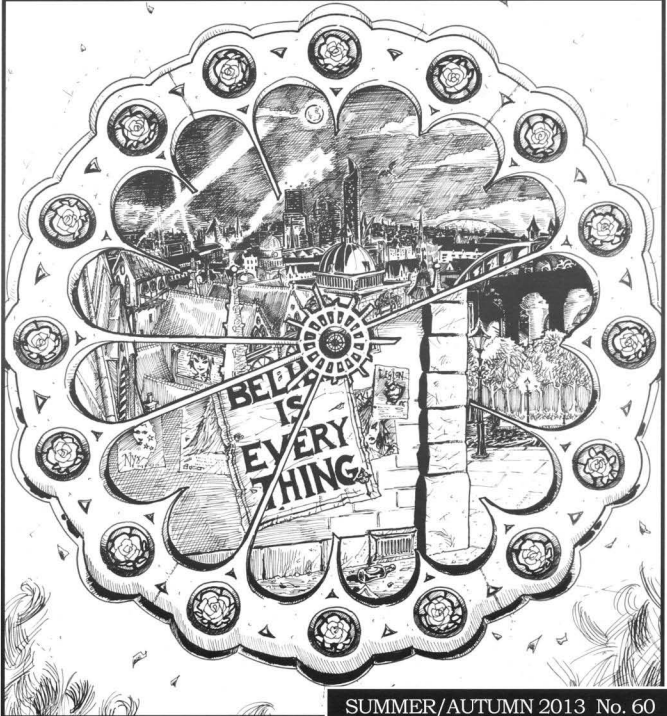


FOCUS

THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION'S MAGAZINE FOR WRITERS



SUMMER/AUTUMN 2013 No. 60



The cover image is a plate taken from the special edition of Kim Lakin-Smith's *Tourniquet: Tales from the Renegade City*, which is due for release next year by Jurassic London.

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KIM LAKIN-SMITH SAYS...

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 on science fiction.

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.

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With special thanks to **Steve Grover** and **Clive Anderson** for their invaluable help with proof-reading duties.

"Science fiction is the most important literature in the history of the world, because it's the history of ideas, the history of our civilisation birthing itself." So said the great Ray Bradbury... No pressure then! If ever there was an individual who must soldier on and endure, it must surely be the lonely science fiction author, ever intent on exploring new universes, transformative technologies and creative evolutions. But what use are these Big Ideas if they exist within a vacuum? And if we are ultimately striving for progress, shouldn't we start by progressing our skills as writers?

With the entire weight of civilisation resting on our shoulders (Lord help us!), it seems only right to dedicate this issue of *Focus* to the coming together of authors, either in our physical forms or as more transcendental entities online. Writers' groups exist to inspire, support, nourish and nurture. They give us hope and friendship and spark all manner of creative genetics which wouldn't have otherwise existed. As Adam Craig remarks in his exposé on a residential writing weekend: "Writers are as much made as born."

So how does the lone author even start to go about looking for like-minded voices? This magazine is an excellent place to start, from advice on organising your very own writing event to something a little more intimate — taking part in a residential writing course, for instance — or joining the BSFA's Orbit Groups. Along the way, Martin McGrath has the low down on writing group etiquette and Terry Jackman on Orbiter Netiquette. In other words, it's all here, like some post-apocalyptic SF writer survival kit.

As an author stuck in my 2x2 cell (aka office) every day, I revel in the inspirational atmosphere of a literary convention, writing course and/or workshop, whether I'm an attendee or running part of the event. There is nothing as mind-expanding as being in the company of fellow storytellers and there is nothing as useful as feedback from folk outside my own thought bubble. As a guest author at one of Alex Davis's excellent residential weekends, I have seen first-hand the amazing bonding that takes place between strangers over a common love of writing fiction and how Alex really does create a feeling of mutual support and personal progression. I've also experienced what happens after dark and how writers, those eternal creatures of the night, can make a tableful of booze disappear in one weekend!

For me, one of the most rewarding aspects of being a writer is seeing new talent come to the fore. Whenever I run a workshop, I always try to soothe any nervous newcomers — usually by reassuring them that they don't need to read their work out aloud. Rather than falling at the first hurdle, my hope is to foster in them a passion for the genre and writing as a whole, and that they will go on to join a writer's group or take part in a course, and find the self-belief to share their stories.

After all, as Ray Bradbury concluded, "Science Fiction is central to everything we've ever done." And if that isn't motivation enough to put pen to paper and engineer brave new worlds, I don't know what is!

Kim

About our Guest Editors

Kim Lakin-Smith is a science fiction and fantasy author. Her work includes *Cyber Circus*, *Tourniquet*, and the YA novel, *Queen Rat*. Her new novel, *Autodrome*, is out soon through Snowbooks and is being officially launched at the World Fantasy Con, Brighton in October/November 2013.

Donna Scott is Chair of the BSFA, and a freelance editor, writer and occasional stand-up comedy poet. She can be contacted via <http://www.donna-scott.co.uk/> if you'd like to offer her some work or see where she's performing.

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STORY STRUCTURE

*Dev Agarwal talks about structuring your narrative, and picks on Philip Kerr's **The One from The Other**...*

Structure is a major part of how stories are told. Structure might be defined as the skeleton that holds the story up, ensuring that the component parts of it combine logically and successfully to produce effective drama. Wikipedia defines a narrative structure as "the structural framework that underlies the order and manner in which a narrative is presented to a reader, listener, or viewer." Structure is the bones of the story's body.

Some form of structure exists in almost all story telling, across all media, and in both fiction and non-fiction. There is the structural framework of the story as a whole as most narratives travel over an arc with a beginning, middle and end. Drilling down to a more microscopic level, there is the structuring of individual sentences. The framework grows from those sentences, as they are ideally building the bedrock of the story's individual scenes. And it is in the scenes that the order and manner of the narrative is revealed to the reader. Individual scenes therefore have a direct impact on the effectiveness of the story as a whole — and this was on my mind when reading Philip Kerr's *The One from The Other*.

Kerr is known for writing both science fiction and historical dramas. His Bernie Gunther novels are first-person thrillers about a private investigator in the mould of Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe. The Gunther series was originally set in Nazi Germany, working on the unusual conceit of a hard-boiled private eye investigating crimes in the oppressive Nazi era (presenting a genre mashup). Kerr has continued

to write about Gunther, moving him beyond the Second World War. *The One from The Other* is set in 1950. Gunther is scratching a living in postwar Germany, and is beset by unreconstructed Nazis and American and Soviet spies.

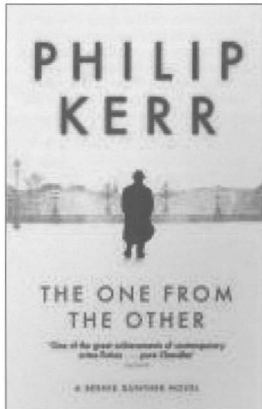
A key development occurs when Gunther is manipulated into carrying out a mission to meet a woman called Britta Warzok in Austria. He goes to a woman's apartment and finds that it belongs to Frau Warzok and that she has been murdered in the bathroom. After discovering the corpse, he is confronted by two policemen. Thinking on his feet, Gunther tells them that his name is Doctor Gruen. The police reveal to him that they are waiting for their chief suspect: a private investigator from Berlin called Bernie Gunther.

Gunther, alert now to the depth of the setup, knows that he needs to get away from these policemen and soon, before better informed detectives turn up. Even worse would be the arrival of the CIA, as they are the agency that is setting him up.

His interior thought is: "I had to get out of there, and fast. But how? If there's one thing cops like to hang on to it's a witness."

If inelegantly, Kerr sets up the premise of this scene. His character is trapped and there's the ticking clock device — the impending arrival of the CIA.

His next observation is that, "Then again, if there's one thing they hate it's a forensic amateur — a member of the



public who thinks he might be able to offer some advice."

Impersonating Britta Warzok's doctor, Gunther begins working on his escape:

"The Stiftskaserne (HQ of the Military Police)... That's the 796th US Military Police, isn't it? And the CIA... So this must be an intelligence matter, as well as a murder. I wonder what Britta could have got herself mixed up in that might involve the CIA."

"Individual scenes have a direct impact on the effectiveness of the story as a whole..."

One cop looked at the other. "Did we mention the CIA?"

"No, but it's obvious that they're involved from what you've already told me," I said.

"Is it?"

"Of course," I said. "...I know quite a bit about this kind of thing. Perhaps I can be of assistance when the Ami turns up. After all, I've met this Bernie Gunther. And I did know Britta Warzok. So if there's anything I can do to help catch her murderer, then obviously I'd like to help... It goes without saying that I can be discreet if this involves something top secret between the CIA and the Austrian police."

The two cops were already looking like they wanted me gone from there, and as quickly as possible. "Perhaps later on you could be of assistance, Doctor. "... He picked up my bag and carried it to the door for me." [p295]

This scene is crucial. We've had several violent encounters already, including murders — so Britta Warzok's death doesn't have a significant emotional impact on Gunther. But in this scene the trap is sprung on him and his enemies become more overt. The set-up is finally revealed to Gunther. This revelation is initially displaced by the immediacy of the threat to him: that he could be arrested. This aspect of the structuring reflects wise planning on Kerr's part. Kerr, like any series writer, has to entertain his reader and find a way of upping the ante with each successive novel. The scene could have played out in a number of ways: for example Gunther could have arrived at the apartment *before* the local cops, find the corpse, deduce that he's been set up and then flee. That would convey all

the information that Kerr puts into the scene. But it would lack dramatic tension. Kerr heightens the drama with the challenge of Gunther meeting the police and being delayed by them as the CIA approach to arrest him. We witness Gunther adopt a persona, pick up clues from the cops and fine-tune

his responses 'til they eject him. This part of the scene adds tension: Kerr comes up with an obstacle that adds the emotional charge that Britta Warzok's death on its own does not. Secondly, by overlapping at the apartment with the police, he has to work hard to escape. He demonstrates to the reader his resourcefulness.

