FOCUS

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POINTS OF VIEW

Christopher Priest puts writing into perspective

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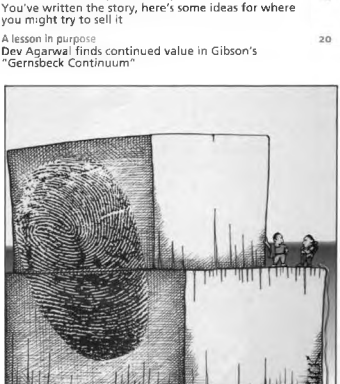

"Of course, it's still a complete mystery as to how the ancients even managed to MOVE these massive stones..."

All cartoons in this issue courtesy of www.nearingzero.net

FOCUS

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CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR

Welcome to the fiftieth issue of *Focus*. There'll be no looking back in this issue, but it wouldn't be right to let the moment pass without thanks to all the other editors who got us this far. They may be gone but none are forgotten!

So, big number, new era and a new editor.

You know the old saying about being careful what you wish for, just in case you get it? Well, I've got it and I'm beginning to see that I really should have been a little bit more careful about my wishes.

Let's take a brief diversion into the darkened hallways of history – back before towers fell and iPods rose, back and back to ancient times, nearly six years ago. I'd been a member of the BSFA for a while, I was just starting a PhD and reckoned I had some time on my hand and fancied having a go at one of the BSFA magazines. And *Focus* was looking for an editor.

"Pick me! Pick me!" My email pleaded

And they did.

To edit *Matrix*.

"I'll do it," I said. "But I won't write anything. No way! I'll just do the lay up."

"Fine," they said.

Four years, twenty-three issues and at least 100 reviews later, I staggered away from *Matrix* now a doctor, a daddy and back working full time as a journalist.

And then, they said, *Focus* needed an editor.

"Pick me! Pick me!" My email pleaded.

And they did. Oops!

Now what have I got myself into?

Because what the hell do I know about writing? I mean I've made a (very modest) living churning out articles on everything from *necrotising fasciitis* to contracts for actors in the era of digital television, but I'm not a *writer*.

I've sold the odd short story, and there's one of them I don't *totally* hate, but no one who reads them is going to be blown away by my mastery of language and my carefully modulated style. I'm not that kind of *writer*.

So what am I going to do with a whole magazine about *writing*?

First, recognising that I know nothing. I'm going to get others to give the advice.

Second, I'm going to take it seriously.

Great writing is undoubtedly art, but the process of writing is a craft and I believe people can be taught, learn and improve. I have been taught, learned things and improved a bit. So that's my goal with *Focus*, to find those people who can help us all write better. To start debates that make us think about our writing and to take this business of writing seriously.

In my first ever Focus, I'm delighted to welcome aboard three new contributors who, I hope, are going to be regulars over the coming issues.

Jetse de Vries is one of the editors of the revitalised *Interzone*, which means that if you write short fiction in the UK, he's the guy you want to impress. He's agreed to write a regular piece for the magazine and will give us the editor's-eye-view of the writing game.

Dev Agarwal is a writer with a number of short story credits to his name who is working on his first novel. I met Dev about three years ago on an Arvon writing course and I was impressed by how seriously he took his writing, how comfortably he manipulated language and how determined he was. Dev, I hope, will give us the aspiring writer's viewpoint.

At that Arvon course Dev and I were lucky enough to have as a tutor Christopher Priest – whose (sometimes brutal) honesty, commitment to great writing and experience left a real mark on me as a writer (I didn't write another thing for a year, but since then I've sold almost every story I've written). When I had the idea to ask an established writer to contribute a "masterclass" on aspects of writing, Christopher Priest was at the top of my list. Actually he was so far off the top of my list I didn't think there was the remotest chance that he'd say yes, but generously he agreed, and I hope you find the first part of his series, on point of view, illuminating.

Having mentioned the writing course at Arvon it is a neat coincidence that this issue features pieces by Terry Jackman and Nick Wood on writers' experiences of those sometimes fraught, sometimes enlightening gatherings. We've also got a feature on marketing your book online by Brian Turner, a piece on scriptwriting from Gavin Williams and my esteemed predecessor as *Focus* editor, Simon Morden, is still around – contributing an fascinating article on the elements necessary to construct a good story.

Cover artwork: Tied Eye © Jitka Saniova

This is just the start, I hope, of a significant makeover of *Focus*. I'm hoping more of you will want to contribute. I'm hoping we'll publish stuff that you'll find stimulating and helpful. I'm open to suggestions, keen to hear from anyone who believes they have material to contribute and desperate to hear what you want to read about.

Part of the BSFA's reason for existence is to encourage the creation of high quality works of science fiction, I hope that we can use *Focus* to do a little bit to help the Association meet that goal.

Martin McGrath

Contribute!

The deadline for the next issue of Focus is:
Friday 27 July, 2007
Send your submissions/queries/suggestions to:
focusmagazine@ntlworld.com

HOW TO MARKET YOUR BOOK ONLINE

So you get a publishing deal – great! It doesn't matter whether it's self-publishing or traditional print publishing, we'll assume that you've reached your goal, because the principles of marketing online apply the same in any instance.

So, what now? How are you going to sell your book, and how can the internet help? First comes the website.

The Website

Your website is your business presence online. And that's a very important point to underline.

Of course, you may not know very much about websites or how to build one, which may present a problem. If you're serious about your work, you need to be serious about it in a business manner.

Far too often, new published writers get their mate Dave down the pub to build a website for them. This is a big no-no.

Sure, we live in a world where many people can build a webpage, and that includes your mate Dave. But we're not talking about building a webpage or a website – we're talking about building a business, and anchoring it on the internet at that.

If your mate Dave isn't already managing a very successful online business, he has no place in trying to build yours for you.

You need to get professional help on setting up online.

While there are plenty of companies out there who are willing to do so by charging you your entire advance, what you need to do first is find out what actual issues you need to address.

Luckily for you, there are business forums online (http://www.platinax.co.uk/forum/) where successful internet entrepreneurs will be happy to help and provide advice – technical issues you need to watch for, the right questions you need to ask, and anything else you need to bear in mind to reach your website goals.

And just to help you get started, here's a couple of key tips:

1. Get your own domain

Why? It allows you control over your online identity, and also empowers you to host your own website. Think: brand identity. Make sure you register it yourself in your own name. For .uk domains, register at 123-reg (www.123-reg.co.uk) – for .com/.net and .org domains, register at somewhere like Registerfly (www.registerfly.com).

2. Get a website built

Be wary that a lot of UK design companies now charge the earth, then outsource to the Third World to pocket a hefty profit. Get recommendations. It really doesn't have to cost the earth – there are also plenty of companies out there who will help set you up online (for example, www.britecorp.co.uk) simply and inexpensively.

3. Decide what other features you want

Don't be too adventurous too quickly – think about what will be useful for visitors, and build up in stages. If you invite user participation be very aware that you'll probably have to build traffic to your website over time to make these effective.

Try to be simple but effective, and don't simply think about features to draw visitors in – think about visitor retention. Just posting news regularly can help by encouraging readers to return regularly and rewarding those who do, and so can slightly more adventurous tools, such as podcasting.

But, you don't want a guestbook – it'll get filled with links to porn, viagra, and casino sites within a month.

If you're feeling adventurous and would like a forum, don't opt for phpbb just because it's free – you'll get hacked within a year, and there goes your site. If you're on a budget, get the free SMF forum (www.simplemachines.org) – if you're really serious, spend money with vBulletin (www.vbulletin.com). For security tips on securing forums and websites against spammers, go to Security Watch (www.securitywatch.co.uk).

The Marketing

Let's assume you have the website up and running, giving you a platform for your internet presence.

Now comes the marketing.

At this point, lots of writers make a big mistake, and start joining forums and newsgroups to advertise their book. This isn't marketing on a budget – this is forum spamming. And it's liable to get you a reputation for being an annoying dumb-ass.

No argument.

Let me let you in on a little secret – the internet is not simply a string a websites – it's a massive interconnecting community of people in itself, and websites are the nodes of communication between these communities.

Scenario: you're at the bar with a couple of friends, when a complete stranger runs up to you, interrupts your conversation, and tells you that they've written this genius book and you must read it – then disappear again.

That's the real-world equivalent of forum spamming. Are you buying from them?

Now consider this: you're at the bar with a couple of friends, when another friend comes over, chats, then tells you about this great book they've read.

You can be that friend – join lots of online communities, discuss general issues with people – give a little to the communities you join. Then you can take a little by suggesting your book. Not often, just as much as is absolutely necessary for you to capture attention without coming across as pushy.

That starts the ball rolling – you get noticed. People will even be tempted to buy your book just because they know you and you seem kinda nice.

Now you're starting something – if they like your work, they will tell similarly interested friend. That's *New Marketing* (www.cluetrain.com).

If you're marketing on a budget, being able to set yourself up within communities who share an interest in the genre you've written for is a great start.

If your work is good, you start generating good referrals and recommendations from people. This helps your sales platform, and for some, it can really snowball... over a couple of years.

By itself this is not going to be enough of a marketing campaign for most authors. The painful truth is that, at some point – and if you are really serious about promoting your work – you're going to have to start parting with your cash.

There are a couple of key ways you can do this (mix and match according to your marketing strategy):

1. Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)
If you got a good team to work on your website, it's already search engine friendly.

Which is great, because search engines are one of the major methods people use to find information online.

Increasing your visibility through SEO means increasing the likelihood of capturing new readers who were looking for something you happened to be able to provide.

However, be warned – there are some SEO practices that can get you wiped out from Google, Yahoo!, MSN, etc. Make sure you know what these are before you let a single company talk you into overly-aggressive tactics.

Also, don't simply shop around on price – there are SEO companies out there who charge a fortune just because some people are stupid enough to pay that price, and there are others who charge peanuts and are only good for monkeys. Try and find a middle ground.

You should also be realistic – search engines gorge themselves on information. Provide it by generating lots of interest content, especially by blogging, or even running a small forum, and push to keep active.

And be patient. You're not likely to be an overnight success, so keep your internet goals long-term.

