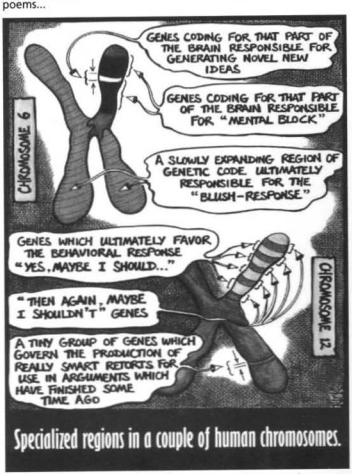
FOCUS

THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION MAGAZINE FOR WRITERS

Summer 2008 No. 52

CONTENTS



Specialized regions in a couple of human chromosomes.

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

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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Rediscovering Rama

Martin McGrath offers an entirely inadequate tribute to the influence of Sir Arthur C Clarke on his own desire to be a writer.

This mailing is the first to go out to members since the sad news reached the BSFA of the death of our President Arthur C Clarke. Clarke's science fiction made a big impact on me as genre fan – although, for many years, I didn't know he was responsible.

I must have picked up *Rendezvous With Rama* sometime in the late seventies (probably between doing my Eleven Plus and going to secondary school) at a time when I was strip-mining the science fiction section of Dungannon District Library at the rate of three books a day – and may the great god of books bless the sweet librarians who assumed that everything with spaceships must be for children.

Anyway I know I read Rama at least three times that summer – although the name of the author and the book didn't stay in my head. I was at that stage too indiscriminate to be a fan of anyone and too disorganised to keep a record of what I was reading. So – a bit like Rama itself – I swept inexorably onward, leaving everything trailing helplessly in my wake.

Except that not everything I read in those days was left behind.

Some books made impressions.

Heinlein's *Citizen of the Galaxy* and Dickson's *Dorsai*, violent, exciting adventures stuck in the mind. Dick's weird, depressing *Galactic Pot-Healer* lodged firmly as, for all the wrong reasons, did Edmund Cooper's *The Tenth Planet* (some books should have stayed in the adult section). James White, a fellow Ulsterman from the "other side", delivered visions of understanding the alien when such things seemed impossible. Richard C Meredith's *We All Died At Breakaway Stations* remains amazingly vivid while other, more lauded novels slipped away.

And then there was that book with the giant spaceship that nobody could understand.

To say that Rama haunted me would be an overstatement but there was certainly a period while I was at university and just after – before the coming of the Internet proper (before both Amazon and Google) and before I discovered "fandom"* - that every visit to a bookshop was accompanied by quick scan of the bookshelves for anything that looked familiar.

In the end, when I'd more or less given up, it was reading an article in a computer magazine about a planned adventure game from Sierra about astronauts visiting a giant spaceship passing through our solar system that put the book back in my hand.

By then, of course, I knew who Clarke was. I'd threaded together the short fiction ("Overhead, without any fuss, the stars were going out" is not a line you forget), *2001*, *A Fall of Moondust*, *The Fountains of Paradise*, *Against the Fall of Night* and put them to the face of that old bloke who talking about science on the television and mysterious crystal skulls.

But could *Rendezvous With Rama* be as good as I remembered.

Yes. And better.

Not only was I transported to that mysterious ship, now with an adult's appreciation of the themes and the skill with which this great adventure was constructed, but I was also transported back to that time in my life when all that mattered was books and adventure and when utter freedom was never further away than the cover of the next novel or short story collection.

That's what books you love can do, they can transport you to distant worlds but they are also time machines that can take you back in your own lifetime. I don't claim to be a writer of Clarke's quality, I don't even dare aspire to it, but I confess one of the things that first put me in front of a keyboard was the knowledge that it was possible to illicit such emotion through words on a page.

Which is my lengthy, roundabout way, of saying thank you to Sir Arthur C Clarke (and the others) for filling my sky with stars and giant, mysterious, spaceships.

Martin McGrath

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The cover of this issue is Spaceman by Stephen Sweet

**Thank God, can you imagine the looks if I'd jumped into the middle of some fannish conversation with my puppyish enthusiasm and said: "I'm trying to find a book about a giant object that passes through the solar system and this spaceship is sent to intercept it and it turns out that the object is a giant alien spaceship and that the end is something about threes..." And they'd have said: "Oh, you mean* Rendezvous With Rama, *the Hugo, Nebula and BSFA award-winning classic of the genre by one of the holy trinity of golden age authors, our very own Sir Arthur C Clarke, you ignorant plonker." "Oh, you have heard of it then," I'd say, before slipping away to kill myself in embarrassment.*

Contribute!

The deadline for the next issue of Focus is:
FRIDAY 3 OCTOBER
Send your submissions/queries/suggestions to:
focusmagazine@ntlworld.com

Taking readers to 11.2 ki per second and beyond

Geoff Nelder is the co-editor of Escape Velocity, a recently launched science fiction magazine that's experimenting with Print On Demand and new formats. Here he talks about setting up the magazine and the struggle to find stories.

We found a niche in speculative fiction and this is what happened. Escape Velocity is a fledgling science fiction & fact magazine published by Adventure Books of Seattle, a small press that publishes books in keeping with the company name but with a focus on science fiction. Our international staff includes owner and editor Robert Blevins, co-editor me, a bookkeeper, a technical adviser and a cover art designer.

RATIONALE

The rationale for *Escape Velocity* came from different directions. Robert wanted: "Stories, articles, interviews, special image sections, letters to the editor, a puzzle page; glossy covers, perfect bound. Other magazines offered a mix of fantasy, soft sci-fi and occasional hard sci-fi tossed into the mix. I wanted to do a magazine for hard-sci-fi readers that stuck to the program."

My reason was more selfish. It was born from a frustration of my limited success in seeing my short fiction in print. Ironically, as found by other magazine editors, we still cannot publish our own stories for vanity press accusations. A more noble reason was to provide a vehicle for other brilliant writers who found it difficult placing their stories.

We both felt there was a niche for a hard science fiction and fact magazine. We are not against other forms of speculative fiction, we just don't publish them in *EV*. Outside *EV* I have had stories and novels published that are thrillers, humour and fantasy, as well as science fiction.

SUBMISSION PROBLEMS

It made a change to use market listings as publishers instead of writers but there came a shock. After submitting a stories to well-known magazines writers are familiar with having to sit on the doormat waiting months for the rejection slips. This, we are told,

is because the submission editors are swamped by thousands of admirable stories that are 'not for us'.

So where were the submissions to *Escape Velocity*?

