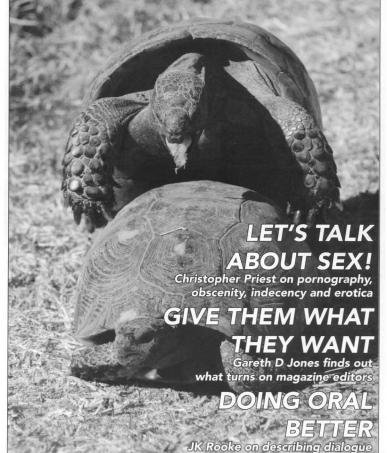
THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION MAGAZINE FOR WRITERS SUMMER 2009 No. 5



## CONTENTS

What are they thinking Gareth D Jones talks to small press magazine editors.

**News from Orbit** 

Terry Jackman reports on the work of the BSFA's Orbit groups

Of Slaves and Liberators

Dev Agarwal on the political backdrop to Blake's 7

Masterclass 5: Narrative Sex

Christopher Priest discusses the process of writing about sex

Writing about speech

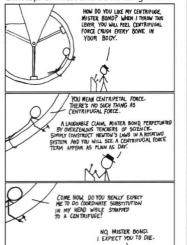
16

Gillian Rooke on the use of speech tags

Creating Believable Characters Emma Hemmings finds help in two books

Writing about Writing

Martin McGrath reviews books by Christopher Priest and David Langford



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## MAKING SPACE FOR DIVERSITY

The early part of 2009 saw much of online fandom immersed in a debate about race, writing and science fiction. As online debates will, the discussion became a row which became an all out flame war. There were intemperate things asid by people on all sides and some people who should have known better said things that would have been better not said. But at least one good thing has emerged from the row, the establishment of Verb Noire – an imprint designed to identify and promote new writers from diverse backgrounds. We hand over this issue's Focus editorial to Verb Noire of Squarder James Neshitt Golden:

There were no dark heroes or heroines in my world. My favorite books — Dr. Seuss, the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series — and my favorite cartoons — *Scooby Doo, She-Ra*, etc — rarely featured any brown faces.

And as I grew older, I simply accepted that this was just the way things were.

I was well into my twenties by the time I discovered Buffy the Vampire Slaver, and I fell in love with the series rather quickly. Here was this brilliant, kick-ass outcast saving the world --and she was a girl. And while her story resonated with me. I couldn't help but wonder why she couldn't be black, or asian, or latina. Better yet, where were the brown people? You mean a girl living in a modern, mythical California town never interacts with anyone of a different race? And when she does they're usually killed off in one or two episodes? How does that work? Why is it okay? And why is that when you point out these issues in fandoms - be it Buffy or Twilight or Harry Potter - you're summarily silenced and written off as The Angry [Insert Race Herel Person?

Fandom shouldn't be exclusionary.

and the fact that people of color can't have these conversations in the general fandom is problematic. My partner

RIVER'S DAUGHTER



TASHA CAMPBELL

the first novella from Verb Noire and is available now from www.verbnoire Michelle Kendall and I are hoping that with the creation of **Verb Noire**, those who felt ostracized or unwanted will now feel like they belong.

Heroes and heroines come in all colors. People from all walks can (and do) have the most incredible stories. Stories that demand to be shared with the world. But, given the current state of speculative fiction, you wouldn't know that. So Verb Noire is here to change the game and bring some much-needed diversity to the orene.

So far, the response has been amazing. We reached our initial fundraising goal in a matter of hours, and people from across the globe have been offering their support. We've got a great team of volunteers who are doing everything from website development to script reading. My partner and I consider ourselves extremely fortunate that so many people want to be a part of this. And we're confident that our debut novella, River's Daughter by Tasha Campbell, will live up to everyone's expectations. It's a really great comingof-age tale with a magical twist, and we look forward to sharing it.

## A CONFIRMED STATIONARYPHILE WRITES...

As a confirmed stationaryphile (lift that's not a proper word, it should be), I chuckled all the way through Nina Allan's Nota Bene on the lure of and attaction of collecting notebooks. I recognise this all too well. While I don't count myself as a writer (one story in Visionary Tongue, over a decade ago hardly shows the necessary drive and committment, and I fall your prorrastination test, to the point that cleaning the bathroom can be an attractive displaement activity) I still scatter notebooks in my wake - often handy pocket-sized black A Feint books - filled with titles of books I've read, interesting books or IDs to look out for, websites, quotations, ideas and, well, notes

But there are many more unsullied notebooks tucked away in draws and

cupboards all over the house, some of which are so nice that, like Nina, I feel reticent to sully with my indecipherable scrawl. Instead I jot things on odd scraps of paper, tuck them into things, and constantly lose them.

Unfortunately my stationaryphilia doesn't stop there. It expends to sketchpads (I'm even worse with these, which is why there's also a pile of scrap Ad paper next to my chair) and pens. Oh God, pens. Don't get me started on pens. Do any other people consider it somewhere between a personal betrayal and major life crisis when a favourite pen finally runs out?

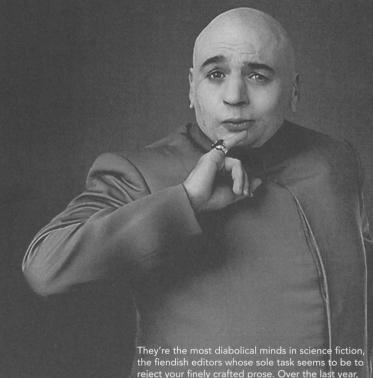
Gillian's article on the perils of the inf dump infodump was useful, although on might have hoped, at this late stage in th a curious historical artifact. Unfortunately most so, even with some pro authors, as a John Scalzi novel 1 reviewed last year displayed when one character turned to another and reeled out over a page of a classic "As you know, 80b.," history of some military/scientific development. I was so stumned at the shere effortney of its that the novel derailed itself at that point and never recovered.

So how does Neal Stephenson get away with it in something like Cryptonomicon, where the infodumps are sometimes the most fascinating parts of the novel?

Steve Jeffer

• I know how Neal Stephenson gets away with it... he's an alien genius, and the rules of petty humans don't apply to him.

## **WHAT ARE** THEY THINKING?



Gareth D Jones has been interviewing the kingpins of small presss publishing to find you what it is that they really want when they open a manuscript.

s every aspiring author knows, there is a strange breed of beings whose sole purpose in life is to scupper our career before it starts, be awkward and demanding about anything we send them and to reply with insults and derogatory comments about our most precious creations. They are of course the magazine editors. So in an attempt to makes them tick and why they're such an unavoidable nemesis, I carried out a series of interviews with as many of

magazine euror start com.

In the ten interviews that I published last year I discovered several recurring points that would surely be useful for us all to know. So here, in one convenient place, I've distilled much of my hard-earned wisdom for you all to share

Despite some authors' opinion that the scattergun submission approach is still worthwhile, the editors would rather be targeted with something that at least has a chance of being suitable. Often their submission for us poor authors who have to alter the format for every different magazine. What do they have to say on the subject?

## Trevor Denyer, Midnight Street:

writers who haven't read either the magazine or the guidelines think that it's OK to send anything. That's not the case, as there are limitations on what I'm likely to reject or accept. Still, I suppose writers who haven't researched the potential market probably deserve to be rejected!"

