# FOCUS

THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION'S MAGAZINE FOR WRITERS

WRITING LIKE IT'S 1999

KRISTINE KATHYRN RUSCH

**ON MY WAY TO SAMARKAND** 

**GARRY KILWORTH** 

THIS WRITING BUSINESS

MICHAEL SWANWICK

KIM LAKIN-SMITH

STEVEN SAVILE

LINDA NAGATA

KEITH BROOKE

LISA TUTTLE

JEFF NOON

THE WRITER'S MASK

JAMES PATRICK KELLY

WINTER 2012 / 13 No. 59

### THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION'S MAGAZINE FOR WRITERS



The cover image is taken from the 2012 edition of Keith Brooke's novel Genetopia. and is available in paperback and ebook formats.

### Masks

James Patrick Kelly talks about killing your fathers, sleeping with mothers, and lifting the mask to unleash the beast within.

06

### 101 Uses for a Masters Degree in Creative Writing

Paul Graham Raven returns from a spell at University with a +3 Vellum Sheet of Self-Confidence, and a renewed desire to write.

### Science Fiction with Honours

Four ex-students talk about their experiences in the classroom, and about life on campus when your specialist subject is SF writing.

### On My Way To Samarkand

The autobiography of Garry Kilworth has just been released (December 2012), and FOCUS are pleased to present two exclusive extracts.

### This Writing Business

In our feature article, Keith Brooke talks to a number of writers about the business side of writing in today's market.

### Typing In The Margins

Una McCormack writes tie-in novels, turning a hobby into a full time career. She's also got the backing of big US and UK publishing houses.

### How To Write A Sentence

Hal Duncan takes us all back to basics, with a short education on getting things right.

36 -

### Writing Like It's 1999

Kristine Kathryn Rusch writes about how to protect yourself from exploitation by agent or publisher; you should pay attention...

EDITORIAL...3 NEWS FROM ORBIT/BSFA ... 14 POETRY....26 TALES FROM TURKEY CITY ... 40

### **British Science Fiction Association Ltd**

Registered in England and Wales. Company No. 921500

RSFA Website : www.hsfa.co.uk

Registered address: 61 Ivycroft Road, Warton.

Tamworth, Staffordshire B79 033

President : Stephen Baxter

Vice President : Jon Courtenay Grimwood

Chair: Ian Whates chair@bsfa.co.uk

Administrator: Donna Scott awards@bsfa.co.uk Treasurer: Martin Potts bsfatreasurer@gmail.com

Membership Services: Peter Wilkinson, Flat 4, Stratton Lodge, 79 Bulwer Road, Barnet, Herts. EN5 5EU

bsfamembership@yahoo.co.uk

### **BSFA MEMBERSHIP FEES**

£29 per annum (Unwaged: £20 pa)

+£2 to the above prices Joint/Family Life Membership £500

Outside UK £40

Cheques should be made payable to 'BSFA Ltd.' (Pounds Sterling only) and sent to Peter Wilkinson at the address above, alternatively you can join via the BSFA website at www.bsfa.co.uk

### **BSFA AWARDS**

ORBITER WRITING GROUPS

Terry Jackman

terryjackman@mypostoffice.co.uk

Online:



FOCUS is published twice a year by the British Science Fiction Association. It is a magazine about writing, for writers, and aims to present high quality articles about the art and craft of writing, with a focus

Contributions, ideas and correspondence are always welcome at the contact address below, but please get in touch first if you intend to submit a lengthy article.

When submitting work through conventional postal services, please enclose an SSAE.

Individual copyrights are the property of

Individual copyrights are the property of the contributors and editor. The views expressed herein are not necessarily those of the BSFA or committee members thereof.

Errors and omissions are the responsibility

ISSN 0144-560X

### guest editor

design editor

## Alex Bardy

James Patrick Kelly Paul Graham Raven Nick Wood Ida Løkås Mike Revell Sandra Unerman Garry Kilworth Terry Jackman Martin Potts Kim Lakin-Smith Linda Nagata Steven Savile Michael Swanwick Lisa Tuttle Charles Christian Una McCormack Hal Duncan Kristine Kathryn Rusch Martin McGrath

With special thanks to Clive Anderson for help with proofreading duties.

### Contact

Alex Bardy, 6 The Crescent, Kexby, York YO41 5LB

focusmag@mangozine.com Twitter: @mangozoid

### KEITH BROOKE SAYS...

Welcome back to **FOCUS**. In this issue we've tried to provide a snapshot of the genre publishing industry and where a writer's career fits into that. Or rather, several snapshots... fragments... a composite, if you like, intended to reflect how publishing is changing and reforming itself and what it is to be a writer in the early oart of the 21st century.

In a very short space of time the whole landscape has shifted. Not long ago I would have advised my writing students to stick to the conventional route: short stories, a bit of non-fiction to get your name out there, and then a novel with one of the larger publishers, with an agent to offer a comforting arm and steer you through contracts and all that other messy stuff.

But now?

Now I'm not sure what I'd advise. There are so many options and we're seeing writers making their mark through all kinds of routes. The best advice I can offer is to stay on your toes, be prepared to adapt and, more than anything, get your head down and write.

In the multiple-author discussion that forms the centrepiece of this issue, Lisa Tuttle volces concerns about writers, and writing, being devalued, and that's a genuine fear for many. It was already hard enough for writers to make a living, but with the plethora of free and 99 cent novels on Amazon, how are we supposed to make ends meet now? Are we really living in a world where readers effectively buy books by the pound? Where they'd rather buy a poorly-written, badly-produced novel for under written, badly-produced novel for under

a dollar than spend the price of a couple of coffees and a cake in Starbucks for something potentially life-changing? (And I know, that in itself is a sweeping generalisation: there are lots of fine books that are on offer at a cut-down price for all kinds of good reasons, but the law of averages does make it likely that a 99 cent novel is going to be, at best, a bit rough around the edges. And while we're on this rather long digression in what is a rather short editorial one of the reasons for the current shake -up is that indie publishers have shown that there are far better ways to do a lot of things, and the big publishers are now scampering to catch-up and reform.)

It's not all doom and gloom, though. As I hope this issue shows, writers are adapting, and science-fiction writers are perhaps better placed than most to embrace new approaches and forms. I've long argued that the 21st century author needs to take a portfolio approach: I'm glad that my novels are with commercial publishers, but I'm also delighted to have had books out with some fine indie presses, and that I'm involved in both self-publishing and running a press that publishes other authors. For each book I can pick the best approach and that simply wasn't available even five years ago. I like that.

As Michael Swanwick says, later in this issue, "Writers are as tough as rats. We've always found a way to survive and we always will."

So here's to all you rats. I'm proud to be one of you, myself.

### About our Guest Editor

Keith Brooke is the author of eight adult novels, six collections, and over 70 short stories. For ten years from 1997, he ran the web-based SF, finitiany and horror showcase infinity plus (www.infinitypulss.ccu.uk), featuring the work of around 100 tog genre authors, including Michael Moorcock, Stephen Baster, Cornie Willis, Gene Wolfe, Vonda Michiyer and Jack Vanoe. Infinity plus has recently been relaturched as an independent publishing importing producing print and ebooks. He most recent books are the novels Genetopia, The Accord, and Harmony (published in the UK as alt.human), and Strange Divisions and Allen Territories: the Sub-genes of Science Faction, an academic exploration of SF from the perspectives of a dozen top authors in the field. Whing as Nick Giffort, his ten fiction is published by Puffin, with one novel also optioned for the movies by Andy Serkis and Jonathan Cavendish's Caverna Flins. He writes reviews for The Guardian, teaches creative writing at the University of Essev, and leves with his wife Debbie in Weerhoe, Essev.



am not a fan of Halloween. Oh sure, as a kid I put on the plastic mask and flammable superhero/pirate/space man costume. But, as an alleged grown-up, I have dressed for Halloween maybe a handful of times, and certainly not in the last twenty-some years. Why should this be? Maybe it has something to do with my aversion to most candy, or perhaps it is that I dress up and put on a mask pretty much every time I write.

Like many of us, I practice my craft in multiple genres. I write fiction — stories and novels — and personal essays like this one and even the occasional poem. But even when I represent myself as the 'real' me in an essay or in my column for \*Asimov's \*Science \*Fiction \*Magazine\*, I am striking a rhetorical pose. The Jim Kelly you might bump into at a convention has some pleasant qualities, I suppose, but he has never been so focused as the implied author of this sentence. His diction is not as precise and his command of his material is informed by his sometimes faulty memory instead of hard research. Rather than spur-of-thermoment opinion, this literary construct offers considered views. In short, you are gazing upon an authorial mask just now — that of Artificially-Sweetened Jim.

And yet that mask is ineluctably mine.

The tension between self and mask is one of the most attractive parts of being a writer of fiction, and also one of the most frustrating. It gives us the radical freedom to be much more brave and sexy and honest and insightful than we are in real life. It is also a license to interrogate our darkest impulses: we can, with impunity, kill our fathers and sleep with our mothers, ruin our enemies and cheat our friends. (Of course, poets can do all of this as well; even those who practice the art of confession are accomplished mask-makers.) We have the freedom to pretend outrageously on the page and then duck into the shelter of make-believe. It's only a story, we say, and he's just a character. Not me, so not me! And yet, if you have ever given a public reading of a difficult piece, you can actually feel the audience mapping your literary extremities onto you. As they lean forward, attention rapt, you know they are thinking, how could he? ... how does he know? ... but he never. ... or did he?

And it is this phenomenon that can sometimes spook the new writer, and even gritzled... urm... seasoned veterans like me. You imagine your readers lifting your authorial mask to gawk at whomever is beneath. What will my mom think when she reads this? My kids? What if my boss buys this book? You begin to wonder: is it really such a good idea to invite the world into your head to commune with your inner serial killer?

Well?

When I am being the best writer I can be, I always answer yes. Here's some advice I offered several years ago in an essay about characterization:

You want to be liked and would much prefer to present your best side to the world. However, fiction is not public relations. We all have dark impulses which we've been taught to hide, perhaps even to deny; to be a writer you must unlearn some of the lessons of civilization. Nobody takes seriously a story in which the good guys are all saints and the bad guys are the spawn of hell. Saints can have their bad days and even monsters love their moms. Increasing the level of moral ambiguity usually enhances



James Patrick Kelly has won the Hugo. Nebula and Locus awards, his fiction has been translated into twenty-two languages. His most recent book is Digital Rapture: The Singularity Anthology co-edited with John Kessel. He writes a column on the internet for Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine and is on the faculty of the Stonecoast Creative Writing MFA Program at the University of Southern Maine. His most recent publishing venture is the exine James Patrick Kelly's Strangeways. You can listen to Jim read his stories on the Free Reads Podcast: http://

freereads

a character's believability. Only psychopaths do wrong for the fun of it. Most of the evil in the world is perpetrated by people like you and me — the very people you want to characterize. Sometimes we do it out of malice; sometimes we're merely selfish or lazy; often as not we think we're doing the right thing. In any event, you have to be brave enough to portray your own ugliness in order to create memorable characters.

(http://www.sfwa.org/2005/01/you-and-your-characters/)

There's a real difference between the mask you might be wearing to that Halloween party and the one you will put on the next time you sit down at the keyboard. One of them you can remove. Go ahead and wash that garish zombie makeup off after the party. And then forget all about it. The other, though... it's the glimpse you catch of yourself in a shattered mirror. It can cut you if you're not careful. But you need to handle it if you're going to be a writer.

That other mask is the scary one.

FIN.





The Sixty-Fourth British National Science Fiction Convention Cedar Court Hotel, Bradford

Past Times and Other Worlds Alternate Presents and Possible Futures, Near and Far

### eightsquaredcon.org

General Enquiries: <a href="mailto:info@eightsquaredcon.org">info@eightsquaredcon.org</a>
Hotel Enquiries: <a href="mailto:accommodation@eightsquaredcon.org">accommodation@eightsquaredcon.org</a>
Programme Team: <a href="mailto:prog@eightsquaredcon.org">prog@eightsquaredcon.org</a>

# 101 USES FOR A MASTERS IN CREATIVE WRITING

Paul Graham Raven grapples with a piece of paper he hasn't received yet...

have in my hand a piece of paper.

That's not strictly true. I'm still waiting on the results of my Masters degree, and I believe the traditional material is vellum (the notorious cheapness of my alma mater notwithstanding). But for all intents and purposes, I now have a Masters degree in creative writing, letters after my name, the whole nine yards.

But what the hell am I supposed to do with it? (I've already tried installing Linux on it, but the drivers are all deprecated.)

If you read my previous pieces in this esteemed organ, you might remember that I wasn't certain what I wanted the degree for in the first place, beyond it being a) an opportunity to learn about writing from smart, experienced people, and b) a year from which the usual excuses for not writing – "but there's all these other things I [should/could] be doing!" — would be banished. Both of those things I got, along with an unexpected side-serving of competitiveness; turns out I actually do care about grades once I submit to a system within which grading takes place. Who knew?

There's no grading in the fiction market trenches, though. Out there, it's still a matter of prepping your little soldiers as best you can, sending them over the top and hoping that, if they come back with a bullet in their breast, you might at least get a clue as to why they didn't survive, the better to prepare their successors.

Oddly, though, I found submitting work for grading far more anxious than submitting to market.

With the markets, your ignorance of what the editor wants is a mercy, making it obvious that (beyond the important considerations of good writing and story-telling, which are themselves highly subjective, and which you presumably trust in your own ability to deliver) it's a taste-based crap-shoot: blow on the dice, throw 'em, roll with the punches. The odds go up once people associate your name with good work in good venues, but those first few big-break publications are tiny targets aimed for from the far end of a long, dark room. You bullseye, or you don't. One day, you will. (Or won't.)

In the academy, however, you're writing for a different sort of assessment, a floating-point score as opposed to a sale/no-sale binary. And while there's an objective framework around it, creative writing is a pretty subjective sort of subject; so while you know that your assessor has some buttons that might be more successfully pushed than others, you have no way of knowing which ones might adjust your score upward or downward. Perhaps it's just my nature, but that sort of uncertainty makes for a flavour of anxiety that the sale/no-sale decision lust doesn't triacer. But hey, my days of worrying about that are over!



Paul Graham Raven recently finished a Master's in Creative Writing, and is now trying to work out what it held to do whill it, in the meantime, he's working as a researcher in infrastructure futures at the University of Sheffield's Pennine Water Group. He's also editor in held of the Syfutures at the University of survivers of book and music, a cack-handed post-rock guitarist, and in need of a proper haircut.

Unless I decide to do a PhD, of course.

I must acknowledge the privilege of my position, here. Unlike a lot of new graduates, I'm not drowning in debt (I paid for the course from savings), and I already have a nonmenial job I greatly enjoy; I have no urgent need to transmute my new qualification into an income stream, which is a position of great luxury in these turbulent times. No violin solo is required or deserved.

So the question answers itself, at least in pragmatic terms: I can do whatever I want with my degree, up to and including wiping my bum with it, because I didn't actually need it.

But I wanted the knowledge it represents, and I like to think I got it. So what should I do with that?