We had issued a call for stories, poems and articles at many writers' forums. We made a nuisance of ourselves emailing writer friends, stuffing flyers into goody bags at conventions, and I scattered leaflets in real-life writers' groups, and libraries. We had only a trickle of stories possibly because payment was only a copy of the magazine. Were we an unknown quantity: escape velocity but to where? Some writers wouldn't want to travel with us and burn up after five minutes. Another reason is that we don't print fantasy: most SF magazines are a mix. Many newbie writers fear rejection and won't release their stories.

We respond to stories we reject with a short critique. We fondly remember those sub-editors who scribble words of encouragement. The 'this time' added to 'not for us' spoke volumes. So we play the long game; responding to writers with more than a form reject. Word will get around and we'll attract more submissions. We now pay $10 and a print copy. It's not much and we now have around 30 submissions per week.

WHY REJECT?

Many submissions are unsuitable in spite of asking writers to read the guidelines. Along come stories about dragons, ghosts, pixies, historical romances and crime stories with no sci-fi element. Then instead of the 5,000 word maximum limit we receive novellas, or a chapter from a novel-in-progress that doesn't stand alone as a story.

Sometimes I suggest another market - apologies to Peter Crowther for suggesting his PS Publishing at least twice, but they were good novellas!

It doesn't bother me if people submit stories in weird formats, because it only takes seconds to reformat; a small price for a gem. I'm British, and Robert is American, so national spelling and idioms are welcome. We forgive minor spelling and grammatical errors, and encourage experimental writing as long as it works. On the other hand we don't want to spend hours working with the author if there is too much Tell, info-dumping, or too many two-dimensional characters (in the literary sense – mathematically, now that might be interesting.)

An overdone trope is another reason for rejection unless we find ourselves nodding at some clever twist, characterization, brilliant Show or something indefinable obliges us to accept it.

- Overdone plots:
- Alien abduction.
- Planetary colonization.
- Post apocalyptic.
- Terraforming Mars.
- Alien invasion with guns and Starship Trooper type stories.
- Alien invasions thwarted by common colds.
- Mini space operas.
- It was all a dream/game/virtual reality.

lometres

I liked these topics the first time I read them, but a story would have to be something very special to be accepted using one of these ideas today.

NON-FICTION

We include science articles especially those that relate to themes of interest to science fiction. Luckily, I know someone working at the Space Telescope Science Institute, Maryland so she was able to give insights into what it is like working with Hubble Telescope engineers and astronauts.

It gave me pleasure to follow Jon Courtenay Grimwood for a day at the Annual Writers' Conference in his home town of Winchester, and John Jarrold was good enough to be frank with interview questions in another issue. Interviewing Dan Simmons was quite a ball for Robert at Norwescon. Having an excuse to talk to writers, publishers and agents is a great perk.

After I'd written a piece on coincidences I expected to receive input to our letters to the editor page. Nothing. After the first two issues I had to send out extra appeals in forums, including one we set up for the magazine only to receive a handful of letters. Chatting to other magazine publishers this appears to be a general problem. Hint: if you want to see your name in a magazine, write a letter – they're like gold dust.

EXPERIMENT

For the first few issues we are printing via the POD publisher/distributor Lulu.com. The downside is they are more expensive for readers than if we printed conventionally, but we'd risk needing to house hundreds of unsold copies. The upside is that it is easy to play around with format, and give ebook options.

Submissions are open all year round, for more details, visit: www.escapevelocitymagazine.com

IS GOD LAUGHING?

Edward Comma

He must be a comedian
On a galactic stage

To create a living thing
Capable of grasping

That we are wrapped in spirals
Of stars and DNA

To understand the origins
Without giving the time

To see how the story ends.

Planning a Novel?

Writing a novel should be enjoyable, relaxing, and stress-free, reckons Michael Amos. If you plan sufficiently at the outset, you will find the whole process a rewarding exercise in organised daydreaming. If you do not, you will be plunged into writer's hell.

This article outlines the method I use to write my novels. And yes, I really do go through all the steps below, in the order shown. The examples I have used come from my work-in-progress at the time of writing, *The Everlasting Beyond of Eternal Happiness*.

The steps are:

1 Define your novel's theme
2 Write a rough synopsis
3 Write your reference documents
4 Map out your novel's structure using filing cards
5 Start writing

What this article does not cover the craft of writing: characterisation, plot development and so on. Much has already been written on these subjects by far more accomplished souls than myself.

Step one: Define your novel's theme

The theme of your novel is important and needs to be written down at the outset. Nobody else but you will ever see this, so it can take the form of a paragraph or two of rough notes. In order to keep your novel focused, everything you write subsequently needs to be written with the theme in mind.

For example, the theme for *The Everlasting Beyond of Eternal Happiness* reads as follows:

"A comedy about sex, death, God and chocolate. The clash between the blind-belief system of religion and the logical proofs of science. The hero is conflicted between his religious upbringing, his sex-drive and his career in research, and is motivated by his loneliness."

You'll notice the above paragraph mentions nothing about the setting. The story could take place during the nineteenth century in a Polish zoo. It doesn't matter - what the story is about is independent of where it is set. As it happens, *The Everlasting Beyond of Eternal Happiness* is a near future story set in a computer.

As the novel develops in the subsequent steps, you may come back and revise this theme. If you do so, you need to check what you have written during the following steps to make sure it does not conflict with your revision.

Step two: Write a rough synopsis

The rough synopsis should be just that, rough! This is not meant to be the document you will later use to pitch to agents and publishers (although it will probably form the basis of that document). The purpose is to provide you with a framework for some serious daydreaming in step four.

You should sketch out all the main elements of the story. Just brain- dump everything at this stage but wheedle out the ideas that conflict with your theme (or change your theme).

You should end up with between two and ten sides of A4.

Step three: Set up a reference document

The reference document serves two purposes:

- To guard against inconsistencies - you don't want to accidentally change your hero's eye colour from brown to blue half way through the novel.
- To act as a notepad to record any ideas you are not ready to place yet. If you think of something funny or wise for a character to say, but haven't reached a point in the book where they can say it, you can record it in this reference document.

As with the previous two steps, only you are going to see this document, so do not labour endlessly over it. The point is that it provides you with a reference to avoid inconsistencies in your novel. The reference document should contain the following sections:

Character profiles.

All the major and minor characters should be sketched out in this document. Include physical details and relevant back story.

Often when I'm writing the bio up, things occur to me about the character that I hadn't thought about before, and this can feed into the main plot and subplots of the novel.

As an aside, one of the things my editor insists on is no dialogue tags. "He saids" and "she saids" are completely out. As a result, whenever you need to identify a speaker, you have an action associated with the dialogue.

So, for example, my editor will not let me write:

> *Simms said "Mandy, I, I, I never, I never thought..."*
> *Instead, I have to write:*
> *"Mandy, I, I, I never, I never thought..." Little pools of spit accumulated at the corners of Simms' mouth.*

These little dialogue actions can be used to say something about your character, and you can make use of the ticks and habits you have recorded in your character profile.

