FOCUS

THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION'S MAGAZINE FOR WRITERS

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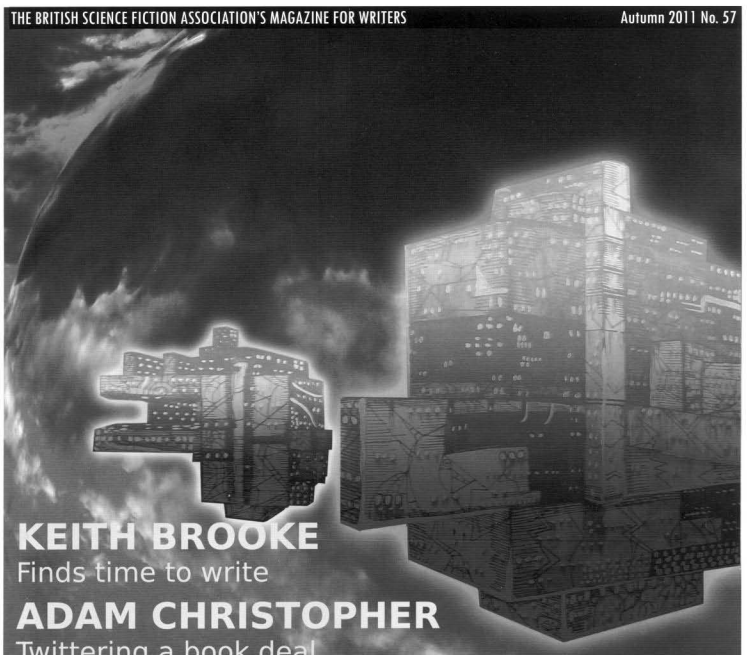


KEITH BROOKE
Finds time to write

ADAM CHRISTOPHER
Twittering a book deal

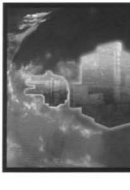
CHRISTOPHER PRIEST
What is structure?

ALASTAIR REYNOLDS
Blue remembered stories

LAVIE TIDHAR
Advice for real writers

PLUS: Middlesex University's MA in writing sf&f, Dev Agarwal shows and tells, David L Clements on extreme astronomy, news from Orbit and more.

CONTENTS



ARTWORK
John F Keane's sci-fi/fantasy art is inspired by Chris Foss, Carlos Ezquerra and Italian futurist artists like Umberto Boccioni and Giacomo Balla. He has published three articles in Vector, numerous academic essays and several short stories.

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FOCUS

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THE GODS ARE LAUGHING...

I've never avoided cracks in the pavements. I stroll with insouciance (but appropriate care, I'm not stupid) beneath ladders. I don't check my horoscopes. I've never even sacrificed a small animal in the hope that its freshly spewed innards would provide some an insight into the future.

I have never been superstitious.

Never, that is, until I began submitting myself to the mind-breaking, soul-shattering, self-confidence-destroying exercise in futility and humiliation that is trying to get editors to accept (and, preferably, pay for) the stories I've written.

Now there are signs and portents everywhere.

Editors are lined up against me, as implacable and unreadable as those giant stone heads on Easter Island, and I feel like part of some vast cult. Like the Polynesians of old *Rapa Nui* we're deforesting the land at an ever faster rate as we try to give these cold, primeval gods their proper tribute. *Please accept my manuscript*, we beg the mighty ones. *Please be happy with it.*

So off goes the story and then comes the waiting. A quick response is usually bad news – the offering was unworthy. Greater sacrifices required. Then time begins to stretch. At first there's hope. Perhaps you've scrambled over a few hurdles and made it closer to the holy grail of (*whisper it!*) publication. Then hope starts to curdle into the fear. Has your manuscript ended up lining the cage of a postman's gerbil?

One magazine has had a story of mine for seven months. I contacted them after three. "Yes we're considering it," the magazine said.

I want to contact them again, but a story in limbo is like Schrödinger's Cat. As long as I don't force them to open the box, then the cat/story isn't dead yet. There's still a chance, although – unlike the probability pussy – the odds are always stacked prettily heavily against a happy ending and a bowl of Meow Mix.

And, when (if) an editor does respond I find myself compelled to pore over every syllable for meaning, as if the words belonged to golden Apollo himself and had fallen fresh from the mouth of the Pythian priestess. No Delphic pronouncements were ever so carefully analysed.

This month I received a rejection from the editor of one of the big American magazines. There's nothing strange in that, I could paper the walls of my home with rejections from magazine editors (not that I would, that would be crazy... and my wife wouldn't let me. Pesky wife.).

But this rejection was slightly different. Not much different, but just enough that I noticed and, having noticed, began to obsess about it.

Normally the rejections are a polite "no thanks" or "this isn't what we're looking for" – which presumably covers all points between "go away and stop writing to us in green ink you weirdo" and "we just didn't think your story was very good." Since I don't write in green ink, often, I've always supposed it means the latter. But this one said: "This isn't what we're looking for... I look forward to your next one, though."

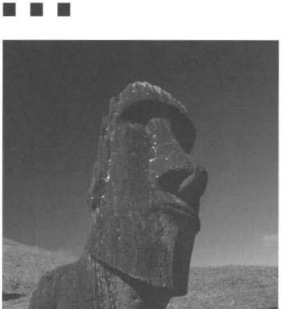
Oh... Is that meaningful? Is it just the random word generator that editors use to throw together rejections churning up a phrase or did this editor *notice* my story and actually welcome the idea of reading something else I've written. Is it an omen?

How do I tell?

And what should I do about it?

I haven't got "a next one" – not one that would suit that magazine. I'm working on something, but it's not ready. Should I rush it in an attempt to strike while the iron is hot? Or should I take my time and work on it so that I avoid using terrible clichés like "striking while the iron is hot".

I could write back to the editor and demand that they clarify the meaning of their gnomic blatherings, but I'm just neurotypical enough to recognise that this is the behaviour of a borderline sociopath and probably won't help my cause in the long term. Or I could surrender to superstition. There's a goat that lives in the field at the bottom of my road. Goats are a traditional beast of sacrifice and the use of their warm intestines as instruments of soothsaying is well established. However, loud spousal sighing and screams of outrage from my daughter suggest this may not be considered appropriate. Also, although the goat is old and looks stupid, it is *surprisingly* hard to catch.



Martin McGrath is finding that editors (like the one above) are making him superstitious.

Which leaves me with only one option... write, submit, wait, repeat.

And hope that the great gods of magazines will look favourably upon my offerings.

HOW TO GET A ON TWITTER

Adam Christopher on forming relationship

At the beginning of 2011 I signed with Angry Robot. The deal was for two books, *Empire State* (the "stunning fantasy noir set in the *other* New York", says the jacket copy, and y'know, I think I'll take that!) and *Seven Wonders* (a big fat superhero novel), and was announced to the world in a press release which was entitled: 'Angry Robot unveils debut author – recruited from Twitter'.

Well, that got some attention. An author discovered via Twitter? Amazing and cool, right? We're living in the future! So, how did I do it? Here's the secret in three simple steps: (1) I wrote a book, (2) I met a publisher, (3) the publisher liked the book and bought it and another one. Easy, right?

Looking at that, you might be wondering where Twitter comes in, but the fact is, that press release was entirely accurate – I was discovered via Twitter, because that's where the second step came in. Twitter was where I first met the folk from Angry Robot – editor Lee Harris and publisher Marc Gascoigne.

I've always been an online sort of person, because the internet is a great place to meet people and make friends if you have specific interests. I like science fiction and books, and I like talking about those things with other like-minded people. A friend introduced me to Twitter back in 2009, and I quickly found that it was a great place to talk about stuff I liked. Twitter's real strength is the way it enables communities to grow and develop in a very natural, organic way. So pretty soon I'd found a group of readers and writers, editors and agents, people who had similar interests, and the conversation began. When Angry Robot arrived in mid-2009 they immediately saw the importance of engaging with people via social media and they seemed like a really interesting company to follow. As we discovered, Lee and I have a fair share of similar interests ranging from comics, films and television to, of course, books. And it just so happened that I was a writer working on what was my third manuscript, one that, after a while, I thought would be a pretty good match for what Angry Robot were looking for.

But let's take a step back here. I joined Twitter to meet and chat to people, and while I was also working on my craft, I certainly wasn't using Twitter to try and sell a book. The key word in 'social media' is *social*. Sure, I had my own website, where I blogged about writing and the various projects I was working on, and I'd talk about that on Twitter because the people I was following, and who were following me, seemed interested. But that was never the reason to join Twitter. There is a great writing community online with a lot of new writers trying to get their break. Angry Robot certainly knew what I was doing – I'd had a few short stories published in *Hub*, the online magazine published by Lee, and as a self-confessed fan of their output and publishing model I'd blogged a couple of times on their website, and I'd even won an Angry Robot

BOOK DEAL

and selling books

short story competition. But the idea of pitching something to them via Twitter never, ever entered my head. Eventually Lee and I met in person at a couple conventions, but again, it was purely social. My manuscript wasn't ready, and Angry Robot don't take unagented or unsolicited submissions anyway.

My manuscript, *Empire State*, was in pretty good shape by August 2010, and one day I was going to be near Angry Robot's office in Nottingham. I dropped Lee a line to ask if I could come in for a tour of their HQ, and the three of us (myself, Lee and Marc) went out for lunch. By coincidence, I'd just had a short story in *Hub* come out that same day, which Lee brought up in conversation. Marc said he'd read it, and then asked a very important question: had I written anything longer?

Over the next hour, I rambled at the pair of them about *Empire State* – I hadn't gone to Nottingham to pitch it, although I had thought it would be cool if they asked. As it happened, they *did* ask, and without any particular preparation I'm sure my off-the-cuff description of a dimension-hopping science fiction detective story featuring rocket-powered superheroes and steam-powered robots was pretty garbled. But Marc said it sounded interesting, and would I like to send it in? There was the invitation I'd always hoped to get, one day!

The rest, as they say, is history.

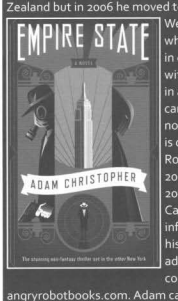
So, was my journey to publication really any different from anyone else's? And was the Twitter connection really so important?

