

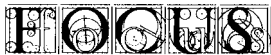
focus

The BSFA's magazine for writers



Issue 45 May 2004

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

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About the cover

More than words can say... in a desperate attempt to make up for years of neglect, the art form of the comic bursts not only onto the cover of Focus, but all over the inside pages too.

The picture is a detail from the Stuart Young/Bob Covington penned "Angels of War".

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. I will also consider stand-alone comic strips up to 4 pages. Science fiction, fantasy, and psychological horror all taken. There's no payment, but you'll see your work grace the pages of this magazine.

Art

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

Non-BSFA contributors get a complimentary copy of Focus.

How and where to submit

Postal and email editorial addresses in the first column!

By post:

Text: double-spaced, single-sided A4, or on disk. I can convert most formats, but always include a .txt file in case.

Art: one illustration per page. Don't send originals - only photocopies. If you want to send a disk, you can. Again, I can read most formats.

If you want your work back, enclose an SAE with sufficient postage. If you don't, mark the work as disposable, and either enclose an SAE or a valid email address for a reply. I like covering letters.

By email:

Text: as part of the body text, please. No attachments.

Art: not by email! Put it on the web and send me the URL!

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

NEXT ISSUE DEADLINE:

1st September 2004

pedantry

When you write with no hope of being published there's no problem with finishing one project and starting another. Completed the hundred-thousand word novel? Feel like a short story or two? Nothing to stop you.

Nothing is ever wasted: it's all part of the learning process. Whilst it's good to go the distance to prove to yourself that you can finish a novel-length work, if it's not holding your interest then how is it going to hold a reader's?

At some stage you pick up a magazine or book and you think, "What I write is better than this, and this is published." You submit your first story. It gets rejected. You try again, and slowly you build up both your craft and your confidence. Rejections still outnumber acceptances. Eventually someone you're not related to might even be bothered enough to say they like your work.

One day – and it might be the second day you put pen to paper, or it might be years after – you hit on an idea. It is, even as you hold your breath, possibly The Good Idea.

So you start writing in earnest, putting down words like they're going out of fashion. At last you put in the final full stop. Then you go back to the start and check everything meticulously. You add new scenes, delete old ones, and polished the dialogue until it shines.

Now it's time to send it out into the world, and then you wait. Months go by and eventually you hear the bland rejection of 'this isn't right for our lists', or 'not quite what we're looking for'. It's like wading through treacle. But you're used to this, the waiting with hope and without expectation.

What is impossible to bear is the cautious recognition of talent, the 'it's a bit rough, but there's something here'. You can finally see the summit of the mountain that you've been climbing. You're going to make it.

I've been there once before and years ago. In retrospect, the fact the deal crashed and burned at the very last moment has made me not just a more patient writer but a better one. At the time, I was crushed. Now I'm there again. I have everything on my side that I didn't have a decade ago. Part of me is all for treating those impostors success and failure just the same. Another part is all aquiver. It's the waiting I can't stand.

Simon Morden
Gateshead, April 2004

"Intellect without opposition stagnates"

Steve Sneyd

weary of worlds are global cities
too many this trip but this system
at least from distance something

extra to see faceted beam back
reflect light different colour
binary suns computer provides

metaphor always answer when
can't think how to describe to self
what see fix in memory sweet she

voice they gave it says anciently
what were called Mecca dance halls
had revolving globes cast just such

effects on couples moved to music
below i was happy then i know what
to think even if unlikely chose

to add description of effect to
report would transmit irrelevant
of course look of places only use

might have for trade balance of
power species strong enough a
potential threat all that what was

supposed to put in let her i call
it her word all that but if against
odds i wanted input this sight knew

now what to say decided next space
port one of these even perhaps if
had facilities would decorate ship

front effect of lipsticked mouth
would face for her to match
her voice my partner now in dance.

Steve Sneyd has teamed up with John Light (collator of the indispensable Light's List) for Neolithon, a collection of poems and drawings inspired by ancient stories. Available from KT Publications as part of the Kite Modern Writers' Series (ISBN 0907759181)

CALIBAN X6

Peter C. Loftus.

1.

I was in the elevator on the way down when he struck. Either side of the compartment was mirrored, and I was watching my own face fade away into infinity on each side. Serried ranks. An army of me. There was a shocking detonation from below that jarred me. I had a fleeting glimpse of my multiple selves falling as I hit the floor. There was a sharp burst of heat as the corrosive force of the explosion tore through the base of the lift. I heard metals twist and buckle from the heat.

With a leap, I tore through the ceiling hatch and began to claw my way up the cables. Close as he was, he wasn't going to get me that easily. Somewhere beneath me, I heard the elevator crash into the basement as I ripped open a set of doors on the side of the shaft. Fifth floor.

There was a window at the end of the hall. In a running jump I was through and plummeting to the alley below. I could see him running out of the main doors of the building and up the street. I always hated that sneaky bastard.

I hit the ground running and surged after him. There was a twinge from my ankle, so I glanded a mix of endorphins and adrenaline. It made me a little dizzy.

I could see him clearly now, and it was *definitely* him splashing through the rain soaked streets in an effort to escape my retribution. He was about to be disappointed on that score. I watched him fleeing through the maze of neon reflected from the dark streets, his jacket tail flapping frantically as he ran. He crossed the plaza in a blur, and, to the amazement of those on the steps and pathways, he began to scale the building opposite like a spider on fast forward.

There are people in this world that you love at the same time as hate. Family, friends, even yourself. I hated him more than any of these, this man who was both more and less than a brother to me. When we fought together in the hives of Luxus I had saved his life, and held him, crying, until the med teams came to mop us up. The thought that he would die had frozen me, so close were we. At times like these you could form a bond with somebody that you simply couldn't believe. It was too intense. I would gladly have given myself to the swarm to protect him.

But that time had passed. Through many long

years, of betrayal, heartache and lies, that two-faced scumbag had burned whatever ties had once bound us. He was going to die tonight and I was going to rest much better for it.

A police seeker roared up from below, pinning him in its spotlight. They started to say something to him as I hurled the grenade. He turned, just in time to allow me to see his face before he was caught in the blast. A single, blue ring of charged particles sped outwards from the centre slicing through everything before it. As he raised his arms, I saw it cleave him at the waist. I leapt from the rooftop as it halved the seeker in a fountain of golden light.

That was the end of him. One less stab in the back for me to watch out for. I'd been much quicker than him. That was encouraging.

If his powers had deteriorated to that degree, then maybe the others wouldn't be that much trouble after all. If only I found them before they found me..

2.

Caleb was coming out of the Consolidated Trust building when I caught him. Power had always been his thing. Power and money. He would ask you for a loan of a hundred *when* he already had twice as much as you had. He'd made it too easy for me by working in a bank.

I watched as he crossed the tarmac to his flier. He looked like he was in good shape, but he was limping. Now that was curious. Given his physiognomy, that was indeed curious. He couldn't have hurt himself in a simple accident, and for him to be limping meant that he had probably broken a bone, in either his foot or ankle.

