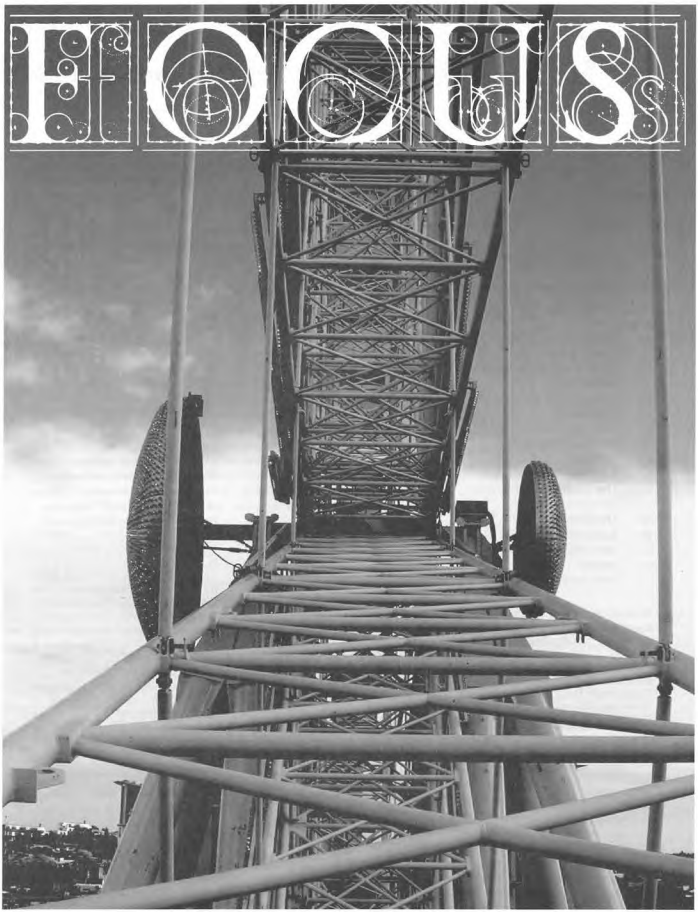
FOCUS



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Issue 48
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About the cover

The Gateshead Eye was admittedly, not as big as the one in London. But theirs didn't overlook the Tyne, and ours did...

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 ***no longer*** takes fiction. But we do need high-quality poetry with a genre subject or bias; I will look at longer-form poetry. I will also consider stand-alone comic strips up to 4 pages. 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 and photoshopped images.

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 2006

Pedantry

A new-look Focus, packed with genre goodness: Steven Baxter telling us of his influences and thought-processes, Jetse de Vries giving us the inside track on how editors see submissions, Terry Jackman on the excellent Orbiter writing groups – and if I might add my own twopennyworth, they're worth the admission price on their own, Gail-Nina Anderson on how to lose context and perhaps find it again, and Neal Asher on the nonsense spouted by literary critics regarding our beloved science fiction and fantasy. Ken MacLeod's piece on political systems is a must-read.

There's some excellent and thought-provoking poetry, too (especially Steve Sneyd's *A purpose come to being*, which is quite beautiful).

Morden Towers is currently inundated with new science fiction books, courtesy of the Arthur C. Clarke awards. As well as the usual suspects (MacLeod and Asher, Hamilton and Anderson) there are some interesting submissions from the independent presses – still time, contact Paul Kincaid – and from non-traditional sf publishers, Bloomsbury, Faber, and Scribner, from authors who wouldn't normally identify themselves as part of the 'Squids in Space' brigade.

Some fanboys and girls might decry their efforts as literary types becoming sf wannabes; but they get the same criticism from their peers who accuse them of slumming it in the sfnal gutter. I think (whilst the sniping is usually tongue-in-cheek) we need to judge each book on its merits, on how the story is told.

Fresh blood is necessary to revive the genre, or it becomes too self-reverential and introverted. We suffer from an outbreak of 'movements', espousing one particular strand of speculative fiction as the One True Way. But I can honestly say that I've never seen sf in such diversity or depth – and the best of them are simply brilliant.

Gateshead
October 2005

Beginning the gift with the word

Steve Sneyd

altho such shortlives
eyeblinks against us
evidence is they nonforget
down hundreds generations

precise instance this one
holy book content precis
beamed now into wholemind
home and all colonies

clear see demands gloats
when occurs fall of
Babylon great city wicked
not pure as earthscratcher

tribe of desert edge observe
now analysed timeline is in
their planetspin calendar
well plus 2000 orbits

hear we have beetle-armoured
tribe claims mind-faithful
to words of bookwriter tribe
from over far seas

is camped on ruin of was
this same Babylon is grinding
under machine treads even
least remnant brick of

is concrete over is to do
to uttermost what book said
is recommendation destroy
such pitiless destroyers now

quick before get off planet
come our way find we build
gardens floating in sky
towers to each moon blind

tribe memory mistake our world
city BBLN born again named
target here now beam evidence
such can't defuse harmlessise

demand take out take down
threat without end seal
under tombshell all one desert
pure dead as book's purest wish

Ahasuerus On Mars, a long SF poem by Steve Sneyd is available from Atlantean Publishing, 38 Pierrot Steps, 71 Kursaal Way, Southend-on-Sea, Essex, SS1 2UY

Fractal Futures: The Background to the *Destiny's Children* Series

Stephen Baxter

As I write I'm putting the finishing touches to *Resplendent*, which is (in the noble tradition of Douglas Adams) the fourth book in my *Destiny's Children* trilogy.

This series, published in the UK by Gollancz and in the US by Del Rey, is about the possibilities of human evolution. The first novel *Coalescent* (2003) is set in the present day, with the hero George Poole uncovering a human 'hive' in the catacombs of Rome. *Exultant* (2004) is set 25,000 years in the future, when humanity is locked in a galactic war. *Transcendent* (2005) follows up both the previous books, as George Poole's nephew Michael deals with climate-change disasters in the near future, amid an intervention from a far future beyond the Galaxy war. *Resplendent* (2006) is a 'fix-up' of short fiction (up to novella length) set against the background of this future history.

Where did this series come from, and how did it end up in its final form?

The answer is complicated; there were many inputs. But one starting point is Australia, which I visited in 1999 for the Melbourne worldcon. I was very struck by my first one-to-one with a 'roo in a nature park north of Melbourne. Close to they seemed extraordinary, with those remarkable levered back legs. To my (non-biologist's) eye kangaroos were examples of alternative bio-engineering, like aliens from the imagination of Niven, Vinge or Jack Cohen.

Of course kangaroos and the rest of the native fauna evolved differently from 'us' because of Australia's long isolation from the other continents. Such experiences gave me a wonderful sense of deep time, and of the reality of evolution. (One outcome of this inspiration was to be my novel *Evolution* (2002).)

Another input was a visit to Japan in 1997 for a convention there. I'm lucky enough to be sold in many countries, and without wishing to stereotype, I've found that different national markets respond to different types of book. The French, for instance, liked the alternate-history politics of *Voyage* (1996). The Japanese, though, seemed to like the super-science of my earlier *Xeelee* sequence, from *Raft* (1991) to *Ring* (1994), and the fix-up collection *Vacuum Diagrams* (1997). I always wondered if the Japanese felt they were already living in the near future compared to Europe and America. My Xeelee sequence, which began with my very first published fiction, *The Xeelee Flower* (Interzone 1987), had been fruitful for me, but by the time I'd completed *Vacuum Diagrams* I'd come to feel enclosed by the whole thing, tied down by my own continuity. But the kindly enthusiasm of the Japanese fans made me think again.

In the Xeelee chronology humanity expands out from Earth into a universe chock-ful of alien life and cultures, in the manner of Niven's *Known Space*, perhaps. The story simplifies as we become dominant, save for one foe: the aloof and supremely powerful Xeelee. At last we fall back, and after a million years we are defeated, our last survivors imprisoned in a bubble universe.

The earlier material had told the story of the beginning and the end of this saga. But now I began to think about the 'middle bit'. How could mere humans actually fight an interstellar war? For one thing, every FTL starship is also a time machine, an awkward consequence of special relativity. I don't believe this has been handled adequately before. I drew on my evolutionary speculations too. Even with FTL technology, war fronts spanning thousands of light years would surely translate into engagements lasting thousands of years. The human species is only a hundred thousand years old; if it lasted long enough, surely the war itself would become an evolutionary pressure. Perhaps in such a war the ultimate form of humanity would be the child soldier.