2. Pay Per Click (PPC)
Another way to market your site is PPC – those ads to the right of Google when you do a search.

On the one hand, it can be a great way to raise the profile of your website and book and gain yourself high-quality sales leads. PPC can be a very effective marketing process.

On the other, it can be a very fiddly process, and if you don't learn how to track sales conversions with keyword targeting, then you can end up burning money.

If you have a large enough PPC budget, it may be worth hiring a company to manage the account for you. Just ensure that if you do, you know what they're actually do for you. Some will claim to be able to halve your PPC budget – but all they do is switch your campaign on and off during the day. Seriously.

TIP: MSN is relatively cheap at present compared to Yahoo! and Google Adwords for marketing on at present.

3. Advertising
Believe it or not, advertising is often a very inefficient way to generate sales. The margins are often poor, and sometimes advertising campaigns are created out of vanity than any real brand awareness exercise.

As with many above points, you're going to have to exercise some initiative here – not least in finding websites with real traffic in your genre area that will actually convert to sales profitably.

It can be done, but try not to get carried away with too much too quickly – remember, you're not looking for your name on every second webpage, but an actual return on investment.

Find a way to measure and track responses. If you can, link the adverts you place on each external website to a page on your site specifically set up to cater for that advertiser. It allows you to see exactly how much traffic that advert is generating.

This sounds like a lot of work, but as you are now a business, you need to apply some initiative in building a business platform online.

4. Viral marketing
Generating a presence in online communities, blogging, and otherwise keeping your profile up, are the best ways of marketing.

Even better still, they're usually free – just time-consuming.

It's a slow and gradual process, but as we know from those whose works sell really well, it generally takes some time for "Word of Mouth" to catch on. Your job is to try and ensure that you're always in the right place – until you reach the right time.

Online communities are probably the most easily abused but most rewarding places for developing your internet presence – it can put you into direct touch with your targeted audience: your best potential readers.

Finding those communities can be a slog, and sometimes you'll have to bite your tongue a little if you find other members, even community staff, a little annoying at times. Ultimately, in these places, you are a guest and generally you will be given every hospitality you need. Be courteous at polite at all times where humanly possible.

To find these online communities, try to use search engines using keywords such as "science fiction" "fantasy" and "forum" or "community". For more niche interest areas, run different keywords as appropriate.

Some major SFF forums include:

Chronicles network (www.chronicles-network.com) – probably the biggest of its kind, and very UK focused

SFFWorld (http://www.sffworld.com) – another big forum, with a very well developed content section

SF Fandom (www.sf-fandom.com) – more media focused, but worth a visit

Of course, also remember that websites love to get free books to review. And online book reviews help drive your online presence.

Be generous and offer free copies to website like the above, or search for review sites and tell them who publishes your book, and what it's about.

Overall, the more you try to develop your presence across the internet, the more likely it is people will notice you and want to find out more – by reading your books.

And then telling their friends what a great read you are.

Conclusion
These are just a few starting pointers to marketing yourself online.

If you're serious about being a writer, you're going to have to treat it seriously as a business – that's if you want to aim to be as successful as possible.

And that means building up a reputation to get people more interested in you and your work.

That may seem daunting, but the same can be said for writing a book. You got this far – don't give up now.

So to end, here's a few simple business tips to help you with your writing business:

1. Be professional at all times – alienate your industry and readers at your peril;
2. Mind what you say in public – search engines can be your friend... or your enemy;
3. Have clear goals – what you think you can achieve, and how to achieve them;
4. Remain flexible – the internet is as changing as the sea, so learn to surf the waves;
5. Persevere – success is 10% innovation, and 90% perspiration – or something like that;
6. Track your spending – don't throw good money after bad, make sure you know what returns you're getting;
7. Keep it real – keep your imagination in storytelling, and be practical in your business dealings;
8. Good luck!

Brian Turner is adminstrator of The Chronicles Network (www.chronicles-network.com), and online staff discussion site and an aspiring author.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD STORY?

'A good story, well told.'
Judging the 2005 Arthur C Clarke award meant reading 47 novels in a few months. It also meant working out what I thought made a good story – something I could compare the diverse styles and subjects against – or doom myself to thrashing around in a sea of indecision. (As it was, we were almost late for our own awards' ceremony.)

So I decided what I looked for most in a novel was a good story, well told. In this article, I intend to concentrate on the first, and not on the second – though parts of 'well told' have impact on the 'good story', in that it's much easier to tell a good story than a bad one.

For me, 'story' has three parts. It needs a plot, it needs characters, and it needs a setting. If I find all three, I stand a chance at finding a good story.

Plot

It has to do something
That 'something' is making the reader want to read on. It is a non-trivial task to get someone so caught up in a story that they don't want to stop.

What it doesn't need to do is preach the gospel, contain a moral or push any particular agenda you might have. Preaching in general, makes for bad storytelling. This is not to say that your story is bad because it contains a message – but the message should not be your primary reason for telling the story.

The story has to go somewhere
The somewhere doesn't have to be to a geographical location, or be your typical 'quest' story. But events that happen to the characters have to in some way affect them. Things cannot be the same at the end as they are in the beginning.

For the Clarke awards, I had to pick a shortlist of six books. It is no coincidence that the six I chose all had good stories and were well told. Too often I read a book which had strong characters, an interesting set up, but which went absolutely nowhere – nothing had changed, no one had changed.

Something non-trivial has to be at stake
If nothing is at stake, then why should anyone (not least the story's characters) bother?

It doesn't have to be earth-shattering: the fate of a world, a nation, a president, a person even. It just has to be important to the characters concerned. It can be a marriage, or a business, or keeping a child off drugs. A story about lost car keys can be trivial – unless there's a body locked in the boot.

Characters

We have to identify with the characters
'I do not care about these people' are the seven deadly words no author wants to hear. In the baldest sense, if I

> "if I do not care about what happens to the characters, I will not enjoy the story."

do not care about what happens to the characters, I will not enjoy the story.

This does not mean that your protagonist has to be a saint, but it does mean that your protagonist has to be real. And look, people identify with anti-heroes – some of the most compelling storytelling in literature and film revolves around characters whose qualities are far from all good.

The characters should be changed by their experiences
It is natural for people to grow and change through the passage of time. If your characters don't, they won't be as engaging as those that do.

The changes they go through could be radical, subtle, or a mixture of both, but change they must. They might gain a better insight into themselves, they might have new knowledge about the world to assimilate.

The outer struggle must be mirrored by an inner struggle.
If, to take an extreme example, a character is racist, yet they find themselves in a position where they find their attitudes challenged – a foreign soldier protecting a village – the story should show them struggling with their attitudes. It need not necessarily show them 'winning'.

Archetypal characters
Archetypes are more than symbols within storytelling: they seem, for some reason, to resonate deep within the soul (apologies for getting metaphysical).

If I say 'Hero' or 'Mentor' or 'Magician' or 'Trickster', you immediately conjure up how each of these archetypes behave. It isn't what they look like, or whether they're male or female, young or old, or where they come from and how they speak. It's what they are. Once you have a good idea of how your character will behave in any given situation, you have a character that will live within the story.

Vicarious experience
Another aspect of your characters' development is the ability to give vicarious experiences to the reader. I'm a bloke; I have no idea what it's like to give birth. Unfortunately, neither does my wife, so I can't ask her... but then again, I've never shot anyone at point-blank range, I've never put on an armoured exoskeleton and fallen to Earth from the edge of space, I've never been tortured to death, I've never talked to aliens living inside my head, I've

Amongst many other things, including having previously edited this magazine, Simon Morden is the author of *The Last Art*, *Another War* and *Brilliant Things*.

never been stalked by a fallen angel. Yet, at various times, I've tried to convey precisely how this feels.

Part of a storyteller's job is to make unreal things real. It's not a question of describing the scene, it's living it through your characters.

Setting

Setting is where your characters are and the plot happens. Setting should be treated like another character – neither described to death nor so entirely superfluous to the plot so that your story could have happened anywhere. Setting is more than just background flavour it is the foundation of the story.

The setting should matter to the plot

Setting is the third leg of your story, inasmuch as Rapunzel would be nowhere without a tower or Hansel and Gretel without the Gingerbread House. It isn't just a painted curtain behind your characters. It has flavour, atmosphere, a solidity to it. The setting should be integral to the plot because it is a character.

The setting should influence the plot progression

In precisely the same way characters influence the plot, the setting should influence the plot.

The setting should influence the characters' actions

This one is obvious, but so easily missed. The setting can be interacted with. It can be picked up, thrown, read, looked through, lit, sat in, walked around. Your characters should be doing that – if they're in a library, they should be whispering, looking around, reading the spines of books. If they're in a coffee shop, they should be drinking coffee, eating muffins, clattering teaspoons

The setting should be memorable and imaginable

Your readers are relying on you to paint a word-picture which is sufficient for them to both imagine the scene and remember it the next time you use it. Over describing and under-describing are both problems – you need to be able to give a sense of place without drowning the reader with two or three pages of adjectives and adverbs. This is, admittedly, pretty hard to do straight off, but it can be learnt.

And finally...

A word or two about research, there is a broad middle ground to inhabit between the twin evils of doing no research at all, because after all, you're making all this up, and spending all the time you should be writing, reading.

As a rough rule of thumb, you should know stuff that has an impact on your story. This can range from simple things – seasonal weather patterns in Nairobi – to obscure things – what sort of sniper rifle a Russian veteran of Afghanistan would use. A friend once put out the call to discover how far a palanquin – that's one of those chairs carried on poles at shoulder height – could be carried by one team of slaves in one day. Another friend actually arranged a test. About ten miles is the answer.

As another rough rule of thumb, you should never be tempted to use your research findings to show your readers how much research you did for your story. That rifle I've just mentioned was never discussed or described in the story I used it in. But I knew the character who used it better because I took the time and trouble to find out what weapon he had. I knew what it looked like, how heavy it was, how accurate it was, how he fired it.

Why is research important? Because it adds the flavour of authenticity to your story. If, as writers, we're trying to suspend the reader's disbelief, anything that helps is good. Anything that hinders is bad. Worst of all is the point where the reader is suddenly dumped out of the story by the writer doing something stupid.

