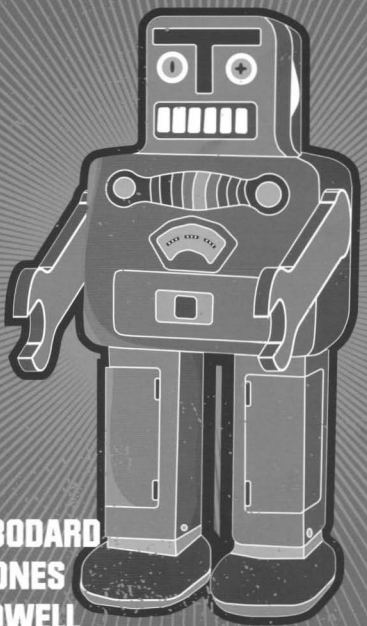
FOCUS

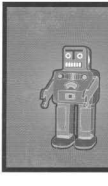
THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION MAGAZINE FOR WRITERS

Spring 2011 No. 56



INSIDE:
NINA ALLAN
ALIETTE DE BODARD
GARETH D JONES
GARETH L POWELL
CHRIS PRIEST
AND MUCH MORE...

CONTENTS



ARTWORK

Are you an artist – or do you know an artist – who produces sfnal artwork who would be interested in having their art featured on the cover of BSFA magazines. Send samples of your work (or links) to:

martin@martinmcgrath.net

Cover image: Retro Robot
© Roverto | Dreamstime.com

FOCUS

Editor: Martin McGrath
48 Spooners Drive, Park Street, St Albans, AL2 2HL
martin@martinmcgrath.net

With the assistance of Clive Anderson and Steve Grover

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.

ISSN: 0144-560X © BSFA 2011

British Science Fiction Association Ltd.

BSFA Website:	www.bsfa.co.uk
Registered in England and Wales.	
Company No. 921500	
Registered address:	61 Ivycroft Road, Warton, Tamworth, Staffordshire, B79 0JJ
President	Stephen Baxter
Vice President	Jon Courtenay Grimwood
Chair	Ian Whates chair@bsfa.co.uk
Treasurer	Martin Potts 61 Ivy Croft Road, Warton, Nr Tamworth, B79 0JJ **bsfatreasurer@gmail.com**
Membership Services	Peter Wilkinson Flat 4, Stratton Lodge, 79 Bulwer Road Barnet, Hertfordshire, EN5 5EU **bsfamembership@yahoo.co.uk**

MEMBERSHIP FEES

UK	£29 pa or (Unwaged - £20 pa).
Life membership	£500
Outside UK	£40
Joint/family membership	Add £2 to the above prices

Cheques (Sterling only) should be made payable to "BSFA Ltd" and sent to Peter Wilkinson at the address above or join via the BSFA website at www.bsfa.co.uk.

BSFA AWARDS

Administrator: Donna Scott
awards@bsfa.co.uk

ORBITER WRITING GROUPS

Online: Terry Jackman
terryjackman@mypostoffice.co.uk

Postal: Gillian Rooke
Southview, Pilgrims Lane, Chilham, Kent, CT4 8AB

ALSO PUBLISHED BY THE BSFA:

Vector
THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

Features, editorial & letters:	Shana Worthen **vector.editors@gmail.com**
Production	Martin McGrath **martin@martinmcgrath.net**
Book reviews:	Martin Lewis 14 Antony House, Pembury Place London, E5 8GZ
Blog:	www.vectoreditors.worldpress.com

REVIEWING: MY POSITION

Martin McGrath likes to get reviewed, even bad reviews, so he's looking forward to you all publishing something about this editorial and telling him why it all went so badly wrong. Just don't mention Steven Spielberg.

I always seek out reviews of the stuff I get published. I know there are people who say they never look at a review, but I don't really believe them. For me the point of writing is to tell stories to other people. Some people say they write only for themselves, not caring whether they're read or if their work is liked. But what's the point of that? If you're telling stories to yourself, keep them in your head – the special effects are better and you don't have to worry about the spelling. And how come so many of those people get published? If they're only writing for themselves, how do the publishers get hold of their manuscripts? Do Orbit or Angry Robot have teams of housebreakers and hackers going round pinching pages from winsome artistic types?

Nonsense. All writers who seek publication want to be read and getting reviewed is one of the few ways that an amateur author (like me) can ever be (reasonably) sure that anyone has bothered to plough through one of their stories.

Not only do I read reviews, I value them, even the ones that point out flaws or rip a story to shreds.

That's not to say a negative review isn't annoying, or even upsetting, but once the sting has passed there's usually something to be learned from the comments. As Aliette de Bodard points out (on page 8) there is an art to taking critiques, but I'm always of the opinion that any review is better than being ignored.

The old advice is that an author should never respond to a review – whether it is good or bad – but there are times when that can be difficult.

Usually it isn't the negative reviews that grate the most, but the bad ones. The ones where the reviewer clearly hasn't paid attention to your story, the ones where they patently get things wrong or just don't get what you're trying to do but are content to go ahead and give their opinions anyway.

In one review I received recently the reviewer said he didn't like the story because it reminded her too much of Steven Spielberg's recent film *War of the Worlds*.

I still have the bruise on my head where it impacted the desk, several times, after reading the review.

My problem?

It wasn't that she didn't like the story or that she compared my story to *War of the Worlds* – that was part of the point.

But she compared it to Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds*.

No!

HG Wells. H! G! Bloody! Wells!

As you can see, the review still rankles, a little, even after all this time. But here's the thing – even this review tells me something. Actually it tells me a couple of things.

First, never explain your story. Stories are a bit like jokes, if you have to tell someone why a joke is funny then either: (a) the joke wasn't funny to begin with; (b) you've made a mess of telling it; or (c) the person you're telling the joke to doesn't share your sense of humour and you're wasting your time. If all of the people who read your story stare blankly at the last page and ask "Huh?" then you probably need to take it back to the drawing board. But if most readers understand it, shrug off the outlier's comments and get on with your life.

Which leads me to the second point, don't obsess over it if not everyone likes or understands what you are trying to do. People react to things differently. There are people out there who prefer Billy Ray Cyrus to Bach – you can't legislate for these people and you probably can't change their minds. If you're aiming for the Bach crowd (or, for that matter, the Billy Ray Cyrus crowd) don't worry about what the other lot think – be grateful that there are some people who like what you're doing.

In the end you have to accept that, in putting your work out for public consumption, you are going to get criticised. **Suck it up.** Always remember that it's better to be read that to be ignored. Reviews, good and bad, are part of being a writer and if you're getting any reviews you're making progress because your story has escaped from your head, made it to paper and is being read by others.

But, really... Steven Spielberg?

AN APOLOGY

You may have noticed that there was only one issue of *Focus* last year. This was entirely the fault of the editor, who spent most of the last six months of 2010 with a boring but relatively debilitating illness.

BSFA publications are produced by volunteers, a fact that has strengths and weaknesses. One weakness is that there isn't always someone available to step in when there are problems.

I'm on the mend and *Focus* is back on schedule this year. We've also made this issue slightly longer than normal.

Thanks to the contributors for their patience and I hope you enjoy this and future issues.

We are always looking for material for *Focus*, so if you'd like to contribute please get in touch.

My email address is:

martin@martinmcgrath.net

THE WAY THROUGH THE WOODS

A WRITER'S GUIDE TO WRITERS' GUIDES by NINA ALLAN.

'.....while it is impossible to make a competent writer out of a bad writer, and while it is equally impossible to make a great writer out of a good one, it is possible, with lots of hard work, dedication and timely help, to make a good writer out of a merely competent one.'

Stephen King *On Writing*

'.....the one way to avoid what has already been done is to be true to yourself.'

Ramsey Campbell 'Avoiding What's Been Done to Death'

Whenever I find myself getting interested in something, my first instinct has always been to read about it. Not only to immerse myself in the facts, but to gain a sense of what other like minds might have to say about them. I can happily admit to owning almost a dozen books on spiders, and to being perfectly content to spend long periods of time studying the directory of south eastern network railway maps. I have amassed books on all kinds of subjects connected in one way or another with the things I like to write about. I have also collected a large number of books about writing itself.

I wrote from a very young age, but it was only when I took the decision to begin writing seriously, to dedicate my life to it, that I began to ask myself searching questions about how it was done. As a reader and as a student of literature I had dozens of opinions about those favourite writers who were my heroes and heroines, but I tended to believe that the *writing* was something I could already do. I had a facility with words, a sound grasp of English grammar and an instinctive knowledge of how to bring order to my ideas. I was soon to learn though that this was not the whole story.

I had to unlearn a lot. There is a strong trend in academic circles that seems actively hostile towards an anarchic, independent way of thinking, which is precisely what you should be cultivating if you're planning on becoming a writer. I was first panic stricken and then amused to discover that the rather formal kind of writing I had once excelled at was now useless to me and that I had to start more or less from scratch.

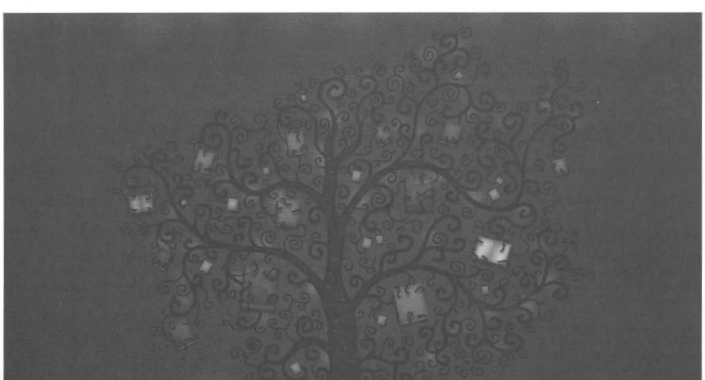
But where was the right place to start? Eager to begin at once, I spent my first weekend as a writer producing the first piece of original fiction I'd tried my hand at in almost a decade. (A story called *The Beachcomber*, later published in *Dark Horizons* in 2002.) It was very far from perfect, especially in its first draft, but it was *mine*, and the satisfaction and sheer rightness I found in completing it meant that this was a life-changing moment.

What I wanted to do next was *improve*. I began to read – I'd been a compulsive reader ever since I first learned the alphabet but my reading now was subtly different, *directed*, an ongoing tutorial with the masters I hoped to emulate. I questioned myself incessantly – why did a book work for me and what made me admire it? What made me *not*? – and being a list junkie I started keeping a personal journal of constantly evolving 'top tens.'