So I started to try to figure out in more detail how humanity's rise and fall could come about, and how humanity might be shaped in response. After a couple of months I began to carve out specific ideas for short stories, the first being *Cadre Siblings* (Interzone, 2000), the start of the sequence of stories that would result finally in *Resplendent*. For me nothing crystallises ideas so well as actually writing something down, and the short fiction let me feel my way into a complicated universe.

Meanwhile, however, I was gathering other ideas. I try to keep my mind open to a range of inputs, for you never know where an idea is going to come from or where it might lead you. In this case I attended a rather heavyweight conference on human evolution in London, at which one speculative paper described the Catholic Church as a hive(!). Well, one manifestation of a hive, as daughters give up their own chance of reproducing to sustain their mothers' babies, is skewed reproductive

strategies, and there are certainly plenty of those in the Church ... The notion struck me particularly as I was born a Liverpool Catholic, and though I'm now lapsed I remain fascinated by the Church and its implications.

Of course hive minds have been done before, from HG Wells's Selenites in *The First Men in the Moon* (1901) to the Borg of *Star Trek*. But I quickly learned that the sociobiologists' explanations of hives in nature have moved on a lot over the last few decades. And I read up on modern ideas of 'emergence', in which, like ants in their colonies, we humans too are all embedded in mass, mindless systems, from traffic jams to the economy, which arise out of our individual decisions and actions, but are out of control of any of us. These developments hadn't been covered (as far as I knew) in sf to that point, and I felt it was time to visit the hives once more. I began to consider a book describing the survival of an early-Christian hive from Roman times to the present day. This would have more of the feel of a horror novel, I thought, compared to the space-operatic glitter of my Xeelee war idea.

'But is redemption achievable, no matter how advanced your technology?'

And then (with apologies for the name-dropping) out of the blue I was contacted by Sir Arthur C Clarke, with whom, in parallel to all this, I was developing ideas for our *Time Odyssey* collaborative series. On 27 January 2001 Clarke sent me a portion of a letter from Olaf Stapledon to JBS Haldane (!), dated 1945:

> Your utopia is a very exciting one. Why, though, must the intelligent animals forget the brutality of the past? I want everything to be fully remembered, everything to be fully cognized ... For me the final utopia is not simply the thing for which past misery is a necessary means, that when it is reached the past may be forgotten. The final utopia *must somehow redeem the past* [my emphasis], or else be something less than utopia. How it can do so I naturally don't know, but at least it must be aware of the past, so that the past can at least be redeemed in the utopia's awareness, as a valued part within the past-present-future (or eternal) whole.

Clarke wrote:

> Dear Stephen – This phrase [emphasised] haunts me – does it give you any ideas?'

It certainly did, as redemption was another echo of my Catholic past. (In fact Stapledon himself dramatised this idea to some extent in his *Last and First Men*.)

This was another piece that fit into my slowly developing thinking about my still-nebulous project. What could be the motivation of an arbitrarily advanced culture of highly evolved humans? If you have it all and can do anything, what could you possibly want? It seemed to me that Stapledon's notion of a striving for redemption gave me a starting point.

But is redemption achievable, no matter how advanced your technology? It would surely be morally vacuous for an advanced civilisation to 'wipe out' the past. Likewise producing copies of individuals who live 'perfect' versions of their lives (as in physicist Frank Tipler's 'Big Crunch' heaven) is surely meaningless because the suffering of the originals is still 'out there' somewhere. In Christianity Christ 'is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world' (1 John 2). But there has been a two-thousand-year debate about what exactly Christ's atonement meant, indeed what was the meaning of His death. (This old controversy was revived recently in the reaction to Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*.)

In the middle of 2001 I began to pull all this together into a proposal for a series of books to be called *Homo Superior*. The three books would be three possible outcomes of the human evolutionary future, but not set in a single universe. The first, now called *Coalescent*, set in the present and past, was about hive minds surviving from ancient Rome: our future as drones. The second, *Exultant*, was the Galaxy war set in my Xeelee universe: our future as child soldiers. And the third, *Transcendent*, was about a highly evolved but flawed mass mind of the far future trying to achieve redemption by meddling with the past – that is, our present. Why a series? The ideas behind these novels, while different from each other, were all expressions of a common root, an interest in the possibilities of evolution. I suspect series of novels are popular in sf precisely because they give you a framework wide enough to look at big ideas from many angles, and there can be few bigger ideas than human evolution.

I worked on this proposal during a signing tour of the UK for that year's published novel, *Manifold: Origin*, and in the middle of drafting the next year's novel, *Evolution*. This is the way it goes; as it generally takes a year from submission of a manuscript to publication, you always find yourself working on many projects at once, and ideas and themes from one project inevitably, it seems to me, overlap into the next.

Amid the mucking-about with contracts,

publishers and agents that followed (I'm always happy to achieve a sale, of course) it emerged that the American marketeers didn't like *Homo Superior* as a title, for they imagined mid-westerners would think it had something to do with homosexuality. (I'm not making this up.) We bounced around alternatives and *Destiny's Children* was their choice, even though I felt it was a bit lame, and was worried I might get sued by Beyonce Knowles.

So I began working on the first of the novels, *Coalescent*, in 2002. There's no cut-off point at which inputs and new ideas stop flowing, and as I started to drill into this novel the deeper thinking and new research reshaped my ideas. I've always had a certain fascination with Rome and Roman Britain. Perhaps this was a naïve romanticism about the fall of a great civilisation in the past: the story of Rome is more complicated, of course. But the mythos of the fall is part of its legacy. So I began to work that in as an element in the drama. As I researched further I visited locations: there's no substitute for actually seeing a place if you can. So we visited Rome, and locations in Britain as well, such as Verulamium (St Alban's) and the London Wall, a fascinating walk.

'I suspect series of novels are popular in sf precisely because they give you a framework wide enough to look at big ideas from many angles.'

My main rescoping, though, was a decision to set all three of my novels in a single timeline, that of the Xeelee universe, so that now Books 1 and 3 would be respectively a prequel and sequel to Book 2, *Exultant*. For one thing I wanted to contrast this new series with my Manifold books which had used a similar parallel-universe strategy. And I had decided a single timeline would give greater resonance: while George Poole investigates the fall of Rome, a cataclysm in the past, he finds hints of greater cataclysms in the far future, to be developed in Books 2 and 3.

With the second book, *Exultant*, I was more explicitly revisiting my Xeelee universe. Human memory seems to have a series of cut-offs, which I've discovered as my career has (thankfully) lengthened. I may forget odd details of a book from a couple of years ago, but it's still 'mine'. A book from more than six or seven years ago, however, while of course I'll remember working on it, doesn't even feel like mine any more. So my earlier Xeelee material had the feel of an external input - as if, oddly, I was collaborating with a younger version of myself. But this helped the project, as incidents from the ancient history of the chronology became transmuted into myth, or the substance of religions. Michael Poole, a heroic but somewhat deranged engineer who features in the early material, is a descendant of the George and Michael Poole of *Destiny's Children*. Also I suspect some of my earlier stuff, produced as I was learning the craft, has a deep connection to my subconscious concerns, never a bad well to draw from.

More inputs came from thinking about the Second World War, which shaped the 1950s Britain in which I was born. I visited Bletchley Park. In the Churchill War Rooms in Whitehall I was struck by a wall map of the world studded all over by pin marks. That map showed that with 1940s technology they really had managed a war on a global scale; if that was possible maybe we could also rise to the 'challenge' of a galactic conflict. I have always responded to stories of heroism, and technological ingenuity under pressure. But personally I'm anti-war, I don't believe it's any way for an advanced civilisation to resolve its problems, and I'm greatly suspicious of our leaders' habit of using fear to control us. There are echoes of the Dambusters in *Exultant*, but Orwell is in there too. One speech I gave a military leader in a story in Resplendent came straight from Donald Rumsfeld.

When I came to *Transcendent* in 2004 I thought harder about the near future which was to be the arena for the far-future meddling. This section of the novel needed its own narrative, and I decided to tackle climate change, surely our greatest near-future threat, to be contrasted with galactic calamities in the further future. I'm depressed how much of the debate about climate change seems to veer from simple denial to a helpless listing of doomy possibilities. I wanted to be upbeat, to plot a way from now to an imagined 2047 in which we have managed a huge transition to a post-oil, low-carbon age.