The writing contains moments of good spare language: "Is it?" for example. We don't need to know which cop said that and his tone is conveyed solely in the context of the exchange. We just need the interjection to reveal the policeman's growing discomfort — and the cue that Gunther is on the right track, saying too much and encouraging them through reverse psychology to get rid of him.

However, in terms of the scene's structure, I would suggest that Kerr makes several significant errors that work against him as a writer and undermine the dramatic tension that he's working to develop.

Most glaringly, he gives us the stage direction explicitly. This 'front-loads' the scene. Gunther's interior thought was:

"Then again, if there's one thing they hate it's a forensic amateur — a member of the public who thinks he might be able to offer some advice."

So immediately, we know where we're headed. Kerr treats his reader as if he/she cannot divine the strategy unless he *shows* it. This is an obvious and unnecessary tell. Kerr announces that "I am going to have Gunther escape by playing the amateur busy-body." A more sophisticated and rewarding approach would be to let the scene unfold without this announcement. It's explicit that Gunther wants to escape. We would understand that when the cop takes Gunther's bag and physically pushes him out, that Gunther has deployed his skills in manipulating the police. This would also strengthen the comedic aspect of the escape. In this way the scene could have become the bones of the skeleton to develop the narrative: the people who think they're in charge are doing what the suspect wants them to do. And Gunther then walks out from under their noses.

Also deflating the scene's impact is Kerr's use of interior monologue. This draws too much attention to the writer's relationship with the reader, "Get out fast. But how?" etc. This chattiness has its uses but in moments of heightened drama it dilutes the scene's momentum.

Editing and tightening would have made the scene move faster and rewarded the reader by unfolding the revelations more gradually. We would have reached the end of the scene by reading Gunther recount that:

"We'll be in touch," said the other cop, taking me by the arm, and encouraging me onto my feet."

This would have led us to reflect that "Cops want to hold on to a witness but they hate the forensic amateur," the point that Kerr made too overtly for us at the start. Kerr wants to tell us the strategy and then still admire Gunther for completing the task. What we're left with is that we know what Gunther's shooting for and we see it achieved. By taking us by the hand in this way, we've been on a significantly less dramatic journey. It's almost as if Kerr's nerve broke and he couldn't trust his reader to believe that Gunther's plan was credible.

"Editing and tightening would have made the scene move faster and rewarded the reader"

The other aspect of this series is the importance of humour, and this scene, with three men holding a conversation in one room, with a young woman's murdered body in another, is blackly comic. Humour is a pool that the writer dips his toe into at his peril. We can all think of stories that have made this step and failed. But again, the humour here is deflated by announcing the set up first. The scene's structure becomes one where we get the punchline, then the set up and the punchline again. So not only the drama but the humour is damaged by poor structuring.

In the wider context of the plot as a whole, the scene delivers the key revelations and initiates the final sequence of the novel (where Gunther succeeds in fighting back against the agencies looking to harm him). However, on the scale of fine detail, with the scene as a dramatic key moment, in my view, this

fell flat. Tightening the prose would not only have saved the scene, but would have built a better book and stimulated the reader. If structure is essential to the novel, then the editing of each scene is essential to building the bones of what becomes a sound structure.

FIN.

BECOMING A BETTER WRITER...



No. 3 Comforts

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 logjam in your writing or just to practice your craft.

1. What objects do you always carry with you? Pick one. Write about its significance.
2. Look at the street where you live. Describe it. Give a sense of the place and the community of people who inhabit it. For bonus points, repeat the exercise in the same detail for an entirely imaginary street/place.
3. What is your biggest secret? What would happen if people found out about it? How would you feel? How would they feel? (You might want to destroy this on completion!)

NEWS FROM ORBIT

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

RECOMMENDED READING?

We hear there are Dodgy Dealings from agents, many of them the bloggiest names in the business! Dabbling in *assisted self-publishing* or just nabbing what they can?

Check out this article:

davidgaughran.wordpress.com/2013/04/22/lazy-literary-agents-in-self-publishing-money-grab-via-argo-navis/

EVER SEE RED?

Apparently someone — whose name escapes me probably cos I really don't want to recall it — has 'reduced' Iain Banks's last novel, *The Quarry*, to 600 words.

Is it only me who found that both pointless and, right now, incredibly tasteless?

A) That's not reducing, it's a synopsis, which by its nature will leave out a lot of story and pretty much all the point of reading it. Unless you're one of those sad people who only want to show off at dinner parties.

B) The guy's just died for ****'s sake. Is it just me, or doesn't this feel rather like dancing on his grave?

C) Surely there are some things people won't do for publicity?

Evidently not.

RECENT SALES AND SUCCESSSES?

A bumper bundle this time, one of the best yet I think, so much so I've split it into four — yes, four! — categories to make it easier to read. If your name is here, congratulations. If not, at least you know you're in good company. And so, in no particular order:

— Cover Art from John Keane —

— a first for Orbits — the cover art for the re-issue of Geoff Nelder's novel, *Escaping Reality*.

— Poetry from John Keane —

'Crash' and 'Digital Ghosts' both published in *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*

— Short Stories —

Rob Harkness 'False Colours' published in *Hungur* magazine
'Eyes of the Child' published in *SQ* magazine

Geoff Nelder 'Colloidal Suspension' published in the anthology, *Extreme Planets*

'Her Battle of Trafalgar' published in the *Horror Zine*

'Accident Waiting to Happen' published in *eFantasy*

Sam Fleming 'What the Water Gave Her' published in the anthology, *Fish* by Dagan Books

'When Shepherds Dream of Electric Sheep' published in the Newcon Press agriculture anthology

'Why Don't You Switch Off Your TV Set and Do Something Less Boring' to be read at the Aberdeen Literary Festival

Terry Martin 'Made in Heaven' in *Woodland 3: What They Saw in the Sky* — another anthology.

'Contraband' published in the Newcon Press agriculture anthology

Patrick Mahon 'Over Exposed' published in *Every Day Fiction*

Barbara Davies 'The Dragonbird' published in *The Lorelei Signal*

'A Trip to Lagasy' in anthology *Far Orbit*, published by World Weaver Press

Mark Iles 'The Years of Grace', published by *Lumi*

Sue Oke 'Patterns' published by *Cast of Wonders*, online and audio

'First Draft' pub. by *Words with JAM* magazine

— Novels —

Geoff Nelder *Returning Left Luggage* (Book 2 of *Aria*) with L.L. Press

Anna Kashina *The Black Diamond* with Angry Robot

Mark Iles *A Pride of Lions* with Solstice

Terry Jackman *Ashammet* with Dragonwell Publishing USA

Okay, so I'm crowing a bit with that last one, but my heartfelt thanks and congratulations to all of the above, and of course, all the individual critters that make all the difference.

VISIONS OF BUSINESS IN SCIENCE FICTION

c/o Gary Graham, Orbiter 2 Group

As a rule, science fiction pulls us outside of our own worlds and concerns. Whether it takes us to another galaxy, to another solar system, to another planet in our solar system, or even to an alternate/future version of our own Earth, it makes us think about a different kind of life and society. And it helps us realize that our way of doing things may not be the only way they could be done.

On the 6th of February, BSFA and Orbiter 2 member Gary Graham organized a fictive prototyping workshop in London which explored the influence of science fiction on shaping future visions of the business world. The key premise was utilising imaginative narratives based explicitly on science fact as a design tool for the development of technology, this is called fictive prototyping. This workshop formed part of a public outreach programme Gary is currently organizing, designed to frame a new agenda of academic and community engagement that draws on the potential of SF to engage with Britain's inner-city communities.

Various speakers from industry and business, the government, academia and the BSFA explored past, current and future connections between the business world and SF.

A total of twenty participants attended the event and the eight keynote speakers included BSFA members Rosie Oliver, Geoff Nelder and Paul Raven.

The event was designed to provide a critical analysis and appraisal of the role played by SF in leading and inspiring future business innovation and to project its social and economic consequences.

Rosie explored how science fiction can help innovation and technology development. In her presentation, she explained that, "SF can help to compile humanity's wish list of improvements; it provides inventors with some idea what to aim for, and an explanation of phenomena that might otherwise be missed by forward thinking business planners. What we are looking at here is not just 'sandboxing', but a far wider partnership between the technologists and the SF writers".

Paul Raven followed Rosie by investigating the history of SF writing and its historical links with technological innovation. He also explored the potential of SF narrative writing as a technique for imaginatively engaging with city communities.

Finally, Geoff Nelder excited the audience with his fascinating recital of 'Auditory Crescendo', a story of the social and economic implications of futuristic hearing aid technology. He wisely pointed out some of the challenges which academics face in integrating fictional imaginative SF writing in their research scholarship.

A key message from the workshop was not to suggest that fictional meta-narratives such as science fiction never appears to predict the future; rather it's that those predictions, in and of themselves, are useless by comparison to the very genuine powers of exploration and idea-testing that the form possesses, and its potential to change the future of business.

In May 2013, Gary Graham left for a 3-month placement at MIT(US) to work on similar engagement projects in Boston and New York.

NEW SITE: AGENT HUNTER?

Writers Workshop has launched a new site, 'Agent Hunter', which is meant to do exactly what it says on the tin. You enter your criteria and it offers agents that fit, and I think this will be extended to suitable publishers too, although when I tried it, that aspect wasn't operational at the time.

It seems reasonably priced at £12 per annum but I'll leave it to others to vet it and see how they react. Maybe those who do will let me know what they thought of it?

DUOTROPE ALTERNATIVES?

Most of you are probably aware that Duotrope, a long established online source, now charges for its services.

For those who sent in voluntary donations to the final appeal, this was a bit of a blow since those people then had to pay the full whack when the change happened.

I'm reliably informed that The Grinder might be an alternate source. And don't forget Ralan of course.

RUNNING A WRITING GROUP

Alex Davis provides some solid advice for anyone who may be looking to start their own Writing Group...