The first question is hard to answer as I'm sure every writer's journey is different. I never had to write a query letter – a lucky escape, most probably, although I'm not sure pitching a book in person is any easier! – but a lot of book deals are struck through personal connections. Getting out there and meeting people is vital, which is why the bar at any science fiction convention is *the* place to be if you want to meet writers, editors, agents and publishers. Those convention meetings have been the starting point for many a career.

Is the way I did it really any different? Probably not. I met the people who became my publishers on Twitter instead of at a convention, or instead of writing a really good query letter. What was newsworthy about it was more that it showed what a valuable tool Twitter could be. Twitter works well for me because it requires active participation and conversations happen, if not quite in real time, then in a very active and engaging way. I'd be surprised, for example, if a publisher announced they'd signed a writer they found on Facebook, because to me Facebook is very static and strangely un-engaging.

But none of this is worth a dime if you don't have the most important thing ready – the manuscript. Meeting a publisher on Twitter or at a convention won't get you far if you don't have something to show them, and it wasn't until I was sure that *Empire State* was ready for publication that I even began to think that Angry Robot might be interested in taking a look. You might also look at my road to publication and think that it was all a case of "who you know", and in the publishing industry that does go a long way – hence the importance of the convention bar, or, in my case, Twitter – but again, there needs to be something solid there to follow through with: a killer manuscript.

Adam Christopher was born in Auckland, New Zealand but in 2006 he moved to the sunny North West of England, where he now lives in domestic bliss with his wife and cat in a house next to a canal. Adam's debut novel ***Empire State*** is out from Angry Robot in January 2012 (December 2011 in the US/ Canada). For more information, visit his website at www.adamchristopher.co.uk or angryrobotbooks.com. Adam can also be found on Twitter at twitter.com/ghostfinder.



STILL GOT THE
FOR YOU

Alastair Reynolds on the many connection

Like most writers, I'm often asked about the processes behind my work. Other than a general tendency not to do much in the way of planning (although that's certainly not a hard and fast rule –I'm doing a massive amount for the new book, by my standards) I find that my stories and novels all seem to arrive from different directions, and to evolve in unpredictable ways. That said, I have come to recognise some rough and ready "tricks of the trade", related to both the conceptualisation of a story and the actual mechanics of writing it, which may be of interest.

I thought it might be useful to talk about one story in particular, not only because the circumstances behind it are fairly fresh in my mind, but because it's not particularly hard to track down. That story is "Zima Blue", which I wrote in 2004. (The title comes from a poem by Yevtushenko, which I happened to have lying around). It appeared in *Postscripts* Number 4, in the summer of the following year. It was reprinted in The Year's Best Science Fiction, Twenty Third edition, edited by Gardner Dozois, in 2006, and appeared in my own collection *Zima Blue And Other Stories*, published by Night Shade Books in 2006, and in the Gollancz edition of the same book, in 2009. Even if the story hadn't been reprinted, though, I would still be very fond of it. It remains one of my personal favorites, and perhaps uncharacteristically for me, it's not really "hard" science fiction by any objective measure.

Spoilers ahead, as they say.

Late in the summer of 2004, Christopher Priest and I had co-tutored a week of writing instruction at the Arvon workshop in Devon. It had been a fantastically stimulating experience – simultaneously exhausting (Chris and I both had to read, and critique, a huge amount of material each day) but also massively inspiring. It was a week in which, in extremely convivial surroundings, a bunch of people did nothing but sit around and talk seriously about this business of writing. And eat quite a lot of biscuits, too.

Chris and I were exposed to many different styles and standards of writing that week, and the students in turn were exposed to our ideas about character, viewpoint, and so on. We spent almost the whole week saying nothing about science fiction itself, concentrating instead on the fundamental elements of writing itself. It's really pointless to start worrying about the ecology of an alien planet, when you still haven't grasped the rudiments of dialogue, paragraph handling, scene breaks, basic grammar, punctuation and so forth. (Some of our students were already displaying great competency, I hasten to add – better than competency in a few cases - but I think it was instructive for all of us to go back to the basics, and really think about why we make these decisions). Half way through the course, Molly Brown parachuted in to give us a great reading from one of her stories. The whole week was terrifically enjoyable, and I came away from it fired up with an almost manic determination to sit down and write a story.

It was the perfect time for it. I did not have any immediately pending deadlines, nor was anything else making demands on my time. It was just me and my computer, with no distractions, and a head buzzing with writerly insights. No one needed a story off me on a particular theme, so my head was free to roam. I could write literally anything I desired, and worry about selling it when I was

BLUES

s that make a story

done.

Bliss.

The story wouldn't come, though.

I had a notion of the theme I wanted to tackle. I don't know about other writers, but there are always six or seven ideas somewhere at the back of my mind - vague, ill-formed but there nonetheless – that I hope will one day become stories. Sometimes I make short notes on my PC, little more than sentence fragments, but as often as not I don't bother. If an idea is sufficiently compelling, it will keep asserting itself.

Sometimes I will be attracted to an idea that is a recognisable science fiction trope, but which I feel merits closer examination. It may be a recent idea that hasn't been looked at in all its ramifications, or a neglected one that could be fruitfully updated and re-examined. For a long time, I'd been thinking about Asimov's story "Bicentennial Man". Asimov is a writer not much in favour these days, and perhaps with some justification. Nonetheless I read almost his entire output when I was growing up, and there's no escaping the fact that it has shaped me as a writer.

"Bicentennial Man" interested me for two reasons. The notion of a robot slowly altering itself to become not only humanoid but organic struck me as a fascinating one, worthy of being taken seriously. Was the robot really human at the end of the process? What did "human" really mean? Secondly, the story encompassed a long span of time. I've always loved that in SF: stories that pack a sense of history's relentless, accelerating pace into a few pages. But I didn't want to simply "rewrite" Bicentennial Man, adding a few post-cyberpunk curlicues to the existing narrative framework. I couldn't have got away with that if I tried: it's a well known story in the SF canon, and having recently been filmed, it had reached a far wider audience than the original text.

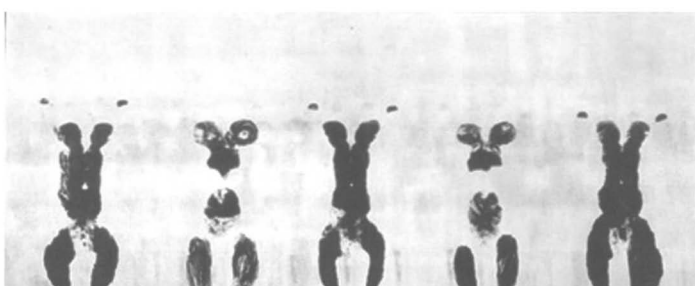
Instead I wanted to do something "new", but which nonetheless came at some of the same questions. In my half-formed conceptualisation, the story would be about a robot that began as a relatively primitive machine – perhaps not even "sentient" as we would understand it. A simple robot butler, perhaps. But this robot would be passed down through successive generations of ownership, each time becoming a bit more sophisticated: the way a family might keep adding floors and wings onto a house, only internalised. In my mental folder, this story was "robot as heirloom". And there it rested, for a good few years, until I came back from Arvon with the determination to actually *write* the thing.

As I've said, though, it just wasn't happening. I spent several days staring at the PC screen, making abortive attempts to get started on the piece. But each time I began, I knew at the back of my mind that something was missing, some vital spark, and that this attempt was as doomed to failure as those preceding it.

Because a story needs more than just one idea. "Robot as heirloom" is a reasonable starting point but it's not sufficient in and of itself. Every story of mine that has ever worked, and received any kind of external recognition, has involved the juxtaposition of more than one idea. And, typically speaking, the two ideas are not on the face of it closely related.

Not that this is a breathtaking revelation. I've seen something similar stated in dozens of other places, especially with regard to the basic craft of short fiction. (A novel probably needs several additional layers of complexity, but an effective story *can* be just two wackily different ideas mashed together). That's all very well, though. As writers, we're always being encouraged to adopt disciplined working practises. To me that implies that we should be able to draw on a toolkit of methodologies, with a specific implement for each problem we're likely to encounter – much as a skilled bricklayer or electrician knows what to do when a particular snag presents itself. Some of these tools are indeed effective: there are efficient, fruitful ways to do research, for instance, and less efficient ways, and the competent writer will eventually figure out the one from the other.

Coming up with ideas is harder to proceduralise, though. Some writers of my acquaintance are fond of saying "ideas are ten a penny", or "ideas are easy". I've never felt that way: ideas are hard bastards! What those writers really mean is that ideas



Anthropometries of the Blue Period by Yves Klein

aren't necessarily the *main* creative bottleneck: it's what you do with the ideas that matters. But still, I've never been more grateful than when I get an idea, especially one that feels immediately right, just the thing I've been searching for. Even if an idea is never sufficient on its own.

So: to get back to "robot as heirloom". That's an idea, but it's not really a fresh one. For the story to work, it's going to need something oblique and unexpected – something that will position the narrative sufficiently far from "Asimov" that the initial seed won't be evident. A second idea, coming in at an odd, unexpected angle.

In my experience, it can't be forced: no amount of staring at the screen, swearing or head-scratching will make any difference. When stuck for inspiration, I've often sat down with a big pile of magazines (New Scientist, New Yorker, National Geographic – it doesn't really matter what) and started paging through, looking for that one nugget or article which will give me what I need. But the success rate for that approach is so low as to be negligible. That's not to say that reading widely is wasted time. Far from it: but what matters, I think, is not the reading you do *now*, but the reading you've *been* doing, the cumulative input over many months and years. Not just reading widely but allowing that material time to mulch down in your memory, to fester and compost and sprout weird, tentacular connections with other things.

