FOCUS

THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION'S MAGAZINE FOR WRITERS

SUMMER 2015 No. 64

The cover is called "Bathing in Earthlight", by **Richard Bizley**, and is in fact a self-portrait (of sorts).

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FOCUS

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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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Alex Bardy Says...

There is never a shortage of advice available when it comes to writing, be it a short story, novella, full novel, or a blockbusting saga extending to three, four or even ten volumes, and that's one of the reasons I've been looking forward to putting this issue together for quite some time now.

Our theme this issue? Well, I like to call it "How To Keep On Writing When All Around You Is Madness..."

Last summer, at Edge Lit 3, I attended a writing workshop run by Tricia Sullivan, and took a marked fancy to Tricia's two handouts on the day, both of which offer excellent advice and are deserving of a wider audience (IMHO). I was pleased as punch therefore, when she allowed me to reprint both of them in this very magazine, since together they formed the original inspiration and core building blocks of this issue. I've searched long and hard to find similarly helpful material from several other genre writers, and can only hope you agree with my choices, but do feel free to disagree and/or let us know one way or t'other — since I took over layout/design duties on FOCUS, Vector, and the annual BSFA Awards Booklet back in 2012, getting feedback of any sort has been tough going. In a community that likes to celebrate its authors and considers itself an inclusive beast (most of the time), it seems strange that feedback on our BSFA magazines is sparse indeed; hard to stomach when so many people work so very hard to bring these magazines to you.

The brainchild of former BSFA Chair, Ian Whates, since FOCUS #59 we've had some marvellous Guest Editors for FOCUS, each choosing a theme of their own and sourcing some fantastic material from their fellow authors and associates for your delectation. For me personally it's been a privilege and a pleasure to work with all of them, and presenting their efforts has been an incredible learning experience, but at the back of my mind I knew this was always going to prove a difficult thing to sustain long-term, even at the somewhat sedate pace of 2-3 issues a year.

It's with a heady mix of relief and delight that I can now inform you that we will have a new and permanent FOCUS editor on board from next issue, in the spritely form of Dev Agarwal. A regular contributor to FOCUS, Dev is keen to take up the baton and move the magazine forward, and already has several new projects and ideas in mind, so I'm very much looking forward to working with him on future issues.

And on that note, I'll leave you with a couple of choice quotes from a writer much missed already, Terry Pratchett (RIP)...

"An author should never be too proud to write their own flap copy. Getting the heart and soul of a book into fewer than a hundred words helps you focus. More than half the skill of writing lies in tricking the book out of your own head."

— Terry Pratchett,
Paperback Writer, Guardian, 6th Dec 2003

"...the role of fantasy as defined by G. K. Chesterton is to take what is normal and everyday and usual and unregarded, and turn it around and show it to the audience from a different direction, so that they look at it once again with new eyes."

— Terry Pratchett,
Richard Dimbleby Lecture, 1st Feb 2010

— Alex Bardy
@mangozoid

About our Guest Editor...

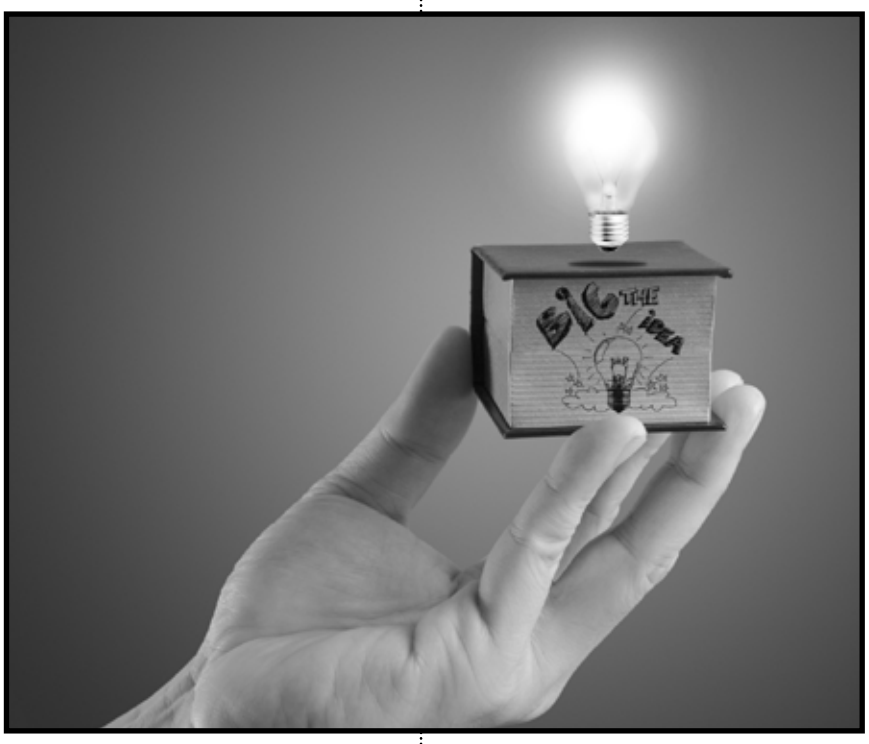
Alex Bardy lives in a very dark place, below a small dank stairwell, beneath a dark step, under a speck of dirt, tucked away in a cold, dark void, somewhere on the fringes of the charming historical city of York, England. He also writes as *DenizenOfTheUniverse* under his *@mangozoid* Twitter moniker. He is a contributor, reviewer, and word-lender to the *British Fantasy Society* (BFS — www.britishfantasysociety.org), and a member of the *British Science Fiction Association* (BSFA — www.bsfa.co.uk). He also writes a regular column for a US emag, and organises the occasional York Pubmeet, an irregular gathering of fans and authors open to all and sundry. He has also had some poetry published, but is not a writer despite several attempts to change this, time for procrastination being much easier to come by...

story openings

by Aaron Miles

This article originally appeared on the FANTASY FACTION website, Feb 16, 2015: ***http://www.fantasy-faction.com/2015/story-openings***

The blank page faces you, whether it's the page in your hand or the one on the screen, the question is always the same – how do you begin? Do you want to set the scene with a sweeping landscape, or launch into the action with a gunfight or duel? Will you ease the reader in with a prologue and back-story, or start with a mystery and rely on the reader's curiosity to draw them on. There are so many ways to choose from, but which is right for your story?



The best opening is one that feels right, something that suits the story and allows a natural follow-on of the narrative without feeling contrived. Ideally you want something subtle that allows the reader to slip into the story and lose themselves in the writing. Getting this right can be tricky and aspects like genre, plot and point of view can all influence it, as well as the overall style of the author.