This is a very different question, because the answers must come from within.

Luckily, those answers are clamouring to get out, at least at the moment. Despite (or perhaps due to) moving immediately from finishing my dissertation to working full-time on day-job stuff, I have the skeletons of two novels rattling around inside my brain-box, along with a bunch or ideas for reviews, essays, papers and short stories. Some of them are old ideas that I can now finally! - see a way for bringing into the world; some of them are new ideas forged in the heat of a fast year of big ideas and new ways of looking at narrative.

So, to reiterate: I have no money worries, and a swarm of ideas waiting to be worked on. An enviable position in almost every respect. The only thing I lack is the goad, and that's the problem I need to look to. In a field dominated by Olympic-grade procrastinators, I am an overachiever. My Masters showed me what I can do when I'm between the rock of a commitment and the hard place of a deadline, but I've always found external motivators to be much more powerful than my own atrophied will-to-achieve.

On a panel in Brighton late this summer, Lauren Beukes spoke of the power of what she calls the meaningful deadine: the deadline which, when broken, will cause real consequences – be that the non-arrival of a cheque, perhaps, or (less selfishly) the inconveniencing of others who're relying on you to do your bit. (As answers to the perpetual "do we even need publishers any more?" lament go, it's one that means a lot to me.)

The largely-unpublished neophyte writer doesn't feel these forces, though; like their sense of direction, their motivation has to come from within. Sending your soldiers over the top to die will destroy you if you don't believe in the cause.

So for now, I guess that's my answer: I'm going to use my Masters as a goad, and as a Vellum Sheet of Self-confidence +3. I have proved to my own satisfaction that I'm not entirely mad to think I can mytte fiction that might move people the same way my writerly heroes and heroines have moved me. Now I have to internalise that belief, and write.

... just like a writer who's never set foot in a seminar has to.

FIN.



# SCIENCE FICTION WITH HONOURS

Is a Creative Writing degree right for you?

While creative writing courses have multiplied at UK universities over the last ten years, courses that actually teach the writing of science fiction are still very rare in this country. FOCUS has tracked down four recent graduates and asked them about their experiences.

### NICK WOOD

hat caught my eye in an *Interzone* ad in 2009 was not just another MA in Creative Writing ad, but an MA in Creative Writing ad that highlighted a focus on the genres of Fantasy and Science Fiction. Up until then, as a (South) African SF/F writer at nights/weekends/stolen fag end moments, 1'd had a few pieces published here and there. However, each piece 1'd managed to get published seemed to be as hard — if not *hander*— to get published than my first sale.

So I had been on the lookout for some way to try and raise the quality level of my writing and, I hoped, the subsequent ease of finding publication success. With this goal in mind, I applied to participate in Middlesex University's first cohort of SF/F Masters students, the course expertly headed up by David Rain (Tom Arden in another incarnation) and Farah Mendlesohn (now Professor and Head of English, Communication, Film and Media et Anglia Ruskin University).

I started the course with some excitement; somewhat irrationally tempered by a fear that focusing on the mechanics of writing might chase away my (imagined) literary muse. Some way into the first year of the course (focusing on Voice, Short and Long Form) I was relieived to find this was definitely not the case. Working a full day job, I had never been within spitting distance of delivering prolific writing, either fiction or psychological research, but I was pleased that my writing output at least kept up with the demands of the course. For me, this converted into a moderately increased level of production, resulting in several more pieces that I was able to sell or place within competitions.

Unfortunately, I lost contact with my cohort due to a year off with chronic illness, but I rejoined the following cohort in 2011-2012. One of the joys of the course has been the richness and depth of workshopping ideas and writing with talented and enthusiastic colleagues; ably guided by tutors of excellence who love and know gene writing. Allied to this experience was yet more theory and practice — this time Place, Character, Narrative and the Long Form Dissertation — all of which further encouraged a greater understanding of the writing process and the crudal factors in developing taut and compelling narratives.

I wasn't certain whether my writing was improving significantly though — which was the acid test for me, in initially pursuing the course. But then, under duress with the Dissertation demands, I ended up writing a book more than twice as long as anything I'd hitherto written — although this was still on the shorter side of tomes expected by many genre publishers nowadays. Still, It's easy enough (perhaps) to write a book. I'd heard — but acain, is it any oood?



Nick Wood studied on the MA in Creative Writing in Science Fiction and Fantary at Middleave University. He has had a YAS Fo book published in South Africa, as well as about a dozen short stories in venues such as Intertone, PostScripts, Albedo One, Redstone Science Fiction, and the first African writer's Science fiction anthology Afro SF (published December 2012). He can be found at http:// inckwood. frogwirte.co.nxf and is a member of The Clockhouse London Writer's Group. In annual trips to Cape Town to visit family I'd also met up with Nick Gevers, the SF editor and critic, who'd given me constant and useful advice since we had first made contact in 2003. He read the manuscript and commented on a quantum leap' in quality improvement from previous material of mine he'd read (most of which had ended up being published somewhere). I'd always known Nick as an astute critic not averse to expressing negative opinions, so this was very heartening to hear.

I have submitted the manuscript (entitled Azanian Bridges, an alternative history set in a current South Africa where apartheid has survived) — to the Harper Voyager two-week open submissions period in October 2012. As I have submitted alongside 4562 other hopefuls, I am as optimistic about the chances of being picked out, as succeeding my weekly ourchased Lotto ticket. But I'm grateful that another thing the course has taught me is just to get on with the next assignment. (This is currently a linked short story to 'Of Hearts and Monkeys', an African postapocalypse story.)

I'm writing with more confidence and what feels like a sharper editorial eye, when it comes to ruthless revision of my own work. But most importantly I am aware that to keep writing—as someone in full time employment and still a long way from giving up the day job — I need to maintain contact with fellow aspiring writers. The MA course provides this, as we have nogoling supportive contact above and beyond the framework of the course.

The course itself also had some excellent guest speakers, including Jo Fletcher, Simon Kavanagh and David Pringle. I have further joined a writing group (The

Clockhouse London Writers' Group), under the expert guidance of Allen Ashley, to help ensure that I keep learning and writing. I'm sure you know the old adage—as a viriter', you need to write.

I believe the MA in SF/F at Middlesex has made me a better writer. I'm also very glad I have a lifetime subscription to Interzone, as part from the great fiction and Nick Lowe, I may otherwise perhaps have missed out on this course and all it has taught me.

In short — and with no marketing cut — I'd recommend this course or similar to aspiring SF/F writers, although query first, to ensure it is still running.

### IDA LØKÅS

remember the reaction from my friends when I told them I had signed up to do a writing course in science fiction. "You don't even like science fiction," they said. "That's not true," I answered, "I just haven't read any sci-fi, so I can't really know if I like it or not." Star Wars, the end of the world, and blade runners had never really been my first choice of literature.

On that note I must admit I had my doubts when I started the course, but I have always believed that as a writer you should try to do things that are a bit out of your comfort zone. And this was far out of my comfort zone, so I was sure I would gain something interesting from the course. And I was right.

After my first lesson I realized that there was so much more to this unexplored part of literature than I originally thought. Not all science fiction books were about space ships and allens. Prior to my course I believed all characters in science fiction books were either living on Mars or in a far away galaxy, and had nothing to do with the society I was living in. But I soon understood that this was not the case. I had no idea that most works of science fiction include speculation (directly or indirectly) on modern society and human behaviour. In the end it's just a different way of portraying the human condition.

I guess what I learned from my course is that I used to judge books because they belonged to a specific genre, even without knowing anything about it. But this science fiction course has really opened my eyes regarding exploring new filterature no matter what genre it is. They say you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, and I do believe that fifts with genres as well.

In my science fiction course I learned that you have to create rules for the world you are creating. You have to know everything. The same thing goes for your characters. And although I always knew that you needed to know what you were writing I had never thought about it in that way before. I don't write science fiction, but I do apply a lot of the techniques I learned during my course.

I had to establish the life of my characters. My first novel is about a young boy growing up in a council estate in London. The subject was so foreign to me it



Ida Lakàs studied Creative Writing at Essex and Kingston University. Since graduating she has published her first novel (The Beauty That Flows Past), is currently writing her second novel, and working as a consultant for two publishing houses.

could as well be science fiction. I am neither a boy. British, nor have grown up in a place like him. I had to do research, and use my imagination to create this world based upon facts and fantasy. I have my cultural capital and it is completely different than my character, which can also be said about a lot of science fiction literature and their writers. But in the end, he is a person, and I had to make him believable. That would not be possible if I hadn't done my research and done a really thorough background check.

I also appreciate the brainstorming process I learned during my course. When I was thinking about what my second novel should be about. I was blank. I had no idea how to get inspired or find something that interested me. But then I thought about an exercise we did in one of our classes. I sat down and wrote down the sentence what if on a piece of paper. And started coming up with different stories. Sometimes you just don't know what to write about and using this technique, all of a sudden had the idea for my next book, I am very grateful for what I learned during my course and although I don't write science fiction. I am not foreign to

the thought that someday I might.

After I finished my bachelor degree in creative writing. I began my masters degree at Kingston University where I started writing my first novel. When I went back to Norway, I had time to focus on my writing and in three months I finished my novel. I decided that I would try and send it to a publishing house and came across a writing competition where the prize was 23,000 pounds and a book deal. Over 300 people had entered the competition, and a couple of months later they called me and told me I had won. In August 2012 my novel The Beauty That Flows Past came out.



Mike Revell studied science fiction at the University of Essex. He now spends his time writing children's books and short stories.

### MIKE REVELL

n my last year at university, I had a choice: I could either do a course on myths and fairy tales, or I could do a course on science fiction.

I thought it was an easy decision. Myths conjured images of Ancient Greece and monsters and Zeus hurling lightning from the heavens. Science fiction was all robots and Star Trek and fizzing lasers in space. Even though I knew I was being ignorant, I chose myths and fairly tales. I've long been fascinated with these oldest of stories, and I thought I would eniov learning more about them.

Halfway through the first lesson, I started to regret my choice. We were handed litheraries and reading lists and schedules, and none of it was what I'd hoped for. It occurred to me that I didn't want to spend a year throwing quotes on a page and talking about the same themes that students have dug up and discussed for years.

I wanted to write new stories. I wanted to make stuff up and put it down on the page. I wanted to create.

The next day I signed up to do the science fiction course. I hadn't read much science fiction before, and I wasn't sure that I would enjoy reading any now. But I'd heard that the course was more geared towards writing. So I jumped.

It was the best decision I made in three years. We looked at the history of the genre, and at its many facets and sub-genres — and each week we wrote.

The course opened my eyes to the many layers and wonders that we now group under the term "speculative fiction". But more than that, it opened my eyes to the business of writing. We learned about world-building, we learned about craft, and — most usefully — we learned about editing. Soon enough we formed critique groups. We wrote a short story every week, gave and received feedback, and developed our work into a more polished product.

Science fiction, of course, has a thriving short fiction market, and towards the end of the course we learned about this too – how to format your manuscript, where to submit your work, how to submit it.

The course stuck with me more than any other aspect of my education. It sparked an interest in reading and understanding and learning about the infinite possibilities of the genre; it taught me how to look at my own writing with fresh eyes; it made me realise that the ambition to be an author, with hard work and perseverance, can be more than just a dream. Today, the fingerprints of that science fiction course are all over my work and my life. I've just signed a literary agent, and I don't think I would be at this stage at this point in my life without the

course I almost didn't do.

And the other day, without really thinking, I found myself able to answer a University Challenge question that stumped the participants: what book is this opening passage from?

It was The Day of the Triffids.

### SANDRA UNERMAN

A long time ago, I had a young adult fantasy novel published and later some short stories in Scheherazade magazine. I never stopped writing but I did not manage to get any novel into print after that first one and I found it increasingly difficult to finish any piece of work. I have attended the Milford Writers' workshop several times and found it a very positive experience. Now I have spent two years studying for an MA in Creative Writing at Middlesex University, hoping it would help me to produce more satisfying work, which might have a better chance of securing a publisher again.

The course at Middlesex attracted me because it included a specialist strand in science fiction and fantasy. I had also met two of the people involved in running the course, David Rain and Farah Mendlesohn, and knew they had interesting things to say. I had some fears that the course might make my writing too self-conscious or even kill it off altogether. But I decided to take the chance and I am very glad that I did.

Anyone who writes entirely by instinct and does not want to think about technique should probably avoid a course like this. But for a writer who enjoys analysing what they do and thying out different approaches, a course has advantages above any handbook on creative writing, even where the same ground is covered. For example, I had read beforehand about the value of the telling detail in creating character or setting in fiction. But I still learned by bringing examples from daily life into class for discussion and from other people's different contributions. My fellow students were a mixed bunch, in writing experience and background. But we could engage with each other's work, even when it was very different from our own and the mixture provided useful insist into different perspectives.

At the simplest level, I have written much more fiction in these two years than ever in my life. The toughest challenge was to write a first draft of a novel in three months (90,000 words), so that we could work on editing in class. For this, I drew on images and themes which have been in my head for years. But I had never put them together into a coherent narrative before. The outcome was a lot better than I expected, though it needed plenty of further work. The process taught me a lot about the benefits of pushing on with a draft, even when I was having my doubts about what I had done so far. And about stiting down to write every day, even when I did not know what came next.

I enjoyed the whole course but felt I gained most from the two specialist SF classes. One was on short stories with Rob Shearman, who encouraged us to try out a different story every week. I found myself with a much better idea of what makes a short story work and I enjoyed playing with a range of different ideas. The other was on SF Long Form (novels) with Farah Mendlesohn. She provided a lot of feedback on our drafts and the class discussions helped us to dig deeper into our own work as well as getting us to analyse a selection of published novels from a writer's perspective.

I completed the course too recently to say much about long term effects. The regular interaction in class with other students produced a support group that would have been hard to develop otherwise and some of us are trying to keep together as a writing group. I am now busy revising the drafts I worked on during the course and I certainly feel more confident about what I am trying to do than if I had been writing on my own for these two years.



Sandra Unerman is a retired Government lawyer who lives in London. She has attended the Millford Writers' workshop and has just completed the MA course in Creative Writing at Middlesex University. She writes book reviews for Vector and her fiction publications are: Trial of Three (young adult novel. 1979); 'Helgi Halldanarson', 'Secret Stair', 'Ragnall's Lover' (Short stories, Scheherezade magazine); and 'History Lesson' (short story, All Hallows magazine).

# On My Way To Samarkand

Two extracts from the recently published autobiography of Garry Kilworth

In December 2012, **Garry Kilworth** (described by New Scientist as "arguably the finest writer of short fiction today, in any genre") published his autobiography, **On My Way To Samarkand**. What follows are two extracts from this volume.

n leaving Cable & Wireless I received a good redundancy payment, with which I cleared my mortgage. On the first day of my new career as a writer I dressed in my suit, shirt, tie and city shoes. I had breakfast at six o'clock and then drove down to the station and waited for the seven o'clock train for London. All my usual travelling companions were on the platform also waiting for the same train, including my accountant friend, Stuart Holliday, When it arrived, they boarded it, I did not. I stood there and waved it out, then went home, changed into casuals, made a fresh pot of coffee and then sat at my desk with a comfortable sigh.