He looked pretty pathetic really, a tiny figure, dwarfed by the massive offices at his rear. Clouds piled across the windows, reflecting to such extent that the building was nearly invisible against the summer sky. A bright arc, and a flash of light and his flier disappeared too.

I followed at a safe distance. One thing I did want was to see this conniving snake's lair. He had enough clout that he didn't have to follow normal traffic patterns, so he was going to have a pretty plush pad. What got me was that he still owed me over seven million dollars. No matter. It was academic now.

I landed twenty miles or so from the complex. From satellite shots I had a pretty clear idea of the layout. He had satellite shielding, but I knew people too. Not many, but enough.

I had a nifty little arsenal in the back of the flier, and as I began to strap in, I was sure my fingers began to tremble for a moment. I hoped it was adrenalin and not sentiment. I had to kill him before I choked on my own bile. My body knew the routine; laser stillettos, pulse grenades, concussion clusters (they sound like a hi fibre breakfast cereal but move you much better), electrowire, acid capsules, force sword, twin Grenden automatics and a multi-role plasma carbine that I'd held back from the Zion revolution campaigns. There was no sense in loading myself down, because I might have to move quickly.

Fifteen minutes later, I was at the perimeter of his compound. His place was huge, a sprawling white zigzag that stretched all the way from the shore, fifty metres or so, into the sea, and out nearly all the way to the reef. The bastard may be lame, but there sure was nothing wrong with his wallet. His security was going to be tighter than his own ass.

There was no way that I was going to go in over the prissy little lawns, so I took the obvious route – the sea. As I eased myself into the warm waters, I kind of envied him, but then I supposed that anybody could get that much money if they were willing to kiss enough ass and step on enough backs. Well, that was what I always told myself. When you see somebody else that much richer than you, you have to make up some bullshit to make yourself feel better.

The reef was bright, and the sun reached all the way to the bottom to touch the white sands. Fish moved to and fro like a kaleidoscope chasing each other and being chased. They all looked the same to me. I wondered why they didn't just eat themselves and save themselves the bother of all that fleeing and sniping. Maybe they just hated each other, and took pleasure in messing each other up. That was what they called nature after all. Now that, I could understand.

Caleb was in his lounge when I attacked, looking at a fat cigar that he was planning on lighting. I used an acid cap to crack the glass, and as the water flooded the room, so too did I, surfing that wave, and strafing the room in a hail of gunfire. He didn't know what hit him. I could hardly see myself, but somewhere in the torrent of water and broken glass, I was sure I saw his body burst. The cleaners were going to be on overtime.

3.

Calvin lived in the west of Ireland, on a rain – blasted and God-forsaken island called Inish something or other. His house was made up of a long low chalet attached to the side of some type of stone tower. The tower, once a monastic

outpost, now bore the glass dome of an observatory and the ancient stonework had been re-pointed and sealed in the modern tradition. Quite nice really.

I had been watching the place for over a week before Calvin took off; to the Caribbean on some sort of business, I discovered. The islands had been linked into a global financial sector and playground for the super-rich. I could guess what he was doing there.

Calvin was the most sensual of all of us. He loved wine, good food and pleasures of the flesh. He collected art, literature and women. On a dozen different worlds we had seen him whoring ferociously, as if his life depended on his expending himself nightly. In fact, his life depended on us, and it was the team that kept him alive and returned him each time to the nearest knocking shops, slums and bordellos. If you could bottle beauty and sell it, Calvin would have choked himself on it. His tastes were not refined, however. They were crass, self-centred and vulgar in the extreme. Only his enhanced metabolism kept him from appearing as he really should, as a red-faced, wheezing Falstaff.

I must admit though, that I was jealous of him. He'd met an opera singer on Catalunya, and thrown both caution and the wayward life to the wind in order to settle down with her. Not one of the rest of us ever settled like that. A lover was a weapon in an enemy's hand, a fatal flaw that guided the dagger through the ribs, the poison past the lips. I have never seen a woman so beautiful. I have never loved a woman so much. It was obvious that we would have similar tastes. I would sometimes fantasise that I replaced him. I could see myself, there in his bed, in her arms. Outside, a storm would be raging and the fish would be cleaning his bones. I would turn and encircle her waist with my arms, kiss her and be tortured by the beauty of her gaze...

That was probably why I hadn't struck earlier, or used the direct approach. As long as the possibility existed that I could supplant him, I would wait. But time had run out for me. I had always been last at everything in the group. The last to learn a new skill, the last home after an operation, and the last to move on. I wanted to be the last to live. While the others had money, power and secrecy, I had my bitterness; my knowledge that I would be forever bettered five times over.

Calvin had very little security, or at least very little security that could bother me. I let myself in, and watched through frosted glass as she showered. How I wished I was the water that ran over her smooth flesh. I moved to the lounge and waited and soon enough she came in, wearing a bathrobe and towelling her lustrous black hair.

"Calvin!" she shouted, and ran to me. "Oh, how I've missed you."

She straddled me, and began to kiss me

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feverishly, my face, my eyes, my lips. My heart surged in my chest, a dam about to burst. Within seconds, my hands were inside her robe, cupping, searching. I traced a line from her breasts to the curve of her buttocks and over her still-damp skin. At the same time, I was struggling to free myself from my trousers. Suddenly her hands were as talons on my shoulders and a ringing blow stung my cheek.

"You're not Calvin," she shrieked, jumping off me. Her eyes were appalled. "You're..."

"Christian," a voice finished the sentence for her. Calvin was back.

I rolled to the side, and off the couch in a single movement. Calvin tracked my movement with a handgun, but held his fire for fear of hitting his paramour. It gave me all the chance I needed. I pushed past Nuria, heedless as she sprawled to the floor, and launched a kick at Calvin's soft parts. He blocked as planned, leaving himself open to the heel of my palm, which crashed into his nose, shattering the bone. He flew to the floor with exaggerated speed and skidded backwards towards the open archway to the tower stairs. I knew that I had to act quickly. I picked up a heavy stone lamp and flung it at his head, putting all of my strength into the action so he couldn't dodge the blow. As if in slow motion I saw his mouth scream *Nooooo* as Nuria leapt to his aid. There was a noise like pottery breaking as the lamp stove in the back of her skull and she was pitched forward, lifeless, onto Calvin.

After that the fight was not one of tactics and weapons. It was a savage trading of blows as both of us sought to annihilate each other through a bloody red haze. We faced each other like battling windmills, fists swinging and continued until our faces were shattered and our eyes closed and black. Any stop in such a precipitous attack from either side would give the other a chance at a killing blow. And so we fought on, levelling the house and each other in the process.

I don't remember when the end came. Suddenly it was night and I was in the ruins of the observatory. Nuna was cradled in my arms and the stars above us were distorted by tears and the empty void between.

4.