In fantasy writing it used to be common practice for authors to have a slow introduction to their story. It might begin with a long passage of description about a location, an event, or the history of a world. It might be something more substantial, like an opening chapter that establishes the home of the protagonist as in many archetypal farm-boy turned hero stories. Some authors even section off a piece of the novel as the prologue, often detailing the creation of the fantasy world or other important events. Every fantasy reader will know the classic introduction to *The Lord of the Rings* and its account of the rings of power:

> *"One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,*
> *One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them"*

And afterwards, when the story officially starts, there is the slow introduction of Bilbo Baggins' history and of his coming party. These sorts of openings allow the reader to ease into what may be a highly complex world, letting the author set up all the necessary plot information so they can begin the story. This method is often used when writing in an omniscient POV (point of view) as the narrative style fits with the "wide angle" perspective, and allows a natural flow from the passages of information to the more focused sections on characters and plot. This kind of opening can allow the author to evoke a sense of majesty and history in their work, setting up an epic tale. However, this sort of info dump can also reduce the pace and make for a slow opening.


artist: Ben Wootten

Other writers might prefer to launch right into the action and drop the reader in the middle of a fast paced fight scene or something similar. The immediacy of the moment can be used to draw the reader into the story, and while this means a lack of detail early on, as long as it is justified by the narrative context the reader will often be content to hold their questions about the world in abeyance until the pace slows and there is the opportunity for explanation. A typical opening of this sort will contain an immediate threat or source of danger, so that from the start the reader is thrust into events:

> *"The blade whistled as it came at his face. Jack twisted to parry and sparks exploded from the two swords. Ducking, he jabbed low at the man in the scarf but his opponent jumped back out of reach. Before Jack could recover the man was on him again."*

Already the reader is in a fight with deadly stakes, there is no external description because the character isn't focused on that. The writing is quick, with short sentences. It leads on with impending peril to the character. This opening works to draw interest by conflict and tension, the reader doesn't even know if the viewpoint character is a good guy or not, but they can still care about the outcome. One of the objectives of this type of opening is also to prompt active questions from the reader: who is the man in the scarf; why are they fighting? If you can evoke the reader's curiosity then the battle is half won. Opening this way allows the author to get stuck in with the story and get their plot moving; but at some point they will need to slow down and explain some key details, abeyance can only last so long.

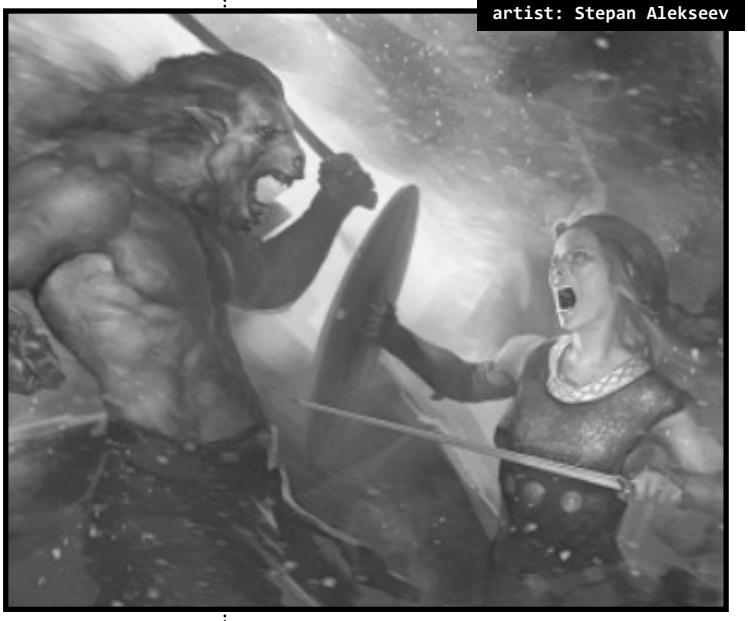
This opening works well with the third person POV, it lets the author instantly ground the narrative into their character without any lengthy introductions and gives the reader the opportunity to build a picture of the character from their observations. While this style may not feel like an "official opening," I think it was Terry Brooks who said "unless you start at the beginning with the creation of the world, you're coming into the middle of the story, you should make sure you enter at an exciting part." It's a rather obvious idea but something we often forget while writing, so why not make your opening as interesting as possible and choose the opportune moment in the story to begin.

There are other less structurally different ways to write a good opening. It can require something as simple as a good "hook" line that draws the reader's interest and makes them want to continue on. It could be something dramatic, sinister, or just plain weird, so long as it piques the reader's interest.

Dialogue can make a great opening for a story as well, it can offer a variety of options for a beginning.

> *"I assure you it's perfectly safe."*
> *"That's what you said last time, look what happened to Brandon."*
> *"What do you mean?"*
> *"He's a vegetable!"*
> *"I'd say it was an improvement."*

Even without any description the reader can quickly get a sense of the situation without paragraphs of explanation. A few lines of dialogue can impart plot information, help to set the scene, as well as giving an impression of the characters. In the section above I


artist: Stepan Alekseev

bet you can already picture the exchange, perhaps an unwilling patient and a sarcastic doctor, readying for some dangerous operation or procedure. Again it can serve to raise active questions: what is the procedure, and what did happen to Brandon? These aspects can all work together to hook the reader.

The need for answers is often all it takes to draw the reader in. Detective stories or other fiction that focuses on mystery will often follow an established arc. First there is the strange occurrence, a half glimpsed event with maybe a few hints, then the author introduces the central characters and sets them up to find out what happened, and the plot develops. Curiosity may be unhealthy for cats, but it's a common trait of a reader, and as long as you can create a suitably tantalising mystery scene to open with, it will pull them in.

Opening with a well-crafted narrative voice can also hook a potential reader. A good narrative voice can help to liven up even a lacklustre tale, and it will help the reader to engage with the story if they enjoy the style of the writing.

> *"As always, before the warmind and I shoot each other, I try to make small talk."*

The sentence above has a strong personality to the writing. From only a few words the reader can already begin to picture the character and get a feel for the type of story. It sounds like the words of a cocky hero type, embroiled in yet another adventure, half serious, half humor. It's the sort of tone that makes you want to read on, and is perhaps the most difficult to establish in a brief opening, but if the right voice can be found and maintained it can make the whole novel.

There are an endless variety of ways to start a story, ideas limited only by the imagination of the author. You could begin with the ponderings of a door handle the hero clasps as he enters the villain's lair, "this one won't last long." Or start with a fiscal report on the economic effects of dragon attacks. Maybe your opening is even stranger, even more experimental. Great! Nothing is set in stone when you begin, so feel free to try different approaches. Make it something the reader can't ignore.

