FOCUS

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All cartoons in this issue courtesy of www.nearingzero.net unless otherwise credited

FOCUS

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WHAT DO YOU CALL A WRITER THAT DOESN'T WRITE?

Martin McGrath has had enough of his own procrastination...

In the past five months I've managed to write one A4 page of fiction – and even that was rubbish.

It isn't that I'm suffering from "writer's block" – at least not in the sense that I don't have ideas that could form stories. And it isn't that I don't have time – I seem to have found plenty of time to play *Football Manager* and to mess around on the Wii and to slob in front of the television watching rubbish – hell I watched the **whole series** of *Bone Kickers*. It isn't even as if I'm not writing other stuff – in the same period I've written a pile of reviews, an essay on John Scalzi (check out this issue of *Vector*) and a load of other stuff.

But I can't seem to make myself put the stories in my head on the page. And, frankly, I've had enough of it – I'm sick of my own procrastination. So I've set myself a challenge, I've decided to set 2009 as a make or break moment when I either do something significant or I go away and do something else.

I don't normally make New Year resolutions, but this year I'm going to make an exception. I'm committing myself to a new writing regime – based on the maxim a little and often.

First I'm setting myself a realistic and low target of words for every day – just 500 words or so. On a good day I can do that in twenty minutes, on the stickier days it might take an hour. The difference will be that I intend, religiously, to devote the necessary time every day just to writing fiction and just to those 500 words. There will be no other distractions.

If I can do that, I reckon that by the end of the year and allowing for holidays and other disruptions I should be able to turn out that novel I've been putting off for so long but which has increasingly been battering at the front of my head demanding and exit.

Plus all the short stories I currently have notes for.

The question is, can I do it?

And the answer I've come up with is that, if I can't then it's time to take a serious look at whether this pretence of being a writer is worth keeping up.

"Writers are people who write" – people who talk about writing are something else altogether and should find something else to do with their time rather than kidding themselves. Too often I've been one of those people who just talked about writing.

So, it's time to gird the loins (whatever that means) and face up to the fact that if I want to be a writer it's time to put my money where my mouth is.

It isn't about time.

It isn't about ability.

It isn't about opportunity.

It's about desire.

I can find a million reasons not to write. I can find a million of other, more pleasant, things to do than bashing my brains out in front of the empty page on a word processor.

But the stories still roll around in my head and demand release.

And I know that when I put the stories down on paper and people respond positively to them, I get kind of buzz that no other experience provides.

So I either want to do this or I don't. No more excuses and no more pretending.

500 words a day. Every day.

Or I'm not a writer.

And then I'll have to find something else to not do while sitting in front of the television watching *Bone Kickers* season two...

COVER ART

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Got something to say?

Focus is always open to submissions for articles and poetry. If you've got something you'd like to contribute, please note the deadline for the next issue is: The deadline for the next issue of Focus is:

FRIDAY 10 APRIL 2009

Send your submissions/queries/suggestions to: focusmagazine@ntlworld.com

THE LIES WE TELL TO SEE THE TRUTH

Dev Agarwal reflects on the fascinating military career of Sergeant Steve Weddle and things that make characters *really* interesting

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.

Imagine this scene: It's 1993. You're a twenty one year old man, a hothead. You've argued with your family, ended your first relationship. You're angry and confused.

So you join the US Marine Corps.

You find what you wanted: order, discipline, routine. Your hard work is rewarded and you make corporal after two years. Now you begin to play the army like a system. What once appealed is now tedious. You yearn for days off, for the discipline to ease up.

One morning, your men are out in two squads. You've got one; your friend Steve Weddle is in charge of the other. You're dropped at the base of a hill and given a mission. Hike to the top, set up a perimeter and defend it. But the feeling that you're pretending and it's pointless is relentless.

Congratulations, this is your first existential crisis at the age of twenty three.

At the top of the hill, you get out a football and invite your squad to start playing. They follow orders and you just gave them one. Steve's squad is busy setting up a perimeter and marching around it with their empty machine guns. To you, it's glaringly obvious that they're pretending.

Meanwhile, the earth hasn't opened up, the world didn't end because you let your men blow off steam instead of marching in circles.

But here comes someone. And it must be *someone* as they're in a helicopter. Senior management. Who else flies at random in a military helicopter? They land and out comes a general. Like most generals he's past middle age, with an iron crew cut and silver moustache. He's old enough to have come through the Vietnam War. He walks over, a slender rack of a man, ramrod straight.

He smiles amiably to you and Steve. Steve, the sergeant, explains the mission and what they've done. Your guys are in the background playing with the football, laughing, yelling, goofing off, as instructed.

Is that Sgt Steve Weddle playing football with his marine buddies? No.

The general, you reflect, is a very senior rank. Unless you're on parade, you never even see a colonel. Now here you are about to have a conversation with a general. He is basically, as Steve points out, a general-in-the-field.

The general is looking at you. Expectant. "And what about you, corporal? What are your men doing?"

With nothing to lose, you explain your thinking. You recount your men's experience, the reality of current world conflict and the chances for another war after such a convincing result in the Gulf.

The general nods, apparently understanding. Feeling more confident you explain more.

No one will even know when you come down off the hill. So if no one knows, what is the point in doing it? The whole squad can do this exercise in their sleep, what does one less repetition count?

The general nods again and looks at Steve. "Thank you, sergeant." He's readying to leave. To you he says, "Thank you, private."

Reflexively, you correct him. "Corporal, sir."

The general leans in and shakes his head at you. "No, son. Private."

In an instant, two stripes, two years of work dissolves in front of you...

This was not your story (obviously). I recount it here by way of discussing character and character sketches.

There are many traps to avoid in writing. Repetition, laziness and superficiality are the more obvious

ones. How to distinguish between characters, to make them distinct is perhaps a subtler challenge. Drawing on real experience and things you know to be true is an asset. In this case, I don't know any of the details I've just described. But I know what I was doing when I heard this story and who I heard it from. I heard it more than once and I then recounted it to other people — one of the reasons that it stays fresh in my mind.

Over time, I've embellished it. Steve Weddle must have told me the hapless corporal's name but I doubt he described the general's moustache and posture. I'm fairly certain that I remember Steve's exact words — "No, son, private" — delivered like a punchline.

I've used it as the guts of this article, taking advantage of the events as they present themselves to me to create characters for the people involved. Stories like this surround us. Vivid details cross our lives constantly. The trick is to be receptive to them. If we're listening, we have the raw material to turn them into characters that tell the stories we want.

Everyone has a clear idea who Winston Smith is. No one would confuse him with Tolkein's Samwell Tarly or China Mieville's Isaac Dan der Grimnebulin. The voice of the character is imbued in the details, which come from the care that the writers take in developing their personalities. They feel true to us, because they are wholly realised. And their truth is based, oddly enough, on the lies that the writer tells.

Writing fiction is lying. By exaggerating, by manipulating details to fit a wider story, writers seek to illuminate character for the reader. These lies are told for entertainment, but also to reveal truth — not actual, provable historic truth, but the more dangerous concept of dramatic truth.

I heard this story many years ago in Santa Cruz, California, when my friend Geoff introduced me to Steve. This was a funny story that Steve recounted. There was, according to him, even more confusion and chaos in his life. Being a sergeant had really straightened him out.

Steve was perhaps an archetypal American, blond, strong, easy going. He had a past, he had a future: he was training to be a social worker. He'd learned responsibility in the military and wanted to get out of its relentless macho culture.