I was a full-time author at last.

However, I was not earning a great deal with my writing at that point, not enough to contribute to the household expenses, so I took on a part time job. The music teacher who taught me to play the trombone, Sandy, started up a house cleaning business with her partner which they called "The Country Maids". These two otherwise able women required a man to wield the heavy carpet cleaner while they zoomed through houses with their dusters and mops. I became that man. For eighteen months I was a carpet cleaner and supplemented my writing earnings with my wages. I still have my 'Country Maid' t-shirt.

During the same period I started teaching creative writing at evening classes. I don't believe you can actually teach someone how to write, but you can juve them some advice on what might work in a story. So, my lessons tended to be on catchy first lines, on last lines, on titles, and so on. I have had no training or experience with teaching so had actually no idea whether I was doing it correctly. The really important thing, I felt, was

to get them excited about writing their own stories, and discussing things like first lines seemed to do that.

I have my all-time favourite first lines. There is the famous opening to Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities: more a paragraph than a sentence, but to me the most stunning of all first lines was written by an author much less well-known, Gordon R. Williams, in his novel The Siege of Trencher's Farm: The moment that Neil Armstrong stepped onto the moon there were men in English villages who had never been more that fifteen miles from their own front door'. Sweetly succinct and mind-blowing. The shortest and probably the greatest first line is 'Call me Ishmael.' from Melville's Moby Dick: Those few words carry so much information. The narrator says, 'Call me...' so we know Ishmael is not his real name. If he does not want to tell us who he really is, then what he's about to divulge is contentious. Then there is the biblical Ishmael, which tempts us to look up the reference to see if we can gather any clues as to this secrets this young man might have to disclose.

With titles there are apparently key words like 'Eagle' and 'Death' that instantly attract a potential reader. The Eagle has Landed, Death in Venice, etc. There are also some gender peculianties. Put 'Wife' or 'Daughter' in the title and you have a female-reader magnet. The Mapmaker's Wife, The Time Traveller's Wife, The Insomeger Sauphter. Such novels immediately become talking points for female book clubs. The male equivalent does not work. The Postmistress's Husband' The Milkmaid's Son' I somehow think titles in this vein would not work in a million years and it's significant that I can't think of a novel or short story with the word 'Husband' in the title. Fine, Dombey and Son, yes, but somehow there is the impression that the book is more about Dombey and the focus is taken away from junior.

Last lines? Frankly, Scarlett, endings need to leave one satisfied but also wishing the story did not stop there. One of my favourite endings is the last line of Christopher Priest's The Affirmation, which leaves the reader in the middle of a sentence that has no full stop or three periods, simply white space. It's a stunning end to a stunning now and this reader was left staring into space, lost in thought, still holding the book in my hands. It's the kind of novel that when you finish it and put it down, you simply sit there and reflect for a long while, listening to the silence.

With my own writing, I still remained somewhat under-confident. I was still rough-edged, with only a few O- and A-Levels from night school and an HND that had little relevance to a writing career. I wanted to feel I had really studied the art and craft of the profession I aspired to join. I put in for a degree course in London University.



Garry Kilworth was born in Yorkshire, but lost his northern accent a long time ago. He now lives in Suffolk with his wife Annette close to a beautiful lake and open countryside. He has been an author now for nearly 40 years and has 80 novels and collections of stories published. Garry's main interests are travelling the globe and photographing widlife, mostly in the Far East, Australia and Polynesia. Peavious to his writing career he was telegraphist with the RAF for 18 years and then 8 years with a ninternational telecoms company.

riting shorts is a completely different exercise from writing novels. A novel is a slow-drip occupation. Each day you sit down and do a thousand, twothousand, or whatever number of words, and the finished article seems an infinitely improbable target somewhere in the future. The whole novel must be structured and crafted, it continually changes shape and form as it grows, and revisions need to be applied even as the pages gradually multiply. You cannot surge ahead with fire and sword, as you do with a short story. You must gradually work a novel into shape.

A short story can be held in the head, whole and ready for the pages. One can sit down and burn through a short story in one sitting if one has the stamina. I do. I love that fiery furious writing pitch that I can reach while getting a short story down on paper. I stop for nothing except coffee: not for revisions, not for spelling, not for checking facts. All that can be done later, once the brain has unloaded its fabulous cargo. Only then do 1 go through it, and through it, and through it, and through it, until 1 feel I have either a gem, or — yes — sometimes a dud. I revise a short story many many times, sometimes doing ten drafts, until I feel I have exhausted all that I have to offer it. Often I start with (what I think of as) a stunning last line in my head and have to get from the first sentence to that final impact.

My favourite short story writer of all time is an Argentinian who lived most of his writing life in Paris, I discovered Julio Cortázar in a copy of an American magazine I used to write for, Omni, Ellen Datlow was the fiction editor of Omni and she took many of my short stories for its pages, paying what was at the time (and probably still is) a sultan's fee of \$2,000. I didn't get that much in the '90s for some of my novels. Anyway, in one of the issues with a short story of mine I found this tale by Julio Cortázar entitled 'The Final Caress'. It was a stunning piece of work that filled me with envy.

I subsequently discovered that Cortázar wrote the short story that inspired the '60s film Blow Up starring David Hemmings: a brilliant movie. There followed readings of 'We Love Glenda So Much', 'The End of the Game', 'House Taken Over' and many many others. I think I've found every tale he has written and there are very very few I don't like. Even just a single line can be impressive. In a story about two boxers in the ring, one of whom is good at ducking and diving his opponent's blows, Cortázar writes, 'He was an encyclopaedia of holes.' Any man who can write a line like that has my undving admiration.

In one of his patchwork-quilt books, just notes and incidents, Cortázar explained, 'Short stories are word tornadoes and one needs to start in the eye of the wind and write the tale spirally outwards from the centre.'

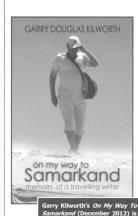
I think I know how the technique should work and I try to apply it when I feel able. I flatter myself that Julio might have liked some of the stories I have written too, such as 'Hogfoot Right and Bird-hands', a futuristic tale. Hogfoot was probably one of the weirdest stories I've written, and was very difficult to sell. It was eventually taken up by friends. Rob Holdstock and Chris Evans were editing a series of anthologies at the time called Other Edens and it was Chris's idea to publish Hogfoot along with two other very short stories of mine, 'The Black Wedding' and 'Murderer's Walk' under the generic title, 'Tryptich'. Once published this hard-to-sell story was shortlisted for an award and the connoisseur John Clute described it in a review as 'stunning'. At a convention later I happened to get into a lift with Stephen Donaldson, famous best-selling author of The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, who looked at my name tag and said, 'Garry Kilworth? I loved your story "Hoafoot Right and Bird-hands" - could I republish in it an anthology I'm putting together?"

Could he? Did he even need to ask.

So thank you, Julio, for your inspiration.

Julio Cortázar died in Paris in 1984.

FIN.



published by infinity Plus books

in ebook and trade paperback

# NEWS FROM ORBIT

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

### RECOMMENDED READING?

Where did you hear about the book you're currently reading? Do you stick to authors you know because trying to find a hot new writer in the bookstores, online and physical, is too bewildering?

Do you rely on particular reviews, blogs, tweets? How about emailing us your favourite sources?

### SALES AND SUCCESSES?

Either it's gone very quiet out there, which I have trouble believing, or I've lost the file when switching to a new computer — much more credible, believe me. Or you haven't told me what you've sold recently.

So apologies for the blank space here, and if you've had a sale that didn't list in the last edition please tell me again? Plus of course, any successes since then?

### **BIG BROTHER?**

## ON THE SUBJECT

How often are we too 'nice when we critique?

When I 'talk' to new Orbiters I spell out the game plan: we should be polite, but we should tell the truth, no flattery. And generally I do find that our members stick with that approach.

I was reminded of this recently when attending a couple of other groups. It seemed to me that far too often, if a critter didn't think much of a submission, they took refuge in vague phrases, or in a couple of cases long pseudo-philosophical commentaries on the nature of.. Neither of which told the poor writer how good or bad the work was, or often why.

Yes, it's very nice to receive compliments, but this is writing, not a new hairdo. And we're there to learn, right? The last thing we want from group —or individual—critique is false hopes and a mutual admiration society.

### Right?

So to all the Orbiters who regularly send out tough but honest responses – my thanks. You've earned them.

I read recently that the ebooks we buy can now tell their sellers more tha I thought.

As well as what I've bought they can tell if I've actually read it, where have up, and even how fast I read an ebook

Ebook sellers can access this data, but no-one else. I'm sure others would ike it though. After all, sales figures don't really count for much if half the readers give up halfway through: they're not likely to buy a sequel are they? And maybe a faster read is a sign of the really good books?

And what about the writer? As a writer, wouldn't it be good to know if, and where, your reader stopped reading? Then you could assess the problem for next time?

So, since the data is out there - how about making it available to all those concerned?

### LOOKING FOR A WEBSITE ENGINEER?

Orbiter Mark Iles, who knows about these things, tells me he's found a good one, who can build a site for you and 'Engine Optimise' the site too (I'm sure you all know what that is, even if I don't).

If you are interested, you should be looking to contact: mike@rachael-russel.com

### AND WHILE I'M BEING HONEST...

I've been heard to say that I used to take a week to get around to accepting an adverse critique, but eventually I got better. Recently I passed that roadblock with consummate ease. No trouble. Yes, the remarks were perfectly justified and worth a reassessment.

Of course what I forgot was how much hard labour —and how many hours— it was going to take to implement the suggested changes! But, Ian and Jacey, if you're reading this, I'm still grateful, honest, because they do improve the story. I can take it, and thanks!

### NEWSFLASH

A few competition deadlines for you...

Jan 31<sup>st</sup> is the last date for the James White Award, for short stories up to 6000 words.

And the James Patrick Baen Memorial Contest deadline is Feb 1st for stories up to 8000 words on near-future space SF.

You can Google all of them for details, and good luck to any of you who do enter these, or any others this bright new year.

By the time you read this you'll be past your Christmas wishes, and probably your New Year resolutions, but from me to you — all the best for the coming year, in writing and in your other lives.

### THE BSFA'S TWEETFICTION COMPETITION — EASTERCON 2012

### Reflections upon the genesis and outcome by Martin Potts

aving always loved the short story medium, one of my all time favourite collections is 1978's "100 Great SF Short Short Stories" Faltled by Asimov, Greenberg & Olander. The ingenuity and skill involved in constructing any story deserves admiration of course but with the additional constraint of delivering in only two or three pages requires a skill set all of its own. The stories that particularly stayed with me since purchasing the volume back in 1980 were the ones that delivered the story in less than a page and one particular story, "Science Fiction for Telepaths" by E Michael Blake, required only one line. With the development of social media and twitter in particular a question had long intrigued me — could good SF be written within the constraints of twitter's 140 characters? I was convinced that it could.

Couple this with the BSFA's ongoing mission to encourage wider involvement in 5F, the idea was floated at a committee meeting and a cunning plan emerged. It was agreed to coincide a twitter fiction competition with Eastercon 2012, with the potential of either, at worst, passing unnoticed or, at best, unlocking a hidden wealth of creativity. I am thrilled to say that the latter proved to be the case as

pretty soon after the announcement, entries started being received via email, as well as twitter. Once the con itself started, the pace increased. We were already into the hundreds of tweets when Stephen Moffat contributed — and then the floodgates really opened. I would like to say a very public thank you to him for taking part as subsequent to his entry the tweets surged. Eventually, in excess of 1200 submissions were received over that weekend.

I lost count of the "What is this #tbsfa all about?" tweets and tried to redirect as many as I could to the BSFA website. I also received numerous complaining tweets about the addictive nature of the exercise! Participants seemed to relish the inclusiveness of #tbsfa and the challence of the constraint.

I now realise of course that this is certainly not a new idea (although in my naivety it was new to me at the time) and many fiction twitter threads already exist, however with the focus around a social event such as Easteroon and the narrowness of the window for entry, it felt like an explosion, a 'frenzy' if you will, of ideas was occurring that made this twitterthon incredible fun to be a part of. The stories (for I will call them that), utilised drama and suspense, originality and cliché,

humour and horror, romance and action. Even the BSFA itself became a character in many.

On reflection then, the exercise achieved its objectives. It demonstrated that people do grap the opportunity to be creative, that there is a diverse cross section of people interested in fantastic genre, that huge concepts can be communicated within the confines of minimum space, that we can all have lots of fun playing with these ideas and that good SF can be written in 140 characters or less. A Special Edition booklet is planned containing many more of the tweets we were unable to include on the winners' announcement page on the website — look out for that in a mailing in 2013.

As a catalyst for creativity and a medium in which all could share and enjoy each other's creativity, to my mind, this is social media at its best. A huge thank you to all who contributed and whether you did or did not, the committee has agreed to repeat the challenge at Eastercon 2013 — start thinking now...

Martin Potts, BSFA Treasurer & Committee Member

> website: www.bsfa.co.uk twitter: @BSFA

# Eastercon 64 · Bradford · 29th March - 1st April 2013

# THIS WRITING BUSINESS

Keith Brooke and a bevy of writers talk Business

Keith Brooke, in conversation with Kim Lakin-Smith, Linda Nagata, Jeff Noon, Steven Savile, Michael Swanwick and Lisa Tuttle...

Isewhere in this issue of FOCUS, Kristine Kathryn Rusch writes about how publishing has changed radically in the last ten years, and how it continues to change at a rapid rate. Here, I talk to half a dozen authors about the state of the business, and how it has changed over the years. Is it any easier, or harder, for writers to make a living from their work these days?

Jeff Noon points out that it's always been difficult to make a living from writing, unless you get lucky. "I don't think that fact has changed much over the years. But there are certainly more opportunities to get your work out there now. and it only takes one book to make a breakthrough." Lisa Tuttle

agrees: "It has never been 'easy', but while there have been many ups and downs and changes throughout the years since then, we never saw the terrain change quite as dramatically as it has over the past decade."

While it's never been easy, Michael Swanwick argues that making a living from writing is now even harder. "When I made my first sale, a third of a century ago, everybody knew the rules. You made a name for vourself writing short

fiction for the magazines, learned how to write novels at a regular rate, built up a backlist which would bring in enough money to support you between sales, and so on. Today the backlist is gone, publishers' advances for successful writers are much smaller than a few years ago, and the amount of promotion they're willing to do is down radically. The rules have changed and it's not clear if anybody knows what the new ones are."

"The difference these days is that any writer with an entrepreneurial streak can look to expand their careers digitally via blogs, e-zines, self-publishing and all manner of electronic avenues," says Kim Lakin -Smith. "But, as with all such rags to riches stories, the theory is easier than the execution. In the main, the most likely way for an au-

thor to earn a living is via the traditional publishing deal. Anything else is the exception rather than the rule."