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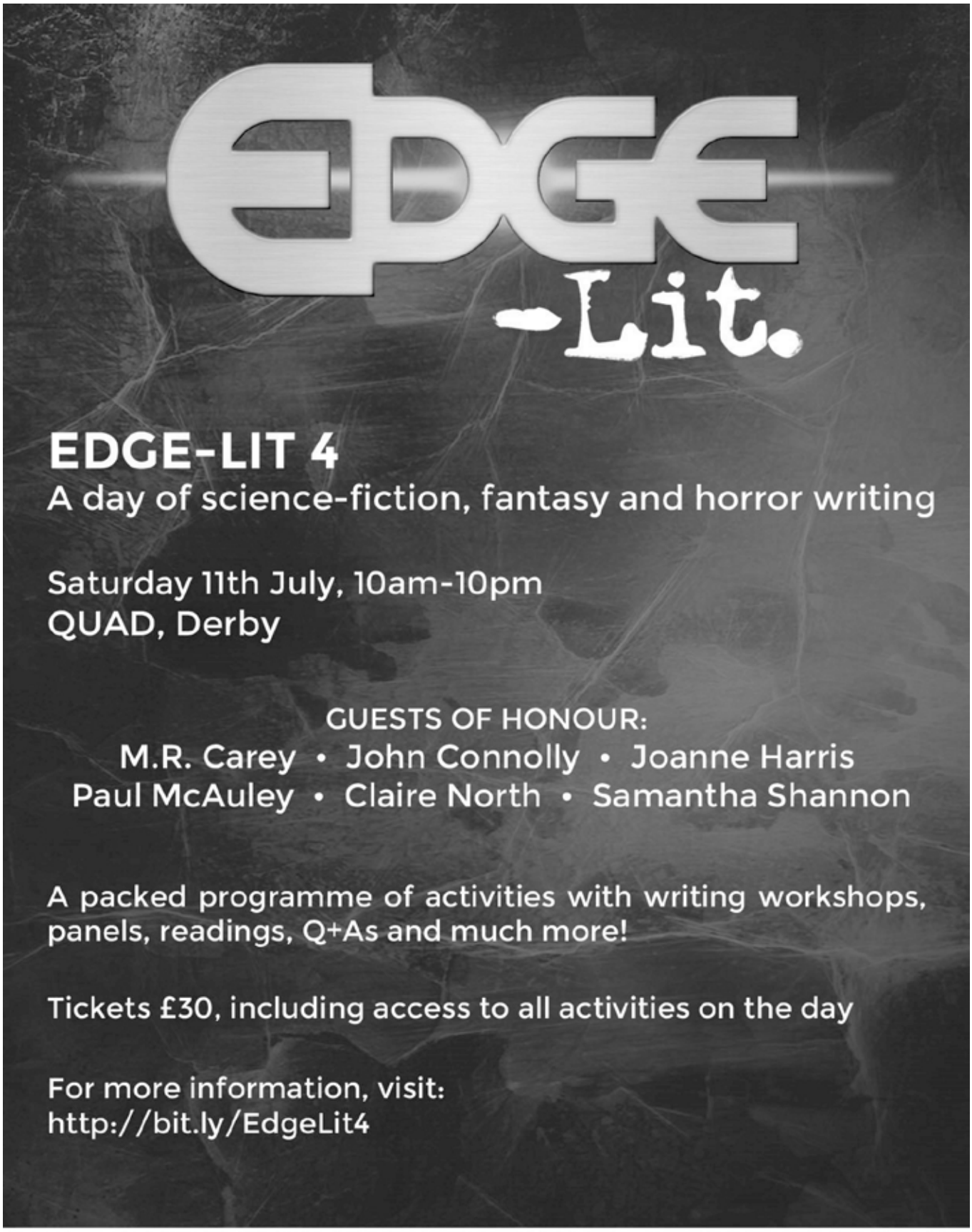

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writing is mostly psychology

by Tricia Sullivan

Taken from a set of notes in 2014, originally written for a writing clinic in Aberystwyth, with editor Caroline Oakley, and subsequently used at Edge-Lit 3 as part of a writing workshop.

> ***"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence is not an act, but a habit."***
>
> ***— Aristotle***
>
> ***"There is no agony like having an untold story inside you."***
>
> ***— Zora Neale Hurston***
>
> ***"Make voyages. Attempt them. There is nothing else."***
>
> ***— Tennessee Williams***

These are the quotes I have on my laptop right now, and a snapshot of my writing head at this moment.

Writing is mostly psychology

There is no one process. Everyone builds their own. Steal what you can from others, make it your own. What I'm offering you are just tips; take what you like, ignore what you don't need.

Learn how to talk to yourself. Keep a journal. It's fine to have a lot of meta going on, a lot of process—I recommend that you be open to thinking about your thinking. Still, sooner or later you have to just get in there and try things. Seek out people and resources that make you want to write. Trust your feelings, however squishy and embarrassing they may be.

A lot of people keep a notebook right by the bed in case they get an idea in that between sleeping and waking state; that's always a good idea. If you're falling asleep and you get an idea that seems good, you must wake yourself up and write it down. Don't think you'll remember it in the morning. You won't. Elizabeth Bear spoke once of keeping a wax crayon in her shower so she could write down ideas on the shower door when they came to her in the shower. This is good too. I used to carry a little tape recorder with me when I went out walking, and I'd talk myself through plot. Anything you can catch raw from your subconscious is precious. It won't all work; some of it won't make any sense in the cold light of day. But on the whole, raw ideas are valuable. Invite them in and welcome them.

Speaking of valuable: I keep outtakes files. I throw a lot of stuff out, but never permanently. I keep it in a cut file in case I need it. Sometimes I change my mind about it, but even if I don't, I like to know that it's there in case I need it. This frees me up to go down a different path knowing that if it doesn't work out, I can always return to the first version.

I also keep a lot of files that aren't fiction but that are related to the book. I keep a lot of notes. Sometimes I have sequence documents and scraps of info and research. Scrivener is brilliant for this and I recommend it. I brainstorm on big paper, I draw sketches of plot and structure, I mess about with post-its and index cards. Sometimes I do doodles related to the book. Twyla Tharp wrote about keeping a 'box' for every project she choreographs, like a big plastic office crate. It's a really good idea to have some way of keeping all your material together so you can get at what you need when you need to. I work in journals

about the author

photo: Lou Abercrombie

Tricia Sullivan is a physics student. She is also an Arthur C. Clarke Award winning author of eleven science fiction and fantasy novels. Her twelfth, ***Occupy Me***, will be published by Gollancz in 2016.

quite a bit, and periodically I will go through and raid them for material and get all of this in my computer.

Changing heads

It's very important to be able to change heads. You need to be the athlete and you also need to be the coach. Don't confuse the roles. When you are writing, you are writing. You are not editing. You are not planning. Editing calls for a certain cold, analytical edge. Planning calls for a combination of imagination and structural thinking, like an architect imagining a building—you have to step outside of time and see something of the whole. But when you are writing you are fully involved in the sensory experience, as state you have to just start wherever you are and find your way in by writing.