Location and setting profiles

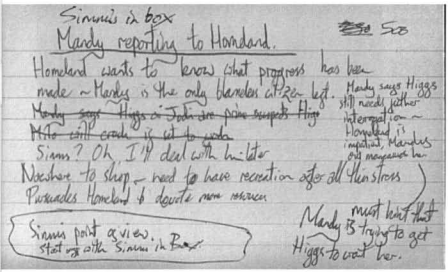
Any important settings, clubs or organizations that appear in your novel should be profiled. Again, this is to ensure consistency - you don't want your characters visiting a shop on a Sunday when you've previously said it's closed at weekends

Timeline

Draw a timeline of when things happen. When you first write this, it will be sketchy. Once you complete section four (below), you should be able to revise this and get all your dates correct. I did not do this step for my first two novels and I had real trouble with the consistency of timing between events.

Step four: Mapping out the novel

The next step is to plan the whole novel out on 5 inch by 3 inch filing cards. I originally read about this technique in the book *Teach Yourself Screen Writing* by Raymond G Frensham, and I believe it is a common technique used for film and television scripts. The method



works very well for novels too.

Using your rough synopsis as a guide, daydream your way through the whole plot, writing a filing card for each scene. Write them quickly – don't labour over them so as to disrupt the flow of your musing.

Each card should have the following:

- A title at the top
- The characters involved
- A brief description of what happens. This will be very sketchy on the first flow through so leave lots of space to add details later.
- An estimate of how many words each scene will be (to the nearest 250 words). If you add these all up, you have an estimate of how long your completed novel will be.
- An indication of the quantity of action/drama in the scene. I do this by using red filing cards for dramatic/action scenes and blue ones for the rest.

An example of a card from *The Everlasting Beyond of Eternal Happiness* is below. You'll see it is a very rough, scribbly note. (see the picture above).

The title is "Mandy reporting to Homeland", underlined at the top. The 500 at the top right is an estimate of how long this scene will be in words. The card originally only had the line "Homeland wants to know what progress has been made - Mandy is the only blameless citizen left." All the rest of the scribbles have been added later.

Once you have gone through this process once, you will have a great stack of cards - between 70 and 100 for a 70,000 word novel. What you can do now is lay the whole lot out on the floor and see the structure of your novel (see the photo on the next page).

If you have used red and blue cards as I suggest above, you can see where the dramatic moments of action and tension arise at a glance, and so check the pacing of your novel. If you look at the photo, you can immediately pick out a three act structure! (*Or at least you could, if we could reproduce colour pics - squinty eyee*

You can now go through the whole daydreaming process again and again, refining the description on the cards, adding, changing, deleting and rearranging the scenes as necessary. As you do this, constantly refer back to the theme and reference documents you set up.

You may well find the plot changes away from the rough synopsis you drew up in section two. This does not matter, you can go back and change the synopsis.

Similarly you will find your characters develop and you can go back and change the character profiles. Quite often, my characters end up doing

ESCAPE VELOCITY

Edward Comma

A rocket to the moon
Exhausts most of its fuel
In the first few minutes
Of its attempt to escape Earth

What chance do I have
Trying to escape from you
When I don' have the energy
To explain how I really feel?

COLOURS OF LOVE

Edward Comma

Red men come from Mars
And blue women from Venus
Will they mix together
And creates something purple?

something they were not supposed to do, like having an unexpected argument. If you can't get them to behave themselves, you have to go back to the stack of cards and make a few adjustments.

I find I have a wonderful feeling of control over the story at this stage. To be able to see the whole thing and physically move the sections around is very liberating.

Step five: Start writing

Once you have finished running through your card structure, you can begin the process of writing. Switch on your PC, put the stack of cards next to the keyboard, turn over the first card and start writing, using your notes on the card to guide you through the first scene.

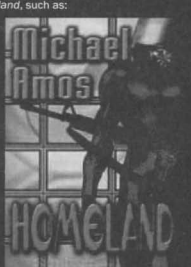
You do not need to worry about the overall structure of the scene because you've already written it down.

You don't need to worry about where the story is going, you've worked that out already.

In fact, you don't have to worry about anything, just relax and write.

About the author

Michael Amos an author based in Oxford in the United Kingdom. His rock and roll comedy *The Rocktastic Corduroy Peach* and SF comedy *Homeland* are currently on sale from Samhain Publishing. People have been saying nice things about his SF comedy *Homeland*, such as:



"Amos makes this perverse world come alive... the reader is pulled along with the fast action and an ending you couldn't possibly see coming." *Neo-Opsis*

"This story is put together wonderfully, with all the satiric elements and humour coming together for a most entertaining tale...of the Shopping Mall of Doom." *Mrs Giggles (84%)*

He loves getting emails, so contact him at mamos@michaelamos.net and tell him something funny. You can also visit his web site at www.michaelamos.net, where there are competitions, articles and interviews with authors. Visit his website at www.michaelamos.net.

MASTERCLASS No.3: BRINGING HOME THE BACON

This is the third in Christopher Priest's ongoing series on the art and business of writing. This time the focus is on business.

Those desperately awaiting Mr Priest's insights into the importance of Maps in Fantasy Novels will have to wait a little longer for that discussion.

The order in which these little articles appear is more or less random, based on what he feel like doing at any one time.

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

When they get together, what do writers talk about? Apart that is from sex, copy-editors, members of the opposite sex, computers, sex, bloody reviewers, sex...

It is the folding stuff, the moolah, the lucre, the dosh, the gelt, the spondulix, the rhino, the loot, the dough, the ...

Money

Dr Johnson said: 'No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money.' I have often remembered this, because it reminds me that I have been a blockhead for most of my career. In fact, I have been a blockhead *all* my career. The first pieces I ever wrote were written without hope or expectation of money – I imagine that will be true of the last.

My first efforts were little space-fillers for the BSFA, based on terrible puns, written and published under a pseudonym for fear of being mocked. The editor in those days was Archie Mercer, long since departed this life, who had a tolerant and in fact supportive approach to young writers. Later I discovered Archie loved puns – I suppose this was an early lesson in producing what an editor was looking for, if accidental. After that I made a few tentative attempts at writing letters to fanzines, book reviews for fanzines, then even more hesitantly an article or two for fanzines. Most of my first stories were published, unpaid for, in fanzines. This went on for years, creating a habit of gratis writing that remains unbroken.

I have never actually counted up (nor would I know how to do so) but I have long suspected that I have probably written at least as many words free of charge as I have written for reward. Probably more, if you include letters, emails, or even drafts of things that somehow were never finished.

