FOCUS

THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION MAGAZINE FOR WRITERS

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Dev Agarwal, Nina Allan, Chris Priest, Gareth L Powell and much more...

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FOCUS

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

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SIT DOWN, SHUT UP AND WRITE

Martin McGrath has never had much time for airy-fairy notions of characters with their own life and stories that misbehave. So why is he writing a horror novel set in World War One? Because. Alright? Just because.

You may have been in a writing group or read some book of advice on writing when someone said something along the lines of: "I had planned to do one thing but my character wouldn't let me and I ended up doing something quite different." Or they said: "the story just demanded to be told this way, I didn't have any control."

In the past my response to that, when I'm being polite, has been to mutter something uncomplimentary about the mental health of the writer concerned and wander off to find advice from someone a touch more sane.

I don't have much time for people who treat writing like hocus-pocus. Perhaps it's because I've spent most my writing life as a journalist – and therefore generally find easy inspiration in the onrushing howl of an impending deadline – but for me writing is mostly about craft. I'm not saying that words on paper can't become art, but there's nothing mystical about the job of getting words from your brain to the paper. You sit down, you have an idea, you type until you get a story and then you send it off and, maybe, somebody prints it.

Now for those of a more artistic bent this reductionism may seem shocking. However, I've been writing one thing or another for a pretty long time now and that simple statement of the mundane process of writing has always served me pretty well.

Sit down. Type a story. Send it off.

There is, I grant you, not much room for romance there and it is not a guarantee of success – I myself have a hard-drive full of stories I've sat down, typed up and sent off and had returned with more or less scornful rejections. But then I did say I was trying to define what it was to be a writer and not what it is to be an author – those two things can be quite different.

Not all writers will be authors (but, by the same token, in these days of celebrity dominated book charts, not all authors will be writers).

Sorry, I'm getting sidetracked.

As I was saying, my view of writing has always been fundamentally materialist.

Writers decide what to write. Stories appear. Characters do what they're told.

None of which explains how, as a science fiction writer, I suddenly find myself almost one quarter of the way through writing a horror novel.

Earlier this year I was working on a science fiction novel and had a clutch of science fiction short-stories underway. Then I had a computing disaster. Despite what I considered a careful, not to say slightly paranoid, back-up regime and frantic, expensive, attempts at data recovery I lost six months work on the novel. And though I eventually rescued most of the short stories (mostly because I forgot to recycle some manuscripts I'd printed out to edit (god bless old-fashioned data storage methods!) I spent several weeks in a deep, deep funk about what I'd lost.

When I recovered I determined to start again. But each time I looked at the notes for the novel I had been writing I'd remember what I'd lost and, frankly, I didn't have the heart to do it all again. I spent about six weeks banging my head against a brick wall, becoming more and more frustrated.

Then one night I had an idea, which I immediately dismissed for at least two good reasons

First, I don't write horror. Well, I say that, but I have written a bit of horror. There's one of my stories coming up in a future *Albedo One* which I suppose you'd have to call horror or dark fantasy or something. And quite a few of the flash fiction pieces that I used to put up on my blog are horror-tinged. But I don't think of myself as a horror writer. I don't want to be a horror writer. I want to write sf.

Second, I don't want to write historical fiction. I mean I've written stories set in the past. I had "Palaces of Force" in *Aeon SF* set in the 1890s and one of my new stories is partly set in ancient Greece. But this idea is set in World War One and I want to write about the bleeding edge, you know, the day after tomorrow.

And yet the idea would not go away. Worse, it's formed itself into chapters in my head. Little bits of prose started leaking onto my notebook. Characters were starting to take shape. Worse, characters were starting to tell me their stories. An arc was forming.

I humoured the story. I wrote down a chapter-by-chapter outline of what it might look like, partly to satisfy myself that I had no real interest in telling this story and partly because I might as well, after all I wasn't writing anything else.

I looked at it.

It was preposterous.

It had monsters in it.

I couldn't write this.

But, twenty thousand words later, it turns out I could.

Disturbingly, twenty thousand words later, it turns out I might not have any choice but to finish it.

So this story came along and it demanded to be told this way, I didn't have any control. And I wanted to do something different but there were these characters who demanded that I do this instead.

You have my permission to mutter something uncomplimentary about my mental health and bugger off to find better advice from someone who has a clue what they're talking about.

YOUR ARTICLE NOT HERE?

I recently suffered a major computer disaster. I know I lost some articles people had submitted for *Focus* (along with their contact details).

If you're one of those people, please accept my apologies and get in touch.

If your article isn't here because you're just to lazy to have written it yet, get a bloody move on.

The next deadline for *Focus* is

SEPTEMBER 3, 2010

Don't be late!

WHAT DOES HAPPEN NEXT?

For most aspiring writers the dream goes as far as holding your first book in your hand. But then what? Elastic Press published **Gareth L Powell's** first short story collection, *The Last Reef*, in August 2008. Focus asked him to look back at the process of releasing the book, and the lessons he learned.

Seeing my first book in print, actually holding it in my hands, was an exhilarating and terrifying experience. On the one hand, it marked the fulfilment of a life-long ambition; but on the other, it meant that the stories in the book were now fixed. I couldn't fiddle with them anymore. Now they were out of my hands and had to stand or fall on their own merits.

I knew they were strong stories. Most of them had already seen publication in various places, including *Interzone*, but still I was apprehensive. I had the support of the publisher, Andrew Hook, and the good reputation he'd built for Elastic Press over the years, so I knew people would take the book seriously – but what if no-one liked it?

The book launch took place in the Citte of Yorke, an olde worlde pub in Holborn, a few short steps from the Chancery Lane tube station in London. It was a joint launch, as Chris Beckett was also debuting his collection, *The Turing Test*, which has since gone on to win the Edge Hill Prize.

The front bar was almost empty when I arrived, and I immediately started to fret that we wouldn't pull a crowd. I needn't have worried. It was a warm but wet Saturday afternoon and soon people were packing the place. Chris and I took turns reading excerpts from our books, and then we held a joint Q&A session. I sold around 20 copies of my book. The crowd were good natured and all-in-all, it was a very pleasant afternoon.

What I Learned:

1. Be approachable. Don't hide away at the bar with a clique of followers. Shake hands with everyone. Make eye contact and listen to everything people say to you. Don't force yourself on people, but if they've taken the trouble to come out and attend your event, do them the courtesy of showing them that you're pleased they are there.

2. When signing books, ask what they'd like you to write. Some book collectors just want a simple signature; other readers are delighted by a personal or quirky message. To avoid disappointment, ask them up front.

3. Dress comfortably. Wear something appropriate. I wore a suit because I find that wearing a suit gives me confidence. However, it was hot in the bar and by the end of the afternoon, I was wishing I'd worn a t-shirt. Find a balance between comfort, confidence and clothes that reflect the image you want to project.

4. When reading excerpts from your book, look at your audience as much as possible. Catch a few eyes. Speak loudly and vary your tone. If you need to, don't be afraid to stop and take a drink. If you're relaxed and having fun, chances are the audience will be too.

#

Over the next few weeks, reviews of *The Last Reef* started to appear online, and luckily most were positive. On the back of them, I did interviews with *Interzone*, *SF Crowsnest*, and *Concept Sci-fi*. Photos of the launch appeared on Facebook, and within 12 months the book had almost sold out its initial print run, and was now available in both e-book and audio versions.