I keep a whinge file. I will whinge and whine away in this until I'm bored with myself, then I'll open up the novel and poke it a bit, and sometimes it won't go anywhere and I'll switch back to whingeing. Other times, having gotten the whingeing out of my system I'm then able to carry on.

If you are like most of us, you need to get off the internet. Unless you know for sure that it's helping you work (through word wars, encouraging friends, etc) then get off. Use a timer if you must. Bribes. Whatever you have to do to make it happen. You may see pro writers on Twitter a lot but in most cases, they are using

There is also a lot of other work going on that's called 'writing' but which is peripheral to this primary task. Planning, plotting, structuring, editing, revising, researching, thinking...all of these things are equally important to the writing itself and they take a lot of time and energy. So you have writing, and then you have all of this other essential stuff. What you need to figure out is how to get these very different processes working in a synergistic way. Very often they fight one another, and this brings misery. If you are trying to write a scene and you are thinking too much about some problem or some insecurity, or you are trying to impress someone or not make some

in a dream. And you need to let yourself go all the way in when you write.

Writers are famous for having routines and rituals. Rituals are about finding the way in. They are about giving yourself permission to go into that dreamlike, play state, the flow. That's where the magic happens. It's not the rituals themselves that are important; they are just triggers for getting into that creative state of mind. Sometimes in order to get into that Freedom [***www. mcfreedom.com***] or something similar for their work sessions. Few people I know can write with background chatter going on.

Use music to trigger moods. Go for long walks if you can. Use Pinterest and make a board for your project if you like that sort of thing. Wash the dishes. Knit. Get in the garden. Paint a wall. Anything that occupies your nervous energy and leaves you free to think is good for your writing.

mistake, or whatever, it's going to be a very unpleasant experience and you will find yourself dropping out of the dream. When you're writing, you want to be fully involved. Ideally, you want to be seeing and hearing everything and just taking all of this down on to the paper almost like a court reporter. That's the level you want to get to. Be aware of what that state feels like, so that you can find it again in the future.

Some people find the writing part OK but they fall down on the editing/planning/revising part, so that they don't get the best from themselves because they don't demand enough or because they can't get a grip on structure and organization. Others are very good at editing and criticizing, but find it hard to produce because of all the second-guessing. Most of us experience both of these poles at some point. The key is, if you catch yourself editing as you write, my advice is to try to stop doing that. Your writing will be better if you let it flow naturally and do the editing later. And conversely, if you're just writing and writing and writing and discharging stuff without ever having the courage to go back over it and make the painful decisions and changes, then you probably won't progress very well, either. Critique—self-critique or good quality outside critique—is very important if you want to improve. You need to do both. **But not at the same time!** That's the key.

And briefly with regard to critique: Be careful about the people you show your work to. Know yourself. Know how thick or thin your skin is. You can ask for specific kinds of critiques from people; you don't have to accept a blanket response from them. Be clear about what you want them to read for. A good critique should leave you feeling like you understand what you need to change. You should feel like you want to do the work, even if you aren't completely sure how you will accomplish it yet. If the critique makes you feel worthless or discouraged (after the initial sting, that is) and if it seems to undermine what you were trying to do in the first place, then seek a new critique from somewhere else.

And take everything I'm saying with a grain of salt. Everyone is different. Everyone is different. *Everyone is different.* Anything I'm saying here comes from self-observation and from conversations with other writers. I think it's good advice, but you always need to listen to what your instincts are telling you.

More about activities peripheral to writing

In our field there's a lot of so-called 'worldbuilding'. This doesn't have to be of the epic fantasy variety where you draw maps, write your own languages and histories, create a magic system, etc. Your imagined world may only be a small departure from this one, or it may be only a small departure from other established alternative worlds, but even so you have to take on an extra burden of work. A lot of the work you do won't be on the page. You'll work very hard on creating background and context and working through the implications of things, but at the same time you have to resist the temptation to put all of it on the page. The story is what's important, and to serve the story sometimes you have to leave out a lot of interesting stuff. So be prepared to have lots and lots of stuff that only you know about.

And don't let lack of prior world-building stop you. Sometimes a story will drag you kicking and screaming in the direction it wants to go, and you'll have to go there even if you aren't so familiar with what you're doing. It's fine to research and develop as you go. Better a live story that's rough around the edges than something that's been planned to death and reads that way. The former is much easier to fix in the mix.

The important thing here is not how much you put in or how much you leave out, but whether you can convince readers that you have authority over the material. And the pun there is intentional. You're in control of the world you create. Own it.

In our field there's a really heavy burden created by genre history. Readers have often seen a lot of stuff, and they will triangulate what you do with that. Particularly in science fiction, there's a certain snobbery associated with knowing the field and not letting in newcomers who can't make the secret handshakes. You have to decide how you're going to orient yourself to that. It's a good idea to have a read around of the subjects you want to work with and go back and see how they have been treated before; most topics have been done before in some way or a*no*ther. That's fine—it's all in the treatment. It does help to be aware of what others have done—it can save you embarrassment, as long as you don't let it hamstring you.

There are a lot of good brainstorming tools out there. There are digital things you can use if that's your thing. But you can do an awful lot with index cards, post-its, and big sheets of paper.

Endurance & survival

You need to work out how and when you will do your writing. Everyone has a different life and everyone has different rhythms. It's not true that you have to write every day. This may work for some people but it isn't necessary. It's also not true that you must constantly be thinking about it. Some of my best growth as a writer has happened when I wasn't writing and when I wasn't thinking about it, so when I hear people saying, 'You must write every day' I just laugh. It

is actually possible to take a complete break for quite a while and come back from it better than you were when you left off. Often there is internal growth happening in the dark.

Still, you have to work. You get out of it what you put in. Simples.

There have been times in my writing life where I was up against deadlines and I had to work very intensely, very hard, and very fast. I got some terrific writing out of those times. I also got some junk. But mostly, reading it over I can't tell the difference between what I slaved over and what I wrote very fast. We all have a sort of level that's a default. So it's very good to put yourself under pressure, even under extreme pressure at times, because you will get more out of yourself than you actually believe possible. But it's very hard to fake deadlines. It's better, I think, to have a real deadline, even if this is just that you will submit a piece to your writing group or a writing friend, by such and such a date. Something that people will hold you to. In order to succeed you have to put yourself in a position where you might fail. You don't actually know what you're capable of until you take some sort of risk. You're actually capable of more than you think.

It's like any physical challenge. The mind usually quits before the body. You're sprinting and you get into oxygen deficit. The body sends distress signals, the mind quits, you stop; but there was actually a reserve in the body for emergencies. The people who are able to perform at high levels physically are able to tap into that reserve. They train themselves to raise their baseline thresholds, but often they can also push themselves past even those enhanced thresholds to a higher level. It's no different in writing, it's just that the reserves are psychological.