This article you're reading now is unpaid work. So is everything else in this issue of *Focus*; so is everything else in *Vector*, *Matrix*, all the fanzines you ever see, just about all internet sites, all blogs ... and so on.

So of course I'm not the only one. Almost every professional writer you've ever heard of in the sf/fantasy worlds regularly and routinely writes free material, usually without thought of payment. This is almost unique in the world of literature, but it has certainly been going on as long as I've been around and seems likely to go on forever. Out there in mainstream literature, no one does anything for nothing, or if they do they make a song and dance about it. Our tradition of *pro bono* writing is different. It is a real strength and we should cherish it.

However, we do also have to write for money.

If you're serious about writing, at some point you have to come to terms with the fact that money is implicitly involved. Perhaps in some other socio-economic society money might ideally be taken out of the equation, but in our real world writing and publishing are paid occupations.

In positioning yourself in this 'market', you have to decide what you want from it. For reasons I hope will be clear shortly, I advocate a sensible, middling approach, but first let's think about the extremes.

One extreme is to go into writing purely with the intention of making as much money as possible. That is certainly achievable – some writers

make a *lot* of money. They do it by taking a shrewd look at what the market seems to want, they angle their work at that market, they then turn out a lot of material. It's one way of being a successful writer.

But it also raises a few thoughts. In the first place, which is more important: finding a market or finding a voice? It's surprisingly easy to find the former, less so the latter. Which one is likely to pay off more in the end? The sort of markets that will buy large quantities of quickly written material generally want low-grade, repetitive, easily marketable stuff – is that what you have *really* set your heart on writing? It's also a lot of hard work: other jobs require less effort, fewer hours. And the clincher, for me at least: if money is what you're most interested in, haven't you realized it's a lot easier to get rich if you become a venture capitalist, a dealer in junk bonds, a retailer of fast food?

The other extreme. This is the tremulous writer of serious intent, for whom the whole subject of money is deeply distasteful, who shrinks from ever mentioning it, who argues that art and Mammon cannot mix, who will agree to any proposal of payment whatsoever simply to avoid having to talk about it.

On this extreme, the writer will be forced to have a day-job (almost certainly a day-job that's humble and low-paid, because anything more involving would interfere with the writing). Living accommodation will be an issue. Daily needs, like food, clothes, taxes, and so on, will be other endless problems. The only alternative to this is to have private means of some kind: a supportive family, an inheritance, early retirement with a big pension.

I don't suppose anyone reading this will fit exactly into either of these extremes (or wouldn't admit to it), so let's assume we're talking about the middle ground, lying somewhere between. Neither rich nor poor, basely cynical nor hopelessly idealistic, spendthrift nor mean ... but with bits of both to keep you in balance. Of course, everyone is different. The most successful living writer in the world, J. K., went for neither of the extremes: she wrote something she wanted to write, and it took off. You can't plan a professional career around that, but it certainly happened and in some ways is the best of both worlds.

'Professional' is one of those words whose meaning has changed with time. These days it is largely used to mean someone who does something for money. I believe this is a distortion. A purer meaning would be to say that a professional is someone who professes something: 'I am competent, I am an expert, I can do that.' A professional is then judged by his or her performance within those implied assertions. Money doesn't come into it at this stage: it's about ability, approach, demeanour, competence. One doesn't lead invariably to the other. Some writers make a lot of money but act unprofessionally.

"A purer meaning would be to say that a professional is someone who professes something: 'I am competent, I am an expert, I can do that.' A professional is then judged by his or her performance within those implied assertions."

It does tend to work more the other way around, though. Publishers like to work with writers who are pleasant to know, who deliver books on time, or who send in material that is in a finished, achieved state. Writers who are late, lazy, untidy, rude, unreasonable, unreliable ... well, I suppose that's most of us, come to think of it!

Just don't make things unnecessarily hard for yourself.

A friend, another writer, once summed up the money side of publishing. 'It's a cycle of poverty,' he said. 'You start with a hard-up writer who sells a manuscript to a publisher having trouble meeting his overheads, who tries to get the book on sale in shops where profits are shrinking, which then waits for people to come in and buy a copy but who complain books are too expensive."

Things aren't really quite as bad as that, but the gloomy remark holds a general truth. Publishing and selling books is not big business. Not compared with, say, writing and selling software, or making cars, or drilling for oil, or lending money, or brewing beer.

Think of it this way. Suppose a hardback book is published at £15.99 – for sake of neatness, let's make that £16. After several months the book has sold 2,000 copies, and that's about it. (2,000 copies of a novel sold is pretty good.) There will be a trickle of single sales to come, and a few returns. But it means that the total worth of that book was £16 x 2,000 copies = £32,000. It sounds like a lot, but that is the absolute total. Out of that the bookseller, the wholesaler and the publisher have to take a percentage each

(and out of the publisher's share all the costs of editing, designing, producing, printing, promoting and selling the book have to be found). The writer gets a royalty, perhaps 10% if the books aren't heavily discounted. (Most are these days ... those 3-for-2 promotions in bookstores are made possible only by drastically reducing the writer's income. Remember that next time you see what looks like a bargain.) It's not much of a cake to slice up and share.

Publishers are sometimes characterized by disgruntled authors as fat-cat capitalists (they have offices in expensive parts of London, they make lavish purchases of worthless biographies of celebrities ... don't they?), but in reality most of the people who work in publishing are badly paid. As a rule of thumb, most of the workers you're likely to come into contact with – editors, publicists, rights managers – are low on the salary scale compared with people doing similar jobs in advertising or television (or junk bonds, and so on).

But hang on – publishing staff get holiday pay, sick pay, pension schemes, bonuses, expense accounts, long holidays. It's not entirely the same as being a freelance writer.

And publishers do act as businesses. They want to sell as many books as possible. They want to make a profit. They want to make a bigger profit every year. They have to pay their staff, pay the printer, pay the overheads on the office, pay the writers, so they are always interested in money. Publishing is a capitalizing business – every book they buy is paid for before it is published, so publishers have to work with investment capital to hand, and try to earn it back through sales. They make money, they are motivated by it, they employ accountants and financial advisers to help them maximize their profits.

If you as a writer don't take at least some interest in the financial side of your work, you will sooner or later find yourself at a disadvantage.

Selling a story or an article to a magazine, a one-off sale in which other writers are also involved, is one thing. There is little any one writer can do to improve or amend the deal, at least not at the outset of a career.

"If you believe what you read in the press, huge, ridiculous advances are regularly paid for books, yet when it's your turn, when you manage to sell your first novel, you quickly discover that you aren't going to have the news fo the advance published in the Daily Mail. "

If you sell a book of your own, though, you're in a slightly better position. But how much should you expect to be paid?