And specifically, why is research important when you're writing SF or fantasy? Aren't you just making stuff up? I would argue that you have to do more research than if you were writing chick-lit. For contemporary fiction, the world is a given. If your world is different in some way, it has ramifications over the whole of history and society. Nothing is a given anymore. Sorry to add to your workload...

someday they'll realise how lucky they are to have me

Steve Sneyd

They try to make me
ashamed of my status, my
immortality,
saying do i not feel so
inferior, unable
to share the edge their
promise of an end brings, my
wine no real taste, my
art flat without precipice
theirs teeters over, seeing
such neat paradox
far wider deeper than mine
ever will be, can do:
i smile at the bastards, those
shortlifes, wait them out,
dance on
their graves year after
decade after century
buy generations
of mayfly critics can't wait
to enjoy life will say just
what i want to hear
of what i create keep price up
despite fact of life
will never enjoy sort of
boom their artists get post-
death

LET'S FACE THE FUTURE WITH A SMILE

In my first column for *Focus* under Martin McGrath's stewardship (and thanks to Simon Morden for the previous years), I'd like to start with a challenge.

In the last couple of years, SF short stories have been predominantly dark and pessimistic. Not all of them – there are obvious exceptions, like for instance Jason Stoddard's "Winning Mars" (*IZ* #196) – but the majority most definitely is. I was discussing this with the afore-mentioned Jason Stoddard, and we agree that it's almost as if it's forbidden to write an uplifting story.

Problem is, that writing a *convincing* optimistic story is difficult, very difficult. Or, to quote Gardner Dozois: "As someone who has written post-apocalyptic stuff myself, I can tell you that it IS easier. It's easier to write about how the current world went wrong than it is to come up with believable ways how the current world is going to survive and prosper (to say nothing of changing in unexpected ways)."

For example, *High Country News* (*HCN*) magazine put out a call to submissions for the 2006 Summer Reading Issue, calling for a short story that showed how things developed for the better in the American Midwest. They already had a dystopian story (Paolo Bacigalupi's "The Tamarisk Hunter"), and wanted to offset it with an optimistic one, and they were willing to pay well (30 cents a word). "We're not looking for an idyllic utopia, but a realistic assessment of people and their place in the landscape." Many stories were sent in, none were taken. Or, to quote their Special Summer Reading Issue's editorial: "Some interesting glimmers, but no one had a plausible explanation for how we might get from here to there."

At LACon IV, Paolo Bacigalupi told me that the readers *HCN* were both extremely well-known and highly critial about all matters Midwest, so that trying to write a convincing optimistic story about the American Midwest was like trying to pass a fictional story about a Theory of Everything through an editorial board consisting of Albert Einstein, Richard Feynman, and Edward Witten. Well-nigh impossible.

Also, Tor editor Patrcik Nielsen Hayden had planned to edit an anthology called *Up*, to be filled with stories about how the future changed for the better. That was back in 2002, and as far as I know that project is still on ice.

Now, I'm not asking you to please the readers of *HCN*. However, I am getting fed up with all these dark and dystopian stories. I agree with Jason Stoddard when he said that Paolo (Bacigalupi) is a great writer, but that his stories sometimes make me scream in despair, because of their bleakness. And I sincerely wonder if writers *really* like a challenge.

> "I sincerely wonder if writers *really* like a challenge."

"Well, to be perfectly honest, we weren't going to revive you. However, the rest of your species is extinct and we are in desperate need of someone to throw us a stick."

So here it is: write an ambitious story about how the future changes for the better: one that is convincing, as well. As realistic and plausible as you can get it. Then send it my way when I re-open *Interzone* for email submissions (probably May 2007, but keep an eye on our website and Ralan.com), or to another market. Get it out there.

Of course, this doesn't mean we should go back to unlimited, naive optimism of the pulp era, or the 50s. It also means we shouldn't aim at the romance genre's HEA (happily ever after) as a prerequisite. No: we live in the 21st Century, so give me a 21st Century story. Let it be grounded in the real, but a real that is more than just nihilistic, cynical, diffident, or disinterested. The progress can be incredibly hardfought, the progress can be met with all possible resistance, have setbacks, and all. But in the end, let there be *some* kind of progress.

In short, give me a gritty pollyanna, and show me it's not an oxymoron.

And, while we're at it, let it be *ambitious*. Joe Sixpack getting a better job is trivial. Jane Doe winning an office argument is boring. Reach for the sky: try to find at least a partial solution, a partly positive development from the great problems of our time. You could do worse than reading through *Edge*'s article "What Are You Optimistic About? Why?", online here: http://edge.org/q2007/q07_index.html, where some of the greatest minds of our time answer exactly that question. Obviously, Jason Stoddard and I are not the only ones who are tired of this trend of depressive thinking.

Don't be a part of the problem, be a part of the solution. Write that story: it'll be a hard, enormously hard. But the reward is phenomenal. Be inspired, and then be an inspiration. Let's face the future with a smile.

Jetse de Vries is:
a) A technical specialist for a propulsion company;
b) One of *Interzone*'s editors;
c) An SF short story writer with stories upcoming in *Hub*, *Postscripts*, and *Clarkesworld Magazine*;
d) All of the above;
e) None of the above.

MASTERCLASS No.1: POINT OF VIEW

This is the first of what is planned to be a regular series. My brief from Martin McGrath is to pass on some ideas about the craft of writing. OK, but it will have to be in bits, and in no particular order. If contradictions emerge (they probably will), then that will only reflect the subjective nature of writing. This is a territory where there are no rules.

Well, there is one. The rule book says you're not allowed to go and scour through my back-list in search of rotten examples that will prove I can dish it out but can't take it. Connected with this, I've always believed that when a known writer offers writing advice, then he or she is basically defending their own position. I can't really see how to avoid that here, but at least you know where you stand when reading what follows. I have also always believed that writing is something that cannot be taught, but it can be learned by the right person. Agree or disagree you may. There's nothing definitive here, but a few summaries of things I've found helpful. As the series develops (if Mr McGrath allows it to) inconsistencies as well as contradictions might emerge. Well, then.

The exercises are exercises, not ideas for stories. Please do not send the results to me.

As we have no particular order, let's start with two very different subjects. The first is long, the second is short. The first will be familiar to anyone who has been to a writers' workshop, but is none the less always worth going over. The second is a personal quirk, the subject of a lifetime's private ranting, a sign of a battle lost but one where the fight goes pointlessly on forever ...

[No, it's not maps in fantasy novels. Those might come later.]

Christopher Priest
2007

Point of view in fiction, the viewpoint of the story, seems endlessly misunderstood. Some writers never seem to grasp it; others become hidebound by it. Many people simply don't know what it is. Others say it doesn't matter. Some writers say they know all about viewpoint, yet every time they type more than three consecutive sentences they reveal they haven't the foggiest idea what it is or how to use it. Others claim that writers paying attention to viewpoint are paying attention to a hobgoblin of little minds. Interestingly, perhaps, many publisher's editors have no awareness of it, haven't the faintest idea about how it should be used, nor why it matters. For all these reasons it is one of the elements of literature which is of the purest interest to writers.

Viewpoint is directly related to narration, or storytelling. It's a way into the character's minds and experiences, and therefore a way of gaining access to the reader's mind. It is literally a point of view, as seen and described by the author, getting into the mind of or behind the eyes of the characters.

In fiction, there are six different ways of treating Point of View.

First-person narrator

This is by far the most common direct viewpoint device: any story or novel told by "I" is being narrated by the central character, the author disguised as his leading actor. It is also the easiest to describe and recognize, and helps elucidate the less obvious variants that follow.

Some of the greatest works in science fiction have been told using first-person viewpoint: *The War of the Worlds* and *The Time Machine* are perhaps the greatest, but there are many more. Other examples are legion, both within the sf genre and without. My own choice of favourite first-person novel in the mainstream is a close-run thing between *Great Expectations* and *The Magus*.

To write effectively in the first person, the writer must imagine and describe everything from the point of view of the narrating character. Only the five main senses may be summoned: sight, sound, taste, touch, smell. (OK, add telepathy, etc., if it's that kind of SF.) If the narrator is not there when something happens, it cannot be described as part of the narrative (but a messenger rushing in with the news can certainly impart the event to the narrator). You cannot impute feelings or sensations to other characters. If the narrator embarrasses a woman friend of his, he may notice only that she looked embarrassed, or responded in an embarrassed way. The narrator cannot say that she felt embarrassed. If the narrator falls asleep or is knocked unconscious, the narrative must stop until consciousness returns.

Once you start imagining a story through this particular viewpoint, you quickly understand its limitations and its range.

Some writers loathe the first-person and claim that it narrows the

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PRIESTLY EXERCISES

Describe the room you are in as you walk around in search of a long rope. (Use first-person narrator. Max. 500 words.)

Now describe the room you are in, told from the point of view of someone hanging upside down from the ceiling. His/her ankles are held by a rope. A candle flame is slowly burning through the rope. (Use first-person narrator. Max. 500 words – last one must not be "Aaargh!")

Now describe the room you are in, told from the point of view of someone who rushes in to investigate a crashing noise and smell of burning sisal. (Use first-person narrator. Max. 500 words.)

possibilities of what they can write about. At least one editor agrees – a few years ago, she banned first-person narratives as an editorial policy, because she said it was impossible to write good SF or fantasy from such a narrow viewpoint. (Lucky for her that Wells and Lovecraft had given up writing by then.)

While acknowledging the limitation, I have always believed that first-person narrative, handled correctly, will actually widen a writer's possibilities.

For one thing, the 'I' viewpoint can be very readable and interesting, because the reader will quickly start identifying with the character. A story told as an account of direct personal experience can be gripping.

It represents our normal experience of the world: we go, we see, we smell, etc., and can only infer what else is going on beyond our immediate senses. Most of us perceive our own lives as mundane. But what was it like to fall in love with a glamorous enemy spy, or go over the Niagara Falls in a barrel, or meet Oliver Cromwell in person? This is the stuff of fiction, and a first-person account of such things gets our immediate attention. In our real lives we cannot experience the crashing of the plane we are not on, the mudslide destroying the village we left several years ago, the love affair between two acquaintances ... but if someone tells us or describes it to us, we gain an interesting second- or third-hand insight that might tell us something about the other person (and if you use the technique in fiction, you might reveal something about the narrator). All this sort of thing, handled properly, will enhance the sense of realism.

