but no. Protocol IX: any transfer of information to a society not yet ready for it is strictly forbidden."

"If that's out of the question there is this little matter of expenses."

"Expenses?"

"Comes with the lifestyle. As you know, we International Operators need to travel a lot — first class only — we wreck expensive cars, destroy the odd building and such."

"True. Incredibly wasteful, but well, yours is still an immature civilization."

"*Bien*. Now can you arrange a substantial transfer of funds?"

"No problem. The incompetence of some of your so-called accountants is only matched by the greed of some of your so-called managers. They won't notice a subtle shift in assets."

"The way you say it," I wonder, "it's almost as if you're developing a sense of humour."

"Humour?" it says, "What concept is that?"

"The quintessential human way to deal with the apparent futility of life and give a little

sense to it in the process."

It looks at me with an expression so frozen in amazement that for a short moment I fear its quantum computer has jammed.

"*Nunca mente*," I finish light-heartedly, "it'll give you a lot to discover in sociocultural areas. You'll find it fascinating."

Then it leaves for the last time. I ought to say something witty like "Groucho Marx without a free-for-all is like Karl Marx without *Das Kapital*," but I'm too excited. *Realmente*, if it has transferred the amount of money I've asked for I cannot only finish my Ph.D. — subject: possible research directions towards the suppression of decoherence in a quantum computer environment—but start up a whole research branch in that direction as well: with the knowledge that it is possible, we should be able to find a way. *Eventualmente*, we might even test it at our *Institut de Física d'Altes Energias*.

Then we'll see just how primitive our society is, Mr. Machine Intelligence.

Jetse de Vries is a technical specialist for a propulsion company and for that he travels around the world. In his spare time his senses become warped and he tries to reformulate his altered perception in fictional form. Other examples of this are coming up in *Here & Now* and the anthology *In the Outposts of Beyond*.



Lynette Apsey

There is an island, far away. You may know it, as do I. Close your eyes and think of it; golden beaches, palm trees, blue water, clouds gathering up on high.

On this island stands a mountain of great portent, Cloudcatcher is its name. History says that on its crown once stood the DreamMaster's tower. There, alone upon his high seat, the Master gathered the dreams of men and was content, although, the dreams of women remained something of a mystery.

So, Cloudcatcher seeded the sleep of women with whispers of the Master and his tower, but they were too busy, it seems. Upon awakening they would think: today there is much to do. I have a mate, and children and animals to tend. I have market and weaving, and herbs to grow. I will dream of him, but I will not seek the Master in his tower upon the rooftop of the world.

Then, there came a woman who had grown like a flower, with her face to the sun, and she looked to no-one but herself. One day, she glimpsed the peak of CloudCatcher and the Master's tower. She climbed the mountain and on her way, witnessed the dreams of men, (which came as something of a shock), and thereupon she found the DreamMaster in his tower of pearl and gem.

"Give me all your dreams," he said. "Let me share the burdens that you brought."

Now the woman was pleased at last, and content to be at ease. So she gave him all her dreams, and the next day, made some more. Of course, the DreamMaster sought to contain them all, until his tower burst asunder and Cloudcatcher watched them fall.

Perhaps that's why so many dreams are aimless, there's no hidden message there. But, if you see a mountain gathering clouds around its peak, why not think of them as slumbering thoughts, set free upon the air?

Lynette is an Australian who has lived in the UK, on and off, since 1988. Her real home is a yacht called 'Melka', currently moored in Trinidad while she and her husband await the arrival of a new crewmember who was due to arrive by stork sometime in August.

In reply to your lack of faith Steve Sneyd

are we not still human
still say Earth Home in
same breath hold Christmas in
both hearts flesh and adapt
even would love President Who
if you ever remembered told
us name in time still
ruling there see here's proof
under these seven russet shiners
look here's shrine bright new
all round faithful-full pray
nonstop as rockets same green
godchild as you who rose
again reborn your metal Moon

Steve Sneyd, acclaimed genre poet, is as busy as ever. Write to Hilltop Press (4 Nowell Place, Almondbury, Huddersfield, West Yorkshire HD5 8PB) for a catalogue.