Michael Swanwick agrees: "Many new writers think that selfpublishing ebooks is the road to wealth and fame — or at least to being self-supporting. But in most cases, that's wishful thinking. Tye talked with people who have self-published themselves into a

comfortable income so, yes, it can be done. But they all emphasised that they went into self-publishing with a detailed business plan and spent just as much time cannily and knowledgeably promoting their work as they did writing. Nobody should go that route without a lot of prior research and planning. Every now and then, I meet a writer who's just published a first novel as an ebook and wants me to tell them how they can get readers to find it. That's just heartbreaking."

For those who can get to grips with this new publishing landscape, however, the shift has been liberating. "In some regards, it's easier," says Steven Savile. "The element of write, submit, wait, wait some more, and be paid on publication can be circumvented. The opportunity is

there to take a risk, write something you don't know has a valid market waiting for it and just put it out there direct to your readers where it can sink or swim." Like the other authors we talked to, though, there's a note of caution: "But that's only part of the picture — the part a lot of indie writers would like you to focus on. The fact is there is a lot of white noise out there and it's still incredibly difficult to get noticed. And, from what I can see, readerships are different. I



can have a 'Kindle audience' that doesn't cross over to my print stuff and vice versa. I was lucky, in 2011, Silver hit something close to 50,000 sales on Amazon UK, and The Bookseller listed it as the #26 Bestselling Digital Book of the Year up with the likes of Stieg Larsson. The book failed flatout in the US. I quite literally just cobbled together an ebook thinking, hmm, I have the rights to the UK and Tesco are about to sell the Kindle... good timing. I don't know what I did, how it became visible, and I haven't been able to replicate it, but my back list, 18 months on from that debut release, is still selling circa 1-1,500 copies a month, money coming direct to me. That means old material has been paying the mortgage for almost 2 years. That's a revelation, and allowed me some luxury in writing a couple of novels for love instead of chasing media work. I think right now the smart money is to think about all forms of written word as exploitable, not just traditional mar-

More than anything, this new publishing environment gives authors opportunities they might not have had before. "The success of a writer has always been down to three factors - connections, personality and talent, with a preponderance of any one of the three outweighing a lack of the others," says Kim Lakin-Smith. "Alongside this, there has arquably been a choice to be made between commercialism and art, i.e. stray outside of the formula and publishers get twitchy. Often it is this choice which has marked the difference between a writer making a living or quite literally suffering for their art while holed up at mum and dad's living off fresh air and Pot Noodles,"Now, authors are more free to make that choice, commercialism or art, because the internet's long tail market can make even niche interests viable. Or, perhaps, that distinction is becoming increasingly



Kim Lakin-Smith's dark fantasy and science fiction short stories have appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies including Black Static, Interzone, Celebration, Myth-Understandings, Further Conflicts, Pendemonium: Stories of the Apocalyse, The Mammoth Book of Ghost Stories By Women, and others, with 'Johnny and Emmile-Lou Get Marned' shortlisted for the BSFA short story award 2009. She is the author of the gothic fantasy Tourniquet, Tales from the Renegade City, the YA novella Queen Rat, and Cyber Circus which was shortlisted for both the 2011 BSFA Best Novel award and the British Fantasy Award for Best Novel.

irrelevant, as writers can more easily do both.

### Where to publish?

ot so long ago, SF authors had their work published in magazines, books from trade publishers, or books from smaller presses. Now we have all those, plus all kinds of self-publishing options, we have print on demand, web publishing, ebooks, audio books, and a far greater diversity of smaller independent presses (and larger onest). Our featured authors are active in all these areas, to various decrees.

Lisa Tuttle is with a traditional publisher: "Jo Fletcher Books did

my most recent novel The Silver Bough this year and they are bringing out almost all my back-list titles as ebooks over the next year or so. My first novel (originally published in 1981) will soon be available as an audio book. I've had books published by small presses in limited editions. My short stories appear in traditionally-published books - even hardback anthologies! - in Britain and America (A Book of Horrors edited by Stephen Jones: The Mammoth Book of Ghost Stories by Women edited by Marie O'Reagan; Blood and Other Cravings edited by Ellen Datlow, to name three of the most recent) and in the past few weeks I've sold a brand new story and a reprint to online magazines Lightspeed Magazine and Nightmare Magazine. You yourself have brought out several of my older short stories in digital form, making them available to a new audience - or so I fondly hope."

Kim Lakin-Smith has stuck to the traditional approach, too: "All of my stories have been published via the traditional print route, as physical novels, or in magazines and anthologies. My novels are also available as ebooks, as are a number of the anthologies my stories have appeared in." She does, however, use online media for some of her work. "My blog is where I selfpublish opinion pieces: articles which I might have once submitted to hard copy markets now add to my 'brand' as a writer. This free content helps establish my personality online and, by extension, what kind of writer I am."

Linda Nagata is taking a more diverse approach. "My short fiction is still being published in traditional print and online magazines. These are good markets with writer-friendly contracts, and they're also a fine means of getting work in front of new readers. For novels though, I've gone rogue. I skipped the months-long (years-long?) process of attempting to sell a manuscript to a traditional publisher and instead selfpublished my last two original novels in both print-on-demand and ebook versions. I will almost certainly do the same with my next - a near-future thriller. It's true that a traditional deal would result in better print distribution, and possibly more reviews and more exposure, but it would require me to give up control of how and when the

book is published, and to yield all immediate knowledge of sales trends as well as most of the per-book profit. Given my past experience in the industry, and looking at typical advances. I can't see that it's worth it."

Steven Savile takes a mix'n'match approach for each of his books, "My most recent novel was with Penguin Sunbird - an adaptation of the computer game Risen2: Dark Waters. My next novel, The Sign of Glaaki, a horror novel, is being published in the US by FantasyFlight Games, as it links in to their Arkham Horror franchise. But, in the meantime I'm releasing three linked short novels/long novelettes direct to Kindle and on demand print, linked to Silver. Those I'm doing independently."

Michael Swanwick takes the bottom line, but for sound reasons: "The easiest and most sensible approach is to go with whoever offers the most money. This sounds crass, but in my experience the more money you're paid, the better you're treated. Omn' and Penthouse always treated me swell. It was



Steven Savile has written for Warhammer, Primeval, Dr Who, Torchwood, Stargete, done adaptions of computer games including Risen 2, and graphic novels like Slaine, as well as writing the storyline for the multimilion bestselling computer game Battlefield 3. His novel Silver was 126 on The Bookseller's Top 100 digital novels of 2011.

the small, virtuous, shoestring operations I had to keep an eye on.

For short fiction, I like the big three magazines - Asimov's, F&SF, and Analog - because they're still at the heart of the field and they get noticed, and if I lived in Britain, Interzone would probably go at the top of that list. But more and more of late I've been sending work to Tor.com. They pay well and their website is both consistently entertaining and convincinaly professional. Plus they commission terrific artwork. When your story is illustrated by the likes of John Jude Palencar or Gregory Manchess, you're happy for the rest of the week." Being satisfied with the finished product is key: "My last two novels were published by Night Shade Books (Dancing With Bears) and Tor (The Dragons of Babel). They both created lovely books,"

One way to be sure you're satisfied with the end-product, of course, it to retain full control, which is what Jeff Noon has been doing with his new work and much of his back list. "I'm more or less doing it all myself these days. Pan Macmillan are publishing *Vurt* and *Pollen*, because they still have the rights to those, but I'm publishing the rest of my backlist as well as my new novel, *Channel SKIN*, as independently released ebooks. I will also be putting out any future books myself."





### So... better or worse?

ith this diversity of publishing approaches, is the business a better place for SF authors nowadays, or a worse one?

"I think it's much better," says Jeff Noon. "Science fiction authors can really take advantage of the new platforms, and the new subgences that will be created or unearthed by the technology. SF both uses the technology of comments on it; this gives it a unique position. The general audience will look to us for inspiration. The genre has always celebrated the imagination, so let's apply that quality not only to the books we write, but also to how we produce and market them."

"From my perspective, it's vastly better," agrees Linda Nagata. "I never made anything close to a living from my traditional novels, and in the usual process they appeared for a short time on the market and then they were gone. These days assuming a writer is careful with the rights - there are options, and options are good. I've got ten major titles published under my imprint, with two more available only at Book View Café. None are at the top of any bestseller list, but they exist. They offer potential and the hope of making a living as a writer. Having guit this business once when hope



Lisa Tuttle began writing while sti at school, sold her first stories at university, and won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Science Fiction Writer of the year in 1974. Her first nove, Windhaven, was a collaboration with George R. R. Martin published in 1981, her most recent is the contemporary fantasy the Silver Bough, and she has written at least a hundred short stories — science fiction, fantasy and horror — as well as essays, reviews, nonfection, and books for children. Born and raised in Texas, a former ersident of Greater London, she now makes her home in a remote rural part of Scotland.

ran out, I can say from personal experience that hope is a very important element in the writing game."

Michael Swanwick is cautiously optimistic: "It's easier to get published, and that's always good for a new writer. When your work first appears in a genuine magazine or book or a webzine you respect, you see it in a way you didn't before. Its virtues are more obvious than they were in typescript, and this gives you confidence, which a writer can always use. Being in proximity with writers you admire promotes ambition, which is also essential. Your story's weaknesses are, alas, more obvious - to you, though not necessarily to the reader - but this only encourages you to become better.

"On the negative side, there are many more intangibles that

an unpublished writer can be convinced to spend a fortune on - editing, copy-editing, promotion, all of which are properly the job of a publisher. I sat in on a discussion of book trailers recently. All the writers who had made them agreed that they didn't appreciably increase sales - and then swapped tips on how to get them made. It was just something one does nowadays. apparently. If you're a professional writer, money flows to you. If money flows from you. vou're just another market."

For authors able to take control, and prepared to spend time on the business side of writing. the news is good, "You ask this pretty much on the day Asimov's and Analog announce pay scale rises, when the UK chart on Amazon has 20% of the top 100 paid sales being independently released," says Steven Savile. "What you need to think about is the business aspect. With London Macabre, which I truly believe is the best novel I've written, we just couldn't sell it several publishers took it to acquisitions only for it to be shot down as too esoteric, too cultbook and not enough bestseller book to take a risk on... so I had choices: partner with an indie. self-pub, sell a limited edition, try and gain footing that way. I actually wound up selling it to my Polish Warhammer publisher, and then to the Turkish publisher who did Silver this year, and as a limited edition hardcover in the US via one of these collectable presses... and then with no normal edition, went to Barnes and Noble and negotiated my behind off basically saving look, Silver did nutso for Amazon... but I don't like their Select Program... I don't like the grab they're doing... what can you do? And B&N selected it for their First Look program - it sold several thousand copies in ebook and charted in the top 10 SF, and earned me more than a modest advance from somewhere like Tor would have, but I still

own all the rights to it... So I think if you're savvy, it's a better place to do business — but that business takes away vital time from the writing. And you wind up doing a lot more of the business stuff you might prefer to hand off to your agent."

Focusing on the business side of writing. Lisa Tuttle is less positive: "There may be more ways of being published. and easier to make your work available to a potential readership - and with self-publishing the bar is much lower so it is an affordable option - but as far as the business of writing is concerned I do not think it is an improvement. Far from it. While I have hope that things will shape up or shake down over the next few years, and some sort of workable system will emerge. I still don't understand how the business model is really going to work. There will always be some whom it suits, and for whom it pays, others for whom it is a disaster. Personally, I would rather not have to take on a lot of the marketing, publicity, design, editing and sales aspects of publishing myself; I would rather spend my time writing and thinking about that, not trying to suss out the market. learn what sort of covers work best. find and develop new markets, etc etc.



- specialist tasks that I think publishers evolved to deal with better than individual writers can, for the most part. Of course, there have always been plenty of publishers who were crap at the job of selling books. As it has become easier to publish, we have seen more cowboy operations, too. With individuals setting up imprints for all sorts of reasons. how can the author tell whether or not to accept a deal from a new publisher? One thing that has changed for the worse is that a lot of authors are offered publication 'deals' which pay nothing. The oldfashioned publishing model, at least since I began to be published. was that the author would be paid up front or on publication and in the case of books, either the 'advance' would never

earn out (according to

the accounting department, anyway) so, whether it was £900 or \$30,000, that would be that: or rovalties would be paid six months, a year, or even many years on. I've had both types of experience. What I never previously encountered was something that seems to be much more common now - at least with smaller publishers and electronic editions — of being offered no money up front with an agreement of a much higher royalty rate on every sale. Usually the contract stipulates that the money will be paid every six months, so long as it reaches an agreed small sum (at least \$10 or \$25) otherwise it will be held over to the next payment period. Sometimes this works. Sometimes you chase the publisher for



what was contractually promised, and never see a bean: again. I've had both these experiences. That means I have agreed to hand over my work for no advance, something I'm sure I would not have agreed to twenty years ago! And as more and more we hear about 'best-sellers' on Amazon — thousands of copies that turn out to have been sold for 20 pence each. or even downloaded for free - I'm afraid that the idea of an author being paid for writing a book that lots of people have read is becoming very old-fashioned. Newspapers and magazines used to pay people for content, to fill the pages and attract more readers - now, many websites expect to get their content for free... and it seems there are many people willing to

provide their work unpaid, either in the hope that this will lead to paid work down the line, or simply so they can claim to be published writers. I find this probably the most worrying trend of all: the devaluation of the writer's work. People still want good stories, however they consume them (on a screen - PC, tablet, phone - or on printed paper pages) yet more and more people seem to object to paying for the experience."

### E-publishing

eff Noon is particularly active in e-publishing, with his new novel just out and his entire back-list in the process of being released. "I write, edit and market my books myself," he says." I get help with editing from friends and colleagues. My new covers were designed by a long-term fan of my work. I use Twitter to find people who can help with the marketing, My

agent looks after the more technological or administrative side of things, especially regarding getting the books onto the different platforms: Amazon Kindle, iTunes, Kobo, etc. They also help with the marketing side, arranging interviews and hassling for reviews, and so on. But Twitter is the main route for all that, these days."

Steven Savile echoes the view that successful self-publishing works best as a team effort: "I've got a layout guy, a cover designer, three proof readers, and a woman who runs my website. I trust them all implicitly. It's a team effort."

"I publish my own books both backlist and original titles - under my own imprint, Mythic Island Press LLC," says Linda Nagata, "I've done every aspect of the publishing process, and not just for ebooks, but for print -on-demand versions as well. In the early days I did my own cover art, but those first covers have all been replaced, thank goodness. For four of my backlist titles, the original cover artist, Bruce Jensen, created new covers for me using his original art. Other books use commissioned art. One of these will soon likely have an entirely new cover - which is another wonderful thing about doing it indie: if it's not quite right the first time around, it's possible to fix things, which is a huge change in the way publishing works.

"The other part of the process that I've gotten outside help on is editing. I hired a professional editor for my last novel, *Hepen the Watcher*. The current novel-in-progress is with beta readers and will have, minimally, a copy editor before publication.

"Marketing! That's the hard part, isn't it? I've never hired a publicist, and the marketing I've done so far has been minimal. I think it's the next book that will show if I'm capable of getting the word out or not. My consolation is that traditional publishers

don't do much marketing either, at least not for their midlist authors."