### Ian Redman, Jupiter:

"Publishing Jupiter is a joy. I really enjoy it, the only trials are the writers who don't read the guidelines, or at least don't follow the guidelines. I don't mean just inappropriate submissions, but simple things letter. This is something which saves me a lot of time in choosing which pieces to read when. You have to real that fiction doesn't come to

me in a nice steady stream. struggling to reply to everyone in the 2 months I allow, writers ignoring the simple parts of the guidelines gets to be a trial. To put it simply, if I've found a 15 minute window to do some ding. I'll scan the storie I have and find one I can fit into the one sitting. If a piece doesn't have a word count. I'll skip it and go read something trial for the author than me, just queue: No, the only real trial is people wasting 20 minutes of my time as I work out a piece isn't science fiction. I don't mind reading bad science fiction; I don't mind reading science fiction not suited to Jupiter. Those are at least things I can ive constructive advice on But if it ain't science fiction what do you say?'

## Terry Martin, Murky Depths: "I'll sound like a cracked

off and keep you there until the end. Anyone who doesn't follow our guidelines exactly – and that means tailoring a manuscript to meet our requirements... is asking to fail. A borderline story will receive more chance of further scrutiny if the author has respected our wishes."

One thing that submission guidelines always include is a plea to read a copy first before they can sell a few more copies. You waste your own time as well as theirs when you submit an entirely inappropriate story. There are numerous cross genre magazines but also many that have a specific remit: Futurismic wants near-future Earth ba SF, Escape Velocity wants Hard

The guidelines themselves should give you a clue though and often the magazine's title is quite revealing. Magazines such as Murky Depths, Darker Matter and Midnight Street hint at the editor's preference for the tone of their contents. What appeals to them about this, and

what should you as the writer be aiming for when you submit?

## Ben Coppin, Darker Matter:

Ben Coppin, Darker Matter: "It's hard to pin down exactly why that kind of story appeals to me, but since I was a child I've always loved science fiction, and have had a particular fondness (maybe that's not the right word!) for post-apocalyptic tales. ... To be more general. I think I am generally a cheery and optimistic person, and stories that are a little bit dark and possibly even miserable different side of myself. I guess to say about that!'

## Trevor Denyer, Midnight

I think that darker stories often reflect the human condition accurately. As a result, I tend to find them more interesting. Everyone loves an anti-hero, whether it's a character or a situation. Often, an element of depth and enables the formation of characters that are more three-dimensional

I think that, in the right hands, I think that, in the right hands, the potential to shock, surprise and thrill the reader is more evident where there are shades of darkness in a story. That doesn't mean that the story has to be overtly shocking. Often the more subtle approach is far more effective. That's what I look for." - Italics mine.

## Terry Martin, Murky Depths:

"We've accepted stories that aren't really spec fic but the handled really well and fits mito the Murky Depths ethos. If writers are going to try us with tired ideas they'll have to find unusual angles. We have turned away excellent stories though that just don't fit in Murky Depths. There's a lack of science fiction submissions and I'd love to see more alternative histories and steampunk or new weird stories. Like I said, we seem to be attracting the horror writers but I don't want Murky Depths route. Perhaps dark futuristic might be a good place to start if you are looking to hit us with something."

There were some insightful comments that are food for thought, but the question still remains: what exactly are they looking for?

## Lee Harris, Hub:

"Any answer to this question would leave your readers asking "Yes, but what do you actually look for?" It has to be something that engages, something that engages, something that strikes a chord. It doesn't have to follow any particular structure, or have a world-shattering conclusion. The protagonist doesn't have to be good or bad. It just needs to be something that, after reading, makes me feel happy that I'd read it."

## Sarah Dobbs, Scifantastic:

"I look for someone with a good idea, who understands what to do with words and structure. People with a real feel for language always grabbed me. or a new spin on an old tale. It's always easier to say what you don't look for: cliche's, hammy writing, poor dialogue, or the general 'Dear Editor, I have been published to Mars and back, you would be stupid not to want my story'. Actually, no, I read cover notes last, and took what I wanted regardless (well, most of the time)."

## Trevor Denyer, Midnight Street:

"What I look for in a story is good characterisation; depth of character; an interesting and original plot line that is not necessarily obvious. The story has to excite me enough from the beginning (because those that don't, tend to be summarily rejected!). There has to be something that very quickly hooks me in to the story, by way of writing style/competence, excitement or promise. I have very little time to cogitate over stories!"

## Trudi Topham, Pantechnicon:

The key's in the question. What I look for in a story is, well, a story. It seems obvious, but I've seen so many submissions which lack any actual narrative, or which are merely snippets of a far larger story. I look for a beginning, a middle and an end (in whichever order suits the story best), which to me is

((It has to be something that engages, something that strikes a chord. It doesn't have to follow any particular structure, or have a world-shattering conclusion. The protagonist doesn't have to be good or bad. It just needs to be something that, after reading, makes me feel happy that I'd read it.

pretty fundamental if you're going to call it a "story" instead of "fiction". I look for stories with engaging characters and interesting plots. Stories which will evoke an emotional response in the readers. Stories which people will want to read."

Pete Crowther, Postscripts:
"... within the story itself, we
watch for good description,
believable characterisation and
dialogue, and tight plotting . . . a sense of wonder and awe,
of mystery and imagination,
and the all-important frisson of
unease. Is that too much to ask
for? Well is it?"

This article of course concentrates on the short story, though I'm sure we all have our preferences between shorts or novels, which may well change depending on the day of the week. So what comments do the editors have on the short story in general?

## Gary Reynolds, Concept SciFi:

There's something special about the short story - you can make it perfect. You can take a three or four thousand word story and craft each individual sentence to perfection. You can play around with the structure while still keeping the plot arch in your head, safe in the knowledge that you're not going to introduce major inconsistencies. This is much harder to do in a novel where changing one thing can ripple major repercussions throughout the novel and result in a major re-work."

Trudi Topham, Pantechnicon:
"Short stories can be incredibly
powerful. Whereas a novel may
build up emotional resonance
and characterisation over the
course of 140,000 words, short
stories require an author to
be so meticulous and skilful
with their writing that they
can deliver the same emotional
punch in a far more constrained
format.

For the reader there's a tremendous advantage to be gained from reading short stories. One can absorb a whole tale in an evening, dip in and out of a book or magazine of short fiction and come away with a complete story in a single sitting. Stories can delight and entertain, they can be cathartic and desperately tragic, and the short story is the fictional equivalent of a chocolatier's finest hand-crafted Grenache who wouldn't want that in place of a 1Kg bar of Dairy Milk now and then?"

Gareth D Jones's full interviews - from which these selected comments have been extracted - can be read online at his blog The Science of Fiction at www. garethdjones.co.uk. Gareth been published in a variety of magazines both on-line and in print and translated into fifteen languages. He also has stories due in two anthologies this year.

## News from Prbit

TERRY JACKMAN, CO-ORDINATOR OF THE BSFA'S ONLINE WRITERS WORKSHOPS, REPORTS

The BSFA itself began in 1958. but I'm not sure when Orbiters, which began postal, were thought of Long before Ligined them. I'm sure. If anyone knows please tell me? I do know that Online Orbiters were added on in 2004, cos I was there, letse de Vries, now Interzone Editor. and I had enquired about the idea, and the two of us made a start. After a year, having found out how easy it was. I reverted to my roots and wrote an article for Vector inviting others to try it. And they did.