Bracing Tales

Geoff Jackson

The call to Skegness Police Station reported a man named Mr White had booked a room at Mrs Quigley's guest house, redecorated it white, everything white including the carpet, furniture, etc. He, himself, dressed entirely in white suiting, had entered the white cube and disappeared.

The landlady, elderly but sprightly, met the two assigned detectives at her front door which was blue with a hanging basket of petunias above, and escorted them to an old-fashioned parlour done out in pale green leaf wallpaper with lots of chintz. The large aspidistra and faded picture of a young gentleman in a high buttoned jacket, indicated a lady who still clung to a former time. The building had an antiquated look and smelled of burnt feathers.

"Mr Conochie's parrot cage caught fire this morning," she explained. "Tea?"

"Please," answered Sergeant Bell, a balding, jaded policeman hanging on for his pension, who used a boot scraper when available before entering other's premises, whereas his young assistant, Detective Constable Colin Carru, who wore a striped blazer and shades pushed up on his head like an undercover agent at an Arts Centre, thought the scraper an upturned mint chopper set in concrete, which they often were.

"You're quite sure Mr White entered the room?" Sgt Bell, sunk up to his armpits in an unsprung armchair and nursing cracked Derby Ware, asked the landlady. Carru remained standing with his teacup cupped in the palm of his hand as the handle was missing. He wondered if the guests' crockery was similar. Perhaps Mrs Quigley kept her own apartment thus for personal reasons.

"Quite sure," she replied. "I heard him enter but not exit. You become accustomed to the ways of guests when you've been in the trade as long as I have." Probably on

constant look-out for runners, thought Carru. "After two days and no sign of the occupant, I knocked on the door, and getting no response, I tried the handle and found the door locked. So, I went and fetched the master key and tried it to find the door bolted on the inside. Thinking something might have happened to the tenant, I rang you lot.

"Quite right, Mrs Quigley," agreed the Sergeant. "Check the door, Colin."

Carru went out in to the hall and checked the register. Sure enough, a Mr White had booked in about a week ago, unless someone else had signed the book, which was unlikely. He took the master key off its hook, popped his head round the parlour door and asked "Which room?"

"Six, on the second floor," said the landlady.

Going up the stairs, he met a tasty blonde coming down dressed in a skimpy outfit for the beach, who smiled. Carru thought the case could take longer than usual. He unlocked door six, pushed, and found that it would not budge. Bolted on the inside right enough, he thought, and made his way downstairs where he was just in time to see the blonde getting into a buggy-type vehicle driven by a smarmy looking character whom, Carru felt sure, didn't have a licence or insurance, or wouldn't have in a day or two.

"She's right, Bill," Carru informed his superior. "It is bolted on the inside. I'll ring the Fire Brigade."

Ten minutes later the Brigade in the shape of Eric, dressed in seasonal gear of red shorts and shirt, appeared. A keen door-buster, he was tooled up with screwdriver, jemmy and sledgehammer.

"Just the screwdriver, I think, Eric," the sergeant advised, well aware of the fireman's enthusiastic approach to his job. They said that Eric took his tools on holiday.

"Oh," murmured the disappointed fireman.

Eric soon unscrewed the hinges and, with police assistance, withdrew the door by sliding it sideways, thus freeing the bolt from the metal holder. The landlady hovered close by. They entered the room.

A smell of fresh paint was noticeable, and they were dazzled by the brilliance, so much so that Carru dropped his shades in place. Even the window glass had been whitened.

"Light and airy, isn't it?" commented Eric.

"Plenty of white but no Mr White," observed Carru.

They checked under the bed and inside the wardrobe which was empty of belongings never mind the tenant. Not even a bucket and spade.

"Could he be hiding behind the wallpaper?" suggested Mrs Quigley.

Sgt Bell chuckled. "I don't think so, dear. The bucket would leave a bulge." Nevertheless, the notion did remind him of an illusionist who performs a trick by blending in with the backcloth. And there was an uncanny feel to the room, one of being watched. He slipped the catch on the window. They left the room.

"Might as well replace the door, Eric."

Driving back to the Station, Sgt Bell wondered if the old dear had made it all up.

"Someone painted that room and put in new furnishing," pointed out Carru.

"Perhaps she did - and signed the register, too."

"That ceiling was high, Bill."