In April, I saw Geoff for the first time in a few years. Over taco soup in a Mexican restaurant, I mentioned his friend who'd been in the marines and was training as a social worker.

He paused and said, "Steve Weddle". Then he laughed.

Geoff told me that Steve never became a social worker. "And he wasn't in the marines either."

Steve Weddle was a compulsive liar.

After I'd stopped choking on my soup, Geoff told me a series of anecdotes that convinced both him and me that Steve was lying. What impressed me was Steve's mental alertness, his ability to keep his story straight each time I saw him.

A normal reaction might be annoyance, but I was intrigued. Steve's stories resonate with a new dimension now that I knew he made them up. For me, that added another layer of character. In this case, Steve personifies Dr Johnson's adage that, "Every man thinks meanly of himself for not having been a soldier." Steve is now a ready-made character, filled with such conflict and self doubt that he invents his own past, complete with fictional anecdotes about other people.

So I might dedicate this article to Steve Weddle. It wouldn't have been possible without him and his invention. You may pity him his lying and his desire for self-aggrandisement. But if you made it this far, you kept reading, and that's thanks to Steve. As a character he comes right off the page.

Finally, in keeping with his fantasy past, Steve Weddle is not, of course, his real name.

BRADBURY ON WRITING

Adrienne J Odasso

Your loves and your hates, he says. Make lists
of your angers, your villains, your secret
terrors of things that go bump in the night.

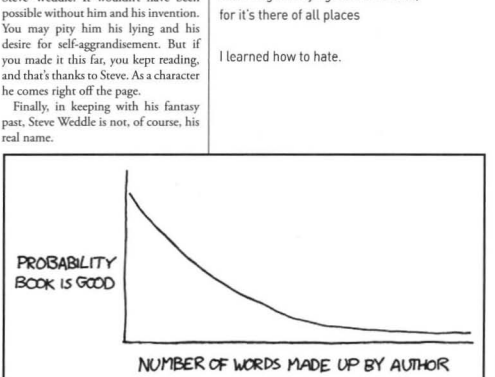
My list does not include banalities
or the creature that lived in my closet.
Only my loves, it seems, can grace the page

as steeped as they are in belief. Winter
twilight without shelter. Footprints. Lingering
a moment too long in the window seat

before I'm forced to look away. These
are such stuff as dreams are made on, no great
secret or walk by the lakeside at dusk.

And I might be lying about the lake,
for it's there of all places

I learned how to hate.



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NOTA BENE: THE ESSE WRITER'S COMPANION

Every writer should have one, the writers' guides tell us, but the wr Nina Allan talks about her relationship with notebooks

The other night I sat down to watch Nick Cassavetes's film *The Notebook* on Channel 4. I thought it was a dreadful piece of work, banal and sentimental, the worst kind of Hollywood schlock. Within half an hour of its beginning it had already joined the ranks of my 'most hated' movies, right up there with *Notting Hill* and *The Sound of Music*. I carried on watching, partly out of a kind of horrified fascination and partly because I had *planned* to watch this film and was damned if I was going to be cheated out of my honestly earned two hours of R&R I was glad when it was over and the specific details of the plot have already slipped from my memory. But nonetheless it did get me thinking about the reason I had picked out the film in the first place – *its title* – and the power that seemed to be contained in those two simple words.

I love notebooks. You might even say I am addicted to them. Most writers' guides are quick to stress the importance of the notebook to anyone interested in writing, and whilst I'd agree with that at once I'd also say that a lot of what has been written on the subject seems to me too prescriptive, whilst at the same time never seeming to touch on the magic of the object itself.

No one should tell a writer what his notebook is 'for'; this is something that the writer should be left to discover for himself. Some writers' notebooks contain whole character descriptions or detailed chapter synopses. Others contain only the vaguest hints of what the writer was thinking about at the time: a date, a book title, a one-line description of someone in a bus queue, just enough to jog the memory. None of these methods are 'wrong.' Each is an expression of the writer's individuality and personal style, as much as the finished chapters on the page.

I didn't need a writers' guide to tell me how important notebooks are because it was something I seemed to know instinctively almost from the time I learned to write. From an early age I felt the need to 'fix' things by writing them down. It was as if even at the age of five or six I was afraid that if I did not consciously remember something it would be gone forever, wasted, cut off from my present and irretrievable. I was disturbed and upset by the thought of this happening, by whole portions of my life and experience sliding inexorably into the past. The best way of preventing this – and it was something I grasped intuitively, without being told – seemed to be to write things down. If I wrote things down the memories would remain uncorrupted, inviolate, and therefore a living part of my present.

None of these early notebooks survive – thank goodness – but they were vital because they set the pattern for my life. I feel naked – incomplete – if I happen to leave home without my notebook. If I realise too late that I've done this I'm immediately checking my bag to make sure that I have at least *something* – the blank pages of a diary, the inside flap of a paperback – to write on if I should need it.

I once read somewhere about a group of school leavers who on the day of graduation were each asked to name their life's greatest ambition. As an experiment, half of them were told to write down that ambition and to keep that written information where they knew they could find it again. The other half were told they needn't bother, just to keep the ambition in mind. Five years later it was discovered that of the students who had written down their ambition more than three-quarters were well on their way to achieving it, whereas of the rest it was less than half.

The only prescription I would give about notebooks is to keep one. I know from my own experience that even the *best* ideas – the most vital, the most personal, ideas that seem so original that forgetting them would be impossible – are in danger of slipping away if they're not written down. It happens most often at night. You wake in a blurry mess but

nonetheless a story problem or detail that seemed insoluble the night before is suddenly resolving itself right there in the centre of your mind. You are filled with a drowsy relief, and fall asleep again, reassured that *now* you can fix the story, the novel, the poem. Only when you wake the idea that seemed so clear to you at three in the morning has vanished without a trace. Now you are stuck again, but with the added nagging frustration of knowing that *you had it*, and now it is gone. This doesn't just happen at night; it can happen on train journeys, in the cinema, anywhere. My advice is to keep that notebook close to hand.

There are as many types of notebook as ways of keeping them. Here again there are no rules. I can't help noticing that the beautiful and durable notebooks produced by Moleskine seem to be the notebook of choice for many writers,

NTIAL

iter's notebook can be more than just a tool.

but I myself cannot use them! I fell in love with one once, a reporter's pad. I purchased it with hope in my heart only to abandon it a mere ten pages in. The feint is too narrow – I don't like narrow feint because it forces me to write too small. Plus it's hard-covered – I don't like that either, it feels too permanent, too impermeable, you can't try things out in a hardback notebook without being constantly aware of the possibility and embarrassment of failure. Also it's close-bound – so ditto. If you rip a page out it *shows*, and everyone's going to know you made a mistake (never mind that you are the only person that ever sees the thing in the first place).

I have the guilty habit of buying 'spare' notebooks, just because I like the look of them, just because there is nothing to equal the notebook in terms of Faustian promise. A new notebook seems to hold out the possibility of giving birth to the best thing you have ever written ('the best thing that *anyone* has ever written,' you whisper to yourself as you hand over the money). While it is new, sweet-smelling, aching to be used there is always the possibility that the work to come, for once, will be easy and inspired and trouble-free. Similarly, the wrong notebook can be blamed for anything and everything. Once, when a story was going particularly badly, I started and abandoned three new notebooks in the course of a week. All of them were wrong; one because it was hardbacked, another because it was narrow feint, and the third because its cover was 'too frivolous.' (I jest not.)