Orbiters were about telling the truth, not patting each others' backs, and that still holds good today. Of course, being told my point of view is off-again - isn't my favourite thing, but being told via email does mean that by the time I reply I've cooled down and got poitte again. And I'm grateful really. Honest

Seriously, auvs. I do know your comments have improved my writing. I only hope I've So to all Orbiters, past and present, thanks for all the time and effort. This page, good or bad, is for you. I'd like to hear from you with ideas or copy. and especially with news of your successes. I know several members had a great 2008. Can you email me and tell me the exact details? Your first tion result? Your new agent? Whatever goes well, let me know? Why shouldn't we use this space to boast a bit, we've worked for it.

## Terry

Our first success story of the year just happened! Geoff Nelder, known to Orbiters for his shorts and novels, has won an EPPIE award for non fiction.

## **Pros and Cons?**

As far as I'm concerned there are only pros to attending an SF convention, even if you only do it once to find out what the fuss is about. If you want to meet up with friends in the bar and sit and talk all day or night, you can. But there's a lot of other stuff to take advantage of instead: talks, readings by authors, autograph sessions, discussions, fiction, non-fiction, publishing, writing workshops, book stalls—with all the books you never see in the high streets.

And that's just the obvious.

Different cons have different ideas on what extras to add: role-play, masquerade, dinners, films. See what I mean about reasons for going?

If you've never dared but are now wondering, I operate a "meet-n-greet' service at any con I can attend, to make your first step easier. Otherwise, I can often put you in touch with other Orbiters who will be there, to allow for a drink and a chat I or whatever nefarious activity consenting BSFA adults agree to J. So if you think you'll be at a con this year, please let me know so I can spread it around?

For 2009 venues, I tapped 'ansible' and its convention link. I've copied a few across the country, plus Worldcon.

the BIG one, which is in Montreal this time. Googling "Ansible" is an easy way to look for further info.

I'm lucky enough to be going to Worldcon, if anyone wants to meet there and compare notes? My other half – who doesn't like sf at all but has recently been drawn to the fantasy side – offered to take me. I'm still reeling. Mind you, he also said something about packing his opfi clubs...

So if you haven't tried a con yet why not make this the year you do? It doesn't hurt, honest. If I can I'll even hold your head up till you tread water. Check out the possibilities below:

- 27 June 2009 BSFA's AGM, ~ London
- 25-26 July 2009 Satellite 2, Glasgow
- 6-10 August 2009 Anticipation (67th Worldcon), Montréal, Canada
- 11-13 September 2009 Reunion 7 (media), Daventry
- 18-20 September 2009 •
   Fantasycon, Nottingham

[note: This year's Alt.Fiction and Newcon 5 are postponed to 2010]

## IN TWO MINDS?

Ever thought that as a writer you seem to have a split personality? Well, you could be right. If you look at a 3D image of your brain you'll notice it seems to have a centre parting, despite the fact our heads don't?

to nave a centre parting, despite the fact our heads don't?
This right-left divide, as I understand it, means the left side controls our creative urges and the right our analytical. Result: if our creative left-side spews out a first draft, our analytical right-side has to go back over it and assess/tighten it, before it's ready for an

So that's why writing process has two distinct stages; we literally shift our the working area of our minds back and forward according to which side we need in charge.

Here are some thoughts to ponder:

- Are you a convergent [logical, train-of-thought] type? Or a divergent [intuitive leap] type? I worked out which I was long ago.
- Does this mean one side of your brain could spend more time in charge than the other?
- Could the infamous 'writers' block' be caused by getting stuck on one side when you want the other?
- And isn't it nice to have something concrete to blame? "Oh, it wasn't me, it was my right brain interfering again."

[Want homework? If you'd like to learn more try Googling 'left brain'. I found not just articles but some fun quizzes came up to test myself on.]

## OF LIBERATORS AND SLAVES

As Sky prepare to resusitate Blake's 7, Dev Agarwal looks back at the original and picks out the strengths and weaknesses of UK televisions only serious attempt at space opera.

As most of us know there is a huge following for Blake's 7 in SF fandom. It's been off the air for twenty three years but remains fondly remembered as a very British space opera. There have been various ideas on how to bring the series back, with either new actors or the original cast. Sky has announced various plans for a pilot, with the last as recently as April 2008.

I've not been asked to reboot the series, but that's not stopping me. To paraphrase OJ Simpson, I wasn't asked to reimagine Blake's 7 but here's how I'd do it if I had.

## THE CANON

With regard to what's best about Blake's 7, no one wants to see a return to clumsy references to Dorian Gray or clichéd episodes like Gold. We're looking to mine the writing of Tanith Lee, Chris Boucher and Robert Holmes. The strength of the reworked

versions of Trek, Dr Who and Battlestar Galactica lies in understanding the source material, retaining its essential components, and striking a balance in respect for the original and adding a modern sensibility.

Essential to Blake's 7's canon is the Federation: It's both background and a character in its own right. The Federation is arguably the essence of the original. And what was the Federation? A totalitarian entity based on Earth, with a broad Nazi aesthetic. It was a dictatorship, with drug and cybernetic control of civilians, penal colonies and slave camps.

Reworked, the Federation could have a more distinct

flavour, extrapolated from Stalinism, With careful handling, this wouldn't be a clumsy device, but one that enhances its milieu. A distinction between Fascism and Stalinism was that many people believed that Stalin offered freedom and liberation rather than purges and gulags. Thus Servalan and Travis speak of "New Federation Man", and the threat from counterrevolutionaries. Travis heads up a mutoid Spetsnaz army (using the translation of Spetsnaz into English as "Troops of Special Designation").

## STRUCTURE

Blake's 7 benefited from a four act structure. This was perhaps function following form,



but worked to create a very definite ending (and the stories about why Blake died are well known). Having Avon succumb to increasing paranoia also reflected an understanding of character, and of story arcs that reach through the entire series. A relaunched version would wisely draw on this format.

## CHARACTERS

The original characters are fundamental. The teams that redesigned Galactica and the latest Trek clearly understood that and have worked to retain their essence. Servalan and Travis are similarly essential to give definition and depth to the Federation.

Servalan espouses the party line until such time as she fractures it to launch her own bid to become leader. Federation rhetoric for her is just a device for self-advancement. She is not a believer, but Travis could be – an ideologue spreading the revolution through violence. Reflecting on a defeat, Travis might announce, "This planet is like the Middle Ages. They were too primitive to accept our Federationist revolution."

The Federation is made up of cynics and idealists. Servalan and Travis reflect both. Like Felix Dzerzhinsky, the original enforcer of the Russian Revolution, Travis believes in his cause.

Blake is the mirror of Travis. Both are ideologues passionate in their purpose. Once united in revolution, now they're opposed. Blake remains the idealistic revolutionary, secretly believing that the Federation's egalitarian



dream can be revitalised. Avon presents the faction of self-interest and conservative hatred of revolution. These tensions damage the alliances that begin the story and lay the groundwork of the series' finale.

Another crucial character is Vila, who brought essential humour to the story line (similar to the rapport between the Doctor and his companions, or the role of Baltar in Galactica).

## DESIGN

Few people would argue that the original cardboard sets and wobbly spaceship models could do with a cash injection. However, reworking the past means spending money wisely. Dr Who re-imagined the TARDIS while retaining its familiar features. Servalan needs to remain the glamorous femme fatale. Travis is still the man in black, obsessive and ruthless.