My background in astrophysics has undoubtedly shaped my writing. It's also provided a useful marketing handle, something to make me stand out from the crowd. But I've always been careful to read widely outside my field, to soak up influences that wouldn't necessarily be associated with a space scientist. I've had a long interest in modern art, and in fact I've spent far more time in galleries than I ever have in science museums. I keep art books on hand in my writing room, and when I'm stuck or need a break I'll often pull one off the shelf and flick through it (one of the reasons, incidentally, that so many of my spaceships are named after surrealist paintings). While the likelihood of getting any direct inspiration from a painting might be small, the cumulative effect of all that browsing can't be overstated. At the time that I was trying to write my "robot as heirloom" story, for instance, I was already aware of the artist Yves Klein. I was also aware that Klein had patented a particular shade of blue paint: International Klein Blue, or IKB. None of that was in the forefront of my mind at the time, though: it was just down in there somewhere, lodged deep in my memory, along with a million other useless factoids.

Why blue, though? Why not International Klein Red, or International Klein Mauve?

As it happens, I'm also interested in neuroscience, with a particular admiration for the writings of Oliver Sacks, the author of *Awakenings* and the bestselling collection of case histories, *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*. Sacks' work has long been compelling to me: elegant, human, wide-reaching, and as weird and unsettling in its way as any SF. As a consequence I've always been keen to catch his occasional appearances on television. And I remembered watching at some point a documentary in which he discussed his almost obsessive quest to track down a particular shade of blue, encountered once and then never seen again. In fact I've forgotten the particular circumstances of the obsession, but that's beside the point: what mattered was the idea that there was something specific about blue, something in that range of hues capable of exerting a unique hold on our emotions. We don't talk about getting "the greens" or "the oranges". It's the blues.

So there's something going on with blue, and I'd read and absorbed enough outside influences to be at least peripherally aware of it. But, as I've said, I wasn't thinking about that. I was just trying to jump-start a

story into life. Waiting, in fact, for my subconscious to do its bit: to provide that intersecting idea, dredged up from that soggy, poorly catalogued mulch of memories and impressions.

After two or three days of frustration, with nothing to show for my efforts but a handful of sentences, I gave in to the inevitable. Writing can be difficult, and you have to learn not to give up at the first problem. No story wrote itself, and unless you're prepared to put in the hours, to force yourself to work even when the words won't come easily, you'll get nowhere. But I also believe there's a point at which it's sensible to just walk away from the keyboard. If I've been hitting a brick wall for three days, then I'll generally accept the fact that I need to put that project aside. The temptation may be to turn to some other writing task, another story or book, but I'm not convinced that this necessarily helps. You're not giving your mind a chance to free-associate, if you immediately upload another set of writing tasks.

Better, I think, to go for a long walk, or cycle ride, or even watch a film or two. Anything that disengages, for an hour or day, the writer part of your brain.

What I did was go for a swim.

I'd been going to the local swimming pool for a while, but I'd never really paid much attention to what was under the water. That day, though, I remember diving underwater and looking down at the floor and sides of the pool, all gloomy blue-grey colours and trembling, gridded perspectives. It wasn't a particularly new swimming pool, and for as long as I'd been going there'd been talk of it being demolished. Looking down at the base of the pool, indeed, I found myself thinking that it looked a bit past its best. There were little square tiles missing here and there, and the tiles themselves were not as brilliantly clean as they might have been. Not that it was filthy, just a bit run-down and lacklustre. And then, thinking of grubby swimming pools, I remembered the first time I'd seen one of those pool-cleaning robots, a slablike machine toiling away underwater in the grounds of a Turkish hotel. I'd been fascinated by it, because until then I had no idea such things existed.

And in a flash, I had my story.

Robot as heirloom: But the robot would have started life as a pool-cleaning robot, a simple machine with an equally simple function. Over years – decades, centuries, even – it would have been added-to and improved, until a point where it was not only sentient, but almost humanoid in appearance. And this robot, because it was so old, because it had changed hands so many times, would have only a faint understanding of its own origins. It would not remember that it had been a pool-cleaning robot at all. But it would remember being immersed in the shimmering aqueous light of a swimming pool.

And now the robot would be an artist – obsessed – like Yves Klein - with a particular shade of blue.

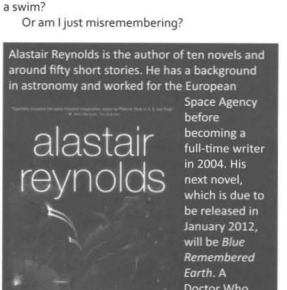
I won't say that the story wrote itself, but from that point on I knew that I would be *able* to write it, and that all the remaining problems would be tractable. I framed the story as a piece of reportage, done by Carrie Clay, a character I'd already used in another piece – she'd interviewed a futuristic celebrity in that one, so it seemed to make sense that she would be in a position to interview the artist here. Since the story was shaping up to be about the fallibility of memory as much as art, I found a way to bring the reporter's own experiences into the plot: as a very old woman, in a posthuman future, she was struggling with a personal decision related to the way she managed her own memories. Her meeting with the artist not only enabled him to get his history across – the main bulk of the story, recounted in reverse flashback – but also enabled Carrie Clay to come to her own decision and, so to speak, "move on". "Zima Blue" need not have been set in space at all, but the use of the Carrie Clay character gave me a pre-existing backdrop and the license to cut loose with some frankly over-the-top imaginative set-pieces, including a reconstruction of Venice on an alien planet (tieing in with art and immortality) and some of the larger constructions of the artist himself. (Tangentially, once I've nailed the basic structure of a story, I go through it looking for places where I can incorporate exactly the kind of widescreen imagery that might look impressive on a magazine cover.)

I knew when I'd finished "Zima Blue" that it was a good piece, at least by my own standards: I felt I'd broken through into a different area of SF. It was one of the first stories I wrote which, while clearly informed by science on some level, wasn't in any sense "hard". On the other hand, it felt personal – I couldn't imagine that anyone else on the planet would have been in a position to form the necessary connections underpinning this story. The story was reasonably well received, although it didn't set the world on fire. But I'm still pleased with it, and the circumstances of its writing taught me a lesson as much as anyone else. You never know what constitutes useful reading or experience, so be as omnivorous as possible. And trust in the subconscious: be willing to let your mind process those connections, even if it means – sometimes – stepping away from the keyboard.

Writing this now, I'm aware of an additional connection that I don't think has ever been apparent to me before, but which may also have played a subtle role. "Bicentennial Man" was filmed with Robin Williams, who also appeared, in the role of Oliver Sacks, in the film Awakenings. Was my mind already following the consequences of that exceedingly tenuous link, even before I went for a swim?

Or am I just misremembering?

Alastair Reynolds is the author of ten novels and around fifty short stories. He has a background in astronomy and worked for the European Space Agency before becoming a full-time writer in 2004. His next novel, which is due to be released in January 2012, will be *Blue Remembered Earth*. A Doctor Who novel, *Harvest Of Time* will appear in 2013.



WELCOME TO T
OF THE UNIVER

As Focus investigates the country's only creative writing degree in sf&f. Martin McGrath interviews programme leader, David Rain.

Middlesex has a "literary" creative writing course and a science fiction and fantasy themed one. Is there something inherently different about writing SF&F that requires a course that focuses specifically on the genre?

Writing fiction is in many ways the same no matter what genre you're writing in: plot, character, theme, setting, point of view, these are things that all short story writers and novelists have to grapple with. Different genres, however, do have different emphases. Teaching science fiction and fantasy on its own enables us to focus, in detail, on those things: world-building, technology, the fantastical and how to use it, to name but three.

The two courses share modules on character, narrative, place and voice. Do the students in the literary and SF&F themes bring different approaches to these shared parts of the course?

Yes, and that's a good thing. The writing exercises we set tend to be very broad, usually focusing on technique rather than subject matter. Therefore students can adapt them to their own interests. For example, if the theme is place, a mainstream writer might describe a real place. A fantasy writer might invent one. Both are okay. The question is whether the description works as a piece of writing.

Do students in the two courses bring (or need) different skills?

They all need the same basic equipment: an interest in writing and language, and a determination to explore these. This is an MA course, so it's not for beginners. Normally we would expect a first degree of some sort, but it doesn't need to be in English or Creative Writing. Most importantly we want to see evidence that the student is already writing. Some students have been published already. Students may have been part of a writer's group, or attended an Arvon course or Milford workshop. But it's the fact that they write that counts. We look at a writing sample from each prospective student. It doesn't have to be perfect. It does have to show promise.

How are the specifically SF&F-themed sections of the course different from their literary equivalents?

On the SF&F modules, all the examples of literature that students look at are taken from those genres. Workshops consider the work specifically from the point of view of genre: not just "Is this a good story?" but "Is this a good SF story?" And how do we tell? (That's the sort of question we'd be encouraging students to ask, and try to answer.)

An MA costs a significant sum of money to complete (fees for the Middlesex University course are £5100 for an EU student) - what do you think a graduate emerging from this course possesses that other writers don't?

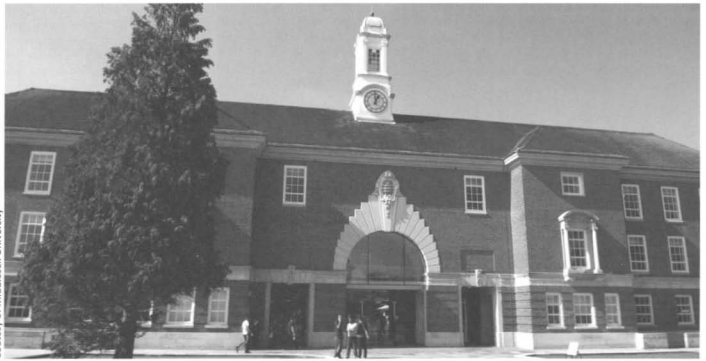
Writers are all different, as is the process of learning to write for each new writer. You don't need a degree to be a writer. And having a degree won't, in itself, make you a writer: let's be frank about that. But students graduating from a course like this will have attended a great many writing workshops, made numerous contacts with other aspiriing writers (many of which will continue beyond the course), heard guest talks and lectures from writers, publishers and agents, and worked on a manuscript with the help of experienced tutors ... If all goes well, the student should emerge much better informed about the realities of writing and publishing, and much better able to carry his or her work forward. No, it won't make you a writer. But if you've got it in you to be one, it might help you get there faster.

What do the people involved in teaching a course like this get out of it?