I use a WH Smith Red and Black A5 spiral-bound plastic-covered notebook with wide feint and a piece of elastic to keep it closed when not in use. I've been using these now for years and have a mild phobia about them suddenly being discontinued. (How peeved, intrigued and delighted I was when I read Paul Auster's wonderful novel *Oracle Night*, and found within the first ten pages his

DEATH WOULD LIKE TO SAY

Adrienne J Odasso

I heard the wail, that horror of wanting
in every breath and cherished word
that passed between them. Like secrets,
the cadences of loving and losing
are tough to mistake for a future.

No tomorrow, then? I'll give you a past,
show you the glass of chance and
measure
every slash and suture made to wounds
that will not heal. I'll play her (O Lady
of Sorrows, you'll pray) and lay him fast
asleep in the unforgiving ground.

There aren't words for that kind of
sound.

narrator describing a similar low-grade fear! Of course the cover blurb had already made the novel irresistible to me by referring to a 'mysterious notebook,' and Auster's heavenly description of the stationery shop, the 'Paper Palace,' is worth the cover price by itself to any writer.)

Not that my underlying faithfulness to this one brand of notebook prevents me from looking to see what else is out there, or even enjoying a brief flirtation from time to time. I have a peculiar fascination for the 'Paperblanks' series of notebooks, exquisite creatures with metallic highlights on the cover and a magnetic clasp. They are so beautiful it seems almost impossible to sully them with idle thoughts. I was given one for Christmas last year – it has smooth, slightly off-white pages and the glittering heads of three carousel horses parading across the cover. I've started to make notes in it, for a future novel. The thing is useful to me as a repository for these ideas but I'm aware even as I write in it that these are 'show notes,' ideas already well-established, that in some sense it is a demonstration of my thoughts rather than a true attempt to clarify them.

This is in stark contrast to my usual notebooks, in which block capitals and exclamation marks and violent underlinings sprawl unintelligibly across the pages. My handwriting is so undisciplined in these notebooks that when I come to check something I sometimes find it difficult to decipher. The thoughts and ideas come so haphazardly and so out of sequence that they are liable to bury each other, and in order to rescue the salient details I have to write them all up later on the computer.

None of that matters. The vital act is the writing-down itself. The most common punctuation mark in my notebooks is the question mark, indeed I would say my notebooks function as a place where I ask myself questions. I frame these quite literally: 'What does Adam want?' 'Where was Julie born?' 'What is this story really about??' I cannot stress enough how often asking the question helps me to discover the answer. This too is a piece of advice I would hand on to anyone: you cannot ask yourself too many questions. The great thing about being the writer is that you know you have the answer somewhere within you. Moreover there is no 'wrong' answer. It is simply a matter of finding the one *you* know is right.

I've often thought that the incipient magic of notebooks must have seeped out into the wider world, not just because there are so many of them in the shops and in such tempting variety – surely not all of them are sold to writers? – but also because there is a sub-genre of the literary biography that might best be called 'The Notebooks Of.' Within this group we find, reproduced on expensive paper and accompanied by copious notes and scholarly essays, the facsimile pages of the working notebooks of notable writers, artists, historians and scientists, laid out for all to see complete with crossings-out, misspelled words and coffee stains. Often the text has to be 'translated' into typewritten form as an appendix to the facsimile so the casual reader can make sense of it. These make beautiful and fascinating books; they are also valuable historical documents that need to be preserved, if not in a saleable form then in an archive or museum. I love to look at and read these facsimile notebooks. I enjoy and find value and inspiration in them just as I find value and inspiration in biographies and literary memoirs. Yet as a writer I can't help asking myself how the writer would feel if they knew. Journals are different. I would argue that any writer that keeps a journal is at least subconsciously writing for posterity; he may not want them published until he is safely dead, but in some part of himself he wants these 'private' thoughts to be read by others. I've heard it said that the writer's most fervent wish is to be known, to be understood, and I would at least partially go along with that. But the notebook is a private place, the writer's rehearsal room. How many writers would wish their notebooks to be published? Is reading them for pleasure or profit little more than a kind of posthumous eavesdropping?

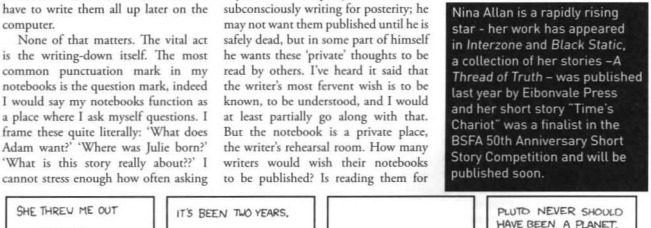
Here again I think the answer to this question must lie with the writer. I recently read a biography of the writer Anna Kavan, in which her biographer Jeremy Reed pointed out in his introduction that one of his main difficulties in assembling the book came from the fact that Kavan purposely destroyed all her notebooks, journals and diaries, with the express intention that she would remain 'the world's best-kept secret, one that would never be told.'

I felt divided when I learned of this. On the one hand it seems a tragedy that we as readers and writers can never learn precisely what drove this unique and uniquely troubled writer, that these 'secrets' are indeed forever lost.

On the other it is difficult to overstate the appeal that this posthumous control of her own estate, this 'clean slate' approach has for me. Kavan wished posterity to judge her by her published work alone, the work she had perfected and judged worthy of her. It was her inalienable right to make sure of this by destroying the work that did not come up to her standards or that she wished to keep private. I not only respect that, in many ways I admire and identify with it.

I have my current notebook in front of me now, complete with all its awkwardnesses, misapprehensions, false starts and blind alleys. For me it's an invaluable resource, a crutch, an inspiration, a friend. But the idea of anyone reading it after I'm gone? I have to say that for me at least it has a ring of Conradian horror about it…

Nina Allan is a rapidly rising star - her work has appeared in *Interzone* and *Black Static*, a collection of her stories –*A Thread of Truth* – was published last year by Eibonvale Press and her short story "Time's Chariot" was a finalist in the BSFA 50th Anniversary Short Story Competition and will be published soon.



www.xkcd.com

MASTERCLASS No.4: DESCRIPTION

We've dozed our way through Dream Sequences. We've squinted at Point of View. We've marvelled at Inspiration and its close colleague Observation. We have licked our fingers and counted the Money. Now we move on to finer things.

In this instalment you will meet a farmer, a bank in the red, an aimless seagull, a man who knows where the drains are and a young lady removing all her clothes. Nothing like this ever appeared in Focus in the old days. Never let it be said that things don't improve with time.

You will even meet a cartographer, a maker of maps, but not I fear a maker of Maps for Fantasy Novels. Those remain in the future, a finer thing that will come with time. Always keep the best to last.

In the meantime, let us concentrate on what might seem at first to be the unpromising subject of description.

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

It was the beginning of autumn, and the steamboat Goncharov was running down the now empty Volga. Early cold spells had set in, and over the grey floods of the river's Asiatic expanse, from its eastern, already reddened banks, a freezing wind was blowing hard and fast against it, pulling on the flag at the stern, and on the hats, caps and clothes of those walking on the deck, wrinkling their faces, beating at their sleeves and skirts. The steamboat was accompanied both aimlessly and tediously by a single seagull – at times it would fly in an outward curve, hanking on sharp wings, right behind the stern; at times it would slip away at an angle into the distance, off to the side, as if not knowing what to do with itself in this wilderness of the great river and the grey autumnal sky.

This is a piece of straightforward descriptive writing that I think makes a quietly brilliant opening to a short story, setting the location, environment, mood and perhaps even the period with economical but beautiful language.