I also began acquiring a tall stack of writers' guides. I still find these enjoyable and interesting to read – the learning process is never over and if you think you've reached the stage where it is then you're probably dead – but in those first few years of practising the craft I was completely addicted to them. I read everything on the subject of writing I could lay my hands on. Although I knew from day one that I was going to be a writer of speculative fiction I didn't know at first that there were guides specifically tailored to this field, and so a lot of what I read at first was more general. I uncovered some gems along the way – Dorothea Brande's *On Becoming a Writer*, Margaret Atwood's *Negotiating with the Dead*, John Gardner's wonderfully acerbic *On Becoming a Novelist*, Christopher Booker's *The Seven Basic Plots* and a rather slimmer but completely delightful practical version of this by Peter Rubie called *The Elements of Storytelling* – but the turning point came when I realised there were writers' guides out there written, for so it seemed, precisely for *me*, by writers of science fiction, fantasy and horror. The fact that these books and these writers did not seek to justify themselves, that they took it for granted that ghosts, monsters, altered states and alien planets were not only suitable but necessary subjects for serious fiction was a huge relief; the fact that these people were willing to share their invaluable specialist knowledge was a genuine thrill.

I would never presume to tell anyone what they should or must read; writing should not be about prescription or proscription, but about the process of self-discovery. But it seemed an interesting and useful idea to highlight some of those writers' guides that I have found to be most enjoyable and thought-provoking. I know there'll be some I've left out, but as this essay is meant as a launch pad and not an info-dump that's something I guess we can live with.

For the new writer, someone taking their first steps in the field and feeling a bit apprehensive about it, I would wholeheartedly recommend Lisa Tuttle's book *How to Write Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Her guide has chapters on all the more 'basic' aspects of writing – character development, point of view, dialogue, description – but usefully and skilfully



© vladstudio.com

cants the whole endeavour towards the speculative end of fiction, with sections on world-building, 'rules of magic,' future language and naming your aliens, together with explanations of those specialist areas of fantasy and science fiction that might sometimes confuse the beginner: steampunk, cyberpunk, heroic fantasy, space opera and the fantasy epic. Invaluable though these insights are, what makes this book stand out is Tuttle's liberal use of her personal strategies and writerly experiences to illustrate and enliven the text. The book shows a thoroughgoing and lucid understanding of the story-writing process; the text is cleanly written and invigorating. The final chapter, 'The Story of a Story,' which follows the progress of one piece of fiction from original inception through to final publication is particularly satisfying, demonstrating as it does the arbitrariness, the mixture of luck and judgement that is present in the lives of all writers, even those that are widely published and well known. The advice that Tuttle gives is always sensible, sound, and above all encouraging:

> *Write. This is the most important thing a writer does. Maybe you're waiting for the big idea, something fantastically original, something with best-seller potential, a real classic. While there's no harm in aiming high, you'll never get anywhere if you insist that everything must be perfect before you begin. If you're not ready to start a novel, and none of your ideas seem 'original' enough for a short story, allow yourself to write purely as an exercise, about whatever comes to hand.*

A favourite format for writers' guides is that of the compendium, a single volume containing a selection of essays by a number of writers, each on a different aspect of the craft. *How to Write Tales of Horror, Fantasy and Science Fiction* edited by J. N. Williamson and including chapters by Ray Bradbury, Ramsey Campbell, Robert Bloch and Steve Rasnic Tem among others is one such book, and even though I notice it's twenty years old now it still feels fresh and exciting. One of the most interesting and often amusing things about a 'portmanteau' guide like this is that it often appears to give contradictory advice! Imagine a group of writers all sat around in the bar at EasterCon arguing about which of Ballard's catastrophe novels is the best or the conflicting merits of the Tarkovsky *Solaris* versus the Soderbergh and you'll get the idea. The sheer diversity of styles and personalities on offer in these chapters is fascinating in itself, and the whole serves to pass on a valuable lesson: there is no *right* way to do it, there is only *your* way.

Ray Bradbury's words on *his* way had a profound impact on me at the time I first read them and are a continuing practical inspiration:

> *I began to make lists of titles, to put down long lists of nouns. These lists were the provocations, finally, that caused my better self to surface. I was feeling my way towards something honest, hidden beneath the trapdoor on the top of my skull..... I began to run through those lists, pick a noun, and then sit down to write a long prose-poem-essay on it. Somewhere along on about the middle of the page, or perhaps on the second page, the prose poem would turn into a story. Which is to say that a character suddenly appeared and said, 'That's me'; or, 'That's an idea I like!' And the character would then finish the tale for me.*

I might add that for the list addict such as myself one of the abiding pleasures of this book is the section at the end in which the editors and contributors reveal their own science fiction, fantasy and horror 'top tens.' There is also a list of 'required reading,' necessarily limited by the publication date of the book but of value nonetheless.

Stephen King's *On Writing* is a book I have read from cover to cover several times already and will inevitably read

again just for the sheer pleasure of King's company and his inimitable authorial voice. Like his must-read study of twentieth century horror fiction and cinema *Danse Macabre* (and in this case I think I really do mean must-read), *On Writing* is styled very much in the chatty vernacular of the endnotes and introductions to King's short story collections and novels. He has the ability to make a gripping narrative out of anything, including this autobiographical study of how one writer was born and made, and as someone who believes that King is the world's greatest living storyteller it's always a joy to me simply to look and listen and try to see – in vain, in vain! – just how he does it.

The book is formed of three sections: an opening essay on how King first became a writer, a 'toolbox' in which he enumerates the new writer's most valuable assets, and the final third of the book, which gives practical advice in all aspects of storytelling, illustrated with numerous examples both from King's own works and those of others. There is also a postscript, recounting King's near-fatal encounter with a drunk driver, and how in the end it was his desire to return to work as much as the doctors that literally got him back on his feet.

As a writer, King's book was very important to me personally because it seemed to give me permission to make up stories in the way I chose. Other more cautious guides advised me to plot carefully before I started, to write chapter-by-chapter breakdowns of my novels, to work out the endings of my stories well in advance. All perfectly sound advice for some I'm sure, but the trouble is I've never been able to write like that. I have always set out with only the vaguest notion of where I'm going, and from then on it's a mixture of scribbled lines in my notebook and – simply writing the story. It sounds insane I know, and it is true that my hard drive is strewn with the carcases of stories that – thus far at least – will simply not reveal themselves to me in full. But still, it's the only way I seem able to work – and I was delighted and most of all relieved when I discovered that King's way of working is broadly the same as my own:

> *I believe plotting and the spontaneity of real creation aren't compatible. It's best that I be as clear about this as I can – I want you to understand that my basic belief about the making of stories is that they pretty much make themselves. The job of the writer is to give them a place to grow (and to transcribe them, of course). If you can see things this way (or at least try to) we can work together comfortably. If, on the other hand, you decide I'm crazy, that's fine. You won't be the first.*

If the master says it's OK, then why not? With its title taken from one of his short stories published in Michael Moorcock's seminal *New Worlds* magazine towards the end of the 1960s, Christopher Priest's book *Ersatz Wines* (reviewed in *Focus* 54) is as personal and insightful as Stephen King's, but if anything Priest goes even further and does something few writers would dare to do: he digs right to the back of his closet and lays before us his earliest manuscripts, some of them never before published, and all of them deeply revealing of those first struggles with becoming a professional writer that most prefer to keep comfortably buried.

With courage and humour and the rigorous insight that is one of his trademarks, Priest does not bury his youthful follies nor try to make excuses for them; instead he analyses the full texts one by one, and in a fascinating journey that takes us from his first completed story to the publication of the novella that immediately preceded his signing by Faber and his decision to go freelance, he demonstrates in the most proactive and original way how he made the transition from simply *wanting* to write to actually doing it, and doing it brilliantly.

It's a crucial point to make that what is lacking in most beginning writers is not talent, but sufficient desire. Many may think they have the desire to be writers, but what they actually have is an aspiration towards a certain lifestyle. When it comes to putting pen repeatedly and consistently to paper, to the years of sheer hard graft, the sacrifice, in effect, of the 'real' life for the life of the imagination, many perhaps understandably do not have the ambition. What Priest's prentice pieces show more than anything is the sheer persistent dogged determination involved, and equally how this discipline if adhered to will pay off.

In his long introductory essay Priest describes the moment when he 'decided to become a writer.'

> *One evening I made my epiphanic discovery about the writing of books. I suddenly realised that a book did not come spontaneously or mechanically into existence, like the product of an unseen industrial process. A book was the result of a comprehensible human activity: a writer sat down for hours on end, with pen and paper, or with typewriter, considered every sentence, every word, even every comma, making choices and decisions all the way. The story was made up, invented, told.*
>
> *I looked at the cover of the book I happened to be reading that evening. It was a paperback I had bought a few days earlier, the Digit Books edition of Brian Aldiss's Non-Stop, with its famous catchpenny cover painting and its sensational but misleading blurb. I saw it in a wholly different light: it had been made. A writer had written it. At that moment the die was cast. I too would be a writer. Nothing else would be good enough. It was within grasp, doable, achievable.*
>
> *It was March 1962. I was eighteen years old, and life had a point at last.*

It's a testament to his commitment and drive that once he had taken his decision Priest never deviated from it. This perhaps is the most valuable lesson of all.

READING LIST

Ed. Mort Castle *Writing Horror* Writer's Digest Books 1998 9780898797985

Ed. James Cooper *In Conversation: A Writer's Perspective* BFS Publications 2009 9780953868193

Chris Evans *Writing Science Fiction* A & C Black 1988 9780713630039

Ed. Niall Harrison and Paul Kincaid *British Science Fiction and Fantasy: Twenty Years, Two Surveys* Odd Two Out 2010 9780955866210

Christopher Kenworthy *Writing Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror* How To Books 1997 9781857034561

Stephen King *On Writing* New English Library 2001 9780340820469

Sarah LeFanu *Writing Fantasy Fiction* A & C Black 1996 9780713642605

Christopher Priest *Ersatz Wines* GrimGrin Studio 2008 9780955973543

Brian Stableford *Writing Fantasy and Science Fiction* Teach Yourself Books 1997 9780340701720

Lisa Tuttle *Writing Fantasy and Science Fiction* A & C Black 2005 9780713672442

Ed. J. N. Williamson *How to Write Tales of Horror, Fantasy and Science Fiction* Writer's Digest Books 1991 9780898794830

Nina Allan's story "Flying in the Face of God", first published in *Interzone*, has been shortlisted for this year's BSFA Awards.

News from Orbit

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

ORBITERS IN PRINT

Congratulations galore! It's been a while since we got to crow, but happily Editor Martin Mcgrath is now back on his feet and *Focus* back in your letterboxes. And here's proof that in its absence Orbiters have been anything but idle. In alphabetical order we have: [drum roll please]

James Bloomer won the James White Award with an Orbited short story: "Flock, Shoal, Herd". It was announced at the last AGM, to his complete surprise, and has now been published in *Interzone*.