Looking back, there are a number of pitfalls awaiting the unwary first-time author. Listed here are five good pieces of advice to bear in mind when embarking on the publication of your first book:

1. Make sure you're working with a reputable publisher and find out exactly what they will do to promote your book, and what they won't. This includes (but is not limited to):
   - Sending press releases to local and genre publications and websites
   - Arranging book signings and interviews
   - Distributing advance review copies

2. Resist the temptation to respond to bad reviews, especially on a public forum. Remain dignified.

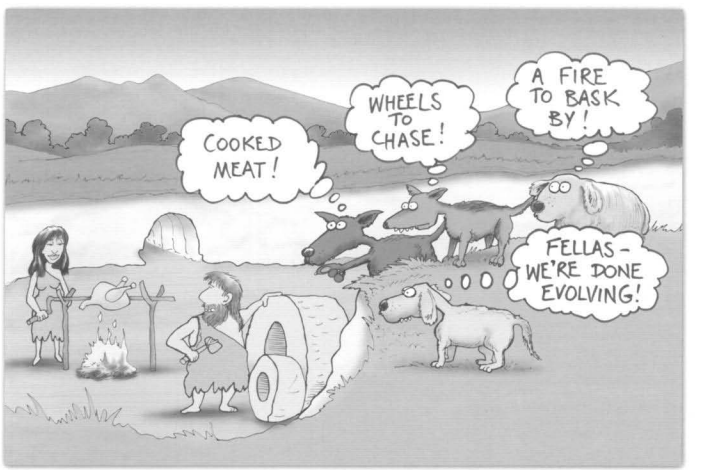
3. Place links on your website to places your book can be bought.

4. Maintain perspective. Don't start wearing black polo neck sweaters to the local pub and expect to be treated like a celebrity. Don't spend all your time monitoring your Amazon sales rank. Make time for your friends and family. Keep your feet on the ground.

5. Keep writing!

Biography

Gareth L Powell is a novelist and short story writer, and winner of the 2007 *Interzone* Readers' Poll. He is also a creative copywriter and proven marketing professional with a decade of hands-on experience across all aspects of marketing and communications, and a seasoned public speaker, having participated in a number of live and broadcast events including conventions, conferences, workshops, and the BBC Radio 4 Today Programme. His website features further tips for aspiring writers at: www.garethlpowell.com.



Forget the experts: domestication of the dog only took about 8 seconds.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

If you've got a comment on anything in *Focus*, write to Martin McGrath, 48 Spooners Drive, Park Street, St Albans, Herts AL2 2HL or email martin@martinmcgrath.net and mark your letter/emal as "for publication".

No writer can afford to be afraid of confrontation. Good authors are the conscience of society, and it is part of a writer's or artist's remit to shock; to hold a mirror to society, to point out the reforms that need to be undertaken. Mostly this is done very subtly, so that the readers don't notice. Nobody likes to be preached to. But sometimes it is done by the author apparently taking the 'evil' viewpoint and taking it to ridiculous extremes, or to extremes that he thinks must be obviously ridiculous. Unfortunately it is sometimes difficult to gauge the level of corruption in society and this approach can have the opposite effect to that intended!

I hope that it was Christopher Priests intention to shock, in the last issue of *Focus*; that he hoped that no one could let his statement that pornography "is essentially a good thing" go unchallenged.

Obviously there is nothing wrong with writing about sex, or as Priest puts it 'Erotica'. Explicit writing about two parties of any sex eagerly and lovingly engaged in the act is fine for adult consumption, if a little boring. BUT he equates Erotica with pornography and they are two entirely different things. Erotica, in writing, usually goes by the name of Purple Prose. In art it includes most images of naked women, and some modern ballet is explicitly erotic.

Pornography, as the word suggests is about sex where only one party is engaged in the act for pure enjoyment. There are cases where a prostitute is sufficiently highly sexed to enjoy her work most of the time, but many more do it just for the money, and a very high percentage of whores worldwide do it simply to stay alive, or even because they are forced. This makes pornography at best exploitative, (yes it can be said to exploit the men who pay for it.) and at worst hideously violent. Some entrepreneurs engaged in the business extend it increasingly nowadays to include Snuff. So, Pornography is not a subject to be played about with, by ignorant young writers. It should only be tackled by experienced writers, who are aware of the full horrors of it, and have something specific to say.

The first page of the last issue of *Focus* demonstrated how much good confrontation can do. It has sparked off an imprint dedicated to redressing the balance on the treatment of dark people in literature. Power to their elbow, but they've got such a long way to go! I saw *King Kong* on the box a few days ago. Incredibly good remake of a silly story, but even here the brown characters were always the first to be killed off, even though they had been very well drawn, and the 'loveable but expendable black guy' has been a bete noire stereotype since *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. We're not getting there fast enough are we?

Gillian Rooke

I thought it was about time I wrote in to congratulate you on the recent improvement to the quality and relevance of *Focus*. For the first time in a long, long time the little magazine that the BSFA frequently seems to forget is the first thing I open when my packages (irregularly) arrive.

I find Nina Allan and Dev Agarwal both invariably have something interesting to say about writing and being a writer (Ms. Allan's article on her notebooks and Mr. Agarwal's on his US Marine friend stand out particularly) and I was delighted to see that the last issue feature a column about the work of the Orbiter groups. As a long time BSFA member I've always felt this unique service that the BSFA provides for members should get more publicity.

But I have to say that it is Christopher Priest's Masterclass columns that really keep me coming back for more. I've always been a fan of Mr Priest's novels and have found each of the Masterclass articles really informative and helpful in my own writing. I really hope there's much more to come in this series.

My only complaint about the new *Focus* is that, while I realise that you've got a limited number of pages to play with, it would be nice to have more articles and more authors in each issue.

Name & address supplied.

I'm always looking for new articles and new voices, if you've got ideas, please get in touch. Martin

News from Orbit

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

OUT OF FANTASYCON

[Helping out in Area 51 at Fantasycon, I met Orbiters Sarah and Adrian for the first time. Little did they suspect... but asked to set down their first impressions of the con they kindly composed the following. Many thanks, both.]

If you love Locke, spend your nights in Villjamur and want to fly like Comet, you could do worse than sharpen your sword and set out for FantasyCon in the fair city of Nottingham. FantasyCon is the annual event of the British Fantasy Society (BFS), and this year, as in recent years, was held at the Britannia Hotel. The event has run almost every year since the 1970s and sees a couple of hundred people attend.

It's not unusual for a newcomer to attend FantasyCon and wonder if it should be called HorrorCon, as many horror writers and fans attend. But while there are discussions on whether paranormal romance is killing horror as a genre and whether vampires should ever sparkle, there is also plenty to keep fantasy fans entertained.

This year included a lively panel on the David Gemmell legend, a fascinating talk by Sebastian Peake about his father, Mervyn Peake and interviews with Guests of Honour Gail Z Martin, Jasper Fforde and Brian Clemens. While the volume of panels may not compete with EasterCon, there's always something interesting on.

As well as the dual programme, there are author readings, signings and book launches, an amazing art show and a dealers' room with a fantastic array of books and magazines on offer. This year there was a magic show by the fabulous John Lenahan and a memorable spoof 'I'm sorry I haven't a clue' for those who were all panelled out.

You may find you miss a lot you'd planned to attend because of the legendary FantasyCon bar. Filled with a mix of fans and professionals it can be hard to find a seat, whether its 2 am or 10 am. It's easy to lose track of time - where else could you find people eager to talk about the differences between American and British Fantasy at midnight? And you never know who you might find yourself talking to next - conversations take on a quality of the surreal – that was? Really? Wow!

If you haven't been before all this might seem a little daunting, so the FantasyCon committee set up 'Area 51' for first timers to meet and break the ice. Visitors this year included Guest of Honour, Gail Z Martin who dropped by to say hello as it was her first FantasyCon too.