You talk to any working novelist and they'll tell you that you reach a point—several points, even—where you feel you can't go on, you hate the book, you're convinced you're producing rubbish, and all you want to do is ANYTHING but keep writing that book. It's a special kind of despair. You just want to stop. Please. Make it stop.

This is entirely normal, routine stuff. You know, childbirth is normal and routine, too, but that doesn't make it easy!

Or you will be caught up in the siren song of a new! Shiny! Project! That is so much better! Than the unremitting crap you are presently writing. Come here, my darling, it will call to you. When that happens, you are permitted to take enough time to jot down a few notes or a few pages, and then you are to put it aside to work on as a treat when you are finished.

I would be surprised if, writing a novel, you didn't have at least some of the above feelings, because they are typical. Now, a novelist under contract has a deadline and this forces them to keep going past the pain threshold. If you're not under contract it's much harder to manufacture that drive. Having friends who will poke you and ask you and encourage you is a big help. You have to have a certain dogged persistence. Don't believe any bullshit that such-and-such Great Novel was written in a fit of passion and relentless enthusiasm and that if you don't have that, you're not doing it right. At some point in the process there is always inertia, misery, exhaustion, discouragement and doubt. Make friends with these things. They are your companions.

You can make a pact with another writing friend to do a daily or weekly check in. No big deal—you don't have to send in your work. You just write an account of what you did, and they acknowledge receipt. Say you are trying to write every day. Have someone who will be your writing accountant. E-mail them every day with your progress. If they don't hear from you for a few days, they are to check up on you.

With regard to when the work gets stale and you're tired, you just have to find a way to carry on regardless. Sometimes progress by inches is all you will get. And there's a tendency for novelists to turn into plough horses with heads down, dragging this thing through the mud day in and day out. So you will need to find ways to treat yourself well, to fire up your enthusiasm, to give yourself fresh input and insight.

Bribes are good. Treating yourself well is important to counteract exhaustion. Sometimes the worse we feel, the more we berate ourselves, the worse we feel. I have found that a little TLC goes a long way.

The thing is, if worse comes to worst you can put the thing down for a week or two weeks and clear your head, and then go back. The writing police won't kill you for taking a break. But if you let it get too cold it can be very hard to get back in the flow. So for your own sake, try not to break away for too long. Charge up your batteries with whatever turns you on and get back in there.

Often, when you get stuck, it's not because you're morally bankrupt or intellectually deficient, it's because you're not quite clear what you need to do or how to do it. Before you accuse yourself of being a hopeless slacker, look at your work and try to figure out what the problem is. Ask yourself questions as if you are another person, and then answer your own questions. You may have to play detective with your subconscious. It's more intelligent than you are, but it doesn't always come clean unless you explicitly make it clear that you want to hear the truth. Be willing to listen to what your subconscious has to say; don't dictate to it and treat it like a servant. You insult it and it won't help you.

It's not necessary to have confidence, to be convinced in what you're doing, or even to believe in yourself. It's not necessary to be sure of anything. It helps; but it's not actually necessary. All you have to do is do the work. The best you can.

About originality and imagination

What can I say? This field is hungry for new ideas and people love to be surprised...but only so much. In many ways the field is very conventional and conservative, in that there isn't a lot of room for experimental writing. SFF is very much a commercial field and within the genre there is a mainstream and then there are fringe elements, and these streams are constantly responding to trends in the market. If you aspire to publish traditionally, your stuff can only diverge from convention along so many vectors at the same time if you want it to be accepted.

The best way to avoid the opposite and far more common problem--being derivative and treading over the same old ground--is to seek your own original voice, and that can take time. It can take a lot of work to get past the TV scripts, the movies, the novels you've read, and all the surface junk of culture. Your own voice may sound odd and ridiculous to you at first. You may be tempted to strike it out when you see it. But don't be afraid to get the truth out there. It has a certain feel when you write it. It has a flavour. It's not canned, it's not pretending to be anything. Your voice is what you really see, feel, hear, think. And when you find it, respect it and let it have oxygen.

The other best way to be original is to get outside the boundaries of literature entirely. Don't be afraid to think laterally. Use the real world. Use art, science, history, the news, anything you come across, as a source of ideas, of 'what if'? Sometimes you can crash things together in mutant marriages to good effect. Play mad scientist, force two ideas or worldviews into a particle collider, and see what falls out. Or you can take something that is an established truth and just stand it on its head. Reverse it. Look at it from another perspective. What do you see?

Often an 'original' idea is really just an unexpected angle on something familiar. SFF as a market generally likes stuff that feels familiar, but with maybe one twist. It's actually a simple recipe. The simpler you can keep your work, the easier it will be to sell. And of course right now we are living in a cross-genre period, so you don't have to worry so much about boundaries between science fiction, fantasy, horror, crime, historical and romance. They are all mashable. You can use anything you like.

The trick here is to be open. Be willing to stand in a place of not-knowing, be willing to deal with uncertainty and be open to the most ridiculous things. Try to just tolerate the discomfort of not knowing what you are doing. Let every idea have its say. Then you explore. You find out what has legs, what has heat, what has the potential to go some distance. Often the creative process is about combining multiple, disparate ideas. You don't just get one idea and that's it. You develop your ideas and you try different things, you go forward, you go back, you go in circles, you stop, you go on. It's not a linear process.

But as far as the market is concerned, you can actually do anything you want to do if you can carry it off. That's a big if, but I think the overall message is a heartening one.

A final tip

Sometimes I find my better stuff comes out when I'm not trying so hard, when I'm running the motor in a low gear and I'm not stressed about what I'm writing. You can learn a lot as a writer by taking on ambitious challenges, but it doesn't hurt to do things that feel easy once in a while. Mix it up. Be willing to experiment and don't be too fixated on outcomes. If you do the work wholeheartedly the outcomes will take care of themselves.

fin.

NEWS FROM ORBIT

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

ABOUT SELLING STUFF ...

Ray Taylor, publisher at Collider, has passed on his submission guidelines. Collider is interested in fiction, non-fiction and artwork, and publishes to tablets and smartphones. Fiction should be between 2000 and 18,000 words and focus mainly on SF related to 'real world' context. Sorry, no pure fantasy or horror, but anyone curious should check at Zine-e Publishing Inc. or email ***ray@zine-e.com***?

ABOUT LEARNING STUFF ...

I've been reminded about two of our best residential writers' sessions, both one week long.