Adrian Faulkner's short story "Jetsam" appeared in *New Horizons* and another story was selected by Mark Charon Newton's as part of his *Remix* project http://markcnewton.com

Rob Harkess has had the following short story publications: "Jack in a Box" in the *Escape Velocity* anthology; "Served Chilled" in *Quantum Muse*; "A Light Touch on the Neck" in *Abandoned Towers*; and "Black Rose" in the *Monk Punk* anthology, published by Static Movement.

Mark Iles has had short story "The Cult of Adam" published in Static Movement's *Monk Punk* anthology, "A Handful of Stars" in *Escape Velocity* and an article on writing published on the site www.profwriting.com

Anna Kashina's short story "The Hatchling" appeared in *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* and her novel, *First Sword*, has been published by Wildlife Press, USA [Yes, she Orbits from across the water].

Martin McGrath's "Proper Little Soldier" appeared in the anthology *Conflicts* from Newcon Press, his flash-fiction short story "Seven Swans A-Swimming" was included in *DarkFiction Magazine's Twelve Days of Christmas* anthology and "Eskragh" was published in *Albedo One* and received an honorable mention from Ellen Datlow in her *Year's Best Horror* round-up.

Geoff Nelder's short story "In Absentia" was the editor's pick at *thehorrorzine.com*, "The Examination" was in the *Queensland 100* anthology for flood relief, "Don't Bite My Finger" appeared in the *Monk Punk* anthology from Static Movement, his novel *Hot Air* was published by the Dutch WU Academy, "An Indefinite Article" appeared in Sounds of Night and there was an honorable mention for *Left Luggage* [opening chapters] in the Strong Scenes.

Rosie Oliver's article "Writer's Rant" was published in *The New Writer* along with her short story "Cold Pressure". Her short story "C.A.T." was published by TWB Press and "Thank You for the Music" was in the *Escape Velocity* anthology

Tim Taylor's short story "I Won the Earth Evacuation Lottery" appeared in the *Shoes, Ships and Cadavers* anthology, published by Newcon Press, and nominated for a BSFA award

Nick Wood's short story "Lunar Voices" won the *Accessible Futures* contest at redstonesciencefiction.com "Bridges" was printed in *Albedo One* having come second in the International Aeon Award contest.

And last , and yes, out of order, but by no means least, another Orbiter - **Terry Martin** - changed into his other hat - as Editor of *Murky Depths* magazine - and won the Best Magazine Award at Fantasycon 2010.

Well done all!

[Did I miss you? Did you tell me? Next time, remember to?]

ARE WE WATCHING YOU?

A member tells me he sold a short story but hasn't been paid for it, although some time has elapsed. I'm wondering: how about anyone who has the same or similar bad experience with a magazine or specific editor passes me the word too? I'm happy to name and shame alongside the other news?

RIGHT FROM THE START

A quote worth pinning on our notice boards?

> **"You can't win a publisher on the first page, but you can lose a reader."**
>
> Malcolm Edwards
> Editor of Orion.

WHO'S WHO?

Recently, a member sent me a website link called *I Write Like*, which purports to equate your writing style with a published author. Since I usually trust other Orbiters enough to use them I tried this one out. As she said it wasn't necessarily a serious experiment. some of you might like to try it too, for laughs anyway. Startlingly, it worked out that a sample of my writing was 'like' an author I don't like! Ouch. If you're brave enough you too can ruin your day, on http://iwl.me/ Just don't blame me!

Terry Jackman is the co-ordinator of the BSFA's online writers' workshops, the Orbiters. You can contact her at terryjackman@mypostoffice.co.uk.

HOW I TACKLE CRITIQUES

ALIETTE DE BODARD OFFERS SOME ADVICE ON ACCEPTING CRITICISM

When I started out, one of the dreaded moments for me wasn't the completion of the first draft, but the reception of critiques. If you've ever done this, you know how it goes: you've crafted a draft that's finally ready for public consumption; you submit it to a group of people who've volunteered to read it – and now you find yourself with anything from half a dozen to fifty different opinions on the story. How do you take those into account without destroying your story?

It's something I struggled with quite a bit, and I thought I'd present some of the things that I wish I'd known when I first started receiving feedback on my work. The usual disclaimer applies: since this is my personal experience not everything will fit in with your writing process – take what seems useful, throw away the rest.

In no particular order, the most useful lessons I learned are:

1. Don't try to take all the critiques into account. For me good writing is writing with passion about something that is interesting. It is writing with a message and a style that is uniquely mine. If I start trying to please everyone (which is simply impossible because everyone has different tastes), I'm writing by consensus – and consensus tends to dampen everything. Stories by consensus tend to become weak and toothless, in order not offend anyone. Think beige wallpaper as opposed to something with very large and colourful red camellias. The camellias aren't going to be to everyone's taste, but at least they'll be memorable.

2. Use enthusiastic readers carefully. If I happen to find someone who loves my story and makes comments about which bits didn't work for them, that's when I start taking careful notes. Generally, a person who liked the story is my target audience, they are someone who "gets" what I was saying: if they have comments to make, I should try to be more mindful of those than the average critique I receive and, if I want to ignore them altogether, I'd better have a very good reason for doing so.

3. If the same issue is raised in several critiques it will have to be addressed but how I address it is not always obvous. Something that seems very large (readers finding an important character unsympathetic, for example) might well end up being solved by very small or very localised changes (changing a scene, or even removing a couple of sentences that cement an impression of the character's personality in the reader's mind). Or, of course, Murphy's Law might dictate it has to be solved by lots of very small changes in lots of different places. The main point is that the "size" and relative importance of the issue probably has nothing to do with the amount of fixing it is going to require when I come to revise the text.

4. When readers disagree finding a solution can be difficult. It may be because something is unclear, equally it could be because different people have different sensibilities. I tend to err on the side of caution and try to figure out what made people want the changes in the story in the first place. If there's an easy fix that will let me to please both sides, I'll make it. If not, I usually ask for a trusted friend's opinion.

5. Be careful of over-revision (and also of over-workshopping). The more a story is workshopped, the the greater the danger of "writing by consensus", simply by integrating the advice of too many people at the same time. And there is the effect on the text at a micro level: Jay Lake pointed out that voice was the easiest thing to edit out of a manuscript, and to a certain extent I think that's true. Voice is something intangible, but I find it tends to come out most often when I'm writing large chunks of text without my inner editor's interference – i.e., when I'm not obsessing over every word (though I'll note that there are times when obsessing over every word is the right thing to do, especially in key moments of the story such as the first and last sentence, or places where I want to give a particular emotional punch). Too much revision and there's a risk that I'll end up writing for grammatical consensus rather for plot consensus – never a good thing.

6. How to spot a good critiquer? Again, this is highly personal: some people resonate better with me and what I'm trying to do; others, not so much. A good tactic, I've found, is to use the fact I'm a much better judge of how other people's work affects me than how my own work affects

others. Therefore, it's much easier to see which style and content of critique I agree with when reading someone else's critique of someone else's story. To see the "value" of a critique, I tend to pay particular attention to other critiques the person has given, and see if I broadly agree with their assessment. Of course, this is much easier in a workshop setting (where I can hear everyone's critiques), or in an online environment such as OWW (*see below*) – where I can read all the critiques of all the stories, and if necessary track down somebody's previous critiques.

7. Know what style of workshop is right: I'm the kind of person who would rather have few critiques, but from people whose tastes and aesthetics are close to mine, rather than have a flood of critiques from people with widely varied tastes. That's because I am never quite able to take my own advice in point one – I tend to think everyone has something valid to say about the story and that I should take it all into account, even if the critiquer has obviously not got the right sensitivity (someone who loves military SF, for instance, is seldom a good target for my SF stories, which tend to be low on action and high on emotions). On the other hand, I know quite a few people who prefer the flood of critiques, because they'd rather not be tied to a narrow sample. If you prefer the flood of critiques, you need a larger workshop (like critters or OWW); if you're more like me, you tend to build a circle of trusted beta-readers – but the important thing is knowing how much you can bear.

That's all I have, I hope it's helpful. If you want a more detailed overview on how to use critiques, may I advise you to check out my friend T.L. Morganfield's articles on the subject., which goes much more into the nitty-gritty of story revision.

A FEW LINKS:

Critters: www.critters.org

OWW: sff.onlinewritingworkshop.com

T.L. Morganfield's articles on how to use critiques http://tlmorganfield.com/using-critiques-part-one-first-things-first/

Aliette de Bodard is the author of the novels *Servant of the Underworld* and *Harbinger of the Storm*. Her short story, "The Shipmaker" is shortlisted for this year's BSFA Award.

SCREENPLAY BY SYD FIELD

REVIEWED BY ELLIOT SUMMERHAYES

I came across Syd Field's *Screenplay* earlier this year as part of my creative writing degree – specifically during a 'Writing Short Film' module - and there is simply no other book on Earth that I'd rather have had beside me during my first foray into writing for the screen medium. It is a book suited to both beginner and established writers and, though written with screenwriting firmly in mind, it also has much to contribute to the prose writer. If in some 'Desert Island' scenario I had ever to choose one 'how to' tome, it would likely be *Screenplay*.

Syd Field's name is one generally found at the head of any list of so-called screenwriting gurus and it's easy to see why – with testimonials for his books and seminars from the writers of *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Terms of Endearment* and many other award-winning box office hits.

As to the book itself, *Screenplay* was the first of a number of books to be written by Field on the subject of screenwriting and, though originally published over three decades ago the book has been revised and reprinted to keep up with shifting times and so remains relevant. Field discusses the standard topics, such as the nature of a screenplay, how it differs from prose and the various aspects that make up the whole: story, structure, character and so on. But the theme, that holds the book together, is what Field calls ***The Paradigm*** – every chapter of *Screenplay* refers to it and Field argues that it is crucial to the success of a Hollywood screenplay. ***The Paradigm*** is a specifically-proportioned plot structure and it is common to almost every successful Hollywood film ever made. An understanding of it could well shave years off any screenwriter's effort to write the *next big thing*. This insight, coupled with Field's nuggets of insider knowledge – what producers want, how to approach them, etc – makes the book almost invaluable to anyone interested in professional screenwriting

But the book also has much to offer the writer of prose. Early in the book, Field identifies the screenplay as a form that stands completely apart from the novel and this is quite true. In terms of how each is written, they are very different beasts. But the creative processes are similar enough in places that a number of the book's guidelines and exercises can be extrapolated for use by the prose writer. These are mostly concerned with story, plot and character construction and, though simple, they are quick and effective. To cite one example, Field recalls in *Screenplay*'s fifth chapter an exercise that he used with students of his 'creating a character' class at Sherwood Oaks Experimental College – a simple question/answer exercise that allowed them to construct an entire cast of characters, complete with individual backstories and relationships as well as a finished plot. All in under two hours. Simple, fast and effective.