The highlight of the weekend is the BFS Awards. The preceding banquet has to be pre-booked and sold out long before the weekend, despite the perennial complaints about the quality of the hotel catering.

There's a real sense of occasion, like a night at the Oscars. It's quite a thrill to be there and hear star names read out, see the statuettes awarded and congratulate the winners – and then as the wine takes hold you can slip into cheerful dreams – one day – it could be you!

So whether you are writing Fantasy or Horror, or just enjoy reading those genres, FantasyCon is an excellent place to connect and make friends, network and make new contacts, discover new writers and find hidden gems you never knew existed.

RECENT SUCCESSES

Mark Connorton, Shouting at the Telly, in a non-fiction anthology from Faber.
Anna Kashina, novel *Ivan* and *Marya*, pub as an e-book in the USA by Drolleries Press.
Geoff Nelder, novel *Hot Air*, pub in Holland after winning an award there.
Gary Reynolds, No Vacancy, pub in *Morpheus Tales* magazine.
Nick Woods, Of Hearts and Monkeys, pub in *Postscripts* magazine.

Congratulations guys, take a bow, you've earned it.

Take a Breath?

In a recent 'crit' I lost track halfway through a sentence, re-read and realised it stretched for 73 words, thus breaking 2 good rules:

a. reading out loud is useful;
b. full stops mean take a breath.

While sentences do come in all shapes and sizes it's reasonable to remind ourselves: if we can't read one in a breath maybe we should look again?
PS. all this took... 73 words!

DEADLINES? Why Bother, It's Only Orbit

I've been lucky enough to sell a lot of articles. Even better, most of them were sold before I actually wrote them. I've only ever missed one deadline and guess what? That editor never asked me again even though I wrote for the same magazine later when another editor took over. So when I asked if people in one group were up to date recently, the following response from one Orbiter definitely had me cheering:

"This session my excuses are: major software release at work, holiday, bereavement, illness and a three year old who wants to be a pirate when he grows up. I'll still get my crits in by month-end!"

Frankly it's determination like this that editors and publishers expect, so using your Orbit rounds to build the habit is really an extra bonus. Anything less and your chances of success could well be 'dead' in the water, however good your writing.

HOW TO WRITE A PRESS RELEASE

If you're serious about selling the books you write, then sooner or later you're going to have to get some press coverage. Maybe you need to attract people to a book signing; maybe you've just signed a big publishing deal; or maybe you're releasing your self-published novel. Whatever your reason, the humble press release is still one of the best ways of attracting an editor's attention. **Gareth L Powell** offers some advice on getting yours taken seriously.

WHAT IS A PRESS RELEASE?

A press release is a short information piece that you have prepared and passed to the media in order that a journalist might use it as the basis of an article. Sometimes they may even reproduce the contents of the release verbatim. A good press release should be short. It should fit onto one or two typed pages.

In this article, I will guide you through the essential elements that go to make up a good press release.

1. At The Top

Firstly, start at the top left corner of the page and write "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE". This tells the editor that the story can be published straight away. Alternatively, if you want to delay the story until a specific date, write "FOR RELEASE ON DD/MM/YYYY", adding in your chosen day, month and year.

Below this, write your contact details: your name, phone number, email address and mobile. Make it as easy as possible for a journalist to get hold of you.

2. Headline

Next comes your headline, typed in bold. Combined with the first paragraph, it is possibly the most important part of the release, because if either fails to catch the editor's eye, the whole release will be discarded without being read.

The best press release headlines summarise the story. Ideally, they contain everything the editor needs to decide if the stories they describe are worth pursuing. Try to get as much information as possible into the fewest number of words. Think of the publication you're writing for and try to make it sound like one of their headlines.

For example, if your first novel's just been accepted by a small publisher, don't use the title of the book as the title of your release. It won't mean anything to the editor. Similarly, don't use you name unless you are one hundred per cent sure the editor (and the readers of the paper) will be familiar with it. Instead try to write something that is descriptive, has a human interest angle, and sums up the main thrust of the story. If you have an offer, such as a free e-book, put the offer in the headline.

I myself have successfully used headlines such as:

- Local Author Thrilled To Sign Twin Book Deals.
- Nine Stories Of Bristol's Far-Out Future.
- £1m Author To Join Local Fans At City's First Sci-fi Convention

3. Content

After the headline, the editor will move on to the first paragraph (or "Lead"). This should contain all the relevant information he or she needs to know. It should answer all the traditional questions associated with the story: who, what, why, where, when.

Start the first paragraph directly under the headline. Choose a font that is clear and easy to read, such as Garamond, Times New Roman, or Courier New. Don't be tempted to use a whacky font to make your release stand out. It won't work. A release written in Comic Sans or Rockwell Extra Bold is most likely to be tossed in the bin without being read.

Begin the first sentence with the dateline. This usually consists of the place and date the story happens, and is usually written in uppercase. The dateline is followed by a dash, and the remainder of the first sentence. As with the headline, try to fit as much information as possible into the first sentence. For instance:

> LONDON, 25/11/2009 – First-time author Lincoln Mendleblat will be signing copies of his new novel DIE ROBOT in the Oxford Street branch of Waterstones this coming Saturday.

Once the first paragraph is written (and it can be as short as that first sentence), the remainder of the release expands upon it, offering concise quotes from the people involved, further background detail, and anything else that is relevant to the story at hand.

Write using active, simple language. Don't overwrite. Resist the temptation to give your

life story. Stick to the matter at hand. Tell the editor exactly what they need to know, and then stop. Keep it straight-forward and informative.

4. End

At the end, don't forget to tell the reader how they can respond. If you are promoting an event, include the place, time, date, cost and duration of the event. If you are promoting a book, list a few of the main places where the book is available to buy. Mention that interested fans can find out more information on your website, and remember to include the address.

Finally, type the word "ENDS" underneath your last line. This lets the editor know that nothing's been lost and they have the whole release.

Sending It Out

Whole books have been written on the art of sending out and placing press releases. PR gurus build their careers from knowing how to do it, and I certainly don't have room here to teach you how to be a PR guru. However, I can offer a few hard-won tips:

- Make a database or spreadsheet containing the contact details of every publication in your field. Create filters so you can target the list by local or national circulation.
- Build up a database of names. Every time you have contact with someone from a publication, make a note of their name, job title, phone number and email address. By doing this, you'll slowly build up an address book of journalists and editors familiar with you and what you do, which you can use to target follow-up stories.
- If possible, always send your release to an individual, not a generic newsroom address or mailbox. There's less chance of it getting overlooked if it's addressed to a specific person.
- Follow the release with a polite phone call, checking whether it has been received and offering further information if required. Don't pester.
- Always be polite and professional. If you're annoying, you won't get written about – certainly not in favourable terms. And who knows, the journalist you're talking to today might be editing the paper in a couple of years, so it pays to make a good impression.

As touch, taste, sight, smell and hearing boarded the charter flight for Havana, Jim knew he had lost more than just good friends. In fact, he had finally lost his senses.

IS THIS THE REAL THING?

The BSFA Orbiter groups are great writing groups, but sometimes you want to look your fellow writers in the eye while you tell them you loved their work. The Cola Factory is a new, London-based writing group open to writers of speculative fiction. **Michaela Stanton** tells us about their plans..

The Cola Factory is a small and friendly speculative fiction (science fiction, fantasy and horror) writing group that meets every month in London. We give helpful and supportive critiques on short stories, novel chapters or articles that are focused on helping and empowering individual authors.

