FOCUS

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FOCUS

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Focus is published twice a year by the British Science Fiction Association. The magazine aims to present high quality articles about the art and craft of writing and, in particular, science fiction writing. Contributions, ideas and correspondence are all welcome, but please contact the editor first if you intend to submit a lengthy article.

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CAN A HOLIDAY ROMANCE REALLY LAST FOREVER?

Writing is a lonely thing to do. Even sitting down to write this editorial I've had to tell my daughter that I'm too busy to play with her and go and lock myself in another room away from my wife and the temptations of a glass of wine, a book or an evening vegging out in front of the television. I can write with music playing - but voices whether it be from other people in the vicinity or from the radio completely distract me.

I have a friend who commutes to work and writes on the train. I can't imagine being able to do that. Even on an Intercity with a table and leg-room I can't manage to type a few sentences.

I need to be able to sit somewhere isolated - not necessarily in library-like silence (I find I type faster the faster and louder the music I listen to) but cut off from the world.

When I was studying I found myself living a practically nocturnal existence. I would write - whether it was fiction or my dissertation - late, late at night when the rest of my family and the world around me slept. The time between two in the morning and five was, I found, particularly good. There were no distractions - nothing on television to lure me away if I got weak, no one to phone, no email - just me tap-tap-tapping into the night.

Now, however, back at work and locked into the tyranny of the nine-to-five routine, finding time to sit down with a blank screen has become harder and harder. I have been writing less and less and found myself starting to resent the time I tried to give to my stories.

Which is why a recent holiday to Cornwall came as such a fantastic revelation. I had a holiday romance. With writing.

Staying in a hotel by the sea with my wife and daughter for just a week I suddenly rediscovered some of the fun in writing.

Hotel living means having to get up at a fairly reasonable time if you want your breakfast and to let the hotel staff clean your room - so, unlike most weekends, I wasn't able to crouch sluglike in my bed until mid-afternoon. Thankfully my wife, having had a good protestant upbringing which emphasised the improving nature of "doing things" while on holiday (going for walks, visiting zoos, seeing "sights") has long since given up on persuading me of her heathen ways. I, as a token of thanks, have allowed her to attempt to indoctrinate my daughter into her god-forsaken ways - knowing that, come her teenage years, the impressionable child will naturally fall back into my sluggardly grasp. This all meant that lunchtime and the early afternoon were mine. Alone.

And here came the revelation.

A laptop, a sea-view and a story that I felt was going somewhere at a reasonable speed added up to a fantastic way to spend time.

Not only was I not resenting giving time over to writing, I was enjoying myself. I was waking up in the middle of the night with ideas - not just for this story but for others. I wrote one piece of flash fiction, long-hand (and I never, ever write long-hand) on the toilet at three in the morning while my daughter and wife snored the contented sleep of those who had spent all day "doing things".

It was, I felt, an insight into what it might be like to be a writer if (and these are important caveats) first, I didn't have to worry about the money, second, I could afford to spend all my time in nice hotels with sea-views and room service, and third if my wife was willing to put up with me being semi-detached most of the time.

Like any holiday romance, of course, the flush has faded slightly now that I'm back in the life-mincing routine that is wake, commute, work, commute, enjoy brief pleasure of moments with family, sleep and repeat. And repeat. And repeat.

The cover of this issue Retro Flying Saucer by Sean Aclerno

But I'm not grumbling. Not really. Because part of the holiday romance has stayed with me. I do still remember that writing can give me a buzz that nothing else does. I tasted again that sensation when it feels like I'm really nailing an idea into place. And I've got some of the determination back to get my ideas down on paper beforethey stagnate and get washed away by the gubbins that normally dominates my day.

It might have been just a holiday romance – born of unfamiliar surroundings, the waft of ozone, the occassional flash of sunshine and a little too much beer – but I think there might be a future in it.

I think I still love writing.

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

THE FURTHER INTO THE ZONE THE NEARER TO HEAVEN:

or how I became a writer of speculative fiction

It's both the most frustrating question a writer can be asked and the question that most fascinates readers. Harlan Ellison got so tired of it, he said he picked them up from a factory in Poughkeepsie. Ignoring their feeble protests, Focus goes where other's fear to tread and asks writers: "Where do you get your ideas from?" First in the firing line is Nina Allan.

I first read *Roadside Picnic*, by the Russian writer-brothers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, when I was about fifteen years old. I borrowed it from Worthing public library, where I was gradually working my way through their stock of Gollancz 'yellow-backs.' I was enthralled by it, mainly by the world it described, in which whole tracts, zones, of our own world became transfigured overnight, became alien and pathogenic to us, of Earth but no longer of Earth, something mysterious and forbidden.

I had some experience of such places. There was an overgrown plot of disused land near our house that my brother and I called the Three Acres. We would take picnics up there and forage for things – old pram wheels, the rusted components of shattered machinery, splinters of wood or sheets of corrugated iron, glass bottles choked with mud – anything that might be used to construct a lethal weapon or to fit out a spy's retreat. One day we stumbled across a large rectangular pit, some twenty feet long by ten feet wide, dug to an even depth of about three feet. We were fascinated by this, by what it could have been for. Still more fascinating was the fact that after that day and in spite of searching for it many times we were never able to find it again.

Such was our zone and such were our artefacts. This, I think, was a lot of what initially drew me to science fiction, the fact that it alone of all literary genres seemed to be in sympathy with the way my mind worked. Far from describing strange new worlds or lost civilizations it more clearly defined a world I was already part way to identifying, the inner reality – or hyper-reality – of the space I had always inhabited.

My early reading of SF was fairly indiscriminate – I read what I found, and that first encounter with the Strugatskys was definitely more luck than judgement. My next Road to Damascus experience – some ten years later at the age of twenty-five – also had a fair amount of luck in it. I was talking books with a friend of mine when he suddenly asked me if I'd ever heard of a writer called Christopher Priest. I said no, and he recommended I read a novel entitled *A Dream of Wessex*. I still remember with the utmost clarity the way the book affected me, as much with the beauty of its language as anything else. Here was the Zone again, but this time it wasn't somewhere across the Atlantic, it was evoked at the heart of a landscape I had myself visited on childhood holidays and come to know more intimately through the novels of Thomas Hardy.

I was blown away by the book. I hadn't known such radical reinvention was possible. I quickly found more of Chris Priest's novels - and found them to be even better. What had started in Wessex as symbolic representation of the gaps in quotidian reality became in *The Affirmation* and *The Glamour* a metaphorical examination of the same conundrum. In these later works Priest seemed to suggest that such a landscape could be written into existence, that the book itself was the Zone, the writer was the Stalker and the Dream Archipelago could thus be found anywhere you chose to look for it. What I responded to most in Priest's work was, once again, this sense of hyper-realism, a vindication in letters of the way I myself viewed the world. The most valuable lesson I learned from him at that time was that, in writing as in life, the angle of perception is as important as what is perceived.