This is a major area of uncertainty for many writers. What is a good advance? What is the right one? What is too little? Is there anything that could be called *too much*? Should the money be in hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands? If you believe what you read in the press, huge, ridiculous advances are regularly paid for books, yet when it's your turn, when you manage to sell your first novel, you quickly discover that you aren't going to have the news of the advance published in the *Daily Mail*.

Some writers say: 'I leave all that to my agent,' which might be good advice if you can find an agent. These days, getting an agent is sometimes harder than finding a publisher. Even if you have an agent, though, shouldn't you at least have some understanding of what's going on so you can evaluate what you're being offered?

Every book, and every deal for a book, is different. That's the way it has to be. So neither I nor anyone else can lay down hard and fast rules about what to expect. But I can offer a generalization that might help.

Three things are likely to happen, in money terms, when a book is published. (1.) It might flop: get bad reviews, poor circulation, terrible sales. (2.) It might do OK: receive a good press, be displayed by booksellers, stay in print, sell steadily, get a paperback edition that does well, and so forth. (3.) It might become a best-seller, stay in print for years, have a movie based on it, sell in translation around the world.

The ideal situation, in my experience, is to try to make a deal with a publisher that adequately reflects, or prepares for, all of these eventualities.

A book that does badly is likely to hurt the publisher more than the writer, who although denied the prospect of long-term royalty or subsidiary income, does at least have the original advance, which needs never to be returned. But publishers cover their tracks by publishing more than one title at a time, which helps even out that kind of loss. However, if a writer has a string of flops, this is the reason the publisher might be cool about the next one.

If a book does as well as hoped for, then it is only reasonable for

the author to expect to share some of those rewards. This means that any contract should contain terms that anticipate moderate success: a rising rate of royalties, or beneficial terms for sale of subsidiary rights.

And if the book takes off spectacularly: again, the contract should be drawn up to reflect this possibility. If a book starts selling well, the publisher moves into the territory of easy profits: most overheads have been amortized by the first publication, editorial, design and production costs are zero, reprints can be negotiated for discounts because of bulk orders, and so on. It seems only fair that if the publisher cashes in on a successful book, an author should benefit as well.

Obtaining a large advance, by hook or by crook, is not the way to achieve the best results, incidentally. A big advance obviously puts money in the writer's pocket (that's good), but it will attract a heavy tax bill (that's not good) and furthermore create a debt to the publisher. If the advance is not earned out within a reasonable time, the publisher will *remember*. It's always better to negotiate good terms, mutually acceptable to both sides, because unlike an advance, contract terms can be built on from one book to the next, steadily improving as the writer's reputation and sales improve.

"It's always better to negotiate good terms, mutually acceptable to both sides, because unlike an advance, contract terms can be built on from one book to the next..."

The best that can be said of a large advance, should you be fortunate enough to be offered one, is that it increases the amount of money the publisher is investing in your title. You then might reasonably hope the publisher will put much more effort into promoting and distributing your book, in an effort to get the money back. It doesn't always work that way, though. Publishing is not an exact science.

You do need an agent. You can survive without one for a while, but everything I've covered here would be handled by an agent. (I maintain that you need to know what's going on.) Difficulty finding an agent will ease, once you have a sale or two under your belt.

Finally: there's more to life than money. There's more to writing than money. It's necessary to know how to deal with it, but it's more necessary to be a good writer. Never write beneath your best, and the money will probably sort itself out.

BSFA to administer James White Award

The BSFA has agreed with James White Award administrators to take over the running of the short story competition from next year.

James White was one of Ireland's most successful science fiction authors, best known for his *Sector General* series of stories and an important figure in UK fandom for many years. Born in Belfast in 1928, James White passed away suddenly in August 1999. The James White Award was established in 2000 in his memory.

The James White Award is open to all non-professional authors and is judged by a panel of professional writers and editors.

James Bacon, the current awards administrator, said: "We were unable to make an award in 2007 and everyone involved felt that the James White Award needed a boost. I'm delighted that the BSFA have stepped in to raise the profile of the competition and to ensure it continues and I know James White's family are fully behind this new structure."

Martin McGrath will administer the award for the BSFA. "I am honoured to take on this role and I hope that the BSFA can build on what has already been achieved to cement the position of this competition and to ensure a proper tribute to a writer I greatly admire."

Andy Cox, editor and publisher of UK SF magazine *Interzone* – who have sponsored the awards and published all the previous winners – has pledged to continue his magazine's support for the award.

It is envisaged that the 2009 competition will open in January, with the award presentation taking place with the other BSFA Awards at Eastercon, 2010. Further details, as they are available, will be published on the BSFA website and in *Focus*.

Writers' Guild celebrates genre success

Recently the Writers' Guild of Great Britain held a symposium on science fiction writing in the UK. It featuring Phil Ford (*Captain Scarlet, The Sarah Jane Adventures, Torchwood*), Ashley Pharoah (*Life on Mars, Ashes to Ashes*), Philip Palmer (*Debatable Space*) and Adrian Hodges (*Primeval*). The meeting looked at the current success of science fiction and fantasy in the UK and the writer's experiences of writing genre material.

There's a consensus amongst the writers that sci-fi's time as an "outsider" in British television is coming to an end, exemplified by this comment by Ashley Pharoah: "We pitched *Life On Mars* for seven years before it got made. We got very, very close along the way but there was a reluctance to take what was seen as a big risk. It wasn't just execs who found it hard to get, though. Some writers have been quite hostile as well. There seems to be some kind of snobbery about anything that isn't social realism. But that is changing – it seems to be mostly an older generation who feel that way."

An article on the entertaining and informative discussion can be found on the Writers' Guild website (www.writersguild.org.uk – click under "feature articles").

Kudos provides writing competition details

So the simple, beautiful act of creation is no longer enough for you? Has your pallet jaded? Do you need something a little more spicy to get those creative juices flowing?

How about a competiton?

How about a magazine full of competions for writers?

That's *Kudos* (formerly *Competitions Bulletin*) a regular round-up listing writing competitions from all over the world in every genre and style. Each issue is available for £2.50 or you can subscribe.

Visit http://kudoswriting.wordpress.com/ or email carolebaldock@hotmail.com for more information

HARSH LIGHT

Edward Comma

As we approach the speed of light
The universe is reduced to two fiery points
The one in front is red
The one behind shades blue
And they are both deadly to look at.

ON DEALING WITH CRITICS IN THE FUTURE

Edward Comma

That's not a poem, he said
Laughing at the work
I'd poured my heart into.

It's got spaceships, he said
And none of it rhymes
or scans

So I chopped his head off with a laser
Fed his body to the reactor of my warp drive
And wired his brain to the electronics of a garbage scow on the Phobos-Deimos run.