"Most ceilings are, Colin - unless it's the floor above the room below. She could have used a roller."

"On the floor."

"On the bloody ceiling, man!" As an afterthought the sergeant added, "You'll make Inspector, Colin," thinking of Clouseau.

Being a wind-up merchant, Carru smiled. "But what would be the reason for introducing someone dressed like a refugee from a seaside pier?"

"Perhaps he was a pierrot wanting digs?"

"They usually remove their costume after the show."

"Well, perhaps he'll turn up again with a logical answer," replied Sgt Bell. "Best to leave it on the back-burner to stew awhile."

The case had rested a couple of weeks or so when another call of a similar content as

before was received from Mrs Quigley. This time a Mr Black had booked in and disappeared.

"You don't think the dotty old dear has been watching *Reservoir Dogs*?" suggested Carru, as he drove along the front on their way to the guest house.

"I've seen some rum dos in my time with the Force, but I reckon this one could take the biscuit," replied the sergeant.

"Tea, sergeant?" trilled Mrs Quigley, showing them into the parlour graced by the presence of the local 'postcard' vicar, only just visible in an armchair where he balanced a chipped cup and saucer on one knee, and a small plate and a triangle sandwich on the other.

"Nice morning," he greeted, and beamed a toothy smile not unlike the Dick Emery caricature. The landlady leaned towards him, no doubt putting the vicar in the picture. "I see," said the vicar, "then shall we all kneel in prayer?"

"No, Pumfrey. I said 'absence', not 'absolution'." Turning to the policemen, she explained that, "Vicar Vocker is a little hard of hearing. In fact, he doesn't know his sermon from his ..." A fit of choking cut short the landlady's speech. The vicar removed a fine bone from his mouth and placed it on the side of the plate. He lifted the top layer of his sandwich and began inspecting the contents.

"It's filleted Polly, Pumfrey," said the landlady. Then addressing the policemen, remarked, "He must look for them else he wouldn't find them, would he?" The two coppers smiled benignly. "Would you two gentlemen like a barbecued chooky sandwich? They're nice and crispy."

"Well, er, I think I will pass on that one," the sergeant answered, thinking another parrot might have gone up in smoke. Carru took one.

Once again the pair nursed crockery while their host reported on the recent weird happening as, from outside, happy seaside sounds drifted into the parlour. When she finished her lilting recital, Vicar Vocker piped a clear but unclear note.

"Pardon," he apologised and fluttered flaccid fingers across his face.

"More tea, Pumfrey?" asked the host.

"I think not, dear Mrs Quigley," the embarrassed clergyman replied.

The interval over, they all trooped once again up to the second floor, jostled by

descending noisy children colourfully garbed for the beach, where Carru tried unsuccessfully to open the door to room Six. Eric was once more sent for.

Eric duly arrived this time equipped with additional gear – oxy-acetylene blowtorch. "I makes a lovely bang when you light it."

"The screwdriver will suffice. We don't want to burn the place down," advised the sergeant.

"We certainly don't," agreed a worried landlady. "Vicar will think he's gone to Hell."

Eric soon had the door off, commenting, "It gets easier each time."

They re-entered the now blacked out room and were instantly aware of foreboding.

"Talk about the Black Hole of Calcutta," muttered the fireman, and retreated on to the landing where he fingered his big hammer.

They searched the room with the same result as before – no tenant.

"Not even a bucket and spade, Mrs Quigley," commented Carru.

"You might as well replace the door," Sgt Bell told the fireman.

Eric struggled with the door, even with the assistance of Carru.

"You'd get on better with the bolt back," Sgt Bell directed. An idea came to mind. "Hang on a mo. Let's see if it can be put back with the bolt forward."

With the door flat against the wall they were able to slide it into position and the bolt entered the worn holder.

"There. Now that's how you bolt a door on the inside when outside," said a triumphant Sgt Bell.

The sergeant then proceeded to gently quiz Mrs Quigley, who either failed to grasp the policeman's inference, or feigned complete bafflement. They decided to check the store room downstairs where, lo and behold, amongst the other household requisites, many empty paint tins were found, as well as some unopened ones containing green paint.