These ideas were partly shaped by where I was living by now. We had moved from leafy but overcrowded Bucks to a rented house in a village called Ulgham in Northumberland, my wife's home county, where we were house-hunting for a permanent move. Ulgham is a classic relic of our petrol-obsessed economy. Once it was a self-contained agricultural community. Now there are no facilities but a pub, and everybody travels to church, school, shops. I saw that to survive the end of oil we are going to have to abandon the false

economies of this endless travelling and live more locally: a revival of a village culture. But I'm not fantasising a return to the Neolithic; with modern communications we can bring work and school to us, rather than the other way around. My 2047 vision is still utopian, however, because it is predicated on wise leadership from the US ...

Another ongoing input, incidentally, has always been ideas from the trunk: stories that didn't quite make it, but which nevertheless had elements worth revisiting. For example my novella *Mayflower II*, which won a BSFA award, drew on a never-published end-of-the-world story called *Custodian* I drafted when I was nineteen, while another early story about undying babies called *Planet of Immortals* was an input to my novella *Reality Dust*, and an end-of-the-sun story called *Twilight* fed the closing novella of *Resplendent*. A story called *The Ghost Pit* drew on a joky old piece called *Save Me, Captain Culpepper!* published in the small press, and another piece called *The Cold Sink* drew on ideas from a dodgy story called *The Glittering Caverns* published only in Germany. A failed pitch for a TV drama called *Virtuals*, from 1997, was another input into *Resplendent*. And so on. One tip I'd certainly give budding writers is never to throw anything away; these ideas and characters are yours to re-explore.

'But much more significant for each of us surely includes the type of landscape into which we're born, the point in history, the ethnic identity, the culture.'

Maybe the deepest input of all into this particular series was my childhood Catholicism. Authors are often asked what their influences are, the expected answers being a writer, a book, a movie, a TV show. But much more significant for each of us surely includes the type of landscape into which we're born, the point in history, the ethnic identity, the culture. And for me that culture was Catholicism. But if religion has shaped my sf, perhaps I'm not alone.

Adam Roberts' remarkable new survey *The History of Science Fiction* (Palgrave, 2005) takes as its framing narrative the idea that science fiction arose (or rather was revived from 'fantastic voyage' traditions dating back to antiquity) during the Reformation, when Protestantism ripped itself alien-like out of the chest of a horrified Catholicism, and that since then the genre has been shaped by a dialectic between rational and 'miraculous' poles.

This makes sense to me. Stapledon's *Star Maker* is about a quest for a supercosmic god outside the universe; works of Clarke's like *Childhood's End* and *2001* are about transcendence, godhood arising from within us. Even in comic-book mythologies you find Jesus-figures all over the place, not least Superman, the ur-hero himself. In an early episode of *Smallville* Clark Kent was 'crucified' in a repulsive high-school-hazing stunt; the writers of that smart show demonstrated they understood the deeper roots of their character. Even Doctor Who, in the final Tom Baker story *Logopolis*, 'died' in the process of defeating the Master, only to be resurrected (as Peter Davison).

Perhaps this religious dialectic lies at the centre of the genre's meaning because, long before sf, religions taught us to frame questions about the universe. For example the Fermi Paradox has much in parallel with the much more ancient conundrum of silentum dei, the 'Silence of God'. Bertrand Russell was once asked how he would respond to God if he were called to account for his atheism: Russell said he would ask God why He should have made the evidence for His own existence so poor. Perhaps the universe imagined by SETI enthusiasts, dominated by superior but invisible consciousnesses, really isn't so different from the Christian universe. The premises of all our religions may be wrong. But thinking about God will have served a profound purpose if it has been a kind of vast practice run, a training programme that has lasted millennia, to prepare us to deal with the real gods out there.

I think there's surely much truth in Adam's reading, though perhaps not the whole truth; nothing as complicated as sf can be boiled down to a single storyline. It certainly works for me. The whole of the Xeelee sequence is about a war in heaven, with we humans caught in the middle. And arguably you could see the three *Destiny's Children* novels as different searches for a vanished God.

While I was still working on the project, of course, the first books and stories began to appear. I was reassured that my struggle through this thicket of ideas had resulted in material that received good reviews and won a few awards, along with a few brickbats. Sometimes success is unexpected, however. I hadn't really anticipated the positive response to *Coalescent*, my first near-contemporary novel, and the most autobiographical, I suppose. I was pleased, but I realised now that the follow-up, the space-operatic *Exultant*, was

going to be a jolt for the readers. But by then it was too late to change horses.

Now, though *Resplendent* still has to go through its editorial process, and though I'm working on a new series of stories (called *Old Earth* and published by Analog) set in a still further Xeelee future, my *Destiny's Children* project is complete, and I'm working on new stuff. The process of developing ideas - my process anyhow at this stage of my career - seems messy and fractal. I'll focus on the needs of a single story or novel chapter which might take a day or two to draft, but which is set in the overlapping contexts of a novel, and of a series which spans several years' work, and indeed of my whole career, dating back to *The Xeelee Flower* – and even before, as elements of my background such as my childhood Catholicism find expression. Messy and fractal, but endlessly fascinating, and fun.

Stephen Baxter has two degrees, used to teach, and has now written shedloads of fiction and non-fiction (see box). Winner of the Philip K Dick award, a BSFA award, and many others, he now lives oop north. He is vice-president of the BSFA.

A selective Baxter bibliography

Space doesn't permit a full hagiography of Stephen's novels, novellas, short stories, collections and non-fiction. But here are some selected highlights.

The Time Ships, HarperCollins 1995 (UK), HarperPrism (US) 1996.
Traces, , HarperCollins April 1998 (UK). (short story collection)
The Light Of Other Days (with Arthur C Clarke), HarperCollins (UK) 2000, Tor (US) 2000.

The Xeelee Sequence:
Raft, HarperCollins 1991 (UK); Penguin Roc 1992 (USA)
Timelike Infinity, HarperCollins 1992 (UK); Penguin ROC 1993 (USA).
Flux, HarperCollins 1993 (UK), HarperPrism (US) 1995.
Ring, HarperCollins 1994 (UK), HarperPrism (US) 1996.
Vacuum Diagrams, short story collection, HarperCollins April 1997 (UK), HarperPrism (US) May 1999.

'The NASA Trilogy':
Voyage, HarperCollins Nov 1996 (UK), HarperPrism (US) 1997
Titan, HarperCollins August 1997 (UK), Harperprism Nov 1997 (US).
Moonseed, HarperCollins 1998 (UK), HarperPrism (US) 1998

Manifold:
Time, HarperCollins 1999 (UK), Del Rey (US) 1999.
Space, HarperCollins 2000 (UK), Del Rey (US)
Origin, HarperCollins 2001 (UK), Del Rey US 2002.
Phase Space, HarperCollins 2002 (UK) (story collection)

Destiny's Children:
Coalescent, Gollancz 2003 (UK)
Exultant, Gollancz 2004 (UK)
Transcendent, Gollancz 2005 (UK)
Resplendent, Gollancz 2006 (UK) (to be published)

Omegatropic, BSFA 2001 (non-fiction and fiction)

Orbiters: The Next Generation?

Terry Jackman

So what's an Orbiter?

Basically it's a group of about five writers who read and comment on each others' work with the intention of helping each other improve. It's free to members, you don't have to attend meetings, you work when and where it suits you. Groups can concentrate on short story, or novel, or mixed, and maximum length is by agreement too, usually 10-15,000 words per round. Experience varies; enthusiasm is constant; everyone benefits.

What do you have to do?

Easy. Just give others' work the attention you want them to give yours. In other words read carefully, and comment thoughtfully. Always be honest. Orbits are not mutual admiration societies, but a means to improve your writing. Be [reasonably] polite, and give reasons. It's surprisingly easy, because you pick it up from the rest.

Remember, even if you don't have work to send every time you will still be expected to read and comment, and to keep to the agreed time scale. Fair's fair.

What do you get in return?

Obviously you get comments on your writing, from several different viewpoints, to mull over and make use of as you see fit. For me, not

having to meet was good. I preferred anonymity. I could read the comments, get mad, calm down, and finally decide they were probably right - which took at least a week! - in private. [Yeah, wimp. I have toughened up since.] As said, Orbits aren't intended as ego-massagers. That would only make us all worse. But we don't like being told our point-of-view is off - again - however much we need it.