So this may not be poetry, I confess
But who's laughing now
At this poetic justice

Writers & readers: caught in a web?

Interzone editor Jetse de Vries looks at the ups and downs of electronic communication between fans and authors.

This article is reactive. We'll see if anyone finds it reactionary by the end.

The last edition of *Focus* drew together a range of material for writers, from poetry and book reviews, to how to generate ideas and advice on websites, agents and the slushpile. Christopher Priest cautioned us about the fickleness of memory and the importance of how you record what you remember. Using this as a starting point, I'm giving Paul Raven's web advice the acknowledgement it deserves before discussing websites myself.

There's recently been a debate on the TTA press message boards. This included the decision to turn *Matrix* into an online webzine and cease its long running print format. Some contributors suggested that *Focus* was a better candidate for web only format. This was prompted by the legitimate question of whether readers who don't write have anything to gain from articles written by writers about writing.

The arguments about moving *Matrix* onto the web are due to its importance, rather than lack of it. A webzine can be updated faster to provide more relevant news on science fiction and science (movies, websites, new fiction, etc) and information specifically for fans (signings, readings, and cons). However, this led me to think about whether my contribution to *Focus* is relevant to most BSFA subscribers (rather than just those of us that want to read about writing).

Paul Raven previously stressed the need for SF professionals to adopt websites. The web is the bedrock of cultural change across almost all sectors of life (and requires no elaboration from me here). Anyone who is serious about a career – as a writer or commentator, or even an SF fan, needs to consider the benefit of a website or blog. I've been thinking about how this can distort the writing experience and the relationship between writers and readers. A key aspect of the change appears to be speed.

Keeping up with the Information Age has driven BSFA to move *Matrix* to a web format. But what might be termed the insatiable demand for information from readers has only increased through the web rather than been met. The more access to information, the more demands appears to grow. This has numerous advantages, especially for writers (such as generating ideas, sharing resources and undertaking research). Having a website draws people to you – both readers and fellow writers. Writing would ultimately be an act of vanity without fans but there is an interesting dimension developing between the axis of the internet, writers and fans. Fansites, Amazon and message boards all act as a permanent, real-time convention where people can come together. While there is a now old adage that technology is neither good nor bad, there are always negative aspects to any invention.

Which is a roundabout way of me discussing a particular writer, George R R Martin. I don't read very much fantasy but I do read George R R Martin's series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

This series began in 1996 – when the world and the web were very different places. The series still isn't finished and has mushroomed into a huge industry. Martin has his own website and is active in providing a blog, sample chapters and discussing his work in progress.

For me, the most important aspect of Martin's series is the standard of writing and the quality of his storytelling. *Song* is arguably now so complex that only a very lengthy review could do it justice. Reducing it to its tropes of civil war, succession, frozen northern frontiers and wights and dragons is to imagine clichés and tired ideas. In Martin's hands, these ideas are fresh and new. A distinguishing feature of *Song* is that it is high fantasy that embraces tough contemporary issues of violence, poverty and abuse. This is fantasy grounded in modern sensibilities.

Nina Allan wrote previously about how childhood experience evoke particular resonances in the writers we discover, especially when we first start reading.I first began reading Martin's science fiction when I was a teenager. I was reluctant to read *A Game of Thrones* as I disliked fantasy. But it was the first George RR Martin novel I'd seen for many years.A particular pleasure now is to read an unfolding series that requires me to wait for each book as it's written. This reminds me of being a child and discovering a new writer.

This process of waiting has proved to be a point of tension for some readers. I am wondering how much of that tension is distorted by the new technologies.

Writing for many people (myself included) is solitary and slow. I prefer to do most of it without external pressures to deliver. If we assume that modern SF/F writers should have websites to build their audience, we should also anticipate the pitfalls as well.

I have been surprised to see that fans not only complain amongst themselves about the delay between Martin's books, but have complained to him on his website.

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.

A website differs from preceding technology through inviting real-time discussion and exchanges. As most writers release sample information, links reviews and display sites to purchase their fiction, the way to distinguish your site is to blog.

Referring back to the debate at the TTA boards (about whether *Focus* is relevant), having a website that only talks about writing projects or the business of writing can be stunting. Martin therefore talks about his other interests, including politics, American football and his support of fandom.

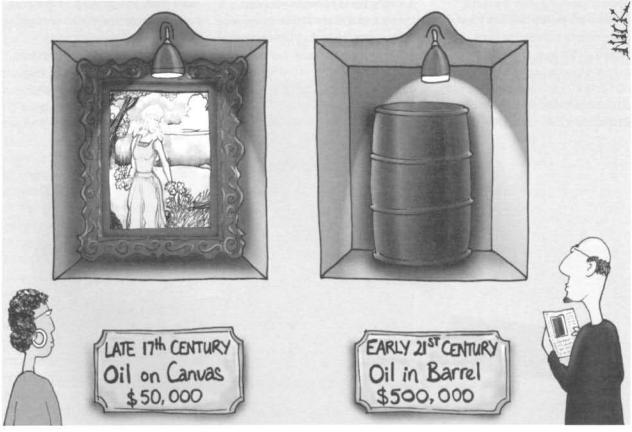
These activities have raised the ire of some readers. Discussion threads on Martin's blog give them a new, immediate way to express their opinions (no matter how intemperate). Surprisingly, at least one reader awaiting the next novel has told the author to stop watching sports, stop travelling to cons, and to stop blogging. Instead, George RR Martin should hurry up and deliver the next book.

Fandom has a long established history of support, fraternity and good manners. I hope that a byproduct of the Information Age is not the erosion of this reputation. The instance I describe is only one particular author and a small number of fans. And of course, this doesn't outweigh the benefits that Paul Raven comprehensively expressed last issue. However, this reaction to an author taking his time crafting his story wouldn't have reached its instant audience without the new technology. The internet offers opportunities for writers but also puts them under a new microscope – in this particular instance, Martin continued to be harassed even when violently ill from food poisoning.

In my opinion, there's an issue about recognising the relationship between the author and the art he's pursuing – a discussion I've enjoyed having with both Martin McGrath and Nina Allan over the years. If the author is honest and committed to his work, then the reader is a significant part of the process – but being true to your fiction means that the reader is not the overwhelming component. The only way Mr Martin can satisfy that particular critic is to write faster (and therefore less carefully).

For my part, I'll echo a sentiment other fans made some time ago to George RR Martin. Take your time; when you're ready, we will be here to read the next book. As visitors to websites and bloggers ourselves, there is perhaps more we can do. Other people reading *Focus* may wish to try *A Song of Ice and Fire* – and I'd say especially if you don't normally read fantasy. People blogging and visiting message boards may want to put their view forward about how readers and writers should interact.