The sun was just a line of amber on the horizon, pale blue above reaching to a vault of indigo. I was in the second courtyard breathing in the night scents of stock when they came to me. They were dressed in their customary black, and they knelt at the edge of the gravel, foreheads pressed to the ground, awaiting my pleasure. Humming, I continued my rounds, holding myself in perfect equilibrium. In the background I could hear the *ching...ching* as the sails in the harbour tapped idly against the masts. I could hear the tide lapping too.

It was easy at times like this to lose yourself, to think that the stars wheeled above you alone and for you alone. It was easier to feel that everything was put there for you than to believe that you were a part of it. Sometimes I felt like I was the nail of the heavens, not centred in the universe, but the centre of the universe. Did I not create the universe through the act of perception? Wasn't it only through my senses that the universe was given any meaning at all?

"Welcome," I said, and when they didn't move, "Speak."

"We have news of your brother, master. He seems to have been involved in some kind of accident, and is receiving treatment in a private hospital on the outskirts of London. We were unable to find out any other details than that he is in serious, although not critical condition."

I thanked them both and gave them my blessing. Such news would have to be exploited and I would have to move immediately.

"Jasper, Topaz, Jade," I called. A paper screen slid aside and in a rush of tiny feet my chambermaids were at my side. "Jade," I commanded, "I am flying to London in one hour. See that everything is made ready. Jasper, lay out my pearl suit and join myself and Topaz in the baths. Come Topaz."

I touched down in London a little after four in the morning. Outside Reading Aerospace port I hired an executive model groundcar, opting for no human chauffeur. It took me just a few minutes to circumvent the navigation and security computer, after which I changed course and headed for Beckenridge hospital.

My poor brother! Did he not know that I had been waiting for this for years? He would never survive this night. I would descend upon him like divine wrath. I would crush him beneath my heel like an insect, and when he was gone I would go straight after Caliban. Whatever den he was sleeping it off in I would find him. I would pour his own stinking liquor over him and burn him to death in his own stench... but first things first.

I parked at the end of the gravel drive. I left the car hidden behind some bushes, facing the roadway, with the key in my top pocket so that it would unlock and start when I approached. After that I set off for the hospital, eschewing weapons. Pride dictated that I do this one by hand.

I waited in the shadows by a side door for nearly five minutes, awakening the serpent. When my chi had risen, I exploded into action. Silently, with a sudden jerk, I ripped the lock from the door and strode straight in. Some attendant had just turned out a light in the hallway ahead, though he couldn't see me as I shot towards him in the darkness. With one hand I seized his neck and broke it. Then I flung him aside and continued. In a lighted booth on the first floor landing two male nurses were boasting about their sexual

endeavours with one of the female staff. I took the stairs in two bounds, then vaulted straight through the glass front of the booth. I landed with my heel on the throat of one, almost decapitating him in the act. The second I struck double fistened on either side of the heart killing him instantly. He struck a filing cabinet so hard that it almost bent double. I wish I could have recorded it. It was poetic.

I had been in the building almost two seconds now. Towards the end of the wing to my left, I heard a window break and a heavy thud. I sped up, and reached the room in time to see my brother land, some forty metres from the building. He sprang up again and began to sprint for the outside wall. He vaulted to the top, and I could see his chest working like a bellows in the instant before he jumped.

There was a forest of sorts, and my brother was making towards it. He was badly injured, and didn't have the fight in him that I would have expected. I almost pitied him. Almost.

I ran up behind him and lifted him from his feet as he tried to jump clear of me. He twisted, but I had him firmly in my grip. I raised his struggling body and dashed him against my knee. A womanly scream ripped from him as his spinal cord was severed. In triumph, I leapt and impaled his still twitching corpse on the branch of a giant oak tree.

Alarms sounded behind me as the hospital awoke to the situation. Too late, too late! I didn't go back for the car but ran like a wolf beneath the stars. I ran until I reached the coast, my body steaming as I stripped the clothes from my torso and legs. I waded into the sea and let my body be buoyed up by the salt waves. They'd send a flier for me. They knew me well enough by now. Elation!

5.

By this time only Carrawn was left, and I knew that if I didn't go looking for him, he'd come looking for me. Neither of us could ever rest with the other still in circulation, and there was no way that we could ever trust each other's word that we would stay away. It hurt me now, when we had fought side by side with such terrifying effect. We had done everything together, ate, slept, trained... Fought in more than twenty campaigns. I'd spent so long trying to settle the rest of them in to civilian life that I nearly drove myself mad in the process. And what were we like now? A snake trying to devour its own tail.

Carrawn was intelligent; the philosophical one. He was logical, and efficient, but he was also arrogant, and this was his greatest weakness. He always thought he was right, and even when he found out he was wrong he'd state grandly that he was glad to have been corrected thank you very much. And because of this, he very often

underestimated his opponent. Given that I was his next opponent, I'd bet my souped-up ass that he'd underestimate me. As long as I gave him the impression that he had a march on me he'd be ok. So I went to New York.

New York is the greatest city in the world to get lost in. Nowhere gives you less notice – you live there for eighty years and die and no-one can recognise your photo or place your name. Like a sardine swimming into a shoal you can disappear. In New York you can even lose yourself.

But New York is also a great city to be found in. There I was sitting in a bar, nursing a Jameson and staring at my puffy face in the bar mirror. I looked down and when I looked up there was two of me. The other me ordered a bottle of Cobra beer and sized me up in the mirror.

"How you been?" he asked.

"What the hell do you care?"

"So you don't even want to be polite..."

"Like it matters what I want. I didn't want it to end like this."

"It's got to end some way."

"Yeah... but did you ever stop to think of how I'll feel without you guys around?"

"Don't worry, you won't get to see what that's like. I'll make sure of that."

"Did you ever stop to think how much a part of each other we are? We're like different parts of the one superordinate personality."

"I have often thought that we were like different aspects of the Gods – but I am Vishnu, above you all. I will exist without you."

"I hope you got it figured out as well as you think, Carrawn. Because you're going to find out pretty soon if you're right or not."

I slipped a piece of paper to him with an address on it. "So long."

The address was a run down office building that was scheduled to be knocked down. There was scaffolding in places and empty windows that looked out on nothing. The plaster was dark grey, dark and rain soaked. I heard Carrawn enter and spring up the empty lift shaft. He stalked out onto the roof, and I allowed him to get a glimpse of me just before I jumped to the ground.

Like a hound, he was straight after me. I leapt to the second floor and across to the far side where I jumped down again. Cavity blocks burst against the wall beside me. He was getting frustrated already. I kept it up for five minutes or more, which at the speed we were moving was like an hour in real time.

"I'm gonna gut you," he screamed. He was losing his cool bigtime. "I'm gonna rip out your eyes, you goddamned alcho."

I was behind him now, so I lobbed an iron scaffold bar like a spear at his head. He ducked and dashed off, but I didn't chase. I found a spot and settled.

He was going crazy now. His grand climax was going to pieces. He had rain, New York, and an enemy he thought wasn't worthy of him who wouldn't even fight him. He was coming to the boil quite nicely.