The group meets once a month usually on Tuesday in the middle of month (about every four weeks) we switched it from the end of the month because it was always the day before BSFA meeting and meant too much faffing in a week for me. I know, lame, but one of my members does attend the meeting and will be writing a blog piece on it for our new site to be launched at colafactory.resurrection-cola.com (currently in production). We meet in a pub usually in the Bank/Monument area of London and we often refer to the group affectionately as "Steak Club!" because one of the pubs we use (a Wetherspoons) has Steak Club on Tuesdays, but eating and drinking are optional and not required. The time is usually 6-9pm although we rarely start exactly at six.

Our goal is provide feedback on novel chapters, short stories or articles/reviews and we use the SFWA and Critters.org methods of critiquing. Constructive but caring with a view to helping each other improve our writing and obtaining our writing goals whatever they may be. We also have regular discussions on writing questions, publishing and writing techniques. Occasionally we have non-feedback, socialising only sessions just to meet and chat and get to know other writers. We're pretty new (under a year old),so things are still forming and we're finding our feet in terms of methodology. Eventually I would like to have some guest authors come and speak to the group and do Q&A sessions and possible down the line look at workshopping.

This is a cola factory (in Las Vegas, actually) but it is not, of course, *the* Cola Factory being discussed in this article – which, it goes without saying, has no link to any internationally famous brand of soft drink maker. Okay? Good!

Recently we've embarked on a scheme to do reviews, interviews and blog posts on writing, networking and the industry in general (to be launched at the site mentioned above). Members are not required to participate in these extra activities. It is only encouraged as a way to improve one's skills and profile.

Some of our members are published, some are not, some are a little more polished than others. This isn't a group for someone who hasn't written anything before, however, I try and operate an open door policy to encourage writers out of their bedrooms and into getting feedback and networking with other writers and genre enthusiasts.

The only criteria are that you must be committed to writing, writing regularly and have had some experience writing. You must be willing to submit work occasionally for critique, willing to follow our critique guidelines and provide critiques for other group members. You do not need to be published but you do need to have a basic understanding of fiction writing techniques and a rudimentary grasp of grammar and punctuation. We also recommend that you be a regular reader whether that be of genre fiction or otherwise as it's beneficial to any writer. So, if you've been writing on your own and crave feedback and the company of other writers then come to one of our meetings and see if it is for you.

Our group is not only committed to supporting one another to grow as writers and help each other fulfil our individual goals, we also endeavour to network within the genre community. We do this through reviewing genre fiction, interviewing published authors or publishers and agents and attending workshops and events. Although members can, of course, choose how much they want to do. There are no obligations.

If you are interested in joining us, please see our page at http://resurrection-cola.com/?page_id=189

Or you can join the Facebook group http://www.facebook.com//group.php?gid=87747987804

You can also follow us on Twitter at http://twitter.com/ColaFactoryUK

Christopher Priest's MASTERCLASS

No. 6: Research (Part one)

The essence of fiction may be invention but unless you get the facts right about the bits that are real then no one is going to believe in the bits that that you've invented. So research, the process of checking your facts is crucial for writing successful fiction. The coming of the internet has made research quick, convenient and open to almost everyone. But should we believe everything we read online?

The essence of fiction is invention; the essence of fantastic fiction must therefore be wild or uninhibited invention. Why then is there any need to research your material?

Because, in a phrase, you won't know what you're missing.

At its most basic level research is a matter of looking things up to make sure you are getting your facts right. Every time you look up the spelling of a word you are researching it. Whenever you check a date or a time, you are researching the past. More exact or detailed or focused research than that is just a matter of degree.

All fiction relies on a level of basic factual accuracy, because the reader has a clear idea of what that means and assumes it will apply to anything written. If the writer deviates from it, then either those assumed facts must be questioned or changed in some way that is inherent to the story, or else the writer is going to look silly. If it's revealed that the writer can't tell left from right, how much time is a reader going to spend on the wilder flights of fantasy?

Nor is research just a matter of facts. It is a kind of additional resource for a writer, providing first of all the reassurance that certain stated matters are as accurate as they can be or need to be for the purposes of your fiction, but on a much more subtle and unpredictable level good research can also provoke ideas and suggest possibilities that might not otherwise have occurred to you. This is serendipity, the phenomenon that all literary researchers come across at some time, often with the feeling that a coincidence has happened that is almost supernatural in its usefulness, uncannily close to the main concern, invaluably adding a whole new dimension.

So ... where and how to research?

#

Let's get straight to the internet, since that is probably at the forefront of your thoughts. Indeed, many people believe, or seem to believe, that the whole concept of looking things up has been defined forever by the internet. It has certainly speeded things up.

The only true thing that can ever be said about the internet is that anything you think or write about it will be out of date within a few days. I place this as a caveat for the future.

The existence of the internet, and especially the availability of powerful search engines like Google, has transformed the way writers can research their work. Some people indeed might be wondering what more there is to say on the subject, when a few seconds in Google will supply information on practically any subject under the sun. An overload of information, in fact. The range and extent of data is now incredible, and seems to grow every week. Certainly the extent of Google, the spread of information it offers, is staggering.

I just Googled "Martin McGrath" (using the quotation marks to force a search on the whole name), and it recorded 26,700 hits – presumably 26,700 web pages or blogs or databases where Martin's name is mentioned. Of course, it might or might not be *our* Martin McGrath. Statistically, most of the hits will be a reference to someone else. Or even something else.

An experienced internet user will therefore know that of that vast and uncheckable store nearly all references are irrelevant. Also beyond sensible reach. Who is ever going to spend as long it would take to look up each and every one of those hits? Even if it could be done, and you didn't go mad or die of boredom on the way, by the time you reached the last one Google would probably be reporting 267,000 hits

on the same name.

Google's software indexes the entire internet every day, and every day the internet is bigger.

The best you can hope for is to trace a fact of some kind: a particular publication, or something Martin wrote. With careful use of search criteria, Google will deliver facts with astonishing speed and, on the whole, reliability. But although facts are a part of literary research, they are not the whole thing, nor even a significant factor.

More facts can be traced with the several general encyclopedias and databases available online. Nearly all basic facts are to hand and quickly discoverable, and there is a multiplicity of specialist info too: films, books and music, of course, but also less obvious stuff like song lyrics, family trees, football scores, histories of regiments, recipes, book covers, Acts of Parliament, spare parts for cars, driver software, hot dates, philosophical arguments. As well as the databases, actual texts of printed books are already available to a certain extent and likely to become universally available very soon indeed.

All this is common knowledge, and commonly available, and indeed commonly accessed by just about everyone who has a computer.

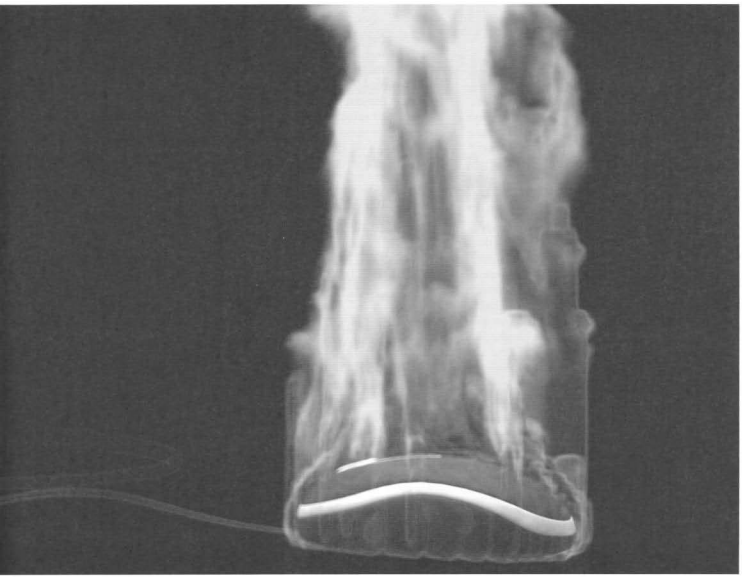
That's enough, isn't it? Why look further?