If writers are willing to share their inmost thoughts on the process, we can all do our part to respect that insight. Sharing your opinions about writing, I'd suggest, does not detract from writing itself. Writing is ideally a careful and reflective process that requires pauses and consideration. Blogging about writing serves the purpose of helping refine the writing you do. This leads me to two final thoughts. On a personal level, if *Focus* is missing a wider appeal to BSFA readers, then as one contributor I can consider what I'm contributing. Secondly, and more widely, the internet is a two-way process and all of us interested in the genre have access to a shared community. Are we going to encourage our writers to do the best job they can, by showing our respect for their art, or are we going to remain silent while they are rebuked at their own sites? As the web is a democracy we shouldn't censor lone voices of dissent. But we don't have remain silent if we disagree either.



Beyond Lies The Blog

Paul Raven, well-known blogger and publisher of online magazine *Futurismic*, returns with more advice on using the web to promote your work.

So, you took the plunge. You've got yourself one of those website blogamathingies, and you've figured out how to publish an update without it consuming three hours out of your writing time. And now, Step Three - Profit, right?

Well, no. A website or blog isn't a silver bullet for conquering obscurity, even in a scene as compact and close-knit as genre fiction. You can write your deepest insights and outpourings, and post pictures of your cat every single afternoon, but you might as well be shouting into the village well unless people know you're there.

Of course, if you're already a published successful author, this won't be an big issue for you. Your legions of fans will have doubtless been Googling your name for ages, eagerly awaiting your words of wisdom on the scrivener's lifestyle, the ultimate solution to book shelving (file by sub-genre, or strict author-alphabetical with Dewey for non-fiction?) and the problem with politicians today. An author blog - indeed, *any* blog - makes a great soapbox, and many of them get used as such. And why not?

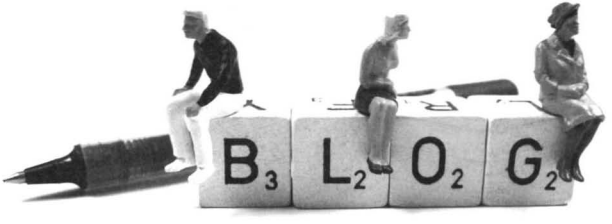
But a word of warning - the very personal and direct nature of blogging makes it a double-edged sword as a promotional medium. Culture vultures today want - nay, demand - a level of intimacy with creatives which is quite at odds with the old-school garret-dwelling cliche of the working writer ... which may be why many older writers, for whom part of the appeal of a writing career was the solitude, refuse to blog at all. Well, that and the fact that blogging is a displacement activity seemingly tailor-made for writers with a yen for procrastination.

Allowing your readers that intimacy - letting them discover the person behind the prose - can form a strong bond between you and them. And it'll need to be genuine, by the way; if you don't know how easily people can spot insincerity in a blogger's writing, you may well be chasing after the wrong career. But bear in mind that the web is like a dinner party: there may be aspects of your personality or beliefs that you may wish to downplay or avoid displaying at all for fear of alienating or angering the very people you wish to reach out to.

The obvious example is politics, and it's also a great demonstration that the same rules don't apply to everyone. For example, Cory Doctorow's politics are worn on his sleeve at all times, and it does him little harm; but Doctorow is more widely known as a blogger than as a novelist.

John Scalzi talks politics on his *Whatever* blog, too, but he was also a blogger first and novelist second, at least as far as actual regular income and profile is concerned ... plus Scalzi has a degree in rhetoric, and he knows how to use it.

On the other hand, I can think of more than one novelist whose blog I've had to stop reading because their personal opinions were threatening to spoil my enjoyment of their fiction permanently. Your life can speak for your art - and vice versa - but once those two quanta are entangled the signal



from one will always be perceived in the other, even if that was not your intent. In other words: measure twice, cut once.

***

So, once you've settled on publishing cat pictures and anecdotes from your microbrewing hobby in between announcements of (hopefully) stories sold and novels published, you sit back and watch your blog statistics for the flood of readers ... and unless you're already a big name, that's unlikely to happen. There's an aphorism that says "blogging is a conversation"; nowhere is this more true than in genre fiction.

If you've not been hanging out on the web with the keyboard cowboys of speculative fiction, you've missed out on roaring debates over copyright and intellectual property, hissy cat-fights and robust discourse over the perceived health of the short fiction markets, and a thousand other discussions of matters pertinent to your art. The blogosphere is much like a convention ... except it's running all year long, and you get to avoid the pricey junk food and the inevitable exchange of respiratory viruses.

Although I'd be the first to say that the internet is not a place hospitable to hard and fast rules, I'd suggest that a newcomer to the online genre fiction scene will find it not only best but easiest to ease into the routine of blogging by engaging in this cloud of conversation.

If you're a writer, it should be easy enough for you to find things to say about the industry you work in, which will allow your genuine personality to shine through without having to force or feign your enthusiasm - just as many of your fellow writers and fans already do. Leave comments on the blogs of others; respond to articles with posts of your own; link and share and debate and discuss. It may seem a lot to take in at first, but you'll be astonished at how easily it becomes second nature. To be honest, the hard bit is having the discipline to not get sucked in to doing nothing else!

It's also getting easier to follow the discussions, with easy-and-free-to-use technologies like RSS feeds offering to pipe updates straight to your screen, keeping you up to date with the latest launches, lunches, and he-said-she-said. In many respects the web is the ideal medium for sf fandom, because the web doesn't obey traditional top-down hierarchies either. So get out there and ease yourself into the conversation - if you think of the internet as a virtual convention bar that never closes, you won't go far wrong.

And just like a con bar, don't approach it purely as a networking exercise or self-promotion vehicle. Treat it as a way to have fun and meet interesting people - the strongest networks are the ones that emerge naturally as a consequence of who we are. But will you sell more stories and books as a result? There's no guarantees of that, but consider this - which are you more *likely* to buy, a book by a stranger or a book by someone you feel you know as a friend?

Paul Graham Raven is a freelance reviewer, critic, fictioneer, editor and publisher - he has explored the pitfalls and procrastinations of blogging so that you don't have to. Drop him an email if you want to find out more (paul@paulgrahamraven.com), or pay him a visit at Velcro City Tourist Board (http://www.velcro-city.co.uk).

On Looking More Closely at the Night Sky

Edward Comma

I point my telescope to a patch of sky
In the darkness between the stars
And discover galaxies without number
Spirals, ellipticals and irregulars.

I settle on a sliver amidst that light
A point like the prick of a pin.
And again billions of stars pour forth
Again a million galaxies spin.