I can only answer from my own point of view, but after spending a lot of time teaching undergraduate students I find it satisfying to work with people who are at a much higher level as writers, often on the verge of making a real breakthrough to professional-quality work. We've had some very talented students. Many times I've felt I'm learning as much from them as they are learning from me.

Formerly writing as Tom Arden, David Rain was best known for the Orokon series - two installments received nominations for the British Fantasy Society award for best novel. His first novel as David Rain, *The Gravity of Americans* will be released by Atlantic Books in 2012.

THE MASTERS RSE



Coutesy of Middlesex University

GOING BACK TO THE ACADEMY

Paul Graham Raven talks about why he's about to start a creative writing Masters at Middlesex.

This October, I become a student again for the first time in fifteen years.

I've been accepted onto a Masters degree in Creative Writing (Science Fiction & Fantasy) at Middlesex University, as what is referred to as a "non-traditional student". My last formal tuition in English was in 1992 when I finished my GCSEs, and I dropped out of an engineering degree about half a decade later; many universities now offer the opportunity to substitute real-world experience and/or (in this case) a portfolio of work to substitute for the bachelor's degree one would normally need to gain entry, and it's on that basis I was offered my place.

Among the well-wishings and congratulations of colleagues, friends and family, it's been hard to miss the generous scattering of raised eyebrows. As Jim McDermott pointed out in a passionate essay at SF Signal earlier this year [1], the doctrine of financially-focussed upward mobility leaves students of the arts and humanities looking like grotesque examples of economic waste at both a personal and societal level. I'm operating under few illusions, here (or at least under fewer than have been assumed of me): a Masters in creative writing isn't going to open doors to big-money employment further down the line, and - given my status as a mature student bootstrapping his way back into the opposite wing of the academy to the one he dropped out of many years ago - it's actually going to eat a lot of money in the meantime.

Not only will that sheet of vellum make me little more employable than I already am, but the industry in which it will prepare me to compete

Courtesy of Middlesex University

the more one learns, the more one realises remains yet to be learned. I think I'm at a point where high-level tuition and a heavy work schedule will be of genuine benefit to my work

is currently undergoing the sort of technological upheaval that has left the music industry floundering drunkenly around in search of workable post-digital business models. Shrinking advances for those novelists who haven't springboarded into the public eye by way of reality TV; the thinning and stretching of the Long Tail as the established horizontals of genre publishing fragment into the niche verticals of subsubgenre and mash-ups; the withering of paying markets for short fiction; the spectres of ebook piracy and Amazon's scary market-share haunting the chrome-glass boardrooms of the big publishing houses... on the face of it, studying to be a written-word storyteller at this point in history looks about as wise as starting an apprenticeship in horse-buggy detailing circa 1908. So why on earth am I doing it?

Because it's what I want to do.

I've spent the last eight years writing, learning in public, working away at the million words of crap one is supposed to write before one writes something worth reading. (I'm not sure if one is supposed to count one's non-fiction output toward that total, but I'm doing it anyway, and I guess - or maybe hope - that I'm getting close.) But the bootstrapper's learning curve flattens off like a cliff giving way to a mesa that turns out to be a valley floor, and the more one learns, the more one realises remains yet to be learned. I think I'm at a point where high-level tuition and a heavy work schedule will be of genuine benefit to my work.

There's also a form of economic self-leverage involved. Every writer in the world will tell you that you have to make time to write with, and that doing so alongside the demands of employment (or family, or both) is a fight. In a way, I'm looking at my course fees as a way of purchasing myself a year within which half my working day is intended to be used for fiction writing from the outset. Deadlines are a big motivator for me, as is the deeply-inculcated fear of letting people down; my plan is to use these incentives and spurs to build a discipline of regular writing at the same time that I'm soaking up fresh insights into the work. In short, I'm in it for the arse-kicking; the call to shit or get off the pot is more compelling when there's someone bashing on the cubicle door.

I am not without my moments of doubt and angst, of course. What if I collapse under the pressure, flake on my deadlines, burn out on the hard shoulder? What if I complete the course, yet still never publish another piece of fiction in my life? And what if - most horrifying of all - I turn out to not have the raw talent that good tuition can polish up into genuine skill?

To which my only answer, after a lot of soul-searching, is "then I will know so for sure". I am comforted to some degree by the numerous biographies of writers, artists and musicians I've read over the years; self-doubt isn't a universal characteristic by any means, but it seems common enough that I'm not unduly worried by my worries, if that makes any sense. Failure is always a risk, and I've racked up a good amount of it along the meandering course of my life so far, but much of it has been failure born of omission, or of insufficient commitment. Having drawn a bead on the one thing I'd rather do than anything else in the world, it's time to hunt it down or fall in noble pursuit.

To attempt something is to invite failure; to not attempt it is to ensure failure. Wish me luck, eh?

Footnotes:
[1] http://bit.ly/qDABjL

A TALE OF TWO MASTERS

Gary Budgen's first assault on a creative writing degree didn't work out. Now at Middlesex, he compares the experiences.

There are vastly more writers without any formal qualifications than there are with. So why do an MA in Creative Writing? There was always the urge to be a student again, to study for the sake of it, because it is enjoyable. But really that's not good enough.

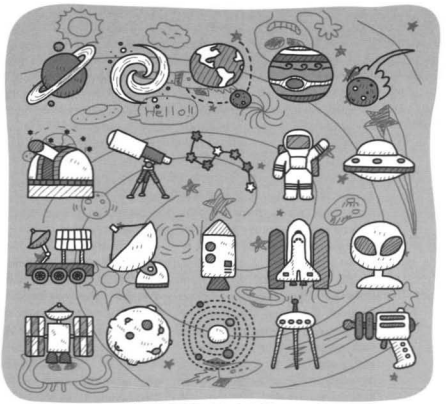
One of the first books I ever read about writing was Sprague de Camp's *Science Fiction Handbook*. He gives an account of a creative writing class where the tutor asks the pupils if they want to write. When they all reply that they do, he wonders why they aren't back home writing. It's a valid question. Life has so many interruptions, why embark on a course? Why not just get on with it?

My genuine motive, I hope, was to become a better writer. But better in what sense? Experience of two creative writing masters courses has taught me some caution. The first was a 'straight' Creative Writing MA. This was, I was told early on, about writing 'literary fiction'. It was an odd experience trying to write science fiction and fantasy in that context. My view was that any fiction could be 'literary'; it wasn't all about the subject matter, was it?

I dropped out after a term for personal reasons (money, children). I wanted to stay, to keep probing the place inside where I had been left so uncertain. I felt like I'd reached the point people talk about in therapy: problems had been uncovered, now the cure might begin. My writing had been investigated, diagnosed. Soon I would heal, improve, get better. Sometimes this felt liberating; sometimes it felt like I'd been pressganged by a Leavisite cult.

I still wonder where my writing would be now if I'd stayed.

Years later and I saw an ad for the MA in Creative Writing at Middlesex University. It had a path in science fiction and fantasy. I decided I would be a student again. It is tough, going in the evenings after work, but I can say, after a year completed, that the experience has been a positive one. Maybe I had changed, become more confident. Perhaps the experience of the previous course meant I was going in prepared. I hope I understood now in what way I wanted to be 'better'.



THIS STUFF BELONGS TO US!
A selection of the material formally excluded from "proper literature" by The Great Genre Treaty of Lucerne, 1877.

The course is run by David Rain (interviewed on page 10). Also involved is the noted critic Farah Mendlesohn, author of *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. There is a genuine respect and knowledge of our genre. Last year the Science Fiction and Fantasy Short Form module was taught by Rob Shearman who wrote the fine *Doctor Who*_episode "Dalek" and is the author of many short stories. He managed to entice a number of non-genre writers into taking the module through his infectious exuberance. This module was, for me, the highlight of the year. It involved an intense period of producing a short story a week with work being submitted by e-mail to the whole group. The feedback was critical and constructive. The intensity was the key for me. And this, I think, is one of the benefits of a structured course. It provides what can only be described as a driven experience, forcing one to get on with it in a way that de Camp's tutor would have admired.

It's not the qualification you do it for. It certainly isn't sold as some path to success (whatever that is). But, I think, it can be a step to becoming the writer you want to be. Just watch out for the cultists.

Christopher Priest's
MASTERCLASS
No. 8: Structure

Literary structure is one of the least understood elements of writing, and (thank goodness) one of the least discussed. A search in Google for 'literary structure' will induce deep and lasting bouts of depression and paranoia. Don't try it. Structure is one of those concepts about writing that the academics have seized on, and in the process have rather missed the point, while in fact a working appreciation of how structure really works is intrinsic to the art of writing.

The structure of a piece of fiction is its foundation, the ultimate basis of the story, the plot, the characters and everything else. A badly structured story will give its author a difficult time (and, in turn, its reader), while one with a good or instinctively created structure will seem to write itself. It is therefore something writers should be aware of, and an understanding of it, or at least a considered attempt to understand it, will always be a help.

What then is it?

Negatives first, what it is not.

It is not the shape of a story (although that comes into it). Nor is it the style, or the way the characters are described or made to interact, the idea, or the surprise ending, and it is not even the plot ... although all those come into it too.

Style comes close, though, and as a matter of fact thinking about literary style is a good way of getting a handle on the meaning of structure.

Work through it like this: We all know what style is, or have opinions about it. We say we can recognize good style, or bad style. We declare that a certain writer's use of language is 'stylish', or of another that the work lacks style. Some writers are recognized as stylists, and we use that word. We speak of a fine style, a poor style. We are often sure about style, even if we are hard pushed to say why any particular book has, or lacks, a good style.

Appreciation of style is a subjective matter. What one person might hail as a fine or advanced or sophisticated style, might seem to someone else to be over-ornate, mannered, fussy, irritating. The same might be true in the opposite direction: what one person thinks of as lacking style could seem to someone else to be vernacular, racy, grungy.

Even so, it's difficult to describe a good style and almost impossible to try to define it. We know what we're talking about when we talk about it, even if we don't agree on specific examples.

There is a parallel in this with a story's structure. We make many of the same sort of subjective judgments about structure.

A search in Google for 'literary structure' will induce deep and lasting bouts of depression and paranoia. Don't try it.