Just as there are lies, damned lies and statistics, so the internet has introduced a similar but entirely new descending hierarchy. Now there are facts, disputed facts, opinions, profoundly held ignorant beliefs ... and the right to call a complete stranger a Nazi.*

When the internet first started moving into the popular domain, it carried many facts and much information, but practically none of it could be trusted. It was almost entirely unchecked and unmonitored. Unprovenanced, in the jargon. People could post almost anything they liked, and it was there to be found, and if you were incautious enough you could use it and believe in it.

For some years I believed that the very nature of truth was being changed by the internet, because not only was it full of misleading facts, no one seemed to care. In the early days of the internet, people with dark motives realized that it was a perfect medium for spreading information

* Seekers after the truth will like to know that I looked up "lies, damned lies and statistics" on the internet. Wikipedia attributes it ultimately to Charles Wentworth Dilke, which of course we all knew already. However, The Phrase Finder declares it was first said by the celebrated Leonard H. Courtney. My dictionaries of quotations (i.e. books, including the Concise Oxford), do not list it, and indeed do not even mention Mr Dilke or Mr Courtney. Make of this what you will.



that few people would be able to check or amend. For instance (speaking of Nazis), a number of neo-Nazi groups were using the internet during the 1990s, firstly to make contact with each other, but latterly to spread their particular perverse version of history. Any incautious researcher into (say) the events of the Second World War and its aftermath, and seeking a specific subject for information about it, would have to be not only careful but already well informed.

As the internet has grown, this kind of malign activity is doubtless still present, but is now a much smaller part of the whole, and therefore less of a problem.

It provides a lesson, however: anyone seeking information or facts from the internet should treat whatever they find as a kind of first draft, a rough guide, something that must be cross-checked elsewhere.

The years have gone by and the fact-based websites are actually a lot better than they were – Wikipedia in particular has greatly improved, perhaps because as the knowledge base approaches comprehensiveness, then the irritating lapses and gaps are becoming less intrusive, and some of the contributors are catching up with the erroneous or incomplete entries. However, I repeat what I see as the important point in this: merely establishing facts is not the same as conducting literary research.

#

So what's the difference?

In a word, reading. In another word, experiencing.

There's not much substitute for getting out into the world and taking a focused look at a subject you're interested in. You might think you already know a place which you intend to describe, but a visit to the actual location with your work in mind will almost certainly reveal a new aspect to you: something that wasn't there before, something that's been removed or changed ... or even a different kind of weather, revealing a mood or an appearance you hadn't seen before. Always look for bookshops or even tourist shops when you're out and about on a research trip, because these often carry books of local interest from small publishers, books you would almost certainly never see elsewhere. Take photographs (you'll need a camera), make sketches (you'll need a talent).

But here's the problem: in fact you're not interested in dull stuff like landscape or local history. Instead, you're writing a much more imaginative and challenging series of novels about the discovery of supernatural magic on a planet of the star Antares, inhabited by cat people. A trip to Tuscany might be very nice, and even nicer if you can pretend to yourself and the taxman that it's a research trip for your next novel, but let's be practical. How

can experiencing a trip contribute anything to fantasy?

Well, taking my throwaway example as a start: you could do some research into cats. Maybe you have cats, know cats, love cats, have a shelf of books about cats, but have you ever interviewed a cat breeder? A veterinary surgeon? Someone who runs a refuge for lost, abandoned or feral cats? You never know what you might find out. Everything is useful. What about the star Antares? Do you know everything about that? Might be some surprises if you take a closer interest. And supernatural magic: are you up to speed on that? Plenty of books around, and a huge number of (say) Wiccans. Ideas and backgrounds are always enriched and developed by investigation.

You can certainly type *cats* or *Wicca* or *Antares* into Google or Wikipedia, and you'll doubtless find much stuff you can download or cross-reference, but there really is no substitute for thinking about your material from a different sort of factual direction, then investigating it with your writing in mind, and finally doing something about it.

As for reading, this should go without saying to anyone who is, or aspires to be, a writer.

Books are our lifeblood, and although I think it would be wrong to suppose that new fiction could and should be written only from the knowledge gleaned from other books, we have in the existing literature such a fund of knowledge, information, facts, opinions, discussion, revelation, and so on, that we would be foolish to ignore it. Remember that unlike most websites, including the famous online encyclopedias, most books have been through a fairly ruthless process of editing, fact-checking and copy-editing. Academic and scientific books are often peer-reviewed before publication. This doesn't make a book *better*, but it does mean it is probably more factually reliable.

Therefore, when researching a specific subject, get the best book you can find: a standard work, one which has been around for a while, survived its reviews, remains in print, is the book the others refer to. Then obtain a few others, perhaps some that dissent from the views of the first book, or have revised its assertions, and read them all. You will often find that the secondary books, perhaps in general reckoned to be a bit dubious in reliability on the particular subject, will offer some interesting or stimulating insights not to be found in the standard work ... but you must read the standard work too.

"For general inspiration, develop an 'accidental' approach to books: if you see a book in a shop or a library that somehow appeals to you, pick it up on whim, keep it (if you bought it), leave it on your shelf, even for years at a time. You never know when this stuff will come in handy."

For general inspiration, develop an 'accidental' approach to books: if you see a book in a shop or a library that somehow appeals to you, pick it up on whim, keep it (if you bought it), leave it on your shelf, even for years at a time. You never know when this stuff will come in handy.

For another thing, there is the weird phenomenon of Book Osmosis, familiar to many long-term hoarders of books: if you have a book on your shelf long enough, and you glance at it from time to time (even if you just glance at the spine), you will find after a few years that you have a strong feeling that you know a great deal about it.

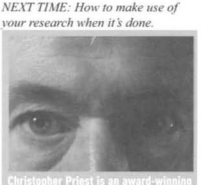
As it goes without saying, I shall say no more on books, except this (returning briefly to the subject of the internet):

Because an increasing number of 'texts' are becoming available online, there is a constant temptation to search around on the internet, following one link after another, perhaps eventually coming across a long text that can be read, just like a book. What's the difference? It's my experience that acquiring texts on the internet (even when legally posted, which many are not) encourages a 'cut and paste' mentality, the belief that bits might be useful or quotable or just too good to miss. But that process means they become used or remembered at the expense of everything else, in particular the context which the writer has carefully prepared and which cut and paste destroys at a stroke. Behind this is the fact, not always admitted, that many people find it vexing or tiring to read text on an electronic screen, and that the best efforts of Amazon, Apple, etc., aside, there really is not yet a genuine replacement for the word printed in black ink on good paper.

Future readers: note the caveat above, about going out of date..

Finally, there is a reason for undertaking literary research that some might dismiss as sentimental. However, I believe it to be inescapable. A deep and deepening interest in books enhances what it is we as writers are doing. Whatever else we might say or claim, and for all the self-serving pyrotechnics and boastfulness of some of our fellows (about performance art, or social engineering, or thrusting our egos naked, as it were, into the world), we are at heart involved in the relatively quiet, relatively harmless, relatively useful business of putting words together for the amusement or enlightenment of others. A general sense of immersion in books simply encourages more of the same, and is therefore to be encouraged.

NEXT TIME: How to make use of your research when it's done.