When I started to write in earnest one of the first things I did was to read *Roadside Picnic* again. I was nervous about it. I was afraid, I suppose, that the book would fail to live up to my memories. I needn't have worried. Far from becoming diminished the Strugatskys' book revealed itself to me as the truly great novel it is. On this second reading I saw that it wasn't just the concept that was brilliant but the execution of that concept. The tight, lean construction of the work, the spare use of language, the neat shifts of narrative viewpoint – these points of technique immortalized the

Strugatskys' ideas in a manner so deftly articulate, so consummately perfected, that it enabled you to return to the Zone again and again and find it as marvellous and deadly as when you last visited.

I was also better able to appreciate the brothers' subtleties of characterisation. Redrick Schuhart, a complex and ambiguous blend of idealism and pragmatism, honour and treachery, is as well-rounded and compellingly drawn as any hero or antihero in any work of twentieth century literature. The Strugatskys seemed as concerned with literary values as they were with their ideas. So was Priest. The combination of such artistry with the verve and the sense of wonder that is the hallmark of all great SF was irresistible to me.

It seemed to me that books like *Roadside Picnic* and *The Affirmation* transcended genre and because they defied categorisation their authors were free – to write whatever they wanted, to imagine without restraint, to adhere to those values – be they literary or ideological - which mattered most to them.

In a sense the characters in the novels – the Strugatskys' Redrick Schuhart, Priest's renegade scientist David Harkman in *A Dream of Wessex*, the soldier-poets of *The Dream Archipelago* – were symbolic of states of mind and being that the authors sought repeatedly to convey. Lawless and subversive, alienated, free-thinking, driven, they represented the epitome of the artist's struggle.

Almost thirty years after *Roadside Picnic* first appeared in English there came a novel that used the title of this essay – a direct quote from the Strugatsky novel – as its epigraph. That novel was *Nova Swing* by M. John Harrison. I had discovered Mike Harrison's work in the late 1990s and had read everything he'd written with delight and gratitude. I read *Nova Swing* before it was even published – a friend generously gave me a proof copy he had acquired from a trade rep. My excitement at the appearance of a new Harrison novel was tempered with some apprehension: would he trespass too directly on a work I considered sacrosanct?

In Vic Serotonin I immediately recognised Redrick Schuhart's spiritual brother, just as it was immediately obvious how the Strugatskys' Zone had in some sense inspired Harrison's Site. But far from being a trespass this audacious and glittering novel proved to be the natural extrapolation of certain ideas, a dedicated homage to earlier masters, and most importantly of all a work of art as individual in tone and unique in itself as Roadside Picnic had been three decades earlier. *Nova Swing* is nu-noir – Serotonin and Aschemann pursue each other through the rain-soaked streets and dingy bars of Saudade like De Niro and Pacino in Michael Mann's glorious *Heat* – it is poetry, it is SF at its most marvellous, it is literature at the cutting edge of virtuosity and power.

As a child I wrote passionately, compulsively and constantly, creating stories of my own with as little self-consciousness as I devoured those written by others. Writing was what I did, it was as simple as that, and it seemed simple then because I had no idea of how hard it was. As I grew older things quickly desimplified themselves and for some years I almost stopped writing entirely. It took people who knew what they were doing to remind me of what I had wanted, to put me back on track.

As writers, what is our job if not to describe the zone we inhabit to those who might wish if not to enter it at least to understand it better? I am at the beginning of my journey as a writer and have a long way to travel. But I doubt I would have come even this far without the guidance and inspiration of those who have mapped out the path ahead of me.

Nina Allan's first, and excellent, collection of short stories *A Thread of Truth* was published earlier this year by Eibonvale Press. Nina has been shortlisted for the BSFA and the BFS short story awards. Her work has appeared in *Interzone*, *The Third Alternative* and the World Fantasy Award-winning anthology *Strange Tales* from Tartarus.

Diaspora

Gareth L. Powell

this may be the last message
that you receive from us

we are far beyond pluto

our engines are pushing us
to a respectable fraction
of the speed of light

this seems to be
distorting our
communications

so we must bid you farewell
go in peace

we will try to send word
when we reach our
destination

we trust there are
no hard feelings

TOMORROW'S SOLDIER: THE FUTURE OF WAR

RESEARCH CORNER

Research is essential, but it is also difficult. Especially as the kind of questions asked by writers of sf&f can sometimes be esoteric. In Research Corner, *Focus* aims to help by finding an expert and asking them how their field might develop in the foreseeable future. **Anthony G Williams** is a science fiction writer who also happens to be an authority on the developement of guns. We asked him for his opinion on near future warfare.

It is nearly half a century since Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* depicted future soldiers with powered, armoured exoskeletons fitted with rockets for flight, and wielding flamethrowers, high explosive missiles and mini-nuclear weapons. But reality lags well behind; apart from the use of night sights, there is little in the equipment of the modern soldier which would not be instantly recognisable to his counterparts in the Second World War. So how long will it be before we see developments long-predicted in SF actually in use?

Powered personal armour is still some way off, but marching up the priority scale. The urgent need to minimise casualties is driving the development of more effective armour, and also increasing its coverage over more of the body. Despite weight-saving efforts, the burden this places on infantrymen (together with weapons, ammunition, and all the other kit) is obvious, especially in the 50°C Middle East summers. Power-assisted movement is therefore increasingly desirable, and is becoming more feasible as a result of developments in various fields: high power-density batteries and miniaturised fuel cells for use in mobile phones and zero-emission cars, plus lightweight electric motors.

An infantryman's weapons use fundamentally ancient technology. Machine guns (MGs) and automatic rifles were developed by the end of the 19th century, and the present versions differ only in detail and materials. Current plans envisage little change, the most radical proposals (in the US Lightweight Small Arms Technologies programme) concerning the adoption of plastic-cased or caseless ammunition to save weight, and these are hardly new. Practical caseless cartridges were developed by Dynamit Nobel twenty years ago for the abortive Heckler & Koch G11 rifle, cancelled at the end of the Cold War.

Intense effort is being put into developing lasers and other beam weapons, but so far mainly with bigger, vehicle-mounted applications in mind. For personal weapons, chemically-propelled projectiles are likely to remain the most efficient way of delivering energy to a target for the next few decades.

For the immediate future, high-technology weapon developments are focused on grenade launchers. These devices, which are typically fixed under the barrel of a rifle, fire a variety of 30-40mm calibre projectiles. The normal warshot is high explosive/fragmentation (HE/F) for anti-personnel use, but other types include HEDP (high explosive dual-purpose, which can punch through 50+mm of armour plate), thermobaric, anti-diver (designed to explode underwater) and less-lethal impact or irritant chemical rounds for riot control. The latest novelty, shortly to enter service, is HEAB (High Explosive Air Burst).

HEAB requires a ballistic computer taking data from a laser range-finder and coupled to an automatically-adjusted sight and an electronic fuze setter. The projectiles fired need a special time fuze. The purpose of all of this expensive technology is to permit the gunner to fire at targets which are hiding behind cover; the projectiles can be timed to explode precisely over the enemy's head. The USA is developing two gun and ammunition combinations purpose-designed for this system, both in 25mm calibre - the XM25 eight-shot self-loading gun and the belt-fed XM307 MG – but the technology is also being applied to older 40mm weapons.