Also, seeing events from only one point of view means the narrator will inevitably miss seeing certain things. Or misunderstand what other people say to him. Or blunder into a trap the reader might sense has been waiting for him. Opportunities for irony, humour, suspense and unreliability are endless.

First-person narrator, at a slight distance

The essence of this approach is that the narrator is present during the principal events of the story. He or she witnessed the story and wants to report it, but was not the protagonist.

The technique has some of the same advantages and disadvantages of a plain first-person narrative. But it adds an extra dimension, a certain distance from the main events, allowing for comment, elucidation, context.

Probably the best-known (and most subtle) practitioner of this style in the SF genre is John Wyndham. Many of his books have a first-person narrator, but there is usually someone else who is the protagonist. In *The Kraken Wakes* it is the narrator's wife Phyllis who does everything interesting or significant in the story. In *The Midwich Cuckoos* it is Zellaby, the talkative, opinionated man who owns the big house in the village. In *The Day of the Triffids* it is (arguably) Coker, the radical social theorist. It is certainly not Bill Masen, the narrator, who observes everything but does almost nothing.

In *Midwich* the narrator, Richard Gayford, is knocked unconscious at the end of Chapter 1, only recovering three pages into Chapter 4. How does the story continue in his absence? It's a puzzle Raymond Chandler never solved, because whenever Philip Marlowe was knocked unconscious, nothing more happened until he was ruefully rubbing the back of his head and finding his desk had been ransacked.

Third-person leading character(s), close focus

Third person singular ('he' or 'she') but the narrative is concentrated on one character. Let's say it is 'she'. She has a name, a life, an appearance, memories, feeling, experiences, conversations, relationships. She leads the plot of the story, but the narration is tied to her as tightly as it would be as if she were telling the story herself.

When we follow her viewpoint, the reader can follow only what she does. If she interacts with other characters, we see only her point of view of that interaction. If she runs, falls in water, has sex, eats dinner, the reader finds out how it feels to her but not to anyone else. In dialogue, she says what she thinks but can only hear what other people say (she has no access to their thoughts). If she for example embarrasses someone (see above) she can only notice that the other person looks embarrassed, or responds in an embarrassed way. To do otherwise (for instance, to have the other character think, 'How dare that bitch speak to me like that?') would be to break the narrative convention you have adopted.

This kind of third-person narrative is in widespread use, and it has many attractions, not least of which is that the slight extra distance away from the central character allows the author a greater freedom with language. The authorial voice can write lyrically, descriptively, allusively, etc., whereas if the voice is locked behind the eyes of a first-person narrator, the author should try to write as if he were the narrator. Suppose the narrator is an uneducated thicko with a limited vocabulary – to be consistent the

PRIESTLY EXERCISES

Your new car is stolen while your back is turned. The thieves are two teenagers who argue with each other while they drive away. Describe. (Use first-person, at a distance. Max. 500 words.)

Two friends discuss you while you are on the other room. (Use first-person, at a distance. Max. 500 words.)

PRIESTLY EXERCISES

A and B are arguing. The narrative is focused on A (a man), but B (a woman) annoyingly wins the argument. (Use third-person, close focus. Max. 500 words.)

A and B are arguing. The narrative is focused on B (a woman), but A (a man) annoyingly concedes in the first line that she is probably correct. He has remembered that he must be somewhere else, but can't reveal to her where. (Use third-person, close focus. Max. 500 words.)

whole book should be written as if by an uneducated thickie. Not much fun in that for either reader or writer. Third person narrative allows a distance, more room for manoeuvre.

Note that the sub-heading mentions character or characters. One of the advantages of third-person narration is that shifting over to another character's point of view is much more natural... but in the present category we are considering close focus: a narrative that concentrates on one person at a time.

Within this remit it's possible to switch from one character to another, or from one character to several others, but the close focus should be maintained. Because of that, if the viewpoint switches too often it simply becomes confusing to the reader. [Reader, frowning: "Which 'he' are we talking about now? I thought he went to Sweden on the previous page."] The solution is to think structurally: perhaps only shift viewpoint whenever a new chapter begins, and stay with the new viewpoint until the end of that chapter, then change again. [This was the technique I used in my incredibly ancient novel *A Dream of Wessex*.] If you find you want to change viewpoint more often than that, maybe you are writing in the wrong voice, so see below: there are three more choices to come.

Close-focus third-person narrative also has the advantage that by staying locked in on one person at a time, there are the same perverse opportunities as writing in the first person: missing the point, not noticing things, misunderstanding, not being present when something important happens. Irony occurs.

Omniscient or "involved" author [third person]

Imagine you the writer are able to hover at will above your characters and the events they are enacting. You may describe what you see without fussing about whose viewpoint is being borrowed. At any time you may swoop down to look closely at them, or at any of them. You know what they are thinking, what they are intending to do, what they did before the story began and what they are likely to do once the story is over.

As they fall in love you are there to help them along, or to judge them, or to warn them of shady pasts. As the happy couple fall into bed shedding their clothes in randy eagerness, you are there to have a quick peek at what's going on under the bedclothes, or to retreat prudently from the room before things get out of [or into] hand. If one of the characters embarrasses the other, you are there not only to feel the humiliation of the victim, but to share the pangs of regret of the perpetrator.

Because you know the plot in advance, you can select one or more of your characters to succeed, or to be eaten by a tiger, or to be impoverished, or to win the lottery. You can also change your mind. If you briefly tire of the characters you can swoop up into the air again, and have a look around at the scenery and describe it, even if the characters themselves are unable to see it. The story is yours. You have authority over it, and the characters are subservient to your will.

Yes ... you are Go–

No, stop!, don't let it go too far! You are not even a lower-case god to these people, since they do not actually exist [This is called a reality check. The Sims don't exist, either.] However you are all-seeing and all-knowing. The word 'omniscient', used in the sub-heading above, is probably as close as it gets, but Ursula Le Guin, for example, says she dislikes the word in this context. She says that for her it contains a hint of judgmental sneer. Who can argue with her? Le Guin prefers 'involved author'. But you get the general idea.

Changing viewpoint is not an issue here. It is in fact the whole idea. The real narrator [the author] is not part of the story, so he/ she can hand it over to the characters. However, the general warnings about viewpoint-change are still valid. Do it too often and you risk confusing the reader; you will also throw away chances for dramatic tension or irony.

When to be an involved author? I believe it could boil down to the question of authority or control. Some writers make their stories up as they go along, others work everything out in advance. The instinctive writer will tend to prefer a first-person or close-focus third-person viewpoint, because the character and the author will discover the details of the story as they unfold. But if you are able to work out your plot in advance, and the setting, and the main characters, then you would benefit by the greater descriptive freedoms of the omniscient viewpoint.

I'm one who makes things up as I go along, but I accept this is not the only way. My own experience is that once a story gets going the characters tend to take over, and all thoughts of controlling them have to be abandoned. This seems natural and exciting to me. But controller writers think my way is chaotic and unreliable. Everyone has to find what's best.

Fly-on-the-Wall [or 'detached' author [third person]

The sub-heading says it all. The author writes from a completely detached viewpoint, comparable [say] to a CCTV camera or a webcam.

PRIESTLY EXERCISES

You are at a soiree in Petersburg, Imperial Russia. The year is 1805. The drawing room is filled with princes, counts, generals, viscounts, who are chatting about their social lives. However, they are all aware that war is about to break out. They disperse to confront Napoleon's army as he invades. Describe. [Use involved author, third person. Formal titles, patronymics and suffixes allowed. Max. 600,000 words.]

There are six named competitors in a 100-yard dash. Describe the race from start to finish. [Use involved author, third person. Formal titles, patronymics and suffixes not necessary. Max. 500 words or 100 yards.]

PRIESTLY EXERCISES VI

A man steps incautiously into a bath and sits down. The water is much too hot. While he is trying to scramble to safety, a woman he does not know enters the room. Describe [Use fly-on-the-wall, third person. Max. 140*.]

A man is standing on the main pier at Orly Airport, Paris. He witnesses a scene of violence, and an image of a young woman's face. Describe [Use fly-on-the-wall; third person. Max 500 words.]

The only events described – action, dialogue, etc. – are what can be observed or heard. We never enter the minds of the characters. Descriptions should be exact and detailed, but what is revealed by them?

This is an interesting way to write if you can sustain it. The effect can be cool, ironic, sometimes humorous, sometimes didactic ... but it can also seem flat and 'alienating'. The point is that by leaving a lot unsaid, the writer is inviting the readers to make their own interpretations. Here is an extract from *Blind Date* by Jerzy Kosinski (1978):

> Levanter woke from this afternoon nap. He bathed, dressed, and went down to the hotel dining room. After dinner, he wandered into the hotel bar for a drink. Sitting alone in the bustling cocktail lounge, he watched as a woman entered with two small girls: all three had thick blond hair and pale green eyes. The woman scanned the room for an empty table, and quickly navigated a path through the crowd to the vacant table on Levanter's left. Once she was seated, she began to inspect the room. She glanced briefly at Levanter, but when she saw that he was looking at her, her gaze quickly shifted.

Although one can deduce that Levanter is the central character, we learn nothing about him from the text. Nor do we learn anything about the woman and the girls. We observe everything these people do, and the rest is up to us.

Viewpoint change is irrelevant here, because there is no viewpoint. Should a viewpoint become apparent, the writer has lost control of the material.

Third-person narrator, at a slight distance

I mention this for sake of completeness, but it is I think rarely used in modern fiction. It's the third-person counterpart of no.2 in this series: a named character who is present during the main events of the story, but who either takes a minor part in them or no part at all. A servant or slave, perhaps, or a child, a relative, a friend.

Questions of unreliability might arise, which suggests interesting ways in which this viewpoint might be deployed by an ambitious writer.

The psychological restrictions of no.2 will apply, but also the relative freedoms to diversify a little.

Viewpoint is from a limited third-person, not the principal character, whose feelings may be described, but (as above) is present at the events only as a witness.