Milford, in September, is booked up now unless there's a last slot for someone who hasn't attended before. If that's you it's still worth a look? See it at ***www.milfordSF.co.uk***

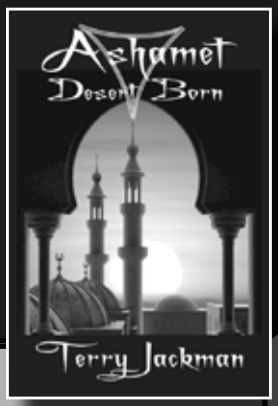
Arvon have a week in November. This one is open to both published and not published writers. To be found at ***www.arvon.org***

Both mean putting your money where your mouth is, but both can be extremely useful, if only to spend quality time with like-minded people. And the food's usually good.

ABOUT NOTICING STUFF ...

Choosing the cover for my debut novel – not once but twice when we ditched the first - has made me more aware of covers generally, especially the messages they send to readers.

Is it me or has there been an amazing number of book covers recently featuring hoodies? You know, all those faces you can't see for fabric. Can I put out a request to avoid them, at least for a while? Frankly, they're getting rather boring. Plus it's now irritating me that I can't even tell what's likely to be inside the book. They appear on medieval fantasy but also on future dystopia, witches, vampires and of course any kind of romance or erotica. I figure you could add to that list. Maybe anyone currently planning a cover image might consider these thoughts?



ABOUT REMEMBERING STUFF ...

Friend Jacey Bedford recently mentioned style sheets as an aid to writer sanity. These are lists of all the details in a book you can't afford to get wrong when vetting the final copy. You know, the things you might forget: the exact spelling of those names you kept changing as you wrote, whether an oft-used invented word is supposed to be hyphenated or not. What colour [this would be me] you made those lines on the ground when you described them much earlier in the story. Inevitably, it was having to scroll back a hundred pages to check that reminded me to mention 'style sheet' to others, in hopes of saving them from my fate!

ABOUT CHUCKLING AT STUFF ...

I saw this one and thought of you guys: I call it SF Snark.

"Since light travels faster than sound, some people appear very bright – until you hear them speak."

AND FINALLY ...

Ex-Orbiter, Anna Kashina, had her book, ***The Guild of Assassins*** undergo some Orbit scrutiny, and recently found out it's a finalist for the 2015 FF&P Prism Awards, under the 'Fantasy' category. The Prisms are given out every year by the Fantasy, Futuristic and Paranormal (FF&P) Special Interest Chapter of the Romance Writers of America, for published authors, and is open to all traditional and self-published books/novellas with a first publication date in 2014.

Congratulations Anna, and we wish you luck!

SALES AND SUCCESSES

Recent sales and successes:

Mjke Wood	Short story, 'The Last Days of Dogger City', in ***Analog***.
	Short story, 'The Man in the Pillbox Hat', in ***Inter-Galactic Medicine Show.***
Mark Iles	Shorts collection, ***Falling From Grace, and Other Stories***, from Solstice.
Max Edwards	Short story, 'White Noise', in ***Holdfast*** online magazine.
Sam Fleming	Short story, 'She Gave her Heart, He Took her Marrow', to ***Apex*** magazine.
Sandra Unerman	Short story, 'The Harper of Stone', in ***Frostfire Worlds***, USA
Dominic Dulley	Short story, 'Dainty Jane', in the anthology ***Far Orbit: Apogee*** from World Weaver Press
Geoff Nelder	Short story, 'Eidolon Redoubt', in Double Dragon's ***Twisted Tails*** anthology

getting through the first draft

by K R Green

"You can't edit a blank page!"
— Nora Roberts

One of the most common things I hear from writers is that they just don't finish their stories — putting the draft away to begin something new, or even struggling to write that first line. I've certainly reached that point in a story where a new idea arises, and it takes all of my willpower not to jump into a new tale entirely.

Whether your obstacles are with the beginning lines, keeping flow in the middle or just finishing the story, first drafts often hold the biggest obstacles for writers.

Since it's such a common stumbling block, there are plenty of ways to push through the barriers of your first draft.

— Expect the first draft to be badly written. It's important to accept that your first attempt at writing will likely suck. No one is born an expert -- it takes time and practise to learn a craft; the only way to get better is to keep on doing it.

Beethoven will have played some notes which sounded horrible together. Leonardo Da Vinci had bad paintings when he was younger. If most writers could write perfect first drafts, editors would be out of a job and the market would be flooded with books. Don't set yourself up to be disappointed from the start.

— Look at writing as a skill to be learned, not an innate talent. We all had to learn to speak, to recognise sounds and to read and write. We learned the rules of grammar and the differences between nouns and adjectives. Why do we expect writers to inherently know the process of story, and how best to deliver it?

Writing a novel is a craft. Just because humans walk then run does not mean we could all complete a marathon. Being able to read and write does mean we can all write a perfect story. Your training regime is the first draft; the practise of writing.

— Accept the bad writing once it's written. If we all gave up the first time we fell over, none of us would have learned to walk. Push through the urge to stop when your writing isn't as good as you'd like. It's one thing to tell yourself that first drafts can be bad. It's another to realise your first draft is bad. Just stay with it, and keep moving forward.

— Similarly, accept that all writing is practise. Much of what you write will be thrown away, therefore never let the doubt of something being 'relevant' stop you writing entirely. It's all practise at the craft, and editing your drafts increases your understanding of how story works.

— Don't get bogged down in labels. Some people feel that calling themselves a writer when they're not fulfilling some internal criteria is a "lie", and that they are an "imposter" in the circle of "authors". However, if author is defined as someone who writes books, and you're writing a book, then don't we have the right to use the term?

Often known as the imposter syndrome, comparing yourself to another leads to a label. So person A is a writer because they: completed their manuscripts/edited their story/ have been traditionally published/ sold a number of novels/became famous. Because of those things,

about the author

K R Green writes novels about dragons, falconry and magic. She attends a local writing group, and outside of writing enjoys herbal teas, reading, and gazing up at the stars. When she isn't painting pictures with words, she works in the mental health sector in Hampshire. You can find her at ***www.krgreen.co.uk*** or twitter as ***@K_R_Green***

you may feel that defines a writer, and thus you can't be one.

This label can be a block in completing that first draft, especially if this label comes from outside. There can be stigma attached to the term 'writer', with people believing in muses and many people only thinking writers sit around all day waiting for the words to just flow, and drinking whisky.

If this blocks you, try to reframe the story as a project to be completed. If I'm feeling uncertain, I'll describe my writing as a hobby, so the pressure drops a little.

— Focus on your motivation. You decided to write for a reason. When the stumbling blocks come up, your motivation can sometimes help you step over the fears and upset. Do you want to be published or just to tell your story? Then focus on that and remind yourself often. What's the next small step to completing that goal? Great; ignore everything else and take that small step forward.

— Everybody has time. We all have 24 hours each day. Do you watch television? Cut out a program to write. The kettle takes 3 minutes to boil? That's 2-3 sentences written. Have your phone with you while in the bathroom? Take some notes. Some of the best plot twists come from mental brainstorming in the shower.