We learn immediately that we are on a river-boat, that the river is the Volga (so we are in Russia), that it is freezing cold because of a wind from the east, and that the feelings of aimlessness and tedium are summed up by the movements of a following seagull. The boat is propelled by steam, so the story is not likely to be set in the present day. All of this is stated, not implied, so as you read through the paragraph your awareness gradually grows and you start to see and feel the scene as it develops.

Although there are no characters in this paragraph, no plot developments, no hints of what the story is going to be about, you become drawn in by this effective opening and (in my case at least) eager to find out more.

The story is 'Calling Cards', written in 1940 by Ivan Bunin, an émigré Russian writer then living in Grasse, France. Most of Bunin's stories from this period are set in an imagined pre-revolutionary Russia, half real, half fantasy. The fact that we have to read the story in translation from the original Russian (by Hugh Aplin) only makes the skill of the storytelling more remarkable.

Descriptive text is of course at the heart of all narrative fiction, and so much an ordinary part of what a writer does that it might seem hardly worth commenting upon. Perhaps one would think that a descriptive ability is so bound up in the whole business of writing fiction that it is a skill indistinguishable from the rest.

Even so, we know there is good descriptive writing and bad, so the usual literary elements of heart, eye and technique must all be involved.

Description in fiction is all about observation. The author observes some place, thing, event, action, character, etc., relevant to the story. By describing it the writer invites the reader to observe imaginatively what is happening. I suppose you could say that the ideal descriptive passage would therefore be one in which the writer manages to convey exactly the intended image. In

effect, writer and reader would then 'see' the image in an identical way. If the reader doesn't 'see', or misunderstands, then the description must in some way be deficient.

The true observer of whatever it is that's being described is in fact neither the writer nor the reader, but either a character in the story or the viewpoint the author has chosen. In both cases, the nature of the observer is itself an influence on what is seen, and governs the selection that is made.

To illustrate the point, imagine a tract of countryside. Various different people set about telling you what they find interesting about it.

A farmer, for instance, would see a certain quality in the land, arable or pasture, and tell you about that. A cartographer would be interested in main features: waterways, roads, hills, dwellings, churches, and put those on the map. A borough surveyor would tell you where the drains and public services had been laid. Someone driving a car on a motorway that runs through it would hardly notice it at all, and perhaps remember only a truck that was annoyingly blocking the fast lane. Someone who lives in a house in the countryside might be interested in his garden and obsessed with noisy motorbikes that wake him up at night.

All of these people would convey something that matters to them, and might even believe they are describing everything that you need to know. But what they tell you informs you as much about them as about what they're describing. Also consider how a creative artist – a painter, a photographer, a composer, a novelist or a poet – might respond to the same scene. They are not restricted to practical matters. They can also convey how the place feels.

Description does not just set a scene or depict action. It also tells you something about the choice the writer has made, the viewpoint that is being used, and from there the actual selection of images then becomes much more subtle. The scene is set. The reader finds out something necessary about what's going on or where it is. The character (or the viewpoint) becomes enhanced.

That's when it's done properly.

Look back at the Bunin example above. The first thing to say is that there is no personal viewpoint in the passage: the scene is described omniciently, so it would appear to fall down at the second step of my definition above.

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or a poet – might respond to the same sc
matters. They can also convey how the p

But an omniscient viewpoint is still a viewpoint, and the way the author describes his scene is none the less peppered with human impressions.

'... the now empty Volga' implies the voyage has been going on for quite a while, that things have changed but that the journey continues.

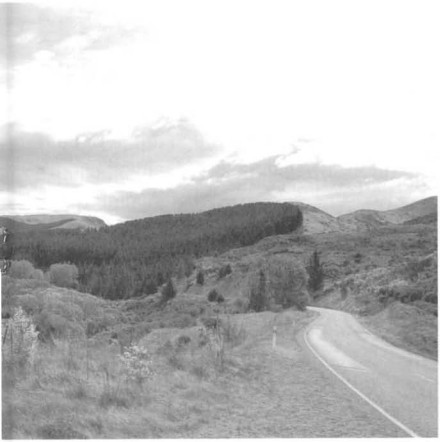
'... freezing wind ... pulling on the flag ... those walking on the deck, wrinkling their faces' tells us indirectly that this isn't a pleasant voyage – you go on deck to escape the confines of the cabin or saloon, but it's bloody cold out there, so you have to suffer the wind and are not likely to stay outside long.

' ... accompanied both aimlessly and tediously by a single seagull' suggests not only that the author is telling us from his omniscient viewpoint about the tedium, but that people on the boat are feeling it too: the only thing happening outside the boat is this bird, and even that is neither interested nor interesting.

Bunin's selection is economical but effective. Everything that follows in the story (which includes a scene of surprisingly naughty but chilly sex, in case you're still undecided about finding out what happens) develops logically from the muted, subtle images he has set out in his opening.

As in so many areas of writing, we can learn from other art-forms. Take photography, for example.

A photograph is a record of something



thing that matters to them, and might
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lace feels. ”

seen. But good photographers, like writers, select what they shoot and make a statement by doing so. That tract of countryside I mentioned: you could take a wide-angle landscape shot, showing what the countryside actually looks like, and if you've got a good camera and you get the shot lined up properly it will be an accurate representation. However, there are limitations on such a picture. It can only ever show what the scene looked like on that day, at that time, from that position, with that camera. It becomes an untrue picture almost immediately: the clouds move away, someone walks into or out of the shot, a car parks itself in front of where you were standing. The picture is just a record of a split-second in time.

To capture something more lasting, to tell a story, a photographer (like the farmer, the cartographer, etc.) would look around for some image that seems to sum up what's important or interesting. It might be an abandoned house, a pond, some woodland, a wind generator ... a close-up shot with relevant detail, or something ironic, typical, beautiful, shocking, and so on. Or even another kind of landscape photograph, not just a view but a juxtaposition of images that are intended to reveal an intriguing contrast.

And speaking of revelation: in making that choice, the photographer reveals something of his or her own intentions.

A painter would do much the same: in misrepresenting the scene by leaving out most of it, the true essence of some part of it would be enhanced. And in making that choice, once again the painter reveals something of himself or herself.

Only two colours are mentioned by Bunin in that first paragraph: the 'grey' floods of the river's expanse, the banks that are 'already reddened', then 'grey' again in the description of the sky. The monochrome effect is almost complete. Just the reddening of the banks, unexplained in natural terms, so perhaps Bunin is using the colour in a gently metaphorical way ... the banks reddened by the cold wind, like the face of someone standing on deck, staring out across the river.

Well, grey is a colour too, and colour is always an important constituent of description. Maybe you have been wondering what a story by a dead Russian exile has to do with the more urgent needs of SF/fantasy.

When I started reading SF, way back before the dawn of time, I was almost immediately struck by the way in which most writers invoked colour. Here are a few extracts from one descriptive paragraph in Ray Bradbury's *The Silver Locusts*:

'... the blue hills ... pools of silver water ... green wine canals ... bronze flowers ... gold spiders ... lava bubbled silvery ... the brown Martian people ... gold coin eyes ...'

Now J. G. Ballard, from the first page of Studio 5, the Stars (one of his Vermilion Sands stories, a fact worth mentioning in the context of colours):

'... broken skeins of coloured tape ... a vivid cerise bougainvillaea ... Red Beach ... a cloud of coloured tissues ... her long Nile-blue hair ... an oval ice-white face ... black glass front door ...'