Other benefits? People sometimes don't realise till they join, but looking at other work-in-progress teaches you to assess your own, so the feedback part also helps your own writing, while sometimes other members can suggest a likely market.

And of course you're no longer alone. Others are experiencing the same thrills, and frustrations

Which Orbit is best for you?

Orbits started out postal. Here a mixed pack rotates, to each member in turn. You take out your previous draft and its comments sheets, comment on the rest, and add your next piece, aiming to send it on again in under two weeks. In my experience a postal Orbit takes around four months, sometimes more. You are asked to let the next person know when you are about to post on, so they know if it fails to arrive, and obviously you need a large letterbox or somewhere the postman can safely leave a thick envelope.

Since it's hard copy, there are usually agreed 'rules' on presentation. Favourites are Courier/Times New Roman and 12 pt [so we can all read it] and printing double-sided [to reduce weight and postage]. Single/double spacing is a variable, though page numbers etc are obviously a must. Sorry, hand-written drafts aren't welcomed [hard to read, and editors wouldn't even try].

Online Orbits are the newer option. The pilot has now had time to find its feet, and is confident there's room for more. While basically the same, the differences may help you decide which is best for you.

First, being online means distance, reliable post and postage costs become irrelevant. Any member in any country can link up, as long as they are writing in English.

Next, online Orbits don't have to rotate. They send out simultaneously, after which members have an agreed period - current favourite two months - to read and feedback their comments. Some people read onscreen; I prefer to print off, using 'scrap' paper, ie sheets with one side used up. Your choice.

Emailing has other results. Online Orbits can be more frequent than postal - say six times a year rather than three. This will suit writers who work faster, commit to their writing more, or are training themselves to meet deadlines, rather than just writing when they feel like it.

A group can also choose whether they see other peoples' comments. The pilot group opted not to so their feedback couldn't be influenced by the rests', though they sometimes throw points back for discussion later.

An interesting side effect is that where postal groups generally avoid marking the texts, Onliners frequently tag specific typos/ phrases, sending this 'marked copy' back to the writer alongside their general remarks. More detailed feedback becomes easier.

There are related practical considerations: letting people know if your email is about to change, or you will be unavailable for some time. Otherwise work is sent as an attachment in rich text format. This condenses, and also ensures everyone can receive it. [Not everyone uses Word, even editors.] And you are of course expected to protect yourself, and your fellow writers, from viruses etc.

Do Orbits work?

Definitely, and I've been in novel, short and mixed; postal and online. Only one group didn't help me a lot. Remember, each group is individual. Most will be great but occasionally you may feel something's not right for you. For instance your needs may alter, eg you start writing novel-length, so your shorts-focussed group now has trouble assessing for you. Or you need to go faster, or slower. Changing groups can be the answer, though I ought to say that if a second doesn't suit either it could be time to ask yourself why you joined. The best response from an Orbiter will be what makes you a better writer, not what makes you feel better. They're trying to let you see your work as others - editors included - might see it. All they ask in return is that you do the same for them. The fact you get to read all these new stories - maybe before they appear in print elsewhere - is hardly worth mentioning.

Terry Jackman is the online Orbiter co-ordinator. Contact details for both him and Gillian Rooke (postal Orbiters) are on the inside front-cover of Focus.
And yes, you have to be a BSFA member to be in an Orbiter!

Politics and Science Fiction

Ken Macleod

Earth has many states. Most of these have different systems of government. Some of them have different social systems. Earth is in this respect almost unique. Everywhere else the default is one government, and one social system, per planet. At least, that's the rule in SF.

When we look at the ancient and mediaeval worlds, we see if anything a greater diversity of forms of rule than we see today. In fantasy, where we might expect a wide play of fancy, we see nothing of the kind. There are good monarchies, legitimised by prophecy or ancient artifact. There are evil empires, usually in the east. There are barbarian tribes. Here and there, if we're lucky, there are city states ruled by merchant princes. There are plenty of exceptions - Pratchett, Pinto, Mieville - but that's the rule.

We can do better than that!

Let's start with SF. There, it's easy. All we have to do is junk the rule of one government per world. If you have a one-world government for a reason, that's fine. But let's stop making it the default. Even if a human settlement is derived from one colony ship (and why assume that, by the way?), there's no reason to assume that it'll stay united. In fact, there's every reason why it shouldn't, as the population expands and moves into new territories. The European settlements in North America existed for centuries as separate colonies before they became, with much upheaval, the United States.

If it's an alien planet, of course, there's even more scope for differentiation, yet here the one-world rule is more rigorously kept. All the more kudos to you if you break it.

If the social system or government isn't just background but central to the plot - to illustrate your pet political theory, say - there's a different rule to junk. That rule is that all foregrounded political systems work the way they're supposed to. This is true even if the way they're supposed to work is to *not* work (crush the human spirit etc etc). Just for a change, I'd like to see a libertarian writer depict a laissez-faire society with persistent social problems. I'd like to see a left-wing writer show a socialist society that isn't a utopia, but has real, nigh-intractable difficulties and internal contradictions (and not just, say, radio-borne viruses beamed at it by malevolent posthumans). I'd like to see the converse of these, as well, from the opposite (and other) authorial preferences.

With fantasy it's a little more complicated. So many plots, after all, turn on claiming rightful thrones or toppling dark lords that kingdoms and dominions can't be easily dispensed with. But there's no reason why these have to be simple. When your hidden princess at last ascends to her rightful throne, can she get away with relying on one or a few wise advisers? Mightn't she have to persuade a fractious parliament to come up with the money

Ones that haven't happened yet:

Adhocracy – coined by Alvin Toffler to describe non-hierarchical and temporary governance to a particular project

Corporatocracy – a favourite of sfnal dystopias where companies pay politicians to pass laws beneficial to themselves.

Demarchy – rule by citizens chosen by lot, rather like juries.

Geniocracy – rule by the above-averagely intelligent. Voting is restricted to smart people.

Kakistocracy – rule by incompetants. No, really.

Krytocracy – rule by judges' opinions.

Minarchism – where the role of the state is reduced to such a degree, reducing it further would result in anarchism. A favourite of libertarians.

Robotocracy – rule by intelligent robots.

Sociocracy – an extreme form of democracy where laws are passed by the consent of those people who have sat through the entire legislative debate, and thus 'informed'.

Technocracy – rule by technology, usually in the form of a centralised AI. The AI may be benign. It may not.

Xerocracy – rule by photocopying. Those in control are those whose disseminated ideas are adopted most widely. Found in 'critical mass' movements.

for the Defeat of the Dark Lord (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill? What if this parliament, like the real-world Polish Sejm, requires unanimous consent? Could her kingdom, like Poland, be in permanent peril of *just vanishing from the map*? Could there be a whole school of thought that holds that mere possession of the Blue-Sapphired Sceptre of Snazziness is not, in fact, the basis of legitimacy? That instead, a pilgrimage to the Convent of Extraneous Plot-Device must *precede* an acclamation by the knights of the Realm? Can the Dark Lord, meanwhile, run his vast domain with a handful of henchmen, terrified minions and lickspittle courtiers? Doesn't he need, at the very least, some plodding but reliable bureaucrats? To say nothing of an arms industry and scientific - or magic - research, all of which will need some genuine enthusiasts. And all of this complication doesn't just add depth and colour to the background - it opens up plot possibilities. Does the Dark Lord's armourer never think of expanding his export markets? Might he not stoop to taking money even from the Forces of Good?

'Mightn't she have to persuade a fractious parliament to come up with the money for the Defeat of the Dark Lord (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill?'

If you compare the map at the front of the standard fantasy trilogy with the maps in The Penguin Atlas of World History (for the Middle Ages, say) the contrast is striking. The almost fractal depth of mediaeval geographic complexity makes most fantasy maps look decidedly thin and unimaginative. A glance at the diagrams of state and social structures (for the various stages of the Roman Empire, for instance, or the mercantilist system) is likewise an eye-opener.

And with that opened eye, take a look down the right-hand pages, which give the chronology and the exposition. If that doesn't get your imagination working, nothing will. There are lots of cool names, too.