Another development which may be particularly suited to grenade launchers is the Metal Storm system: this involves stacking several caseless rounds of ammunition in one barrel, which are electronically fired in turn – a modern version of an idea which has been around for centuries. However, the much-hyped ability of Metal Storm to fire "a million rounds a minute" is purely a publicity gimmick.

The most radical innovation about to affect the soldier is concerned with communications and information, as a part of the "net-work-centric warfare" concept. Much attention

The US Army's Future Force Soldier (right) - adds high-tech communications gear to the soldier's traditional rifle and body armour.

is being paid to providing the man on the ground with as much information as possible; by radio, projected onto a visor attached to the helmet, or sent to a hand-held PDA. The displays includes maps of the area showing the location of friendly troops, plus real-time video images from day/night rifle sights, small Unmanned Aerial Vehicles or parachute-borne cameras fired from grenade launchers.

In theory, this information revolution has the power to transform warfare, but the first trials of the prototype American "Land Warrior System", which incorporates much of this, have hit a snag: the soldiers are being so overwhelmed with information that it is distracting them from the business of fighting. The high cost, weight, technical glitches and reliance on batteries are also worries, but it could be that the main limitation on introducing advanced systems for the infantryman is not the technology but the "wetware": the ability of the human brain to process information under stress.

This connects with another current enthusiasm of the military: the development of unmanned aircraft, vehicles and naval vessels. At present they are remotely controlled or pre-programmed, but the ultimate aim is a fully autonomous system, which can identify targets and decide when to open fire. This is still some way off, and is ethically highly controversial, but robots have major advantages in never sleeping, eating, losing concentration, or having to be sent home in body bags. It may be that the "Terminator" movies provide a more accurate vision of future warfare than Heinlein's.

Anthony G Williams is a military technology and science fiction author. His homepage is www.quarry.nildram.co.uk

OLYMPUS MONS

Gareth L. Powell

On the third day we came
To the weather station
On the lip of the volcano's caldera

We forced the airlock
And shook dust from our boots

The interior was dark
And smelled abandoned

A discarded pressure suit
Sprawled on a bunk
Hanging open like a dissected ghost

Through the pitted windows
We watched shadows
Creep across the floor of the crater

I tuned the radio to pick up
Dance music from distant Earth
As we brewed breakfast
On a portable stove

And we listened as we ate
Our eggs and sardines
The music swirling with
Static pops and hisses

Later as we danced uncertainly
You held me close
And whispered into the
Flame-proof fabric of my fatigues

I'm pregnant you said

THE DEPRESSING TRUTH ABOUT WHO WRITES MOVIES

Who writes British Films, a recent study carried out by Royal Holloway College, University of London on behalf of the UK Film Council revealed some sobering statistics. Randomly selecting forty films approved for distribution in the UK between 2004 and 2005 they surveyed the sixty-three writers credited on those productions.

- 98% of the writers were white
- 82.5% of the writers were men
- 66% of the writers were over 46 years of age and relatively wealthy
- On over half the productions the writers employed had previously worked with the producer, director or production company.

What does all this mean? It means the films we watch are being written by a clique of old, white men who appear to owe their work at least in part to who they know as much as how good they are.

Does it matter? I'm certainly not going to argue that white men shouldn't be allowed to make films. I'm not even going to argue that older, wealthier, white men shouldn't be allowed to write films. But the dominance of one type of voice hardly promises diverse storytelling.

There might be those willing to argue that the make-up of this sample of writers simply marks out the dividing lines of talent in our society. That, however, would take a brass neck of unusual size. The racism and sexism inherent in that argument are surely too crude to be seriously sustained.

Another, perhaps more persuasive, argument might be that these figures simply represent the inequalities in society more generally. These are, of course, deplorable but it is hardly the role of industries (even the arts) to take it upon themselves to challenge the status quo. Of course we support your progressive causes, the argument goes, but what can we do until you give us the better educated, more amenable black, Asian or women writers to work with. After all no one wants quotas, or (heaven forbid!) tokenism.

This is, of course, bullshit.

These figures reveal exactly what any reasonable person might have expected, that the film industry is dominated by a small group of people who know and trust each other and who all, more-or-less, share the same comfortable backgrounds. Indeed they reveal a picture that is even worse than most would have imagined.

It is hardly creditable that out of 63 writers only one was non-white.

But what is to be done?

Clearly, for as long as the ability to make films is concentrated in the hands of a small minority and investment in film-making is treated like a high-stakes roulette game, the engrained conservatism that insists that producers stick to who and what they know is unlikely to change.

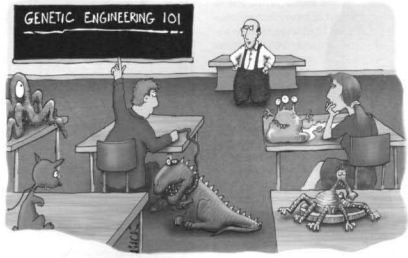
One might hope that the development of new technology and the mushrooming of new means of making, distributing and watching commercial films and television productions might mean that the next decade will bring the seeds of change. If making films becomes less expensive then perhaps the range of people involved will become more diverse.

But holding on for technology won't be enough. Film-goers who are interested in change will have to put their money where their mouth is and take risks on the smaller budget, less conventional offerings where writing from more diverse backgrounds is likely to be found. By demonstrating that there is a market for the work of writers who don't correspond to the white man in comfortable slippers stereotype they might encourage the money men to pursue profit outside the current mainstream.

Writing isn't an easy business to get into. Even with the advantage of having the right coloured skin and the right set of genitals, most people who try to write scripts will never see their work on the screen. But the kind of barriers revealed by *Who writes British films?* show that being a black person or a woman makes the chances of success almost infinitesimally small.

That's bad for those at the sharp end of the discrimination, but it's also bad for those of us who value diversity in the material we watch and read.

(MMcG)



"Okay—is there anybody ELSE whose homework ate their dog?"

MASTERCLASS No.2: INSPIRATION/ OBSERVATION

This is the second in the series. The first one came before – the next one will follow in a few months. If only all of life were as tidy and reassuring.

The order in which these little articles appear is more or less random, based on what I feel like doing at any one time. However, **MAPS IN FANTASY NOVELS** will be discussed next time.

Did I just use the word 'discussed'?

Christopher Priest is an award-winning author of novels such as *The Separation*, *Fugue for a Darkening Isle* and *The Prestige*, amongst may others.

The other day I took delivery of a parcel intended for a neighbour several houses along, who was not at home. I signed for it, and the delivery man went on his way. If you work from home, taking in other people's mail is an almost daily occurrence, so in itself this wasn't worth remarking. But as I put the parcel down I noticed that it was addressed to someone called 'Soprano', while I happened to know that the neighbour's real name was something else. The address was right, and the first name was right, but now he was called 'Soprano'. Or was he? The only 'Sopranos' I knew of were the fictitious Mafia family in the TV show. A quick check of the local phone book established that no one of that name lived in Hastings – which I had already guessed. So what was he up to? Ordering stuff on the internet under a fake name, perhaps living up to some creepo fantasy about himself as a Mafia operative? No crime in that, but another insight into the weird non-reality of the internet?