Algis Budrys, in one short paragraph of *Rogue Moon*:

'... a tilting plane of glittering blue-black ... two faces of coarse dull brown ... curtains of green and white ... folds of green and white ... flickering red light ... blue, green, yellow heaving upwards ...'

Space precludes more examples, but you can no doubt find your own. Use of descriptive colour is of course entirely legitimate, but here's an experiment you can try. Turn down the 'colour' control on your TV to desaturate the picture. (You can also desaturate the colours of digital images in Photoshop, etc.)

Watch what happens to the relationship of the colours to each other. Instead of seeming natural, the colours suddenly take on a much more interesting, subtle quality. Sometimes a sort of overall hue becomes apparent, not noticed while the colours were set normally; actors' clothes look different; areas of shadow become monochrome. Other colours become surprisingly important, not noticed before, even though they are less 'colourful' now. Turn it too far and you will end up with a black-and-white image, devoid of all colour, but as soon as you start reversing the process, colours again become striking, even though they are grey-ish, muted. Keep turning the knob beyond 'normal', and you enter the realm of psychedelic, over-saturated colours, beloved of TVs in Chinese takeaways and Dixons' showrooms, and here colour becomes abnormal and intrusive.

Normal colour is fine. It's natural, expectable, unremarkable. Go on using it. But try a similar experiment in descriptive writing: make less to be more, use colour sparingly to emphasize it and make it stand out, try to find exact synonyms for shades, pastels, tints. Budrys's rat-a-tat of primary colours – blue, black, brown, green, white, red, blue, green, yellow, whizzing around almost at random – is about as interesting and evocative as a display of disco lights.

"But try a similar experiment in descriptive writing: make less to be more, use colour sparingly to emphasize it and make it stand out, try to find exact synonyms for shades, pastels, tints."

Back to Bunin. His use of colour is minimal, and the overall impression one gains is of a metal boat moving along a cold grey river under a dull sky. Even the seagull (undescribed by Bunin in any detail) is likely to be grey. But is it a monochrome picture, an old b&w film, a 1950s television set? My own subjective reading of that passage renders it in colours: they are subdued colours, a pallet of different greys, desaturated but not denatured. Colour is present, if not presently in view. Meanwhile, grey is a colour too.

Here's Bunin's use of colour to describe the woman in the story, after she has taken refuge from the cold weather in the man's chilly cabin. As she removes her clothes under his unwavering regard:

'... grey-lilac ... grey stockings ... little black shoes ... the prominent triangle of ...'

I think I'll stop there.

● 'Calling Cards' is included in *Dark Avenues* by Ivan Bunin, One World Classics, ISBN: 978-18474-90476.

Unidentified Flying Abject.

BEWARE OF THE INFODUMP

The infodump is a trap that can ensnare even the most experienced writers. Gillian Rooke offers some advice on how it might be avoided.

Quick definition: Infodump is any explanation or information, of whatever length, that interrupts the flow of the narrative.

So the idea is to introduce explanations and other info in such a way that it doesn't slow up the reading and get in the way or even look ridiculous, as it so often can.

Infodump is more of a problem for writers of science fiction than it is for writers in any other genre. This is because in other genres we tend to assume that grass is green and people are breathing the air. In science fiction we cannot make any assumptions about the world. We have to wait until we are told everything, including whether that nice tall dark and handsome hero John Smith, is in fact human. The tall could be eight foot, the dark, a black nothingness, and the handsome a feeling it engenders in the minds of human females or males.

A heck of a lot more information, about everything, has to be slotted in unobtrusively in SF, and quite early on in the writing too. We cannot leave people assuming that an opening conversation outdoors on a spacefield with ships all around is taking place on an eco- planet with free air. We need to know at the outset whether people are wearing space suits, whether there is gravity and how much, whether they are on an asteroid or a planet etc etc., and learning to juggle all this extra information is really hard. It is a common fault with new SF writers that they leave out a piece of information resulting in the reader thinking that outdoor conversations are as we might expect, and then finding after ten chapters that all the houses are underground and that everyone lives in a vast cave with artificial day and night. Of course there are times when the writer deliberately withholds information, but I am not going to discuss this here.

Infodump is a very large hurdle, (more of a Grand National fence really) which is at its worst right at the beginning of a book and continues for three or four chapters. Here is a simple Example of trying to dump the very first necessary information- name and personal description, plus a bit of background, into an ongoing narrative, and note it isn't even specifically SF!

So we have:

Algenon Clive Livingstone Scott Tensing Sherlock Dodder, a rather tubby, in a cherubic kind of way, balding gentleman, whose longish fair hair made him look even balder than he was; woke up one morning and stretched his only good arm, the other having dropped off with frostbite, and climbed out of bed to open the window, but unfortunately he had forgotten that last week when on the trip up the Amazon he had just returned from, he had broken his ankle and it was therefore in plaster, and he must have forgotten also how awkward it made him, because he hit the side of the plaster which was sticking out more than one is used to making allowance for in the normal course of negotiating objects, on his portmanteau, which he had been meaning to put away the previous night but had never got around to it, having had a rather long annoying phone call from his ex who was trying to ingratiate herself with him because she had heard a rumour that he had found an emerald mine: was unable to recover his balance; fell through the window, which was unfortunately a French window with a dodgy latch, on the third floor with a balcony and rail outside that wouldn't have been safe for a tortoise;- because although Algenon lived in a Bungalow near Aldershot, he was at present staying with an old school friend, one Nicholas Weyland Bently Ferdinand Stouter the younger, known as Toadturd to his friends in celebration of a rather tedious nature lecture he had been allowed by a rather misguided teacher to deliver in the third form, and broke his neck.

[N.B. I wouldn't run this through the grammar checker if I were you. It'd probably crash your computer.]

The actual narrative in the above consists of - Algenon Dodder woke up one morning, stretched and climbed out of bed to open the window; hit his plastered leg on his portmanteau, was unable to recover his balance, fell out of the window, and broke his neck.

Of course if the infodump is deliberate it does (I hope) become amusing. Douglas Adams is past master of this. His humour is in his spliced in inconsequential asides which hold up the action, often for pages, but nobody cares (I hope) because they are so delicious.

But you only want people to laugh at you if you meant what you wrote to be a joke. So you have to decide at the outset how you want to introduce the name and description. If the tone of the piece is jokey, or stylised in some way, then there is less of a problem. If it is straight and serious, then you have to be more careful.

The most commonly chosen opening is a scene setting. This is a piece of evocative atmospheric description of a place, which can't hold up the action, however long it goes on for, because there isn't any action yet. If you start the action and then stop to describe the scene at length, exactly the same description would be infodump. It is all a question of where you put it. So there is no right or wrong information or description, there is just a right or wrong place to put it.

Another opening of a book could be an

The infodump can leave readers feeling swamped with information.

attempt to set the scene in a temporal way, i.e. a potted history. This is always a bad idea. If you have a long involved history you need to either put it in a preface, or find places in the text where it is apposite, throughout the first three chapters. The most obvious (I hope) and commonly used way of doing this is to have someone telling their history or the history of their people to someone else. Warning, it is a good idea if the person they are telling it to doesn't already know it,- hurdle 1- also -hurdle 2 - that they need to know it, and -hurdle 3- that they are not shooting rapids while fending off giant alligators with their paddles, during the telling of it. Hurdle 4 is a little more difficult. There should be a specific reason why someone is being told this history at this particular time.

Another way is to have someone thinking about a status passage they will be going through, and thinking of what their ancestors would have done in similar circumstances.