I've talked at length regarding the knowledge and information contained in *Screenplay*, but that is not all that the book is. Field's attitude and approach are as valuable as any of the information he passes on. *Screenplay* dodges a common and infuriating pitfall of 'how-to' books by never making it's reader feel like a school child. It's written at an utterly adult level. When Field wants to make a point, he makes it in a succinct and memorable way – these points stick with a reader so he'll only rarely need to refer back to the actual book. And, for the academic, a succinct point is easily quoted. But crucially, it is Field's light-hearted, almost jovial, style and the anecdotes he plucks from his own career that serve the reader most, as they draw him in. The reading experience is a compelling one. *Screenplay* is not a chore to read – on the contrary, you may not want to put it down. I often hear it said that the key to learning is to make it fun and this is exactly what Field has done.

As should be apparent by now, this book made an impression on me. I now find it almost indispensable and I can't recommend it enough. *Screenplay* educates without ever feeling too didactic, it encourages the reader in all screenwriting endeavours and, above all, reading it from front to back is both effortless and enjoyable. In my mind, *Screenplay* is everything a how-to book should be and more.

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/email as "for publication".

IS IT SCIENCE FICTION OR NOT

I was intrigued by Dev Agarwal's article "Escape From The Tauran Moon" (*Focus* 55), but the revelation that the proposed story idea is based on an actual historical incident raises the old question: what, apart from the use of an offworld future war setting and the use of genre furniture, makes this story uniquely a sf story?

This goes back to the argument that a real sf story is one that could only be written and read as sf, and that the sf element is crucial to the plot rather than being layered on for novelty or effect. Having said that, I realise there are countless examples of classic adventure plots adapted as sf, from the 'pirates in space' of the pulp era to the borrowing of Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo* by both Alfie Bester and, more recently Gwyneth Jones in *Spirit*, but is borrowing and transplanting a piece of found research into a genre setting really all it takes to create a sf story, and if so, why are we so dismissive of mainstream writers who borrow generic furniture for their own use?

STEVE JEFFERY

DEV AGARWAL REPLIES:

I am pleased to read Steve Jeffery's letter and I feel he makes a number of salient points. He asks the question, what makes Devyataev's story uniquely SF? In this particular case, the response might be "nothing", or at more length, "nothing yet."

The article was a discussion about research, and about being receptive to story ideas when the opportunities arise to hear them. I therefore agree with Steve's central point that, depending on how the story is used, the premise could be adapted into any genre context. Turning to Steve's further point, that a real SF story has its sf element as crucial, that might be the challenge in working Devyataev's story into its final form. The original premise of it offers scope for exploring the psychology of our planet united, but pitted against an external threat, or exploring an alien psyche, or what our thinking might become under the pressures of space flight, war, or totalitarianism. Depending on the writer, these ideas might be either crucial SF elements or novelties.

Steve also poses the question as to whether transposing research into our genre creates an SF story by itself. The answer to that might also depend on your perspective as to what an SF story is. Is it definitely ***not*** *SF if the SF component* ***isn't*** *integral? Is it SF if a genre writer writes it? And is it still SF if the writer insists that it's not. All interesting questions that Steve throws up into the air.*

BOMB SCARE

Like Nina Allan ("Here be Earthworms", *Focus* 55) I never feared Daleks. I was, however, much impressed by another TV offering from many years ago. *The Road* by Nigel Kneale – not to be confused with the recent film of Cormac McCarthy's novel – was a play transmitted by BBC TV on September 29, 1963.

Produced by John Elliiott and directed by Christopher Morahan, *The Road* is set in rural England in 1770. Most of the action occurs in a wood which local people believe to be haunted. It is said that on a certain night each year – and this is the night – strange noises are heard. Local squire, Sir Timothy Hassall (James Maxwell), is interested in occult phenomena but a sophisticated visitor from London, Gideon Cobb (John Phillips), mocks Hassall's simple-minded notions. An apostle of the dawning Age of Reason, Cobb scorns any idea of ghosts and the supernatural. Science will sweep away such nonsense and bring humanity greater prosperity and happiness than it has ever known. Men like Hassall, grubbing around in folklore and superstition, are holding human progress and enlightenment back.

After dark Hassall, Cobb and a party including young Sam, who heard the noises the year before, Sam's girlfriend Tetsy and Cobb's wife Lavinia – move off to the woods for an all-night vigil. To Cobb, an Eighteenth Century Dawkins, the whole concept of a spirit world is nonsense; only science will save mankind. When Lavinia asks innocently: "All this, with steam?" he assures her that greater forces will be discovered. Ironically, as it turns out, he talks of "Forces that must exist to bind this universe and to quicken it... Man will find them in the end."

The party's interest is starting to wane when the first odd noises are noticed - short bleeps and blips of sound. Sam confirms that these are the sounds he heard a year ago. Then Tetsy is seized by terror. For a moment, she wails, she saw "no trees but a huge wide road, and things moving".

Cobb too is shocked and frightened. He mutters about a touch of dyspepsia, but Tetsy knows that the strident unbeliever has also seen the apparition.

The noises increase in volume and their nature becomes clear. They are the sounds of modern traffic, with its chorus of car horns. Then, in the background, sirens. Cobb now drops all pretence of disbelief. He stares across the clearing in the woods and cries, "Machines, Jethro, great machines! This can be nothing of the past."

A crunching pile-up is heard, followed by running footsteps on concrete and panicking voices. A woman gasps "They said four minutes!" Another cries "Send them quick! I want the rockets quick. Get it over!" A child asks its father "What rockets, daddy? What rockets?"

The ghosts are not of the past but of the future. The jolting lunge from a leisurely Age of Reason to the horror of the modern world gives the play its memorable shock value. Kneale later said it "worked beautifully".

Cobb realises he is witnessing something terrible. Not the golden future he expected, but a man-made catastrophe. A reverberating roar, and a close up of Cobb's horrified eyes, tell us that the bomb has fallen.

Gradually realising it is all over, Hassall recovers his nerve and goes to Cobb, persisting: "What did you see? Who were they?" Cobb scoops up a handful of soil and tries to regain his old bombast. "Yet some day, men will come here and make a great road through these very woods."

But he is a broken man, his words fade and he slumps forward, weeping helplessly.

The credits roll.

The Road probably gained something from being transmitted less than a year after the Cuban missile crisis, when its nightmare of the future seemed real and present. A few months afterwards, Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove* was released: it never seemed to me to be nearly as chilling as *The Road*.

Sadly, though the script is on the DVD of another Kneale play – *The Stone Tape* – the recording of *The Road* was wiped by the BBC years ago. The British Film Institute's Missing Believed Wiped programme has searched for a copy, but so far unsuccessfully.

Which is a pity; the play is thoughtful, eloquent and disturbing – a lost masterpiece.

MG SHERLOCK

MARTIN MCGRATH REPLIES:

When writing can both inspire strong emotions and make us think about the nature of the world around us, then the writer has surely achieved his or her ultimate goal. Nigel Kneale, through his work, managed this again and again during his career on UK television.

Kneale had an instinctive understanding of the innate power of speculative fiction to combine gripping entertainment with a powerful subject matter. It would, perhaps, not do any harm for the current generation of commissioners at the BBC to look at his work and ask themselves why so little of their current programming comes close to matching it.

Christopher Priest's
MASTERCLASS
No. 7: Research (Part two)

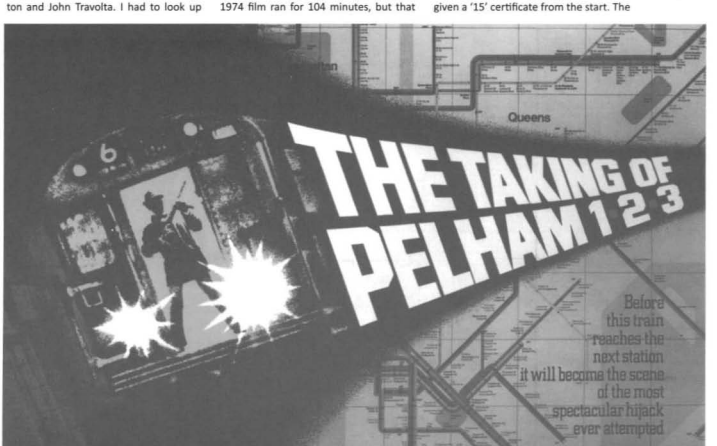
'The dispatchers report to the desk trainmaster, who in turn is subordinate to a supervisor, who does not concern himself with the minute-to-minute operation of the division. The desk trainmaster's console allows him to reach the motormen in all sections, which is to say, every motorman in the division. The desk trainmaster is the boss; he is responsible for keeping the trains running smoothly and on time. He earns his pay on any day, but particularly when there is an emergency that threatens the functioning of the division. Then his job is to work out a flex, an emergency schedule which will keep the trains running: switching locals to express tracks and vice versa, moving trains from the East Side line to the West, ordering motormen to dump their load or travel light - any of a variety of intricate improvisations designed to make a schedule flexible, to maintain service ...'

John Godey - *The Taking of Pelham 123*

You can wake up now.

John Godey's novel about a hijack on the New York subway system was published in 1973 and quickly became a best-selling title. It was made into a film starring Walter Matthau and Robert Shaw, and later remade with Denzel Washington and John Travolta. I had to look up both these films to find out the dates – 1974 and 2009, respectively – and while I was using IMDb (the Internet Movie Database, a research resource familiar to almost everyone, I'm sure) I couldn't help noticing certain extra relevant facts.

For instance, I discovered that the 1974 film ran for 104 minutes, but that the remake ran for 106 minutes. The budget for the first film was $5 millions, but twenty-five years later the remake cost $100 millions. When the 1974 film was released in the UK it was given an 'AA' certificate, later changed to '15', but when the 2009 version appeared it was given a '15' certificate from the start. The



remake included cellphones and thermal imaging, but the first film did not. The lead actors in the 1974 film, Matthau and Shaw, were clean-shaven, but in the remake Washington and Travolta both wore beards. I believe these facts are not only correct, but interesting.

There are many more differences and similarities between these two films, and while finding them I wrote them down in my notebook. As I have included many of them here I have crossed out each one, so as to avoid repetition. You are now better informed about *The Taking of Pelham 123* than you ever thought possible.

However, it doesn't end there. The novel is crammed with information. For instance, early on in the novel Mr Godey puts the following thoughts into the mind of one of his characters:

> '... he [knew] that each car was driven by four 100-horsepower traction motors, one for each axle, and that the third rail fed in 600-volt direct current through the contact shoes, and that moving his controller into power position sent a signal to each car's motor control unit ...'