### THE STORY

This might be distilled into:
A consistent fight between
the rebel Blake, who was once a
Party man. He originally fought
alongside the Great Leader
and Travis. Blake recants the
revolution once he sees it turn

to dictatorship. He undergoes a show trial (*The Way Back*) and is shipped off Earth to a gulag on a Siberia-like planet (Cygrus Alpha). Some of his future Liberator crew are new arrivals with him (pilots and guerrilla fighters, like Jenna, Vila and Avon), some are prisoners who've moved up the hierarchy to become guards (Tarrant) — a feature of the actual Soviet gulagos.

All news of the Federation filters through rumour and gossip around the gulag. And there are many gulag planets.

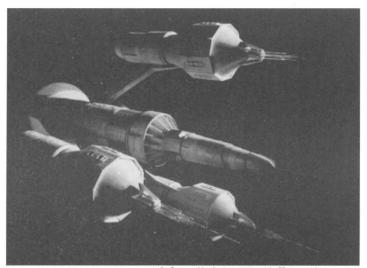
The crew escapes to the Liberator and forms the resistance. An idea they didn't use originally was that the Liberator control room wouldn't have any controls. It was an order of technology so advanced that its control centre was a dark room powered by the pilots' thoughts. The Liberator is the superweapon of its day, but outnumbered by the volume of Federation pursuit ships. The resistance have their successes and setbacks, culminating in two key moments from the original series, Star One and Blake.

Star One is, according to Adrian Riglesford's The Making of Terry Nation's Blake's 7, the most popular episode of the series. This is the series' Stalingrad. The allen invaders are even more totalitarian and hostile than the Federation, and infiltrate human space. The only option is for the Liberator crew and the Federation to unite.

The battle forms a "cauldron of totalitarian violence" as Vasily Grossman described the clash of Stalin and Hitler. The episode is "Stalin One." perhaps.

The aftermath of Star One is: the aliens are destroyed, but at the cost of vast Federation resources. The Federation's slave states revolt. Counter revolution brews. The Liberator Superweapon is sacrificed. Travis is dead and Blake is missing. He reappears on Gauda Prime, which is a mixture of wartorn Berlin and present-day Mogadishu – a city of both anarchy in the north and a totalitarian state in the south. The series finally ends in

blood, a slow motion homage to the original, reworked to include either this ending: Servalan and the Federation is brought down as well. The Federation is swept by a new revolution, perhaps led by Vila, lone survivor and new Blake's 7 rarely receives credit for its exciting use of modern



Liberator
- the finest
designed
spaceship
ever?

leader of the resistance. Or, in keeping with the original, Blake and Avon are crushed, their revolution destroyed and the Federation is victorious.

## WHY REMAKE IT?

Blake's 7 was, and is, an entertainment. That in itself is an argument for bringing it back. Most people writing or reading science fiction are searching for some definition of entertainment. Also, the more good genre TV, the more interest there will be in the written form. How might a relaunch affect the genre? The Wikipedia entry suggests that Alistair Reynolds, Stephen Baxter and Jain Banks' interest in hard SF can be traced from the original. Which new writers might arise from relaunching the series? And how about Alistair Reynolds, et al writing episodes of it?

In imagining Blake's 7, why set it against a communist dictatorship? For me, this adds another dimension to the story. What would happen when the Liberator crew travels

to far-flung worlds where revolutionaries struggle to overthrow feudal dictatorships (a la Power and The Keepen? Those revolutionaries, distant from the Federation's centre, invoke its original spirit of freedom and equality, not understanding that New Federation Man leads to dictatorship and the gulgas.

Not only does the series present an opportunity to tell an entertaining story, but also to address historic and contemporary themes. Our concerns in 2009 include the uncertainty of fundamental aspects of daily life - the global economy, our national politics, whether we should continue wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Using the past to reimagine Blake's 7 allows us to explore many of these issues. We might remember, for example, that the Nazis used to refer to Allied bomber crews not as aviators but as "terror flyers". This use of history resonates against today's news stories of torture and "special rendition" and how we define resistance and terrorism.

An SF story set in a totalitarian state, relentless in the destruction of individualism, even offers a slant on the longstanding preoccupation of our genre, what it means to be human.

And my last thoughts: as part of the Soviet aesthetic, the Great Leader will be a figurehead who's never seen, like Orwell's Big Brother. His face is a recurring image of a middle-aged, handsome man. And whose face would it be? Paul Darrow's, of course. Who knows what Sky will do?

Who knows what Sky will do? But having worked through these ideas for *Focus*, I like them so much, I think I'm going to use them myself.

## **MASTERCLASS 5:** NARRATIVE SEX



'Look away now,' is the traditional warning ... which many people interpret to mean 'Come over here and have a look at this!' It is time for a close interest in what goes on below the belt: naughty bouncy-bouncy, people wanting to do it or actually doing it or even doing what they do after

In other words it is about:

Now here's a novelty. How many books on sexual technique give you advice on how to write? The answer is none. But because we are superior beings, here is some advice on writing that will tell vou

## HOW TO DO IT

ince we are going to discuss how to write about sex and not how to perform it, let's start by defining terms and establishing what certain descriptive words actually mean. They are often used wrongly or interchangeably, and therefore misleadingly. Our business is with words, not nookie, so let's be clear about what we mean.



## PORNOGRAPHY

and likes to use. Pornography ('porno', 'porn') is widely held to be a bad thing, associated with corrupt depictions of sexual activity, sold to seedy people in an underhand way. Calling someone a pornographer is usually meant as an insult. Calling a work of art pornographic (as in a pornographic novel, or a pornographic film) usually means that it is inferior work that contains material which it is thought some people will find shocking or offensive. There is also the pornography of violence, a charge usually levelled at films, comics or TV that contain what is deemed

to be an unnecessary amount of graphic violence. Too many guns, knives, explosions, and so on, too much cruelty, too much sadism. We are all familiar with

But let's think about what the word really means. Etymologically it derives from two Greek roots: porne, meaning a whore or harlot, and graphein, meaning to write. Pornography therefore means the writing of a whore, or in a slightly looser sense the drawings of a whore. Some of the earliest known examples of this kind of pornography were found on the wall of what was probably a brothel in the ruins of Pompeii. What possible motive could a prostitute have for writing or drawing something, other than to arouse sexual excitement in her clients?

Pornography should therefore always be used to describe something that has that intent: a drawing, film, painting, photograph or piece of literature that is designed to stimulate a response, usually a sexual one.

Is that such a bad thing? All art intends to induce a response: laughter, romantic longing, nostalgia, excitement, suspense, terror, wonder ... and many more. Sexual activity is not a taboo or forbidden act - it is a natural human function. Therefore any literature or other art that sets out to make people sexually excited is in my view essentially harmless.

The word 'pornography' should never be used in a negative sense. Don't worry about the people who haven't thought this through - writers should always use the word with pride, as a description of artistic endeavour.

## OBSCENITY

We move on to less aesthetic ground. Obscenity is not pornography, and the distinction is important.

Obscenity' is a legal term, which although not intended to mean the same thing as pornography can include it. Obscenity can also be applied to non-literary activities, such as nude dancing or live sexual performances. Those who legislate against obscenity are normally busying themselves with public morals. They believe obscenity is harmful, especially to children, and that there should be controls on it. They

try to define an obscene act as something that will tend to deprave or corrupt those likely to come into contact with it.