He began checking each of the smaller offices upstairs systematically, impatient to find me so he could get back to his banzai trees. He was sticking his head into each office, cursing all the time, and moving with insect speed. But I was waiting, like a trapdoor spider.

He stuck his head through the door and I slipped the garrotte onto his neck. He twisted like a hooked fish, pulling me from the girder I was grasping with my legs. But it was over already. The garrotte was high tensile fibre from the gut of a reptile on Vega. It was covered in microfilaments that cut and lightened the more the victim struggled. He gave in, thankfully before his eyes popped out, in a last great sweeping spasm.

I got up and started dusting myself off. There was a mirror on the other side of the office. I saw myself reflected in it, dirty and unshaven, but looking like any one of my brothers. My family. Rain was pouring through a hole in the roof plastering my hair to my head. I was so wet it almost hid the tears. I picked a glass ashtray off the floor and sent the image shattering to the ground. I really needed a drink.

6.

I am Caliban, the last of an elite squad, cloned to fight in the hive wars. We fought because no human was quick enough to win this fight. We were the best kept secret of the Terran military from our conception until nearly the end of our service. We were so successful, that we were used again and again, and as alien enemies ran out we fought humans, sometimes terrorists, sometimes colonists rioting for food on the rim worlds. Our hands are stained with the blood of innocents. We were a tool put to the wrong use. If you could see the bodies scattered on Albebaran III or Lucius you would understand why I drink.

It's lonely now, being the last of your kind. I sometimes think they wouldn't have brought us to Earth unless the media hadn't found us out. I think we knew too much for them to be comfortable.

I sometimes think they may have programmed us to destroy each other in times of peace, so that we would neutralise our own threat.

Well I'm going to drink this whiskey now, and destroy myself a little more, and when that's finished I'll have another. Goodnight.

Peter Loftus lives in a quiet village on the coast to the north of Dublin. He teaches English as a foreign language. He spends most of his free time writing, and is currently seeking a publisher for a fantasy novel set in Victorian London, entitled the 'The Arcane Eye'.



For Truth, Lies, and Friction

David Rawson

Thirty years after he had lain down in readiness for it, death came to the occupant of a windowless room, set deep within a ferro-concrete membrane that ran along the Pacific seaboard like an abnormal encephalograph. An unacknowledged memorial to the human end game, the membrane was first and foremost a barrier, keeping the corporate domain safe from the depredations of the sea - that world of untamed matter.

The man's body was lean and white, and devoid of hair due to the drugs administered to stop the growth of such exudations. Had there been anyone to see it, it might have elicited feelings of horror and pathos, yet for decades most of it had been irrelevant even to its owner - its sole function having been to provide points of attachment for the tubes that dealt with the waste products of metabolism. Below the neck, the only other part of the body to carry any form of connection was one of the arms. Together with

the gurney that supported the subject, this feed pipe running from a superior type of drip, gave the impression that he had been executed by lethal injection.

In contrast, the head was a profusion of thin, white cables, attached to the scalp by sucker-like appendages. They had the appearance of saprophytic life forms, taking nourishment from him and then struggling upwards to force their way through the ceiling, as though it was the surface of the earth. However, appearances were deceptive, their relationship with the host having been more symbiotic. They had carried food for the psyche, and in a continuous loop had traded synthetic nectar for ersatz honey, the two intermingling such that it was impossible to tell which was which. The deceased had dreamt a seamless dream of a loving woman and her children; of leaves, each one a fractal masterpiece; of the imagined lives of others, as

glimpsed from the crisp, unreflective mirage of a street corner.

Moments after its occurrence, his biological death had been registered by the authorities and quickly the suckers were withdrawn, waving as they did so like kitsch, alien fingers, the perverse laying on of hands having finally been completed.

A tube though, remained attached to his arm. Now it would carry embalming fluid rather than nutrients - a measure intended to buy a little time whilst the final arrangements were made for dealing with his mortal remains.

In due course, vents would open in the floor to allow the ingress of a highly viscous, yet transparent fluid. Slowly the gurney would retract from beneath him, its place being taken by the thick resin that would eventually fill the room and then harden into something akin to the vitreous outpourings of the earth.

The superficial reason why corpses could no longer be buried or incinerated was that the human body was full of toxins. It was said to be so chemically alienated from the natural environment, that any attempt to recycle it would violate pollution legislation, and thus it had to be treated as the most dangerous waste. There were, however, deeper political and symbolic reasons for this procedure. The abstraction of humanity from nature was the *raison d'être* of Imago and the other corporations. They were responsible for all that their clients and functionaries ingested. The recycling of the deceased would have implied the reabsorption of the individual into nature and an abrogation of their own control. To have sanctioned the right to a natural death and dissolution would have admitted the possibility of such a life preceding it.

With dreams of the impossible, Tyler looked up at a cradle containing two men who washed the glass surface of the Imago tower. They resembled the birds that stood on the back of a rhino. The birds ate ticks lodged in its hide, and the rhino tolerated them because it was being cleaned. The men's task though, was doubtless easier, for the bright black scales that constituted the curtain-wall of the building, locked together almost perfectly, eliminating awkward projections and rebates.

Soon, almost the only people who would be left on the outside would be those in the most menial service jobs. Despite the corporations making the external environment less and less attractive, Tyler envied the men in the cradle. For above the great towers of 'Nexus', 'Melody' and 'Imago', the clouds still ran beyond their control, as though taunting these great enterprises with their infinite variety and unpredictability. He felt he understood why men had once believed that above even them, there lay a realm of truth and goodness.

Tyler crossed the great plaza that lay to the

south of the Imago tower, as alone as a soldier ant crossing a marble floor, and acutely aware that he was a remnant of the unclear world of growth and decay that Imago was rapidly replacing. Nowadays he rarely left his apartment and he regarded the invitation to attend the meeting in person as highly symbolic. He mused that the most important things in life were often cloaked in archaic ritual - the condemned man eating his hearty breakfast....

In its absurd size, the tower's reception area appeared as though it had been constructed as an exercise in irony. Behind the desk there sat a bored and especially plain young woman, dressed in an immaculately pressed uniform that looked as though it had only ever hung on a mannequin. As an organic entity she appeared entirely out of place - unless one imagined her being the first exhibit in a new zoological museum. Once, such a prestigious role would have been taken up by a pretty girl, but now fleshly beauty was obsolete - indulgence in it having been relegated to a perversion akin to necrophilia.

As he took the elevator up to near the top of the building, Tyler's mouth felt dry. Despite his excitement, he was apprehensive about his face to face meeting with Isaksson, the First Secretary to the Continental Chief of Transformations - to give him his correct title. Years of both designing and exploring Imago's ethereal architectures had isolated and socially retarded him.

As the appropriate floor was reached, Isaksson was at the doors to greet Tyler personally. In appearance and - as Tyler was to find out - his behaviour, he was an intriguing atavism. Grey haired, a man of his status should long ago have disappeared into some exquisite alternative reality. The fine cut of his suit, together with his gold spectacles and cufflinks, bespoke of more than his taste in personal adornment, and gave him the air of a captain - one determined to be the last to abandon ship.