Over the years, I've had a lot of experience with writing groups, both in a voluntary capacity and in my role as Literature Development Officer for Derby. Even as a freelancer, I'm often visiting groups to give workshops and talks.

I think that writing groups do often come under unfair criticism – people sometimes lament them as being too 'social', or not being sufficiently 'serious'. First of all, I think that the social element is important – many of my current friends and acquaintances came out of running my writing group, Sepulchre Dark Fiction (cheery name or what?). Second of all, these are not literary festivals – they are small meetings, generally run out of the goodness of various people's hearts. Each group is also made up of a vastly different range of people. This is why I always say to anyone looking for a group, do go and check out a few – you'll eventually find the right one for you.

Writing groups provide important opportunities for writers to get feedback on their work, to get support from their fellow writers, get consistent encouragement and momentum and generally share the trials and tribulations of life as a budding author. Importantly, they are also regular in a way that many festivals or larger-scale literature events are not – it's all very well getting a glut of advice in a large dose at a lit fest, but what do you do the week, fortnight or month after that?

For me, I took to running a writing group because I couldn't quite find the group to fit me. Those who know me will testify that my first love is horror, and that often bleeds into the SF, fantasy and even literary work that I turn my hands to. After visiting many writing groups in Derby, I didn't quite feel that there was a place where I could safely share some of my edgier work and get a positive response. And so Sepulchre was born – a group aimed at those writing fiction or poetry with

a darker lilt. This was at a time when I was fresh out of University, and personally it was a very valuable experience, involving many of the factors that go into a larger scale literature event, and so it stood me in good stead.

There are many key steps in putting together a writing group, and getting started can be a fair task in its own right. It's also important to keep your group building and to keep the numbers and standards of activity up. I've attempted to sum these up below, with a few pieces of advice both learned and acquired.

WHAT IS THE GROUP ABOUT?

Some groups like to meet up for feedback, to share their work and give constructive criticism. Some groups offer a workshop each session, led by a member of the group on a specialist area of their choice. Some groups share their favourite work, or have discussion sessions on a range of subjects. It's important to decide up front what the agenda for your group is, as this will have a huge impact on how you run things and what sort of audience you'll be attracting.

WHAT IS THE GROUP CALLED?

What's in a name, eh? As with any type of event, coming up with something snappy that captures what the group is about is important. There are often references to the place or town where the group is held, and you will of course need some kind of reference to books, writing or authors.

WHERE ARE YOU GOING TO RUN?

This is a really important issue, as finding just the right venue can be something that truly makes or breaks a writing group. The first question is – can you afford a venue that is going to charge? Many library rooms and museum rooms will charge for space, as will com-

munity arts venues, so you may need to have some kind of subsidy or charge per session from members to cover this. Often there are pubs or bars that are willing to give up spaces for free on their quieter nights of the week, and provided you and the group are bringing in a few quid at the bar then they'll generally be happy to have you there. Of course the other issue as per venue is location – if you're running somewhere a long way out of town, or off the beaten track, again this can have an effect on draw and numbers. I've always found central locations to work best, but if you can tap into an active writing scene in a small town or village this can be every bit as good.

WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO RUN?

It's another decision that can make a big difference to the make-up of the group. First and foremost, it's an important factor to decide what time and day suits you – if you're running it, you need to make sure you can be there! Many groups run in the evening, as it means that a wider demographic and more of a range of people can make it down. However a daytime group can be just as successful, although odds are it will lead to more retired or unemployed members coming down – after all, you do have to consider who will be free at that time of day.

HOW WILL YOU MARKET YOUR GROUP?

This is a key factor in the success of any writing group – you have to make sure that you spread the word as widely as possible, as this gives the maximum number of people the chance to attend. Of course we're not in the world of billboards or full-page newspaper ads here, so we need to think a bit more local and a bit more targeted in our approach. Press releases and radio appearances are probably the highest profile you can go for, and both local papers and radio stations do have a considerable reach around any given region. The job is now a little easier for writing group organisers because the power of the internet is on our side. There are a whole host of events listings and classified websites out there where you can easily promote your activities, and you also have the aspect of social media to tap into. Facebook events and pages can be very effective, as can a steady and intelligent use of Twitter. Finally, don't forget to look up any local arts organisations or arts officers who may be able to offer their marketing support. Flyers can still be a good way to spread the news of your group, but there are obviously many costs involved, including design, print and distribution. If you have the money to spare, then great, but it's not always an option.

ARE YOU GOING TO HAVE SPECIAL EVENTS?

Naturally the regular running of your group will largely be organised amongst the members of the group, but there could be the opportunity to have one-off specials in the future. These might be visits from local authors, tie-ins to local literature festivals, partnerships with local libraries or more. It's worth keeping your eyes open, as these kinds of special events can bring valuable profile as well as important income for the group – usually any special events would carry some sort of charge.

As with so many things in life, advance thought and planning are important in getting any writing group off the ground. However it is not always easy to keep things going – many groups run for a while before petering out, so it's always necessary to keep a sense of momentum going. Make sure that sessions are varied, and get as many people involved in the running of the group as you possibly can. The more hands you have on deck in terms of organising meetings, and indeed the content of those meetings, the better. You may be the initial brains behind the group, but developing a committee of people is a valuable process in the long-term. It's also a help to get along to some other groups – if you can become a part of your local 'scene', it's a great way to attract new members and co-operate with other groups in the region.

On the whole, running a writing group can be a hugely rewarding and enjoyable experience. It's something I relished for a number of years, and a role that was really my first step into the world of literature. There are times when it can be hard work, but that can be more than paid back in many ways if you truly put the effort in.

FIN.

Alex Davis is a freelance author, events organiser, writing tutor, proof-reader and copy editor specialising in science-fiction, fantasy and horror fiction. He has taught writing courses and workshops in Derby, Nottingham, Wolverhampton, Spalding and other towns, and has worked with leading genre authors such as Iain M Banks, Peter V Brett, Mike Carey, Paul Cornell, Raymond E Feist, Harry Harrison, Brian Lumley, Robert Rankin, Charles Stross and many more. To get in touch, feel free to email him at:

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ORBIT GROUPS : MAKE FRIENDS AND INFLUENCE PEOPLE

Terry Jackman tells you all you need to know about the BSFA's best kept secret, the 'Orbit' Writing Groups...

The British Science Fiction Association's own writing groups date back so far no one seems to know when they started. The early groups existed via brown envelopes – no, really – people added a new story to a big padded packet, put *actual stamps* on and carried it lovingly to an *actual post office* to send on to the next name on their list. And in the fullness of time the envelope came back around so that they could remove that story, and its critiques, and send out a new one. And that's the reason they were called Orbits.

I got into an Orbit group by word of mouth after attending an Arvon week. (With *many* thanks to Martin Mcgrath for the tip). Incidentally, I like the focus and, frankly, the isolation of a *good* residential course, but do advocate spending wisely. I can recommend Arvon; it's usually fun, even if the tutors vary a bit. Nowadays I go to Milford, which I love but, yes, it costs, doesn't take complete beginners, and doesn't cover the other fifty-one weeks of the year when you might need feedback on your writing.

So I tried a couple of online forums. The problem was I never knew what quality of feedback I'd get, how informed the 'critter' was, or even if I'd get any feedback at all. Face-to-face groups were out too, partly because it's very rare indeed to find a local group that 'gets' SFF writing, so the feedback is likely to be misinformed, even if it's not too amateurish. In my case, I also found it hard to even admit I was writing, let alone assimilate comments before I'd had ample time to think about them, so I didn't *want* to be face to face with my critters. (Yeah, wimp, but I'm better now, honest. It just took a while.)

Orbit groups, however, provided everything I wanted... except I didn't really want the posting bit. So I asked if there was an online version. Answer: no. Ah well. But then, hey presto, along came a couple of like-minded souls, Jetse de Vries and Ian Whates (Yeah, the one who had to leave us because he sold five novels to two publishers, simultaneously! How

he copes with that as well as publishing books I'll never know). And so the first online Orbit was born.

I took over running it around 2005-6, I think – time flies! Things were changing, postal groups shrank, online groups grew as some of those members moved in with us. We just expanded, slowly but surely, from word of mouth.

Not all of our members live in the UK, since you don't need UK residence status, or a visa, to join the BSFA and there are quite a few members from abroad. These days we run around 6-8 groups, as people move in or move on. Some people move on because they've reached the point where they need to work with a particular editor or publisher and no longer have the time to spare. We wish them all the best, and hope they think fondly of us. Occasionally, and sadly, someone leaves us because of ill health, and we hope they can make it back. I was once almost one such member myself but escaped with only a few rounds missed, which people were great about.

Sometimes someone arrives, gets a crit they don't like, and basically scoops up their ball and flounces off home. Warning: crits will be honest and constructive; prima donnas will not get their egos stroked; the stated aim is to improve the writing! The worst case of this was someone who took one week to say goodbye, after taking about three months discussing it with me before getting round to joining! Presumably it wasn't because of me, since he did join, and no, it really wasn't because the crits he got were so nasty. As always, the critters had looked for both the good and the 'could be improved' — but apparently his was perfect. Even more unbelievably, one 'member' left after only two rounds because "the crits are too detailed"?!?

Yes, it takes all sorts, as they say, and that's part of the fun, but some do make more work for me than others. One problem that does make work, for both me and the group leaders, is when occasionally

a member starts slacking – they stop meeting deadlines, and miss a round without informing anyone that they're unable to take part. Simply put, they stop pulling their weight within the group. If this happens it can damage the group as a whole so we try to keep tabs on the situation, and, if necessary, have a quiet word. Fair's fair after all, and each group thrives on its members' input.

Happily the above are the exceptions rather than the rule: most people who come in stay, and the most I have to do for them is place them in their first group, or, occasionally, rejig a group, or form a new one, as numbers fluctuate up and down. In fact most members stay as long as they can, so that many of the current Orbiters have multiple published works to their credit (shorts, novels and scripts), have won awards, edit and/or publish as well... the list goes on.