I'm not concerned with the pros and cons of obscenity law here, merely attempting to elucidate terminology in a way helpful to writers. A useful definition of obscenity, as opposed to pornography, would be that something obscene is offensive or outrageous to generally accepted standards of behaviour or morality.

For a writer, another useful distinction would be that obscenity includes an unnatural or exaggerated degree of closeness, or displaying an interest in detail that is greater than normal.

Pornography can certainly include obscenity, and obscene material can sometimes be pornographic, but just because each can contain examples of the other does not mean they are the same thing. Pornography is intended to excite or arouse, obscenity will often intend to disaust or repel or corrupt.

(The etymological roots of 'obscene' are in doubt: Latin obscenus means ill-omened or disgusting; caenum means filth.)

## INDECENCY

This is another legal term, not dissimilar to "obscenity". In one sense it is a lower or less extreme kind of obscenity. It is usually applied to behaviour in public – somebody getting up to something that they know will outrage or shock others: perhaps exposing their private parts.

Does it have artistic connotations? Is there, in other words, any such thing as indecent literature, indecent art? Perhaps art can depict indecency such as in a movie) without itself being indecent. Literature can certainly describe it without becoming lit.

## **EROTICA**

We leave the law behind and return thankfully to art. Erotica is only art. It is the depiction through words or images of erotic things: acts, performances, people, images, even symbols. Good or successful erotica (a plural Latin word, but rarely used in the singular, like 'data', 'bacteria' or 'media') induces a feeling

of pleasant or heightened sexual awareness. Erotica, like pornography, is essentially a Good Thing.

The difference between pornography and erotica is slight, but as a general rule pornography is created by one person for the pleasure of others.

Erotica need not have that intent. For instance, a sexy poem written about a lover would be a form of erotica. even if no one but the poet ever read the words, dreaming or remembering. Photographs or drawings shared between lovers could be erotica, without being pornographic. On the other hand, much erotica might seem pornographic to a third party for whom it was not intended. Pornography can be erotica; obscenity and indecency are almost never erotic, except to perverts.

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While still thinking about words, one of the traditional problems for any writer in English who is writing about sex, is that the vocabulary is in some ways extremely restricted.

Most of the words for sexual organs are either anatomical. scientific or crude. There's hardly any middle ground. Familiar or commonplace names for sexual organs or sexual acts are usually private, an intimate shorthand between two people. That sort of thing doesn't travel. A few familiar terms have migrated into general use. 'Willy' and 'pussy' seem to be widely accepted, often with comic undertones. Some words have an annoying ambivalence: 'fanny' means one thing in Britain, something else in the USA. The familiar 'Anglo-Saxon' words have a special, exact meaning when writing about sex, but because they are so often used as obscenities or swear-words they are still laden with an offensive quality, even though their use is becoming commonplace on TV and in films.

Writers are left with a difficult choice. That difficult choice is the main subject of this essay. How best should we use words to describe the actions that are memorably summed up in the last three lines of a limerick?:

They argued all night / Over



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who had the right / To do what, with which and to whom.



So how do we go about writing sexual material?

If you accept the four main categories above, it's not immediately obvious where narrative sexual material might fit into them. That is, writing the sort of sex scene most writers will want to describe at some point. It might be neither pornography nor erotica. vet still be descriptive prose which makes it clear what is happening, and why, and between whom, and with what outcome. I'm calling it NARRATIVE Sex, and I nominate it as a fifth descriptive sexual term.

Let's ask ourselves more specifically: why do we wish to write narrative sex? The motives are various, and here is an incomplete list of some of them:

- To write pornography, as defined here, to give the reader an erotic experience simply from reading.
- To shock or outrage, to draw wider attention to the book or story for its sexual content, perhaps to become a cause célèbre, to sell more copies or to become notorious for having written a sexually frank book.
- To give a deeper insight into the relationship between two characters.
- To pad out a scene, giving the characters something to be getting on with while other plot matters are gathering around them, or to suggest the passing of time.
- To make a plot point that can only be established through the fact of a sexual encounter.
- To reflect the belief that sexual activity is as normal or unremarkable as eating or breathing, and therefore to reflect human life fully.
- To write erotica: in other words to describe a personal experience or memory through the medium of fiction, a way of pleasantly recollecting an erotic encounter.

- To release oneself from a perceived or real inhibition, to prove to family and friends that you have grown up and now understand what goes on between two people in private.
- To depict with honesty every aspect of a natural physical encounter between two people, one which informs and deepens their relationship, while adding a dimension of sensuality and realism to the literary qualities of your story.

The last of these is probably the 'mature' reason, the one that sums up the literary instinct in the best possible way, but if we are honest then elements of most of the others will also be present

Let's look at some examples of narrative sex.



The first is from a commercial novel, published some time ago. but of fringe genre interest. The intention here seems to be at least partly pornographic: in other words, to make the reader feel randy. The lovemaking scene occurs early in the story, at the first meeting between the male protagonist and a woman of almost androidal beauty, with the sort of physical dimensions seen only in Playboy. The first sexual encounter occupies more than 1,000 words, of which the following is a mere extract. Look away now:

... he buried his face against her. Her nails grazed his back as her long legs jerked convulsively upwards. Her ankles locked against his spine. He moved slightly upwards to her core, sucked it into his mouth. Her loins rolled upwards in powerful thrusts as she cried out, his tongue and lips constantly moving until he felt her shuddering against him, heard her scream, the tenseness dissolving out of her, and wetly, heatedly, she drew him up towards her, her fingers seeking him, her lips wildly on his. wanting him in her now, at this precise moment, more than she wanted anything else, to continue the

exquisite heat she felt, to give him pleasure as he had given her. Her sex felt like a furnace as she guided him into her.<sup>2</sup>

That is not, incidentally, the climax. If I may put it that way. More description, more narrative sex, follows, but I think what we have here is enough. This is terrible writing, of course, almost entirely without merit. It is:

Repetitive – three uses of 'upwards' followed by 'up towards':

Illogical – 'he buried his face against her' – you normally bury something in, but that wouldn't make sense, even here:

Euphemistic – what is a woman's 'core' and how do you suck it into your mouth?; Syntactically chaotic – one sentence contains thirteen commas:

Inconsistent – The viewpoint flops around to and fro – '[he] heard her scream', then in the same sentence '[she was] wanting him in her now';

Overwritten – 'the exquisite heat'; 'her sex felt like a furnace' – a furnace?

Forget the dreadful style for a moment. What is allegedly going on is also ridiculous. In the real world, having perfect sex with someone you've just met is a fallacy. Sexually inexperienced readers, seeking information about this stuff, would be horribly misled, in the way Hollywood films and dime novels have been misleading naïve audiences from time immemorial. And what is this face-burying, ankle-locking, nail-grazing, leg-jerking, core-sucking, loin-thrusting, shuddering, screaming, furnaceing, upwardly mobile couple going to do the next time they are in bed together? What's left to do?

But for our present purposes, let's remember we are talking about the craft of writing. The believability or otherwise of the sex scene is actually a side issue. What function does a narrative sex scene like this serve in a novel?

It doesn't build or develop

character, because the whole passage is full of clichés performed by unrealistic people barely described except by their unconvincing actions. It doesn't advance the story - on the contrary, it holds things up for a while. It doesn't tell you anything interesting about the sex act (see above). It's certainly not erotic to read, even if the author's intention was pornographic, because it's so badly written and unbelievable. No information is conveyed about characters, plot, story, background or anything.