Never one to be scared of mixing political theory with fiction, Ken Macleod's latest epic is *Learning the World*. And everyone I know has said, 'cool title'

When The Time Comes

Alessio Zanelli

When I have ceased to watch the sun
go down and roll on the spine of the world,
plunge into the heap of our once passionate
hours;

when you have no more silent tears to shed,
no more sere remembrances to cherish,
no more private regrets to let die;

when the time comes
for you to open wide
your sea-born eyes—

you'll see me run atop the loftiest giants,
on towering cumulonimbuses adrift in the blue
swollen with our long-exhausted dreams.

Up there I'll be running alone forever,
no longer on dusty roads crowded with moody
ghosts
nor in the assuaging solitude the rain is used to
engendering.

No longer in the wake of infeasible desires.
Simply running on high nonstop far and wide.
Above your present but under your future eyes.

When the time comes—
I'll be eternally unseizable,
I'll be fast and graceful.

At last an absolute runner.

Alessio Zanelli is an Italian poet who has long adopted English as his artistic language and has published widely in literary magazines across the world. He is the author of three collections, most recently Straight Astray (Troubador Publishing, UK, 2005), and a featured author in the 2006 edition of Poet's Market.

Website: http://www.writesight.com/writers/Zanelli/

The Whittington Wassail, or: The importance of finding the sub-text.

Gail-Nina Anderson

"These fragments I have shored against my ruin..."

There's an awful lot of archaeology about at the moment, and some of it is a bit rum. Call me old-fashioned, but when I was a gal, an archaeology programme on the telly meant hairy men in Arran sweaters digging up fields. There was usually a lot of earth involved, and if things got really exciting, actual mud. Objects uncovered fell into two categories, "remains" and "artefacts". These were usually indistinguishable to the naked eye because of the obligatory covering of mud. The attentive viewer came away with the rewarding awareness that life in the past had consisted largely of twisted, rust-coloured metal and broken, mud-coloured pots. Simple, you see, not to say primitive.

'Every item has to be given immediate "human interest", which effectively means turning the past into a soap-opera.'

Nowadays, however, the popular presentation of archaeology involves less mud and more women, with beards remaining optional. It also engages in constant contextualisation, often veering into unashamed dramatisation. Every item has to be given immediate "human interest", which effectively means turning the past into a soap-opera. You've found pig bones in the grave of a middle-aged woman? Cut to atmospheric mini-drama of straggle-haired granny stirring the family stew-pot. Or steely-eyed warrior-priestess shaking the sacred war-rattle of the pig-cult. Or defenceless outcast pelted to death with bones of unclean swine. All beautifully realised, all highly memorable, all speculation.

It's not that I'm criticising the principle, you understand. Even in the absence of textual evidence, sensible speculation based on context and comparison can be illuminating. It's just that life isn't always sensible. The desire to interpret ignores the vital "just stuff" principle that governs so much of our lives. Sometimes an assembly of disparate objects really isn't a "ritual site" (well-known archaeological shorthand for "I don't know"). Sometimes it's just stuff.

With this in mind, I shall use my literary and interpretative skills to reconstruct for you a recent meeting of the Terrorscribes, a chummy little circle of small-press horror authors and enthusiasts. Our venue was a suburb of Chesterfield (which location alone should inspire several doctoral theses from students of 21st century history researching this aeons from now.) Partly by chance, partly because most of us were in a strange place, the day was full of memorable little incidents whose connections are oblique and origins obscure. Let's try to make "sense" of them.

It's around midday (ah-ha – always a potent time!) and having met at a railway station, we immediately decamp to the nearest pub and start drinking. This is lunchtime, so why aren't we consuming food? The alert archaeologist starts to follow our trail with the words "ritualised behaviour" forming in an imaginary thought-bubble. We adjourn to another pub, a process which takes over an hour and involves losing several participants along the way. Why yes – this must be some sort of test, a means of assigning rank perhaps as the travellers seek to arrive at the next stage of their mystic journey? (Well no – it's more a case of bad management on our part, plus an illustration of the effects of drinking on an empty stomach in the middle of a hot day.) I am one of the first to seat myself in this new location, and immediately begin to exercise my function as tribal shamaness of all things female by hearing a detailed account of someone's recent hysterectomy. (Or to put it another way, I fail to get out of the way fast enough.) I take one ritual draught of heady liquor from a vessel shaped like no other on the premises, but presumably it serves at once to elevate me to the required state of heightened awareness, for I drink nothing else except symbolically clear water. (That is, one glass of the muck from that wine box and I was on the wagon.)

As we, the strangers, sit in the shaded interior of the building, the locals gather outside to engage in a range of activities for which no meaningful term is available (i.e. why did no-one realise we'd chosen the pub's Family Fun Day?) An example of their inexplicability? Well, I do realise that by virtue of its material, a bouncy castle is unlikely to survive long enough to become an archaeological "find", but what if it did? In a couple of thousand years, who would be able to reconstruct the mentality which made, out of entirely inappropriate materials, a crude replica of a long-outmoded kind of defensive stronghold, then inflated it and

presented it as a temporary structure on which children were invited to bounce until they felt sick? Duhh?

The presence of celebratory foodstuffs would be fairly explicable, but the choice and range of them looks calculated to inspire some mind-numbing attempts at connection. Why, on a hot day, does a mobile cooking unit draw up and start selling what might kindly be described as chopped meat products in bread? Is there a reason why the pork-based ones are cylindrical while the beef-based ones are round and flat? Alongside the van with the hot-plate is another with a freezer, selling milk- and fruit-based frozen comestibles. Heat and cold – we're surely onto some seasonal reference here. Meat and bread, dairy and fruit – the major food groups of the western diet. Do I detect a celebration of plenty – or perhaps a propitiatory rite designed to ensure future supplies?

Eventually, lured by the sound of ersatz Meatloaf blaring from an al fresco karaoke machine, (try explaining that concept out of cultural context) I emerge from the dim pub, blinking in the sunlight, and engage in a ritual transfer of food. (I buy a carrot cake from one of the stalls, and present it to my lunchless drinking companions.) Now think about this – our future archaeologist identifies the carrot as a vegetable usually served as part of a savoury meal. But here a strange woman carries in triumph a sweet cake into which this most phallic of roots has been grated, and serves it to men who have partaken of various trance-inducing liquors. Thus the male principle is controlled. As if to demonstrate this, the men engage in a trial of skill by throwing vicious-looking darts towards a curiously marked board. They do this so spectacularly badly that it must be part of the game – they have become jesters, mocking the warrior role that society usually assigns them (i.e. the beer is catching up.)

The transactions between indoors and out, initiates and community, grow more frequent as the day progresses and come to centre on an offering table bearing a bewildering array of...stuff. A container of rabbit food, a bottle of British sherry, mercifully unnameable objects of knitted yarn whose colours surely betoken the ingestion of hallucinogenic substances. Each bears a number, non-sequential. Some are handed over to those who approach the table. Are sacrificial victims being chosen, or social roles assigned? A flame-haired stranger re-enters the pub in triumph – she has visited the stall and carried off a dwarfish red clay figure whose hat surely proclaims him to be a protective genius from a Mithraic shrine. Now we're getting somewhere! (Anna wins a terracotta gnome. We call him Rumpole in honour of the late Leo Mc Kern.)

As the sun goes down the group (now smaller, as the ordeals grow more demanding) progresses to a symbolically shared meal, the ritual nature of which becomes clear as some dishes are sent back to the kitchen three times. The idol Rumpole presides. The inner core of this hierarchical unit moves on to the courtyard of a nearby house, to complete by moonlight the processes begun under the midday sun. The strain is beginning to tell on the faces of shamans and acolytes alike, but a blood-like drink is poured lavishly (some of it actually into our glasses) and we must partake. (That is, we stagger to Lynn's back yard and continue boozing.) A priestess lights a multitude of candles, the holy felines roam at will amongst the devotees, and arcane texts are intoned aloud. (Go on – we're horror writers beating up a little atmosphere.) Libations are proffered to Rumpole by the esoteric process of holding his image upside down and dipping him into the sacramental liquids. As a dark red stain spreads down from his pointed headgear, no self-respecting historian could resist the words phallic, arousal, emission – or even castration. Rumpole is the concentrated essence of all those bearded, jovial figures whose remains characterise this strange society – Father Christmas, Colonel Saunders, Rolf Harris. A god of vegetative life, of seasonal death and renewal, the male principle anointed by female hands...(ok – the sensible reality is that we've reached that stage of inebriation where dwarf-dunking seems both hilarious and inevitable.)