"Expecting little green men from Mars, are we, love?" asked Carru, grinning wildly. The landlady still looked puzzled, and Pumfrey sheepish.

"Shall we offer up a prayer?" he suggested.

"I don't think so. We've got to be getting back to the Station," replied Bell.

Cruising along the sea front on their return to the Station, Carru opined the matter would be best referred to Welfare. "She's possibly suffering some sort of dementia. And the old Vicar was a tight 'un, too."

"In more ways than one," agreed Bell, a remark that brought forth much laughter. "By the way, how did you get on with your parrot sandwich, Colin? Tasty, was it?"

"I dropped it into the vicar's pocket," replied Carru.

"You were always good at that, Colin."

Rounding the clock tower, Carru braked abruptly. He pointed to the tea-garden adjoining the sands where two black and white garbed persons sat on a bench in the shade of a sycamore tree. Of one accord, the two policemen got out of the car and searched the sky. Satisfied that no alien landing was imminent, they proceeded towards the strange beings, who were holding sticks of striped rock.

When still some yards short of their quarry, a large seed-vessel fell spinning downwards from the highest branch of the sycamore, gaining in size in descent, its silvery wings turning into rotors, the pod a cockpit. It landed on the beach. Messrs Black and White, seemingly oblivious to the gawping beach revellers, went to meet it.

The two transfixed policemen, clothing flapping in the helicopter's slipstream, watched as the two men climbed aboard. The ship rose upwards into the faded denim sky and whirled off over the razorblade sea. When just a dot on the horizon, the two policemen, neither speaking, walked stiffly back to their car and continued on their way.

After many minutes silence, Sgt Bell said: "Best not to put this incident on report, Colin. After all, they haven't broken any law I can think of – and my pension is only a year away."

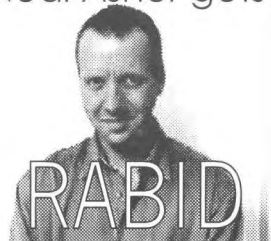
His companion agreed. "They certainly weren't speeding, Bill."

Sgt Bell nodded. "They could even be regular visitors to Skeggy. Perhaps they find it bracing."

"They liked our rock, too," replied Carru.

Geoff Jackson is a retired horticulturist who pottered about the small press during the 60's and 70's. Now powered by pacemaker, his stories have appeared over 200 times worldwide, including *Happy* (USA), *Litspeak* (Germany), *Poputchik* (Russia) and *Unhinged* (UK). He still uses his gas-fired Olivetti Studio 45 typewriter.

Neal Asher gets



Rebrand the Brand

The boundaries between the very ill-defined genres of fiction have always been blurred and always will be. This is a good thing as the ground in those grey areas can be very fertile. It has brought us the hardboiled detective Brother Cadfael, Robert Graves' wonderful family saga, that war/historical/romance Captain Corelli's Mandolin, and many more besides. But why oh why this continual need to search for new labels?

In the genres of science fiction and fantasy this is especially noticeable, and often maddening. I was dumbfounded to discover that Jurassic Park was labelled in a fast-seller list as the genre 'dinosaur', and on principle it is highly unlikely I'll ever read *Oryx & Crake*. SF&F have an image problem for some, and this is why they try to label parts of it differently. Forever in search of respectability, they grope for new names for the fiction they write, read, criticise or publish. But where are they looking for this change in attitude? Who are they actually hoping will look upon them in a different light?

Many in the mainstream literati intelligensia sneer at these genres. This is in spite of the fact that they take up about twenty percent of the fiction market, have resulted in many of the most successful films in recent years, and, science fiction specifically, is hugely relevant to today's culture with its rapid technological change. Where will anyone have first come across videophones, genetic manipulation, satellite

lasers, and missiles that think for themselves? In SF, of course. And it is to those who sneer, that those in search of new labels are going cap in hand pleading, "Please, take me seriously. I'm not really involved in that awful science fiction or fantasy stuff!" This is not only insulting to some great past authors, it is bloody annoying for those who are writing SF&F right now. How dare these people grovel for acceptance from those who don't have the imaginative capacity to grasp science fiction or fantasy? And how gutless they are to not claim these genres as their own.