It is a waste of space. The following sentence contains everything in this long and implausible passage. It conveys the same information, it's grammatical and it's much shorter:

They went to bed together and made love.

Unfortunately, sentences like that don't sell books to a mass audience. There must be a better way of doing it.

Attempts at humour are probably not the answer, though, as our next sexually sophisticated author is about to show us. Look away now:

Whimpering and grinding his teeth, Shiva swung open the gate and entered another of the fields on his funny farm. He herded the cow into the hoof-cratered corner by the water trough. then slipped his trousers off so he could mount her. His first wife Sandra bucked and mooed beneath him. Despite the tumult of upheaving flesh Shiva still noticed - with lofty, Brahminical pity - the sprinkling of livid spots on the inside of her anal cleft. Sandra's conical fingers, which resembled jeweller's ring trees, dug into an earthen bolster, and her high-pitched bellows rent the rapidly compressing atmosphere.3

How on earth does incoherent writing like this get past a slushpile reader, let alone a professionally trained editor? For one thing it's almost impossible to discern what's going on: is the man actually having it off with a cow? Or is the author making heavy-handed satire on the

she was a cow? You grant that metaphor suspiciously for a few moments, but then the author says she was literally bucking and mooing and renting the atmosphere with high-pitched bellows. Were the bellows renting the atmosphere, or did the author mean rending? Incoherence mounts: a Brahmin is either a high-caste Hindu or a cow/bull; are both meanings being referenced here? What is the meaning of the blue spots in her anal cleft? '[Her fingers] dug into an earthen bolster' - a bolster is a kind of pillow, or sometimes a chisel; what is an earthen bolster? What is making the atmosphere rapidly compress? Or did the writer think this distinctly unerotic passage might be funny? The writing is incompetent by any standard.

woman (Sandra is Shiva's first

wife, implying the relationship

was not going to last), by saying

distinctly unerotic passage might be funny? The writing is incompetent by any standard. As narrative sex it's hopeless, and it's definitely not in the least funny. Not even that. Speaking of metaphors, they too can present horrible traps to over-excitable writers. I shall leave the next passage for someone else to take apart with gleeful malice. For everyone else, it's time to look away again, please:

Her hand is moving away from my knee and heading north. Heading unnervingly and with a steely will towards the pole. And, like Sir Ranulph Fiennes, Pamela will not easily be discouraged. I try twitching, and then shaking my leg, but to no avail. At last, disastrously, I try squeezing her hand painfully between my bony thighs, but this only serves to inflame her ardour the more. Ever northward moves her hand, while she smiles languorously at my right ear. And when she reaches the north pole, I think in wonder and terror ... she will surely want to pitch her tent.4

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One can quote bad, funny, embarrassing or annoying examples of narrative sex forever. Fantasy and science fiction books are full of them, including several famous lines quoted fondly and predictably whenever the subject arises. (Use of the word spung will almost always get a laugh.) There is even an annual award for the worst sex passages in novels<sup>3</sup>, and if you're interested Google will find most of them for you.

When you've satisfied your curiosity, and now I've had my fun with this nonsense, the question unavoidably arises: how then is good narrative sex to be written?

One might as well ask how any kind of good work should be written. The answer, naturally, is: there are no rules. A strong argument can be made for the belief that good writing largely consists of avoidance of the bad. This applies to all areas writing, and the removal of any of the passages I've quoted in this essay would immeasurably improve the books in which they appeared.

But in the words of Cap'n Barbossa, we pirates have 'guidelines' instead of rules. Here are a few that might apply to narrative sex (it's safe to keep looking):

- Anything you describe of people having sex should be consistent with their characters, as established in the rest of the story.
- Only describe sexual activity that is relevant, either to the characters, the plot or the overall mise en scène.
- If the sex scene you are describing slows up the story, or distracts from it, or betrays the personality of the characters, or is included for purely titillative reasons, get rid of it or replace it with a bland statement of fact. They went to bed together and made love.
- Always think of sexual activity as a normal human act, perhaps comparable with eating, sleeping, and so on. How much of a story do you devote to narrative breathing, narrative yawning, narrative farting, etc? Why should narrative sex get more space?

Because we think it's more interesting, perhaps ... but why? Make it so, if that's what you think. Don't if you don't.

- When using the vocabulary of sex, the names of organs or activities, be responsive to the vocabulary of the characters. Those technical terms are horrible, so avoid them. No one ever says, except perhaps as a joke. 'Will you copulate with me?' (Or 'fornicate', 'have intercourse', 'have carnal knowledge', etc.) If your characters have a private, intimate slang for what they are getting up to, use it, but make sure you depict them as the sort of people who do that, and reveal it in other non-sexual areas of their relationship. If they seem likely to shrink from four-letter Anglo-Saxonisms, you should too. If they are loud-mouthed assholes who f- and c- and everything else, go for it! And you can also use vocabulary to reverse things, to show a side of the characters hitherto not revealed: a sexual braggart might suddenly become inhibited when confronted with the real thing, and the maiden aunt, stripped of her stavs and with the bedroom door firmly closed, could turn out to be a randy old raver with a taste for salty language.
- If your narrative sex has a moral point to make, it should be one that is true to the characters or their situation, not a voicing of your own views. Never lecture the reader.
- Keep it stylistically true to the rest of the story. If for instance you have gone in for elaborate or detailed descriptions of scenery, feelings, actions, etc., would it be right to turn down the picture definition suddenly and go a bit vague about the hot scen in bed? Remember, coyness is a literary sin, just as showing off is.

In short, always think about what you are doing, question your motives, try to keep a balance with the rest of the story. By writing narrative sex you are bringing into public view an act that normally takes place in private – maybe there's a good reason for privacy? On the other hand, what is there to be ashamed of? What is the point you are trying to make by describing the physical act of love, already known to and practised by just about every adult on the planet?

In the same way as you should never write any scene for base or ulterior motives, narrative sex should be written responsibly and with integrity. Perhaps this means that your scene should follow your characters as far as the bedroom door, but then should wait outside while they hurry in on their own. (Should you peer through the keyhole to find out what they're doing? That's another subject, I think.)

Above all, if when you've written the scene and it has more upward core-sucking and loin-thrusting than any other book ever written anywhere, and something about it still doesn't feel right, then cross it out. Use an X.

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## NOTES:

- The term 'narrative sex' can also be applied to, e.g., mainstream movies with sexual elements, which are not intended as pornographic films.
- 2. The Ninja by Eric Lustbader,
- 3. Dr Mukti and other tales of woe by Will Self, 2004.
- 4. Rescue Me by Christopher Hart, 2001.
- 5. Literary Review Bad Sex in Fiction Award literaryreview. co.uk/badsex.html



## "TAG! YOUR IT" WRITING SPEECH

Gillian Rooke offers advice on using speech tags.

'Speech Tags' or the vexed question of how to wrap your speech. By J.K. Rooke

What is so difficult about wrapping speech? Well... Never, on any other subject in the history of 'How to' writing, has so much advice been given to so many, to the benefit of so few.