"All of that is done by my publishers," says Michael Swanwick, although he does keep other options open for particular projects. "I do have plans to create an ebook of Hope-in-the-Mist, my critical biography of Hope Mirrlees, when I can find the time, just so it will be easily available to scholars. Because there's no serious money in the project, I'll have to do all the production work myself to keep costs down. But my critical writing is a labour of love, almost but not quite a hobby, so my fiction writing takes precedence."

For many, the prospect of all the additional work involved in self-publishing is a deterrent, particularly those specialist tasks requiring a particular expertise. Ti would rather leave those jobs that I'm not good at or know little about to someone else," says Lisa Tuttle, "preferably someone who is really good at a task I would struggle with, like design and marketing. I have opinions on covers, but that's all they are. It

is nice to be consulted — veto power is especially good! — but any random person is as likely as I am to have a really good idea for the artist or approach

taken to a cover for one of my books. As for editing, of course I self-edit (known as 'revision') and I can proof-read, but the point of having an editor is that they see things the author doesn't - sometimes I know something is wrong with the structure of a nov-

el but don't know how to fix it; sometimes I have no idea that I've spelt a name wrong (You mean it is "Rod Serling", not "Rod Sterling"?), and I may have written four or five versions of a single scene without noticing that I've repeated the same word four times on one page, or changed one character's as e— and it would be nice to have this pointed out before it goes into print! Editors do a lot of different tasks, some of which are more obvious than others, but they can make a big difference in the finished product — and this is something that self-published authors may never realise, alas. I have not self-published anything, yet — unless you count fanzines, long ago."

# Shifting opportunities and approaches

ave changing approaches to reading altered authors' approaches to their work? Should we write differently for the new media?

"I have a suspicion that people do read ebooks slightly differently, but no, I have not changed my style and probably won't," says Lisa Tuttle. "Not for my fiction. The only thing my awareness that reading on-

Cobralingus

Jeff Noon

screen is different from reading on a page has affected is that I try to eschew subtlety in emails and be very clear and straightforward ditto, Facebook."

Michael Swanwick is adamant: "Writing is writing is writing. I write as well as I possibly can and then I sell the results to the best available market. That's it." Read al-

most any writing forum — or, for that matter, any publishing/marketing forum — and you'll get that advice repeatedly: write, and write as well as you possibly can. Michael

goes on to add, "The only real change I've made in recent years is consciously dividing my writing into serious work and what Graham Greene called 'entertainments'. The Mongolian Wizard stories appearing on Tor.com are a good example of the latter. They're very much in the tradition of Poul Anderson's Opera-



Jeff Noon was born in Manchester in 1957. He trained in the visual arts and was active on the post-punk music scene before becoming a playwright. His novels include Vurt (Arthur C. Clarke Navard win-en), Pollen, Automated Alice and Falling Out Of Cars. Pikel Juice was a collection of fifty avant-pulp stories. He also writes microfictional spores' via @effnoon on Twitter. His latest novel Channel SKIN is experiment in independent digital publishing. He lives in Brighton, one the south coast of England. More information can be found at www.metamorphiction.com.

tion Chaos and Randall Garrett's Lord Darcy tales. There's an underlying seriousness, but their purpose is primarily to entertain."

"I haven't made any conscious changes to adapt my writing style to the medium," says Linda Nagata, "but then again, the original work that I'm publishing is intended to come out in both ebook and print-on-demand. I do think there's a place for shorter books these days, especially given the time crunch so many readers are facing. One of my original titles is only 65,000 words, which is a great length to work with both as a writer and a publisher."

Jumping between media and varying approaches has become second nature to Steven Savile. "I wrote the storyline for Battle-leid 3 last year, the massive computer game, which leant heavily on the style of Silver, for instance, but I just did a

kids set of Top Trumps books for Penguin about dinosaurs and creatures of the deep, and have done fantasy, SF, and everything in between thanks to the media stuff, which can be mimicking other people's voices (in the case of TV shows) rather than writing in my own... but I did do an audiobook for Torch-wood which was never

in print, and that took a very different kind of writing — the poor narrator would have died over some of my character names and tongue-twister sentences — we read differently with our eyes. Words read to us need a different rhythm...

"But ebooks have allowed me to do a series of collaborative novellas that are all linked — the Sally Reardon Supernatural Mysteries — that wouldn't exist otherwise. And technology allows me to collaborate with Americans, Brits, Australians and Canadians (so far this year) which is mad in and of itself."



Others, like Jeff Noon, are drawn to the possibilities offered by the way people read, and interact with, the newer ways we have of presenting stories. "This is very interesting, I think," he says. "We know by now that people can read novels easily on the smaller Kindles. As soon as the screen gets too big however, iPad size, then people find it more difficult to stick with long

narratives, So that may well affect the length of stories. Chan-le SKI/N is a short novel anyway, more like a novella, so I think it's the perfect size for the new media. But if readers really want to read, they will read, no matter the platform. So for novels, I'm not changing my style consciously to work with the new media. But I think there will be new kinds of storytelling that will rise from the technology itself, in regard to both opportunities and limitations. I have a

number of experiments on the go at the moment that will explore these new possibilities."

### **Interactions**

n today's interconnected, social media-rich world, contact with readers is easier and more prevalent than in the past. Is this a good thing? And does it — or should it — influence our work?

"Oh, it is much easier and more prevalent," says Lisa Tuttle. "Almost unavoldable! I do like hearing from people who have read and liked my work and obviously they find it much easier to just drop me a line on Facebook or via my website than they ever would have when you had to write a whole letter and then find an address to send it to, and then worry that the publisher probably wouldn't forward litt... so, I do hear from more of



Writing is like any skill, practice may not make perfect but it can certainly help make us better. These short exercises are designed to help you think critically about what you do when you write. You should be able to complete each exercise in about fifteen minutes. Use them to spark new ideas, to break a logism in your writing or just to practice your craft.

- 1. In a public place, pick someone out of the crowd. Write about the scene from their point of view. What do they see when they glance your way?
- Take a passage from a book you have recently read and write it from different points of view. If it's written in the first person ("I did this") or third person ("He went there") try rewriting it in the second person ("You were here") or from the point of view of a omissionent narrator. Don't such changes the imagined world.
- Write a short scene in the first person. Write it about someone who is sitting in a coffee shop. They have just learned that they have an incurable disease: but do not tell the reader. What would the world look, sound, feel, smell, and taste like? What will catch their attention?

my readers, and that is lovely. But. I know that this contact can be a double-edged sword... it is not so nice to hear not-nice things, of course! Or to read 'reviews' from people who consider it a personal affront if they don't like your book - they can respond as if they've been missold inappropriate insurance by a pushy salesperson, when in fact they've chosen to buy a book on the basis of another reader's opinion - or, worse, they can sound as if the writer must have set out to offend or trick them. I don't know if it influences my writing. I kind of hope it doesn't - that I'm not swayed by either the praise or the grumbles."

Kim Lakin-Smith points out a difference between how we interact online and off. "Increasingly, I think there can be a division between the personality of the writer online and

in real life," she says, "Social

networking is a breeding ground

Michael Swanwick has received the Nebula, Theodore Sturgeon, World Fantasy and Hugo Awards, and has the odd distinction of having been nominated for and lost more of these same awards than any other human being. He lives in Philadelphia with his wife, Marianne Porter. Swanwick's mos recent novel in Dancing with Bears, a post Litopian adventure featuring confidence artists Darger and Surplus. He is currentl at work on two new novels.



alytical, antagonistic and political opinion, often offered by individuals who wouldn't say boo to a goose in person. Of course this is wonderful bait for attracting attention, and by proxy, new readers. That said, it is still the storytelling which should speak loudest in terms of attracting a readership, and the hope is that no amount of PR will disguise bad writing.

"In terms of readers having greater contact with the author, I thrive off reader/writer interaction and am eternally grateful for people taking the time out to talk to me about my work. I always try my best to put myself across in a truthful light, in other words friendly, outgoing and reserved by equal measure, and a little odd at times — not unlike my stories."

For most, contact with readers has been a positive thing. "I'll admit to being surprised that my readers are pretty much the way I imagined them," says **Michael Swanwick**, "smart, openminded, willing to be challenged, happy to be entertained. What were the odds?"

Contact with readers can sometimes offer a welcome spark, too, "My contact with readers has almost always been positive," says Linda Nagata, "so I enjoy being able to interact with them, and that interaction can be helpful in surprising ways. Last year, a long-time reader wrote a bit of a diatribe in a comment on my blog, insisting that I should write more short stories because it would be good for my career. I hadn't written any short work in over a decade, but this reader provided the nudge I needed to get going again - and I sold five stories in the ensuing year." It can be a double-edged sword, though, "The hard part of interacting with readers is when I can't give them what they want. I've been encouraged to write a fifth Nanotech Succession novel, as well as a third Puzzle Lands novel. I'm seriously considering both, but I have to weigh the odds. Will there be enough of an audience to make the effort worthwhile? Or is it better to roll the dice on something new? Still, simply knowing that there are people eager for the next book, whatever it might be, helps immensely."

Writers are not necessarily the most gregarious of people — after all, they choose to shut themselves away from the world and make stuff up for most of their working life. For some, the internet can dissolve some of the barriers. "I'm not a great internet 'chatter'," says Jeff Noon, "never have been, so I tend to keep that side of things to a minimum. But I use Twitter to give out news and views, and to connect to fans, and most of all to write fiction. I started to create 'spores' earlier this year, 140 character stories. I've done a lot of them by now, well over a thousand, and



I write them more or less every day. I enjoy that side of it tremendously." For others, it just ain't gonna happen: "I hate it and can't do it..." says Steven Savile. "I'm useless at it. I envy guys who do it well."

### The hard sell

s our featured authors have already commented, the business - and marketing - side of writing has become an increasingly important part of an author's working life. Do they actively promote their work, and, if so, how much time does it take up. Do they enjoy it, or is it a necessary evil?

As Steven Savile has already said, that side of the writing business doesn't come naturally. "I try to do some... but I'm a useless blogger, for instance, My best promotion is my next book, But I am more consciously aware that I need more reviews, links with bloggers etc... but god it's hard. It just goes against my personality."

"Well, I've finally got a website, as well as Facebook pages," says Lisa Tuttle, "I am aware of having the obligation to promote my work! But I am not very interested in doing so, and afraid I probably don't do it very Linda Nagata well. I don't spend much time on it, and sometimes worry that I should be try-

ing to think up some more subtle and clever way of selling my work beyond just putting the information 'out there'. Generally I consider it a 'necessary evil' - I don't enjoy having to try to 'sell myself' or my books (much as I want people to buy and read

them!) - although

I love going to book festivals, conventions, any sort of event like that; I enjoy meeting readers, love giving readings, am happy to do signings or give a

talk to a group - those are special events, it's great to be able to go out and meet people. whereas blogging, giving interviews, trying to think of something intriguing to say about my books, all that is just more time spent at the computer but not doing my real work!" [Oops -

For others, social media and promotion have become a natural part of the landscape, to varving degrees. "I do little bits of promotion here and there, now and again," says Jeff Noon. "I don't want that side of things to take over my life and my writing time in any significant way. I'm on the long tail, which means I can do a kind of low-level, more or less constant promotion. Slowly I am making contact with people, mainly through Twitter, who are working in digital culture in various ways. Hopefully, some mutually beneficial proiects will come out of these contacts. I'm interested in creative marketing, using

Linda Nagata

Vas

Linda Nagata

Tech

Heaven

Deception

the Bohr

Maker

Well

ideas and methods that rise naturally from the books, both in style and subject matter."

"I do actively promote my work online, via my website, quest blogs. Facebook, and Twitter," says Kim Lakin-Smith. "I can't say this is

something that comes entirely naturally to me. Whether this is due to

> quintessential British queasiness when it comes to 'bigging myself up' or just shyness, I am not sure. I have had to train myself to see self-promotion as part of the job description. My consolation is that selfpromotion via personal websites and

social networking has become the norm. I still need the proverbial kick up the backside by my husband in order to keep my blog up to date. But I do understand that the visitor stats spike whenever I publish new content. Ouite how that translates into physical sales of my books, I don't know. The whole process is very much a part of modern publishing. In fact, I know of one publisher who claims they won't touch an author without a strong online presence. For me, the way a writer presents her or himself online has become an art form in itself."

"The consensus of my editors is that I should promote myself, and so I do," says Michael Swanwick, "I have no idea whether it actually does any good, so I try to make the promotions worth doing for their own sakes. To promote Dancing With Bears, for example, I wrote a series of podcasts for Starship Sofa, in which the protagonists explain the ins and outs of running a confidence game. Gregory Frost was magnificent as the British master con artist Darger and I got to play the bluff American dog-man Surplus. That was enormous fun.

"I put in about twenty minutes a weekday on my blog, which has turned out to serve well as the diary I never had the discipline to maintain. Facebook is more of an indulgence than a promotional device: its chief result has been to build a rabid following for my wife's breakfasts."

Is social media more about preaching to the converted, though? "I do the minimum promotion of announcing new publications across the usual social media as well as my blog," says Linda Nagata, "I also have a newsletter which I encourage anyone with an interest in my work to sign up for - it comes out rarely, but it's the best way to know when something new is available. But these means are

only useful in communicating with people already familiar with my work. In my experience, social media is not very helpful at all in expanding readership, unless someone else, someone influential, is pushing your work.

"I've never tried ads. I've never done a blog tour. I am happy to participate in articles like this one, because it's another means of connecting with potential new readers. But promotion is hard, I don't enjoy it, and I don't spend alto fr time at it. For the next novel though, I've got some promotional ideas simmering. We shall see."

### The state of play

o one would argue that the publishing landscape isn't going through a process of dramatic change, but perhaps one thing this discussion shows is that it's hard to generalise about the impact of this on authors. Some are losing out, some just keep on doing what they do best, while others are excited by the new possibilities. It's tough to rise to the top of the heap, whatever the environment is like, but writers are still finding audiences, for now, at least.

"We used to complain in the 1970s, the 1980s, the 1990s," says Lisa Tuttle, "about the unfairness of the fact that the going rate for short fiction was still roughly what it had been in the 1950s, despite the fact that the price of books, magazines, and indeed everything had increased. But I don't think anyone (except perhaps an opportunist fanzine editor, offering to print anything) ever asked me for free stories. And I do get asked that now, and realise, when I see the anthology appear, a handsome volume from a small press, that quite a few 'professional' writers must be giving away their stories. Why? Because there aren't enough paying



ple novels and short stories including. The Bohr Maker, winner of the Locus Award for best first novel, and the novella "Goddesses" — the first online publication to receive a Nebula award. Though best known for science fiction, she writes fantasy too, exemplified by her "scoundred life "scient Stories of the Puzzle Lands, ther newest science fiction novel. The Red- First Light, will be published this spring under her own imprint, Mythic Island Press LLC. She lives with her husband in their long-time home on the island of Maui. Find her online at: MythicIsland.com twitter.com/LindaNagata

markets for short stories? And once it's out there, maybe another anthologist or TV producer will make an offer... Of course -Howard Waldrop aside - no one imagined making a living as a short story writer; that was like expecting to make your living writing poetry. Making a living from writing novels was rarely possible - unless you were turning out several a year (under different names), you'd usually also have to do journalism, or write advertising, or teach, or be supported by a partner for years. Nevertheless, quite a few of us managed to scrape by, because we did get paid for our work even if it wasn't what even an optimist might consider a living wage. But for the near future? I don't know what that holds."