Conclusion

To sum up, the main requirement of viewpoint is that you understand it, then use it properly or imaginatively to gain the effect you most require. Never assume it is unimportant, or that it will sort itself out. Like so many elements of literature it is silently present and essential, it goes unsuspected or unnoticed by most readers, and it is misunderstood or ignored by bad writers.

PRIESTLY EXERCISES VII

Repeat the exercises from II (Use third-person, at a distance. Max. 500 words.)

DREAM SEQUENCES

A dream sequence is one in which the central character either falls asleep and has a dream, is knocked unconscious and has a dream, or is wandering around in an aimless state and has a dream.

Dreams in fiction are always enraging, maddening and pointless. They are employed by lazy writers, who believe in error that if they invent a dream it will provide them with a short-cut. In this short-cut they can telegraph the character's hang-ups, neuroses, fears and other features of character which could and should be established by conventional literary means, but which are thought to be too hard or time-consuming. Similarly, the same lazy writer, sensing a tricky plot development ahead, thinks a dream will prepare the ground symbolically.

In this we detect the three main rules of the lazy writer's dream sequence. It must have hints about fascinating psychological hang-ups, it must have other characters from the story playing symbolic roles, and it must go on for at least three pages.

To most readers, some things are abundantly clear. Firstly, the dream they are reading is completely unlike any dream they have ever experienced themselves. Secondly, the psychological hang-ups are never fascinating, or for that matter even mildly interesting. Thirdly, any suspicion of symbolism means you have to try to interpret it, or (worse) have to remember it in the long pages that lie ahead and in which everything is likely to be influenced by this bloody dream. And fourthly, after half a page of this stuff, the thought of at least another two and a half pages to come means ... it's time to slam the book closed.

If you have read this short, lucid and enviably calm argument about dream sequences, and you subsequently write a dream sequence, I will personally track you to your lair and hurt you.

PRIESTLY EXERCISES VIII

A man falls out of a plane at 35,000 feet. He is saved by a giant white dove who reminds him of his mother. The dove deposits him safely in a swamp, which has yellow water and which smells of excrement. Describe his dream that night. [Max. 3 pages, then hide.]

PAR FOR THE COURSE: WHAT COURSE IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

So you start writing. It's not as simple as it looked, but you persevere. Then you realise you could do with more objective help than family and friends. The time has come to interact with strangers.

Most of us begin by joining like-minded types willing to help each other, local circles or online groups like orbiters. Naturally these vary, but they're free, they're potentially (and usually) helpful, and you can always move on if one doesn't suit.

Going further means paying, say for local college classes or correspondence courses. A postal course I tried had a money-back clause if you completed it without earning your fee back but the only thing I recall learning from it was how to format an article, despite the fancy texts and structured coursework! The fiction side actually put me off. You may find a better one, but that was my money wasted, and it made me cautious.

So what's next?

You may not be Shakespeare (yet) but you reckon you're improving; getting closer. Time to consider a more concentrated approach?

For a very few this could be a degree course, or something like Clarion, six weeks in the USA or Australia, but most people are prevented by the time and cost involved (think in thousands). So the most likely choice is a one-week residential course run by a published writer; essentially an activity holiday, but shouldn't you enjoy it?

(A note here; it's often possible for non-writing partners to go too, but it's a good idea to consider: do you want them, and will they actually enjoy it? Will *you* be better off talking to them rather than the other members in the evening? Will *they* want to be surrounded by a group discussion on the gremlins in your writing?)

Finding the course for you

Research as widely as you can. Look on the net, or writers' magazines, or ask the group you know already.

How do you choose?

Try this checklist; pointers I have learned, the hard way. Ask yourself:

1. Am I ready for this? – you should consider a group before a course, and the honest truth is if you can't take criticism, or meet deadlines, you're not likely to learn much from a solid week either.
2. What should I *expect*? - Is the course geared to your experience level, or the genre you are working in? If you're not sure what's on offer, ask for details. If you're still not, either ask again, or look further.

> "Research as widely as you can. Look on the net, or writers' magazines, or ask the group you know"

3. Who's who? Do you know this writer? Do you like/appreciate their work? Have they done this before, or are they in some way 'qualified' to teach you? Being able to write doesn't always mean able to pass on their knowledge. How do you find out? By tracking websites or articles, or opportunities to hear them speaking, eg at conventions or signings. Ask yourself, do I want to spend a week with this person?
4. What's what? - Is the course *planned*, rather than artistically 'fluid'? Are you asked to send samples of your work beforehand? Will there be one-to-one sessions as well as group ones?
5. Where? - Is the venue/ organisation established and experienced, and somewhere you want to go to?

Don't take any of the above for granted, because some deliver a lot less, and it's your money. But there are some very worthwhile courses out there.

So how do you get the most from your final choice?

1. If possible prepare beforehand, or do some reading.
2. Submit the best sample you can, but *don't* send more than the permitted length.
3. Make sure you pay attention. That doesn't mean spend a week taking copious notes. You'll see little with your head down, and good tutors will provide them.
4. Find a balance between getting actual work done and chatting with other members, both are valuable.
5. Listen more than talk?
6. Look around you for the strengths, and weaknesses, of both the tutor's writing and the other members'? Learn from *everyone*.

What if the week still isn't what you thought?

1. Take a breath before you complain too loudly? Did you make unreasonable assumptions, e.g. does the tutor have time to discuss your entire novel *and* do the same for sixteen to twenty others? Or indeed can everyone read through ten thousand words from everyone else and have time to write as well?
2. Did you really expect to hear nothing but compliments about your writing?
3. If you still feel disappointed, then say so, politely. That way maybe the tutor can alter the format a

Terry Jackman coordinates the BSFA's online Orbiter groups. Contact her at terryjackman@tiscali.co.uk for further information.

bit, especially if others agree. At worst, you might help improve the next course.

Lastly, how can you make more use of the experience?

1. Ask yourself, *what* did I learn, and am I *doing* anything about it? Don't throw the notes in a drawer, *use* them.
2. Rewrite a piece you submitted, and *study* the result
3. If you got something from the experience don't forget to *spread the word*. That way the best courses will prosper, and everyone who should will profit

My own favourites? Arvon is generally fun, and they appoint two writers in charge. They don't do SF every year though. As with other courses the standards can vary with the writers chosen, not necessarily because of their writing skills, as mentioned earlier, but because of their teaching ability or the amount of hard work they contribute. Still I'd recommend them.

My best so far? A fantasy course with Juliet McKenna at Castle of Park. The dearest Iwouldn't you know it?I but the course ticked almost all my boxes. The quirky venue, safe from interruptions, gave me friendly staff and super food, and even a four poster! The writer had both literary and organisational experience, demonstrated throughout, and was nice enough not to vanish from sight between sessions either, which you shouldn't count on.

It was enjoyable and educational, and I can tell myself I didn't waste my money but no, money doesn't guarantee results. Not being a `celeb', I may not win the Booker prize just yet, or sign that million dollar deal.

It's a gamble.

Let's hope some of us will win it

See the page opposite for the experiences of Nick Wood, who attended this year's Arvon sf writing course.

When we are reminded to remember

Steve Sneyd

"in spite of things gone silently out of mind and things violently destroyed, the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society."
William Wordsworth, 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads, 1802

i had to follow Kxandra
she was just crazy enough
to do what she'd said

before he goes she'd said
i'm going to have him get his sperm
then i'll have his child

then we'll have one of our own
won't need to wait for Them
to send one once a whatever

thousand years i said
he'll be all alone she'd said
he won't have a guard

i'll just go straight in
he won't be able to resist me
she'd grinned no man can

he'll be tied exhausted
all that journey and then
all those hours

all those epics old Earth
how beautiful how wonderful
how sad all those wars deaths

heroes i said
heroines she'd said and how
the Empire was made all through

all the stars how we're still
part of it even though the ships
never come any more or any

goods from there or any
tribute from here still we're
part of it if we stay faithful

one day when we die we'll
rise again on heaven that is
Earth itself so many towers
how

he said so perfect glorious
he looked just like the holograph
we have from last time not

changed a bit that's what he said
she'd said on Earth they're immortal if we
stay faithful when we rise again

there we'll be immortal too when i
have my daughter by him – it might
be a son i'd said she'd sneered

she'll be immortal too our OUR
poet we won't need Earth anymore we'll
be free at last she'd got in easy

i sneaked in behind and hid and watched
she was onto him straight away she
had him like she'd said for an instant

i thought the great lion head planned
to bite hers off midmate she screamed
and then in climax he burst a flood
of clockwork rust

THE JOY OF CRAIG: EXPERIENCES AT AN ARVON COURSE

Ever watchful for a writing course or book on writing that would distract me from *actually* writing; I spotted the Arvon science fiction course while browsing on the Web. I quickly signed up and, in the last week of August 2006, trundled down a steep valley track to an old grey manor house. I found out that the place had been owned previously by the poet Ted Hughes and was known as 'Lumb Bank', based on the outskirts of the village of Heptonstall in West Yorkshire. Deeper into the cobbled stone village is St Thomas Churchyard, where Sylvia Plath lies buried.

An impressive and daunting literary heritage suffused the place then - and I felt the first stirrings of performance anxiety. These were allayed to some extent at our first group meeting – there Ted Hughes' revealed herself reincarnated as a friendly and lazy black feline, who took turns to sprawl on any willing laps. The group of participants for the week's writing course was an interesting and eclectic mix of aspiring writers seeking to develop their craft. The tutors for the course were Adam Roberts and Justina Robson; who took turns to present but were always there to support each other and chip in as needed. Adam tended to be the more obvious and informatively chatty extrovert; but Justina's contributions, although quieter and a little less frequent that Adam's, were apposite, insightful and helpful too.

So what did we learn then? Valuable for me was the exercise to identify the core concern of the [short] story we were working on in one sentence. This was challenging but useful in terms of helping to ensure a focused story with a unifying theme. The issue of the 'novum' [Darko Suvin] was interesting to explore too – i.e. what is the point of 'difference' in the story that provides the contrast with the real, the sense of 'cognitive estrangement'? More to the point though, is it actually integral to the story's core concern, or just exotic 'window dressing'?