This is because the writing and reading of direct speech is largely a matter of personal taste. Some people don't like reading direct speech at all and prefer an all action plot with as little as possible. Others consider that direct speech is one of the best ways of describing characters, and like to study it, insisting that every character has an individual voice. Between these two extremes there are lots of different reading paces and preferences, and one reader might be irritated by a lot of 'he said she saids' whereas another would be equally irritated by a lot of 'he suggested she declined." So the poor writer has to try

to steer a passage between all extremes, to please everybody. But the writer himself will have preferences. One writer will naturally use a lot of 'said' and another will prefer to use more varied descriptive terms for the speech. Yet another might go right down the page without any tags at all. (Note, I call them tags. Definition Anything which is outside the inverted commas on the same line as the speech. If you have another name for this, fine.) So what does one do? Well the golden rule for the speech tag is VARIETY. There is no method that is wrong per se. And in trying to get it right it is so easy to go to the other extreme and make it a lot worse. What happens is, someone points out a fault in a particular writer and other people read it and assume the advice also applies to themwhereas in fact they could be erring in a completely different direction and their taking the advice would make their writing worse.

This is where orbiting, or letting others read your writing comes in handy. If a 'crit' says you are using too many 'saids' then you should take notice because although the other orbiters might not agree that

there are too many, at least 25% of your eventual readership will agree with that orbiter. (4 crits per orbit.) Remember you are aiming to please everybody. So what should you do? Well, reduce them; but not by much! Two less on the page will probably do, if only one fellow orbiter complained. If you had two complaints then you need to take more drastic action.

Of course an orbiter could complain about too many flowery speech descriptions: he bemoaned she concurred, and here again if only one orbiter, then only substitute 'said' for one or two per page. But of course if you use tags as had as this then you are most likely coing to quef four operations.

So I am not going to make matters worse by offering general advice on simple questions of taste like 'how many saids is wrong?' I am simply going to break down the 'speech tag' and outline the different methods that can be used.

## TAGLESS SPEECH

The first method is no tags at all; just lines of pure speech ex.

"Are you coming down?"

"In a sec."
"We haven't got long you know,

it starts in ten minutes"
"Just finishing."

"I thought you were ready"
"Just one or two things..."

"We've got to go now."
"Well start the engine I'm just

"Well start the engine I'm just coming" "It's already running, and you

really re out of time."
"Ok I'm nearly done."
"I am going to count to three
and go without you. One...two....

The door banged, and the car whined away into silence.

In an exchange like this between two people, and where it is quite clear who is doing what, speech tags are not necessary at all. In fact they would slow up the reading and make the whole exchange quite boring. I know that some pundits say a string of speech should have an 'N said' every four lines, (or three or five) but this goes to show that arbitrary rules are there to be broken. Imagine a 'said Fred' in

the above. It would ruin it wouldn't it? In fact an exchange, or to be more specific an altercation, like this; with a little more content, and getting very much more heated, could go on for three pages, and still be perfectly acceptable.

The rule that matters here is that it must always be clear who is saying what. The other rule that applies is that it must be pure altercation with the participants not doing anything other than shout at each other. Within these rules it is almost always better to leave the speech pure, because anything else slows up the pace. Even stopping to say 'N was breaking out in a sweat by now' at the end of his speech slows the action. Really, emotion should be implicit in the words themselves.

## HE SAID SHE SAID

When do you use speech tags and when do you look for more professional sounding alternatives? Obviously when someone asks a question you write 'asked' not 'said'. If someone shouts you write 'shouted' If they are musing you write 'mused', but be very very sure that they are doing these things and not just 'saying'. Looking for alternatives at any cost, when all people are doing is having a normal conversation, is certainly not the more professional option.

more professional option.

If you are a good writer and people are interested in that conversation they are not going to count the 'saids' you are using. A good way to lessen the impact of the said 'saids' however, is to have some at the beginning of the speech and some at the end; or even in the middle. It pays to vary where you put your speech tags. The caveat here is that wherever you are using a less usual method; as for instance putting the 'said' in the middle of the speech, you have to be more sparing with the use of it.

You must remember always that you can get away with using ad infinitum, any sort of travesty of English that is in common use; but if you do anything perfectly correct but a bit inventive, more than once on a page, people will notice and yell that you are being verbose.

## ADVERRS

Now we come to the other inclusions in a line of speech. THE ADVERB. As in ...' she said

They can be extremely effective, but as with almost everything, their use must be strictly rationed.

The ADVERBIAL PHRASE ...' she said with a sweet smile. - is not normally recommended. What does this example do that the previous simple adverb doesn't? What it does do is slow up the action. If you really want a pause in the conversation, then I suppose with a sweet sad smile,' could work. Everything is useful for something.

## ACTIONS IN

CONVERSATIONS
For example, "I don't understand
this at all" said N, running his
fingers through his hair, "does
not slow up the action because
it is action. Such little inclusions
are a useful aid to our visualizing
what is going on. Indeed we do
need to be reminded during long
conversations, of where people are
and what they are doing.

So phrases like 'putting down her teacup'; or 'jumping to his feet' have a purpose in reminding people, but they are also pointers to the level of tension in the conversation. If the next person to speak, picks up his teacup first, and takes a sip: this shows us that he is not worried by what is happening, and his calm action will serve to calm the others down too. Using people's actions to describe their states of mind is normally preferable to the use of adverbs, although of course, describing actions slows the pace more than adverbs

The art of wordsmithing lies in knowing exactly when to use what.

## SPEECH DURING ACTION SEQUENCES

Of course verbal exchanges during a period of action are rather sparse. There will be long bits of writing in between each spoken sentence. The danger here is in forgetting why someone said what they did, or indeed, that they said anything.

I have often found an apparent answer and have had to look back a page or so to find the question. So the rule here is don't have an embedded conversation, with direct speech so far apart that the reader has to look back to remind themselves.

Remember that the golden rule is that a book should always read in an appropriate manner, fast when the action is fast, slow when it is slow. And reading should always remain linear. Making the reader go back because there is something

they haven't properly understood, is never acceptable.

ver acceptable. For instance :

They examined the puzzle.
"I don't think that's going to work."
"Well of course it will."

"Well of course it will."

"OK, try it if you like." Said
Fred.

Here the exchange is started without the reader knowing who started it. So the reader may have to readjust their idea of who spoke first.

It is clear understanding that you are always aiming for in speech tags. That is their sole purpose. If the speech and situation could be fully understood and appreciated without them then there would be no need to use them at all and it is worth bearing this in mind; and always during rewrites, seeing if there is anything you can lop off without compromising any clarity.

Perhaps I should say a word here about indirect or as it is also called 'reported' speech. And that word says it all. 'Reported' means 'told' not 'shown'. Indirect speech is always more laid back and static than direct, even when it is part of the ongoing narrative. So which you choose to use is dictated by the reading pace you are aiming for. If for instance you want to slow down the action dramatically, perhaps to introduce a new speculation, realization, or change in the background, then you could do it by switching to indirect speech. More common is starting with indirect speech during the setting of a scene and then switching to direct as the action hots up. Switching from one to the other at random or for no good reason, is of course a no no.

## NO NOs

Which brings me to what is hopefully a helpful list of other (almost invariable)no nos. First and foremost NEVER use more than one speech tag per speech.

Fred said " well I don't think so, do you?" while looking up at her. It should be: Looking up at her, Fred said...

Dr.

Mary ran to the hatch, shouting down "The sails are coming loose." and more urgently "I need a hand here. Can anyone hear me?".