Focus once more and the pattern repeats
And repeats each time the same
There is no night, the sky's not black
It's filled with ancient flame

Write About What You Don't Know

Every neophyte writer is told the same thing: "Write what you know." But what if that advice is wrong. Dev Agarwal suggests the sf writer might benefit from breaking the chains of the everyday.

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.

One of the most common pieces of writing advice is 'Write about what you know'. Obviously, this is sound advice when writing non-fiction, but when you're trying to write fiction, and particularly science fiction (or fantasy, or horror for that matter) then you might consider thinking about the reverse. Without restraint, but with a certain moderation.

Typically, the right balance is somewhere in the gray area between the extremes, and depends on what the writer is trying to achieve. On the one hand, writing *only* about what you know runs the risk of becoming too self-absorbed. As mentioned, this works very well for non-fiction, especially if someone can enrich a field of expertise with fresh personal knowledge. It can work in fiction, as well, with the caveat that this will not push a writer into new territory. Especially for genre fiction this is – in most cases – not a fruitful approach. On the other hand, writing *only* about what you *don't* know might easily devolve into an undecipherable mess (which, according to some critics, is exactly what some of the early 20th Century experimentalist literature produced). My argument is that a truly audacious SF writer tries to push the 'write-about-what-you-don't-know' envelope as far as possible without becoming unintelligible.

Since this appears in the BSFA's magazine for writers, I'll limit myself to SF. SF is – in my viewpoint – the literature of change. In order to understand, and ideally anticipate change, one must consider the unknown. In that, an SF writer is always looking for the strange, the alien (not necessarily a non-Terran lifeform), the alienness of the world we live in, and the mystery of the Universe at large. A SF writer has a thirst for the unknown, and that shows in their writing.

That unknown, that unexplored area doesn't need to be exclusively technological or scientific. Of course, extrapolating or wildly guessing future scientific, economic, technological, biological, environmental, or sociological developments (or a combination thereof) is a staple of science fiction, but it isn't the only way to approach the unknown. There are alien things much closer to home: people with a different sex, skin colour, sexual orientation, religion, set of interests and what-have-you can be total strangers to each other. Even more nearby there is the mystery of the human brain: we still don't know exactly how it functions, and there are still monsters lurking in the subconscious. (This summation is not exhaustive: I'm merely to get the idea across.)

So dare to explore: write about the estranging societal changes ahead, and try to do that in a manner that is both broad and deep. Quite often SF explores only one single point of change, and leaves the rest of society more or less as it is today. That is not only rather unambitious, but quite implausible as well: in the future society will change at more than just one level. But also dare to write for the point of view that is radically different from yours: let your main character be someone with a different sex, race, persuasion, or mindset than your own. Then drop a bucket into your subconscious and be astonished with what it hauls up. Explore the stranger and expand your mind; get to know your enemy and find that they might not be that evil, after all.

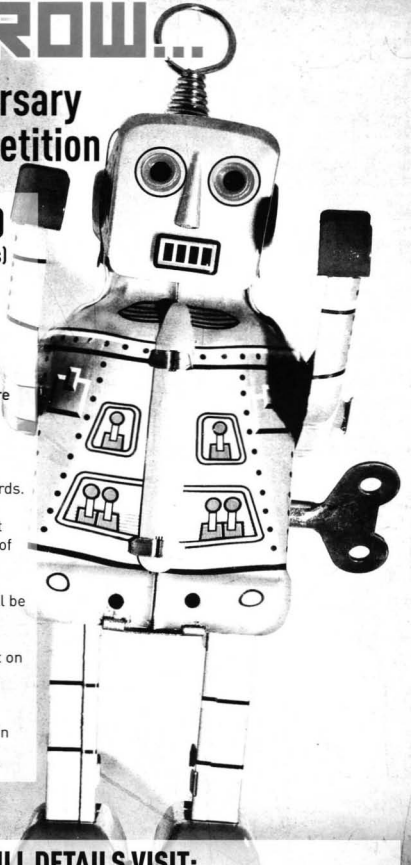
The greatest risk – and the main reason why a lot of writers are reluctant to do it – with 'writing-about-what-you-don't-know' is getting it wrong. Yes, you can get it wrong: but great risks often bring great rewards. As an aspiring, forward-thinking SF writer you owe it to yourself to try: as an editor who has gone through thousands of unsollicited submissions I will take a spectacular failure over a highly competent, very safe story that doesn't take me anywhere new anytime.

And you can try to minimise that risk: that's where your critique group and/or friends come in. Are you a male writing about a female character? Ask the women in your writing group how much you got it wrong. Are you a white person writing about a coloured character? Ask the coloured persons of your acquaintance if you didn't err too much. Writing about a homosexual character as a heterosexual? Ask the homosexuals you know to tell you where you screwed up. Apply as appropriate, and don't be shy to ask advice. But do try out alien points of view, and stretch your mind: this will help you develop as a writer and as a person.

Then, as you improve as a writer, you might consider using more than one single 'point-of-alienness': for example, you could set your story in a strange, exotic country, with a celebrity-obsessed, gossip-driven, martial arts female TV programmer as one main character, with a bisexual, borderline multi-personality disorder, charming-yet-uncertain conman as another main character, and an Irish jesuit priest-cum-swordsman-cum-philosopher-cum-visionary as yet another main character, and use these three timelines to explore the inherent strangeness of a multiverse that might be a huge simulation. You might call that novel *Brasyl*. Or you might have a main character whose had half of his brain replaced with a computer join a posthuman crew on an interstellar mission with an exobiologist so integrated with his tools that they cause synaestesia, a communicating officer who has deliberate multi-personality disorder, a military commander who's almost indistinguishable from her mechanical fighting drones, and an evolutionary vampire as captain, and let that crew confront an alien force so enigmatic they make that crew seem like normal janes and joes. You might call that novel *Blindsight*. Just two examples from the top of my head where delving both deeply and broadly into the unknown leads to spectacular results. To boldly go, indeed.

IMAGINE A NEW TOMORROW...

BSFA 50th Anniversary Short Story Competition



FIRST PRIZE £500

(plus £50 for all shortlisted stories)

JUDGES

Justina Robson
Stephen Baxter
Alastair Reynolds

The BSFA is fifty, and to celebrate we're holding a short story competition.

The competition is open to any writer resident in the UK or Ireland. The maximum length of stories is 8,000 words.

The stories must be science fiction, but we're willing to take a broad definition of what that means.

The winning and shortlisted entries will be published in a special issue of FOCUS.

The closing date for entries is midnight on Friday 5 September 2008.

The winner will be announced at the BSFA 50th Anniversary Birthday Party in November.

FOR FULL DETAILS VISIT:
www.bsfa.co.uk/bsfa/website/Competition.aspx