Yes, editors and publishers join as writers. So do teachers, various species of computer geek (sorry guys but how else can I describe you?), health workers, accountants, scientists, students, retirees... and, again, the list goes on.

I mentioned the time it can take for someone to get started with us. So how long does it take? Answer: it can vary enormously, from a single week to several months. Why? Because it's up to you. I'll ask you for the following:

- 1). Contact details: your name, email, telephone number, and address
- 2). A BSFA membership number, since that's your entry 'ticket'
- 3). What kind of group(s) you want to join
- 4). Your first piece of writing, ready to go to a group

For some this is as straightforward as it looks. They send in the above and I arrange their group placement, hence getting them going within a week. My volunteer group leaders—who deserve medals for the time they save me—usually respond immediately when I call.

But then there are others... Some want to ask more questions, which I'm perfectly happy to answer till they feel okay about it. Some just take longer getting that first submission ready, and that's okay too. Then it gets interesting. Some ask the questions, say they'll be back, then vanish without a word. Sometimes I think it's because they see there is a commitment required here, realise they're not that serious about writing after all, and duck out.

That's also okay — Orbit groups are for people who really want to write — better they're honest with themselves than come in and let their group down. Other times I think it's because they're complete beginners who have lost their nerve at the last minute. If that's you, please don't

be put off. Every Orbiter is, or was once, a complete novice. We've all been there, we all remember it, so we have every sympathy. (And trust me, no one, but no one, can ever be as paranoid as I was!)

So I guess I should discuss the reasons I think these groups have lasted.

1). The Continuity:

A tight membership commit to regular input, which means they get to 'know' each other pretty well (some do meet face-to-face, say at cons), can judge how each others' mind works, and often become real friends. Another aspect of the group system is that there's always someone specific you can turn to if you have a query or problem, namely either your own group leader or me. You never need to suffer in silence or worry about what's acceptable and what isn't.

2). Group Size:

I aim for around five members per group, especially in novel groups. Think of it as a group of people sitting down and talking together, enough for a discussion where everyone gets heard. It's big enough for a decent variation in the feedback, but small enough so that people can easily cope with the amount of reading and critting required.

3). The Time Factor:

There is a deadline for each round, which is a good writerly habit and stops us putting things off. All groups — short or novel — currently run a

"Orbits do not set out to be a mutual admiration society. We think the best feedback to receive is what makes your work better, not what makes you feel better. Members are trying to let you see how your writing appears to other eyes, maybe an editor's? And they want you to do the same for them..."

two-month 'round', so far tested out as best suited to members in terms of keeping up. Plus, the physical distance between members, as I said, allows us all time to think twice about the crits we've received. (That "Nonsense, what do they know" stage has time to reach the "Ah, hmm, I see what they mean" stage, without going through the 'swearing in their face' stage.)

4). The Feedback:

The quality of feedback is amazing and usually very detailed — people really work at the whole 'do as you would be done unto' approach — sometimes surprising, often amusing, and always useful. And it doesn't always stop at critting the writing. I've had encouragement, trade gossip, news about open submissions, suggestions about possible markets, discussions about science or writing technique, and more.

5) The Cost Factor:

BSFA membership costs me £29.00 for a year, which gives me access to Orbits as a bonus deal with the package. That ain't much at all compared to several hundred pounds for a single-week residential course, or around £100 for a one-day course. Yes, there are sometimes big-name writers for those big bucks, but while some (my personal pick being Juliet McKenna) are good value, others frankly aren't; being a great writer doesn't necessarily make them great teachers. I've found that out the hard way. Cost-wise, even travelling to my quarterly NorthwriteSF meetings probably costs me as much as my annual sub, and that's despite getting lifts most of the way. (Yes, I have a sort-of-local group now, if the whole north of England counts as local, and, yes, a local group is great, but I've only recently found one and how many of us are that lucky?) So pound for pound an Orbit group is amazing value too.

So to sum up, I stick with Orbits because these groups give me more feedback than anyone else ever has. Plus, I get to read lots of interesting fiction, often before it goes on to be published. Very importantly, I get regular feedback from SFF-informed writers from all walks of life and writing experience. I get people who become friends as well as helpers. I lose the inevitable sense of aloneness that goes with most writing, and I get the occasional much-needed lecture. (Usually it's "Garh, you're supposed to *submit* the stuff after you write it!")

All of which tells you the Why, but not the How?

So here goes. Basically there are short story groups and novel groups — and the option to invent something else if people want, such as a script group. We've had one of those when people wanted one. We haven't to my knowledge had a poetry group, but if there are people out there interested, why not?

You can join as many groups as you can keep up with, at no extra charge. As long as you keep up. Why split the groups into types? It was decided that the skill sets needed both to write and crit differed significantly between these types of writing, so it worked better that way.

At the start of each 'orbit', you submit your story. To clarify, this can be anything that counts as speculative fiction, that's science fiction, fantasy, horror or cross-genre. Then you settle in and read and crit what your fellow group members have sent. You do that politely but honestly, and send back any time before the next deadline. Where possible, I like to crit in the first month. Everyone likes feedback faster rather than slower and it also leaves me free to focus on my own writing.

Each submission is a maximum of 15,000 words, unless by agreement within each individual group (each group can vote to alter its 'rules'. Some have experimented with shorter times, longer word-counts, etc. but oddly we seem to keep returning to the standard package). You send this as an attachment, which couldn't be easier since you can send submissions, or crits, to the whole group in one email. (If in doubt your group leader will tell you how.) And you set your work out in standard publishing format.

Why? Because, again, it's a good writerly habit, and lets you practise for when you decide to send something out to a magazine or publisher.

So what is standard format? If in doubt just ask, or even send what you think is right and I'll check it for you before I send it on to your designated group — it won't be the first time. Basically, it means you use double space, 12 point, and Times, Ariel or Courier. Times is probably the most popular these days. Courier, once the industry norm, much less so. And if you thought a prettier font, or, heaven forbid, a different colour would attract a publisher — think again, they really, really don't like that. You also need to add a header with your name and/or title, and page numbers. Page numbers are the thing most often missed. Yes, the computer screen tells people that, but, believe it or not, some readers, especially for novel segments, choose to read paper copy; some writers know they *edit* better that way and want to give you their best efforts, so they don't want to be faced with rearranging forty odd un-numbered pages after they've dropped them.

And that about covers it. Emailing is a very simple system, and for a reason. We tried out a Google group format once and it didn't work half as well, so if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Bottom line: Orbit groups have lasted because they work for most of the people who genuinely want to improve their writing. They're available to

absolute beginners and much-published authors; both benefit and no one minds which you are, it's where you're going that counts. They're a fantastic, essentially free resource, they're fun, and they've helped a lot of writers get published. Of all the variations I've tried, they're still one of the best, most regular ways to get decent feedback I know, and definitely the best as far as not mattering where you are in the world, or how flexible your time is, yet still focussing on genre-specific writing.

A couple of months ago one member emailed me saying, "I've had a short story accepted for publication. This will be my first published story anywhere so I'm very excited. I think being an Orbiter has significantly improved my writing skills, and I'd like to thank you all very much for your help." He even put it on Facebook, which was much appreciated as we do tend to be rather backward at coming forward when it comes to shouting about our successes.

He's not the only one, as you can see from the current 'Successes' list on the Orbit page of this issue (see page 8). You'll see that I'm on that list too. I've just signed a novel contract. I've no idea if the book will sink or swim when it eventually comes out, but I'm quite sure it wouldn't have so much as dipped a toe in the publishing ocean if it weren't for the input I've had from other Orbiters.

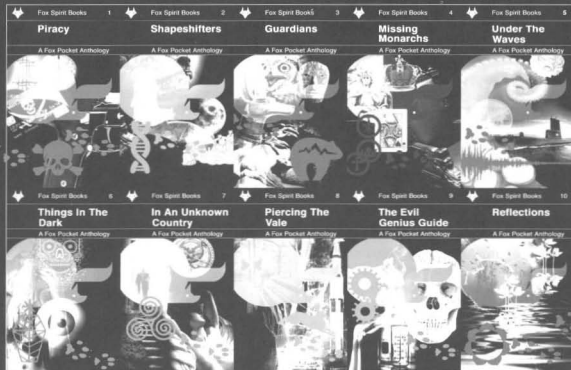
Maybe I'll meet some of you here sometime too.

Terry Jackman is the current Orbit Group coordinator, reachable at the email address below. She started out as a teacher, turned into a Clarks shoe fitter for a while then morphed into an internationally-known picture framer, writing articles and speaking to pros and the public, from North Scotland to Cornwall, with stops at London Olympia and Alexandra Palace along the way. She now teaches creative writing, among other daft things. She knows she writes about things her village neighbours never dream of, and isn't at all sure how they'll take it when, or if, they learn about her novel, especially if they actually read it (and — gulp — at least one is a SF fan). But she's gritting her teeth. And no, her nearest and dearest still aren't allowed to read the coming novel, not until it's published anyway. Only other Orbiters have had that privilege.

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REFLECTIONS IN ORBIT

Adrian Faulkner has been there and done it, and he has a few things to say about that...

I've always been a big fan of writers' groups. They've served two main purposes for me; firstly they have aided me in improving and developing my craft as a writer but also to remind me that I was not alone on my path to publication and that there were others going through all the same trials and tribulations as myself.

My first writers' group experience came in the form of a ten-week adult education class. I'd wanted to do a night class and since I'd always enjoyed writing it seemed like the logical option. The lessons were a little haphazard and I remember being annoyed when it was announced that, due to a request from a bunch of students, next week's lesson would be on writing articles for magazines. I'd come to do a creative writing course, not one on writing non-fiction! Strangely, that one lesson resulted in me submitting an article to a magazine, getting my first publishing credit and then embarking on a decade of non-fiction writing.