At other points Mr Godey describes the signalling system, the way the lights on the front of trains are used, the security precautions in place, and an endless array of facts about numbers of daily passengers, lengths of rails, numbers of sleepers, the stations which are deepest underground, and those that are above ground. 'You may be interested to know,' says a cop, 'that the highest station on the railroad is Smith-Ninth Street in Brooklyn, eighty-seven and a half feet from the street to the base of the track.'

This is probably the moment to remind ourselves that *The Taking of Pelham 123* is a thriller, that category of novel usually recognized for its fast pace, realistic dialogue and gripping action.

There is hardly a scene in the book when one or other of the characters doesn't notice something like this: '... he paused, visualizing, beneath the steel threshold plates, the thick electric cables that transmitted power from car to car, and the neat grasp of the couplings.'

This is probably the moment to remind ourselves that *The Taking of Pelham 123* is a thriller, that category of novel usually recognized for its fast pace, realistic dialogue and gripping action. Thrillers work by being *thrilling*: not just with violence or ingenious crimes, but with insights into criminal or police minds, exotic or low-life settings, glamorous or treacherous women, deadly villains and a sense of realism, in that the reader is invited to believe that the story is taking place in a recognizably real world. These are the elements which habitual thriller readers look for.

The Godey novel (which makes concessions towards all these usual elements – in fact, it contains hardly anything original at all) gives you the feeling that the author, much taken with the notion of setting a thriller on the New York subway, went in for copious research.

He obviously spent hours with a PR

person employed by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, who showed him around and told him a score of anecdotal details. Mr Godey wrote them all down and later found somewhere to put them in his novel. He was apparently also given a technical manual or two, describing not only the many hundreds of miles of tracks and points and sleepers, but the power systems in the trains, the way the signals worked, and maintenance schedules. Mr Godey found somewhere to put them in his novel too. He also seems to have been given a timetable of the subway system, no doubt a detailed and complex document, and he later found somewhere to put everything from this as well into his novel.

There are two writing lessons to be learned from this. The first is that the sort of extraneous detail that Mr Godey shovelled into his uninspiring book was not real research at all, because none of these useless facts contributes anything to the story, the characters, the action, or even the background. They are simply padding.

The second point is that the heavily padded, unimaginative, routinely written *The Taking of Pelham 123* became a best-selling novel, and was twice made into a Hollywood movie. Food for thought?

Now here's an extract from another book, published in 1968, five years before Mr Godey's. It was never a best-seller and was never filmed, in Hollywood or anywhere else. It is written by someone who not only knows and loves steam locos, he can write about them too:

> 'He stopped by the last locomotive in line and reached up to hang the lamp from her hornplate. He stood a moment gazing at the big shapes of the engines, chafing his hands unconsciously, sensing the faint ever-present stink of smoke and oil. Then he swung on to the footplate of the loco and opened the firebox doors. He crouched, working methodically. The rake scraped against the firebars; his breath jetted from him, rising in wisps over his shoulder. He laid the fire carefully, wadding paper, adding a criss-crossing of sticks, shovelling coal from the tender with rhythmic swings of his arms. Not too much fire to begin with, not under a cold boiler. Sudden heat meant sudden expansion and that meant cracking, leaks round the firetube joints, endless trouble. For all their power the locos had to be cosseted like children, coaxed and persuaded to give of their best.'
>
> Keith Roberts - *Pavane*

Here is character movement and description, blended unobtrusively into practical descriptions of the loco. Note the use of words like 'gazing', 'chafing', 'sensing', 'carefully', 'cosseted' – all insights into the feelings of the man who is working. The whole passage, the opening of the novel, is far too long to be quoted here in full. It describes a freezing cold winter's afternoon in an engine shed, where a young man is getting his steam loco ready before a night-time run. The scene is a masterpiece of descriptive but informative writing, full of movement, character and physicality, which makes your hands cold and your heart warm.

The best way of assimilating information is to take it in so that it becomes a part of your own knowledge, your own imaginative impulse, so you can colour it with your own reading of it. Graham Greene went further: he urged forgetfulness on writers, as 'what a writer forgets is the compost of the imagination.'

You might be wondering, then, why I pick an uninteresting thriller like Godey's, when Mr Roberts provides a much better example of writing. Anyway, are we not more concerned with speculative writers like Roberts rather than dullards like Godey? I'll come to that shortly, but I chose the Godey novel precisely because it's such a rotten example of how not to do something. Anyway, he goes in for a kind of bad writing that is not confined to one genre, but can crop up in different guises everywhere.

For instance, historical novels are frequently vulnerable to being Godey-ed, and even non-fiction is not safe from it. *Indecent Exposure*, by David McClintick, which I read many years ago, was a documentary account of a major fraud that took place in Hollywood. One of the executives at Columbia Pictures embezzled millions of dollars ... not only did he get away with ransacking the till but he ended up running the studio. Not a great book, not even all that enlightening because it was about a system most people know or suspect is already corrupt, but the fruits of the author's research were dropping off every page. Not a day passed in Mr McClintick's wordy saga without a reference to the local weather, regional sports results, political events, the stock exchange prices. Presumably the author intended this sort of trivia to add local colour, but the details were totally irrelevant to the main subject. The fact that at the end the author paid 'acknowledgement' to (for instance) the National Weather Service for all those details of fine days with a high of 89ºF, did not mitigate it in any way.

In Part 1 of this essay on research, I argued that a writer of fantastic fiction has the same opportunity to carry out research as any other writer. That being so, the same risks of Godey-ing exist.

In fantasy or SF it can take a different form. In the early days of the pulp magazines there was a familiar scene in which a boffin would explain to his young assistant: 'As you know, my hyper-temporal warper ...' This was mumbo-jumbo, not quite the same as real research, but the crudest forms of SF seemed to require a quasi-scientific explanation, and the professor's words were it.

Today, a similar narrative trap exists in more subtle forms of speculative fiction, since it is in the nature of the material that the writer will have worked out a *scenario of change* – that is, the sequence of events which are deemed to be possible or probable (or at least arguable) and which have created the central situation in the fiction which is different from our own.

This more sophisticated speculative

argument will often come as a blend of imagination and research: perhaps an idea or a thought set off by something noticed in a magazine or newspaper, followed up by investigative reading of specialist books or papers. This is the stuff of much modern serious speculative fiction, and although it doesn't involve the same sort of research as, for example, an historical novelist working on the life of Anne Boleyn, the process of reading, checking and selecting will be similar.

The historical novelist (or the thriller writer) will be seeking to flesh out their fiction with the muscle of detail, but the SF/fantasy writer's purpose is less easy to define, because the end results are so diverse and uncategorizable. Extra or exploratory reading, or checking newspaper files, or web-surfing, can be argued to be a part of the imaginative process, rather than just a matter of finding out details.

However, the rule (let's call it The Non-Godey Rule) remains the same. Godey-ing has no place in fiction. The best way of assimilating information is to take it in so that it becomes a part of your own knowledge, your own imaginative impulse, so you can colour it with your own reading of it. Graham Greene went further: he urged forgetfulness on writers, as 'what a writer forgets is the compost of the imagination.'

Another way, less good but more exact, is to write it down in your notebook, or keep it on your computer, so that later you can copy it by hand, or paste it in. I see both these methods as extreme opposites of each other, with a middle way the preferred one.

When a writer creates a character, devises a story, describes backgrounds, or almost anything else in the act of writing, judgement and taste come into play. It is these qualities that make writers good writers, or better.

Similarly, if you have read up on something that is useful to your fiction, or you have found something out, or you have come up with an ingenious idea which needs to be *explained*, then your task as a writer is to make it a part of the whole, indistinguishable from the rest, consistent with the characters and the rest of the story, and also with your own outlook and general intent as a writer. When using the results of research, the same demands of taste and judgement are expected.

To summarize. There are three good reasons to conduct research while writing:

The first is *finding out* about material you do not already know, or an aspect of something you have not considered before.

The second is *checking* factual material before you include references to it in your fiction. If you depend in your fiction on facts or other information, you must be sure of your ground.

The third is *serendipity*, impossible to define or predict or even to cause to happen, but you will know it when you see it. A search for information almost inevitably throws up side issues, incidental facts, and these surprisingly often have an uncanny quality of coincidence, usefulness, appropriateness, a fresh insight not only into the information you had been seeking, but the writing in which you are engaged.

But those three are the lesser requirements of good literary research. They are the easy bits, the enjoyable stuff. The hard work is the next step, and that is what Mr Godey, and many other writers like him, got wrong.

Christopher Priest is an award-winning author of novels such as *The Separation*, *The Dream Archipelago* and *The Prestige*. His new book, *The Islanders*, will be published later this year by Gollancz.

Reverse Psychology

POEMS FROM THE STARS

WINTER CAME
by Fay Symes

Long ago my tears were shed
and dried
for the death of all hope
and the passing of good lives
and now in this grey dusk
of winter
we strive to till the ground
with little more than blunt knives.

When we saw the eyeless clouds
press down
obliterating the sun
encompassing the green land
we knew that Death would be
our friend
and welcomed most of all
but life holds on with clawed hands.

The cold is like a shroud
of ice
our breath mists the dim air
as we speak of times lost
and then remembering
we curse
and bend to toil again
to eke a living from this grey dust.

Dust is in our eyes our ears
our mouths
we know our years are short
and why we live I cannot say
yet we exist, so few
so few.
Being human we must strive
to survive for every last day.

OLD SOL
by Fay Symes

One last carmine kiss
caresses the timeworn hills
as silent, shadowed twilight
closes to ebon night.
Old Sol's ghost, fading,
cataract-eyed,
has watched the brittle sand run dry.

We sit by a sealess shore
beneath a leaden, bloodied sky,
dark shadows gathering
in silent supplication
as time relentlessly
drips on and wears away
our fragile immortality.

Reach out
touch the final sunbeam before midnight
then take my hand.
Love's the last thing here to die.

DARWINIAN LOVE SONNET
by john f keane

Fair Laura's fragile face moved Petrarch most
When April stirred his slumbering desire;
His selfish genes bestirred their mortal host
And set his bright testosterone afire.
Her lissom, graceful form and giddy eyes
Revealed her health and readiness to breed;
He had evolved to yearn for such a prize
And plant therein his self-insistent seed;
To prove his mating fitness, - strength of will,
His heart, his hand and excellence of mind, -
He shaped adoring sonnets with his quill
For beauty's judgement, fickle and unkind:
So science has explained the art of love
Without recourse to arrows from above

APOCALYPSE
by K Potter

Apocalypse
Lightning trips
Chaos slips
Walls break down

Round the turn
Zombies burn
Stomachs churn
Coming down

Comet strike
In the night
Grab the bike
Drive on down
Core explodes
No one knows
How it goes
Up or down

Apocalypse
Lose your grip
Feel it slip
Sliding down
Down
Down

SHIPS CHANGE; THE PORT REMAINS THE SAME
by Scott E. Green

Curragh
made of
leather and yew.
Raft
of balsa
logs, drifting on
currents.
Enterprise of
metal and composites.
Ships
change but
the destination remains
the
same. Unknown
ports under new
stars.
Stars waiting
to be seen.