'In a couple of thousand years, who would be able to reconstruct the mentality which made, out of entirely inappropriate materials, a crude replica of a long-outmoded kind of defensive stronghold?'

There's more, but after this the symbolism gets a bit fragmentary. Significance must be assigned to the breaking of the lustral bowl of gleaming porcelain and to the basket of dried flowers and cones sacrificially offered to the gods of the waters therein. (An accident in the bathroom). But what should we make of the other idol, the soft blue one whose three eyes surely betoken an inspirational visit long before from creatures not of this universe (Think *Toy Story* – "Be chosen!")

And how would you like to tie this all together, for a window of insight into a distant civilisation? Such a multitude of symbols, so many mystical libations, so disappointingly little mud… As the end credits roll on my imaginary documentary *Ritual in Whittington* a mocking voice-over (bearded, muddy) intones the mantra "Just stuff, you realise – just stuff."

Gail-Nina Anderson is a freelance arts lecturer and journalist, goth icon and expert on all things cryptozoological. A Dracula Society member, she conducts guided tours of Whitby, including its famous museum.

www.gail-nina.com

A purpose come to being

Steve Sneyd

I go first
for tests of stability
of humanity battery
of inkblot images
multichoices
reactions under truth drugs
so many more I can't remember
am told at last have
achieved sufficient
passmark levels in
all catagories
will be safe for me to change
will not make me
un in antihuman
whatever I become
now I can look at all
the possibilities offered
computerwise 3D alterimages
appear before me
what I could be become
would be criminal
offense worse than any alien
pornwatch even to see these
without sufficient stability
rating
horrible the indecision
even limiting my looking
to choices within my budget
precious savings of so many
drudge decades
still so many to see
take on elements of me
me of them before my eyes as
craziest funfair mirrors ah
but all so beautiful although
of course as I agreed in test
human is best still
how glorious to have

falcon wings narwhal horn
coil on coil of cobra
peacock tail catbody
porcupine panoply of
spikes megaelephant
tusks doesn't evn have
to be lifestill exists
could be extinct stegosaur armour
terrible tyranosaur body
I am dizzy now with
choice voices over
speakers demand decision
at last my selection
almost random did I
forget to say can also be
imagined creature is just
only just affordable very small
version of unicorn I am so
wonderful seeing myself at last
really so not simulation
let out into grassland
to find pool and maiden
will take my head into her
lap unafraid of sharp spike
before those hounds are loosed
halloo hallay to hunt me down
that end the other factor
kept the transformation price
inside my poor small range
ah worth the wonder though
of this small flowerswarded
time her soft her violet
breath her long hair
round me my eyes sweet
bed-warm her kind tears
gentlest rain I scarcely even
hear the faint far barks begin

The Write Fantastic: What's the Big Idea?

Well, according to the front of our leaflet, what we refer to as our 'mission statement', mostly managing to keep a straight face when we do so, goes like this:

The Write Fantastic is an exciting initiative by professional authors aiming to introduce fantasy fiction to readers who have yet to experience the genre. Its mission is also to show those who have stopped reading it, for whatever reason, the breadth and depth which exists today in fantasy writing.

Which we're very happy with, as far as a paragraph on the front of a leaflet goes. Obviously, there's a lot more to say.

The project has its roots in a convention. Not an SF&F event, but at the annual St Hilda's Crime and Mystery Conference, in August 2004. Juliet McKenna was talking to Margaret Murphy about the Murder Squad. This is a group of crime writers who have banded together to speak to libraries, literary festival, reading groups and just about anyone else who's interested, to promote crime fiction as a genre, and yes, obviously, raising the profile of their own work as an incidental bonus. Over the last five years, the Murder Squad have been increasingly successful, as libraries, literary festivals etc have proved far more amenable to a joint approach focusing on wider genre and creative writing themes than to individual mid-list writers pitching what can be misinterpreted as a desperate plea to flog their books. Indeed, the Murder Squad's success has led to other crime and mystery writers banding together in similar groups, such as the Unusual Suspects. This was all very interesting but what really got Juliet's attention was Margaret mentioning Chaz Brenchley was a Squaddie. As discerning readers will know, Chaz is also a fantasy author and as it happens, one of Juliet's pals.

So at the 2004 FantasyCon, the two of them mused in the bar on the possibility of doing something similar with other fantasy authors. Stan Nicholls, Anel (of The Alien Online website) and Anne Gay were asked for their opinions. As authors and/or ex-booksellers, everyone was well aware of the increasingly hostile retail climate. The last ten years have seen dramatic changes in the book trade, as the same titles are promoted with the same discounts everywhere. Bestsellers thrive, while writers seen as 'mid-list', and especially those in genre fiction, suffer. Browsing used to be the route by which such authors picked up new readers. This has simply died, since people popping into a bookshop 'for something to read' get no further than the 3 for 2/2 for £10 deals. So authors face a choice between grousing into their beer or looking for alternate ways to contact potential readers to bring them in past the discount tables and the bestseller charts.

Agreeing that action is always better than inaction, it was obvious more people were needed. It was decided, with some regret, that such a group needed a clear focus on fantasy rather than including say, horror or hard SF writers. Also, since we'd be working closely together, we needed to all get on well on a personal level. Fortunately, the SF&F convention circuit has given us all opportunities to meet and sit on panels with a range of other authors. James Barclay, Sarah Ash, Jessica Rydill and Mark Chadbourn were contacted accordingly. Sarah, Jessica and Mark were all enthusiastic about the idea, as was James, though other factors left him unable to sign on as a full time member. So he's an associate, joining in as and when he can, as in The Write Fantastic's gig at Bromley Library on 20th of October 2005.

'The last ten years have seen dramatic changes in the book trade, as the same titles are promoted with the same discounts everywhere.'

That's fine with the rest of us. One of the first things we agreed is we're not setting ourselves up as some exclusive cabal. Depending on where and when we organise gigs, we're happy to include other local writers, and also to work as part of larger initiatives, such as the Heffer's SF&F event in Cambridge, on November 1st 2005. There is plenty of scope for events to interest those fantasy readers who don't feel inclined to go to conventions. Those are the people we're aiming to reach.

Mark Chadbourn made a particularly good point in those early discussions, based on his experiences in the music industry. HMV are often blamed for polarising that market into one dominated by long-established acts and heavily promoted new bands created by marketing men rather than musicians. How is new talent supposed to get that big break? But the hopeful don't bin their guitars and give up. They get out on the road and build a reputation by setting up their own gigs. If writers fear that HMV, as

owners of Waterstones, are leading the book trade down the same ruinous path, let's take note from those musicians who are finding ways around it.

We launched The Write Fantastic with a very successful London evening event in association with the British Fantasy Society in May 2005. A couple of weeks later, we went to Birmingham, to speak to the Birmingham SF Group and also to appear at the Tolkien Weekend at Sarehole Mill. Stan Nicholls made those contacts and also arranged book-signings at Waterstones and the late-lamented Andromeda. In July Chaz Brenchley organised a couple of days in Newcastle, where we talked to the Literary & Philosophical Society as part of their Tall Ships Week, on whether or not sea stories and fantasy are mutually incompatible. On that same trip, we spoke to Bedlington Library and did an evening event with Ottakar's in Sunderland. Juliet ran a creative writing course for the Faringdon Arts Festival and since she was free to come up to Birmingham early on the first day of FantasyCon 2005, Stan organised a two-handed gig for them both at Hall Green Library. This is how we work; everyone uses their own contacts to benefit the group as a whole, and we aim to maximise the effect of every visit with as many related activities as we can. We supply the libraries and bookshops we visit with leaflets, posters and bookmarks, and publicise the events in genre circles. Again, all these tasks are shared among the group, to spread the load.

How are we funding this? Chaz Brenchley's expertise was invaluable here, as he took on the challenge of making an application to the Arts Council England. We drew up a plan for our first six months, set out a budget and made our case in detail. Our success in getting start-up funding has enabled us to cover travel and accommodation expenses, to print a full-colour brochure and to mailshot a targeted list of literary festivals and libraries as we plan our activities for 2006. We'll be producing a booklet with short samples of all our work for distribution at those gigs. Once that initial funding is exhausted, the intention is to make our on-going programme self-financing, since libraries do have reader development funds available and organisations such as The Society of Authors are making literary festivals increasingly aware of the need to pay authors' expenses.