Yet there was nothing overtly commanding about the way he received Tyler. A deferential manner combined with his dress to give him the air of some high-class gentleman's outfitter, from an age of opulence and instability. Certainly, he would be fitting Tyler for a new life, and it was this image that the newcomer took forward as his host opened a door for him and ushered him into a consulting suite.

It was the most extraordinary room that Tyler had ever entered. In his youth, he had been inside many obsolete spaces, such as churches and stadia, but this had been entirely unexpected, situated as it was within the cortex of an organization dedicated to the extinction of nearly all physical environments. High above, were a multitude of exquisitely carved timber roof trusses, and set into the stone walls, an array of backlit stained glass windows. Far more numerous than these though, were the tabernacles and niches

that were filled with a sculptural cross-section of world history. Rescued from the rubble of the tactile past, their decayed surfaces gave them the air of careworn mummies.

Yet initially baffling though it was, such a room was entirely logical. Just as the treasures of the harem were always guarded by eunuchs, so the gates to the worlds of light and shadow had to be kept by someone immune to their ethereal charms. Such a person had to be supremely knowing of the arts on offer, yet in spite of this, besotted with matter and the glorious friction between things - in awe of a world where once spoken, truth and lie would forever remain as told.

Isaksson was sat upon a finely upholstered piece of antique furniture, clearly familiar with, but still enjoying the sensation. Eschewing the padding for wood, Tyler perched on the very edge of his chair and tried to frame his requirements in as straightforward a language as possible. As he spoke, Isaksson listened to him with the tact and patience of a madam indulging a well-heeled client. Sometimes he nodded with approval, and invariably he scrolled a stylus across a white tablet. As he wrote, his tongue occasionally protruded from between his lips, as though even the archaic process of writing was a sensuous pleasure.

Once Tyler had stopped, Isaksson took the opportunity to read his notes out aloud, pausing at suitable junctures to allow his client the chance to make corrections. The exercise proceeded in prosaic order until he felt moved to take off his spectacles and look up.

'You say that you want to feel needed by someone, and in turn to need them?'

'That's correct,' said Tyler, conscious that he should sound as forceful as possible. He was about to ask if there was a problem with such a specification, when he realized that the First Secretary was intrigued rather than upset by this unusual and exacting requirement. Tyler expected him to ask why, but then wondered if such a question would have been a breach of professional etiquette. Perhaps he no more regarded it his place to psychoanalyze his clients, than those who had procured entertainments for depraved emperors had sought to question their motives.

Whilst Isaksson concerned himself with detail, Tyler looked up again at the roof trusses.

'They're English - fifteenth-century,' said Isaksson, clearly pleased that his client was taking an interest in them. 'They were taken from a chantry chapel, where prayers could be said for a man's soul whilst it was held in purgatory.'

'What exactly was purgatory?' asked Tyler, for the moment skipping over the dark humour implicit in what had been said. Like most people, he had only ever heard the term used loosely. Now he expected Isaksson the madam, to

become the theologian and pedagogue.

'An interesting question,' said the First Secretary, as though Tyler was a promising pupil. 'It's the place intermediate between earth and heaven, where the soul is cleansed of its venal sins.'

'And do you believe in it?' asked Tyler bluntly.

'Whether I do or do not is immaterial. Suffice it to say that Imago cannot, because it neither recognizes sin, nor believes in the soul.'

Isaksson excused himself briefly and Tyler wondered if his gauche questioning had offended him. Perhaps he was the last man who engaged in the physical pleasures in the certainty that he sinned. Only someone who truly believed in the flesh could believe in something as transcendent as the soul.

Tyler didn't believe in the soul, but he believed in the consciousness - in the sense that the universe was without purpose unless there was something to bear witness to it. Yet men had turned their backs on a shared experience of the totality, lured by the prospect of becoming small, somnambulant gods, enmeshed in plays of light and shadow. The generations before him had dropped one part of the trinity comprising existence, so that by the time he had been born, only the body and its sensations were still recognized. He had long recognized that he would die in an age that would only have knowledge of the latter.

Isaksson carried on writing.

Tyler mused that most men's dreams contained little autonomous content, and were merely consumerist fantasies inculcated by decades of conditioning and references to a certain sexual aesthetic. Imago's transformations were largely a homage to the *fin de siècle* brothel and what he had termed 'porno-modernism' - which consisted of huge sheets of plate glass and mirror smooth swimming pools, whose surfaces reflected the obligatory beauties. Once, it had taken ten years graft for the corporation's most talented to get even that. Now such a thing had become the common currency - soon to be within reach of the men who cleaned the outside the building. Tyler, who regarded himself as a superior type of man, had been partly responsible for this.

Yet it took an uncommonly large amount of currency to feel needed by someone, and in turn to need them - in fact, more than anyone had. The next best thing was the best that Tyler could hope for. What the world had once regarded as so precious, yet had given so freely, had now become almost worthless, but could no longer be bought.

Isaksson began quizzing him in detail, with what at first seemed technical questions about the architecture of the world he wished to inhabit. As he did so, it struck Tyler that his earlier

assessment of the First Secretary as captain, madam and savant; as sinner and paragon of sartorial virtue, required yet further revision. Certainly, elements of each were present, but he had too readily discarded the role of psychiatrist. The man was effectively carrying out analysis in reverse - questioning him, not about the dreams he had once had, but the single one to come.

During this, Tyler's frustration grew, as he contrasted what he imagined to be his own inarticulacy with Isaksson's urbanity. The First Secretary also elicited both his unease and envy, inhabiting as he did the diminishing flesh world like some carrion feeder, and living vicariously through a host of men's dreams. For a moment, Tyler was tempted to accuse him of sucking the marrow from the future's bones.

'Isaksson?' he asked quickly. 'I want to feel needed by someone, and in turn to need them - to be needed so much, that I'd lay down everything I had for them. I want a pulse between ecstasy and despair and a dream within a dream of heaven and...' He paused to catch his breath. '... I want to believe in something beyond our own hubris and the blindness of nature.'

He believed above all else, that these were impossible demands, but he wished to shake up the First Secretary and let him know of the distaste in which he held the project that was to be undertaken on his behalf.

Isaksson tapped his chin with the stylus.

'We can only give you paradise.'

'I want more than that.'

The transformer put down the instrument, and pressed together the tips of his fingers, almost in prayer.

'We're illusionists, not magicians,' he said softly, but to his client's mind, coldly.

'I want you to give me the answers,' Tyler asked, in as quiet and controlled a way as he could muster - as if to steal some ground from his host.

Isaksson drew close to him.

'We only take away the questions,' he whispered.

Then he smiled before offering his hand - indicating that the first session was at an end. This formidable etiquette broke down all Tyler's powers of resistance. It hinted that the man had had such a conversation many times before, and would do so again. Then Tyler wondered if this would be so - the future was nearly over, and what then?