What is always important whatever way you introduce your history, is that the action must be slowed right down and the scene be set for this tale, or speculation, or reminiscence.

Ex The curtains were drawn against the cold dark night, and the wizard lit a blazing fire with his staff, and whisked two comfortable arm chairs up close to it.

"Come boy" he said "The time has come to tell you of your parentage..."

This is about the shortest intro you could get away with. In a good book it would be longer and more detailed. Remember of course that an action sequence has preceded it. You couldn't; for instance, start a book like this.

or- Griselda studied herself in the mirror. She hardly recognised herself in this ridiculous outfit. Why did she have to wear a dress hundreds of years old? Because it has been handed down for how many generations? What have we to do now with ancestors that fought with swords for heavens sake...etc

In this case you get the emotions and opinions of the heroine interlarded with the history, and you learn how present day mores clash with it. You get an emotional scene in which you learn not only the history but how it conflicts with present ideas, plus you also get your character profile of the heroine. A scene like this has a triple function.

Every scene in your story should have at least one function, and a good writer can usually find two functions for any scene. Three though is quite good. I wonder what the record is?

Which brings me back to part of the definition "necessary or not." Necessary writing, and it can be a single word or three or four chapters, is writing that fulfils a function.

What are the functions of writing?

1. Advancing the plot.
2. Describing a person or scene
3. Making a point or analogy which is outside the confines of the book itself, or action, description, voice.

History of course is usually part of the plot, although it is also occasionally used as colourful description. You need to be certain sure with history particularly, that it is necessary to the readers full appreciation of the plot. If it is not, it is unnecessary, and therefore infodump, however successfully you have fitted it in. And it is an annoying red herring because people expect every piece of information in a book to be used.

A prime example of unnecessary history is found in Tolkien. There is a great tome of Annals of the Kings, but fortunately for those of us who are not that interested in history, especially fictional history, it is normally published separately.

Description Of Surroundings

There is less of a problem with this because it seldom constitutes infodump.

Writers usually have the sense to 'set' the scene before the action takes place, or to stop the action in order to describe something. The only descriptions allowed during an action sequence are those pertaining directly to the action itself. ex N blinkered by his visor, and hampered by his inability to turn his head in the helmet, didn't see the blow coming. This is OK, but 'N was wearing a space suit, and blinkered by ...etc ' is not, because we should have been told that he was wearing a space suit right at the beginning of the sequence. We couldn't actually be told that the space suit would make him vulnerable in a fight, before the fight happened; because that would have been as much an infodump as reference to the actual space suit during the fight sequence is. Complicated? Well, the watchword is **relevance**. Every word phrase sentence etc should be relevant to the words and phrases immediately around it.

Think of a scene as a stage set. Once the action starts you expect the set to be complete. You don't expect to see back stage boys bringing in new stuff while the characters are engaged in a steamy love scene. But when that love scene suddenly turns into an accusation of infidelity, and one of the characters jumps up and grabs something from a rack on the wall, it is most unlikely that you will have remembered what the object was from your first cursory appraisal of the set, although you would probably have noticed a weapons rack. You examine the object in detail for the first time, only when he gets hold of it, and you see that it is an old fashioned blunderbuss. So the blunderbuss would be described at this point, not as part of the scene setting at the beginning. **Relevance**.

Description Of People

One of the most difficult descriptions to get right is that of the hero himself, and this is a big problem even for the seasoned writer. There are only a limited number of possible ways to do this and so they all seem hackneyed.

1 He can be thinking of what he looks like to somebody else
2 He unexpectedly sees himself in a mirror and is struck for some (good) reason by his appearance.
3 Another character sees and describes him.
4 He is described by another character to a third character.
5 He describes himself to another character in an email or similar.
6 You, the author describe him, but this latter is restricted to a novel which is author- narrated throughout.

Unless you are using author narration you have to use 1-5 for all your characters because simply describing a character for no reason is always infodump.

So also is using part of the description during the action for no good reason ex 'Her fair hair flying around her head, she started to run.' Worse is the part for the whole 'The fair haired man' or even 'the fair head picked up the tuber.' Always avoid snippet descriptions in the text unless they are **directly** relevant to the action. ex ' His fair hair made him an easy target.'

I have often heard it said that reminders of people's physical appearance should be found throughout the book. I don't think this should ever be necessary. If the description was properly done in the first place we should be 'seeing' the character from then on. Only if there is a change in their appearance is another description called for.

Making A Point

The writer's voice should of course always be implicit in their characters or plot situations. If it is intended to rise above the content of the book, it must be launched by the plot and characters, like a trident missile erupting from the sea. Again, it must have complete relevance or it won't reach its target.

Lastly, remember that a single word can also be infodump. It is anything, basically, that doesn't fit into the flow of the reading. 2300 words.

WHERE TO BEGIN

Adrienne J Odasso

WHERE TO BEGIN

The wonder of this is the grief that's with us, the wine
that's in us: blood of God and body of song. Even Troilus

knows how and when to make an end, regardless
of love. I'll find you as I've promised, remind you

our story is too true to make amends. I'll bind you
as heroes must need become bound. I'll hide you

downwind of here, outside this garden. My dove,
untruss your burdened wings: we've run aground

where light no longer gilds aspiring dust. Let's linger
just a while now, till the day's done, ere we move on

and apart. Sure, your grave's a deep one. That's a start.

KNEE DEEP IN THE SLU
EXPERIENCES OF A FIR

Martin McGrath is normally on the other side of the desk when it c rience - here he talks about what he learned from judging the BSF

When I took on the task of running the BSFA's 50th Anniversary Science Fiction Short Story Competition I had no experience of editing fiction – I'm a magazine editor in real life, but it's not a fiction magazine – and no real idea what was going to start to drop through my door and into my email in-tray. I assumed that, for the most part, the task of sweeping the husks and chaff away to reveal the golden wheat beneath would be relatively straightforward. I suppose I thought that most of the "bad" stories would stand out like sore thumbs – with people incapable of stringing two sentences together without stumbling over their adjectives or misplacing their tenses. I'd simply wash this lot away by reading their first few paragraphs leaving a handful of real stories that I could then pick out with ease before passing the longlist of quality stories along to the competition's real judges to sweat over the winner.

I was wrong.

For someone who, most often, is on the other side of the slush pile this was a sobering slap in the face. I had always casually assumed that the vast majority of other "aspiring writers" (that is, people who, like me, submit stories to magazines without regularly getting published in pro markets) I was in competition with were obviously and immediately inferior to my own writing and that the only thing between my work and the proper fame it deserves was some luck and recognition.

But of the 120 short stories I read as part of the judging process for th this competition barely one in ten could be simply dismissed from the slush because they were obviously incompetent in the basic mechanics of writing. By this I mean that the writing contained basic spelling and grammar mistakes that got in the way of reading the story, that writers couldn't divide their text into paragraphs or that the story was immediately and obviously derivative (e.g. stories that were rehashes of *Buffy* or *Star Trek* with the names filed off).

As this is my only experience of being on this side of the slushpile I can't speak to whether this is the common experience of editors. It is possible that the BSFA Competition attracted an unusually high proportion of good quality writers – perhaps the £10 entry fee put off the "casual" or less experienced writers. Even so, it is worth aspiring writers who are serious about their craft paying attention to the fact that there are a large number of writers out their who have mastered the basics. Competence is not enough.

Even after casting aside the small number of obviously inept I was left with a slushpile of over one hundred stories that I had to whittle down to a long list of about a dozen. It was a difficult job. Right until the last moment I was switching stories in and out of the final list and some of the stories I left out still come back to haunt me. The truth is perhaps twenty stories that might have found a place on the final list.