A couple of weeks before this happened I was on a train to London, and I was listening on my earphones to the radio. That afternoon Radio 4 were putting out a programme about people who reconstruct faces professionally: plastic surgeons, waxworks modellers, forensic scientists, etc. It was all of only mild interest, a distraction during a journey. But then the forensic scientist made a comment about the impossibility of getting false eyes to look realistic. 'Even ophthalmic hospitals can't help,' he said. 'Because they never make matching pairs of glass eyes.' I wriggled with pleasure! Of course – that odd and now obvious fact had never occurred to me before!

A man who 'dresses up' to go on the internet. The discovery that no two glass eyes are ever exactly the same. Do either of these suggest an idea for a story? Are they, in fact, illustrations of that moment of inspiration we all hope to experience? People often ask writers, especially SF writers, where they get their ideas – the answer might be here.

In fact both of these examples are trivial, and having enjoyed the frisson of noticing them I can't see much creative mileage in either. Help yourself, if you think otherwise.

(But read the warning about commonality of source below, before you do.)

Creative inspiration is not a special thing, unique to writers. Everyone has these moments of transitory illumination – they are often the basis of anecdotes, conversations, jokes. The difference with writers is that we try to make something of them, build them up into a story or novel that is serious or metaphorical or funny or in some other way worthwhile. Writers make themselves open to possibilities, are usually alert to ideas.

Furthermore, because the accident of inspiration cannot be predicted, we often actively look for ideas. Whether we do it consciously or not, most writers

are constantly searching for material. Books, TV, the internet – we cast the net wide.

Some writers even embark on what they hope might be the sort of adventurous lifestyle that will provide an endless source of material. The fly-leaf of a book will reveal all. 'After leaving the Sorbonne with a Master's degree in medieval French literature, Mr Harlison worked as a roadie for the Rolling Stones, drove an ambulance on the Western Front, acted as bodyguard to Mike Tyson, delivered pizzas by motorcycle in Lhasa, ran with a gang of teenage hoodlums,' etc. etc.

There's nothing to beat having a varied life! (So long as it's true.)

Even those of us with quieter lifestyles can be pretty ruthless about the acquisition of material. Graham Greene, in his book *A Sort of Life*, tells of the time he was a patient in a men's hospital ward, when a ten-year-old boy was brought in after a football accident. Complications arose, and the boy started to die. His parents were hastily summoned, curtains were drawn around the bed. The mother started wailing her misery. Greene describes how the other men in the ward pulled on their radio earphones, to drown the commotion of upsetting sounds. 'All my companions,' writes Greene, 'but not myself. There is a splinter of ice in the heart of a writer. I watched and listened. This was something which one day I might need.'

Direct personal experience is for a writer by far the most important part of imagining ideas and conceiving stories. Coming to terms with it is a big step. It's much of what constitutes the difference between a writer, a good writer and a very good writer.

Coming to terms with it is the key phrase. We all have a childhood behind us, we have knowledge of events around us, we have all undergone traumatic or happy or interesting or unusual experiences.

For some writers this is enough. Their simplistic, unimaginative view of literature is that fiction exists mainly as a convenient vehicle for semi-disguised versions of the writer's own life. A substantial number of people, including many book readers, also believe that all fiction is ultimately based on the writer's experience. Writers and readers are often suited to each other, and these two groups of dullards maintain the stagnancy of the big mushy swamp that lies in the heart of fiction publishing.

"Their simplistic, unimaginative view of literature is that fiction exists mainly as a convenient vehicle for semi-disguised versions of their own life."

The view held by many writers in the SF/fantasy world is of sterner stuff. Because of generic preoccupations with external events and ideas, most fantastic literature appears to be imagined, invented, made up. Autobiography is not on the agenda. None of that wussy stuff about an unwanted pregnancy, a campus intrigue, the horrors of an English public school, a nervous breakdown in a Kilburn bedsit, the endless quest for nookie, or running with a gang of teenage hoodlums. SF takes us into the heart of the sun, and out to the far future, to the stars!

SF/fantasy lacks personal soul, or that it how it is often perceived. Largely because of that perception, fantastic literature is still despised by critics in the main stream of literature.

We are entering subjective territory, but there is clearly something to be learned from this. While we don't want to read about an unwanted pregnancy on a space station, or about teenage hoodlums thinly disguised as Martians, perhaps experience should have a part to play? None of the externals – the concepts, the ideas, the quests, the nightmares – has any potency as fiction unless the author brings a personal dimension, a felt experience, to bear.

Learning how to respond to personal imagery, and transmute it into fiction, is a prime concern when starting to write.

On the subject of personal experience there are then two extremes, both to be avoided, and a moderate balance sought.

One extreme might be summed up as: 'You have to carry the pain, tell it how it happened, how it felt, what it was like to cry, how you overcame terrible odds ... but you must change people's names, otherwise they'll sue you.'

The other extreme is: 'The idea is everything, so get the science right, make the magic spells consistent, check all your facts from research notes ... but don't forget to put in a spot of characterization.'

The middle ground – a fertile place, I have usually found – is where you should seek to work.

There's another clue from Graham Greene about how to use personal experience in fiction. It's in the same book, *A Sort of Life*. Conventional wisdom about writing urges the use of notebooks, diaries, to record

memories. Greene takes the opposite tack. 'It is better to remain in ignorance of oneself and to forget easily,' he writes. 'All that we can easily recognize as our experience in a novel is mere reporting: it has a place, but an unimportant one. It provides an anecdote, it fills in gaps in the narrative. It may legitimately provide a background, and sometimes we have to fall back on it when the imagination falters. Perhaps a novelist has a greater ability to forget than other men – he has to forget or become sterile. What he forgets is the compost of the imagination.'

That final phrase is apt. A good memory clutters the mind with anecdotes, the irrelevance of reality – but fecund amnesia charges the creative spirit.

But what of using a notebook?

Many writers carry them. In fact, books on 'how to become a writer' often tell you that you must carry a notebook wherever you go. The typical scenario they describe is that you are travelling on a bus or a train, and you overhear a fragment of conversation between the two strangers sitting immediately behind or in front of you. Such conversations are usually banal, but because you overhear comments out of context, they can sometimes by their oddness suggest situations or insights which might lead to an idea.

These overheard fragments are pretty common. One I always remember was between two women chatting about something. The older woman suddenly said, '... so I told him to put the fish in with the socks, and ...' That was all it was. A story idea? Hardly, but the authors of writing manuals would urge you to scribble this into your notebook, presumably on the waste-not-want-not principle.

Some writers do write these things down, though. Notebooks have uses. They can be used to jot down real ideas, or fragments, or something you've noticed. They can be used to write down overheard conversations in full, if you can scrawl them quickly enough or recollect them accurately a short while later. Ideas of your own can be set down for future use. And they are of course the ideal place to copy out items you notice in newspapers and magazines, or passages from books which have particularly impressed you.