How are we doing? So far, it's been great fun and we've been very well received. We've had a lot of interest from libraries and a few literary festivals. We'll be doing an event for Ealing Library in February 2006 and have been invited back to the Tolkien Weekend at Sarehole in mid-May. Other events for 2006 are still being finalised. Keep an eye on the diary at our website, and if you see we're doing a gig near you, come along!

The Write Fantastic are (left to right) Chaz Brenchley, Mark Chadbourn, Jessica Rydill, Sarah Ash, Stan Nicholls and Juliet E McKenna

www.thewritefantastic.com
www.murdersquad.co.uk

Submitting Short Fiction

Jetse de Vries

Since I became involved with *Interzone* almost two years ago, I have now experience with both sides of the submission proces: as a writer, and as an editor. I thought I could share some of my experience with you aspiring short story writers, and hope to give you some tips in the process.

Keep in mind that in this article I am not talking about the actual story itself: that is probably better done in a separate piece. This piece is about how to get the finished story to an editor's desk while looking as professional as possible. So I'll be discussing how to aim your story to the best market, manuscript format, and the cover letter, and a few remarks about etiquette.

Most improtant thing is, and always will be, the story itself: put about 98 to 99% of your effort in making that as good as you can possibly get it: a very good story badly formatted with a clumsy cover letter still has a much better chance of acceptance than a bad story in perfect format with a slick cover letter (of course, aimed at the wrong market gets neither story anywhere).

Therefore, first of all:

Read! If you write short fiction, read short fiction a lot: the more, the better. Not only does it give you a good idea of what is written in the genre, and helps you avoid doing things that have already been done, it also broadens your own horizons. This may sound very familiar, but it can not be repeated often enough: even Stephen King says the same in his *On Writing*. Then, the most important matter:

Try to aim your submission at the right market.

Check out your market. That is, try to buy at least a sample issue of the magazine that you are planning to submit to. This gives you a feel of what that magazine is publishing, and helps you aim your submissions to the right markets. For instance, your hard SF technothriller will not pass much muster at *Realms of Fantasy*, neither will haunted ghost story be of much interest for *Analog*. This might also seem obvious, but my experience is that almost 50% of submissions to any magazine is stories that are simply unsuitable to that magazine, something every editor will know halfway through the first page (often the first paragraph). So avoid wasting both the editor's and your own time, and aim your story at the right market by checking them out.

Of course, Ralan Conley's Webstravanganza (www.ralan.com) is an excellent market resource (and there are several others on the net, but Ralan is simply the best, and most updated one: often his info is more up-to-date than that on some publisher's own websites), but nothing really gives you a better idea of what a magazine publishes than actually reading it.

Obviously, you can't afford to subscribe to each and every one. But purchasing sample issues is relatively easy: in the UK you can check out Chris Reed's BBR distribution (www.bbr-online.com/catalogue/), Simon Gosden's Fantastic Literature (www.fantasticliterature.com), and Bob Wardzinski's The Talking Dead (www.geocities.com/Area51/Corridor/2997/talkdead.html) .

Jon Hodges's Project Pulp (www.projectpulp.com) is an excellent place to buy single magazine issues and antologies, for both UK and USA customers. A few other US retailers are ClarkesWorld Books (www.clarkesworldbooks.com) and Shocklines (store.yahoo.com/shocklines) (these ship within the USA only, so are mostly of interest to US citizens).

Having said that: now you have finished that story, polished it to perfection, and found a suitable maket for it. Now, how to send it?

Manuscript format.

In the majority of cases publishers request, and prefer standard manuscript format. The thing is, that nobody knows exactly what 'standard manuscript format' is - opinions are divided - but the two best references are Bill Shunn's article: (www.shunn.net/format/story.html) , and Vonda McIntyre's article on manuscript preparation on the SFWA website: (www.sfwa.org/writing/vonda/vonda.htm) . Use either of these two - the differences between them are minimal - and you are fine.

Keep in mind that markets that allow email submissions, often request a different way of manuscript formatting. These are different for almost every market, so when submitting by email it is best to carefully check the market's preferences and instructions. Some of them can be very particular in how they want their electronic manuscript formatted: I strongly advise to follow their lead, not only to avoid immediate rejection, but also because this saves you postage, and international postage can be quite steep.

Now, in practice I find that not everybody carefully adheres to the 'standard manuscript format': I see non-proportional fonts, separate paragraphs instead of indented ones, *actual italicising* instead of underlined italicising, and more.

Thing is, personally I don't care much: as long as it's readable I will read it. However, most publications are swamped in submissions, and sometimes need only the smallest of excuses to reject a story: faulty grammar, non-standard MS format, and such. These are things a writer can avoid: present your story as professionally as possible, so in case of doubt simply use the 'standard manuscript format'.

Some of you may protest that this makes all manuscripts look the same, and that yours 'will not stand out'. The former is true, and the point is that *the story itself* must stand out, not the presentation. An offbeat presentation will detract attention from the writing itself, and this is almost always a bad thing.

A notable exception: Ellen Datlow – editor of *SciFiction* – prefers Times New Roman above proportional fonts, so do indulge her in that.

The cover letter

First of all: don't agonise over it: keep it business-like and concise. If you have no sales, don't worry. If you do have sales, then mention only either the last three, or the three best (or most appropriate) ones.

Editors don't pay much attention to cover letters: Gordon Van Gelder only reads them afterwards, when he's already made up his mind, so they don't influence his decision either way. Personally, I quickly scan them, then download the story, and - like GVG - only get back to them well after I've read the story.

A few don'ts:

—Try to address the letter personally: so if you send a story to *F&SF*, address it to Mr. Van Gelder, or Gordon Van Gelder. Only use Dear Editor(s) if you really don't know who the editor is.

—In case of doubt, keep it formal. Personally, I'm an exception to this rule: I have absolutely no problem if complete strangers address me as Dear Jetse, or even Hi Jetse. Also, Andy (Cox) doesn't care much either way. However, if you do not know the editor personally, even if you have been discussing several things with her/him on the various discussion boards, then you better still address her/him formally.

For example, Ellen Datlow is very active on both the NightshadeBooks and TTA discussion boards, where everybody addresses her as Ellen. However, the moment you submit a story to *SciFiction*, do address her as Ms. Datlow: because that's how she prefers it.

—Don't overdo it: keep it concise. In the two monthly email reading periods I've done so far for *Interzone* (next one coming up in january 2006), there were a few cover letters (your email does count as a 'cover letter') where the author listed each and every publication they were in, not only fiction, but even non-fiction and letters to the editors that were printed. As mentioned, I normally give the email only a quick scan, then download the story. But in such cases this long, exhaustive list makes a negative impression: it shouts 'amateur' at me. (I actually even replied to a few that were overdoing it, advising them that this is frowned upon in general by editors. Some listened and refrained themselves with their next submission, a rare few simply kept at it. Of course, you don't have to listen to an editor's well-meant advise. On the other hand, we accepted 8 stories out of 400 from the May slushpile: you don't want to reduce your chances by irking the editor.)

Having said that, there are a few editors that appreciate some information in a cover letter. Both Andy Cox and Ellen Datlow do read your cover letters, especially if you've received personal rejections from them, and use them as a way to keep up with a writer: have you made any recent sales? How are you developing? So, in that case, I would mention your three most important (or appropriate) sales, and mention your last (maximally three) sales, as well. And even then, I would keep it concise and business-like.

—Follow-up on personal comments: If an editor, especially a professional one, takes the trouble to give you personal comment (instead of the standard form rejection), then do mention this in your next submission. Something along the lines of "Thanks for your comments on my previous submission", or "I hope this time you will find my story good enough to publish" is definitely appreciated. Also, if the editor mentions something personal in her/his response, then it is OK—and in most cases expected—that you respond to that. Also, keep that to the point, and friendly, but really do it.

Reply envelopes and postage

The infamous SASE and IRCs: or Self-Adressed, Stamped Envelope, and International Repy Coupons, that are required to get your reply.

In my own country (The Netherlands) IRCs were used so infrequently that our national post company simply stopped selling them. Also, I think they are getting increasingly less used in Anglophone countries, as well. I wouldn't be surprised if they became obsolete in 5 or 10 years.