But why seek the approval of the mainstream literati establishment, especially when those seeking that approval often style themselves as 'radical'? More blurred lines. It is because SF&F have their own literati intelligensia who cross the line into the mainstream: one group standing with their feet in both worlds. They enjoy the creativity and ideas of the first but loath its status. They like the status of the other but do not enjoy its pedestrian limitations.

Some would also have us believe that what they are labelling is something new. What conceit, what arrogance, or what pretension and ignorance. One can only suppose that they have not read widely enough. There's also some misapprehension of how the English language works in this age when if you're bad, man, you're good, and if you're cool you're hot. Like the PC lobby they hope that changing labels changes attitude, when in fact current labels change in people's perception. And the delusion that this rebranding (for that is what it is) will work, is misguided. It not will cause what has been rebranded to perform better. Perhaps they should call the new thing Consignia Fiction, or Corus Fiction – that should do as much good.

Ooh la la! Le bon Monsieur Asher avez *Gridlinked* et *Le Skinner* sold dans le Français pour grand beaucoup Euros. Tres biens, non?

Neal Asher space is at:

<http://freespace.virgin.net/n.asher/>

Caution - Construction in Progress:

A few thoughts on Character Building

Juliet McKenna

Character building. What does that mean to you? Cross country running in the freezing cold at the behest of some smugly track-suited gym teacher? Night hikes in the rain as a Girl Guide or a Boy Scout? Yes, it's all too often been the excuse for inflicting such delights on unwilling teens. But that's not what I'm thinking of here. Well, I'll come back to such experiences but my starting point is something else.

As a fantasy fan and reader, I've read a fair few articles on world building and now a writer myself, I've been invited to share my thoughts more than once. It's undeniably an extremely important element in creating a satisfying story. But it's not the whole story. A solidly constructed plot is equally important and the third leg of the stool that supports the story teller in the chimney corner has to be well rounded, convincing characters. Readers rarely care about things as much as they care about people. A book's characters must come off the page as living, breathing, loving, hating, sorrowful, joyful, triumphant individuals. As with the world they inhabit, if a fantasy novel's characters aren't solidly believable, the reader will have a far harder time accepting the outright fantastical, magical elements.

So where does one start? Bespoke or off the peg? It's an unpalatable fact that SF&F as a genre is vulnerable to ridicule for relying on stereotypes. Glance along the bookshelf and identify the plethora of wise wizards, feisty heroines, salt of the earth artisans, the evil overlords each with their conniving underling, farm boys who suddenly turn out to be lost princes raised by wise women who dispense good advice along with clean clothes and nourishing soup. Taking any of these as a starting point is a bad idea in my

opinion. If your character is defined by one overriding trait from the outset, they will always struggle to rise above it. You'll continually run the risk of writing two-dimensional melodrama rather than fully rounded drama.

These days, with the breadth and depth of the fantasy genre, familiarity also breeds contempt. The first time we meet the solitary hero hiding a secret, struggling with his destiny or a seemingly impossible love, it's intriguing, especially if it's Aragorn, son of Arathorn. On the tenth such meeting, the reader is far more inclined simply to think it's just Billy No-Mates again and to ask just why they should care?

That's not to say that by the time you have painstakingly built your characters, readers won't try to pigeonhole them but they'll have a far harder time of it and your characters will easily escape such constraints. Voldemort's

hanger-on Wormtail might have less impact for those readers who've already encountered Grima Wormtongue but he does have sufficiently distinctive traits and a role of his own to justify standing on his own two feet – or four paws. Stereotypes do serve one useful purpose when building a character. As soon as you realise you're in danger of perpetrating a loveable rogue, you can immediately start looking for ways to ensure that is merely one facet of his personality. After all, the people you know aren't defined by one overriding label, are they?

Is that the answer? Should you draw your characters from your circle of friends? Some How to be a Writer books suggest as much. I wouldn't necessarily advise it, not if you want to keep your friends and anyway, where is that going to get you? A random trawl through my address book wouldn't supply a balanced cast for a fantasy adventure. On second thoughts it might but that's only because I used to do live role-playing and still practise a martial art. Where I use my friends and family in character building is in making reality checks for action and reaction. Is what this character's doing plausible or frankly unlikely? That's certainly why I've no patience with the clichéd view of the writer's life as a



**'A random trawl
through my
address book
wouldn't supply a
balanced cast for a
fantasy adventure.'**

solitary one. Not if you're doing it right, it isn't. You have to meet as wide a range of people as you sensibly can, if you're to portray them convincingly on the page and avoid the stereotypes.