For instance, we might say that a book has opened slowly, or that it has a weak ending. We remark that there are loose ends in the plot. Or that the story felt as if it lost its way halfway through. But the same comments can be turned around: someone else might say that the book opened with long and attractive descriptive passages, and that the plot developed in an unexpected direction. It had an ambiguous ending.

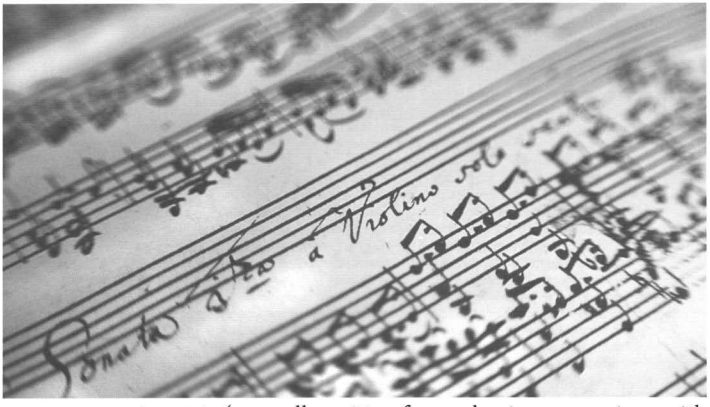
Such problems with a book (or its qualities) could certainly be connected to the plot, or the character development, or the poor (or good) use of language. But underlying all these would be the work's structure, and the way the writer has created that.

After all, beginning-middle-end is the classic literary structure, accepted by all.

Modernist fiction sometimes rearranges that (the famous words '... but not necessarily in that order' were spoken by the film director Jean-Luc Godard), and we are all familiar with it now. But modernist effects, or post-modernist techniques, are merely variants on the structure, rather than an abandonment of it.

Here's an example of why structure is not the same as plot:

Let's imagine a story, a plot, about a young man who makes a startling scientific discovery. His breakthrough will have a world-shaking impact when it is made known, changing the lives of millions of people. He is just about to make his findings public when the



JRossol

A sonata (normally written for a solo piano, or a piano with one other instrument) traditionally consists of three sections – exposition, development and recapitulation.

organization he works for abruptly fires him, and closes its doors against him. There is a violent attempt on his life. His girlfriend, who acts as his invaluable assistant and collaborator, vanishes. Her father, an important politician, is discredited in a sex scandal ...

This plot could be made into a thriller, a comedy, a science fiction adventure, a political story, a tragedy, a satire ... it could also be made into a film, a musical, a TV serial, an opera, a stage play.

While the plot would remain more or less the same, the underlying structure of the story would have to be different in each case.

There is also an analogy with the structure of music, which can be useful.

A sonata (normally written for a solo piano, or a piano with one other instrument) traditionally consists of three sections – exposition, development and recapitulation. Translate that into literary terms, and you would have: thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Would that not be an ideal structure for, say, an essay or a short story?

It's not a formula, and it does not dictate anything about the subject of an essay, or the plot of a story, but it does provide a sort of hidden skeleton, an armature, an infrastructure on which something can be based.

Nor does it make anything more than vague suggestions about the shape. The 'thesis' – the starting proposition for an article – can be as long or short as you wish, as could the opening situation in a short story. The 'antithesis' would present opposing or dissenting arguments, or in fiction unexpected events or discoveries, creating tension of one sort or another. The piece ends with the 'synthesis', a rationalization of the arguments or the plot, and a satisfactory climax.

This kind of structure can be used repeatedly, and indeed *is* used repeatedly.

Still on music as a kind of structural template: Years ago I was learning about, and becoming fascinated by, the counterpoint compositions of J. S. Bach, which at the time seemed to me were almost mathematically precise in the way they used similar but contrasting harmonies, repeating, overlapping and coinciding. I wondered if it would be possible to write a piece of fiction in four contrapuntal voices, the timescales and the plot and the characters weaving in and out and around each other in the way Bach's music did. The result was a novel with the word 'fugue' in the title – somewhat fortuitous, since the word 'fugue' also has the meaning of a loss of memory and associated wandering, which was one of the main subjects of *Fugue for a Darkening Island*.

The problem here is that the *Fugue* kind of structure comes close to literary *shape*. I see the difference now as being that literary structure lies hidden within, while literary shape is detectable from without.

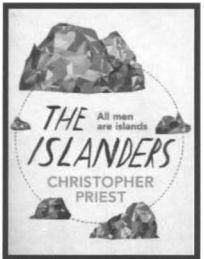
Although they are similar they are not quite the same thing, and it's important to know the difference. However, as a young novelist I found this experiment instructive, and made me aware of some of the possibilities offered by working with a clear structure in mind.

One should be careful, though, of extending the musical analogy too far. I would not wish to go out on a limb and try to create a structural theory based on, say, a concerto, a chorale or a symphony. However, all narrative arts do contain structure, from which a writer can borrow ideas (or to put that less blatantly, can find inspiration). All drama works from structure, although theatrical drama has concerns about staging that do not involve a novelist or story writer – films, however, offer hundreds of fascinating possibilities for structural innovation. For example, some of the films that have recently emerged from Central and South America are genuinely breaking new ground with their use of daring narrative structures.

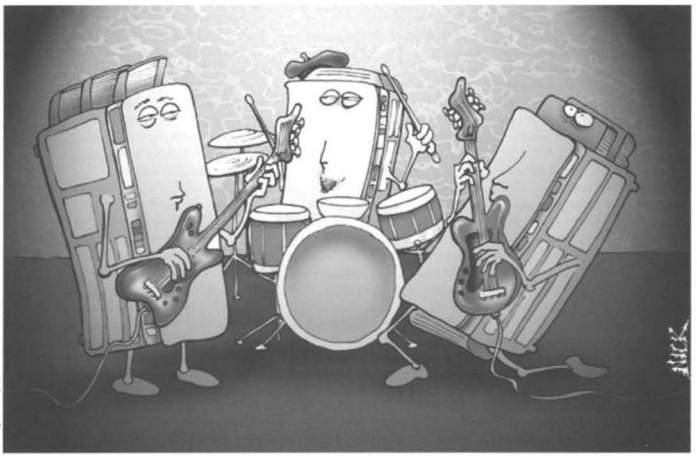
This short discourse on structure is intended to be helpful, although it's obvious that it is a technical subject, vulnerable to many subjective approaches and opinions. Therein lies its fascination, of course, but it makes it a tricky subject for a didactic essay.

If it has created fog in the reader's mind, where hitherto there was only clear air, let's remember that an entire body of modern critical literature has been based on a study of literary structure. Here is how Collins English Dictionary defines structuralism: *An approach to ... literature that interprets and analyses its material in terms of oppositions, contrasts, and hierarchical structures, esp. as they might reflect universal mental characteristics or organizing principles*.

I'm not at all sure I know what that means, nor do I particularly wish to.



Christopher Priest has published eleven novels, four short story collections and a number of other books, including critical works, biographies, novelizations and children's non-fiction.His previous novel, *The Separation*, won both the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the BSFA Award in 2003. He has been nominated four times for the Hugo award. His new novel, *The Islanders*, is available now from Gollancz in harback.



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Photocopiers jamming

News from Orbit

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

BEING OUT OF TOUCH CAN BE GOOD FOR YOU

Terry Jackman reports from a week at the Milford Writers' Conference

I'm missing all the good Autumn cons right now. Wish I was there but needs must, and I hope those of you who can make it enjoy them for me.

On the plus side I have just been at Milford, one of the longest established writers' 'conferences' in the UK. It's a week-long residential course currently held near Caernarvon in Wales, deliberately far from the madding crowd. The Milford system has been widely copied. If you've been to other courses, one day or more, chances are you've experienced it already: concentrated group critiquing. Not for the faint-hearted, but then having previous sales are an entry requirement.

I'd never been before and was really looking forward to it – until Jacey and John started regaling me with tales of 'the demon vegetarian chef' on the drive. I am not a fan of pulses, even for one meal, and when they got to the previous year's group revolt, that resulted only in a 'very grey' fish pie...

Happily the first meal was spag bol, and the rest of the week saw meat offered, with a veggie alternative, most days. Plus there was cake, and cake, and much wine, port and beers [and Marsala I confess] was consumed, though without any hint of loutish behaviour, honest. Well, we were all too busy reading, frantically, most of the hours we weren't in meetings. It was definitely a case of eyes down...

It was hard work, not a holiday but I'd recommend it to the serious. And I like being out of touch; I just warned various people, like orbiter group leaders, that I would be. If you're one of those addicts [sad but true] who can't survive being out of mobile range [for most the nearest signal required a walk to the top of the next hill] and even wifi range at least part of the time, then I hear there are sometimes Mini Milfords, weekends, that you can look out for. But really, being cut off for a bit is a great aid to concentrating on what you're actually there for. I hope to be able to make it into one of the fifteen places again.

The Milford Writers Conference is an annual event for established and new writers. For more information visit **www.milfordsf.co.uk**

PROOF OF READING

A fellow orbiter suggested I try the proofreading self test online at:

www.sfep.org.uk

Now it's your turn. Why should I suffer alone?

Try it for both curiosity value and as a reminder of how much we need to focus on what's really there. I did know I wasn't as good proofing text on-screen as I was on the 'real' page but I ignored that and did it without printing. Result? I just failed to pass. See if you can do better on your first try.

SALES FROM ORBIT

The Orbit writers' groups allow BSFA members to improve their writing by sharing stories with a small number of other writers. You receive comments on your stories and learn by studying and commenting on the work of other writers. Here are some of the recent sales made by current members of the Orbit groups.

Rob Harkness's short story "Pedal Power" will appear in the anthology *Will it go Faster if I Push This?* published by Static Movement. "Jack in the Box" reprinted in the BFS 40th anniversary anthology *Full Fathoms Forty.* And Rob's story "In Vino Veritas" will be published in *Satyrs* anthology, from Wicked East Press.

Elinor Caiman Sands was a semi-finalist in the Writers of the Future contest.

Martin McGrath's "Eskragh", originally published in *Albedo One*, will be republished by *Dark Fiction Magazine.*

Geoff Nelder has had his Aria trilogy of novels accepted by LL Publications.