It had been many years since Tyler had really shaken hands with anyone, but he was disappointed with the grip and touch of this man whose tactile sense meant so much to him. Imago really had designed such things to be better - the flesh was increasingly disappointing, as though even God was now distracted and dreamt of his cold usurpers.

He headed down and then out across the reception area. The girl at the desk was staring in another direction, as if in a trance - perhaps refining the dream that she too would one day disappear into. Like a yacht on an ocean, he changed tack and headed towards her.

'What's your name?' he asked, with a hint of nostalgia in his voice.

'Renna,' she said, surprised out of her reverie.

Tyler stood looking at her for a few moments, as though she had posed a problem, and then made his way out of the building.

High above, his solid eminence the First Secretary had already gathered his team - more ghosts that were in, and soon would be of, the machine. Talented designers, each with fifteen years experience, they aspired to more than the beauties, but to less than the breathtaking requirements of their new client.

Though they were hesitant before such a complex of emotions, they were enthusiastic at the prospect of transforming a heretic - even if it was by his own design. The irony of Tyler's wish was that Imago could not but take it seriously, since by its successful execution they would debunk the assertion that there were human yearnings they could not satisfy. The corporation would engineer this pretence of its own rejection and furnish Tyler with a paradise that rejected paradise, for only by conceding such a victory, could it defeat and thus possess him.

Far into the future that men had long since denied themselves, the vitrified contents of the decayed membrane tumbled down onto the Pacific littoral, where their cubic forms were rounded by sea and sand into glassy boulders. Few of these objects strayed far from the coastline and most were heaped up at the high watermark, like an informal breakwater. Each carried a creature, as in a prized drop of amber, and in their number and perfection the blocks could have comprised the dumping ground of a race of giants, who had abandoned their literacy and left all their paperweights in one place.

Though the membrane had crumbled, this could not be said of the true causeway to the future that had been laid down by the giant corporations. Behind the low and transparent forms that dominated the beach, there soared a far greater number of gleaming but opaque, polygonal shapes. They crowded together as though the stone figures of Easter Island had had the power to reproduce themselves, yet for all their shocking regularity these figures bore no impress of humanity. Descendants of the glass curtained towers of the Quaternary, they had risen higher and grown closer, their shapes the consequence of having eliminated all the space that had lain between them. They had colonized the land in the manner of a climax vegetation -

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vertiginous like giant redwoods yet as implacably conjoined as stromatolites in a primitive sea.

At certain places along the beach there lay isolated glassy tombs that had rolled down from the breakwater like pieces of ice calved from a glacier. One straddled the tidemark and was part draped in kelp, which hung dark and shriveled like a rotted wreath. Inside, Tyler lay staring – his blue eyes, unseeing worlds within the great unconscious arc of the sea and sky. In a curious spasm, or perhaps as a mark of liberation, he had opened them at the moment of death.

A small, horse-like creature foraged hoof deep in the surf. Beautiful but retrograde, it looked like an illustration from a treatise on equine evolution. It sniffed at Tyler's vitreous shroud before tugging at the festoons of kelp, which then fell at its feet – an unexpected bounty which startled rather than appeased it. It snorted and shook its head, before trotting off up the beach to where its fellows were gathered together.

Tyler's eyes were angled up at one of the towers which lay at the edge of this global climax. Its free faces jutted out towards the sea, like an arrow pointing the way.

Rising up one of those faces was a cradle, superficially akin to that which Tyler had seen an age before. This one carried no men though, and it cleansed the tower by scraping off the thinnest of layers of glass, in an operation as divorced of conscious direction as a fly rubbing its hind legs together. Yet like so many autonomic functions, this one was of great importance, for the play of the sun on the epidermis of the corporate organism powered the creatures beneath it. These microscopic machines laid down the shell without, and the sclerotic heart within, together with a whole vestigial architecture of staircases and elevator shafts, each like an appendix – becoming smaller and smaller with every new

generation of towers.

Imago grew its exoskeleton slowly and asexually, like a brain coral increasing its girth. And as the coral housed its soft and ever mutating bodies, so the corporation held captive the pliable dreams of the dead, such thoughts and feelings being endlessly spliced to produce new un-lived lives – an hermaphroditic exchange between the once imagined and the never to be. All were replayed within Imago's fruiting bodies; fully, constantly and without consequence, in a language whose meaning had long been forgotten.

Once high and in its way holy, Isaksson's suite now lay within the darkened root of a mature tower. The stony humans in their niches had been doubly petrified beneath their own veneers of glass – covered by the drip dripping of a new history destined to remain unread. Even the captain, savant and collaborator, the friend and the enemy at the gates, had disappeared beneath the invisible waves. For when all the dying had been done, what need of a priest, or a ferryman? Now all that remained was that place of requiem for the world of truth, lies and friction – an upturned boat; a prehistoric canoe within an unseen cabinet.

And somewhere within nowhere, as an un-lived and undying memory, as a dream within a dream, Tyler walked with Renna. Their talk was full of hope and as they looked up at the clouds, so infinite in their variety as to be beyond replication, he told her, in a voice cracked with emotion, that some great and all encompassing purpose lay above and beyond them all.

When not digging holes in the ground looking for bones, archaeologist David Rawson spends some of his free time hunched over sheets of blank paper... This is his second Focus story.

Miracle, Eldar's World

Steve Sneyd

it took all we had
and more, debts to forever
to repay – gladly, though, paid

as promised, alien technicians did
no more damage than unleash
monster storms that day; we

deep-cellar-cowered, emerging to find promised
result achieved in full, rotation
stoppage total, new-fixed terminator demarking

exactly our planet's chasmic frontier
between Good us and Evil them;

daily we rejoice, give thanks

to God who brought wise
glitter beings here to help
at price we could just

pay that never again His
red sun eye have to
shine on affronting benighted unrighteous –

if They should prove repentant
the glitterers will sell us
mirrors will sweetly shine our

light though faint on Them –
till then, their longed-for salvation,
praise Him whose justice done







Our clans fought throughout the aeons until he and I were the only survivors. No friends, no family. All we had left was each other—locked in an everlasting cycle of warfare, a ring of hatred. After our last battle Grarn ran wounded, searching for someone seething with passion he needed to feed on to survive. He found Susan. But in his haste he failed to notice that she also contained the melancholy that would sustain me.





Interview



This issue – Stuart Young: you've seen *Rings*, now meet the author...

Stuart – please tell us a little about yourself.

I was born in 1973. I live in Essex. And I work in a mental health community home which people always assume is really exciting but it isn't.

My first short story collection *Spare Parts* was published last year by Rainfall Books. Last year I also had a story published in *The Mammoth Book of Future Cops*. I've had a few comic strips published in mags like *Usher*, *Legend*, and *SF Revolution Comics*. Hopefully my eBook *Shards of Dreams* will be out this year. It's a collection of short fantasy stories from Double Dragon Publishing. Until recently I wrote a comics column called *Words and Pictures* for The Alien online but the site had to be downsized and the columns were one of the things to go. All my old columns are still up there but I don't get to write any new ones. Sobs!