My true love had always remained fiction, and so when thoughts turned, a decade later, to taking my fiction more seriously, I enrolled with the Online Writing Workshop. Via a webpage, members posted their prose for critique. The workshop worked on the basis that you read and critiqued others' work with a view that you would get critiques in return. I submitted a story called 'Fever', a fairy tale told in dreams as if envisioned by Tim Burton. Looking back now, it was a terrible story, clichéd in places with a main character who lacked agency, but it did have some lovely imagery. However, despite all these faults, it got the Editor's Choice Award that month and received a critique from Kelly Link, who pointed out all the flaws but deemed it a salvageable first draft. It even got a mention in their newsletter. I felt quite proud.

Maybe because my first submission had been so well received, or because there were a number of members, at least at that time, who'd just say nice

things about your work to fish for praise for their own, I only stayed there for about a year before moving on. I've been told I write quite detailed critiques and I'm a very slow reader so it took quite a lot of time. The Online Writing Workshop continues to this day and has an impressive roster of alumni.

Around the same time as I joined the OWW I had also joined a real world writers' circle who met every week. I'd originally queried a more local group. When they didn't reply to my emails, I chose one that was further away but, from the updates on their website, clearly very active.

People would read extracts of their work in progress and then the group would comment and critique. I enjoyed this, maybe because it was easier to discuss it in a group than tag copious amounts of notes to a word document. But more than just this, you got to talk face to face with people who were trying to do the same thing as you, usually over a very civilised cup of tea and a biscuit. There were all levels of people from published authors to people who just wrote for a hobby, writing across all genres and giving the group a really nice mix. I must admit there was some snobbery towards genre from elements of the group, but I used that as a reason to work harder to try and win them over. My short stories did well in circle competitions and one even went so far as to get highly commended in an Open Story competition organised by NAWG (National Association for Writer's Groups).

However, as I progressed I found myself wanting a harsher, genre-specific critique. It's one thing to be told you wrote a fun story, it's another to sell it to a genre publication who've seen that same plot a hundred or more times before. Coupled with a split in the group over a circle anthology, I felt it was time to move on again.

I can't remember where I heard about Orbiters — it's possible it was at an Eastercon or I may have been a BSFA member at the time and seen

one of their flyers — but I had a discussion with coordinator Terry Jackman and remember being very impressed to hear that a number of the members had gone on to publish novels.

I decided to throw myself at it and signed up for both short stories and long fiction. With hindsight, this was a mistake. I spent so long on critiques for others that it ate into my writing time. I was writing fantasy and I'm thankful that Terry tried to group the fantasy writers together. But, still, I found myself often struggling with critiquing the odd bit of hard SF.

I honestly believe that you can outgrow a writing group. If you find yourself in a position where the comments coming back aren't giving you some new insight or confirming something you had feared, it's probably time to move on. That can sometimes be difficult to see. Sometimes belonging to a writing group is about knowing that you are not alone, about having contact with people who have the same dream as you. It's very easy to have an inflated idea of your abilities, but if you want to use groups for more than just socialising with like-minded people, you need to have a sense of your strength within a group, even if it's something you would not admit publicly.

With the Orbiters Novel Group, I felt I was a strong member of the group, but not so strong that I wasn't getting useful comments back. The comments gave me the confidence that what I was trying to do was working, and when it didn't, an idea of what to do to fix it.

However, with the short story group, the first piece I ever got to critique was 'Of Hearts and Monkeys' by Nick Wood, a story that would go on to be published by PS Publishing in one of their *PostScripts* magazines. It was a magnificent story that made me realise just what an amateur I was. I wouldn't go so far as to say it was solely responsible, but it played a large part in causing me to understand that my strengths as a writer lay in novel-length fiction and to focus on that. Whilst I would go on to write another short story (which was published and garnered an honourable mention in *The Best Horror of the Year*, [Night Shade Books, ed. Ellen Datlow]) — that was more to prove to myself that I could, rather than as a career focus.

Because I was a sporadic writer, and prone to going back and revising earlier drafts to lift character or plot another notch — I found having enough prose ready for the next round a constant struggle. If I had been

"I underestimated the amount of work it took to do it justice, so I would warn you to make it your focus rather than something extra you do."

better at organising my time, I would have found it more manageable. I was trying to devote myself to Orbiters whilst doing other things and I think that was a mistake.

Would I recommend Orbiters to a new writer? Well, this being a BSFA publication, I'm almost obligated to say yes, but in all honesty, I found

Orbiters incredibly helpful. It's probably a little extreme for writers taking their first steps — but for those looking to take their writing from a hobby to something more professional, I would most certainly recommend it. I underestimated the amount of work it took to do it justice, so I would warn you to make it your focus rather than consider it as something extra you do.

I made good friends during my time in Orbiters and we still converse to this day. For some, their writing has taken more of a back seat, others now have publishing deals, and some continue to just write. At the end of the day, writers' groups like Orbiters cannot guarantee you success, but what they can give you is insight into your work you might otherwise miss.

I think the trick is to sample widely until you find the group that works for you. That might be online or real-world — genre specific or much wider — each have their pros and cons. As you progress and find yourself consistently thinking that you are putting more in than you are getting out, do not be afraid to move on. Keep in mind though, as much can be learnt from critiquing other people's work as being critiqued yourself.

FIN.

Adrian Faulkner has been writing stories since he was 7 and has never really stopped making things up. He spent a decade as a leading pop culture journalist and geek culture commentator, before focusing on fiction. The Four Realms, his debut urban fantasy novel, was published by Anarchy Books at the end of 2012. Adrian lives in Berkshire, England. You can find more details here:

<http://adrianfaulkner.com/>

AN ALTERNATIVE WEEKEND AWAY

Alex Davis (and later, Adam Craig) introduce you to residential writing weekends in fantasy, science-fiction, and horror...

Anyone who knows me will vouch that I'm willing to give most things a go, especially in working terms. I may not be the most adventurous individual in all aspects of life, but when it comes to freelancing I've always thought 'you never know if it will work until you try.' It was much in this spirit that I first came to run a residential writing weekend.

The initial thought process very much emerged from a number of successful workshops around that time, which made me wonder whether there was any potential in running a literary escape for genre writers. Of course, going from paying £5 for a couple of hours of workshopping to over £100 for two days away is a very different matter. But organisations such as Arvon seem to be making it work, so why shouldn't I?

And of course, as is often the case with my work, I'm attempting to scratch an itch that is all too often left alone by larger organisations – that of 'genre' work. You can go away for a weekend and talk about poetry, crime, romance or general literary work at any number of events, but there are very few specialising in Science-Fiction, Fantasy and Horror. And I for one don't live with this view that literary 'snootiness' is the problem – having worked for many years in Literature Development, I think it's largely a matter of expertise. I wouldn't dream of running a romance writing weekend, or a western writing weekend, because those are genres I have no knowledge of or indeed connections in. My interest and – dare I use the word? – 'expertise' lie elsewhere. I spent many a year banging the drum for 'genre' work in more general literary outlets, and will continue to do so.

But I digress. (*Climbs off high horse...*)

Running a residential writing weekend, on the whole, is a fun if very full-on experience as an

organiser. First stop is locating a venue, and here in Derbyshire we're blessed with a number of wonderful cottages and holiday accommodations, many of which are right in the heart of picturesque countryside and very reasonably priced. If I can't find a decent spot around here, there must be something deeply wrong...

My regular spot over the years has been the Dove Valley Centre: www.dovevalleycentre.co.uk/ – it is beautifully located, very reasonably priced and sleeps a good number of people at 12. The owners are also extremely approachable, and have a strong interest in writing, all of which combines to make it just about ideal. I can't see any reason I'd go anywhere else, to be honest. And if you do happen to still fancy a writing getaway at the end of this article, I'd recommend looking them up.

Of course, venues will usually ask for some sort of up-front payment, so this is something to bear in mind if you're planning on running a residential retreat. You may also want to consider flyers, which will be a further initial cost. These costs can certainly be recouped, but it will need you to have a few quid lying around ready for these things before you commit to such a weekend.

One of the key factors in attracting people to your writing weekend is – of course – your guest speakers. Most residencies will have at least one guest in, and sometimes two. I've often aimed for one guest a day, where such a thing proves possible. These guests need to be relevant to the genre(s) you are looking at on your writing weekend, and ideally writers or publishers with a strong background in the field. I'm lucky enough to be able to count authors such as Simon Bestwick, Kim Lakin-Smith, Mark Charan Newton, Nicholas Royle, Adrian Tchaikovsky and Conrad Williams among those authors I've worked with at residencies (and apologies to anyone whose name I have forgotten!).

Of course, you can't expect the guests to run everything, so their guest workshops/talks/Q+As (take your pick!) have to be complimented with a host of other activities. Fortunately enough I've picked up some experience in teaching over the last couple of years, so running a workshop myself doesn't hold much fear. So here's a short list of tips on programming that you might find helpful:

1) Even if your first 'serious' activity is Saturday morning, Friday night is still well spent at the venue from a social angle. Bear in mind that the likelihood is that this will be a group of complete strangers you will be drawing together, and kicking off cold on Saturday morning can be tricky. A nice chilled out Friday night serves as a chance for everyone to get to know each other and, ultimately, leads to a more constructive weekend. You'll generally be surprised how easily people get on, especially when it comes to the subjects of books and writing!

2) It's best to keep the morning activities very much as a 'warm-up' session. You don't want to drain the creative urge out of everyone too early in the day, and something a little more fun and light-hearted again serves as an icebreaker for the day. And that's not to say that these exercises can't produce good results! I've also tended to keep the first workshop a bit shorter, just to give that morning coffee the chance to take effect...

3) Interaction is an important element in any writing event, and a residential weekend is no different. Workshops should ideally include time to share the work that is being written, or include paired/group exercises. Other activities with a strong group focus can also work well – feedback sessions and sharing of 'best practice' have tended to go down well. Discussions on genre-related subjects have, in my experience, tended to produce a mixed sort of response.