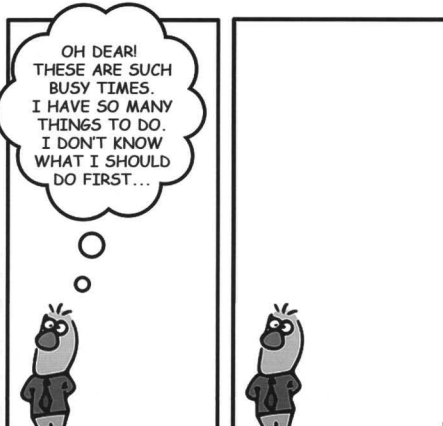
Rosie Oliver's flash fiction story "There and Here" was finalist in the Lady Denman Cup competition on the theme of the Women's Institute in 2025!

Sean Jones, a new member, sold his short story "Nexxus Point" and it will appear in a future issue of *Absent Willow Review.*

Congratulations to all these Orbiter members for their successes. If you're a BSFA member whos has recently sold a story or novel, we'd love to hear your news.

Terry Jackman, is co-ordinator of Orbit, the BSFA's online writers' workshops. Contact her via terryjackman@mypostoffice.co.uk.

WRITING STRAT
DIFFICULT TIMES



http://geekandpoke.typepad.com/geekandpoke/

BUSY TIMES

Keith Brooke on finding the time to fit wri

I've loved working on my current novel, *alt.human*. It's what I'm thinking of as extreme trad SF, a gritty story crammed full of aliens and big ideas, and quite unlike anything I've written before.

But it hasn't exactly come easily...

In real life, my day job consists of five days' worth of hours crammed into four long days. The job is demanding at the best of times, but right now we've been put under ridiculous pressure and the cracks are starting to show. It's incredibly hard to step away from it and switch off: I'm stressed and angry, I'm not sleeping, and instead I lie there through the small hours with my head full of day-job crap. When I manage to get a writing day, it's hard to immerse myself in the novel and forget about all the other stuff. The novel itself isn't helping: by its nature the book is full of ideas and multiple strands and characters and species that I need to hold in my head. This is possibly the hardest novel I've ever tried to write.

This isn't unusual: most writers have other jobs too. Most of them have lives. I'm not pleading a special case: "Look at how hard it is for me to be *creative*, dahling!"

So how do we do it? What's the secret of juggling it all?

The answer, of course, is that there is no secret. It's more a case of having a toolkit, a portfolio of strategies and tricks that can help you get on and write, even under the most trying of circumstances. Other writers have it much harder than I do.

Things were much easier when I started out. I went straight from university to writing full-time. I had the luxury that I could shut myself away in complete peace and quiet, for hours on end, and just write. I acquired such bad habits from that! If I didn't have at least two or three hours free for it, I didn't feel I could write. If I couldn't find absolute peace and quiet, I couldn't write. I didn't quite reach the stage of being unable to perform unless I had a bowl of orange M&Ms, but it wasn't far off.

I had to learn it all over again when circumstances forced me to find a day job.

I had to learn that even if my head was full of crap, when I sat down at my computer I could force myself to lose myself in the world of my story, and everything else would recede. I had to learn that two or more hours free was a luxury, not a necessity: you can do a lot in half an hour; if I'm in full flow, I can sit down for half an hour and produce 500 words; if I'm not in full flow I can do some editing, make some notes, anything to help lodge the story in my head again.

If I have ten minutes while I'm waiting for other people to turn up for a meeting, I can get my phone out and start making notes on my work in progress. If I don't have anything to make notes about? I ask myself questions. How well do I know my protagonist? That scene I've just written: how can I go back into it and twist the perspective, make it sharper, make it *different* and

EGIES IN S

geek and pokе

iting into a busy life.

deeper?

On lunchbreaks, with the wonders of high-speed internet and cloud computing I can open up my work in progress and write a couple of hundred more words. Or fifty more words. Sometimes just re-reading and adding a sentence or two can make all the difference in keeping the story in my head for when I can come back for a longer writing session.

Right now I'm at the halfway point in *alt.human* and I'm stepping back from it. Because of the bitty nature of my writing sessions over the past few months I know there are lots of loose threads, lots of sparks of ideas that I've made a note to go back and further develop. So before my ragged band of protagonists set off into part two I'm going right back to the start to work on all the bits that would benefit from enriching, pushing harder, digging deeper. And as I go, I'm making notes for part two.

I'm a word counter. On a full writing day I'm disappointed if I don't get well past 2000 words of new material. So spending writing time on this revisiting – fixing and researching my own material – seems incredibly unproductive. At the end of the day my word count might be minus 200, or zero, or six. It doesn't exactly feel like progress.

But it is: the story's in my head again. All the little details in part one that might flourish into sub-plots in part two; all the deepening of what's gone before, making what's to come all the more vivid even before I've written it.

Apart from anything else: it's one hell of a confidence boost. Writing in difficult times, when life's knocking the stuffing out of you, isn't easy; it makes it hard to believe in what you're doing. There's one scene I've just edited that has done me a world of good: a kaleidoscope of the alien, a bombardment of images and impressions. When I reached that scene I started to believe in the world of my story again.

There are lots of ways to keep momentum going in a long piece of work, but sometimes stepping back from it is more effective than plunging ever onwards.

So these are strategies for keeping going with a novel, even when life gets in the way. But more generally, how does a writer fit the act of actual writing in when s/he has any of the following: family, day job, friends, day to day commitments, a life? [delete as appropriate]

As well as developing the knack for making the most of every opportunity - journeys, waiting for meetings, lunchbreaks, etc - you can can add the following strategies to your writing toolkit:

Getting up early. This is an approach I've used at various times. Generally it would be difficult to do: I start work at the day job at 7.30 in the morning, so to get any useful writing time before then I'd need to be getting up at around 5am, I reckon. In the past I've had spells of getting up at 6.30am, writing for a couple of hours and getting in to work for 9. It's been very productive, but wasn't sustainable for more than a few weeks at a time. It's great when you need a burst of productivity and evenings and weekends just don't allow that. Having said that, there have been times when I've managed to fit in regular 6am starts, a trick that has proved incredibly useful in keeping the momentum going..

Grab an hour after work. If you finish work at 5.30pm, why not stay in the office until 6.30 and write for an hour? Or stop off at a coffee shop or a scenic parking place on the way home to write for an hour? Or grab that hour as soon as you get home? Then by 6.30 you still have the evening ahead of you. Really, if you did a long commute instead, you'd have less of an evening than this.

Carve out some time late at night – those midnight to 3am stretches. Lots of writers are at their best writing late, so why not give it a go? I chatted to one writer about this recently and this is his preferred way of working, but I've only rarely worked like this myself: it's not my

best time, and I do try to have a life, but when I've done it, it has worked well.

When you actually manage to get a good long writing day, make the most of it. When my partner was away for the weekend recently, I did exactly this. I had a good writing session in the morning, then took a break for lunch. Then another good session in the afternoon and I was well past my word-count target for the day. It would have been so easy to pour myself a glass of 25 year-old Linkwood and call it a day. Instead, I had something to eat and then sat down to write again. Any words I wrote during that session would be a bonus. In the end I added another 1500 words – almost as good as squeezing another writing day in.

One of the loveliest presents I've received was a long writing weekend: my partner and I went to a bed and breakfast in north Norfolk; I wrote for a few hours in the mornings and then we did holiday things for the afternoons and evenings. That's such a chilled way to work and I was incredibly productive.

In a perfect world, when I'm writing a first draft I like to write intensely: write every day until it's finished, then fix it later (and believe me, it always needs a lot of fixing). I think my record is to write a complete novel draft in 16 days, although normally it takes much longer (and it took me several years to sell that particular novel).

Nowadays I don't have the luxury of long blocks of writing time, so I have to compromise and find ways to keep that momentum going. Nobody says it's easy, but if you're serious about your writing you can't duck the challenges!

Keith Brooke is the author of eleven published novels (that he'll admit to) and several short story collections. For ten years he ran *infinity plus* (www.infinityplus.co.uk), publishing over a hundred top authors; now he runs *infinity plus ebooks* (www.infinityplus.co.uk/books), with full-length books from Eric Brown, Garry Kilworth, Anna Tambour, John Grant and others and the new line of short *infinity plus singles*, featuring work by Lisa Tuttle, Kit Reed, Eric Brown and more. His next books are *Strange Divisions and Alien Territories: the sub-genres of science fiction* (editor, Palgrave Macmillan, December 2011) and *alt.human* (Solaris, June 2012).

NEED TO KNOW

Lavie Tidhar reveals the habits of highly successful authors. Real writers...

... write in their own blood. Never a pen.

... prove their superiority over other writers by challenging them to a duel. Of jelly wrestling. To the death.

... get their mums to blurb their books.

... **always** use a variety of fonts and colours to make the book more INTERESTING.

... have really interesting lives, climb volcanoes, prospect for gold, sail the seven seas, explore Antarctica, train as astronauts or circus acrobats and lie. All the time.

... that last one isn't true.

... the answer to the Two Guards Riddle is: "If I asked the *other* guard, which door would he say leads to safety?" Take the door opposite to the one he points to since both guards would point to the wrong door.

... where was I?

... ah yes. Real writers have katana blades on their walls.

... To be initiated into publishing new writers must spend two months in the Siberian wilderness hunting the rare Siberian tiger, or Amur.

... reportedly only 40 Siberian tigers still live in the wilds, which is exactly the number of slots still available for new writers.

THE SIBERIAN TIGER, OR AMUR, IS THE NATURAL PREY OF ALL COMMITTED ASPIRING AUTHORS

... all of publishing is now controlled by a single shell company. Its owner is a recluse widely rumoured to be an immortal Roman general over 2000 years old.

... no I won't give you his fax number.

... to become an editor you need to sacrifice a goat to the Mesopotamian god Ba'al. To become a senior editor, it needs to be a young child.

... proof readers *don't* go to heaven.

... in fact publishing parties consist of wild hunts accompanied by the cry "Release the proof-hounds!"

... that is pretty much the only satisfaction writers get. Apart from beer.