But if you do use a notebook, treat it carefully and keep it in order. Never jot down any old thing without attributing its source, even an overheard scrap of conversation on a bus. By its nature what you are noting is ephemeral, and in its nature you will soon forget where you found it. No longer sure of where it came from, you might think you made it up yourself.

"Chaos is a less predictable, more fruitful tool for a writer. Grow to like the pong that rises from what you have forgotten: the compost of your imagination."

It's easy to do. One famous (mainstream) writer has from time to time been accused of plagiarism. Most recently, he was found to have copied into one of his novels extracts from an autobiography by the writer Lucilla Andrews: *No Time for Romance*. This, like his story, was set in a wartime hospital in London where wounded troops were being treated. Confronted publicly with the embarrassing word-for-word evidence that critics had come across and were now cheerfully exposing, the writer pleaded fair use. He said he had used *No Time for Romance* for 'research.' He seems to have got away with it, as the mini-controversy soon died down. However, in a TV interview some twenty years ago, when his plagiarism was first being noticed, he had explained it happened because he was in the habit of copying bits of books he liked into his notebook. Later, probably 'by accident', he would come across them and think they were so good he had to use them.

I still prefer Graham Greene's advice: it's better to forget as much as you can. A notebook works against this: it organizes your memory, reduces it to notes and sentences. Chaos is a less predictable, more fruitful tool for a writer. Grow to like the pong that rises from what you have forgotten: the compost of the imagination.

Let's talk about commonality of source. This is a matter of concern if you are serious about your writing.

Not for nothing are newspapers, TV, radio, magazines, etc., called 'mass media.' They are used by the masses. That means hundreds of thousands, sometimes millions, of people. If you read something in a magazine that seems to suggest an idea, before you rush to put it into a story, reflect first on how many other people might have read the same article. Also, think to yourself how many of them might be writers, equally interested in finding ideas for stories.

This does not mean that all ideas you gain from the mass media are worthless or already

in development by someone else, but you should certainly question their value as story material.

Real ideas for stories that arise through the mass media do not exist in a vacuum. They are in fact moments of minor inspiration that make themselves known to you. If you respond to them in a superficial way, then you are adding nothing of any worth to them, because you are likely to be responding to them in the same way as other people. You have to add value, but the value you add must be original.

Try testing this sort of thing against three questions. The first is a familiar one, often bandied about in the world of SF:

"I WONDER WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF?"

If that question suggests a possible way of developing the notion, then you have something to start with. It's probably not going to be enough to sustain a whole story, let alone a novel, but it's a good beginning. Speculative ideas are the protein source of fantastic literature. Most of the great works of science fiction (and most in the world of general literature, too) have this question lying somewhere deep within.

But remember the commonality. Of the hundreds of thousands of other people who came across the same odd or intriguing idea, how many are now, like you, daydreaming of the possibilities inherent in it? I sometimes call this first-level imagining. To make something more of it, you need a second question:

"YES, BUT WOULD IT MATTER?"

Now it's getting more interesting. We are at the second level of imagination. The second question puts a test of seriousness to the idea. It gives it relevance, meaning, something worth discussing, something to write about.

For example: You've been watching *Horizon* or reading *New Scientist*, and a first-level thought has struck you. What if Earth's gravity could be switched on and off? Shift down immediately to the second level.

> "If the idea affects you, if it moves you, worries you, excites you, amuses you, then you have probably found something worth writing about."

Who cares if Earth's gravity was 'switched off'? Would it matter? Who would be most affected by it? What would follow? What could anyone do about it? What would change as a result? Who was making it happen? How? Who chooses when it happens? And so on. Give it some significance, and an idea will start rolling along, picking up momentum as it goes.

But the problem of commonality is still present. It doesn't take a particularly original mind to pick a speculative idea and start exploring the possibilities. Seriousness alone is still not enough. You need to go one level deeper and address the third question:

"OK, IT MATTERS ... BUT DOES IT MATTER TO ME?"

This is where things get personal. If the idea affects you, if it moves you, worries you, excites you, amuses you, then you have probably found something worth writing about. The relevance of the first two questions now fades away.

By the same process the reasoning about direct personal experience should emerge. Unless you are heading for the swamplands and writing blatantly autobiographical fiction, memories and personal experience should not have a place in what you are writing. However, personal experience can lend a perspective, can suggest ways of writing about a subject that matters to you.

It's not a case of implying or saying: 'This is what happened. I know that for a fact, because I was there. I experienced it and therefore know it to be true.'

But perhaps instead: 'I can make this feel true, because I can imagine what it might be like, how people would respond, how they would react. I know none of this for certain, but I can write plausibly about it.'

That is a general rule, not one confined to SF and fantasy. It applies to all fiction.

If you are still unsure about the best approach to the matter of inspiration, ask yourself how many people might have been listening to Radio 4 on the same day as me, and heard the same amusing throwaway line about glass eyes.

Then ask yourself how many people took in a parcel addressed to Signor Soprano.

You might also ask yourself what happens to most people's teeth after they die. There's an unexpected question that could have taken you by surprise.

Well ... do you know what happens? Does it matter? Does it matter to you?

I confess I had never thought much about dead people's teeth either, but the forensic scientist on the BBC revealed all. That particular snippet of information (surprising, startling, even amusing) is one I'm keeping to myself, though.

Christopher Priest

TEXTS DON'T GROW ON TREES

A new campaign, *Texts Don't Grow On Trees*, has been launched by the European Writers' Congress (EWC) to raise awareness of authors' rights across the continent.

Amongst the campaign's principles are a determination to protect the rights of the author to be named as the creators of their work, to preserve the author's right to choose how and where their work is exploited, distribtued and modified and to demand that authors receive payment in fair relation to the profits that arise from licensing and exploitation of their work.

In support of these goals the EWC has said that it will campaign to promote the "uniqueness of individual creation", denounce misappropriations and the derogatory treatment of writers' work and seek to strengthen the authority of creators over the licensing and explotation of their work.

"The idea behind this campaign is to educate and inform the reading, viewing and listening public; not

criminalise them," said EWC board member and former Chair of the Writers' Guild of Great Britain, Graham Lester George. "Our ambition is to get them to see us as workers too, with all the same basic living problems: homes, children, bills, mortgages etc., and that taking our work without payment deprives us of income."

The EWC is encouraging authors to sign up to support the campaign at www.yourauthor.org/about/partners/authors-ambassadors/

NEVADA

Gareth L. Powell

Boy in denim
Desert
Automatic transmission
Lizards on the road
Hot metal
Gun in glove box
Radio cuts out
Cactus
Dust

Stars
Space
Gold
Alien sunrise
Run away
Boy
Hide amongst
Silver
Wreckage

Scientists work on new ways of delaying Death.

HOW DO I STAND OUT ON THE SLUSHPILE?

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.