4) Don't forget that individual or 'free' writing time is an activity as much as anything! People may wish to work on their own projects, develop things they have started in the writing workshops or just take a bit of time to work on ideas and thoughts. People might even want to sit and watch TV or take a walk



in the countryside – it's up to the individual! But many participants value this time away from scheduled activities that see them sat around the workshop table.

"...there are very few [residential writing weekends] specialising in science-fiction, fantasy and horror."

5) Don't try and programme formal activities in the evening! I lose track of the number of times I've schedule activities for after dinner, and then quite frankly they've never happened because everyone is too busy chatting away, drinking or playing games. I eventually gave up after my third writing weekend – just let the evenings go with the flow.

Often people will end up talking writing and ideas anyway – one of the joys of drawing together so many like-minded people! The usual evening will see a good amount of drinks shared, plenty of conversation and usually a few pretty late nights.

6) Don't finish too late on Sunday. Bear in mind that people have homes to get to, and though all of my writing weekends to date have taken place in Derbyshire, people have come from as far as Scotland and the South Coast to be there. A 3pm-4pm finish has worked well, as people can usually get home at a sensible time and get back into the old routine before work on Monday.

7) Variety is important, and you don't want to have the same kind of activities time and time again. Whilst workshops often feature heavily, make sure that these take sufficiently different approaches to remain interesting to your participants. Try and mix the day's activities so you are never doing the same thing



twice in a row, and make sure subjects are relevant and interesting. Finally, make sure any workshops that you intend to run are different from those your guest authors are taking on! There's nothing worse than doing a similar or identical workshop twice in one day...

8) As organiser, you'll be the one expected to keep things moving along and to keep everything running to schedule. With that said, a little bit of flexibility can be important, so be willing to make and accept changes as things go. Sticking too rigidly to the plan can sometimes be counterproductive – if something has worked particularly well for the group, then see if you can do more of that. If something hasn't worked out, then you may wish to do less of it. Every group is different, so don't assume that the same thing will work just as well on two different occasions. Also, don't sit there guessing if you're not sure – you can always just ask what people might like to do at any given time!

Other than the scheduling side of things, I'd say that there are two other key considerations in terms of making a residential writing weekend work, namely the food and the sleeping arrangements. Obviously when you are gathering together a group of strangers, deciding where everyone is going to bed down can be tricky. Most cottages and holiday homes do have shared bedrooms, whilst if you are

booking a hotel you might be able to offer single occupancy as an alternative. In terms of sleeping, first of all it's important to ask if people are booking as a pair or if they have any friends or familiar faces going on the weekend as well – if people know each other already, obviously it makes co-habiting for a weekend that bit less awkward. The way I've always tried to approach things, as far as I can, is to try and put people of a similar age together. That way, there are usually some common areas of interest and people will tend to go to bed at a similar sort of time (although there's never any guarantee of that, of course – you'll be amazed how late people will be up sometimes!)

In terms of food, menu-planning is an important element of the weekend. This has always particularly been the case with my weekends, as the Dove Valley is fabulously tucked away, and about the only downside I've yet found is that you can't just nip to the shop if you happen to run out of milk. Therefore, my first word of advice is to get *plenty* of everything, especially when it comes to the essentials – things like milk, bread, butter etc. etc. These are the things that are most commonly used, and if you do run out then it probably causes the biggest problem in terms of people's diet over the course of the event. If you have anything left over, there's usually someone willing to take it away with them at the end of the weekend – in fact it usually provides an added bonus for attendees!

It's also very important to consider who's actually going to *cook* and *prepare* all of this food? It's in these kinds of little details that a weekend like this can be won or lost. If you've got someone willing to come along and arrange the meals (as my very patient wife has done many times) then you are free just to think about the other needs of your attendees. However if you do need to prepare the meals yourself – as well as run things throughout proceedings – then you may want to think a little bit differently about it. In this case, keep things as quick and easy as you can – think continental breakfast rather than fried breakfast, sandwiches for lunch, dinners that don't take hours to prepare. Many supermarkets now offer good ranges of party food, which can be a good bet, offering platters of meat, cheese, sandwiches etc – these can be a good easy alternative. You'll also need to leave yourself time in the schedule to do the cooking, setting up and (dare I mention it?) washing up – although in my experience people are pretty generous with helping on that front!

Another thing that is useful to bear in mind is that snacks are a good bet – with coffee breaks and tea breaks, a few biscuits or a chocolate bar often go down a treat. Crisps are also really handy, not only for lunches but also for those attacks of nibbles between sessions or even late at night. The one thing I have always said that I wouldn't provide is alcohol – for no reason other than it is a very expensive thing to cater for, and there's no guarantee that you'll provide enough, or provide the drinks that everyone prefers. As such, people have always happily brought their own alcohol to my weekend – in the variety and quantity of their choosing, to be consumed at their leisure. I've never minded this being over the workshop table, provided nobody is completely blotto by the time the guest author turns up. The author usually likes to be the first one blotto... I kid, I kid!

The final point on food is a really important one – be sure to ask about dietary requirements. Bearing in mind that you may be tucked away from civilisation somewhat, nipping out to pick up soy milk or gluten-free bread may not be the easiest of things to do. It's also important to ask – and to receive an answer to this question – in good time, as if you are planning on a shopping delivery then this will need to be placed in ample time before the event.

In terms of ins and outs, I think that's about all the advice I can give – apart from to remember that it's often the little touches that people remember. If you can provide a goodie bag or some free books, notebooks and pens for everyone, perhaps a bit of luxury for dessert... all these are things that can leave a good, positive impression.

With that being all I have to say on the matter, I'm delighted to pass the remainder of the article over to Adam Craig, who attended my fantasy writing weekend in Derbyshire recently. Adam is a very talented writer indeed to boot, and someone I have no doubt you'll be hearing more from in the future.

So, over to Adam...

I'm heading north on the A515. The sun's skimming the horizon, when I can see the sun between the hills. Snow lurks in otherwise empty fields and under every dry stone wall, glowing coldly. The air's distinctly grainy; landscape becoming grey as a mist gathers and the shadows get deeper. Ahead, the turning I've been looking for...

A mid-February Friday afternoon in the wilds of North Staffordshire: the distinctly secluded venue for Alex Davis' fantasy writing weekend. In case you've not guessed, I'm having second thoughts about attending. All the others (all those strangers) are bound to be great writers who've got thousands of publishing credits. Me, I've never published anything. I won't fit in.

The sign for the venue appears and I'm even more worried. The track runs down a steep (as in *steeeeeeeep*) hill with no end in sight. Am I in the right place? More to the point, just what is the venue? An outhouse from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*?

In fact, it's an extremely comfortable barn conversion. And I'm sharing with Alex, so at least I'm not in with a complete stranger. One worry ticked off.

Friday night is given over to getting to know each other over a plentiful meal. (Alex doesn't stint on the nosh, so there's plenty of opportunity for blowing your diet. And, anything left come Sunday you're free to take away.) It turns out the five other people here with me (A.J., Alison and her son Rory, Jon and Joy) have almost as little writing experience as I do. They're also a reassuringly friendly bunch (we're up talking until gone midnight), with a good mishmash of tastes and backgrounds, and enthusiastic about the weekend.

A couple more worries ticked off.

Saturday morning. Sunlight gleaming off the frost, mist rising along the length of the valley. Utterly quiet and not even a contrail overhead. After breakfast it's finally time to write. Cue my exit: thanks to seriously scraggy arms (chronic tennis elbow) I'm using speech recognition software (Dragon Dictate, oh how I loathe thee) these days, so it's away to one of the bedrooms off the main room. Feels a bit lonely at first but I survive the warm-up exercise on 'spoken word magic' unscathed. Not that I read out the results during the feedback session, although some of the others struggled more than I did and I suppose my effort isn't substantially worse than any of theirs. Maybe next time...

After a break, we start working with fantasy archetypes: taking familiar characters and putting them in strange situations, inverting their powers, and generally messing them around. Perversely, I choose to write about a dragon that can't fly (why? I hate dragons — see previous aside). But the exercises are a fascinating challenge and the post-scribbling feedback session extremely constructive. (But, no, I'm still not brave enough to read anything out.)

The afternoon is taken up by a visit from Adrian Tchaikovsky. Quite intimidating, being in the presence of a real, published author. But here he is, sat on the other side of the table, noshing a sandwich and appearing quite human. Could it be that published authors are actually mortals not entirely unlike me?

Adrian's world-building workshop is an appetite-wetting gallop through the subject. If only there was more time... But there's a Q&A and a discussion of writing tips to squeeze in. The Q&A is a real eye opener, with Adrian going into detail about his writing process and what it's like to be a working author. More food for thought. And then time for food, downtime, and another long night spent talking.

Not surprisingly, Sunday starts a little later than the day before but we're soon writing again. The main feature of the day is a workshop on battle scenes: use of present tense, perspective, zooming in and out of the action.

All great fun. Feeling a bit more confident, I read out part of a story I've been working on for a week or so during the next feedback session. Not only do I not get laughed out of the room, but the comments and criticism are broadly positive, certainly helpful and constructive.

After lunch, there's a discussion on publishing opportunities, submitting work, and some more writing tips, and then...

And then it's time to go. All done. Damn, just when I was starting to enjoy myself! Back up that winding track, past all those hills and snow. Faintly exhausted and trying to absorb all the stuff crammed into those two days.

"...thankfully, some of the mystique around being an honest-to-God working writer has evaporated..."

Fast forward three months: what do I think about it now? Well, Sunday's feedback helped shape that story for the better. Secondly, the workshop exercises have come together into the rough outline of a novel. And, thankfully, some of

the mystique around being an honest-to-God working writer has evaporated (writers are as much made as born). I also met a good bunch of people, talked a great deal, probably ate too much, laughed even more and stayed up very late. All told, not a bad way to spend a weekend. Okay, so it didn't turn me into Catherynne M. Valente (the sex change's booked, though) and I still have periods of self-doubt that make Kafka look like a positive-thinking guru, but Alex's writing weekend did show that it's not so crazy to think that I might become a published writer.