Spending weeks reading, sorting and weighing stories against each other was at times a painful process but it was also a rewarding one. I think I've come out of it with a number of useful observations that I can apply to my own writing and which, for what they're worth, I offer here to my fellow writers. Perhaps these will seem blindingly obvious, but it was surprising how many writers had plainly invested a great deal of time in their craft but still made these mistakes.

Avoid the flabby beginning

Perhaps the most frequently occurring problem with the stories submitted to the BSFA competition was the flabby opening – stories that took a long time to get going or that seemed to start moving in one direction and then (usually about a third of the way through) took a sharp turn and go down another route entirely.

Too often stories began with long passages of exposition or complicated descriptions of place and time which, even when well written, were weak ways of opening a short story. There are a number of problems with these openings, First, they tend to fall into the trap of telling the reader about what is going on rather than involving them in the action. Second they tend to sideline the characters, yet is the relationship between your characters and the reader that will ultimately decide whether your story is successful or not. Finally long passages of exposition tend to read slowly and, in a short story – and perhaps most particularly in a science fiction short story – pacing is crucial and passages that slow things down need to be used very carefully. The best writers can use a slow passage effectively but it requires a deft touch and confidence.

In most cases, however, the cure for flabby beginnings is obvious. Take a look at the opening quarter of your story and ask yourself if everything there is absolutely essential to the telling of your story.

Invest in your opening

This is related to the point above but more specifically deals with the first one or two paragraphs. Really memorable openings are hard work but the old saying that "first impressions count" is absolutely true. A great opening sentence won't cover up the fact that your next 8000 words are pedestrian nonsense, but if you've got a good story a great opening can elevate that story to a new level.

In the judging of BSFA Competition at least one story made it to the long-list (and was scored highly by one of the judges, though it only just failed to make the shortlist) because it had

SH - ST TIME EDITOR

ımes to being part of the slush sorting expe- ı Short Story Competition

a fantastically energetic opening that threw the reader right into the heart of the story with enormous momentum.

Most stories, however, don't invest their openings with the same sense of urgency. A remarkable number of stories started with their protagonist waking up (slowly) or sitting back and comfortably reminiscing about the past, openings which seem to me both overused and basically flawed in that they lack intrinsic drama. It may not always be possible to come up with the perfect pithy line for your story (and it may not always be appropriate) but you should make the effort to make your opening as engaging as you can.

Tell a story

This might sound painfully obvious but a remarkable number of submissions to the BSFA Short Story Competition weren't stories. In some cases this is deliberate – one of the most intelligent and interesting submissions to the competition was a beautifully written stream of consciousness that encompassed everything from rock music to philosophy and science, it was perhaps the most enjoyable thing I read during the whole competition, but it wasn't a story.

In most cases, however, failures of plot weren't deliberate artistic statements but structural flaws in the writing. In a story it is important that things happen to your protagonist (this may or may not be your point of view character) and that the protagonist responds in a way that makes things happen in the environment around them. The character may begin as passive and slow to act (like, most famously, Hamlet) but ultimately they have to do something or you don't have a story. And, for the story to be really complete, their action has to change something within in them or in the world around them.

If you've written something where characters just watch what is going on around them passive observers you almost certainly haven't written a story. It is very difficult to make a worthwhile read from material where the protagonist is passive.

End with a bang

One submission to the competition genuinely did finish with the narrator waking up from a dream. No, that story didn't make the shortlist. Nor did the one where the protagonist uncovered an alien invasion and then walked off to live in a log cabin.

Satisfying endings can be happy or heartbreaking, they can be violent or calm, they can be a surprise or they can be grindingly inevitable from the very opening sentence of the story but they should deliver an emotional pay-off and logical conclusion to the events you've set into action through the story.

A number of unsatisfying endings recurred in the stories submitted. The "deux ex machine" ending (where a previously unhinted at force emerges at the end to set everything right) was distressingly common, as was the bad guy pontificating about his plan before succumbing to some simple trick that turned the tables and sent him into another dimension/the path of a particle beam/back in time. Most frustrating of all were the endings where the protagonist discovers something terrifying/amazing and then simply runs away and does nothing about it.

Again, really good endings are hard to do but where a good opening will at least encourage the reader (and editor) to read everything you've written, a good ending will leave them with a warm feeling about what they've just read something worth their time.

As always, I make no claim to expertise in this writing lark and offer these observations without guarantee.

NIGHT RIDING

Adrienne J Odasso

The company of the dead have been riding
about in my sleep these past nights, asking
favors. "Will you buy me some envelopes—"

"—some paper? Some pins? And will you
sing—"
"—for my daughter, my mother? Find my
ring?"
I freeze by the windy roadside as they pass

in a clatter of hooves and cloaks and shoes
from all times and places, their many pale
faces
drunk with dew and moonlight to behold
me.

If I wake, I wonder, will the grass
be as green in the place where I stood
if I might find it? Or will I see

the cloaks and the horses, the midnight
gloom of the forest and the watch-fires
of the hunt's master and his sentinels,

who have no need of paper, pins, or sleep?

CONVENTIONAL WISDO
FOR ATTENDING SF CO

Jetse de Vries reckons that neophyte writers can get far more fro

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.

I just returned from the World Fantasy Convention in Calgary. Normally my column is about writing (SF) itself, but this time I'll talk about what a writer—a relatively unknown one—might do actually get a higher profile in the publishing business by attending cons.

So let's assume you have just finished (or already published) several short stories, or have started or finished your first novel: basically you have a product to sell. Obviously, you should also do this by submitting short stories to magazines or anthologies, or sending in your novel synopsis and first three chapters to agents and publishers (the ones that are open to it). What might be a great help, though, is meeting up with those agents and publishers in person.

Now, there will be many of you who will insist that the only thing that should count is the 'quality' of your work (and I'm putting 'quality' between quotation marks because being a superb short story or a phenomenal novel does not automatically translate in good sales: quite often the contrary. Or to phrase it differently: 'good' does not always mean 'commercially successful', or even 'commercially viable'). Now the point is that however good your work is, it should be noticed first. Both the novel publishers and agents that are open to unsolicited submissions have enormous slushpiles and mountains of queries. While personal contact with a publisher or agent does not guarantee a sale, it does make those people look at your work with a more intent eye. Also, by talking with people in the publishing industry you might find that doors previously closed to you—like 'invitation only' anthologies—might open up. Again, an invitation does not mean a sale, but mostly the special attention of an editor or an agent.

Furthermore, do not get discouraged if the work you sent out after the pitch you did for it at the convention gets rejected. This happens all the time, and as long as you behave as a professional, you will get more chances. And if the work is up to scratch, it will eventually sell. For example, an author we had published several times in Interzone met an agent at World Fantasy (a few years ago), and on the strength of his short story sales that agent asked him to send a synopsis and first three chapters of his first novel. This was turned down, however with a three-page rejection letter full of feedback. The second query this author sent to this agent sold, and will now be published by a British publisher. And keep in mind that this is just one example of many.

Some of you may say that you are too shy, or are too intimidated to go to conventions. I strongly advise to try a convention anyway: an author (a different one) we had published in Interzone went to a recent EasterCon with some trepidation, and I took her under my wing: showing her the ropes, introducing her to a lot of people, dragging her into a podcast interview, and so on. This same author was now at World Fantasy, networking like a pro, and when we shared a cab back to the airport we discussed what our plans for next year were—either WorldCon in Montreal or World Fantasy in San José—she wanted to do both, but needed, very reluctantly, to drop World Fantasy because of family matters. In short: do try at least one convention, even if you're shy: you will find that people will actively welcome you with open arms.