But we're still looking for a starting point. Where do we find the foundations of our character? What about that other great cliché of those how-to books that say write about what you know? All writing is autobiographical? Is it? Really? Well, you can certainly draw on the cold, the aching legs, the burning resentment of those afternoons driven out to pound pointlessly round the school field to convey your character's feelings when faced with some trial. But unless you've had a remarkably startling life, your own experiences aren't going to get you too far, certainly not for a fantasy book. You can and indeed should head for the

autobiography and biography shelves of your local bookshop and library in search of character detail. I found *The Hungry Ocean* by Linda Greenlaw an invaluable read when fleshing out the character of Halice in my *Tales of Einarinn*. As a female swordfish-boat skipper (the one mentioned in *The Perfect Storm*) details of her life and working relationships gave me key insights into the mind and the life of a female captain of mercenaries. But that wasn't the starting point. I didn't read that book and decide to write about a female sea-captain. *The Hungry Ocean* is a fascinating book but a thinly disguised copy wouldn't make for a fantasy novel. Halice came first and then I went looking for the details I needed to make her a convincing character.

Where did Halice come from? She was initially a plot device whose broken leg gets my heroine Livak delayed on the road. As a consequence Livak is tempted into some foolishness that sets off the whole train of events in *The Thief's Gamble*. To make Halice more than a plot device and to reveal more about the world where they both live as well as Livak's less than respectable place within it, I decided Halice was a female mercenary and Livak's partner as a travelling

gambler. With that established, Halice was the obvious person to call on later in *The Swordsman's Oath* and *The Assassin's Edge* when Planir or Temar needed armed assistance. That's when I needed to know a lot more about her.

So we have come back to the three legged stool that the story teller sits on. The overall story is built of character, plot and setting and all of these develop alongside each other. In this circular process creating one inevitably feeds into the creation of the others. Initial aspects of the plot dictate who the characters must be, to serve the story. The imagined world they live in affects who they are and what they can do. This is where you will find your characters in the first instance. Then it's up to you to breathe life into your creation.

I find a good way to start is visualising the character and I don't just mean applying the

Crimewatch identikit approach. I have a whole box file of postcards of portraits from museums and galleries and not just for those details of period costume that are also so useful for describing a vivid character. I keep magazines ranging from *National Geographic* to *SFX*. If I'm looking through these for inspiration and someone catches my eye, I can describe them in far more varied and interesting terms than checking off height/weight/colour of hair/colour of eyes/shape of nose. If the girl's face that's caught my eye is under a

hat, I can consider giving her a hat in the book, possibly make that a quirk of hers. A fantasy heroine isn't going to have a Jimmy Choo shoe habit but a weakness for frivolous feathers in her hair adds colour to her character as well as her coiffure. If I find an interesting portrait of an older man and notice he's got a stick in his hand, adding some physical infirmity to a wizard can add realistic frailty as well as plot hurdles and steer us away from the Gandalf stereotype.

How do we go from picture/postcard to living colour? I find a useful next step is asking the method actor's much-parodied question; what's their motivation? Why is this



'... unless you've had a remarkably startling life, your own experiences aren't going to get you too far, certainly not for a fantasy book.'

person here and what are they after? Motives should range from the intensely personal to the broadly general. In *The Swordsman's Oath* we learn Halice's broken leg mended badly. Finding life as a cripple intolerable, she'll work for wizards if they can even half-promise a cure. Livak isn't at all keen but her guilt at not having done enough for Halice after that accident drives her co-operation as well as setting up tension between the two of them.

Taking a broader view, there are always those useful standbys; sex and money. Our hero can kill the dragon to rescue the princess or get first pick of the treasure depending on your choice. Ideally his motivation will be a little more complex and help drive plot, sub-plot and drama within the over-all scheme of the book. Our hero might want to kill the dragon to get first pick of the treasure so he can go back and marry the girl of his dreams. Mind you, he might be tempted to dally with the ever-so-grateful princess in the meantime. His choices will tell us a lot about him. Would that give his rival time to get back before him? What happens to the plot if the girl of his dreams finds out our hero's been playing away? Does his rival race back to tell her? Is he acting out of spite towards our hero or unspoken devotion for her? Does our hero care at this point? Motives can change.