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

POEMS FROM THE STARS

ALSO, GREATNESS AS ITS OWN MEMORIAL
by Steve Sneyd

promise as came hero saved us now
is old lies raging can't have solids
let alone leave go Home before dies
this will have that moon up there his
own for tomb memorial will go be taken
there all honour soon as time comes
never sure afterwards didn't tell him
or perhaps pretended to selves only
old colonists' tale not really true
who of us this generation too mature
to waste time in space ever seen with
own eyes even been up there that moon
is where skylizards go to shed old tails
vast left loose lash round that surface
forever everywhere will soon as body's
sent down smash all box wood or stone
hero flesh bent old hero bone into
dust fly round bits forever as can't
have solids there if story true or
maybe any how such hero maybe even
dead will stare down skybeast offsheds
be left alone remain cure moon too for us

COMING READY OR NOT
by Steve Sneyd

so many light-years
following a signal not meant for us
odds against whatever to the n
got there just in time
in time to see both worlds go up
must've had mutual assured destruction
in spades much bigger
whateverkind of bombs than us
Yerkyn calls self ship's
archivist keeps encoded
diaries every time you sneeze you think
noting down historic first sneeze
this far from Earth
clearly reckoned should say
something appropriate watching
as ship rocked in irregularities of
forces radiating out from
two dead worlds at once
said so actorish "an
unknown murdered by an unknown"
couldn't
even leave it there had to explain
thinks rest of us are too slow
to know anything "said in the
Kaspar Hauser case of course"
Captain said we should stay around
look for any sign anyone of whoever
they were had escaped
Gurman muttered in my ear
"he's on the lookout for any
loose loot flying about"
thinks everyone
just like himself
me as I tried to sleep
when sleep rota time came I wondered
did they know they couldn't
keep their hands off each other
those two worlds those twins so close
did they know long ago how it would end
send the signal out
a crazy hope there'd be witnesses
about which as it happened they were right
something human about them
not wanting to have their dying
unmarked unknown and for an instant
didn't want quite so much that nosy
peeping Yerkyn in his tomb
he at least was taking all this down
was epitaphing them

AT XANADU REDOMED
by Steve Sneyd

in thirteenth lunar
month of thirteenth
decade of thirteenth
New China century
completed ready
first place in
central core high-
daised Empire
Master then around
range far as eye one
million to serve
hereafter seal
replacing sand ice
fire burn all trace
lest any ever dare
disturb within
android army robot
ruler will watch
eternal over
their obsequious
antics without
care changeover
to new model needful
now bored with
forever rulers
even Heaven-holder
shortlifes grow
how cheap to amuse
with mystery with
wonder job done
can return to
true cold pleasure
watching planetwide
Gobi Desert grow

A SONNET TO THE FUTURE OF SPAM
by Edward Kenna

My ai wakes and the interface sighs
Your longed for name into my eager ear.
I blink away the Net, dismiss its lies,
Give up all my bandwidth so you appear
Intense and smooth, perfect simulacrum
Of the body my avatar worships
And I know that I will always succumb
To each demand you render with those lips.
I'd kiss them softly if you once turned on
Tactile feedback, but you again demur
And bid me listen to the EULA drawn
Through fibre optic cables as you purr.
With special offers, cut prices, you flirt,
My beautiful, interactive advert.

SEND ME POETRY – OR ELSE!

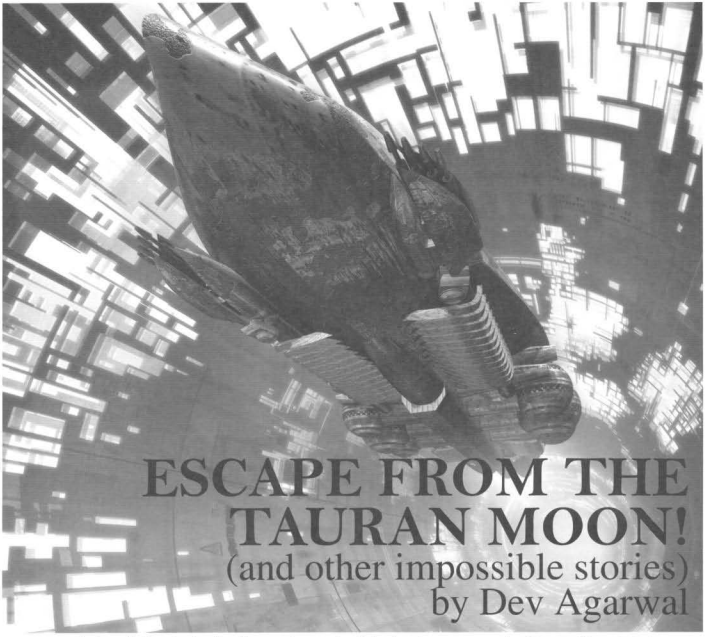
My wife begged me not to do it, but things have got despearte. I want to keep poems in *Focus* because so few people publish sf poetry, but if I can't get more submissions, we'll have to stop. So, as a warning, here's a sample of what you might get if I don't get some new writers:

Is there anything that rhymes with poem?
The hapless editor said,
That'll sound less forced than jeraboam
He typed while shaking his head

I always need stuff to fill this space,
And I'm certainly not a poet
Too true! cried the readers, red of face
We've read what you write and we know it!

So if you rhyme and think it is possible
You surpass in terms of fine verse
The lines I've written, my doggerel
Send your work and I'll print it of course.

And if you think that's bad, wait till I start on the stuff I wrote as a teenager! The address is at the front of the magazine - get writing!



ESCAPE FROM THE TAURAN MOON!

(and other impossible stories)

by Dev Agarwal

I've been thinking of a story idea. It begins against the backdrop of a huge grinding war. Competing ideologies are thrown against each other in a battle for annihilation; humans versus aliens.

The protagonist, Mike, is a pilot in a single person fighter when we meet him (like an x-wing or a viper). He crashes and is badly injured. He's deep inside the front lines and knows that he will captured by the enemy. The enemy are aggressive and definitely *alien*, not just in appearance (such as numerous Bug Eyed Monsters from the pulps), but also in their ideology. The Taurans in Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War*, are one model.

This story is an opportunity to use Mike as an example of humanity pushed to extremes. The Taurans hate humanity and they hate fighter pilots in particular. Perhaps because pilots are the cutting-edge duellists of the conflict. Mike knows his punishment will be exceptionally harsh, so he swaps identities with a dead comrade. As far as his enemy knows, he's a foot soldier with limited education or training.

That makes Mike ideal for slave labour, which is a step up from being killed. Now he has to survive the privations of slavery – and they'll be tough. This is akin to the slave pens that Gurney Halleck's sister went to in Frank Herbert's *Dune*.

He's put to work on a remote moon. The Taurans have built experimental weapons to attack humanity (shades of the Death Star from *Star Wars*). This is a classically grim place, with icy winds blowing over a desolate landscape. The moon is tactically important, and four thousand human slaves repair the surface to launch weapons from.

The humans die through starvation – the Taurans are indifferent to feeding them properly – or as they clear unexploded warheads left from human bombing runs. Those who try to escape -- and none of them succeed -- are killed by fierce creatures that the Taurans use to patrol their moon. These animals are of limited intelligence and very fierce, similar to the D-wolves in *God Emperor of Dune*. These are described by Herbert as having giant fangs and hunting in packs. In my story, a man who tries to run to a remote corner of the moon is torn to pieces by the creatures in front of the prisoners, an example to others who might attempt escape.

So far, the story's SF forebears are evident. When these earlier writers used these ideas they were unfamiliar and new. The challenge today is to make my version distinct and fresh. This can be done partly by flavour, but also by imagining the scene as vividly as possible. Don't skimp on the details -- if you do, you'll leave your reader unconvinced.

I can make this story more unique as follows: The Taurans' moon is a forward base. Mike, still a foot soldier so far as his fellow prisoners or guards know, has been caught late in the war. Human forces are on their way and the missile base will be overrun. This is both liberation and death. The base is too valuable for the Taurans to surrender, so the slaves will be killed.