A SF (or fantasy, or horror) convention is basically a very friendly environment. The publishers, editors, agents, big name authors & artists are there—apart from the business aspet—because they love the genre. The uttermost majority of them are evidently approachable, as long as you behave in a professional manner. Also, each and every one of them wants to discover the next great talent, and they don't know yet if you are that person. So how do you approach these people the right way? Here are a few tips:

- Attend a panel and even better, ask an intelligent question (normally a panel will take questions from the audience). Then right after the panel closes, it is perfectly acceptable to introduce yourself to panel members you want to make contact with;
- Go to a signing (yes: some editors do signings), have something signed (if you don't have anything published by the person you want to talk to, then you're not really interested in them), and then introduce yourself. It's what happens all the time;
- Go to the dealer's room: several publishers will have a dealer's table and buying some of their product is an good way to get to talk to them. It also supports the field;
- Go to the art show: not only will there be great artwork on display, there will be plenty of people checking it out, and discussing a piece of art is also a great way to introduce yourself to somebody. You might be surprised in another way: for example on a recent EasterCon I saw the original artwork for a short story published in *Interzone*, and I called the author of that story—the artwork itself was quite affordable—and he bought it. I bought a print of Vincent Chong's artwork for my story published in Hub, and bought a fantastic print of a Shaun Tan artwork just because it blew me away. Kenn Brown and Chris Wren even gave Jason Stoddard and me a print of one of their artworks, and you never know: one daythese people might be illustrating your fiction;

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n attending SF conventions than a hangover

- Attend a reading, either of an author you greatly like, or of an editor/writer you like to get in touch with (and there are indeed plenty of people who are both writing and editing). Almost nothing flatters an author more than attending either their signing or their reading (or both);
- Go to the parties: every convention will have a message board where most of the parties are announced. There are plenty of fan parties, but publishers throw parties, as well. Launch parties, or just parties to promote themselves. And make no mistake: publishers want people to come to their parties. I threw an Interzone party at LACon IV, and helped Lou Anders throw a Pyr party at Denvention, and both of us had one big fear: that far too few people would show up. As it happened, both parties were packed and a great success. It is usually perfectly acceptable to walk into a party uninvited: most publishers want their parties to be well-attended and will rarely, if ever, deny people access. They will be packed with the people you want to meet, and nothing breaks the ice better than a good drink;
- Go to the Con bar: conventions are always held in big hotels with con facilities, and these hotels have a bar (at least one). Almost everybody in the publishing industry will be there one time or another: relaxing between panels, signings, presentations and readings; relaxing before or after a business meeting; having an ad hoc business meeting; relaxing before or after dinner, or actually having dinner there; getting warmed up for a party or just partying there right in the bar. Or all of the above. Again, in the bar it's perfectly acceptable to walk up to somebody you want to see—as long as you don't disturb the conversation they're having too much, but it's fine to tactfully join that conversation—and introduce yourself;
- Always introduce yourself, and always wear your name badge. As Gordon Van Gelder quoted Alfred Bester to me at a recent lunch: "never assume everybody in the field knows you". In case you're not sure if you already introduced yourself, just do it again: people will not be offended. Better one time too much than not at all;

So, which cons should you go to? Certainly it won't hurt if you check out a small local con before you go to the big ones: I went to the BeneluxCon before I went off the deep end to attend Interaction in Glasgow (my first WorldCon). It gives you a bit of the feel of a con without the intimidation of the big ones. Still, you will have to face those eventually, as that is the place where the publishing industry people will be gathering. Therefore, in the UK I strongly recommend EasterCon for SF, and FantasyCon for fantasy and horror. Inevitably, you should try at least one WorldCon to see if it works for you. The size—four to six thousand people—might intimidate, but keep in mind that all these people are, like you, fans at heart. But for the seriously networking writer I cannot recommend World Fantasy highly enough: this is the place to be if you really want to get in touch with those at the heart of genre publishing. I just returned from the Calgary one, and I can't wait for the next one. Actually, I already paid my attendance fee. Be there!

ICONOCLAST

Adrienne J Odasso

He said there were eyes in the trees, and roses
in the bush, which might sting if I touch
their leaves. Upon the stone wall, which we
did not build, branches overladen curl
to the sky—persimmon, pomegranate,
nettle.

I'll fight for the words, for the names,
which are mine, and I'll touch the rose-
leaves
if I please. In my veins is the picture already,
the chance of paint, the scraped hide, the
eyes
in the trees become eyes in the vines

of the dance, of the blooming
and the sting of remembrance that I

am the woman asleep
in the branches.

SHORT STORY COMPETITION WINNER ANNOUNCED AT BSFA PARTY

Roderick Gladwish, with the story "Nestbuster", won the BSFA's 50th Anniversary Short Story Competition. Roderick (pictured opposite with plaque marking his victory) received the news – and a cheque for £500 – from BSFA President Stephen Baxter.

With 120 entries and an extremely high quality shortlist, the BSFA 50th Anniversary Short Story Competition was a big success. The overall quality of stories was very high and the selection of a final shortlist was extremely difficult. The distinguished panel of judges (Stephen Baxter, Alistair Reynolds and Justina Robson) reached their final decision only after considerable debate.

The winner and many of the other shortlisted entrants were present at BSFA 50th Birthday Party – held at the Melton Mowbray pub in Holborn in December – to hear the winner announced.

Readers of *Focus* will be able to make their own assessment of whether the judging panel chose the correct story as the next issue of this magazine

(which will be included with the next BSFA mailing) will be a fiction special featuring Roderick's story and the five other stories that made it onto the competition's final shortlist.

Also in that issue will be details of the relaunched James White Short Story Competition, which will in future be administered by the BSFA.

PUSH

Adrienne J Odasso

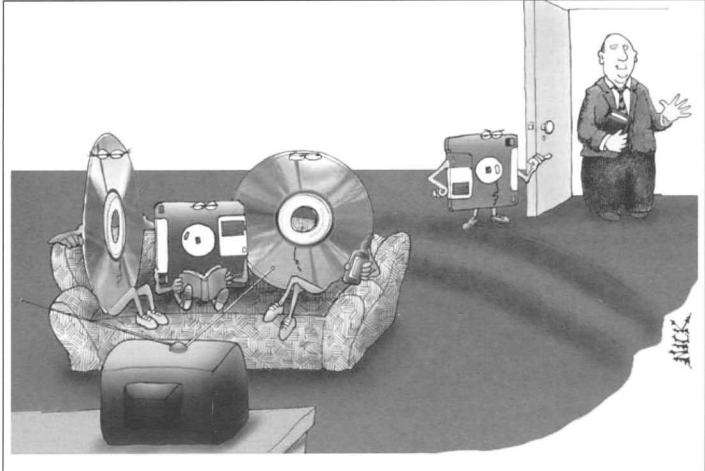
They say it works perfectly, this slab
made of stone that may be the only thing
between us and the darkness. Deftly,

lift your hand and sign grief, brush the sand
from your eyes, and know that eternity
is a pivot-swing and a single step

forward if you would but place your palms
against the blackness and pray for amends
to be made. You, standing there living

and breathing, know that this threshold
sends
us to where the horses are running
and dragging us we are here waiting

for death, for an answer, for the door—



"The guy at the door wants to know if we've all been saved?"