There was a lot more too, dealing with the nuts and bolts of writing, such as structure, characterisation, style and spec-fic markets. We even got to hear Gwyneth Jones read from her *White Queen* trilogy, which was a wonderful experience, but tinged with the anxiety of knowing she was an impossible act to follow – yet follow we had to, as the next day we were all expected to publicly read from our own writings!

> "but no doubt the art of writing lies in writing, not attending writing workshops or reading books on writing"

Having said that, the expectations proved far worse than the event – despite having an aversion to public performance, I managed the (literal!) spotlight reasonably well, with a minimum of stuttering. (I think the occasion was smoothed to some extent by a collegial atmosphere and liberal sprinklings of excellent red wine.) There were some great readings by the other participants which proved a fitting finale to the course.

But what was most helpful of all about the Arvon course? For me, it was the individual feedback provided by both Adam and Justina, who gave tutorials to each participant, and discussed the stories they had been given to read. The detailed feedback I got from both Adam and Justina felt extremely helpful and, needless to say, is still something I'm trying to put into practice. (One aspect of the feedback was the need to find consistent and significant space and time to write, rather than scribbling frantically in stolen moments.)

I think it also helped that we had a lot of good fun too – we discovered the thriller writings of Craig Thomas (*Firefox*, *Playing with Cobras* etc) – which, along with a generous communal wine budget – illuminated our evenings together. (For those who might be interested, Adam has written an online commentary entitled 'The Joy of Craig' in the Valve at: www.thevalve.org/go/valve/article/the_joy_of_craig/)

It felt like much was learned in a densely packed week – but no doubt the art of writing lies in *writing*, not attending writing workshops or reading books on writing. It does give me some pleasure to feel I have made a start by at least writing about a writing workshop. Actually, I *did* write a story at Arvon – now if only I can get someone to buy the damn thing! Oh well, back to more 'real' writing – short stories, that defiant novel – ah, but first there's that new Craig Thomas book to get through...

- Adam Roberts' *Gradisil* has been nominated for the 2007 Arthur C. Clarke Award.
- Justina Robson's *Living Next Door to the God of Love* has been nominated for the 2007 Philip K Dick Award.
- For more information on the Arvon Foundation and the courses they offer, visit: www.arvonfoundation.org

Nick Wood is an aspiring author

SCRIPTWRITING: FROM PAGE TO RAGE (PART 2)

In part two of his feature on scriptwriting, Gavin Williams offers some thoughts on the progress of a script, from initial idea to vague waving distance of the screen.

"Hello, I'm trapped in the belly of a script and I can't get out. Please send help quickly!"

At this stage, some real fun occurs – it's back to play school! Everyone gets markers and great whopping sheets of paper and starts drawing all over the walls! Sort of... and not always. But now you've been properly employed it's time to "break" the story in full i.e. time to flesh out your tentatively mapped out dirt tracks into fully realised plot lanes (this is assuming you weren't already asked to do so with a full-length ubertreatment– see, I told you it was a messy, contradictory process).

This tends to mean getting into a room with a small group of people – producer, head of development, and possibly script editor (well, definitely in TV, occasionally in film) – and just talking ideas over, thrashing shit out. It's here that the collaborative aspects of screenwork come into their own for a writer. Writers – particularly if they come from a prose background – are typically trapped in a room all day, alone, slaving over a hot keyboard, so it's a real rush to spend creative time *with other people*! Days just talking ideas, arguing, getting inspired and sparking off other thoughts and experiences. This is when you might use visual aids, sketching out story arcs and wotnot on bits of old wallpaper then pining them proudly up on the wall so you can all stand back and uhm and ahh in unison. As many people know most big, long-running American shows work primarily in this fashion (*New Galactica, Friends*, you name it) employing a Writer's Rooms, sessions where everyone sits around a conference table with hot and cold running doughnuts and talks out the show. After all the laughter has died down, the tears of the vanquished have dried and the stories all worked out, the individual episodes are then divvied up amongst the staff writers, who mainly work on-site at the show's production offices, and they go off to make the magic that is TV actually happen.

In our version, too, once everyone is satisfied with the road map you've collaboratively created it's time finally – deep breath – to go away and write a first draft of your script!

Now, scripts are a much less labour intensive form than novels (i.e. Shorter), but WAY more structurally reliant. Novels can easily be cursive, ambling, mood pieces and the author doesn't really need to know what going to happen on the next page until... well, the page before, really. In Screenwriting, by contrast, you need to know pretty much everything up-front, day one, and preferably two weeks before that.

I am quite rigid in my preparation to write, even *after* breaking the story with colleagues, and I usually go on to take an extra stage or two just to ensure my plotting is sound and that everything is ticking along like clockwork. I write the whole story out in bullet points on wee filing cards and blue-tac them to the wall so that I can see the whole story laid out. Whether it's because you are employing a different, visual part of your brain, or simply it's the perspective of seeing the narrative laid out in its entirety, this is very good way to spot flaws in the planning, and to painlessly to test, and shift around, elements simply by moving cards around the structure. It's something I heartily recommend. From that wall I then write a *very* detailed step outline, up to thirty pages, into which goes all my other satellite notes and jottings from the bus

Then I start the draft.

Again, this might all seem needlessly anal, but, honestly, it is worth labouring over. As has already been observed screenwork is expensive by its very nature, and you will always be limited by what your team – whoever they might be – is prepared to fund. This can be a budget concern, but isn't necessarily, as certain genres have certain requirements. For instance, a standard feature script for a Romantic Comedy should come in at approximately an hour and a half, an hour three quarters. That's 90 to a 105 pages, the rough rule of thumb being that one page of script equals one minute of screen time. So, should you deliver up, oooh, say a 162 page document, then there is a problem... As has, er, been patiently explained to me at some length in the past.

Clearly, it pays of to get your planning absolutely licked before you even *start* typing "Scene 1..". Again, the comparison to prose is useful: for most novelists the greatest part of the work – and often the joy of it, too – comes from sitting down in front of that page or screen and bullying their imagination out onto the page. You really feel you're working, solving problems, breathing life into characters and events, digging out glittering sentences from the sheer word face. That's when you feel the burn, man. You end up with, who knows, five good pages after you've finished, and it has the emotional weight. A good days work you can feel and hold. Writing a script feels much more like empty calories, because banging out the actual dialogue is almost like an afterthought, once all that earlier work on structure is done. It's the dotting of 'i's and crossing of 't's and it's not where the real graft is located. If you've done all your planning properly the actual, physical writing should flow like water.

One other piece of wisdom, which is easy to lose sight of when it's just words on the page, is that a script is a visual medium... so make it visual. This is more than just the basic writer's creed of Show Don't Tell. A script will be *seen*, so conjure up that experience visually and it'll have more chance of jumping the gap into actual production. Think of how many times you've read a review which criticises an adaptation of a play for not escaping its "stage-bound" origins. One interesting exercise is to go through your script and see whether, if you removed ALL of the dialogue, would it still make any sense? If not, it may be worth taking a second pass at it. The dialogue is the candy on the cake. The pictures are the cake. They are the bones of how you tell the story. After all, it's not radio. Remember that small visual incidents can have huge power when magnified up on the screen.

So, screenwriting, to recap: planning hard, writing easy (sort of). Re-writing...? Oh sweet Jesus–

The hundred-bladed, revolving, flesh-cutting rewrite machine or "I know it doesn't work, but it was YOUR idea in the first place!"

OK, my cardinal rule of scriptwriting would have to be: Don't Love it Too Much. Don't. Oh no, no, no, *no*. Don't, don't do it. No.

Of course, you need to love it *enough* to write it with passion and integrity and that's a difficult balance to strike, but if the project is too precious to you, you are only leaving yourself open to pain, pain, pain, and, possibly, ulcers. Save your love for prose. You are much less likely to suffer heartbreak with a novel, because you only have, really, your editor to answer to and argue with. In screenwriting EVERYBODY gets to chip in, and pretty much everyone else has more power than you. This is especially and horrifyingly true of film, as opposed to TV.

TV is often described as a writer's medium, whereas many film producer's would rather deal with a writer *through* a medium. Writers are considered, at best, a necessary evil and, at worst, an *un*-necessary evil, which is why many big American movies cavalierly start filming without even a finished script, having it completed, piecemeal, as shooting progresses. It is also why all of those movies are unmitigated horse shit. That'll teach 'em.

An added insult here is that, in film, you don t even own the rights to your idea. Unlike TV, where you tend to retain ownership of the concept you created, in film when a producer comes on board they buy out the rights to your script so as to be able to "fully exploit the property". As I understand it this is supposed to mean that you can't, further down the line, suddenly throw a shit-fit and cause major ructions in a multi-million dollar juggernaut, but it's still a tough trick. What it means in practice is that, if you created a TV idea then you can always keep a hand in if you want to, and retain some level of influence. In film, you can be fired off your own script. Yeah, I had to take a moment to let that one settle in when I first heard it. Smarts, doesn't it?

It's not universally true, of course, but in creative disagreements over the content of a novel a novelist should win out more times than they lose. With a script your odds are probably, what, one in five? Who knows? Not great, and, yet, you are the guardian of the writing. You are the only person who has an overview of the whole narrative and people *will* miss crucial aspects of the story, tinkering with them in a way which could throw off everything else. You are the one in a position to offer continuity throughout the making of the film and you have to stick to your guns, speak up even though the momentum is often not on your side. This doesn't make it any easier to accept or to deal with, and in some areas of the industry writers are still routinely treated in a pretty appalling fashion.

One option to avoid a sense of sullen impotence is to become a writer-director yourself and actually *make* the films you write. You retain far more control that way, but that may not be the job you had in mind. My advice? Maintain that emotional distance from all screen work. Again, don't love it. Don't merely *kill* your babies, treat them from day one with the grisly indifference of an infanticidal pet rat which eats its own young.

All my personal angst aside, however, it actually does stand to reason that the opinions of many people from all other stages in the production process should feed into your rewrite. A novel is a complete edifice, an expression of one person and what they want to say. Most importantly, it's a *finished* product. You don't get a package from Amazon with the latest Dan Simmons and then have to hire a hundred other people to help you put it together. A script, by contrast, is just the *start* of a film. To get it into a form where an audience can access it you need an army of other – equally skilled – professionals to come in and apply their craft to the project. I like to think of a script as a framework, the bones of a film, which everyone else comes along and layers a beautiful skin onto.