Motives are also a key element when considering your readers' attitudes to your characters. It's hard to engage with a book where everyone is unpleasant or unsympathetic. On the other hand, a book where even the baddies are actually just poor misunderstood victims of society will ring fairly hollow as well. You're looking for balance and believability right across the spectrum. Heroes doing the honourable thing for solid, quantifiable reasons are far more satisfying than parfait noble knights just as villains with concrete ambitions are far more frightening than some evil overlord stroking his white fluffy cat as he plots to rule the world because it's there.

If well-thought-out motives prompt our

characters' actions, let's get Newtonian. For every action there's an equal (and possibly opposite) reaction and those will tell us still more about each character. If our hero's rival has raced back to tell the girl of his dreams who's been creasing the princess's wimple, her reaction will tell us a great deal about her. Does she break down weeping, either refusing to believe it or collapsing onto the rival's sympathetic shoulder? Does she start yelling and throwing things? Does she cynically invite the rival into her bed out of sheer pique? Or does she grit her teeth and bide her time, plotting some nasty surprise for our hero on their wedding night?

When it comes to sex, we can consider Philip Larkin's assertion about your Mum and

Dad. An individual's character is initially formed, as regards sex and much else besides, by the circumstances of their birth and the first relationships within the family. To get Livak out on to the road as an itinerant gambler, I made her the illegitimate daughter of a housemaid, so subject to snide remarks and contempt from the outset. Then I gave her the bloody-mindedness that made her rebel against this rather than a sensitive nature to end up crushed by it. Which subsequently explains her skittishness about formal commitment to a lover. Having abandoned her family, her carefully chosen friendships are extremely important to her and influence her choices elsewhere.

That's not to say we need intense psychological exposition of every single nuance of every single character. 'My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die.' goes a long way in *The Princess Bride*. As a secondary character, (and in a book playing gleeful games with cliché and stereotypes) Inigo really doesn't need much more motivation than that. The less important the character is to the plot, the less detailed motivation needs to be. I find a page of background notes suffices for main characters, maybe half a page for the supporting players and no more than a scribbled note for the incidental cast. All the same, it adds pleasing depth and realism to the world if the passing peasant who lets our



‘... villains with concrete ambitions are far more frightening than some evil overlord stroking his white fluffy cat ...’

hero know that his rival is a day ahead of him has some reason to be on the road. Let's say he's driving his pigs to market. That'll do for someone coming on for a spit and a cough. We don't need a detailed breakdown of the pork economy of the whole region and that peasant's place within it.

All the same, their place within the society they live in will influence our main characters, just as much as their motives, be they selfish or noble, and their relationships with other people, good and bad. We're contemplating another, slightly different three legged stool. If the girl of our dragon-slaying hero's dreams is a princess in her own right, she is far more likely to have the self-confidence to tell him to sling his hook. If she's the poor but honest daughter of an impoverished merchant, she's far more likely to have the habit of deference.

Alternatively, the princess in her own right might be forced to overlook his betrayal, for the sake of dynastic marriage. The poor but honest lass would have far less stake in such a society. She might even take to the road herself – and run into Livak.

This is another area where character and world building overlap. Your character's reactions to their plight must be believable in the context of their world. Grafting modern feminist attitudes onto a quasi-medieval princess is going to jar. Equally, a historically plausible world coloured by unthinking sexism and racism isn't going to sit well with modern audiences. Again, we're looking for balance and once more, background reading will help you. Historical biography, autobiography and social history will broaden your own horizons, show you how such historical attitudes developed and changed. Consequently you'll construct a convincing world where your characters can live their lives to your satisfaction.

So after asking all these questions and making these choices we have our characters developed alongside our plot and our world. Now comes the stringing the words together and actually writing the book. Ideally the plot will proceed with gradual revelation,

occasional misdirection and a gripping ebb and flow of drama. Readers will come to know the world through careful use of incidental description, scrupulous maintenance of internal logic and accuracy of facts while at the same time avoiding the data dump. The characters must come alive through similar well-crafted writing.