OPEN TO POETRY SUBMISSIONS

Thank you to those who shared their poems with us for this issue. However, we need more. Focus is open to poetry submissions. Send your poetry to:

martin@martinmcgrath.net

WHAT WILL YOU DO WHEN THE WORLD ENDS?

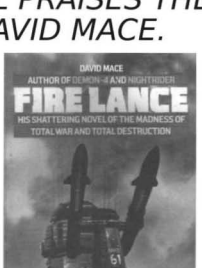
DEV AGARWAL PRAISES THE NEGLECTED NOVELS OF DAVID MACE.

Military SF is not my spiritual heritage and probably only a minority of *Focus* readers and contributors enthusiastically embrace this subgenre. However, one author in particular has worked in the field of military SF and might be said to have built a one man resistance cell that subverted this genre from within. He deeply understood its tropes and nomenclature, and worked within it to craft strikingly complex and vivid stories of war, the effects of war on human beings and the emotional and physical impact that waging war brings.

His writing still takes the reader by the throat, no small feat given that two of his books were written in the 1980s and are separated from today's reader by an ocean of cultural and political change. If all that were not enough, David Mace has established himself twice as a writer, in what must have been a grueling process of breaking out once in the 1980s, then again more recently with his return to *Interzone*.

On the face of it, Mace's novels *Firelance* and *Nightrider* are tough to sell as examples of our genre's literary tradition – one is a story of nuclear war and the other a story of interstellar war – but these two novels are distinguished by their characters, their lyrical descriptions of physical spaces and their depiction of the interior, emotional journey through life in the future.

When I first read *Firelance* I was looking for an exciting thriller of war and apocalypse. I lent it to a friend a few years later because he said he wanted to stay up one night reading about the end of the world. *Firelance* certainly delivers on that score. The novel stayed in my mind over the years and when I came back to it I appreciated the depth of its characterisation and sense of place, even though *Firelance* is built from the boy's toys of nuclear missiles, command bunkers and the stratified world of military regimes.



Yet Mace's deft characterization is woven through the story, revealing how people think, both men and *women*, as the protagonists deal with the fundamentals of their reality changing. The characters face challenges so extreme that their psychology is damaged. The physical circumstance – a man-made disaster that destroys the global weather system – is now commonplace. But what's striking is how Mace conjured his disaster over twenty years ago with economical description that's still vivid.

> *Food was no good in those conditions without heat, heat no use under such stress without food... Perhaps some fight to the death was going on down there between two desperate packs over a crate of canned oranges or dehydrated instant cheesecake.* p44

These are the observations of David Drexel, an Englishman cast adrift among the American military at the start of a nuclear war. The story begins when Drexel is forced to leave the relative safety of a subterranean base in the American heartland, a place of warmth, light, shelter and relatively little direct violence. Political machinations drive him to another base and he sees the damage to the world outside:

> *The outer door moved, a massive rectangle of laminated steel and locking bolt mechanisms swinging outwards and open – Pitch black icy iron night poured in.* p12

This description of nuclear winter is pared down to the right words, carefully chosen, and not overburdened with detail. Drexel, we learn, "hurried out into the freezing midday night." Mace deploys this line because the world Drexel is stepping into is midday in June in the New Mexico desert.

This is a story about the end of the world, which could easily become a novel of nihilism and surrender. Instead, Mace manages expectation and drama by building his details. There's been a war, with massive damage to the world's political and social systems. The United States government has collapsed into its military bases, and within them, into a makeshift totalitarian state.

But at the beginning of the novel, there is still hope, the expectation that the particulate matter blanketing the skies will lift and life can resume above ground. Trapped underground, with a shrinking, suicidal population, the novel describes the range of psychoses that people endure. As political maneuverings become more acute and deadly, Drexel is reluctantly drawn into this fight. He is confronted by a power struggle where the group seeking to stop the war is quickly executed, and what's left are two factions: the "hardline war-readiness group" against the "extremist war-prosecutionists" – an Armageddon group who want to resume the war immedi-

ately, though the other side has stopped fighting. In that scenario, the less violent are those only *ready* to fight. There is no pacifist option. Not only are the remaining two groups preparing to fight the enemy, but they'll be fighting a civil war against their own comrades. As a female soldier called Oppenheim tells Drexel, "Selecting and motivating the execution squads is going to be one tricky problem." p45. Here Mace imagines a young American woman describing the mechanics of factional murder, when Oppenheim tells Drexel about the coming witch hunts:

> *They go their own way. First you wipe out the witches, then the suspected witches...Then you start on the possible witches and the potential witches... What do witchfinders do? They hunt. And who can they find who's been associated with witches, maybe contaminated? Witchfinders. So – they hunt each other.* p46

Drexel and the other characters find themselves caught up in the unending stress of a political situation that holds no safety. As this state of affairs spins out of control, the nuclear winter accelerates, realising the adage of the best of genre writing: that the background is a character in its own right. We see the characters' realisation that they are not just in a war, but at the end of the world. The planet will never recover. The trauma ratchets up even further. The novel asks the question, what would you do at the end of the world? There is no hope for the survival of your species.

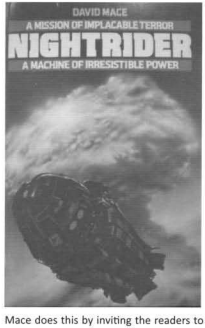
As the weather kills the planet, the plot and reactions of the characters mirror this degeneration. Initially the less extreme war readiness faction prevails. They plan to ready their weapons, the Firelance missiles of the title, rather than unilaterally use them. But as the reality of nuclear winter becomes apparent, this faction is overthrown by witchfinders from the extremist Armageddon Group. And Armageddon is what they bring.

Mace not only recounts an exciting story – the characters are on a vessel capable of surviving a nuclear attack and do, at one point – but he also makes militarism accessible and packs his war story with character and complexity. That may take the casual reader by surprise. This is a book about moral decisions, presented without moralising. It combines the SF question of "what if" with the dilemma of "what would you do?" in their place, and through this axis develops the characters. By the end of the novel, the protagonists are not merely pursuing a destructive war, they are speeding up the destruction of the Earth itself. What psychological demands would that put you under? The character Gloria Craze reflects at the finale on her options.

> *She was wearing the gun she had stowed safe in her cabin, the one Raffles had used on herself...The gun, she still told herself – the gun would be used, if at all, to help her survive. Only that.* p398.

Note that telling detail of the use of the word "still".

Nightrider, set in a background of a different type of war, begins by creating a credible interplanetary conflict that doesn't require the magic wand (as Charles Stross has called it) of moving a spaceship across vast galactic distances.



Mace does this by inviting the readers to take a leap of the imagination that our sun is part of a dual star system, and therefore other planets are within our technological reach. The opening line sets up the dual system: "Nightrider fell from the Sun to Hades." We learn that "Hades was a corpse, the Hades System was dead. Its planets orbited a lightless cinder that curved in mutual circles with the Sun, out in the utter interstellar dark."

The novel's politics are also introduced efficiently on the opening page. "Two political camps disputing the oh-so-important human future while united by natural law. So it has always been." p9.

A challenge with this type of fiction is how to convey key physical details, especially when you're discussing the movement of spacecraft. This needs to be done clearly to provide expository information, but clear language can itself be the enemy of literary writing. Nightrider, the spacecraft of the title, is both a weapon and a troop transporter. As weapon, it chases the enemy spaceship, the Outsider ship towards the dead star, Hades.

> *Eight minutes to the Outsider's Hades encounter. The ion drive beacon in its track predict was already swinging so steeply around the concentrated mass of the lightless cinder that it was moving almost laterally to the line of its long approach path – a path that Nightrider was supposed to be following, 1.8 million kilometers and three thousand seconds behind. But Nightrider was the predicted time and distance away, travelling at the predicted velocity – but not on the track.* p199

This pulls off the trick of conveying necessary technical detail and encouraging the reader to use their imagination to see the ships, the dead star, and the chase as it unfolds. It also sets up the tactics of the fight and builds the pace and drama of it. For me, that's a lot going on in these sequences – and this only one of many that build in the novel. *Nightrider* might be termed "mundane SF" in the current fashion, as space flight is based on the ion drive (in existence now), and it takes hundreds of days to reach the enemy. Mace uses these mundane physics to reflect on the human story behind the technology:

> *The sheer power of the Outsider's ion drive was a surprise...The research and development that had gone into it, the sheer resource commitment, must have been hugely disproportionate for the so desperately limited means of the allied colonies – an extraordinary achievement.* p125.

I haven't begun to talk about the last third of the novel, when the onboard artificial intelligence collapses and turns homicidal, what happens when the crew land on the planet orbiting Hel and take hostages, or how the humans respond to their military programming. This is a complex novel, but its most striking feature, as with *Firelance,* is the elegance of Mace's writing.

These are both unfairly neglected novels from the 1980s. Happily, however, they're easy to locate online, and even better, David Mace is back, writing and publishing both short fiction and longer works. I am looking forward to reading both his back catalogue and his new work.

Nightrider (Grafton, 1985) and *Firelance* (Grafton, 1986) are available from the usual used book sites.

Dev Agarwal's story, "Grotto" is published in the current edition of *Aoife's Kiss*

UNDER ALL THE SPACESHIPS

Elliot Summerhayes on his experiences of studying for a creative writing degree and attitudes to SF amongst his fellow students

In September of 2009, following several months wherein my post-college, pre-university gap year holiday plans had been shot down in flames by recession, I was ecstatic at the prospect of taking my place at university – a place on London South Bank's creative writing degree that I'd applied for whilst at college, more than a year and a half previously. With that much time having passed and, following the failed gap year, I'd built up the idea of the degree to such an extent that I felt certain it couldn't live up to my expectations. But it did. And the last year hasn't disappointed in the least. I have met all the bookish-yet-extroverted people I'd hoped to meet, I've learnt more than I'd hoped to about writing and everything that it entails. And when it comes to science fiction, well...

I don't imagine I'm alone in having experienced a degree of snobbery directed at my favoured genre - from little comments like "Well, it's hardly *The Great Gatsby*..." to having one university application declined because I expressed an interest in science fiction. So it came as a pleasant surprise when I found that this 'genre-ism' was completely absent among the staff at London South Bank and that - at least on the Creative Writing degree - a student's interest in genre fiction is fostered just as surely as an interest in the literary greats.