So, many thanks to Alex, for doing such a bang-up job in guiding us through the weekend, and many thanks to A.J., Alison, Jon, Joy and Rory for being such good company. But, would I do it all again?

Just hand me that booking form...

FIN.

ANDROMEDA ONE

SF - FANTASY - HORROR

Andromeda One is a one-day science-fiction, fantasy and horror convention taking place on **Saturday 21st September 2013** from **11am to 10pm** with Dealer's Room open at 9:00am and early bird kaffeeklatches from 8:30am.

Taking place at the Custard Factory in Birmingham, it brings together a host of science-fiction, fantasy and horror writers and publishers for a day loaded with book launches, kaffeeklatches, panels, signings, writing and publishing workshops and much more.

There will be a stream dedicated to workshops on gender parity and multiculturalism and disabilities in the SFF/Horror community.

Single Tickets are £25 each. Group Tickets (for up to five people) are £100.

Prices held until 9th August 2013.

Prices go up 10th August 2013: £27 each, or £110.00 for a Group Ticket.

GUESTS OF HONOUR include Paul Cornell and Jaine Fenn

Plus sessions with an impressive range of speakers: Chris Amies, Jacey Bedford, Misa Buckley (SFR) Mike Chinn, Theresa Derwin, Jan Edwards (Alchemy Press & Editor/Writer) Janet Edwards SF Writer, Simon Marshall-Jones of Spectral Press, Adrian Middleton, Stan Nicholls & Anne Gay/ Nicholls, Adrian Tchaikovsky, Mark West and Ian Whates.

Book your tickets now at <http://terror-tree.co.uk/andromeda-one/>

WRITE ON, OR NOT?

Roderick Gladwish joined an online writing group, and lets you know what to expect from YouWriteOn.com

Getting unbiased reviews of your writing is vital to improve as a writer. Local writers' groups are a good option. If you are holding down a day-job like me, evenings are supposedly for recovering for the next round of bread-winning not for nipping out to the local school or library. So, I looked to use the time (and energy) I had, to effectively get the help I needed. Online groups looked like a good option with sites like Critters.org being available. I had also wondered about the BSFA's own Orbiter groups.

Unfortunately, I am utterly off-genre at the moment writing historical teenage fiction and I didn't want to trouble the SF community with that. But then I found *YouWriteOn.com* and decided to investigate.

YouWriteOn.com is a community criticism website, where members review each other's work. In that way it is similar to Orbiter or *Critters.org*, though it differs in two major aspects. Firstly, it is non-genre specific. Secondly, although the main aim is to improve members' writing, it runs this process as a rolling competition with Top Ten Charts and the carrot of high achievers having their work presented to editors from Orion and Random House.

The home page mentions top performing authors and pushes the possibility of six figure book deals. While an interesting idea, this created a sense of unease for me. Another concern was that the site owners offer publishing services. This smelled a bit like vanity publishing.

Despite my concerns, I decided to give it a go. I joined in late 2012 to assess the site before submitting my own work in January 2013.

The site works using 'Reading Credits'. These are earned by reviewing other members' submissions through Reading Assignments. Asking for an assignment leads to a randomly allocated piece of work (short story or novel extract) to review. An assign-

ment must be completed within four days to earn a credit. Up to six assignments a day can be requested.

Once earned, Reading Credits are then attached to the writing to be reviewed. A member can have several pieces of work under review if they wish. If a Reading Assignment is completed within two days it increases the rate at which your writing is reviewed, thus rewarding more active members.

Users can only see their reviews after four have been completed, and after eight the work enters the charts. If you end up in the top ten for that month editors from Orion and Random House give their critique.

If you are in the Top Ten then you have to keep earning a credit every week to stay there. There are regulations to prevent the same work hogging all the professional reviews, which are explained in detail on the site.

If a submission gets into the Top Ten and stays there for more than 25 days, it is then listed in the Best Seller Chart where it gets more attention.

Apart from the overall Top Ten, there are charts broken down by genre; whether this increases professional access or simply helps genre-fans pick out their own niche more easily is unclear.

Initially, I reviewed other people's samples without submitting my own. This is probably as close as any non-professional gets to dealing with the slush pile. The standard of work is variable. Out of the twenty or so pieces reviewed two thirds were readable, the remaining third felt like first drafts with only two being truly unreadable. There have been 'chick-lit' entries, a few psychological thrillers, some YA work, a couple of supernatural fantasies and one hard science fiction tale. Assignments can be turned down without penalty. I have only declined to read an erotic thriller in the vein of *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

Reviewing has been the most difficult part. It is hard to be constructive rather than critical and avoid giving pat advice, although 'show don't tell', 'keep a consistent viewpoint', and 'read it aloud' is sometimes all that can be said.

What others have commented on the same submission is hidden from view while you are reviewing the piece, but you can look at comments afterwards. Usually reviewers spot the same weaknesses and strengths. Only once have I given a poor review to discover everyone else loved it — hey, what do I know?

Reviews must be 100 words or more and to prevent fraudulent non-reviews being submitted, potential reviewers must undergo a reading test before their first review makes it to the site. This stops people maximising reading credits by accepting everything and not actually reviewing the work.

The system can be cheated, but that kind of behaviour might indicate the reviewer doesn't care about writing, so it's likely the reviews of their own work will be damning. There is also a community forum on the site, which would quickly highlight users doing that.

Once I was comfortable with the process I uploaded the first 5,000 words of my novel. The limits are 5,000 to 7,000 words for novels and 2,000 to 5,000 words for short stories.

Reviews appeared roughly every two to three days. All were honest and helpful leading me to rewrite my submission and achieve more positive reviews. I have also worked through my novel and dumped 10,000 unnecessary words.

I did watch my chart position — fairly steady in the low twenties — and I did get twinges as it rose and fell, but the reviews mattered to me more. I am still concerned about the competitive element because human nature tends to make people play the competition instead of remembering the objective (writing better). After every five reviews, one can be deleted. The system automatically highlights the lowest rated review and there's always a temptation to just zap it and rise a little higher in the charts.

Chart position appears to be very changeable. After a two week break caused by life in general, my position plummeted to 60th position from 25. It returned

to the teens once a new review had been earned. I could imagine people watching their chart position and getting emotional about slipping down the order, loathing anyone who dared score them low. I wonder what the Top Ten achiever thought of my negative comments of their popular prose.

"Reviews were honest and helpful, leading me to rewrite my submission and achieve more positive reviews."

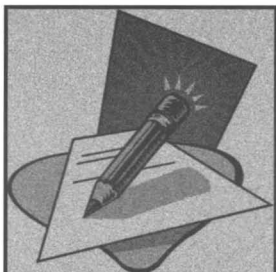
Am I aiming to achieve a Top Ten spot? No. I feel whatever the pros will tell me, I have already heard from dozens of ordinary readers. I never turned down advice (listening to it is another matter).

Would I recommend the site? Possibly. The competition element is a negative point, but the reviews have been honest and genuine, and I was free to review

and submit when I had time and didn't feel like I was letting anyone down if I couldn't.

If you are writing SF I would suggest starting with Orbiter, and once I can get race-built galleons out of my head I hope to follow that path, too.

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.

HOW ANNOYING ARE YOU?

Martin McGrath goes wandering, and provides a rather handy spotter's guide to those very annoying critters...

In my experience, all writing groups have at least one annoying member *. Sometimes, I have to confess, the annoying one has been me. Sometimes not. People tend to move in and out of the roles — but, at any given time, most writing groups will contain at least one person who isn't being particularly helpful. This is a brief spotter's guide to the most common varieties of unhelpful behaviour in the hope that awareness of their habits and behaviour will help us all avoid being that person or, more truthfully, help us avoid being that person all the time.

The Lover

The Lover is a particularly insidious kind of annoying critter because at first they don't seem annoying at all. Having someone tell you your story is great and that you are great and that editors who reject your stories are idiots and that we're all going to win Hugos next week often feels brilliant. But, let's be honest here, if you really believed that your writing was perfect then you wouldn't be in a writers' group, would you? Writing groups that become mutual appreciation societies are great for the ego but useless for the writer because, at best, they fail to encourage you to become better at your craft and, at worst, they reinforce the errors and shortcomings in your work.

The Hater

The Hater is more easily identified as annoying because everything he or she says is negative and everyone hates being told that they're bad at what they do. Developing an ability to offer realistic critical appraisal of other people's work is an essential skill for someone in a writing group but being critical is not the same as being rude. In a writing group, especially one like the BSFA Orbiter groups, where people from different backgrounds are thrown together you are likely to find yourself critiquing the work of people who write in styles you would not otherwise choose to read. Finding a way to see positives in such work is good for you as a

writer because it means you are starting to look beyond the surface of the text, to understand how different techniques work and when they fail. But, also, if all that members of a group receive from a fellow writer is an unending stream of negativity, they will soon tune out and ignore the advice.

"It can feel like you are being asked to write the story on their behalf."

The Nitpicker

Line edits — pointing out errors of spelling, grammar and continuity — are an exceptionally useful part of the writing group process. No matter how carefully you scour your own text for errors, you're likely to miss stuff that a fresh pair of eyes will spot. But, line edits are not the primary purpose of a writing group. A critter who only points out typos and does not engage with issues relating to character, setting, structure and theme is not fully contributing to the process.

The First Drafter

In some ways the obverse side of the coin to the Nitpicker, the First Drafter is a writer who submits work to the writing group that clearly isn't ready to see the light of day. Filled with errors and containing passages that are obviously little more than placeholders, the First Drafter presents his or her fellow writers with many frustrations, not least is the sense that they are being asked to do an unfair amount of work on behalf of their colleague. It can feel like you are being asked to write the story on their behalf.