Would you say you wrote in any particular genre, or are you all for blurring the lines between the various speculative fiction styles?

Oh, blurring the lines definitely. Nothing against traditional genres but I tend to operate in a kind of nexus between SF, fantasy, crime, and horror. Sometimes I lean more one way, sometimes another, depending what mood I'm in. And sometimes I lean so far that I end up smack in the middle of a particular genre.

Still, when people pick up my stories ideally I don't want them to say, "Stuart Young, oh he's an SF author" or, "Stuart Young, oh he's a horror author." I want them to say, "Stuart Young, oh he's good."

Much of your short fiction seems to have a theme of love – love lost, love betrayed, love exploited. In many respects, these aren't what we'd think of as traditional horror stories. Explain yourself, man!

I describe *Spare Parts* as tales of love and death. It wasn't planned that way – all but one of the stories had been previously published elsewhere – it just worked out that all the stories that were chosen touched upon those subjects.

I suppose it's just that love is this glorious joyful feeling – it's so powerful that many religions cite it as the guiding force of the universe – and yet it's also this fragile emotion that can so easily be shattered, turning to bitterness and disillusionment. That twisting of something pure and beautiful, making it dark and depraved – the end result contains an obscene beauty, an aesthetic despair, that in many ways represents the heart of true horror.

At least that's what I said when I phoned up Steve Wright's Love Songs.

Do you write much science fiction? And how cool was it to be in 'The Mammoth Book of Future Cops'?

I'm toying with the idea of putting together a SF collection. But I'm not sure at this point whether it might be best for me to bring out another horror collection first. Plus there's the problem of establishing some sense of overall tone for the SF collection. Because most of the stories were written for separate markets they have different tones – some of them are comedies, whilst others are very bleak, in the same mould as my *Future Cops* story. That was my attempt to do a SF story with a kind of Frank Miller/Jim Thompson/Andrew Vachss *noirish* vibe because the working title for the anthology was *The Mammoth Book of Future Noir* and the guidelines were really pushing for sex and drugs and violence.

Receiving the acceptance for *Future Cops* was fantastic. I couldn't believe one of my stories was published alongside work by Philip K. Dick and Joe Haldeman. I was convinced I'd received someone else's acceptance letter by mistake.

Comics: books for illiterates or a higher art form?

Depends who's doing them. At the top end of the scale comics can combine the best aspects of prose (the interior experience of the characters) and the best of film/TV (strong visual narrative) and throw in some things which are unique to comics. At the bottom end of the scale, even if they're technically proficient, they may not have much substance to them. Not that there's anything

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wrong with that *per se*, sometimes it's nice to read something purely on an entertainment level. Besides, it's the same as reading prose; kids start with simple stuff and work their way up.

In fact I know people who can't read comics — they can't understand them — because they never read them as a kid. They don't know which order to look at the pictures or which order to read the captions and speech balloons. And they can't fill in the gaps between the pictures. They see a picture of a man sitting in a lounge followed by a picture of the same man walking along a street and they don't think, "Oh, he's decided to go for a stroll" they think, "Why is there a street running through the middle of the lounge?"

Surely the captions would make things like that clear?

I'm told some people refuse to read the captions in comics, they only look at the pictures. So obviously they're missing out on large chunks of the story. Particularly if the captions are describing something that's happening in a scene that *isn't* been being shown by the pictures (the comics equivalent of split-screen, letting the writer tell two stories simultaneously). In that instance those readers are definitely short-changing themselves.

So is there nothing the writer and/or the artist can do to make the comic easier to read?

Generally speaking comics are read left to right, top to bottom the same as prose. Drawing the pictures in box-like grids similar to newspaper strips makes it easier for non-comics readers to follow. But over the years artists have developed all these weird and wonderful panel shapes that sprawl across the page, allowing them to draw scenes from fancy angles and create different emotional effects. For example, a panel showing a character's shocked face might have jagged edges to emphasise their shock.

In theory the pictures are composed in such a way as to draw the reader's eye across the page in the correct order but the more elements that are introduced the harder it is to guarantee this will work. If you've got weird-looking panels going up, down and across the page; captions and speech balloons floating inside and outside of the panels; not to mention sound effects scattered all over the place, it can be pretty confusing for a first time reader.

I think if you look at most of the comics that have found success outside of the core comics fandom (*Watchmen*, *Dark Knight Returns*, *Maus*, *Ghost World* etc) they all utilise some form of box-like grid for the panels and most of them lean towards minimal captions and sound effects. I'm not saying that's the only reason they were successful but it probably didn't hurt.

Have you ever been tempted to illustrate one of your own stories?

Tempted, yes but I've never gone through with it, not since I was a teenager. My anatomy's weak, my draftsmanship awful, I have no concept of light and shade, and my use of perspective is non-existent. Bob Covington and Dave Bezzina who did the artwork for *Spare Parts* keep telling me about the artists who have influenced them, like Frank Frazetta, Al Williamson, Joseph Clement Coll etc. So I'm looking at all this beautiful black and white artwork by Bob and Dave and all these other artists and I'm, "It's not fair! I wanna draw!"

The most I tend to do artwork is to sometimes sketch out the story with stick figures just to get an idea of whether what I'm asking the artist to draw is actually practical. I should do that more often really because it's very easy to write something like, "Do a shot of someone standing 10 miles off in the distance. Oh, and remember to show the bit of cabbage that's stuck in their teeth."

Isn't it frustrating then to have this great story, and for the want of an artist, it goes unwritten?

Oh definitely. Last year I wrote a mini-series called *Seppuku* for Engine Comics. It's set in feudal Japan so I spent months reading up on Samurai and death poems and Zen and stuff. I hand in the script, the editor loves it, he's got an artist who wants to draw the story, we're good to go.

And then the artist pulls out.

Aaaarrghhh!!!!

It should still go ahead at some point but the waiting is a killer.

And as Michael Moorcock once told me (excuse me while I pick up that name I just dropped) it's possible to turn a comic script into a prose story if you need to take it to a different market. Although obviously you have to adapt things to fit in with the different medium.

How do you break into the comics market? Is it a case of writing for the Americans, or is there an indigenous industry?

Okay, let me preface this by saying that so far I've only been published by small press comics publishers. There's probably lots of ways to break into the professional market that I don't even know about.

Talk that, 2000AD is the big UK market. The way to get in with them is to submit a 5 page *Future Shocks* story. If they accept a few of those you might get a crack at an ongoing serial. And from there you might get one of the big US companies Marvel or DC to notice you. Other big US companies like Image or Dark Horse will take a look at your pitches even if you're a complete beginner. Whether they actually publish your work is another matter.