Seeing that the Taurans are in a dangerous mood, Mike confronts his work gang of nine prisoners and announces that they must escape, from both the Tauran guards and the attack beasts. His squad decline. Escape to where? They're on a moon. Mike tells them, "I'll fly you out. We'll use the commander's personal spaceship." They scoff at him till he insists that not only is he a pilot but that he can even fly an alien ship.

One cold grim morning, they rise early and kill their guard -- a battle of wills as well as physical strength. The biggest man wears the Tauran uniform (which makes for a passing fit at a distance) and the others act like the work gang. The D-wolves have been removed temporarily for retraining to attack human landing craft.

The men walk a mile through the prison, past other gangs, and onboard the commander's personal ship. The camp hasn't risen yet, which is good, because their luck doesn't hold. The ship runs on a series of generators and an essential one -- perhaps a small nuclear battery -- is dead. (Hard SF authors like Charles Stross and Alistair Reynolds often reference nuclear power).

So the prisoners spend fifteen tense minutes finding a replacement generator, dragging it to the ship and replacing the power cell.

Morning arrives and the camp is now rising. Tauran guards watch Mike's gang. The humans have to taxi the commander's ship past them. Mike strips off his recognisable prison fatigues and sits bare-chested in the cockpit, appearing slightly less conspicuous. Shivering and scared, they wait as the ship moves into position.

They struggle with the controls and lurch into takeoff, with moments to spare -- as in all good drama. Mike struggles to work the controls. The equipment is in confusing glyphs. Mike's role is now, of course, critical and he fights his exhaustion to concentrate. He's so starved he lacks the physical weight to handle the ship.

The prisoners sing patriotic songs to lift their spirits. The ship battles the moon's gravity and they almost enter a fatal crash dive. Pulling up, they fly into orbit and on towards a human armada. What happens? The obvious dramatic step is that as they're flying an enemy ship and don't know how work its communications, they are attacked by their own side. This is a familiar enough trope, think of Starbuck in a Cylon raider in *Galactica*.

Mike crash lands and surrenders. His story, to human forces, is so incredible that he's suspected of being a fantasist, a liar or a spy. It turns out that the human forces have turned on themselves while fighting the war (shades of Alfred Bester's "Disappearing Act"). Earth is no longer led by democracies but by a single totalitarian war machine. Individual humans are expendable now and have lost their personal freedoms in their long fight with the Taurans.

As this has all been done before, it leans perilously close to cliché. It will take some work to make it distinct and unique. Mining primary source material is always a good way to make your story stand out. As I've described this idea, there are a lot of genre moments to negotiate round.

So alternatively, I could tell this story as straight historical fiction. This is because it is the verbatim account of Mikhail Petrovich Devyataev, a Soviet flyer in World War 2. Everything recounted above is based on fact. His story is incredible and if anything, I've paraphrased and reduced it here.

Devyataev was shot down in July 1944 after flying 200 sorties. He was badly burned and suffered a broken leg parachuting out of his Yak-7. After recovering in one POW camp, he was sent to another at Konigsberg. Aware that the Nazis hated Soviet pilots, he changed identities with a dead Red Army soldier.

In 1945 he was sent as slave labour to Peenemunde, a place that will be familiar to many SF readers. BSFA President Stephen Baxter previously wrote about the rocket programme there and Werner Von Braun's contribution to the birth of space travel. What is less well known is that Von Braun worked prisoners to death as slave labour. More people died building V1 and V2s than were hit by them in London. (The *V* refers to Vengeance. The Nazis concluded that they needed to *revenge* themselves on the allies).

No one escaped from Peenemunde and Max Hastings described the regime as "pitiless brutality." The camp's attack animals were specially trained dogs that were considered unstoppable. As the Red Army approached, the Nazis planned to evacuate the scientists, destroy the equipment and murder their inconvenient witnesses.

Devyataev's escape included stealing the commandant's personal Heinkel transport aircraft. The Russian prisoners knew they only had one chance, as killing a Nazi guard was a death sentence in itself. On boarding the aircraft, they found that the battery was flat and they had to wait an excruciating fifteen minutes to power it up.

The story is as I've described it, including the men singing the *Internationale* as they escaped, the German controls confusing Devyataev and the Heinkel almost stalling out. They were shot at by Soviet artillery as they approached their army. Devyataev crash-landed through frozen snow and the plane's undercarriage collapsed. Hastings describes the landing in *Armageddon* as "a jumbled mass of bodies were thrown into the cockpit by the impact."

I read this story last year and its possibilities as fiction leapt off the page. Its principal problem is that it's so amazing and so dramatic, who would believe it as fiction?

Linked to this is the belief that the twentieth century is well known to us, when in reality it still has many stories to tell us -- even about such well-documented events as the second world war. The relationship there between the Germans and the Soviets even lends itself to the perennial SF question of what it means to be human. That the Nazis and Stalinists didn't regard each other as human is well known (as in the German expression *untermensch*), but less well understood is how the totalitarian regimes reduced their own populations to disposable numbers in order to expand their empires.

Devyataev survived the crash and interrogation by Soviet secret police. Their conclusion was "what you claim to have done is completely impossible. This is obviously a German plot." After the war, he returned to Stalinist Russia, smeared as a traitor. Devyataev survived that too and after further long years of hardship was rehabilitated as a Hero of the Soviet Union.

His experience doesn't have to be just an anecdote from the past. It could be research. If you're open to research, stories like his come off the page and hand themselves to you. A maxim is that writers steal. Anything that isn't someone else's fiction is fair game -- memoirs, true life, scientific fact. And by drawing on them, fiction itself can keep moments like these alive. That's got to be a benefit to us all.

HERE BE EARTHWORMS: HARNESSING THE WRITER'S IMAGINATION

Nina Allan doesn't fear the Daleks but big green slugs have the power to terrify. What can a writer learn from the monsters that come to keep us awake all night?

"I lay in bed tense with anxiety and straining my ears for every extraneous sound, convinced that one of the giant green Wirrn larvae was crawling its way up the stairs towards me"

I was never all that frightened of Daleks. Not that I ever scorned an opportunity to watch them in action – from the time I first became aware of *Doctor Who* right up until, well *now*, I guess, I have scarcely missed a single episode, and for a fan whose first adventure was "The Green Death" in early 1973 that's quite some track record. It's simply that one man's monster is another man's tin can, and in spite of their blanket shoot to kill policy I always found the Daleks about as frightening as a bunch of maths teachers who had risen a little above their station. It occurred to me more recently, however, that one man's tin can might equally be another man's monster, and that was an idea that appealed to me very much. For those of us that are writers, identifying not just what scares us but what moves us, excites us, angers us will be of central importance in establishing what we choose to write about and in developing that elusive property which is a writer's most valuable asset: a personal voice.

I hadn't been a Whovian long before something came along that really did terrify me. There was an adventure called "The Ark in Space", about the invasion of a space station by giant space-going insects called the Wirrn, that scared me so badly I had sleepless nights over it. On the Saturday night after Episode Three was broadcast I lay in bed tense with anxiety and straining my ears for every extraneous sound, convinced that one of the giant green Wirrn larvae was crawling its way up the stairs towards me. I must have lain that way for at least an hour. In the end I called out for my mother. My pleas for help were answered a few moments later by the sound of her footsteps and then by her voice, calling out to me from the upstairs landing:

"Don't be so stupid! Go back to sleep."