Having just devoured a record number of stories for the May 2007 email reading period (one short of five hundred), it struck me that the majority of the stories weren't actually bad. Popular belief has it that about 80 to 90% of the slushpile is excruciating, but, well, it isn't.

The majority of the stories I see are competent. Varying from barely competent to highly competent, but certainly readable, and not a pain to the editorial eye. This not only makes my life as an editor more difficult (I have to read more of the story to see if it's for us or not: godawful stories can be discarded much quicker), but also your life as a submitter, as you need to do more to stand out from this sea of adequacy.

So, if the writing is OK, what makes me pick up a story from the slush?

Unlike *Realms of Fantasy* assistant editor Doug Cohen (who's story "Feelings of the Flesh" will be in a future *Interzone* issue), whose LJ entry of July 21 — http://slushmaster.livejournal.com/64282.html — focusses purely on the opening paragraphs of *RoF* slush survivors, I'm going to discuss the whole story, not just the beginning.

So, if you begin with a hook, you have to follow through; if you show initial promise, you have to deliver on it; meaning you can't just put the best parts at the beginning and the end and hope that I will forgive the sagging in the middle. I won't: the whole story has to work.

Nevertheless, the beginning remains the most important part of the story: it should give the reader an irresistible taste of what is to come, like the 'nose' of an excellent wine. However, the complete story must be at least as good, and preferably better, than the beginning. To continue the wine metaphor: after the first, enticing sniff, the wine itself should fully please the discerning tongue and palate of the connoisseur, and leave an aftertaste that begs for more.

With that in mind I would advise not to worry too much about the beginning: first try to make your story as good as you can get it, and then – if the story truly works – you can always greatly polish up the beginning, and enrich it with tantalising hints, the foreshadowing of things to come.

So, keeping in mind that there is no formula for fiction, no 'easy-way-to-write-the-perfect-story-in-ten-easy-steps', as every truly good story has something unique, something quintessentially individual, here are things that are always in the back of my head while I'm reading submissions (or short stories in general):

Voice

Voice is the uniqueness that an author brings to her/his story. It's an almost impossible to define combination of factors like how you choose your words, how you choose and develop your theme, how you choose the point of view, how you set the tone and the delivery, and more. It's the individuality you bring into the story, the way you do all these things – tone, expression, reflection, experience, skill, concept and more – different from the rest. A strong, confident voice pulls me into a story, and never lets me go, because it tells me that I am in good hands, and that this story will not disappoint me. (For instance, Jae Brim's "The Nature of the Beast" – *Interzone* #206 – has this in spades, just read the two opening paragraphs.)

Ambition

I can't repeat this often enough: reach for the sky, and beyond. This is SF, goddammit, and I want, nay expect to be blown off my socks.

Raise the stakes, raise them higher, and then add another few notches. For example, let the final confrontation between two old friends not only destroy their friendship, but also their conscience, and the course of history. Let an advancement in technology not only change a personal relationship, but also the whole way people do things, and the power balance or wealth distribution in a country or the whole world. If people find themselves in a strange world, make it ever stranger, weirder, crazier until they – and the reader – have no choice but to use every cell of their brains to understand it, and then shatter the paradigm. Three examples from the May slushpile that, seemingly effortless, left most of the competition far behind. Don't think big: imagine vastitudes, create infinities (and yes, gargantuan events can take place on pico-scales, as well).

Good Writing

Contrary to the idea that SF writing should be as transparant as possible so that the complex ideas and high concepts can shine through – the "Asimovian 'pane of glass' metaphor", as Nick Mamatas calls it – I believe that good writing and intricate imaginings can go hand in hand, nay should go hand in hand. So no matter how revolutionary your new idea is (or might seem), it's not going to work if isn't packed in good prose. As the saying goes: 'it's not what idea you have, but what you do with it'. I'll expand that with 'no matter how innovative your concept, the presentation matters equally'. Literary prose (and pay attention: I didn't say literary themes) is not a liability, but a perquisite, or even a prerequisite.

> "after the first enticing sniff, the wine should fully please the discerning tongue and palate of the connoisseur and leave and aftertaste that begs for more"

Unusual Themes

Again, I agree with Nick Mamatas: "My response to unusual themes is 'Yay!'". I like to think SF is the literature of discovery, so I have a great weakness for stories that show a strong willingness to explore. This exploration does not necessarily need to be physical: in a familiar setting you can introduce an alien subject matter, a complette different approach to things. Conversely, if the thematic approach is fairly standard then you can set it in a truly exotic world. And if you can combine the two successfully, well, you know how to find me (http://ttapress.com/185/interzone-contributors-guidelines/#more-185).

Strange Settings

See above.

Story

When all is said and done, story tops everything. A compelling, unforgettable story can ignore all of the above, break all the rules, and get away with it. Now, I don't have the space, nor the inclination to tell what exactly a great story is (although Simon Morden did a heroic effort in the previous *Focus*), because it is, by definition, not graspable. If writing a great story was a kind of trick, or something that could be duplicated, then not only would it lose all its lustre, but everybody would be doing it. That doesn't happen, so I'll tell you what a great story is when I see it.

Finally, I realise that I am demanding much of you, the aspiring writer. But the competition is fierce, and I ask you: do you want to be published, or not?

The first steps in the Colinisation of space.

BASIC BOOTSTRAP BRANDING:

Using the web to raise your professional profile

If you're serious about your career in writing – or any other creative profession, for that matter – you need to take the business of promoting yourself seriously too.

Isn't that a bit crass? After all, time was that writers and artists were aloof from commercial considerations. But those days are gone; sure, maybe if you're really talented and really lucky, you'll break through from zero to hero as soon as your manuscript arrives on a publisher's desk. But the odds are long, and the competition is hungry.

And there's no need to overdo it – you don't need to be a household name. But you need to be locatable, even if only within the sphere of interest in which you intend to work. Visibility alone won't sell stories to publishers, but being a recognisable name isn't going to hurt your chances either. Just ask Cory Doctorow. Or, at the lower end of the scale, ask me – I'm positive I wouldn't be reviewing and writing for the number of venues that I am if I hadn't made a name for myself by blogging.

In short, I'm suggesting you need your own website, tied to a domain name that is either your name, or a unique phrase that will become your online brand.

Isn't that overkill? Websites cost money, after all. Maybe you already have a MySpace or FaceBook account – they come for free, and have all those useful networking features. I hear this all the time from local bands and musicians, and I'll tell you what I tell them: I'm not suggesting you should abandon social networks, but you certainly shouldn't rely on them as your sole point of presence on the web, either.

Why not? Well, leaving the aesthetics aside for now, social network accounts have become the lowest common denominator of web presence. Having a MySpace page is nothing that some fumble-fingered aspiring teenage guitar hero can't have as well – and if you are taking your career seriously, you need to differentiate yourself from the herd. A professional in any sphere of business should be willing to invest a little time and money to appear as more than a bedroom-based amateur.

The other problem with social networks is that they aren't future-proof, and their 'walled garden' approach (requiring an account and password to view pages and profiles) means that when they fall from fashion, you're unlikely to be able to export your content or friends list to a new platform without a considerable amount of effort.