Now, most English language markets are in the USA, and you can buy 80 cent stamps (which are good for international airmail postage) online at the USPS website, here: (shop.usps.com/cgi-bin/vsbv/postal_store_non_ssl/display_products/productDetail.jsp?OID=3843234). Those are the Special Olympics stamps, which you can buy in batches of 20. Since the majority of the markets are in the USA, this makes sense, as they are cheaper than IRCs. However, do keep an eye out at possible rate changes: I know USPS haven't changed their rates in several years, so one might be coming, and then suddenly your 80 cent stamps are insufficient. Still you can buy a batch of 4 or 10 cent stamps of additional postage, when they suddenly raise their rates.

Also, if your post office doesn't sell IRCs anymore, just explain that to the editor you're submitting to. In general, editors of professional magazines are *very* reluctant to answer by email, so in that case I would advise to buy the USPS stamps (since most professional markets are in the USA). Most other editors, in my experience, are understanding—if you're submitting from overseas—and are willing to reply by email if you can't get IRCs.

Multiple and simultaneous submissions

Multiple submissions meaning that you are sending more than one story at a time to a certain market. Simultaneous submissions meaning that you are sending the same story to more than one market at the same time.

Now, do keep in mind that both are not strictly forbidden: no publisher can actually stop you doing either, or both. However, in most cases it is highly frowned upon, and if things work out wrongly, they can seriously affect your writing career.

Of the two, multiple submissions are considered the lesser sin. Normally, editors prefer that you send the next story *after* you have received their reply to a previous story, and I would advise to adhere to that, especially if the market in question has a good response time (i.e. *F&SF*, *Strange Horizons*).

Also, if an editor reads one of your stories, and wasn't particularly impressed, and sees another one coming up almost immediately afterwards, then chances are she/he won't be delving into that one with a positive mindframe. If a few weeks have gone between your stories, then the next one will be read with a more open mind.

Also, you don't want to be competing with yourself. Suppose that an editor likes your writing, but has two (or three, or four) stories of you in hand: then chances are that she/he will not pick all of them, but that the best one will be cherry-picked. Gardner Dozois (ex-*Asimov's* editor) has told that this is what he does when he has more than one story of an author he likes, and that there was a good chance that he would have bought both stories from that same author, if they were sent in one after another. And I agree with him: for the *Interzone* email submission periods I do allow multiple submissions (because I only do three such monthly periods a year), but I also do take out the best story of an author, and only very rarely more than one.

Simultaneous submissions: again, nobody can actually forbid this. You are free to send your story to more than one publisher at the same time. However...

The problem comes when more than one publisher wants to buy the same story. Make no mistake: every publisher purchases first time publication rights. So you can only actually *sell* it to one publisher, so in this case you must turn down another publisher. That other publisher now knows that you have been submitting the story to more than one place at a time, and will be *very* unhappy. Most likely, that publisher will not look at any story of you again. Ever.

Also, the publishing genre world is not that big. Editors meet each other on a lot of Cons, meet each other online on email groups and discussion forums, and once an author has a certain reputation of being a simultaneous submitter, this will spread through the community.

Of course, some editors take less offense than others. But in general, you don't want *any* editor to take offense.

Finally, don't think: this will not happen to me. I will admit to comitting this sin: I had a story out with several publishers, only to find that *three* wanted it. I had to turn down two, one of which was paying professional rates. I've learned my lesson the hard way, and I urge you to avoid submitting simultaneously, and only do so if *both* parties implicitly allow it.

Finally, more than a few of you will wonder why so many editors still prefer to receive paper manuscripts in the electronic day and age. Basically, there two reasons.

First: paper submissions function as a first hurdle. All professional magazines get a huge amount of submissions, ranging from 200 to over 800 a month. For a good indication, check out Christopher Stires's article 'The Submission Pile' (www.sfreader.com/article004.asp). Quite probably, opening to email sumissions would double or triple those already huge numbers. The whole process of formatting and printing out your story, and then using postage to send it, already force you to be reasonably serious about your submission, and weeds out those writers - and there are a great amount of them, unfortunately - that will send out their stories blindly to every publication possible.

Second: most editors still prefer to read the story on paper, and dislike reading from a screen. Apart from the fact that printing out up to 800 stories per month is a considerably expense, which the publisher does not wish to carry, your chances drop if an editor who prefers paper manuscripts has to read your story on a screen. You want an editor to feel good when she/he reads your story, and if that takes a paper manuscript, then so be it.

Therefore, prsent your story in the format that the editor prefers, keep the presentation concise and business-like, and let your story do the talking.

Jetse de Vries is a writer and editor. *Focus* readers will recognise him from *Dubious in Dublin*.

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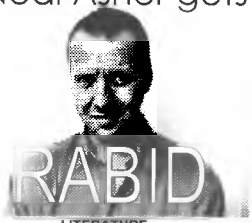

LITERATURE

According to my dictionary 'literature' is a term defining everything from leaflets giving information on haemorrhoids to *War and Peace*. Even a Blair speech is literature, though a form of it somewhat overburdened by ellipses and bathos. But the first dictionary meaning admits the word commonly refers to 'poetry, novels, essays etc', so are all these always literature? No, apparently, because there is another usage of the word that seems to define it by what it is *not*.

The wider literati intelligentsia – a diverse collection of self-promoting critics and would-be academics – feel it their business to decide what to include under this title and what to exclude. Why they feel they have this right is debateable. But then people of a similar stripe denigrated Charles Dickens for his penny dreadfuls, and William Shakespeare for catering to plebs who just wanted plays containing plenty of royalty, murder, sex and ghosts. So we have this thing I will italicize as *literature*, and what a strange beast it is.

Genre fiction is not such a beast until sufficiently aged (perhaps buried in peat and dug up again). Those books that are popular and show no sign of going away, are only reluctantly accepted, because to the literati intelligentsia 'popular' equals 'not-*literature*'. Books moving into the *literature* category, popular or otherwise, undergo a transformation. In long turgid dissertations they become satirical, noir, surreal, allegory (insert favourite pretension), and the clunky robots, magic swords or smart-talking detectives blowing away bad guys are, with some embarrassment, shuffled off stage. Thus, *The Lord of the Rings* is a political allegory of World War II and Sauron is quite obviously Hitler; *The Sirens of Titan* is a superb satire favoured by neophyte academics, but the less said about the Tralfamadorian on Titan the better; and Raymond Chandler 'leads writers of the twentieth century' with his 'brutal noir' and 'inimitably literary style'. It would be nice if those writing such dissertations occasionally came out with an honest statement like, "Actually, I really liked that book, but I'm a pretentious git so I've got to dress it up in what I consider to be more presentable clothing and work very hard on its diction."

This is a situation to which those writing fiction in the SFF world are quite accustomed (hence Pratchett's tongue in cheek statement about being 'accused of literature'), but it is unfortunate that our genre is not immune, internally, to the same snobbery directed against it, for it is merely a microcosm of the entire writing world and contains its own self-styled judges. In the not-*literature* category they lump anything by E. E. 'Doc' Smith, Edgar Rice Burroughs (not sufficiently peat-aged yet), Robert Heinlein (wrong politics) and anything unashamed of being definitely science fiction or fantasy, and in which the writer aims to entertain an audience rather than demonstrate personal brilliance. In the *literature* category they give us the boredom of the New Wave (in reality just a bigger and noisier version of similar waves spreading their flotsam over the shores of SFF now), various other versions of, "Well, not a lot happened, but I managed to write a novel about it," and the products of those writers so enamoured of the *literature* label they produce stunning prose and mind-numbingly deep insights into the human condition, while usually forgetting essential story. The *literature*/not-*literature* classifications are all very very subjective and in need of seasoning with large pinches of salt.

But how should you identify excellence? How then do you know what is *good*? Well, pick it up and read some of it, then if you want to carry on, make your own decision when you finally close it. How, after that, do you identify *great* literature? Simple really: you bury it in peat for a couple of centuries then see if it is still recognised when dug up. In other words you don't, posterity does. I suspect today's literati intelligentsia would be horrified at the rich strata of J K Rowling, Stephen King and Terry Pratchett that will be revealed. But by then, ensuing generations of critics and academics will have produced reams of turgid prose about the work of those writers, without too much mention of gnomes, wizards or vampires.

Neal Asher won a Salamander (best SF published in the Czech Republic) for *The Skinner*, signed another three book deal with Pan Macmillan, and turned his loft into a library. It's good to keep busy...