... where was I?

... oh yes.

... get out while you still can.

... seriously.

... don't say I didn't warn you.

FORGETTING TO BREATHE

David L Clements on extreme astronomy

As an observational astronomer, I get to travel to various supposedly exotic locations. People get envious when I tell them I'm going to Hawaii to observe, and they don't believe me when I tell them that to me, Hawaii is a cold windswept mountaintop, working nights.

Of course it's not just the cold and the nights that are the problem. At 14,000 feet, the Mauna Kea Observatory on the Big Island is above a third of the atmosphere. Nothing about the human body works properly at this altitude unless you've done some serious acclimatization, and even then things can go wrong. Observers sleep, when they can, at the accommodation block at 10,000 feet, but this is never restful when you're spending twelve or more hours a night on the summit. And when you're on the summit things can get quite strange.

My first observing trip provided a useful demonstration of this. You expect to get out of breath easily, and the infamous staircase at the UK Infrared Telescope (UKIRT), from the control room down to the toilets, is a case in point. It's short enough to run up, but at 14,000 feet you should never try to do this unless you like hypoxia.

But what gets to you is the unexpected.

I am sitting at a workstation, examining some of my data, when I get the feeling I'm forgetting something important. I check around me to make sure the telescope's not stopped and that we're still taking data. No trouble there. I check the weather monitor to see if the clouds are rolling in. Nothing there either, and these problems seem rather too distant, too impersonal to be what's worrying me.

I'm forgetting something important, that I do all the time by instinct or reflex, but that isn't currently working.

Breathing.

Yes, that's it!

A few deep inhalations later and I'm feeling much better, and my CO_2 levels are back to the point where they can trigger the reflex again.

It's not just small problems like forgetting to breathe that make the mountain hazardous, though. You lose IQ points the higher you go, and this can affect you in very strange ways. It's the things you least expect that catch you out, even when it comes to the simple set-up procedures. For example, we managed to waste fifteen minutes one night working out how to align an instrument on the sky – just because we couldn't remember which way was east.

But observers have to face only a limited set of problems. Those building telescopes have to face new issues throughout the day as they assemble some of the most complicated constructions on the planet. And altitude doesn't help.

Hence this conversation reputedly overheard at the construction site of an observatory that shall remain nameless:

Construction worker at the summit: We have a problem with this particular part.

HQ at sea level: What is it?

CW: It's the wrong size.

HQ: The wrong size?

CW: Yes – I've cut it three times, and it's still too short!

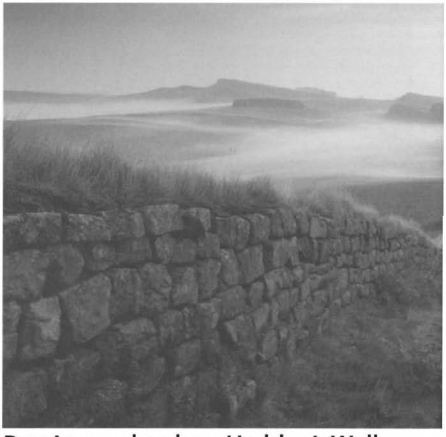
HQ: Come down the mountain – now!

Fortunately the effects of the altitude aren't permanent. Once you're at sea level everything goes back to normal. In fact, it's a little better than normal after any time at the summit. You're suddenly reminded just how much air there is, how much oxygen there is in it – and that breathing is not a major form of exercise.

DOING IT FOR REAL...

Ever seen the job you do portrayed in print or on the screen and thought to yourself: "That's not right!"? Why not tell your fellow writers what it's really like.

SHOWING, TELL
MAKING THE ST



Dev Agarwal on how Hadrian's Wall cause most common pieces of advice given to w

In a writing workshop some years ago, I submitted a story "Grotto" about Roman soldiers at Hadrian's wall. The story is told from the point of view of a 19 year old officer, Vitalus, and concerns the clash of culture between the men he commands and the ancient Britons they encounter. Most of the story takes place in the wilderness beyond the Romano-British frontier but, inevitably, I referred to Hadrian's Wall. Indeed, why write a story about the Romans in Britain, if you're not going to mention the wall?

In an early scene, Vitalus is thinking about the wall, and reflects that it cut "the land in two with seventy nine miles of earth and stone and wood." A fellow workshopper wrote on my manuscript, "Show, don't tell." This is a popular term in writing workshops and wikipedia defines "show, don't tell" as "an admonition to ... [allow] the reader to experience the story through a character's action, words, thoughts, and feelings rather than through the narrator's exposition and description."

Knowing when to show, to dramatise the story's events, and when to tell, to summarise, is a fundamental step in telling a story. It also requires work to develop this skill set. In this instance, my fellow workshopper's remark felt like a reflex action. The reader had just been told something – the wall was 79 miles long – so according to the rule, the act of telling must be wrong. I should have shown the reader instead.

I remember looking at that comment and thinking, all right, but *how?*

How do you *show* that the wall is 79 miles? Do you have Vitalus walk a mile, then reflect that he's got another 78 to go? (That assumes he's starting at one end of the wall rather than a point in the middle – where my story was set.) But then aren't you just recreating the problem on a micro-scale? If you can't tell the reader that the wall is seventy nine miles long, how can you tell them that he's just walked one mile? So does that mean you show that he travelled one mile? Presumably you do that by avoiding any telling here, and only show the length of the journey. Once you've done that, you then show the reader that Vitalus does that another seventy eight times until you've shown the length of Hadrian's Wall. Then, assuming that you and the reader haven't parted company at this point, you can move on with the story.

There were a number of reasons to reject that workshop advice. One is that the story was 6000 words long and I was trying to make each word count. The length of Hadrian's Wall was a detail on the way to the real story – which isn't about how long the wall is, but what it shielded the Romans from, and how a 19 year old from Italy reacts to the blasted heath of Northumberland in winter and what he finds there.

Spotting where a writer is "showing" or "telling" is quite easy when you're presented with a manuscript. It's therefore a comfortable place for the beginner to start making comments. Writing workshops can be intimidating.

NG AND
ORY WORK

d him to think carefully about one of the iters.

That's apparent to most of us if we imagine what the writer must feel like, offering his or her manuscript to a group of strangers for the first time. But equally, as the reader being asked to comment, there's a challenge as well. Your thoughts, and your advice, are on display to everyone else in the group. The last workshop I attended required people to read a story and comment on it within twenty four hours, every day for a week. Staring at the printed word and deciding whether the story works (on both the fine scale of line by line and at the "wide angle lens" of the manuscript as a whole) is tough. You're on display as a critic and your fellow workshoppers always react to each other as well as to the writer. Therefore, if a reader finds a line of exposition, such as that a wall is seventy nine miles long, then it's a safe place for them to repeat what they've learned by rote.

Understanding how to craft a story as a whole, and how to support a writer in shaping their story, means sharpening our understanding of how to control the narrative. And that includes learning when telling is the right tool.

It confuses many writers starting out (and this includes me) that there seem to be rules to telling a story. Another maxim is that you can break all of those rules, as long as you understand what they are. The novelist Francine Prose says in her book *Reading Like a Writer* that, "the warning against telling leads to a confusion that causes novice writers to think that everything should be acted out...when in fact the responsibility of showing should be assumed by the energetic and specific use of language."

Telling is efficient; it conveys details which build to create a whole. Part of the difficult task of shaping fiction is knowing which aspects of your story need to be dramatised – and how to both *show* and *tell* in a way that makes your prose unique and entertaining, and something that people want to read for pleasure. Deliberate and appropriate use of narrative summary, the "telling" part of your story, enables the dramatised events to come into focus. Telling conveys details which build to create a whole.

Ursula LeGuin, in her book *Steering the Craft*, puts the discussion of showing and telling into the context of narrative flow, using the terms *crowding* and *leaping*. "By crowding I mean keeping the story full, always full of what's happening in it; keeping it moving, not slacking and wandering into irrelevancies; keeping it interconnected with itself. But leaping is just as important. What you leap over is what you leave out. And what you leave out is infinitely more than what you leave in. There's got to be white space around the word, silence around the voice...Only the relevant belongs."

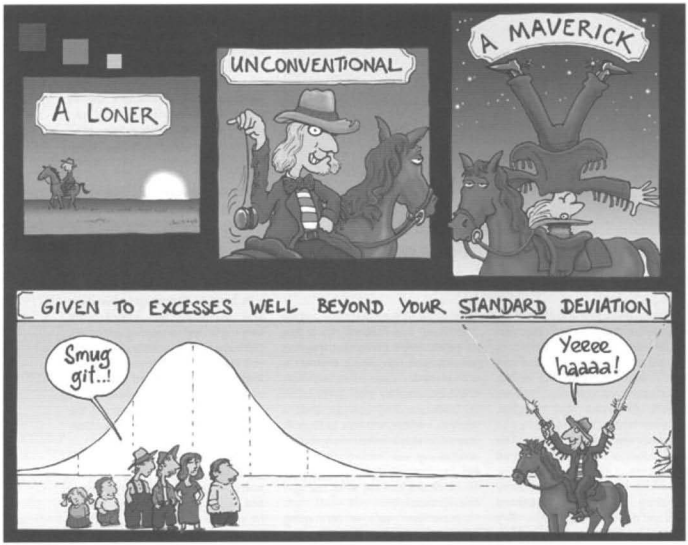
I should add that I got a lot of good advice from that workshop which helped to shape my story and make it better. This ranged from microscopic detail – that I demonstrated my research too obviously by my use of Latin terms, something I hadn't realised I was doing – to the more generalised observation that my characters

repeated themselves too much in their dialogue. Some readers liked the archaic tone of the characters, others hated it and told me to write everything in contemporary terms, as in Alan Garner's *Red Shift*. With regard to the last point, I duly sought out a copy and looked at how Garner's Roman soldiers all spoke in contemporary idiom. I decided that for my particular story, I didn't want to do the same (and that's not, of course, to criticise a giant like Alan Garner).