Steven Savile echoes this: "Big mergers, shifting sands underfoot. It fightening. I don't know what the land-scape will look like in two years' time. My last novel didn't make it into Waterstone's, and it was published by Penguin... Once upon a time that would have been a given. In a numbers game, things like Bookscan become a massive sword of Damocles over our heads. The risk is to try and think what will sell, not what do I want to write? That's the lesson I'm trying really hard to learn."

"The history of publishing has been one continual series of disasters spelling doom for writers: Samuel Johnson destroyed the patronage system, and writers couldn't make a living anymore," says Michael Swanwick. "Newspapers stopped serailising novels, and writers couldn't make a living anymore. Rental libraries went under, and writers couldn't... The pulp magazines folded and writers... Ebooks and internet piracy came along and...

"And yet here we are. Writers are as tough as rats. We've always found a way to survive and we always will."

And maybe not just survive: "We are creating a new literary landscape," says Jeff Noon, "The major newspapers and the big publishers are still clinging onto the old ways, but that will change. We will see more and more smaller independent presses, and more and more writers going it alone, as I have. This is going to produce a whole range of new books and new themes and new styles. The gatekeepers are losing their place; the doors stand unguarded. I really do believe that SF writers are uniquely placed to write the true novels and short stories of this new borderless zone, and to explore the possibilities of the future."



# POEMS FROM THE STARS

### BSFA Poetry Submissions edited by Charles Christian

Time for our second selection of sci-fi and fantasy poetry for FOCUS and this time I have to take a leaf out of Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure and suggest that all would-be contributors need to lighten up dudes! We had a record number of submissions but way too many that lacked the spark of life (which might seem oxymoronic when writing poetry about vampires and zombies) and deftness of touch. Or, to put it another way: don't take yourselves and your writing so seriously. Have fun, enjoy yourselves with your craft — and you'll also find your readers will enjoy your work more.

What else? Moving on from oxymorons to irony, it is ironic that earlier this winter the Science Fiction Poetry Association in the US agreed on a new tee-shirt design featuring a slogan by the American horror writer and poet Michael Arnzen, (You can find him at @MikeArnzen on Twitter.) The SFPA slogan is "in space no one can hear you rhyme" which is a great pun on the old Alien movies tag-line. That's the good news. The bad news is we also had a glut of submissions that were, to paraphrase the words of that arch-diva Grace Jones "slaves to the rhyme". End rhymes have their place in poetry but not clunking, forced end rhymes at the expense of everything else. Once again, have fun with your work and so will your readers.

Topics-wise, the most popular subject matters for poems were Doctor Who, vampires and zombies. Very little 'traditional' science fiction and no High Fantasy, which is perhaps surprising considering the new Hobbit movie is in the news. I know I shouldn't express preferences but my favourtie in this selection is California Vamp by James S Dorr. It has that deft touch I mentioned, capturing the poignancy of the protagonist's plight but without hammering the message home with all the subtlety of a stake being driven home into a vampire's coffin.

### **California Vamp**

She missed the sun.
While vampirism was a ball,
when missed the sun,
the days of partying and fun,
the beach, the bars, her friends, the mall,
non blood-based drinks, but most of all
whe missed the sun.

- James S. Dorr



'Tooth' by Detroit writer and artist Acquanetta M. Sproule

### **Having It All**

"Asexual clones were developed in the 23rd century but these were found to be unsuccessful in work environments."

- Clone Technician's Handbook Chapter 7

I sit down beside him, her, it.
We talk about the shift, the food,
the way a work station is sticky
after 17 has eaten donuts.

I cannot take my eyes from its mouth the way its face at rest can return to a state of everything and not quite. I have thoughts of reaching out, touch.

How will its skin warm to my finger tips? Smooth is a language that has no word for this desire. Eye contact holds no I. In its voice I hear every note, one song.

It smiles and each breath is a rolling dice and nothing is all and more and more and all I want is it, a moment of reply other than its fleeting glance of pity.

- Andrea Porter

# With apologies to HG Wells

The machine it rattled and shook The dials whirred and spun We disappeared from sight Into the future of our world

- Eileen Ward Birch

### Haiku

after you won riding the lift with your clones

- Julie Bloss Kelsey

### Dalek Poetry

The Dalek is not well known for its mellifluous voice, nor is it known for its poetic imagination.

The Dalek is not known for stairs, or for speeches at weddings. Daleks are not well known for their appreciation of the arts, unless it is watching repeats on Dave, which they'll watch for hours, drinking lager and eating Vindaloo, for exterminating is what they like to do.

- Ben Macnair



Charles Christian is currently putting the finishing touches to a trilogy of horror/fantaxy novel-last that will be published in 2013. In the meantime you can find him lurking on the interweb at www. UrbanFontasist.com where he blogs about his adventures in the worlds of creative writing, sci-fi and fantasy fiction, ebooks and equilishing, digital and social media, futurology, trend spotting and conference presentations. In fact everything and anything outside his day-job of running a legal technology newwletter.

### The New Blue Kiosk

The kiosk door is closing.
"I need some freesias, please,"
I plead, wedging the crack
with my foot.

He shoves a plastic bag into my arms: "Last of the day: free to a good home." The door slams.

Mental health issues, obviously; young men don't wear bow ties.

And he's given me celeny, beyond its date.

At home, I snip the packet's end wallowing in disappointment: the contents are furry and smell like Grandad's wind. I leave it on the table while I make a cuppa.

The fur moves: tensing, bulging — splitting the packet. Not a butterfly but an enormous elbow, bicep, pecs and paw — no! Hand: fur-backed, leather palmed — a huge face: two eyes, deep-set yet gleaming; beneath a brow, frowning over a yawn of yellowed canine teeth than would cow a lion.

An entire gorilla — silverback, not a comparatively petite female ecloses. My Ikea table cracks, collapses; he fills the kitchen; the grill vibrates with his resonant greeting grunts.

As would his breath.

"Did you eat my celery?" I wonder. He looks sheepish, stifling a burp. Then, with a theatrical sleight of paw, he sweeps a bunch of freesias from an alternative universe.

- Myfanwy Fox



# **TYPING IN THE MARGINS**

Una McCormack writes tie-in novels, and loves it

o date, I've published six TV tie-in novels based on *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who* (with another *Star Trek* novel in progress). I've also recently been writing for Big Finish, producers of audio dramas based on *Doctor Who* and various spin-series.

I'm aware that writing tie-in novels falls very low down the geek hierarchy and I make no pretence to be a great literary innovator. These novels are meant to be (and I write them to be) good stories, solidly told. Nonetheless, tie-in writing has been good to me, allowing me to get published, as well as giving me on godrable creative freedom to write about subjects that are dear to my heart. I am, I believe, a rare example of a British woman writer publishing science fiction novels with big publishing houses in both the US (Pocket Books/Simon and Schuster) and the UK (BBC Books/Random House). I bear in mind what Joanna Russ has to say about the confused standards often applied to women's writing: "She wrote it, but it isn't really art: it's a romance, a thriller, a children's book — It's SFI" To which I would add: "She wrote it: but it's got a TARDIS on the cover!"

My 'background' was in media fandom and fan fiction writing. While other members of the BSFA were perhaps losing themselves in the short story collections and novels from the Golden Age, I was watch-

ing and re-watching my few off -air and increasingly jaded copies of Blake's 7. I inherited numerous fan-fiction zines from an older sibling, and, as a child, raided the library for Doctor Who and Blake's 7 novels, Later, as a teenager, I consumed Star Trek: The Next Generation novels. Around this time, I progressed to writing fiction of my own. These earliest stories, written in my late teens and early twenties, appeared in old-fashioned zines. With the internet (and a new interest in Star Trek: Deep Space Nine) came online fan fiction. And, via email, came a note from an editor at Pocket Books, saving that my DS9 fan fiction had been praised to him, and asking whether I'd be interested in

I'll leave you to imagine my response.

pitching to the range.



# THE PRACTICAL BUSINESS OF WRITING TV TIE-INS

or both the 'universes' in which I've written, the writing process begins with an outline. TV tie-in writing involves an extra round of vetting, in which outlines are passed from the publisher to the licence holder (in the case of Star Trek, to CBS: in the case of Doctor Who to the BBC, or 'Cardiff' as the shorthand has it). The Doctor Who book outlines are checked by the production crew to make sure that there isn't overlap with ideas currently in production. With the Star Trek books, the shows I have written for have been off-air, the vetting process is chiefly to make sure that nothing too outré will occur to the characters: there is a sense of custodianship towards these popular and wellloved figures. Requests for small amendments generally follow, the aim

being to find a story which everyone is happy to tell. Sometimes the request for changes are more substantial: I went back to the drawing board on one occasion when I pushed Ben Sisko slightly too far in the direction of realpolitik! My outlines have varied in length from 2 pages/1200 words to much lengthier treatments of 7-10k (for a much more ambitious book).

The novels too have varied in length, from about 50-60k for the *Doctor Who* books (which are currently conceived with their younger readership in mind), to 70-100k for the *Star Trek* books. The outline, while crucial to the commissioning



process, provides more a framework for invention than a stralijacket to which I'm subsequently rigidly committed. The stories unfold as you tell them, in the way all storytelling happens, and I find plenty of surprises along the way to keep the writing process fresh and interesting for me. Particularly when a show is in production, and the production team have other immediate and pressing concerns, the turnaround between outline approval and manuscript due date can be very tight: being able to cope with this is, of course, why you're being hired!

TV tie-in novels are licensed work, written with the permission and supervision of the creators, studios, or other copyright holders of the original characters. This means that you are, on occasion, simply doing a job for hire: I do not hold copyright on my Star Trek books. (I do hold copyright for the Doctor Who books, although obviously not for those elements that

are trademarked to the BBC.) It's true therefore that, in theory, CBS could therefore make themselves very rich from something that I've written. I'll believe it when I see it.

I don't underestimate my huge luck in getting invited to write for the Star Trek books (which in turn led to writing the Doctor Who books). I know that writing a Star Trek or a Doctor Who book is a fondly-held ambition of many of my writing colleagues, who often ask how I broke into writing them. I'd advise anyone hoping to write for a particular series to get publishing their own work first. The publishers want to know that their authors can reliably fill particular publication slots. You need to be able to demonstrate that you're able to deliver a manuscript of the required length in the required time.

# CREATIVE CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

enerally, when I'm asked about writing TV tie-ins, the question is framed in terms of constraints: there seems to be a sense that working in a pre-existing universe necessarily implies some limit upon my creativity. The most obvious constraints are related to the characters and, to some extent, the settings that are available to you. The Doctor, Amy, and Rory were always going to be necessary components of an Eleventh Doctor novel, and some mention of the TARDIS was likely. Recently, the Doctor Who books have been published twice-yearly in batches of three: the creative director, in pursuit of variety, might therefore ask you for something "contemporary and spooky" or "with aliens, please", to make sure that the books being published aren't the same. Beyond that, I've been able to interpret any brief freely, and I've been fortunate that my own taste for Doctor Who to be fantasy adventure has been in keeping with the show's current tone. In general, I think it helps to see these requests as inspirations rather than limitations.

An editor with responsibility for a long-running series in mind might ask you to focus on a particular character who has not been foregrounded in recent books, or perhaps you might suggest it: for example, in my most recent Trek novel, Brinkmanship, I made Beverly Crusher a major protagonist, not only because the character has largely been a spear-carrier and deserved a little time in the sun, but because the book was a (successful)



Una McCormack is the author of six T Vtein novels based on Star Trek and Doctor Who. Her short fiction has appeared in numerous publications including Glorifying Terrorism (ed. Farah Mendlesshn), The Year's Best SF (ed. Gardner Dozois), and Doctor Who Magazine. She is lecturer in creative writing at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge.



experiment in ensuring gender parity across the characters, (I had also had some fun playing with the genre of feminist utopias.) In my DS9 novel Hollow Men, I brought together the characters of Doctor Bashir and the station constable Odo, a combination not seen much on screen, but which seemed to offer potential for humour One 'constraint' that I feel keenly is to make the characters sound right: this is often how a book will be judged by aficionados, and you do feel a certain amount of responsibility to make Picard 'sound like' or 'act like' Picard, knowing that a reader will be disappointed by a wrong note.

Perhaps the main constraint is to remain consistent with what's



been established on-air, or in other books. With Doctor Who, I take the path of least resistance, and don't go near complex backstories about, for example, Gallifreyan politics. The Stat Trek book series is now a very well-evolved and complex shared universe. I've specialised in writing stories about



one particular civilisation (the Cardassians); even so, other authors have built aspects of that world and that culture. In general, it's fun to take what someone else has invented and see how it coheres with your own vision. Again, I think it's important to see 'constraints' as opportunities for invention: a challenge to your own creativity. If you're someone who firmly believes in the individual



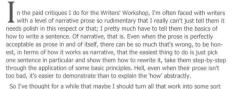
nature of talent, and has anxieties about influence, TV tie-in writing probably isn't for you. For those of us who like the collaborative nature of storytelling – who enjoy picking up the ball and running with it – this kind of shared-world writing is going to be a more enjoyable process.

It's been a delight to get paid to do something that started out as a hobby. It's good to know that the books sell well and have a wide reach - particularly when you think of your argument in favour of socialised healthcare sitting on a bookshelf in an Oklahoma Wal-Mart. She wrote it, and she wrote it as well as she could – in the time available!

FIN.

# How To Write A Sentence

Hal Duncan on getting the basics right



of Sentence Writing 101 post for the blog, but of course, I can't exactly use a client's text even anonymously. What to do, then? What to do? It's actually kind of
hard to deliberately write a sentence that's fucked up in all the ways I need for
such a demo. But fear ye not. A flash of inspiration hit me, I had a quick shufty
online, and came up with this prime example from Jim Theiss's seminal 1970 novel,
The Eye of Argon:

"A sweeping blade of flashing steel riveted from the massive barbarians hide enameled shield as his rippling right arm thrust forth, sending a steel shod blade to the hilt into the soldiers vital organs."

I think we can safely all agree that this is unmitigated shite, yes? OK, then. Let's take a closer look at it and see if we can't perform a little alchemy, transform it... well, if not into gold then at least into a serviceable steel. Because really, the principles involved in writing a decent fucking sentence of narrative... they're not that fucking complex.

### 1. Decision

There are many things you want to say in a sentence, but you can't say them all. Decide between them. There are many ways a thing might be said. Decide between them. There are many words on the shelf, close enough to hand that you could grab any one of them and just chuck it in there. Don't. Stop. Look at those words. Decide between them. And when you do put the words down on the page, there's still a decision to be made as to whether the sentence says what you want it to.