Over the last few years getting published in an indie comic has been a good way to impress the larger companies, they get to see what you can do without having to risk any money on you. This is how people like Brian Michael Bendis and Judd Winnick got noticed. (Actually Winnick also starred in a reality TV show which raised his profile quite a bit.) I've heard that recently indie work isn't such a good way to impress the big companies as it used to be. But it's probably still worth a try if you can't get any professional gigs. At the very least it gives you a chance to hone your skills.

So surf the Net for comics companies and check the classifieds in *Comics International*.

Or you could always do a Michael Chabon and write a Pulitzer Prize winning novel proclaiming your love of comics and then wait for the big companies to offer you work ...

How would you pitch a project to say. Dark Horse?

First off I'd check out the Dark Horse website because I know they have very specific guidelines on how they want scripts laid out. The same goes for any other comics company; check their website 'cos you never know when they're going to get picky over a certain aspect of the submission process. 2000AD for example like to see an ultra-short prose synopsis at the front of a *Future Shocks* submission so they can check out whether your basic plot is sound without having to plough through the entire script.

So what are some of the different ways of writing a comic?

Paradoxically, unless a company specifies a particular method you can write a script pretty much any way you like so long as people can understand it.

That said, there are three basic methods people tend to use.

(1) Full script. You break the whole story down into pages, panels, description, dialogue captions etc. For example:

PAGE 1

PANEL 1

Interior of a sleazy bar. A real dive, all shadows and grime. The kind of place that even the cockroaches look like they want to get out of, go somewhere nice and clean and take a shower. Man slouches over the bar, a shot glass and a bottle of whisky by his hand. He has 'loser' written all over him. The bartender eyes him with gruff concern.

BARTENDER: Don't you think you've had enough?

(2) Plot first. You write down the plot, give it to the artist and let them decide the best way to draw it. Then when they've completed the artwork you write the dialogue to fit in with what they've drawn

(3) Screenplay format This combines the previous two methods. You write the whole story - dialogue, description etc -- but you leave it up to the artist to decide how to break it up into a visual narrative. Basically this is full script but without the page and panel tags.

Who are the writers and illustrators you admire the most?

Prose-wise I'd say Joe R. Lansdale, Stephen Hunter, Douglas Adams, Greg Egan, Alfred Bester, and John Connolly.

Comics writers include Neil Gaiman, Alan Moore, Frank Miller, Garth Ennis, Brian Michael Bendis, Chris Claremont, Grant Morrison, and Warren Ellis.

Artists that spring to mind are Mike Mignola, Frank Miller, John Buscema, and John Cassady. And there's people like Adam Hughes, Frank Cho, and Frank Frazetta where I haven't seen enough of their comics work to judge their storytelling skills but I love their pinup work.

I'm also really into Bill Watterson's *Calvin And Hobbes* at the moment. It's amazing the stuff he used to pull off in a mainstream newspaper strip. Gags, satire, different art styles, different story genres; it's pretty incredible.

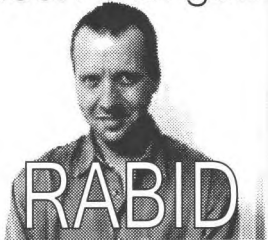
What next for Stuart Young?

I've got a novella of religious/philosophical horror under consideration right now. And it's fingers crossed that *Seppuku* finds an artist. As I said earlier I'm torn between trying for a horror collection or SF collection (in an ideal world I'd find a publisher for both). I'm also knee-deep in occult/religious research at the minute which will hopefully lead to a novel, although it's possible that the project will splinter into an array of short stories.

So there's lots of things going on, it's just a question of seeing which projects come to fruition.

Stuart Young has had stories published in various magazines and anthologies. His debut collection *Spare Parts* received rave reviews. He has been described as "One of the best young writers working in Britain today". Although that description isn't used nearly as often as he would like. (Only once so far.)

Neal Asher gets



SF archaeology

The idea that old is bad and new is good is one that permeates some quarters of our culture and sees its expression in the New Labour verses the 'forces of conservatism' in the political world. The former seems intent on destroying anything old even when having nothing better to replace it, the latter wants to hang onto the outmoded even when something better is available. But before anyone switches off, I'm not going to get into a rant about all that – this magazine isn't big enough – I'm going to look at it as applied to science fiction.

For many, SF has to be primarily new and innovative. Now, while I agree that SF should open our eyes to possibilities never seen before (though that is by no means all), I also feel it should never close our eyes to the eminently likely.

Some while back I produced a story in which I named an android manufacturing company 'Cybercorp', and was told the name was nothing new. But being much used in fiction, is that name less or more likely to be used in fact? Already we are coming out the other side of rebranding for the sake of it. Consignia is now once again the Post Office and most people know that Corus really means British Steel. Of course I could have named my company Epsilon, Floogle Bugler Ltd or Rumbatious Pumpwhistle, but I came up with the Cybercorp in the same way as many company names are formed (when advertising executives are not becoming 'creative' and disappearing up their own fundaments): Microsoft, Vodaphone, Telecom, Railtrack – simple basic and descriptive. But my real contention here is that though something may be old hat, that doesn't make it bad, wrong or unlikely. I know it's a distasteful prospect for some, but it is quite possible that sometime a company will be formed and it'll be called Robotics Inc. Though, going off at tangent

here, the most likely name, for a future manufacturer of androids, is Honda.

Zap guns and rocket ships (or squids in space) are what SF is all about, apparently. I can take issue with that straight away 1984 certainly isn't and, despite what Jo Brandt might think, it's classic SF. Other books in the genre that don't fall under that supposedly derogatory description: *The Time Machine*, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, *Frankenstein*, *Half-Past Human* (T J Bass), *Hawksbill Station* (Silverberg) ... I'm probably preaching to the converted here. However, what's wrong with zap guns and rocket ships? Certainly the terms themselves are clichés, but what about the ideas and the reality behind them? Must they be abandoned because they are no longer innovative?

Many years ago the American military asked Congress if they could test a ground-based laser for knocking out satellites (refused). Microwave beam weapons were employed during the Gulf War to screw Iraqi communications. The laser has been in use for a ages and now, in the process of being developed, is a laser that uses no wires but a beam of plasma – the utterly clichéd SF stun gun. Even my neighbour, working years ago for Marconi, was developing specialist transformers for powering military lasers. All zap guns, all real. As for the rocket ships ... well erm, there's this thing called the space shuttle, a couple of years ago the first ion drive was tested in space, there are plenty of contenders for the \$10 million prize for putting a privately-funded craft up into space (twice in a limited period to prove it's a viable proposition), there's the prospect of many more missions into the solar system, rocket ships have put two robots on Mars. I won't go on.

Only writers of utterly dystopian futures of technological collapse think zap guns and rocket ships won't figure in them. To ignore these supposed old clichés of SF makes about as much sense as ignoring trees because they have too often been used in fiction. It is plain wrong to discount something because it is old and well-used. Things, in general, become that way because they work, because they are right, and because no one has thought of a plausible alternative. New doesn't mean good or right and old doesn't mean bad or wrong, they just are what they are.

Cowl (reviewed in Vector#234) is out: SF with dinosaurs. Joy!

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