No time for monsters, my mum, but no matter. She had given me what I wanted: not sympathy, but *proof*. My mother had passed through the hallway and up the stairs, and there had been nothing in her voice to suggest there was a giant green Wirrn larva lurking outside my room. Job done. I could sleep in peace.

But looking back on this episode now what I see is the unusual extent to which I was already in thrall to my imagination. Even at nine years old, my head was scathingly dismissing my fears as utter rubbish; of course there was no monster on the stairs. And yet even as I was agreeing with it, my heart, my nerve-endings, the hairs on the back of my neck were insisting that the thing was out there and it was coming to get me. I learned at a young age that imagination can defy logic, a valuable lesson for any writer, but most especially for a future writer of speculative fiction. When we write SF we are using our imagination to do precisely this and it is up to us to make a good job of it. In some sense we have a head start, because in selecting a work of SF from his shelf our reader has already shown us that he wants to have his disbelief suspended. But from that point onwards the fate of his faith in monsters lies in our hands.

Every writer will have his or her own personal picture gallery, a set of images and ideas that are especially resonant, symbolic or iconic, and it is these *leitmotifs*, in their recurrent and varying forms, that form the basis of a writer's emotional lexicon. Identifying our own core imagery is vital to us in harnessing our imagination, and these images can come from anywhere. Don't worry that your subject matter might not be 'big' enough, or 'important' enough; the point is to convey your own emotions, the positive or negative feelings surrounding whatever it is. If you do this with originality and insight you will carry your readers along.

In a story called "Eleven Orchid Street" by Alexander Lamb (recently published in *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet* Issue 24) the 'instruments of terror' are a broken toaster, a blackened plug socket, 'a pair of forks in the bottom of a bucket.' The story is so good it stirs in me the unhealthiest feelings of envy. It also illustrates perfectly and with dazzling originality how *anything* can be a source of mystery and dread, so long as the writer is committed to his material. If you don't believe me track down this story and be convinced.

Don't get sidetracked by the question of what scares other people. It's what gets to *you* that really

matters. Zombies may be very 'in' right now, but if they don't scare you or at least unnerve you they're no good to you as instruments of the imagination. I for one love a good zombie movie as much as the next person, but aside from a few iconic scenes in *Night of the Living Dead* zombies do not *scare* me at all. Similarly while watching Juan Antonio Bayona's recent and well-received movie *The Orphanage* I sat through all the scenes of masked children and creaking floorboards and crashing waves with arms folded and completely unmoved. The film had a taint of melodrama about it, and most of the material seemed disappointingly familiar. But the scene where ancient wallpaper is torn back to reveal dusty steps leading down into an infinite darkness produced in me a genuine *frisson* of terror, and that glimpse of a world-behind-a-world is with me still, not because it was inherently more frightening than anything that had gone before but because it tapped directly into my personal iconography of unease. There is nothing so ripe with potential as a locked door.

Most people don't need much prompting to come up with a whole host of objects, situations or ideas that fascinate or terrify them. But as writers we must go one stage further. It is not just the what but the why. What is it about the Victorian age that makes you want to set your next story there? Why, exactly, are you frightened of flying? Is it the close confines of the aeroplane, the fear that the plane might crash, or what might be waiting for you at the end of the journey? Why are you inexorably drawn to all books and films and television programmes that feature Dr Crippen? See yourself, for a while, as a character in one of your own stories. What motivates this person? *What is he trying to hide*?

Answering these questions will give everything you choose to write about a sharper focus. It will help lead you away from the dead zone of loose generalization – cliché, in other words – and into the fertile ground of the particular and personalized response, the quirky detailing, the insightful analysis that will always ring true with a reader and make your stories peculiarly your own.

It could also open the gateway to new ideas. Reading around a subject will inevitably stimulate your thoughts, fertilizing them, cross-pollinating them, perhaps revealing whole new areas of interest you never knew you had. In his essay "The Fear of Spiders" (collected in the volume *Other People's Trades*), Primo Levi draws not just on autobiography but biology, history, Greek mythology, showing in just a few short pages how close examination of a single idea can be expanded into an argument, a story, a meditation on the nature of man.

That essay is a touchstone for me, not just in its marvellous articulacy and kaleidoscopic verbal rendering of the process of thought, but in its vitality and of course most immediately in its subject matter. I am not frightened of spiders, but I have always been fascinated by them, and Levi's clarity-in-dread makes me shiver with excitement and recognition every time I read this piece of writing.

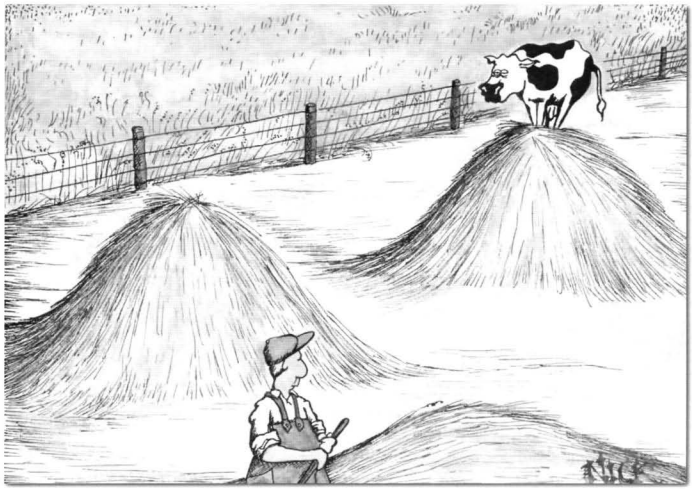
A number of years ago, when I was still living in Exeter, I attended a writers' seminar led by the novelist Monique Roffey. The subject was *Touchstones*, and each person that attended was invited to bring along a touchstone of their own and share it with the rest of the group. No definition of 'touchstone' was offered, and I was inspired and moved by the differing ways in which the word was interpreted. A glass paperweight, an antique fountain pen, a silver St Christopher, a bronze statuette of the Hindu god Shiva, an illustrated edition of *Frankenstein*, a cowrie shell, a postcard of Venice. One writer brought a photograph of her grandmother. Another showed us one of his wisdom teeth, extracted under anaesthetic when he was nineteen. There were also the literal touch-*stones*: beach pebbles, obsidian, pumice, quartz. In every case the thing that mattered was not the nature of the object itself, but the nature of its relationship to the person who had brought it, the stories they had to tell. Some people treated their objects as amulets, lucky mascots, things they could draw strength from physically; for most they were a wellspring of memories and ideas. Whatever the association they were sources of power.

As writers, most of us are stuck with the particular brand of talent that we were given. I might secretly dream of writing a fast-paced murder story set on board an interplanetary space vessel (now there's an idea) but most probably it's never going to happen because I do not instinctively think along those lines. For better or worse my stories tend to start life with people and objects as opposed to events or ideas. Rather than waste time fighting this it seems sensible to channel that energy into improving and strengthening what my guts are already telling me I should write. To find out what I know and do it better.

A good friend once said to me that what made my stories most satisfying for him was 'all the weird stuff' I was interested in. I treasure that remark, because it seems to confirm the belief I have that the most important thing for a writer is to be true to himself and his passions. Even if those passions happen to include such odd obsessions as peeling wallpaper, understairs cupboards and of course large insects.

One of Nina's stories featuring invertebrates, Microcosmos**, was recently published in *Interzone*. Another,** The Lammas Worm**, will shortly appear in *Strange Tales from Tartarus Volume Three*.**

Cambridge, 1953. Shortly before discovering the structure of DNA, Watson and Crick, depressed by their lack of progress, visit the local pub.



The physics of the situation had Jed confused. The cow had merely ambled onto the haystack, so was clearly ***not*** a lept-on. Yet at the same time, it clearly ***was*** a moo-on.

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