— Write when your brain works best. Night owl, early riser or somewhere in the middle; try writing at different times of day and take note when you feel at your most creative or when the words seem to flow best. Try to schedule your writing times around your personal body clock.

— Know when you're done for the day. Set concrete goals to manage your time and writing well. Try finishing a writing session in the middle of a scene so that the next time, you'll be right in the action. Do you aim to reach a daily wordcount, or use a timer to keep yourself concentrating? I find the 15-minute sprints, where I do nothing but write for 15 minutes, is a short enough time to not get distracted and fit in my schedule, yet long enough to write 300 words which is a nice amount.

— Make use of anti-procrastination tools. Some writers like Write or Die, a site where pausing to think or getting distracted results in deleting the words you've written; letter by letter. I prefer Written Kitten, where every 100 words a new kitten picture pops up. Programs like Scrivener and forums like NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writing Month) are motivational and offer practical support with completing your first draft.

— Keep focused on the current task. Writing a first draft focuses on getting ideas on the page, learning about your world and exploring the journey of your characters.

Editing is about word choice, plot holes and clarity of your concepts.

If you're in the 'write new scene' phase, don't get too caught up in specific words and how unclear a paragraph is. You don't need to know everything about your world; you can make notes for the later editing phase and still stay in the drafting mindset. Write yourself a note, highlight it and then move forward. Otherwise you'll have a polished first scene and 300 pages of emptiness.

— Use a plan or understand your map. Some people have very strict plots before they write, some plant a seed and let it bloom, and others do a mixture of the two. In order to complete a first draft, try to let your story weave a little. It can be helpful to have an outline, but sometimes the creative mind comes up with new twists, and those moments are to be celebrated and followed. Have a destination or journey in mind, but don't let it stifle you.

— Trust the process: that you'll find the actual story in the edit. Not the first draft. If the story is a tree, the first draft is your pencil sketch of branches. Only when you go back over in pen, then choose your colours do you prune off the dead ends and let the growth shine in bright coloured leaves.

— Keep in mind that every writing session and each story is different. If you have a bad writing session or a large portion of bad writing; don't let that define you as a writer or your whole story. This is a first draft, and every first draft beyond this one will improve as you learn. Don't give up based on the quality of one session or story.

Remember that you've chosen to write for a reason and that motivation should include elements of fun. When writing a first draft, don't worry about being a writer or the processes beyond it.

Just write. Then let the momentum of completing it carry you forward.

fin.

my novel writing process, aka writing with baby

by Aliette de Bodard

This article originally appeared on Aliette's website, Aug 21, 2014:
http://www.aliettedebodard.com/2014/08/21/novel-writing-process-aka-writing-baby/

There's a fabulous essay by Ursula Le Guin (I think it's "The Fisherwoman's daughter"?) on writing and motherhood, which contains the following: "The point, or part of it, is that babies eat manuscripts. They really do. The poem not written because the baby cried, the novel put aside because of a pregnancy, and so on. Babies eat books. But they spit out wads of them that can be taped back together; and they are only babies for a couple of years, while writers live for decades; and it is terrible, but not very terrible."

I read this years ago, and it's stuck with me (though I'd forgotten that awesome last part). It's all so true; and even more so when you have the actual baby. I stopped writing about seven months into my pregnancy, because I spent most of my time lying down with no energy, feeling very much like a beached whale. After the birth of the snakelet I went a bit insane with not writing, so I started doing it again in fits and starts; but it wasn't until the snakelet was 4-5 months old, and I was almost ready to go back to work, that I started writing my novel again.

Novels, for me, are different commitments than short stories: I can research a short story for weeks and binge-write the actual first draft in a couple of days; I just can't do that with a novel. With novels, I have to sit down and write consistently; a little at a time for a long time. The problem, when you have a baby, is that "little" can mean three minutes before something goes wrong (™) and you have to rescue a crying snakelet from whatever he got himself into.

I've seen people post about setting some time in the week for writing, always the same time: it never worked for me pre-baby, and it certainly didn't

about the author

Aliette de Bodard is a system engineer, a mother and a writer of speculative fiction. Her work has won two Nebula Awards, a Locus Award and a British Science Fiction Association Award. Her newest release is ***The House of Shattered Wings***, set in a devastated Paris ruled by fallen angels, and featuring an ex-Vietnamese immortal with a grudge, a washed-out alchemist and entirely too many dead bodies.

work afterwards (when something does need your attention, it's a choice of me or my husband; if my husband isn't available it has to be me. In those circumstances, a set schedule is a bit like mission impossible). My philosophy was: "whenever there is available time, grab it". Didn't matter if it was ten minutes while the baby napped or while my husband played with him; I just used whatever I had.

"Available time", though, doesn't get you very far with a day job and a baby. When I started up the novel again, I was 25k in, and needed to get to 100k in a couple of months: simple maths told me I would need to write more than 1000 words a day to make my self-imposed deadline. Given that there were a lot of days when I just couldn't manage to write, this sounded like a lost cause.

Fortunately for me, I have a commute. And an alphasmart (a Neo 2 I think).

They don't make them anymore (they stopped in 2013, I think), but those things are the best friend for a writer like me. Basically, it's a keyboard with a small screen. I admit the attraction, put like that, is limited, as you could get the same mileage out of an iPad or a laptop. But the thing is, a Neo is totally distraction-free, boots up in a heartbeat, (you touch a button, it lights up, you touch a button, it turns off), and it keeps going *forever* (and I mean forever. I got mine in 2009, I put three AA batteries in it, and it's still at 60% despite my typing up 1.5 novels, 1 novella and a bunch of short stories on it). You only get a chunk of 10,000 words or so (after that you need to change memory buffers, which is trickier), but given that you can't really edit with it, it's fine for me. I basically would type my day's scenes on the Neo, transfer it to my laptop (it hooks up to computers by pretending to be a keyboard, which means it's dead easy to set up), and do cleaning up and editing on my laptop.

The trouble with this method is that I need a lot more editing afterwards, because I make a lot more typos and because scenes easily get very repetitive (the Neo screen has about 6-8 lines of text on it? not ideal to get a large-scale picture). I did a lot of things in Word, and then imported the lot into Scrivener, where I searched for repetitions and moved stuff around (Scrivener is a very powerful tool that's good for a lot of things; my use of it is akin to using a kitchen robot to chop up a few cloves of garlic: that is to say I label different scenes according to their POV, and move scenes around in my draft).

I didn't *quite* make my deadline (of course), but I was still pretty darn close. Certainly, if you'd told me I'd write most of my novel while minding a very young child a year ago, I'd have told you you were insane ^^

At any rate, that's my writing process. What about you? How do you make time for writing? Do you have any tips for writing with young children?

fin.