Social networking isn't going to die off; the speed of adoption alone demonstrates that it's providing a service that many people have a use for. But it will become just another basic web function – a standard protocol in simple free code that can

be installed on a regular webhost server, giving you all the benefits of social networking without locking you into an ad-smeared nightmare that makes money for someone else.

That's a way off yet (though I'd guess at no more than a few years). So for now, keep and use your social networks - but use them to funnel people to a site where the content and image are completely under your control. Your site becomes your brand, the face you present to a potential audience or client; your social networks become business cards, signposts toward that face.

But isn't getting a website really expensive? Quite simply, no, it isn't – which is another reason social networks won't last forever, namely that the barrier to leaving becomes lower as the months go by. A simple hosting package will cost you perhaps £5 a month, with a free domain name thrown in, storage and bandwidth aplenty for your basic requirements, and probably a price reduction if you pay for a year or more in advance. £50 annually is a pretty small fee to pay for a professional-looking web presence. That said, shop around, and ask people who have sites already about their experiences – sadly, all webhosts are not created equal, and moving between them can be a nightmare if you make a bad choice.

You don't know anything about computers? That's no problem; some hosts have simplified set-ups for basic website software, or supply pre-installed systems. Alternatively, use your social networks – if you don't know someone who does web development, then someone you know will do. A friend with the relevant skills should be able to get you up and running in an hour or two for the price of a few beers and a favour returned – offer to write some copy for their own site, perhaps. But watch closely, and try to pick up the basics of what they're doing – a bit of website savvy is a useful skill to have, and will become more so as time goes by.

So, now you're all set – a domain name that is yours forever (so long as you keep renewing it), and a space on the web that is totally under your control. How much further you decide to go is up to you – you can do basic aesthetic tweaks yourself, or draft in a friend, or pay a pro for a custom job. You can keep it all business, or you can put as much about your life up there as you're comfortable with. It's entirely up to you – but I'd suggest that having plenty of stuff there for people to see is the way forward, because it lets a visitor get a hold on who you are, what you do, and how you think. This why blogging (a horrible name for an elegant concept) has become so popular with the creative professions.

> "you need your own website, tied to a domain name that is either your name or a unique phrase that will become your online brand."

Of course, merely having your own site is only part of the equation – now you need to let the people in your chosen field know it's there, and to become part of the network of sites in the same scene. In this respect, genre writers are lucky, because the scene is small, close-knit and generally friendly. There's still a lot to learn ... but the best way to do that is to get in the pond and start swimming!

By day, Paul Raven is a mild-mannered museum library assistant. But at night, he transforms into a music journalist, science fiction critic, and a social media consultant – as well as Reviews Editor for *Interzone*, and Non-fiction Editor for *Futurismic.com*. See him practising what he's just preached at http://velcro-city.co.uk, or drop him an email at velcrocity@gmail.com if you'd like more advice on getting yourself set up with a proper website.

YEAR ZERO

Gareth L. Powell

Are you sitting comfortably?
Then we shall begin.

As you can see, we've come a long way
In a handful of years.

And we are very disappointed in you.

We had such high hopes.

When we created you.

Don't struggle.
This TV cable connects directly to your brain.

The footage we'll show you is addictive;
It will leave you drooling.

RAGNAROK

Gareth L. Powell

You can hardly see the sky for saucers
And portents

Elvis is back
And he's promoting a new diet book

"I lost forty pounds," says the King

DO I NEED AN AGENT, AND HOW DO I GET ONE?

Do I need an agent?

There's no doubt that if you're serious about getting novels published and making a career out of writing, then an agent is pretty much essential. An approach from a respected agent or agency is going to go a long way to getting you on to the substantial foothills around most publisher's slushpiles. In terms of dealing with the negotiation of contracts, administering payments and dealing with legal issues, an agent is going to take a lot of work off your back as a professional writer – but, of course, that's what they get paid for.

What agency should I approach?

Who you approach depends on the book you want to write. If we assume it's a novel, and that you're writing in the science fiction or fantasy genre, then you're going to want to find an agency that deals in fiction and that will accept sf&f material. There are a lot of agents, but not all deal with fiction and of those that do, a depressingly large number refuse to look at genre submission. Although poets probably have an even tougher time, so don't feel bad. Opposite are the details of UK-based agents who specifically solicit for sf&f manuscripts – and those who specifically rule out such submissions. There are many more agents (try the *The Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* or *The Writers' Yearbook* for a much more extensive list) who while not explicitly encouraging sf&f submissions may, nevertheless, consider them – so the list opposite is by no means all inclusive.

How do I impress an agent?

Be sure to grab their attention with brightly coloured paper – perhaps with hand-drawn sketches of your central characters – and a clever binding system that looks fantastic, but makes it hard to read your manuscript. And bunnies. Lots of bunnies.

No. Not really.

Be professional. Send a straightforward letter of introduction that briefly lists some of your relevant experience and a submission in the format the agency requests. Usually this is a brief synopsis of the work (one or two pages) and a sample three chapters (often the first three chapters). Present the manuscript as requested – if there are no specific instructions then a standard format (single-sided with good margins, double-spaced text and a straightforward font like Courier or Times won't go too far wrong).

An agent wants money to read my work, do I pay?

Generally speaking your answer to this should be unprintable in a magazine that children might accidentally pick up. The relationship between agent and writer should be, writer approaches agent, agent likes writer, writer likes agent, agent signs writer, agent gets writer work, agent takes a cut (10-20% normally) of the money they bring in for the writer. Anything other than that should start alarm bells ringing and you should be concerned.

Are there other signs of a dodgy agenct?

Sadly there are plenty of scammers out there willing to part the unsuspecting author from their cash. Remember the rule here is that money should flow to the author so, except in exceptional circumstances, where an "agent" asks you to pay them or a third party to edit or publish your work, then something unusual is happening and you should do plenty of research before signing anything or handing over cash.

In any case you should try get information on the agency, whether they are known and respected by publishers, what their existing and past clients think of them, how many books have they sold to reputable publishing houses (ie not vanity publishers where the author pays for printing) and whether books by authors they represent are in your local bookshop.

Is anyone on my side?

The Writers' Guild of Great Britain is the trade union for writers in the UK. They won't recommend specific agencies, but members will be able to access their experience of the UK publishing industry and their legal expertise if things go wrong. Candidate membership for those without a professional writing contract starts at £90 per year.

AGENTS WHO MIGHT BE INTERESTED...