Good decision is conscious, considered, confident, conclusive\*. To be those things, decision must be informed. Decision resolves. Decision is therefore ultimately about clarity — clarity of purpose creating clarity of import.

So...
You're aiming to say three things here, that (1) a blade is swung by a barbarian as (2) his arm thrusts forward, (3) skewering a soldier's belly.

The word "riveted" has been grabbed off the shelf. Is this what you mean? Check the dictionary, No, it's not. How about "enameled"? No, that's clearly just the first that came to hand too. You figured, what the fuck, it was close enough — but it's not. And "shod"? A blade is made of steel, not shod with it. Did you stop and think what you're trying to say? Did you mean that the sword comes out of the shield (huh?) or out from behind it? Did you mean that the blade is sent to the hill?

With "rivet," you should be deciding that you mean a sudden action as from a riveter's gun — a shooting forward. With "enameled," you should be deciding that



Hal Duncan's VELLUM was nominated for the World Fantasy Award, and won the Spectrum, Kurd Lasswitz and Tähtivaeltaia Along with the sequel, INK, other publications include the novella ESCAPE FROM HELL!, the chap book AN A-Z OF THE FANTASTIC CITY, and a poetry collection SONGS FOR THE DEVIL AND DEATH, with a short story collection forthcoming from Lethe Press. He wrote the lyrics for Aereo gramme's "If You Love Me, You'd WHERE TOWN. Homophobic hatemail once dubbed him "THE. www.halduncan.com, revelling in that role.

you mean "wrapped in." With "steel shod blade," you should be deciding you just mean "steel blade." You should be deciding that the sentence needs "behind" and "up":

A sweeping blade of flashing steel shot forward from behind the massive barbarian's hide-wrapped shield as his rippling right arm thrust forth, sending a steel blade up to the hilt into the soldier's vital organs.

2. Excision

There are many things you can say in a sentence, but you don't want to say them all. We do not give a fuck about many of the things you could say. We do not give a fuck about *most* of them. Redundancy is fat, and fat should be flensed.

# "I think we can safely all agree that this is unmitigated shite, yes?"

Adjectives and adverbs —all modifying terms— are to be met with the ruthless scalpel of a surgeon. Do they actually add information that is not carried in the verb or adjective already? Even if so, is it information we need? Even whole clauses are to be put to the sword if they repeat what has already been said. If clarity is a primary aim, so too is economy. Excise all that is extraneous.

So here, since the motion of the sword is the predicate of a clause, it doesn't have to be a quality of the subject too. "The moving blade moved is redundancy, the verb rendering the adjective extraneous. We can eliminate "sweeping" then. We don't need to specify that it's his "right" arm either; the reader's imagination will default to that. And if the blade "shot forward then we don't need to know that the arm holding it "thrust forth." This is one action, not two. The secondary action performed by that arm is to send the sword into the soldier's guts, so we can cut and stitch. Similarly we already know that the object in use is "a steel blade."

So this

A [sweeping] blade of flashing steel shot [forward] from behind the massive barbarian's hide-wrapped shield as his rippling [right] arm [thrust forth], sending [a steel blade] up to the hilt into the soldier's vital organs.

Becomes:

A blade of flashing steel shot from behind the massive barbarian's hide -wrapped shield as his rippling arm sent it up to the hilt into the soldier's vital organs.

### 3. Precision

There are many ways a thing might be said. Vaguely is not good enough. Where a sentence of basic prose is purposed to communicate, a sentence of narrative is purposed to conjune. A sentence that only communicates what happened is not narrative; it is deposition. Your job is not just to convey the basic gist of a sequence of events to the reader, but to invoke that sequence of events vividly in their imagination from the cumulative import of every word and phrase. Vividness is cumulative, but so is vagueness, and vagueness is not good enough. Exchange generic terms for precise ones. Look for stoppap phrasings where there's an exact word for the meaning you're delineating clumsily. Look for stoppap pormbinations that don't work if you really consider the precise meaning. After clarity and economy comes accuracy. So, here, "short" is a generic term for sudden movement, including all manders.

ner of firing and dashing motions. The word you want is "thrust." Likewise "sent" is a generic term for getting something from A to B, where we could be using something specific to the immersion of a blade in a soldier's guts, like "buried." The term "hidewrapped" is a stopgap phrasing for a meaning nailed by the term "leathered." Knowing.

term "leathered." Knowing this about the shield, we know what type of shield it is, can replace the generic "shield" with "targe." And "rippling arm" is rather inaccurate. An arm doesn't ripple; it's the muscles of an arm that ripple. So we take the sentence on another step.

A blade of flashing steel thrust from behind the massive barbarian's leathered targe as the rippling muscles of his arm buried it up to the hilt in the soldier's vital organs.

### 4. Concision

There are many words on the shelf that you could use to say precisely what you mean. But there are some words you can use to say even more than precisely what you mean here. And if the additional import is one you're trying to convey elsewhere. you can pot those two balls with one shot. The word or phrase you use to describe an action can capture qualities of the object performing it, and vice versa. If you can say two things with one word, do so. Even if there's no rebound import, if you can use two words in place of three, do so.\*\* "But isn't this just economy?" I hear you say. Yes, this is economy returned with a vengeance. Where economy is about rigour, this is about vigour.

So, the word "flashing" is here being used to conjure the reflection of light off the blade, but it is also loaded with an import of motion, sudden and swift. So we can kill two birds with one stone, let "flash" be the verb. It lacks the precision of "thrust," but it binds object and action into object-in-action. The phrase "blade of steel" can also now become simply "steel blade."

A steel blade flashed from behind the massive barbarian's leathered targe as the rippling muscles of his arm buried it up to the hilt in the soldier's vital organs.

### 5. Incision

When you put the words down on the page, does the sentence say what you want it to? The question is, what do you want it to say? The better question is, what do you want it to do? Do you want it to, for example, encapsulate the import of the action, as it

happens, how it happens? To cut to the very quick of the event, to conjure it not just as a superficial description of how this did that and such-and-such happened, but to slice it open and drop the reader right in it? Then you need to carve into the nature of reality itself

How does a sudden attack that puts a sword in your belly play from the inside? If you'd seen the blade properly would it be in your belly? Didn't you see it properly a little too late, when it was up to the hilt? Shift that "blade" and we shift the awareness of it.

Steel flashed from behind the massive barbarian's leathered targe as the rippling muscles of his arm buried his blade up to the hilt in the soldier's vital graans.

Did his arm skewer you with his sword or did he do it, him, the fucking cunt? Did your arm skewer him with your sword or did you do it, you, because you're a fucking god among men? Let muscles of his arm do what they actually did —ripple— and let the barbarian take the glory/quilt that's his:

Steel flashed from behind the massive barbarian's leathered targe, as the muscles of his arm rippled and he buried his blade up to the hilt in the soldier's vital organs.

Is his mass mere flabby corpulence, or is it the rippling-muscled brawny bulk of a warrior? Attach "massive" to the muscle rather than the barbarian and we lose the direct specification of his size but gain a more precise, albeit indirect, specification that conjures the larger picture from the telling detail:

> Steel flashed from behind the barbarian's leathered targe, the massive muscles of his arm rippling as he buried his blade up to the hilt in the soldier's vital organs.

Apply concision. Apply all previous principles. These aren't stages you move on from,

## "Did you bury your blade in his vital organs, or did you sink it in his guts?"

go through one by one. There's no moving on until the sentence is good. So, apply concision. What are "massive muscles" but brawn?

> Steel flashed from behind the barbarian's leathered targe, the brawn of his arm rippling as he buried his blade up to the hilt in the soldier's vital organs.

Did you bury your blade in his vital organs, or did you sink it in his guts? How do you think of innards as a barbarian? How do you think of sticking the fucker? Isn't there just a little more of your satisfaction reflected in a sssssank!

> Steel flashed from behind the barbarian's leathered targe, the brawn of his arm rippling as he sank his blade up to the hilt in the soldier's guts.

### 6. Decision

There are many ways to structure the words in a sentence. There are all the commas and conjunctions you could ever want on the shelf, close enough to hand that you could just grab them and chuck them onto the page, as and when it seems you could maybe do with one. Put them down and look at the sentence. Just because it's grammatically correct doesn't mean it's good. Remember, where a sentence of basic prose is purposed to communicate, a sentence of narrative is purposed to conjure. The logic of structuring a sentence of narrative goes beyond grammar. It is a matter of dynamics, of focus turning and twisting this way and that, slick as a swordsman's parry, feint and thrust. The structure of your sentence is its dynamics. The dynamics of your

sentence is its drive. The drive of your sentence is the impetus of narrative, drawing the reader in, whirling them through your slingshot syntax, hurding them onward, sentence to sentence. There are many ways to structure the words in a sentence. Decide between them.

So, here, the swift flashing of steel requires a swift phrasing. So we switch the full descriptor for a punchier pronoun, let the brute hulk of the barbarian fall back to his moment of triumph:

Steel flashed from behind his leathered targe, the brawn of his arm rippling as the barbarian sank his blade up to the hilt in the soldier's auts.

If that steel is being whipped out from behind the shield, suddenly being made visible, we can let the structure of the sentence reflect that, present the "from" adverbial first, then spring the flashing steel upon the reader as suddenly as it's sprung on the soldier:

> From behind his leathered targe, steel flashed, the brawn of his arm rippling as the barbarian sank his blade in the soldier's gut up to the hilt.

When does the brawn of his arm ripple? Simultaneous with the sinking of the blade, but after the flash of steet? Or vice versa? Is it all happening at once — steel flashing as brawn ripples as the blade sinks into guts? Or is what we're going for here the sequence in which they register, the shift of those moments... quick, quick, and suddenly all too final.

From behind his leathered targe, steel flashed, the brawn of his arm rippled, and the barbarian sank his blade in the soldier's guts up to the hilt.

If we're applying the same logic of perception to the rippling of brawn as to the flashing of steel though, let's apply the same syntax. We're not losing the precision of an arm, if you think about what brawn is actually involved here. We're gaining the precision of an arm, a shoulder, a whole body putting its bulk behind that blow: From behind his leathered targe, steel flashed, brawn rippled, and the barbarian sank his blade in the soldier's guts up to the hilt.

But in that final action, is it awkward that the "up to the hillt" is dislocated from "sank his blade" at You did a reversal of phrasing, "sank his blade up to the hilt in the soldier's guts," be better? Or maybe that dislocation is exactly what we want — two stages for the blade's motion, "in" and "up to the hillt." Let's apply incision here, and carve ourselves a new clause entirely, bring back a verb from the cutting room floor to give the barbarian a syntax that springs out steel and brawn on the soldier too fast for him to deal with, skewers the poor fucker in the belly, and then drives his death home to him with relish:

From behind his leathered targe, steel flashed, brawn rippled, and the barbarian sank his blade in the soldier's outs, thrust it up to the hilt.

That's how you write a sentence. It's not a great sentence, just passable, but then really, if you asked me to get to a good sentence from that line, I'd suck my teeth, shake my head and say, "You don't want to be starting from here, mate." But it's a functional sentence of narrative, wrangled out of shite by the application of basic principles to the words and their structurings—those principles of decision, excision, precision, concision, incision... which are all, you'll note, derived from the Latin word for cut. Words are, as I've said before, the only substance. Style is not a patina, a decorative finish; it is a process, the process described above, performed with the scalpel of one's savyu wand that substance.

Which is why, of course, the end result is 25 words versus the 34 of the original.

Because style is not a fucking patina.

\* Excellent decision is instinctive, intuitive, instant, a skill learned to automation, but to master the skill to excellence you need to go through competence. If you think you have mastery as an innate facility, I'm not innarested in your condition.

\*\* Unless there's a damn good reason not to, like not demoting an object to mere modifier, or simply because it would foul the rhythm. Note that I haven't changed "ripling muscles of his arm" to "ripling arm muscles". The rhythm of the former is smooth, a slicker combo of syncopated punches finishing on an uppercut — DUMdum DUMnuthruthu DUM — while that of the latter is awkward — DUDdum DUM DUHruh — not helped by the shared "m" at the end of "arm" and start of "muscles".

FIN.





If you've got a comment on anything in **FOCUS**, please do get in touch, you can email us at: **focusmag@mangozine.com** 

Or write to: Alex Bardy, 6 The Crescent, Kexby, York YO41 5LB

We assume all comments are "for publication" unless otherwise stated.

# WRITING LIKE IT'S 1999

Kristine Kathryn Rusch delivers a few home truths, and they hurt

hen change hits in the arts, it hits hard. Recently, I was reading an article in the April 2011 \*\*Lanity Fair Mayazine\*\* about the move All The Presidents Men. The last two paragraphs of the article discuss how, in 1975, Scheny Shenberg at MRC arme up with a new way to release movies. Once upon a time, folks, movies released slowly, one or two theaters at a time, and worked their way across the courtry. It meant that the studio had to make fewer copies of the film, and that movies could become "sleepers" — films that actually built word of mouth over time.

Sheinberg decided to amortize costs by sending hundreds of prints of the film to theaters all over the country, and to run a nationwide advertising campaign at the same time. The movie he chose to do this with? Jaws.

That little idea changed the way movies got

marketed — and did so damn near overnight. All the President's Men got released just after Jaws, while this system was still in flux.

"Jaws was a good, populist movie," Robert Redford, star of All the President's Men, said. "But it became the

flagship for a campaign that overtook American movies. It became a slick package, advertising-directed, about selling popcom and product placement. I thought the timing of All the President's Men very fortunate, because

it was a very honest and unpolluted film. I'm not sure if we could have managed it in its purity a decade or two later."

Over the years, Redford has fascinated me because he has always had one foot in the bisiness world even as he built his artistic career. He started the Sundance Film Festival when it became clear that the smaller films which All the President's Men was—had no shot in the changing market. The festival helped give films like that, films that didn't have the benefit of thing, a shot of thing. Why arn I talking about movies here? Bécause I warit you to see the rapidity of change in the film industry. A marketing and business decision that was quite wise from a studio's point of view ended up having a major impact on the kinds of films that opt produced, distributed, and sold to film audiences. Say what you will about the auteurs in the 1970s, most of them wouldn't have had a chance had they started in the 1990s. And it had nothing to do with their talent.

It had to do with the way the business had changed.

The publishing industry is going through the exact same kind of rapid change. It's extremely fast — so fast that that I now give out different advice to newer writers than I would have given them just a year before.

Writers have to learn business and they have to learn the *new* business. If they don't, they'll go by the wayside quickly.

I'm worried about this. And I've been worried that my friends and fellow established writers aren't moving with me. Here's why:

It has become increasingly clear to me that the publishing industry is making changes that emulate the music industry. Those of us who exist on the periphery of the music industry have heard for years that new artists and even established ones can't make money in the traditional music industry.

I didn't understand that until I read Jacob Slichter's So You Wanna Be A Rock N Roll
Star several years ago. He wrote about a system in which a musician who

signed a deal with a major record label could end up owing the label tens if not hundreds of thousands of dollars. He delineated it all out in a long book that showed just how the label ended up taking a naïve artist and putting him into debt.