Though our unit guides made clear from the beginning that genre fiction would be a prime topic in our lectures, I was still taken aback by extent to which science fiction was referred to. In one semester, we were introduced to a host of speculative short stories and the iconic screen works of Nigel Kneale, whom I was later given the opportunity to write an essay on. The second semester saw us examine J.G. Ballard's *Drowned World* and a number of short films - several of them slipstream or speculative in nature. And, amongst other things, the second year promises studies of Kurt Vonnegut's works as part of a non-linear fiction unit.

That science fiction has a fair presence in two units out of three in each semester is, in my opinion, something to be commended. In a bid to make a comparison, I tried to get in contact with several other

universities in London and the South East - after four weeks of waiting for replies, I decided that they'd all deigned not to respond. Whether this is an example of the aforementioned snobbery, I can't be sure. Nonetheless, I have it on fairly good authority that South Bank's syllabuses carry more sci-fi than the average university's and this may or may not have something to do with the degree's course director being 'one of us'. Of course, if it is the case, then I think we might do well to infiltrate the hierarchies of other Creative Writing degrees.

Apologies if I seem to have plugged my *alma mater* a little too much, but I feel it's a good preamble to this fact: it has taken two entire semesters there to begin to show my peers what science fiction can really be. And now we move on to the main point of this article: somehow, a great deal of people in my average lecture's age group (19-24) seem to have been rather underexposed to the genre.

Prior to their time at South Bank, there were members of the class who had never heard the names "Isaac Asimov" or "Arthur C Clarke", and there was one daunting individual who seemed convinced that Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* was a prime example of science fiction. Perhaps the addition of a forehead-mounted laser to the shark, *à la* Austin Powers, *Jaws* might have come within ten miles of the limits of the City of Sci-Fi. But alas, there was no forehead-mounted laser.

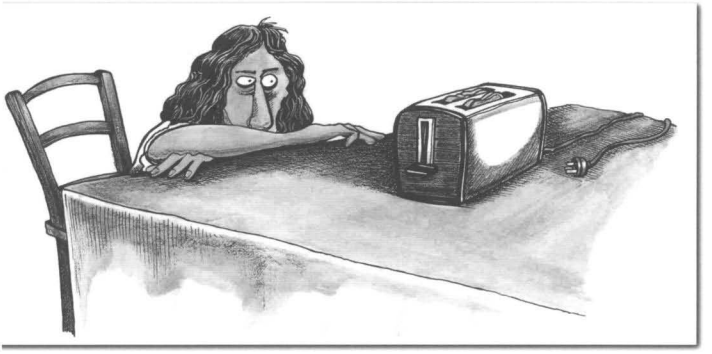
Whilst that particular person is most probably beyond help, the rest of the class seemed to take on board the fact that a lot of science fiction does not conform to one of the haggard stereotypes. A look at Nigel Kneale's *The Stone Tape* and excerpts from his first *Quatermass* serial gave them some idea of how science fiction and horror could converge in a terrestrial setting. And, with a look at Ballard's *Drowned World* they saw how environmental issues could play a part in a science fiction narrative - the same lecture gave some understanding of how other current affairs have been foreshadowed in other examples of sci-fi.

In a bid to understand their views of science fiction, I circulated a brief questionnaire around those of my class that I have contact with. The questions were simple: 'what is the first piece of science fiction that comes to your mind?', 'Can you describe an image that sums up what science fiction is to you?', 'Have our lectures changed your take on the genre?' and so forth. The responses featured numerous mentions of pop-culture film and TV examples along the lines of *Star Wars* and post-millennial *Doctor Who*. Items such as *Stargate* and *Battlestar Galactica*, though dead-centre of the beaten track, were relative unknowns and, curiously, no mentions whatsoever were made of *Star Trek* - make of that what you will. And when it comes to any given genre, televised examples are generally better known than written examples.

On the back of our lectures, most of these boys and girls can now quote a mound of heavy-hitting names, of both science fiction authors and their respective works. A handful have even picked up copies of *Nineteen Eight-Four*, *Brave New World* and other dystopian-themed examples of the genre - they say they were drawn by the political elements, the presence of which they think of as a rare occurrence in the genre. But the presence of those elements is not that rare at all. It didn't look to me as if they thought of these novels as average pieces of science fiction and, when prompted, they readily agreed that they didn't. Their questionnaire answers back up this point as, despite having read the aforementioned books, they nonetheless offer up very space-and-technology oriented images in response to the 'image' question.

It seems fair to say that a number of my fellow students still carry around some misconceptions regarding science fiction. But I don't hold that against them. In my opinion, there is something for almost everyone in this genre. If we could shine a light on some of the stereotype-obscured areas of the field and allow these individuals to see science fiction in it's entirety then I believe it is possible that they will see something they like. Subsequently, they might even take an active interest in the genre.

JRR Tolkien once referred to science fiction as 'that most escapist of all genres' and, like myself and many others, he didn't consider escapism to be a downside. Quite to the contrary, he idolised it. And with escapism very much in ascendance in society these days, our genre could see a big boom in years to come. But these niggling misconceptions could get in the way of that far too easily.



Starving philosophy student grappling with the question of the Toast in the Machine.

WRITING A SYNOPSIS

GARETH L POWELL WORKS THROUGH THE PROCESS OF PRESENTING YOUR NOVEL TO A PUBLISHER

A few months ago I sold my second novel, *The Recollection*, to Solaris Books on the strength of the first fifty pages and a synopsis. But what is a synopsis, and how do you go about writing one?

When I first set out to write my synopsis for *The Recollection*, I found many contradictory articles on the subject. Some said it should be a single page, others that it could be up to ten. The only points they all seemed to agree on were:

1. **The synopsis should be written in the present tense.** No matter which tense you use in the book, write the synopsis as if you're commentating on events that are transpiring as you write them: *"He goes to the back door and sees the zombies..."*

2. **The synopsis should be written by an omniscient narrator.** Even if your novel is written from a first person viewpoint, you should still write the synopsis in the third person.

3. **The synopsis should tell the prospective publisher (or agent) what happens in the book.** It should be a complete account of the plot, from start to finish, including any twists or denouements.

4. **Don't hold anything back and don't try to tease.** If you conclude your synopsis halfway through the plot, the publisher (or agent) isn't going to be intrigued, they're going to be irritated. This isn't a cover blurb you're writing, it's a book proposal, and in order to judge whether this is the book in which they want to invest their time and effort, the agent (or publisher) needs to get a picture of it in its entirety.

These four points weren't much to go on, but they were a start. So one evening I sat down at my word processor and started writing, trying to turn a box full of scribbled notes and ideas into a coherent narrative outline. I typed out the main points of the plot, using a separate paragraph for each key scene or chapter, and this came to 2500 words and covered just over five pages. To it, I added:

1. **A couple of introductory sentences** describing the novel, giving details of its genre and expected length.

2. **A 100-word cover blurb.** Like an executive summary on a briefing document, I hoped the inclusion of a blurb at the top of the synopsis would snag the publisher's attention, and give them an idea of how I was envisioning this novel as a commercial product.

3. **A bullet-point list of the major themes.** To put the story in context, I included a very short list of the major themes I wanted to address in

The Recollection
A science fiction novel
Planned length: 80,000 words
By Gareth L Powell

The Recollection is a character-driven science fiction novel placing modern twenty-first century men and women into a far-future, action-packed space opera setting. The story has two interwoven strands: one set in contemporary London and the other in space, on board the trading starship Ameline, four hundred years hence:

the book, as some of these wouldn't come across in the simple plot description of the synopsis itself. Not only does this help sell the book as a concept, it also forces you to really consider that it is that your book is *about* – something you really need to know *before* you try explaining it to anyone else!

4. **A short biography** giving details of my previous publications, to show that I had the experience needed to write and complete this book.

5. **A bullet-point list of USPs**. Like it or not, publishing is a commercial business, and I had heard stories of other writers having books turned down because the publisher (or agent) thought they were too similar to another book they'd recently handled. To avoid this, I jotted down a list of five Unique Selling Points: five things that (in my opinion) made this book stand out from the competition. These included my particular writing style, and two of the unusual technologies included in the story. I could also have included any relevant life experience or details of any ready-made following that I had.

The first page now looked like the page opposite.

I followed this with the cover blurb, my bio, and the list of themes. One thing I didn't do was include a one-line description of the book, and I probably should have done. Discussing synopses on my website in October 2010, Marc Gascoigne at Angry Robot wrote:

> *"You should write us a one-sentence elevator pitch if you can – because if it's cool enough that is what the editor or publisher will use to convince salesmen to back his/her suggestion that they buy the novel."*

Once all the preliminaries were in place, I added the main body of the synopsis: the five pages of plot description; and the USPs came last. The final touch was to add my address, phone number and email to the top of the first page and the bottom of the last.

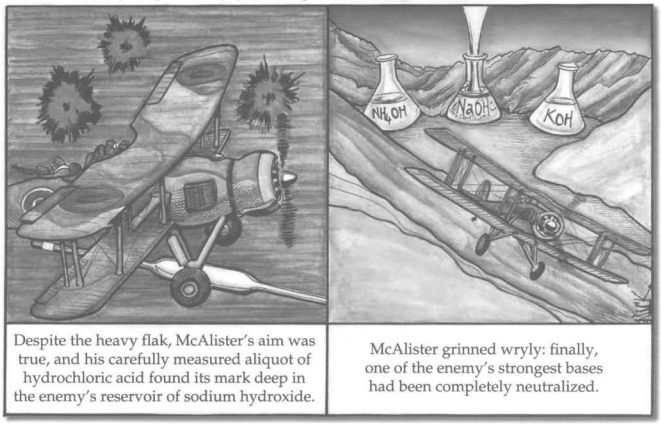
This left me with a seven-page document of approximately 3000 words. I submitted it to Solaris Books along with the first fifty pages of the novel and, a couple of months later, the Editor-in-chief came back to say he wanted to commission the book.

Now, I'm not suggesting you slavishly copy my example. The main point I want you to take away from this is that I followed as many rules and conventions as I could find. I wrote the outline in the present tense, from a third person perspective and I let it be as long as it needed to be in order to get across the main events of the book; I also added my own touches, such as the blurb and the list of themes.

When you come to write your own synopsis, the thing to remember is that you will be describing *your* book, and you will have to sell both it and yourself; you will have to find a way to inject *your* personality and professionalism into the document.