Furthermore, it is naturally true that there are actually many, many quite fabulous, generous and creative people working in all levels of the screen trade – as there are in every industry – and it's quite possible to go through your entire career with nothing but happy, cordial working experiences to speak of. But, for all the reasons outlined above, I d still say you should probably hold the whole circus at a distance of, well, at least *half* an arm's length.

The actual, physical process you go through when rewriting is pretty simple and deceptively benign. Once you have delivered your first draft – and a long enough interval has elapsed for your colleagues to read it and cogitate – you ll go back to the office to talk it over (it could happen over e-mail, but face to face is better and more common in my experience). You go in, you chat and receive their notes, then go away to write a second draft. You deliver it, they read it, you return for more notes. Wash, rinse, repeat... ad nauseam (components of your contract, notwithstanding).

For a writer rewriting is mostly always horrible, and always, always necessary but, due to the nature of the business, you often get rushed into it before your brain has quite had time to settle and get sufficient distance or perspective from your first draft work. This can make it a very painful process for the writer and it's not uncommon to go through ten, twelve drafts or [many] more to get it right. Things will change, then change back, sexes of characters might migrate, some may disappear entirely and, if things aren't going well, it can be tough for you to find solid ground amongst the constantly shifting morass of A plots, B plots, midpoints and dangerously untethered inciting incidents flapping round the room. For everyone else the rewrite can be quite a clinical process, but for the writer it's very personal and you feel like you are constantly being judged and criticised. Learning to deal with this constructively – and hang onto the spirit of that idea you wanted to write in the first place – can be one of the biggest challenges you face.

There are some, ahem, challenges that you can only chuckle at, though. A recurring problem I find is the Booby-trapped note. At a script meeting one of your colleagues will very insistently flag up a change to the story they are *certain* you should make. So, you're a pro, off you go and assiduously implement *exactly* those notes they gave you. However, when you all come back to discuss the following draft the *same* person, point by point, vehemently criticises most all those changes they *told* you to make, but – with the bare-faced innocence of a babe – as if they were all *your* idea! Granted, this is just human nature, but it doesn't make it any less silly.

Interesting ethical questions can arise, too, if exterior talent is drawn into the project *during* its period of development. For instance, you might be encouraged to rewrite or beef up certain characters in the script if an established performer has expressed interest in the role. Were they to come on board it would be much easier to secure a budget, or a series commission, and it's very tempting to capitulate. I was once asked to honey up a role in this manner, add a big speech, include some more comedy business, because a famous actor – and friend of the producer – was tempted to take the part. I was happy to do it. It wasn't any great distortion of the material, since the character in question was a lot of fun, anyway, and able to bear the magnification (I think the change helped the script a little, in fact) – but it does present an intriguing set of dilemmas, particularly if any of these aspects had not been the case and caused me to risk damaging the script by altering it. It is, however, just the way the world works and canny professionals learn to tack into these winds and sail *with* them, not against.

One terrible, central reality, though, which the rewrite process reveals and which you always have to be aware of is just how goddam long the process takes. Screenwriting takes **forever**. Seriously, you can get old waiting for your script to hobble onto the screen (I m currently doing rewrites on an original script I first wrote back in 1999!).

But not here, in our little imaginary article world, where everything is going well. In fact, much better than well... The script is down. It's done. It's rewritten to the nth degree. It's lean, it's tight, it's visual. The producers love it, the *exec* producers love it. The money loves it! The broadcasters/studio love it, too. It's going to get made. Yep, actually be shot and finally escape from the bindings of those bare, white pages. You've won, you're going to be okay! You can see the flickering silver – or cathode-ray – light at the end of the tunnel.

Run towards the light! *Run*!

And good luck.

Fingers crossed you don't need it when the reviews roll in.

UK SHORT FICTION MARKETS

There's no point toiling over your masterwork if no one else ever gets to read it. *Focus* will seek to provide you with the information you need to to get your story before the reader. In this issue, we present all the genre magazine markets in the UK and Ireland. We've tried to give you all the information you need to submit - but really, buy a copy, subscribe, support your local markets.

Albedo One

Albedo One, 2 Post Road, Lusk, Co Dublin, Ireland
www.albedo1.com
Eds. Co-op committee
Medium: Print/online, 2-3 per year
Genre: SF/fantasy/horror/slipstream/dark fantasy
Payment: €3 per 1,000 words, comp copy

Submissions

Max length: 8,000 words (flexible)
No reprints/no simultaneous or multiple submissions
Email bobn@yellowbrickroad.ie, in body of email, no attachments
Post to address above, sml or similar

Purchase

€2 pdf download, €6.25 single issue, €19.50 four issue subscription
Online via Paypal, or by post to address above

Ballista

Ballista Magazine,
Mucusart Publications,
6 Chiffon Way, Trinity
Riverside, Manchester, M3 6AB
www.mocusart.co.uk
Eds Paul Neads & Andrew Myers
Medium: Print, 2 per year
Genre: Slipstream/dark fantasy/horror/SF
Payment: £5 per story, comp copy

Submissions

Max length: 3,500 words
No reprints/No simultaneous submissions/ Up to 2 stories per submission
Email (preferred) paul@mucusart.co.uk in body of email, no attachments
Post: to address above, sml or similar

Purchase

£3.50 per issue, £10 for three issue sub
Online via Paypal or post to address above payable "P Neads"

Black Static (Formerly The 3rd Alternative)

TTA Press, 5 Martins Lane, Witcham, Ely, Cambs, CB6 2LB
www.ttapress.com
Ed. Andy Cox
Medium: Print/6 per year
Genre: Dark fantasy/horror
Payment: Pro-rates, by negotiation

Submissions

Max length: 15,000 (approx)
No reprints/no simultaneous or multiple submissions
Email: no
Post: To address above sml or similar

Purchase

£21 six issue subscription, £42 twelve issue subscription
Online by credit card, by post to address above payable "TTA Press"
NB Black Static *is currently on hiatus, a long-awaited relaunch is expected soon(ish)*

Dark Tales

Dark Tales, P.O. Box 681, Worcester, WR3 8WB, UK
www.darktales.co.uk
Ed. Sean Jeffry
Medium: Print, 4 per year
Genre: SF/horror/dark fantasy
Payment: £2.50 per 1,000 words, comp copy

Submissions:

Max length: 3,500 words (flash fiction considered)
No reprints/no simultaneous or multiple submissions
Email: no
Post: To address above, sml or similar

Purchase

£3.50 per issue, £12 for four issue sub
Online via Paypal or post to address above payable "Dark Tales"

Fiction Magazine

Fiction, 52 Clarks Road, Bridgwater, Somerset, TA6 [illegible]
www.fiction-online.co.uk
Ed. Stuart Tracey
Genre: SF/horror/fantasy
Payment: 2.4p per word

Submissions

Max length: Not specified, will serialise longer work
Email: stu@digital-addiction.co.uk, attachment only
Post: To address above, word/rtf file on CD only

Purchase

£1.99 per issue, no subscriptions
Online via Paypal (£0.75 surcharge), or by post to address above

Farthing (temp. closed to submissions)

Farthing Magazine, PO Box 49752, London, WC2E 9WW
www.farthingmagazine.com
Ed. Wendy Bradley
Medium: Print, 4 per year
Genre: SF/fantasy/horror
Payment: $0.05 per word (sterling equivalent)

Submissions

Max length: 7,000 words
No reprints/no simultaneous or multiple submissions
Email: farthingmagazine@gmail.com in body of email, no attachments
Post: no

Purchase

£15 for four issues
Online Paypal or post to address above payable "Farthing Magazine"

Forgotten Worlds

www.forgotten-worlds.co.uk
Eds John Cooper & Graeme Penman
Medium: Print, 4 per year
Genre: SF/horror/fantasy
Payment: 0.5p per word

Submissions

Max length: not set
No reprints/no simultaneous or multiple submissions
Email: submissions@forgotten-worlds.co.uk
Post: no

Purchase

£4 per issue, no subscription rate
Online via Paypal
NB Recently switched schedule from monthly to quarterly.

Four Volts

www.fourvolts.co.uk
Medium: Print/online, 6 per year
Genre: Literary/SF/horror/poetry/comics
Payment: comp copy

Submissions

Max length: not set (novellas serialised)
Email: fourvolts@hotmail.co.uk
Post: no

Purchase

£2 (pdf download), £3 per issue. No subscriptions
Online via Papal

Gold Dust

www.golddustmagazine.co.uk
Ed. David Gardiner
Medium: Print/online, 4 per year
Genre: Literary/mainstream/fantasy/sf
Payment: none

Submissions

Max length: 3000 words
Reprints and simultaneous submissions allowed/up to 3 stories per submission
Email: davidgardiner@worldonline.co.uk, MS Word attachment
Post: no

Purchase

Free (pdf download), £4 b&w/£9 colour from www.lulu.com

Hub

Hub Magazine, Unit 415, Clifton House, 7-9 Clifford Street, York YO1 9RA
www.hub-mag.co.uk
Ed. Lee Harris
Medium: Print, 6 per year
Genre: SF/fantasy/horror
Payment: £25 per 1,000 words

Submissions

Max length: Not specified
Reprints considered/simultaneous submissions allowed/no multiple submissions
Email: fiction@therighthand.co.uk, attachment only
Post: No

Purchase

£2 single issue pdf download, £3.50 single issue print, £18 six issue print subscription
Online by credit card or post to address above payable "The Right Hand"

Interzone

TTA Press,
5 Martins Lane,
Witcham, Ely,
Cambs, CB6 2LB
www.ttapress.com
Ed. Andy Cox
Medium: Print/6 per year
Genre: SF/fantasy
Payment: Pro-rates, by negotiation

Submissions

Max length: 15,000 (approx)
No reprints/no simultaneous or multiple submissions
Email: Not normally. Fixed reading periods when email submissions are accepted. Email submissions currently closed. Check website for further details
Post: To address above, sml or similar

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Interzone is the UK's longest running SF magazine and will celebrate its 25th anniversary with issue 209 (March)