The Rule Giver

The Rule Giver peppers their critiques with phrases like “show, don’t tell” or “write what you know” without demonstrating that they’ve really understood what they mean. I once read the comments on another author’s story. They’d written a sentence that was something like: “John visited Sheffield, Birmingham and Bristol before returning to London.” The critic had written “show, don’t tell” next to this sentence. But this was meaningless. The journey was not important. The purpose of the sentence was to move the story forward as swiftly, efficiently and unobtrusively as possible and the author was right to skip over the details. If you’re going to recite some rule you’ve had passed down to you, make sure you’re applying it correctly. And always remember what Orwell almost said: *break any rule sooner than write anything outright barbarous.*

The Argumentative One

Remember, you asked for these critiques. So, when you get one you don’t agree with, writing a pissy response that makes clear you think the other members of your group are worthless idiots who don’t deserve to share oxygen with an author of your genius is both stupid and pointless. Suck it up and shut up. But if you really have to write your whiny response, for God’s sake don’t send it.

“Getting better inevitably involves change — hard though this may be to accept.”

The One Who Never Learns

There’s little more depressing for everyone in a writing group than an author who keeps making the same mistakes again and again. One definition of madness is that a person keeps doing the same things over and over, each time expecting a different outcome. The same could be said of bad writing. Getting better inevitably involves change — hard though this may be to accept.

The Unreflective One

Writing “this is good” or “I don’t like this” is not useful criticism. You need to tell your fellow authors why you think something works and why it doesn’t — that way your fellow writers have some idea of what they might do differently or how they might replicate their success or whether they just disagree with you and can safely ignore your worthless wittering.

“...always be aware of exactly why you joined a writing group in the first place — because you wanted to be a better writer.”

Writing groups are good for getting other people’s opinions, but they’re even better for helping you develop the ability to look at your own writing and judge what works and what doesn’t. If you’re not developing those muscles by offering a proper critical analysis of your fellow group members then you’re not taking full advantage of the opportunities available. That’s why one of the key jobs you should set yourself when you join a writing group is to become the best critter you can, and that means trying not to be one of the people on this list.

Almost everyone will, at some stage, stumble into acting as one (or all) of the characters sketched out above. The trick, I think, to avoiding getting permanently locked into any of them is to always be aware of exactly why you joined a writing group in the first place — because you wanted to be a better writer.

FIN.

**** For anyone with whom I’ve ever been in a writing group, don’t worry, I’m not talking about you.***

POEMS FROM THE STARS

BSFA Poetry Submissions edited by Charles Christian

Poetry time again — we have zombies but as the deadline for submissions was *before* the announcement that Peter Capaldi was taking over as the new Doctor Who, we have only two submissions from the Whovianverse.

My thanks also to Alex Bardy of this parish for drawing my attention to a new (well at least to me) poetry format called the *Nonet*. This is a 9-line poem in which the first line is nine syllables, the second eight, and so on down to a single syllable for the final line. The Japanese haiku remains the poetry world's favourite syllable-based format — with its three line 5-7-5 format — although the sci-faiku variant (we have two in this selection) is probably more appropriate in the SF&F genre.

The graphic (opposite page) is from a forthcoming collection illustrated by Bad Robot Brain called **The Thirteen Days of Christmas** — this is Day Two:

*On the Second Day of Christmas
my True Love gave to Me
Two Copies of the Necronomicon
(second editions, bound in
Cthulhu skin, slightly foxed)*

Two Sci-faiku

time travel -
seeing tomorrow today
and yesterday tomorrow

my ego is ok
but my karma -
just ran over my dogma

— Alexis Byter

Drowned Moon

*Ever wondered what a crescent moon looks like when it is
peeping above and below a cloud bank?*

At dusk it rode over the streets of the town
but when I looked up just one horn glared down.
Just half the crescent gleamed in the twilight
its lower cusp drowned in cloud out of sight.
A crooked summons to that black cloudbank
or the tip of a last wave as someone sank?

Finger, claw, antler or something much worse?
Barb, tusk, tail, spike, fang, phallus or fin
was one coming for me, laying a curse
or sinking or breaching and calling me in?
Why should an image of something beckoning
to me appear to be so threatening?

I shut the windows and then drew the drapes
but even closed eyes could not bar that shape
so I opened the door and looked up again.
The cloudbase had risen, the crescent thrust down
an imperial thumb, symbolic but clear.
Who would fail to feel a frisson of fear?

— Roy Gray

Moon Walk

Wisps of cloud cross in front of a pale-lit moon.
Leaves rustle as they spin and twirl
Flirting with the edge of the pavement.
A black raven squawks nearby as it flies away
Up and into a wet-kissed sky.
A car screeches to a halt on the corner
Everything fades to black.
And all because you looked up first
At a pale-lit moon in the morning sky.

— Alex Bardy

Little Boffy Poems

Little Boffy and the Culture

Little Boffy remarked that he was interested in the Culture
Which his mum took to mean
Art and music and the suchlike
This led to her taking Little Boffy
(One day as a treat)
To the local museum
After what seemed like hours they stopped for a break
In the cafe Little Boffy asked
Mum, could I have a cream cake?
Well, Little Boffy replied his mum
You know you are only allowed such treats on red-letter days
But Mum, said Little Boffy
We've been traipsing around this museum for hours
Because you didn't hear the definite article
So I'd say these are Special Circumstances.

*(In gratitude to Iain M Banks, and
indeed Iain Banks, for many hours
of reading pleasure)*

Dalek Poetry: My Vision is Impaired

My vision is impaired
I cannot see!
My vision is impaired
Emergency!!
My vision is impaired
What can it be!!!
My vision is impaired
Oh deary me!!!!

— Dale Roberts

Little Boffy and the Time Lord

Little Boffy was sitting with his grandfather
Watching Doctor Who
Who is the best Doctor, Grandpa?
Asked Little Boffy
Well said his grandfather
I used to like Patrick Troughton best
As he was my first Doctor
Just as Matt Smith is yours
Oh said Little Boffy
And who is my dad's favourite Doctor, Grandpa?
Your dad's favourite is Sylvester McCoy
Oh said Little Boffy
My dad's not the brightest
Is he Grandpa?

— Andy Mills



'The Second Day of Christmas' by US artist, Bad Robot Brain

Zombie Plan

Do you have one? You don't?
Well surely you should start planning,
It won't do to be caught out when
It all goes to hell,

Yes, the smell of decaying corpses
Will be a challenge but it is
Their relentless desire to eat you
That needs to be prepared for.

My husband has an arsenal hidden
In the airing cupboard: swords,
Knives, sharp things to sever
Their heads,

Yes, you have to cut right through
Their necks or they just keep on
Coming, don't you get it?
The un-dead don't die like you

Or I, they just will not stop
Until they have chewed off
Your arm because their hunger
Is insatiable (rather greedy in fact.)

My plan is to hide and not go
Outside, I have hoarded dried
Foods and bottles of water; board
Games to avoid being bored.

The electric will be gone, all
Those workers who sort that sort
Of thing out will be hungry corpses
No doubt; and we will be hiding

Or slicing straight through dead
Necks: slash, swish, snickerty
Snack – Oh, I do hope the zombies
Don't come by and attack.

— Ruth Stacey

Charles Christian is a barrister and Reuters correspondent turned award winning technology journalist, newsletter publisher, blogger, new media maven, science fiction author, storyteller, conference chairman and keynote speaker. Away from his day-job he can be found at UrbanFantasist.com, which will shortly be launching a SF&F imprint.

Submissions to Poems From The Stars, long or short (and artwork too) — are always welcome. Please email them directly to:

charles@charles-christian.com

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TALES FROM TURKEY CITY

The Turkey City Lexicon is an attempt to create accurate, descriptive, critical terms for common problems found in science fiction as an aid to writing groups. *Tales from Turkey City* is an ongoing attempt by **Martin McGrath** to illustrate some of these errors in the form of flash fiction. You can find the Turkey City Online (Google is your friend) and previous entries in this series can be found at www.mmcgrath.co.uk

"FALSE HUMANITY"

An ailment endemic to genre writing, in which soap-opera elements of purported human interest are stuffed into the story willy-nilly, whether or not they advance the plot or contribute to the point of the story. The actions of such characters convey an itchy sense of irrelevance, for the author has invented their problems out of whole cloth, so as to have something to emote about.

Hannah had run the simulation three times. It wasn't that she didn't trust the model, or even that she had hoped that the figures might, miraculously, change. She just knew that Marcus would ask whether she was sure, whether she had double-checked. Marcus was having trouble facing up to the reality of their situation.

They had thirty-one hours, give-or-take, and then...

Hannah thought of Alice, her older sister. Alice was married to a dentist with three children and in possession of a finely-honed sense of her own innate moral superiority. She had never understood why Hannah had wanted to fly and had always mocked Hannah's interest in space. *You'll never find anything in the skies, she'd said, usually as she slapped the back of Hannah's head. Keep your eyes on the ground.*

She could imagine how Alice would respond to the news of the mission loss. She'd be sad, of course she would, and there would be tears but she'd never quite manage to completely disguise a hint of satisfaction. She would not be able to resist the urge to say *I told you so* for long. Hannah felt childhood resentments boil to the surface, her face burning in indignation.

And, of course, her mother would just nod and agree with Alice. *She was always too like her father.*

Hannah was nothing like her father. He'd left when she was six, run off with his secretary of all the depressing clichés. Not that he'd gone far – just six miles. Hannah had walked into him once when she was in a coffee shop on the High Street. They'd stared at each other for a moment, standing at the counter, and he'd nodded. Then the barista had handed him his extra-large mocha, or whatever it was, and he'd shrugged and turned to pay. Hannah fled. He didn't call after her. Six miles, but it might as well have been through one of the Falken Gates. He might as well have been on the other side of the galaxy.

Hannah was nothing like her father.

She closed her eyes, forcing away tears. An image of Alice's face swam back into focus. It was fixed in that familiar mix of contempt and pity and confusion that Hannah's actions seemed to provoke so often. Anger began to swell in her chest. How could fate side with prissy, conservative, Alice?

Hannah hit the upload button and then turned away from her console. The figures would not change. Marcus was going to have to face the truth, whether he liked it or not.

FIN.



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