Being able to work through a range of comments and identify those that suit not only the story, but what you want to say, is an essential part of learning in a workshop setting. Rejecting the reflexive use of "show, don't tell" might be easy to avoid – if you understand how showing and telling can both be applied. Receiving feedback is crucial, not only for improving a particular manuscript but for the writer's wider professional development. Part of the feedback I received was the advice that most writers develop by going through plateaus. Writers tend to develop in stages. Being able to show what you write to other people and hear their reactions is a normal first step. Handling, assessing and accepting criticism is for many the next stage in the process. Workshops can also make you more resilient (an asset in itself) and hopefully open your mind to new ideas. My experience at this workshop has led me to reflect on that last challenge all the more. As we get older we gain more experience, but we can also reject new ideas rather than embrace them, and falling back on rote reactions can actually put us in reverse. Instead of climbing plateaus, we run the risk of heading in the opposite, wrong direction.

Dev Agarwal's story "Ghosts" – a historical vampire story – is forthcoming from *Hungur* magazine.

"Grotto" was published in *Aoife's Kiss*, with the line "cutting the land in two with seventy nine miles of earth and stone and wood," left in.



PISTOL PETE – THE WEST'S MOST NOTORIOUS OUTLIER

Hearing Zero http://www.lab-initio.com/

MORE ADVICE FOR REAL WRITERS...

Lavie Tidhar offers more insider infomation on the rules you must follow to become a real writer. Learn well...

Change your underwear, at least once a week (whether you need to or not).

•

Drink beer.

•

Never refer to a writing group as a "circle jerk", in public.

•

If you think cocaine is the drug of choice for writers, then you have unrealistic expectations of writing's financial rewards.

•

Never drink wine at a book launch.

•

Open your own fan page on Facebook and invite everyone to become your fan. Do not be offended if they all think you're a jerk.

•

If you really have nothing to say, write an article on the tools you use as a writer.

•

When discussing anonymous proxies, make sure to stress you use them due to civil rights issues, not to look at porn.

•

When writing hard SF, make sure to use the terms "post-human", "singularity" and "quantum". Write an awkward sex scene. Wait for fame and fortune to come your way.

•

You are too good to be nominated for awards.

•

Write with the door closed, to keep out the bailiffs. Re-write with the door open, to keep an eye on them coming back.

•

Never refer to your "shitty four room apartment." Some of us would kill for that much space.

•

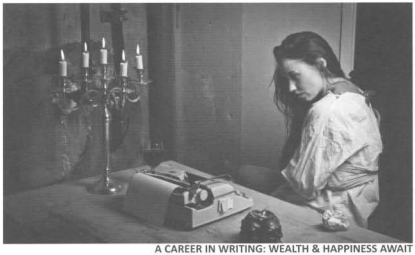
Never play cards with a man named Doc. Never eat at a place called Mom's. Donuts are bad for you. Coffee is good.

•

Drink lots of coffee.

•

When people ask what you do, never, ever say "writer", unless you want people's eyes to glaze over. Say "Sanitation Engineer", which is both more interesting and a more accurate way to describe what you really do.



A CAREER IN WRITING: WEALTH & HAPPINESS AWAIT

•

If you're just starting out, remember publishing is a global conspiracy designed to keep you out.

•

If you're in mid-career, make sure to complain on your blog about the lack of suitable advice for mid-career writers.

•

If you're Dan Brown make sure to complain about the vintage of Champaign not being expensive enough and ruining your bath.

•

If you're in America, make sure to go to conventions. The best way to "break in" is to corner an editor at the bar and tell them how great you are.

•

Never buy an editor a drink. That's why they have those huge expense accounts.

•

Run for political office, but for someone like the socialists or the libertarians, to make sure you don't get in. It would make you look interesting.

•

Complain about paper submissions.

•

Get an agent. It will give you something to complain about.

•

Make sure to eat at least once a day, whether you can afford to or not.

•

They don't send people to Australia any more for stealing bread.

•

If you really have nothing to say, guest-blog.

•

Finally, repeat the following procedure to become a successful writer:

10 Write
20 Coffee
30 Write
40 Beer
50 GOTO 10

•

Trust me on the underwear.

Lavie Tidhar is a prolific and award-nominated Israeli-born author whose work includes the novels *The Bookman*, *Camera Obscura* and *Night Music* from Angry Robot Books and recent publications *Osama* and *Gorel and The Pot-Bellied God* from PS Publishing and *Jesus & The Eightfold Path* from Immersion Press. He also runs the World SF blog (worldsf.wordpress.com).

POEMS FROM THE STARS

SHE CURSED MY FLIGHT

by Edward Kenna

We lay together, naked in the starlight,
Until I told her I must go,
And she, sighing, softly cursed my flight.

We cannot tell when passions will ignite
The heart has no orbit and so
We lay together, naked in the starlight.

Item on a checklist, farewells to recite,
As the clock ticked nearer zero
And she, sighing, softly cursed my flight.

A bar, a drink, her smile, the brief delight
Of life lived without tomorrow,
We lay together, naked in the starlight.

I ascended on bright pillars into the night,
Earth made pallid by their glow
And she, sighing, softly cursed my flight.

She did not weep, we did not fight
Men always leave, she said, I know.
We lay together naked in the starlight,
And she, sighing, softly cursed my flight.

TALK ABOUT A LONG FLIGHT

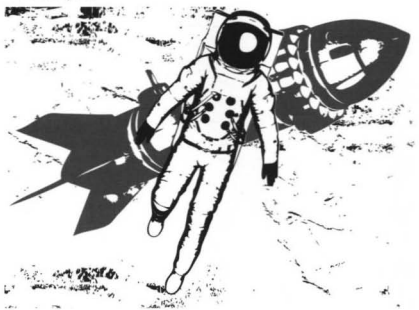
by Mat Denny

Ladies and Gentlemen I present to you today
This incredibly unusual aeronautic display
The vehicle in front of you has been uniquely designed
To leave our planetary system behind
In fact, in only a matter of hours
You'll be out of reach of this sun of ours
Sir and Madam, ensure your seatbelts are tight
For you are about to travel at the speed of light
Has light got a texture? You betcha! It's coarse
And this craft is designed to hook into it of course
Please don't shudder when we start to beam
Consider it a canoe upon a stream
There are some rapids around the asteroid belt
Then we turn left at Jupiter and we'll be at full pelt
Sit back and relax, we'll be serving free beers
We land in Andromeda in one million years

ON COURSE

by James T Lay

The form was right, the photon good,
Nerves awaken its lifeless brain.
Trigger stayed, its course remembered.
From infinity to neuron sparking.
Filament rises, extends beyond.
Searching, searching, finding more.
Photons strike, again awaking, more intense
than before.
Surface cracks and portals open.
Life begins since millennia.
Senses activate within.
The eye perceives the likely source.
Life's force received in cells long dead.
The hulk awakens forgotten systems.
A million light years ahead is
the evidence of life's discharge.
The power grows, weapons stir.
The third planet from the sun is target.



WANTED: POETRY EDITOR

Do you know anything about poetry? Then you're more qualified than I am. Would you like the chance to promote sf poetry within the BSFA? Contact me...

martin@martinmcgrath.net

AND FINALLY...

"Dischism"

The unwitting intrusion of the author's physical surroundings, or the author's own mental state, into the text of the story. Authors who smoke or drink while writing often drown or choke their characters with an endless supply of booze and cigs. In subtler forms of the Dischism, the characters complain of their confusion and indecision — when this is actually the author's condition at the moment of writing, not theirs within the story. "Dischism" is named after the critic who diagnosed this syndrome. (Attr. Thomas M Disch)

The Turkey City Lexicon

"Damn!" Harvey said to no one in particular. "I could murder a cigarette."

He got up and started to pace around the room. Two steps across, two steps back. There wasn't much room for pacing in the cockpit of a mark two astrotug.

He'd definitely picked the wrong week to give up smoking.

Maybe a coffee would help? But if he went to the galley he might bump into Loretta and she'd probably want help with something. Or one of the Scrunthorns would corner him. He hated the Scrunthorns, pesky little aliens with bulbous heads and their bellies sticking out over those diaper things they wore and their horrible annoying language that sounded just like the screaming of a hungry baby. They were always touching him. He hated it when their tiny, sticky fingers touched him.

Harvey sighed and scratched his ear.

Forget the coffee! Best to lock the doors and stay hunkered down here in the cockpit. He was safe here. Loretta and the Scrunthorns knew better than to disturb him when he was working. Especially when he was working on something big.

And these hyperspace equations certainly weren't going to fix themselves.

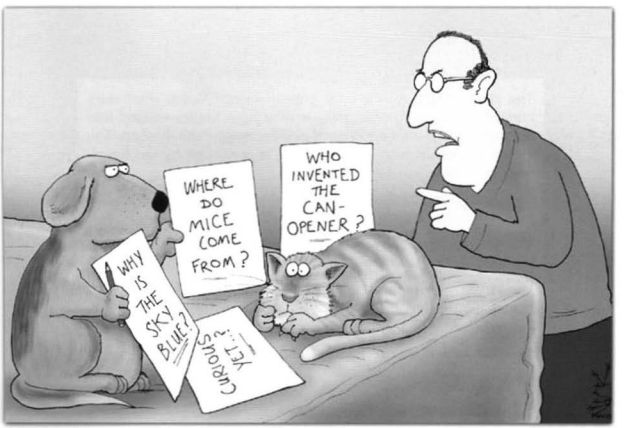
Harvey pulled up the display. Three days since the accident and he still hadn't been able to plot a route for their little ship back to the space lanes. The littlest Scrunthorn hadn't meant to tip that coffee cup over the console, but he shouldn't have been in here, dammit! He had no idea of the damage he'd done.

No point crying over spilt milk, Harvey told himself. *Or even spilt coffee.*

Harvey wasn't worried... yet. Or at least not so worried that he'd admit it to anyone else. There was no point alarming Loretta and the Scrunthorns if he could avoid it. But Harvey was beginning to fear that they might never find a way out of this problem. And if he missed the deadline on this delivery, there was a chance that the bank would foreclose on their mortgage and they'd lose everything – even *The Desperate Endeavour*.

Harvey patted the old girl's consoles.

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll think of something... If only I had a damned cigarette."



"Bad dog! Stop trying to kill the cat!"

Nearing Zero http://www.lab-initio.com/