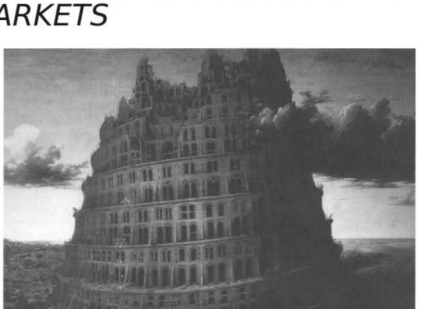
Learning to write a synopsis is just like learning to write short stories or poems: it's another discipline to be mastered. Do what you can to make it your own; but whatever you do, please bear in mind that some editors have very strict guidelines that they will want you to follow, so it's worth checking their requirements in advance.

Gareth L. Powell's second novel, *The Recollection*, will be published by Solaris Books in September this year.



SPEAKING IN TONGUES

GARETH D JONES OFFERS SOME ADVICE ON SELLING YOUR STORIES TO FOREIGN LANGUAGE MARKETS



For a relatively little-known author, my stories have been translated into a surprising number of languages. As I write this, the total stands at 19, but with a couple more accepted and numerous others under submission the number may well be greater by the time you're reading it. Spanish is particularly popular: ten stories published in Spain and South America. In total I have 42 publications in languages other than English. These range from non-paying blogzines like *Froles Mirandesas* in Mirandes, to professional publications like Hungary's *Galaktika* and the Greek national newspaper comic supplement *Ennea*. The latter has a circulation of 100,000 copies, far more than any SF venue in which I've been published in English.

It's a great feeling to see my story in another language, even if it's something like Hebrew that I have no hope of reading. In languages that use Roman script I have the fun of looking for my characters' names in the text. The work of the translators fascinates me. How do they translate complex concepts that I've made up, British idioms and cultural references, phrases that rely on homonyms to have any meaning? These are the challenges that I assume they face, but oddly the few questions I've had from translators working on my stories have always been on much more mundane issues that seemed perfectly clear to me. Only on one occasion, the Catalan translation of 'Roadmaker', did the translator resort to a footnote to explain an untranslatable point. This was for a homonym that the boy Jeb gets confused over. Evidently the equivalent words in Catalan are not at all similar, so there is no reason he would get confused in that language.

If you check out sites like Duotropes and Ralans you'll find literally hundreds of English-language markets for your genre fiction. Markets in other languages only seem to number into the dozens when totalled together, so there's theoretically much less chance of your work being translated and published in another tongue.

So, how do you find your way into these foreign markets? (I know that sounds terribly parochial, but we have to call them something.) Well, I can do no better than point you to Canadian author Doug Smith. He maintains a foreign language market list on his website: www.smithwriter.com/foreign_market_list.htm

Doug has been doing this for a long time, and his site also includes useful information and guidelines on submitting to foreign markets.

Doug's stories have been translated into several more languages than me, but leading the field is Belgian author Frank Roger with over 30 languages to his credit. It doesn't stop with the Foreign Markets List though. Several markets on the list are ones I've found myself. Using various language forums and discussion groups, and with the help of Google translated search, you may well be able to discover a new market of your own.

Submitting to a foreign market is a bit of a different experience to English markets. The most important thing is to read the submission guidelines first, or in the absence of guidelines, to email the editor. What you'll likely find is that you get no reply, and I generally put this down to the language barrier. After all, would you reply to an email in Ukrainian if it arrived out of the blue? At least half of the submissions I send out are never acknowledged, and even some that send an acknowledgement don't send an eventual reply. I write them off after a year. Don't give up though - I've recently had stories published in Hungarian and Spanish over two years after submission, and an Italian translation that was accepted within days but not published until two years later.

Remember that you are only offering rights for one particular language, which means that you can submit to

as many different language markets simultaneously as you want to. Be careful not to get confused and send your manuscript to two magazines with the same language though. The unfamiliar names and the fact that similar named magazines appear in several languages can be confusing.

Another regular occurrence in the foreign market field is to find a translation of a story that I didn't know had been accepted, or that I hadn't even submitted, or in a magazine I'd never heard of. When I've contacted the editors involved they've all been highly apologetic. I've also been contacted by a translator working on one of my stories that I didn't know had been accepted, and found the original English versions published alongside the translation more than once. All of this is usually due to communication problems rather than anything sinister. It's something to be aware of and shows the importance of making sure any communications with the editor is clear on what rights you are offering.

The other thing to keep in mind is that, although most of the magazines don't mention it explicitly, they're generally looking for stories that have already been published in English. Some magazines, such as Russia's *Esli*, only reprint stories from professional English markets. They may even have translation deals with a particular magazine such as *F&SF*. Only one of my unpublished stories has been accepted for translation. *Absolute Zero* was published in *Ennea* but has never appeared in English. The reason for this was that *Ennea* had such a tight word count limit at the time that this was the only story I had that fit. Despite its lack of pedigree it was accepted.

For me, tracking down foreign language markets is not enough. Although I've been published in 19 languages, my stories have actually been translated into 37. Many of these are minority languages that not only have no SF venues, but no literary magazines at all. I started with Welsh - after all I am half Welsh - and went on to investigate the other Celtic languages. I tracked down friendly translators across the planet and asked them to translate some of my shortest flash fiction. My 100-word story *The Gondolier* can now be read in 32 languages, including Latin. I've posted several of these on my own website.

There are many reasons to enter the foreign market field: to make a bit of extra money from something you've already had published, the fun of seeing your work in another language, to further your interest in linguistics, or to compete with Frank Roger. Whatever your motivation, I'd encourage you to give it a try. I've enjoyed it immensely.

GOODBYE HOLLOWAY ROAD

GARY BUDGEN BIDS FAREWELL TO AN OLD FRIEND

Writers often talk about other writers who influenced them. During my brief (one term) stay on a creative writing MA degree one of the tutors said something along the lines of 'you choose your influences'. As a would-be SF writer conscious of the traditions of our genre, that act of choosing has often involved seeking out books recommended by others, in the pages of the Clute and Nichols SF Encyclopedia or mentioned by other authors. Much of this involves the search for out of print books and these days this can easily be done on-line. But what about chance? What about *serendipity*? (Which is a word with an etymology close to us, from a fantasy by Horace Walpole). Serendipity is the beneficial discovering of something by accident. For writers discovering books by chance can be hugely significant, it can mean a new influence. Well for me serendipity had a home and it was a marvelous bookshop, *The Fantasy Centre*, on Holloway Road in London.

For those who don't know the Holloway Road it is a traffic choked north London red-route that leads from Archway to Highbury. It is lined with a mixture of shops that reflect both the affluence of nearby Islington and the more working class areas nearby. It has junk/antique shops, cafes, and recently seems to be specializing in sex shops. The one opposite the *Fantasy Centre* is called Fettered Pleasures, which one wit remarked sounded like it could be a Greek salad bar: it is not.

But the *Fantasy Centre* had been on Holloway Road since the early seventies and was a world in itself. Run by Ted and Eric it was always a place of discovery, crammed with all those out-of-print titles I was looking for but also books by writers I'd never heard of, or forgotten about, anthologies on every theme (SF and… sex, cities, paintings. You name it), old magazines, books on genre writing and first editions.

Over the years I used make the pilgrimage there as often as I could but then my job took me to Holloway Road itself. As I now worked nearby I would often spend my lunch in *The Fantasy Centre* and would always leave with something, usually something I hadn't been looking for when I entered. When I found out they were to close I asked why and was told: well the lease was up; what's wrong with retiring anyway, we've been here for a long while? I made some quip about needing to keep it open as a kind of social service, a drop in centre for the likes of me. There was more truth in that quip than I'd probably care to admit.

One of the other reasons for closing was that, well everyone is shopping on-line, who goes to bookshops anymore? Science Fiction is often about how the big changes (technological, social, environmental, what have you) affect individuals' lives. So that comment about on-line shopping was telling; but I find nothing consoling in the irony.

Places shut, things changes. The *Rye Stamp and Hobby Shop* in Peckham (RIP circa 1985) used to be filled with wonderfully painted role-playing and wargames minatures; the old Den, home of Millwall Football Club; Catford Dog Track; the London Docks. We all have our own list. But the demise of a beloved bookshop should be especially telling for both readers and writers. If we all end up relying on reviews or Amazon recommendations what place is left for serendipity?

As it turned out big changes were about to affect me too. The global economic meltdown meant that I learned, shortly after the bookshop closed, that I was about to lose my job as a lecturer after ten years. So, goodbye Holloway Road. At least I won't have to look at the old *Fantasy Centre* anymore. Last time I was there the sign was still up, but the shop was now selling old furniture, not dreams.

AND FINALLY...

"Call a Rabbit a Smeerp"

A cheap technique for false exoticism, in which common elements of the real world are re-named for a fantastic milieu without any real alteration in their basic nature or behavior. "Smeerps" are especially common in fantasy worlds, where people often ride exotic steeds that look and act just like horses. (Attributed to James Blish.)

The Turkey City Lexicon

Thrignor wiped the gore from the blade of his ivory-handled throg-cleaver and rammed it back into the flinner-skin scabbard that hung from his belt. The battle against the fire-breathing doosinfalg had been long and terrible and many brave bomsaw-brothers had been lost this day.

"They have sacrificed their lives for a great cause," Thrignor hissed and rested a hand on the shoulder of Fury, his might battle-smeerp. "It will not be in vain."

The smeerp snorted through the three nostrils that ran down the back of its neck and shook its massive head. The great beast was sweating and pawing at the ground with blood-smeared claws.

The warrior could sense the smeerp's continued agitation.

"Steady now Fury. The doosinfalg is slain, our work here is done."

There hadn't been a doosinfalg this far south in many centuries, Thrignor thought to himself. *And smeerps had been imported just a few generations before from the wild continent and there were no doosinfalg in that distant, fly-plagued, Boolgar-forsaken land.*

"You fought well, my friend." Thrignor took an apple from his saddle bag and went forward to rest a gauntlet on the smeerp's great horn. "Your kind would never have faced such beasts before, eh Fury?"

But Thrignor could not have been more wrong.

It was true that the wild continent had no living doosinfalg, but there was a reason for that. The scaly doosinfalg had been hunted to extinction on that far land by the packs of wild smeerps. Now, smelling the blood that had once driven his ancestor's to a feeding frenzy, Fury's true nature was struggling its way to the surface.

The smeerp shook its head again and bore its mighty fangs. It sniffed the air, drawing in more of the doosinfalg's musty tang.

"What is it, boy?" Thrignor tugged on Fury's reins.

The great battle-steed snapped at the hand that tried to restrain it. Rage began to build. Fury wanted to feed.

Thrignor held out his hand. In his palm was an apple.

Fury opened his mighty jaws.

And munched happily on the delicious fruit, dreaming now of his stable and a warm blanket.

The Humpback of Notre Dame