Dialogue is crucial for exposing character; crude or prissy, bold or hesitant, shy or arrogantly insensitive. It cuts both ways when a woman inadvertently betrays herself with an ill-chosen word or man is proved a hypocrite by doing the very thing he has scorned in someone else. Actions speak loud than words, as we see our characters react to challenges, how they interact with each other and with their world. Whether in first or third person, we learn most when we see that

world through the character's own eyes.

When I sign a book contract, my publisher has accepted an outline of what I plan to write. The finished book is never the same as that outline. Plot problems crop up, inconsistencies in the world need rethinking but the main force driving such changes is when the characters grow in the writing to develop a life and an autonomy of their own. It's quite one of the most satisfying aspects of being a writer and is why, after the way the cast of characters

developed in *Southern Fire*, my copy of the outline for *Northern Storm* is now covered in red pen amendments.



'Dialogue is crucial for exposing character; crude or prissy, bold or hesitant, shy or arrogantly insensitive.'

Juliet E McKenna is the author of *The Tales of Einarinn* and her new series, *The Aldabreshin Compass* has begun with *Southern Fire*, out now from Orbit paperbacks. *Turns and Chances*, a novella casting an eye over the Lescari Civil Wars waging in the same world will be out later this year from PS Publishing.

Included out

Steve Sneyd

he sends me where he does not want to go
social events parties family things
gettogethers of old schoolmates funerals
he programs me beforehand to be polite
sociable wear the right expressions
make smalltalk all those human things
he says he cannot make himself do
not successfully he also primes me never
to reveal i am not him i am his android
double i do it all well am popular get
invited back afterwards he downloads my

performance my experience experiences it
himself sometimes he is it seems jealous
of my easy access to what it is to be a
social success punishes me with electric
jolts small whips pokes slaps wristburns
such like but never enough to hurt for
long to damage enough to leave a mark and
then he cries says i sorry how grateful
he is really he i who am not human spare
him agony of revealing he who is human is
so bad at doing what humans do i never

ever tell him it is not my place how it
is tiny signs the tiniest i detect i am
sure beyond doubt more than half at least
the others at these dos are same as me are
not the humans they appear to be at all and
all the towers of the world i am so sure
full night on night of humans hiding from
each other and the nightlife gatherings the
joyful babble backslap joking people get-
togethering even the solemn tears release
of layings down to earth to burn is really us

but then perhaps if so obvious they all
the human ones like him already know this is
conspiracy unspoken who would break such spell
what unwise word desirable to spoil answer
is perfect to such needs of all and then i
wonder briefly who or what is fooling who & then
i wish real anger were softwareed into me that i
could feel as is deserved for such fool being
made completely out of me instead smile sets
in place required of course to make sure never
ever will he know i know & go ash-weary to the ball

Steve has a collection of poetry ('We brought her back
from Antares') online at the Minotaur Press site:
www.minotaurpress.com.

The Key

Alessio Zanelli

lost in her microcosm
in search of flares
in which to burn
for eternity

inattentive seeker
jaundice-blind observer
of ordinary bodies

unaware of trapping
in his focus
the nova of a lifetime

the end of the quest
for a private door on her
the key to her world

like quarks
baryon-confined
inseparable instants
glued together in love

Alessio Zanelli is an Italian poet who
adopted English as his artistic language,
widely published in UK and US magazines,
including *Pulsar*, *Orbis*, *California Quarterly*,
Potomac Review and *Hadrosaur Tales*. The
author of two collections, *Loose Sheets* (UK,
2000) and *Small Press Verse &
Poetic conjectures* (USA, 2003), he primarily
works as a private financial advisor in his
hometown, Cremona, northern Italy.

Postscript

Just about enough space to squeeze in a
short personal comment: many thanks to all
the contributors this issue. It did take me
longer than I liked to get back to all the fiction
and poetry submissions, and I apologise
without reservation. I think I've got back to
everyone who submitted before September
2003. If not, please drop me a line. My
computer spends more time on its back,
waving its legs in the air, than it does
functioning normally. Something will have to
be done!