Jupiter

Jupiter, 19 Bedford Road, Yeovil, Somerset, BA21 5UG
www.jupitersf.co.uk
Ed. Ian Redman
Medium: Print, 4 per year
Genre: SF/poetry
Payment: comp copies

Submissions

Max length: 10,000 words (2,000 min)
No reprints/no simultaneous or multiple submissions
Email: submissions@jupitersf.co.uk, MS Word/RTF attachments
Post: To address above, sml or similar

Purchase

£2.75 single issue, £10 four issue subscription
Online via Paypal, by post to address above, payable "Ian Redman"

Midnight Street (temp. closed to submissions)

Immediate Direction Publications, 7 Mountview, Church Lane West, Aldershot, Hampshire, GU11 3LN
www.midnightstreet.co.uk
Ed. Trevor Denyer
Medium: Print, 3 per year
Genre: SF/dark fantasy/horror/slipstream

Submissions

Max length: 6,000 words (some flexibility)
Reprints considered/no simultaneous or multiple submissions
Payment: £2.50 per 1,000 words, comp copy
Email: tdenyer@ntlworld.com, in body of email or as attachments
Post: To address above, sml or similar or on disc (MS Word, RTF)

Purchase

£3.50 single issue, £9.50 three issue subscription
Online via Paypal, by post to address above, payable "T. Denyer"

www.murkydepths.com
Eds: Terry Martin, Matt Wallace & Gill Ainsworth
Medium: Print, 4 per year
Genre: "Dark speculative fiction" SF/dark fantasy/horror
Payment: "prorated from 500 words up"

Max length: 5,000 words (firm)
No reprints/no simultaneous or multiple submissions
Email: subs@murkydepths.com, word or rtf attachment only
Post: no

£1.75 issue #0 (promo), £4.75 single issue, £16 four issue subscription
Online via Paypal

Nemonymous (submissions close on 31 March, 2007)

www.nemonymous.esmartdesign.com
Ed. Des Lewis
Medium: Print, irregular
Genre: Fantasy/horror/sf/slipstream
Payment: £50 per story

Submissions

Max length: 8,000 words
No reprints/no simultaneous submissions/maximum 2 stories per submission
Email: Anonymously emailed (see website for details on how to do this) in body of email, no attachments
Post: no

Purchase

Email dflewis48@hotmail.com for back issues, no subscriptions
nb: Publishes stories anonymously – author credits only published in subsequent issue or online post-publication. In Nemonymous 7 (next issue) a list of authors' names will be published in random order in the magazine but readers will not know wrote each story

Triquorum, Pendragon Press, PO Box 12, Maesteg, Mid Glamorgan, CF34 0XG
www.triquorum.com
Editor: Christopher Teague
Medium: Print, 2 per year
Genre: Horror/fantasy/SF

Max Length: 8,000-20,000 words
No reprints/simultaneous submissions allowed/no multiple submissions
Payment: £35 per story and three complimentary copies
Email: submissions@triquorum.com, attached MS Word or RTF files
Post: to address above, SMF

£5.99 single issue, no subscription
Online via Paypal
Triquorum publishes only novelettes - stories with a minimum 8,000 words, up to 20,000

Pantechnicon

www.pantechnicon.net
Eds: Andy Frankham-Allen & Trudi Topham
Medium: Online
Genre: Modern fantasy/sf/horror
Payment: none

Submissions

Max length: 50,000 (longer works will be serialised)
Reprints considered/no simultaneous submissions/query before submitting
Email: editors@pantechnicon.net (send only synopsis initially)
Post: no

Purchase

Published free, online only

Postscripts

PS Publishing, Grosvenor House, 1 New Road, Hornsea, East Yorkshire, HU18 1PG
www.pspublishing.co.uk
Ed. Peter Crowther
Medium: Print, 4 per year
Genre: SF/fantasy/horror/crime & supense
Payment: Not set, pro-rates, on acceptance

Submissions

Max length: not set
Query with synopsis before submitting/no multiple submissions
Email: editor@pspublishing.co.uk
Post: to address above

Purchase

£26 four issue paperback subscription/ £100 four issue hardback subscription
Online via paypal, or by post to address above payable "Peter Crowther"

Premonitions

Pigasus Press, 13 Hazely Combe, Arreton, Isle of Wight, PO30 3AJ
www.pigasuspress.co.uk
Ed. Tony Lee
Medium: Print, irregular
Genre: SF/modern fantasy/horror/slipstream
Payment: £5 per 1,000 words

Submissions

Max length: 8,000 words
No reprints/no simultaneous or multiple submissions
Email: no
Post: to address above, SMF or similar

Purchase

£4.50 per issue, no subscription
Online via Paypal, or by post to address above payable "Tony Lee"

Scheherazade (closed to submissions)

14 Queens Park Rise, Brighton, BN2 9ZF
www.schez.co.uk
Ed. Elizabeth Counihan
Medium: Print, irregular
Genre: SF/fantasy
Payment: Token

Submissions

Currently closed to all submissions
Status unclear after next issue (see note)
Email: No
Post: Not at present

Purchase

£3.50 single issue/£9.00 last two issues + *Fabulous Brighton* anthology
By post from address above payable "Scheherazade"
nb: Scheherazade's current editors step down with next issue, after that future of the magazine is unclear

Twisted Tongue (Temp. closed to submissions)

www.twistedtongue.co.uk
Editor: Claire Nixon
Medium: Print/online, 4 per year
Genre: Horror/dark fantasy/SF

Submissions

Temp. closed, reopens 1 May 2007
Max length: not specified, will serialise novellas
Payment: £10 to "Eds Choice", others none
Email: twistedtongue@blueyonder.co.uk, MS Word, text attachments
Post: no

Purchase

£1.50 pdf download, £4.50 single print issue, no subscription
Online from www.lulu.com/twistedtongue

Whispers of Wickedness

Whispers of Wickedness, 9 Henry Cross Close, Shipdham, Thetford, Norfolk, IP25 7LD
www.ookami.co.uk
Ed. D
Medium: Print, 4 per year/online
Genre: Horror/dark fantasy/sf

Submissions

Max length: 4,000 words (2,000 online)
No reprints/no simultaneous submissions/multiple submissions welcome
Payment: none, comp copies
Email: whispers@ookami.co.uk, attached MS Word file
Post: no

Purchase

£3 single issue, £10 four issue subscription
Online via Paypal or by post to address above payable "Peter Tennant"

RECENT PASSINGS

Two magazines, *Scifantastic* and *Here & Now* both declared to be dead markets in early 2007

SOMEONE MISSING?

We've tried to make this list as comprehensive as possible, but if we've missed a market then please get in touch with *Focus* at:
focusmagazine@ntlworld.com

A LESSON IN PURPOSE: GIBSON'S GERNSBECK CONTINUUM

I was a teenager when I first read William Gibson, some time ago in the 1980s. His writing has influenced my understanding of what both science fiction and fiction itself can accomplish. His novels present fully realised, three-dimensional universes. He immerses you, as he immerses his characters, in the heart of the story and the worlds that he builds.

Recently I've been rereading his collection *Burning Chrome*. "The Gernsbeck Continuum" in particular offers lessons in brevity, specificity, and conjuring a sense of place in an absolute minimum of words.

I have been told that I can be too ornate. Gibson is the very antidote to ornate writing, as he builds *mise en scene* with barely any authorial intrusion.

Gibson also excels at balancing detail with storytelling and crafting evocative moments. In "Gernsbeck" the protagonist is located in London through the specificity of a Greek taverna on Battersea Park Road. He then pauses in Tucson with a vivid description of drinking beer by a poolside in brilliant sunshine, before Gibson sweeps him across California. That much geographical movement in a short story could be too much, but the narrative stays tightly focused as the story unfolds. The Californian cities are emblematic of the different flavours of America, filled with "Coca-Cola plants like beached submarines, and fifth-run movie houses like the temples of some lost sect that had worshipped blue mirrors and geometry".

The story balances conflicting tones – humour and terror both feature when the protagonist is confronted with a vision of the future filled with blond Aryan supermen.

This moment typifies the trick of effective SF, as the reader is moved credibly from the everyday to the fantastical:

"I penetrated a fine membrane, a membrane of probability...

"Ever so gently, I went over the Edge –

"And looked up to see a twelve-engined thing like a bloated boomerang, all wing, thrumming its way east with an elephantine grace, so low that I could count the rivets in its dull silver skin, and hear– maybe – the echo of jazz."

Gibson is a unique voice and an obvious pitfall in reading him closely is that you end up mimicking him. However, studying how his voice speaks can show you how to develop your own: what words work, how long to spend on each scene, how much space to devote to each character.

Bruce Sterling wrote that "Gernsbeck" is ultimately about science fiction itself, "the shambling figure of the SF tradition." The narrator confronts an alternative universe where the world evolved from the Aryan perfection of *Amazing Stories*. In "Gernsbeck", this world of perfection collides with the post-Vietnam cyberpunk generation of the 80s. The story is a complete piece: clever, humorous and with a distinct conclusion, and offers the further lesson of having a purpose to your fiction.

There is nothing ornate about this writing. There is nothing even dated about it. The story was first published in 1981, and in the intervening years cyberpunk has fallen in and out of fashion. Good writing, however, hasn't.

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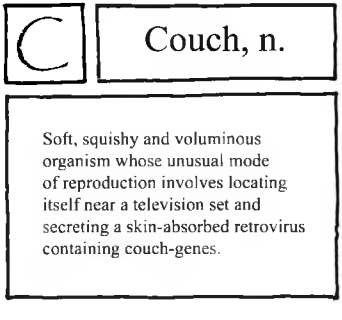

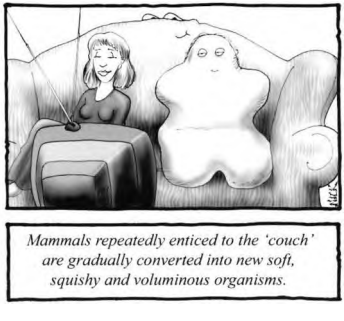

Mammals repeatedly enticed to the 'couch' are gradually converted into new soft, squishy and voluminous organisms.