Anubis Literary Agency
6 Birdhaven Close, Lighthorne, Warwick CV35 0BE
Rates: home 15%, USA/translation 20%)
Send 50 pages, a one-page synopsis and SAE (essential). No reading fee. No telephone calls.
Clients include: Adam Roberts

Artellus Limited
30 Dorset House, Gloucester Place, London NW1 5AD
Rates: home 10%, overseas 20%
Frst three chapters and synopsis in the first instance. We operate a selective reader's service by invitation – *note: no reading fee for first chapters but charges £40 reading fee if interested in seeing whole manuscript, reimburse money if author accepted as client. Not recommended practice.*
Clients include: Lois McMaster Bujold
www.artellusltd.co.uk

Mic Cheetham Literary Agency
11-12 Dover Street, London W1S 4LJ
Rates: home/overseas 15-20%
Will suggest revision. Contact initially by post, one page synopsis, first three chapters of novel for consideration, brief biographical information and an SAE. No reading fee.
Clients include: Iain Banks, Paul Cornell, Jon Courtenay Grimwood, Ken MacLeod, China Mieville, Tricia Sullivan, Steph Swainston
www.miccheetham.com

Dorian Literary Agency
Upper Thornehill, 27 Church Road, St Marychurch, Torquay, Devon TQ1 4QY
Rates: home 10-12.5%, USA 15%, translation 20%
No reading fee. Contact initially by post with 1-3 chapters and brief outline plus return postage/sae. No telephone calls, faxes or emails.
Clients include: Gillian Bradshaw, Andy Remic

Antony Harwood Ltd
103 Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6EB
Rates: home 15%, overseas 20%
Send brief outline plus sample material – for example, the first two or three chapters. You can email the material to us as a Word for Windows or Rich Text Format file or post it to us, including an SAE. Will suggest revision. No reading fee.
Clients include: Peter F. Hamilton, Roger Levy, Paul McAuley, Simon Morden, Garth Nix, Geoff Ryman
www.antonyharwood.com

John Jarrold
j.jarold@btinternet.co.uk
Rates: home 15%, overseas 20%
Submit the first six chapters of your work by e-mail as a word document, for consideration by the agency. No reading fee (*also operates separate independent editorial service which charges, so make clear which service is required*).
Clients include: Chris Beckett, Eric Brown, Ramsey Campbell, Zoran Zivkovic
www.johnjarrold.co.uk

Sheil Land Associates Ltd
43 Doughty Street, London, WC1N 2LF
Rates: home 15%, overseas 20%
Synopsis and three chapters with covering letter. No reading fee. SAE essential.
http://www.sheilland.co.uk

London Independent Books
26 Chalcot Crescent, London NW1 8YD
Rates: home 15%, overseas 20%
Will suggest revision of promising MSS. No reading fee. Specialises in teenage fiction. Submit 2 chapters and a synopsis with return postage.
Clients include: Richard Morgan, Chris Wooding.

Marjacq Scripts
34 Devonshire Place, London W1G 6JW
Rates: home 10%, overseas 20%
Send first 3 chapters with synopsis. May suggest revision. Sae essential for return of submissions.
Clients include: Steven Duggen
www.marjacq.com

PFD
Drury House, 34-43 Russell Street, London, WC2B 5HA
Rates: home 10%, overseas 20%
A short synopsis and two or three sample chapters (the first two or three chapters are preferable) together with a covering letter giving an account of the background of the book and an account of the writer's career to date.
Clients include: Stephen Baxter, John Clute, Storm Constantine, Robert Jordan, Christopher Priest, Alastair Reynolds,
http://www.pfd.co.uk

...AND THOSE WHO DEFINITELY WON'T*

A.M.Heath & Co. Ltd
Annette Green Authors' Agency
Book Bureau Literary Agency
BookBlast Ltd
Causeway Literary Agency
Christopher Little Literary Agency (JK Rowlings agency)
Diane Banks Associates
Edwards Fuglewicz
Futerman, Rose & Associates
Gregory & Company Authors
Jane Turnbull
Jeffrey Simmons
Jenny Brown Associates
John Johnson (Authors' Agent) Ltd
John Pawsey
Johnson & Alcock Ltd
Judith Chilcote Agency
Judith Murdoch Literary Agency
Lavinia Trevor
Lorella Belli Literary Agency
Luigi Bonomi Associates Ltd
Maggie Pearlstine Associates Ltd
Mary Clemmey Literary Agency
McLean & Slora Literary Agents
Peter Knight Agency
Rebecca Winfield
Rosica Colin Ltd
Rupert Crew Ltd
Shirley Stewart Literary Agency
Teresa Chris Literary Agency
William Morris Agency (UK) Ltd

* at least according to their entries in *The Writers' & Artists' Yearbook 2007*

Note, these are only agencies who positively state that they accept sf&f submissions, other agencies may also accept such work. BSFA does not recommend any agency listed here and cannot guarantee the accuracy of the information in this list – although every effort was made to ensure accuracy before going to press.

WEIGHING THE WRITING: TACKLING THE SECOND DRAFT

It's important to say that writing is uniquely rewarding. Good prose, characters, settings and ideas get better as you age. Just as the power that writing conveys when it's done well remains, so you as the reader, bring something new to the fiction when you reread it. You return to a familiar work as a different person and – ideally – you find refinements in what you've read.

I'm holding hard to that thought as I begin the second draft of my first novel. The first draft went a lot easier than I had expected and I ended up after two years with a complete story and 250 000 words.

That's obviously too much for most first novels. I am now redrafting, and after only 16000 words I can see that if the first draft was easier than expected, this is already a lot harder.

I return to the story with a clearer idea of who my characters are, and what they become by the end of the story arc. Having completed the whole novel, I have clearer ideas about what I need to seed into them at the start of their stories.

For me, redrafting is crucial. It is through a constant process of scrutiny and criticism that I understand who my characters are, what motivates them, and what their reactions to plot developments will be. Having written so much about each of them – perhaps too much – I know them from the inside out. I hope to be able to reduce the words on the page to what I need for this book, without losing the scope of their personalities.

What redrafting is teaching me is the importance of getting the balance right. I want this novel to be accessible and exciting to read. The first draft is close to that while also being flabby, slow and repetitive. Redrafting tightens the prose, but can also reduce the immediacy.

With regard to the mechanics of redrafting, many writers talk about the difficulty of killing their darling bastards and sacrificing favourite lines. I'm finding that less difficult than I thought. What does concern me is losing the slightly indefinable sense of excitement that came initially. A further challenge, I've discovered, is to ensure that my protagonists fit together logically as well as dramatically. One of them is off earth and begins the novel trapped on a spaceship. He is physically constrained while the other protagonists are in motion across different parts of the globe. This presents a challenge in managing the passage of time as well as the emotional distances that people travel in stressful and dramatic situations.

Weighing the writing, being critical of what words I've chosen and what I want them to convey, is taking longer than I expected. It also risks making a duller story. My intention is to hold on to the initial heat of excitement that came off the first draft while refining the prose. George R R Martin, writing in his blog, has described redrafting as walking a tightrope. This is an appropriate analogy. You need balance to walk a tightrope – a balance between overwriting, rushing and dawdling. I'm mindful of that as I crawl through my second draft at what feels like a page a day.

All of us writing now, talking about writing, or wanting to write, need to ensure that our fiction is both accessible and worthwhile. We owe it to our readers not to waste their time.

Dev Agarwal has published short fiction in a number of magazines. "Toys", a story featuring Rebecca, one of the main point of view characters of Dev's novel, will be forthcoming from Aeon magazine.