Slichter said this was why so many rock bands disbanded —because the band itself was a legal entity, and as a legal entity it was in hock to the studio. The only way the musicians could continue to perform and try to earn money from their music was to create a new legal entity and abandon the old one. Otherwise, they were working in a kind of indentured sentiturie.

Think this is just sour grapes from one musician who didn't make it big? A rock producer named Steve Albini discussed it back in the 1990s in a magazine, \*Naximum Rock in \*Rol,\* which I hadn't heard of before a reader sent me to a link. (For those of you who want to read the entire airtide, you can find it at \*negati-wland.com/albini\*). In an article titled, \*The Problem With Musse, \*Albini lays out the line-by-line "costs" that the musicians agreed to when they signed their record deal. The musicians received a \$250,000 advance, But by the time the album got released and the tour was completed, the advance was gone — and the musicians over the record ball \$14,000.

You're understanding me right. The "standard" contractually negotiated costs that the musicians agreed would come out of their pockets came to \$264,000. The only way for the artists to recoup that loss was to



sign a new deal with the label, often at lesser terms. If the label even wanted to sign them. (That part is courtesy of Slichter.)

How much did the label earn — with the same costs deducted?

\$710,000. In 1990s dollars.

Albini also lists how much each "player" made. He includes a producer (\$90,000), a manager (\$51,000), an agent. (\$7500) and a lawyer (\$12,000).

He writes, "The band is now ¼ of the way through its contract, has made the music industry more than 3 million dollars richer, but is in the hole \$14,000 in royalties. The band members have each earned about ½ as much as they would working at a 7-11, but they got to ride in a tour bus for a month. The next album will be about the same, except that the recording money on the same same and the same and the same and the same are the couped; the band will have no leverage and will oblige."

When I read Slichter's book, I thought, "Thank God publishing hasn't figured out how to do this to writers."

Well, folks, guess what. Publishing has figured it out.

The day I wrote this, as I looked over yet another contract addendum for a friend—this addendum sent by a big-name agent who didn't even bother to check the addendum against the original contract terms—I saw the agency rider added into my friend's contract. The agency rider—the thing that says the writer authorizes the publishing house to negotiate with and pay the agent in the writer's name—was awful. My friend had detted it down to something similar to what was offered ten years ago, but I know dozens of writers who probably never the

Writers are signing away their rights, just like the musicians listed above did, because these writers aren't savy enough to understand industry change and how it impacts art. (Like Redifford mertilioned in that allowe quote ).

Once upon a time, publishing was a monopoly. From about 1920 to about 2006, this is how publishing worked:

Writers provide content (product) to Publishers.
Publishers distribute that content to Distributors.
Distributors distribute books to Bookstores,
Bookstores distribute that content to Readers.

Now, however, writers can do this:

Writers provide content (product) to Bookstores Bookstores distribute that content to Readers

The middleman is no longer necessary.

Many writers find this scary. They don't understand that they are —and always have been—in business. So they don't act like business owners.

Business owners invest capital up front to start a business. They recoup that investment over time, and eventually earn money from that investment.

When publishers started paying advances, they —in effect—told writers not to bother their pretty little heads with business. "Write," the publishers said. "We'll take care of your bills while you finish that book."

Writers got used to this. Writers forgot that they had to take risks of their own like other small business owners. And right now, that attitude is bitting writers in the ass — and most of them don't even realize it.

I write a blog called *The Business Rusch* on my website, irristin-éathingnrusch.com. The blog focuses on the changes in the publishing industry from the writer's perspective. As I wrote my posts in 2011, I got e-mails and private comments from long-time professional writer friends which, in effect, say things like, "We need agents. We can't market our books otherwise."



Kristine Kathryn Rusch is an internationally bestelling fiction writer in several genres. She writes as Kris Nelscotl in mystelling thick of the Kris Nelscotl in mystelling thick of the Grayson and Kris Detable in comance. Under her real name, Rusch, she has published fifty novels of science fiction and fantasy and more short fiction than she can count. She has won the Asimov's Readers choice award six times, the Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine award twice, and several other readers awards. Her editing has brought her a Hugo and a World Fantasy Award (She has also won a Hugo for her fiction.) A former journalist, she lies to herself and claims she doesn't write non-fiction any more, but she blogs about publishing every Thursday at www. Kristinekathrynrusch.com, and has turned those blogs into several non-fiction how-to-books.



Or

"Publishers are the only ones who can get us into national bookstore chains:"

Or

"I have no way to reach foreign markets/ Hollywood/the gaming industry without my agent."

And you know what? Ten years ago, that was all true.

Publishers had a monopoly on distribution, Unless a writer become a full-fledged publisher, invested tens of thousands of dollars on a single book, and knew how to work the system, the writer could not get his book into a bookstore. How do I know this? I owned a publishing company twenty years ago. I. Knowhow hard it used to be. I remember the footwork my husband Dean Wesley Smith used to do to get one bookstore, two, five, or ten, on board. It was labor-intensive. He courted distributors for years, before one took on our company.

It's not that way any more. Now, I can reach you with a blog. I can take the novel I finished on Monday, pay a savvy editor to go over the book, pay a copy editor to make sure I don't

change my main character's name midway through, pay a cover designer to make me a lovely cover -all for a flat fee- and put the book up in two majornational bookstores by the end of the week. One of those bookstores has sister stores in the U.K., Spain, France, Italy, and Germany, with more countries on the way.

Of course, this is an ebook. Putting up an e-book is spectacularly easy — and suddenly you have a worldwide market. If you're willing to go to other distributors, you can have your book in more than 20 major national bookstores within two weeks.

If I spend about \$50 on CreateSpace and add a small fee for my cover designer to design a wrap -around (front and back) cover, I can have a trade paper edition of my book that will be listed in the

catalogues of major distributors. I don't have to do anything else. I don't have to court those people for years, like Dean did twenty years ago. And if I'm really willing to put myself out by designing a small catalogue of my work, I can send that to independent booksellers, give them a discount, and have CreateSpace produce and send them the paper books.

And suddenly, I am a publisher — with as great an ability to reach the consumer as any of the so-called Big Six publishers. In fact, I can reach more readers because I control air of the rights, and I can opt to go into overseas markets that they can't penetrate.

The monopoly isn't just broken. It's shattered.

Most writers don't realize that. Most don't want to do the "work" because they don't know how little work they have to do.

What, really, must they do? They must pay someone *up front* instead of letting that person take a percentage of the work in perpetuity.

So let's discuss agents, because that too is important.

+MPOSSIBLES

Once upon a time, I had an agent. Hell, I've had a lot of agents. And I needed them.

Every writer did.

In the days before the internet, before the ubiquity of email, before instant messaging and Skype, agents had a purpose. Writers hired agents for their connections. Agents got books in the door with a relutant publisher. Agents found

partner agents overseas. Agents got into Hollywood studios.

And writers paid the agent for those connections. Writers, essentially, needed an agent to open all the closed and locked doors.

and locked doors.

Some writers,
salespeople all, did
the work themselves. They
booked a trip to

New York, managed to get into the editor's offices, and got their work looked at.

But those writers were rare.

Then the internet came along. And web pages. And e-mail.

The doors became open. All that secret information that agents got — which editor was buying what, who edits for the biggest publishing house in France, what's the name of the literary scout for such-n-so studio — could be Googled.

What's more, if you had a successful book or hell, even a mid-list book on a hol' topic (say, vampires), then the foreign editors and the Hollywood scouts came looking for you.

On the internet.

Through your e-mail.

I get letters all the time from interested foreign publishers, and from movie people. Fjust closed an option deal last week with an independent producer who found me through my website.

And that is not unusual.

It's now a myth, an old and tired myth, that you need agents to open these doors. In fact, agents will often close the doors by believing that if some young producer is interested ain Property A, then the agent can leverage that interest with a studio so that the studio will pay big money for Property A. I've had agents promise that kind of thing all the time, and it has never panned out.

But since I stopped using agents on my Hollywood nibbles — guess what? I have Hollywood deals. When I was agented, I only had one option in twenty years.

Now I have options running all the time.

Because of access.

And because I'm making my own decision. And because I do worry my formerly pretty little head about these things.

Most of my colleagues do not realize that the industry has changed, that evenything they learned when they were starting out no longer applies. They don't realize that the Eusiness part of their industry has changed drambicially, that the deals they're signing, the people they're working with, would fit just as easily into the music industry of the 1990s.

I He're's the flat buth of fi, my friends: If you are a mild-list writer and you sign a traditional publishing contract with most modern terms, and you do so with an agent —and not an IP attorney—negotiating for you, you will not make any more than your advance on that book.



And the advance is not enough to live on. You will not be able to reserve ebook rights to you. Those rights will be a percentage of net, which in most contracts is undefined. And you will have to sell world rights so that the pullshing industry can adequately exercise those e -book rights, making any money you would reerive on foreigh rights vanish.

If you have what I'm now beginning to believe is the standard agency rider in believe is the standard agency rider in your contract, you will also lose a percentage of any auxiliary rights sale to that agent even if you fired that agent will be that agent and someone else negotiated the deal. Plus that agent will be entitled to a percentage of any work you write using that series, those characters, that work, or anything resembling that.

There is a line item in Albini's article at the end. Someone else made money on that album deal. It was the previous label (450,000).

Change the word "label" to "agent" and you start to see the scope of the problem here.

If you are a New York Times besteling author, and you sign is traditional publishing contract with most modern terms, and you do so Within an agent and not an IP attorney—negotisting for you, lucky you. You have the chance and I mean chance of earning more than your adviance. You better be a toptern New York Times bestseller and you better stay on the list for longer than one week. Because all the things I said above will apply.

The only difference? You'll get a sizeable six-figure advance, and if you're smart, you'll write at least two books per year. Until the opportunities dwindle, and they will.

Do you know how many former New York Times bestsellers I'm friends with? Do you know how many of them can't get a traditional publishing deal for more than a five-figure advance?

Most of them.

If they're offered a deal at all,

Folks, all of the things you learned about agents, editors, and book publishers used to be true.

Ten years ago, you needed an agent to open the doors for you in traditional publishing.

Ten years ago, your editor —who loved books (and still loves books)—

could go to bat for you within the publishing house and actually win the fight, protecting you, her author.

Ten years ago, traditional publishing while not a friendly industry (I don't think there are any)— did not screw its artists the way that the music industry and Hollywood did.

Ten years ago.

Not any more.

Things have changed or apidly that the contract I signed last September is not a contract. I would sign today. Not because of the advance or even because of some of the contract terms. But because it's a multi-book contract. And honestly, y'all, I want to decide from the contract that the contract is the contract that the contract is a multi-book to make the pook in book if I want a

traditional publishing company to handle everything.

Sometimes I will. Sometimes I'll use a novel as a loss leader. Sometimes I will want the traditional publishing house to take all of the risk.

Sometimes.

But not all the time.

And certainly not for multiple books in the same series. Now, if that series isn't being well handled by my publisher, I want the option to do it myself. If the book is being well handled, I want to ask for a greater early contract terms.

I have clout for the first time in my lovely little mid-list career. I plan to use it.

Most of my friends and colleagues will slowly discover that they can no longer make a living as a writer. They'll wonder what happened. They'll wake up one day—after their latest multi-book contract is complete— and wonder what the hell happened.

They changed industries. They moved from a hidebound old-fashioned industry to a Hollywood-level shark pit — and they didn't even realize it happened.

It is happening as quickly, if not more quickly, than Robert Redford described with All the President's Men. Redford, savy business men that he is, saw the writing on the wall and decided to help save the kind of movies that he loved.



I am trying to save writers whose work I love. The only way to do that is to get them to realize that they've moved to a hostile and unforgiving world, one that is willing —no, eager — to take advantage of them.

The agents that they once trusted now answer to their agencies instead of to the writer.

Those agencies are trying to steal a percentage of the writer's copyrights.

The editors whom they (rightfully) love have completely lost clout in their own industry, and often can't keep the verbal promises that they make.

These writers need to learn business, and they need to learn it fast. Because the scammers have moved

in, willing to take advantage of the writers who are unwilling to invest in themselves, unwilling to pay flat fees to companies that can do the work for them if they can't do the work themselves.

I'm sorry to tell you to stop trusting people. I know some of these people are your friends. Sadly, some of these people are my friends. In fact, many of these people are my friends.

And it breaks my heart, it really really does. But please, go look at that music industry link. Then realize that this is what's happening in publishing now.

If you want to do all the original work, create the content that everyone else is making a profit on, and get paid less than you would earn at 7/11, then don't learn any of this.

But if that idea scares you, if the idea that you might never earn more than your advance, and maybe not even all of that, then invest in yourself. Learn to say no.

And stop working on a business model that's ten years out of date.

FIN.

"Writing Like It's 1999," copyright © 2012 by Kristine Kathryn Rusch Excerpted from Surviving The Transition by Kristine Kathryn Rusch, WMG Publishing 2012

First published in slightly different form as part of the April 2011 Business Rusch blog, on <u>www.kristinekathrynrusch.com</u>

### TALES FROM TURKEY CITY

### "PUSHBUTTON WORDS"

c/o Martin McGrath

Words used to evoke a cheap emotional response without engaging the intellect or the critical faculties. Commonly found in story titles, they include such bits of bogus lyricism as "star", "dance", "dream", "song", "tears" and "poet", clichés calculated to render the SF audience misty-eyed and tender-hearted.

### A Song to the Sea of Tears

he tears were warm on Alicia's silken cheek. The movement of the ocean stirred a susurration, sea against shingle, that seemed to grow more insistent as she listened. Seagulls screamed, wheeled beneath fast-moving clouds, and turned inland. The dawn warmed the western sky with bands of orange and gold but heartache clouded her vision, smearina the word bevond reconsition.

Her true love was lost.

He had come to her as she slept. They had danced together for a while, distant music playing amidst the soft mist of dreams, and then he had bid her farewell.

"loshua!"

She had woken calling his name. The ghost of his final kiss lingered on her cheek.

Confusion had evaporated quickly, driven off by a cold terror. She had risen, throwing aside the heavy, winecoloured damask curtains. The first light of the morn, red as blood, drove a stake through her heart.

A storm was rushing in and Joshua was at sea.

Alicia pulled her robe around her shoulders. She forced the fear down deep into her belly and turned away from the

waters. There were preparations to be made before the lamentation could be sung.

he sea was already rising angrily above the harbour's seawall. Alicla walked along the quay, passing families gathering nets and ropes and traps and sails from their boats and hauling them inland. Some of the children paused for a moment to wave and call to their teacher but their mothers, seeing her dressed in her widow's weeds, pulled them away and hustled them back to their work.

As the wall curved sharply west, turning to enclose the harbour, the number of boats thinned and Alicia was alone. Heavy rain was driven hard into her face by a stinging wind that whipped away her black shawl. She let it go.

She climbed the steps to the base of the beacon. The gaslight torch burned bright high above her head, sea spray hissing on the mantle. A calm resolution filled her. She straightened her clothes, smoothed her hair, planted her feet firmly on the worn stone and began to sing in a bright clear voice. She sang of the cruel sea, a love lost, her faith that they could not be separated and she called on the storm to bring them together again.

And the waves grew higher.

FIN.