Extra tags are always horribly clunky and this really dumps the urgency it is supposed to be showing.

Much simpler and more effective is an improvement to the speech itself:-

> ... shouting down "The sails are coming loose. I need a hand here... Now! Can anyone hear me?"

Your tags can be at the start in the middle or at the end of the speech, but never in two places at once. Another definite no-no is repetition of something that is already implicit in the speech itself;

"No! That's dreadful" said Fred, horrified.

Yes, I know, it is so easily done, and so frequently that we hardly notice it. But it really shouldn't be done at all, because it tends to make us rely on the tags rather than qetting the speech itself right, which it must always be remembered, is what it is all about. It is the speech which has to shine out, while the tags disappear into the background.











http://nearing-zero.net/

## CREATING BELIEVABLE CHARACTER

Emma Hemmings discusses how two books have helped her improve as a writer.

## THE PROBLEM

My characters were emotionless people who were plonked in ridiculous situations. Lused physical combat, even death, to put action into my stories. I did not explore my character's motivations properly which made them seem to get into fights for no reason. I chose events without stopping to ask why my characters would do that. All this forced me to explain their feelings to the reader, because the characters were not behaving naturally.

Stories I thought were excellent got negative reviews back. Feeling sorry for myself was not going to improve my writing. I needed to find out what I was doing wrong.

I found two books that helped me understand: Dynamic Characters by Nancy Kress and Creating Character Emotions by Ann Hood.

### BEYOND THE STEREOTYPE

I learned to create biographies for my characters. The princess. the bully, the idiots all had their hopes, fears, pasts and daily lives. I stopped telling my readers who my characters were. I let my readers find out what sort of person my character was through their actions and interactions with other characters.

My heroine encountered an burglar in her home who did not behave as she expected. Her fear at finding an intruder turned to a mixture of emotions when she realised that he might not be dangerous.

My villainess trapped the hero because she had evidence that her enemies were using him as a figurehead. She hoped the news

of his capture and torture would stop them plotting against her.

My hero caused an accident which he refused to admit to. He had to battle with his conscience before he could make amends.

## INCREDIBLE CHARACTERS

Battles in my fiction were there because they were cool. Erotic scenes were foisted on a character. I did not ask why?

I learned that the heroine did not need to tell her life's story to every stranger she met. Nor did I have to describe her or her surroundings in any detail. I could put that information in her biography and reveal it when it became relevant to the story.

## RIDICULOUS SITUATIONS

My hero had to rescue his colleague who was being held captive by the villain. The villain was laving a trap for the hero but the hero was under orders to carry out the rescue mission. His dream of being taken captive was his mind's way of dealing with his conflicting emotions.

My heroine regained her memory to discover that she was a spy. I foreshadowed the event by having her know things that only a secret agent would. In the build up to her regaining her memory I had her consider the possibility that she was a spy and what it meant to her.

### ANNOYING EXTRAS

Minor characters were there without purpose. They had less of a role but I realised that it was still important for me to ask what their motivations were. Understanding their purpose helped me decide how to use them. The villainess' captives were politicians involved in the

destruction of her community. She brought in the heroine's brother to make sure they survived her tortures and told them why they were there while they were unconscious.

Nancy Kress

Emotions Dynamic haracters

## **FICTION Vs. REAL LIFE**

In real life apparently healthy people do die suddenly and dreams do prophesy future events. The danger of putting a real life person in fiction was that they can seem unreal to the reader. As a writer I had to give explanations for their actions. Why did a healthy person die?

Creating

your characters' true feelings

A lonely person was surrounded by friends but did not trust any of them enough to share his terrible secret. My character experienced happiness by appreciating a simple pleasure they had forgotten in their desire to become rich and famous. A heroine's quilt at letting her father die in hospital was described in terms of her belief that he should be allow to die at home and her realisation that he would receive better care in hospital.

When some characters showed fear others mask that fear with anger. How someone dealt with an emotional situation when they were tired was different to when they were rested. The emotion did not always come immediately. Where some people jumped for joy others took time to comprehend their changing situation and what that meant

## WRITING ABOUT WRITING

Martin McGrath on two very different volumes

There's a temptation, as a writer starting out, to look for books that will give answers. If you've been writing years and failing to get published or you are putting stories in front of writers' groups and getting back reviews from your fellow writers that don't seem to relate to how you see your own work, you simply want someone to tell you what's going wrong and how to do it right.

There are plenty of books out there that are willing to offer that kind of advice. Books, some of them by exceptionally successful authors, that will give you rules and structures and tips and tricks that will all make you "a better writer".

That sort of advice certainly has its market. And given the level of sales and the number of writers who swear by such volumes, there are many people out there who find them useful. My experience, however, has been that their advice has never stuck. Too often! feel as though these writers aren't so much telling me how to write like them and, no matter how much! admire them, that's not what! I want.

What I prefer are books that are enable me to think more clearly about my own writing - to give me an alternative perspective from which to critically assess my own work. The books that do this aren't necessarily those that are specifically about writing. Some of these books are novels some well-written, some not so well-written - other are works of fact that have nothing to do with writing (Arthur Koestler's Sleepwalkers, Bernard Crick's In Defence of Politics) but that make you look at the world you live in - and you writing - from a different viewpoint.

These two books didn't quite shake my world to that degree, but the interest they offer those who want to write comes from exactly this ability to make you look critically at your own writing.

Christopher Priest's Ersatz Wines is an unusual book - the first part is an autobiographical essay in which the author reflects on his youth, looking for clues to his development as a writer. Priest's schooldays and his early career in (of all things) accountancy seem to offers little hint of how he went on to become one of the most literary of speculative fiction writers. Except, of course, that there is always that sense of the outsider looking at the world from right angles, seeing things differently from everyone else, that characterizes the protagonists of so much of Priest's fiction.

The second part of Ersatz Wines contains twelve short stories – some of Priest's very earliest works – many of which have not even been published before, let alone collected. These stories are accompanied by a fascinating commentaries by Priest as he attempts to critique his nown work.

Taken together the two parts of Ersatz Wines add up to a fascinating insight into the development of one of the UK genre's most consistently interesting authors, but they also offer the aspiring writer the opportunity to look at their own work in the same critical light - to look at their own history and judge how it has influenced their work. In the clear-eyed way Priest assesses his own early work he offers writers a perfect example of the necessity of being able to step back from their own work.



Where Priest's book is a personal insight into the development of a writer. David Langford's Limbo Files could hardly be more different - a selection of very public columns published in various Amstrad computer magazines between 1986 and 2002. The columns. which at least in principle were intended to deal with the life of a freelance writer working on an Amstrad PCW using the venerable Locoscript word processing package actually range widely across a vast range of topics.

Some of the information dealth with in the columns remains broadly relevant almost thirty years later we're still formatting manuscripts in the same style (although the keystrokes for setting margins in Locoscript are probably superfluous even for those in whom it stirs a certain nostalgia) - but like Frsatz Wines it isn't so much what Langford says in these columns that is most useful to the aspiring writer, but the way in which some of the columns will encourage authors to reflect on what they're writing and why

These columns are also full of the warmth, charm and wit that anyone familiar with Langford's work in other areas (Ansible, SFX or his own fiction) will immediately recognise. And will immediately recognise. And will makes Limbo Files, which might seem an esoteric, historical oddity of possible interest only to a narrow band of aging computer geeks, something more – something that could offer insight to all writers.

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