POEMS FROM THE STARS

BSFA Poetry Submissions edited by ***Charles Christian***

Vampires are big this time, we've got the cold-hearted bloodsuckers everywhere. We've also got some more scifaiku – that's the 17 syllable Japanese haiku format tweaked to a SF&F genre subject matter – and we have an example of a haibun from Bethany Powell. This is another Japanese poetry form that uses haiku to add emphasis to a prose passage.

Finally, check out *The Reading* by the stunningly named Samson Stormcrow Hayes, which is a very good example of a traditional verse poem where the end rhymes actually work. The trouble with end rhymes is they are all too often heavy and clunking to almost comedic effect: Only a buffoon // Would inflate a balloon // In the middle of a typhoon // While eating a macaroon // In the month of June // (I think that verse came from a Tweetie Pie & Sylvester the Cat cartoon.) On with the poetry...

HIDING MIRRORS

My love is gorgeous,
his hair and eyes dark as dreams
– any woman knows.

Yet, with such reason
for vanity, he shuns glass,
mirrors, still water.

We met first at at a time of carnival
– in a good year, with high corn
prices down in the city to make us
breathe easy. Everyone's pies looked
unskimped-on, and I won several
prizes for my flowers. He was the big
dark stranger at the rodeo, but with a
boy-like smile for the mutton-buster
children. He chose me, but also I chose
him – a direct smile into his hot-coal
eyes, before he sat down beside me.
We keep house and he is good with
the animals. He's built me hen-boxes,
cattle-gates, and bookshelves. Our
pottery dishes are pretty and hiding
my mirror in the medicine cabinet is
no trouble. And yet, it bothers me.

I fear that someday
gone cat-curious, crazy,
I will find out why.

by Bethany Powell

Sweet Tooth

I thought
her pointy teeth
looked sexy
when she gleefully accepted
my offer
of dinner

afterwards
when she invited me in
for a drink
I did not realize
she would and I was

by John Reinhart

The Reading

At first she seemed so very calm,
As tarot reader took his palm.
She searched the lines and saw a sign,
Something dark and most malign.
What she saw, she would not say,
Abruptly she urged him on his way.

Once he left, she closed her shop.
She hurried home, she dared not stop.
From darkened alley a hand reached out,
And snapped her neck without a shout.
One by one he killed those who see,
So he'd remain forever free.

by Samson Stormcrow Hayes

Keys

There are eighty-eight keys to the
mansion,
And she waits,
Clad in black, stroking a white cat,
Clad in mystery, pondering a victim,
She appears as a young woman,
No more than twenty - and alluring,
But she is ancient and hungry,
And she has devoured stronger than you,
And she will again,
She seats you and calms you with a glass
of red wine,
Hints of chocolate and blackberries
haunt your palate,
She will serenade you on the piano,
Until your head becomes light,
And when she has finished,
She will disrobe and offer you her
paleness,
Her ancientness,
And you cannot resist,
Your blood is hot in your veins,
But only for the shortest while.

by Edward Palumbo

Black Suit

The man in the black suit finally came
And conscripted us
But he was smart about it
Sending men ahead of him each month
To get us used to the idea
In suits that got darker
First there was a man in a white suit
Who brought us ice-cream
Then a man in a lime-colored suit with
melons
Followed by a man in a red suit
Who brought us V-8 juice
Finally, like I said, came the man
In the black suit
By now we were ready for it and him
So we went along with him
And he gave us each our own black suit
Which we put on
And then we rounded up
Those who weren't and didn't

by Paul Smith

SCIFAIKU

a hundred light years
from all civilization
check engine light winks

avoiding wormholes
and more numerous black holes
phoning highway crew

purple sunset
the terraformer
adjusts the beach

by Joshua Gage

Saturn's rings...
leftovers from a game
of alien hoop-la

the shuttle to Mars
is late due to aliens
on the line again

by Tracy Davidson

hell-bent
on talking to you -
Ouija board

Comicon –
every Darth Vader
says he's my father

by Susan Burch

terrible twos
alien child screaming
from both heads

traveling light speed
alien children complain
are we there yet?

amazing spacewalk
family delighted
especially the dog

by Guy Belleranti

Aussie latency
ain't got nothin' on
the lag from Earth to Mars

by Rhonda Parrish

Detention at the Mage Academy

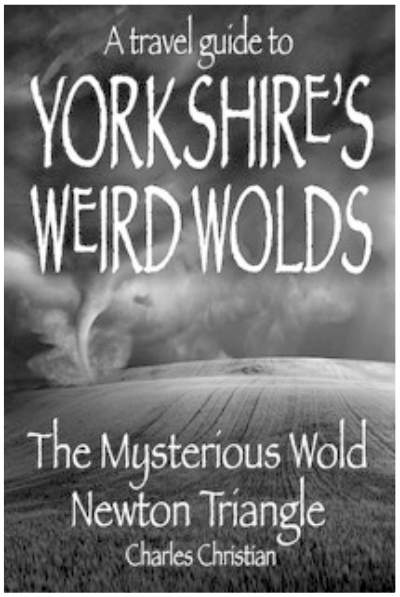
Tad's brilliant discovery –
that wind charm + skirts = expensive
adolescent thrill –
earned him six hours. Patrick dozes,
arm bound with charred Evocation Club
banner: -rom flame to fame!
Ash on his face – six weeks yet
'til his nose grows back.
Sasha fumes – literally,
transmutation gone awry –
while Greg and Ariel
in the corner don't discuss
their transparent skin,
flushing faces visible only
in the cheekbone capillaries.

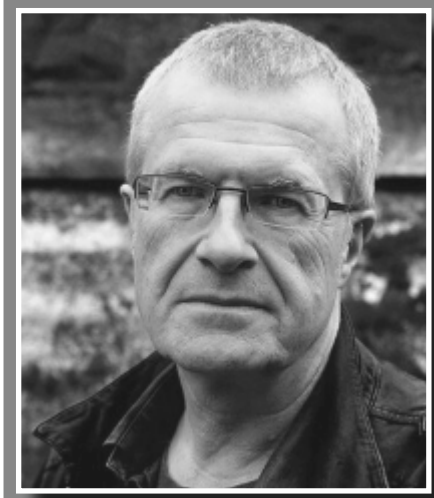
Lily – only 1 hour, out after
curfew – takes her books and leaves:
brushing the latter out of her hair
after passing Master Alder at his
desk. Glad – Asten had escaped.

So they could practice
more advanced techniques:
entanglements, fingertip
lightning bolts, and even
stopping time.

She smiled, for she knew
that for the two of them
these needed no magic at all.

by Alex Plummer





Charles Christian's latest nonfiction book is ***A Travel Guide to Yorkshire's Weird Wolds: The Mysterious Wold Newton Triangle*** - in it you'll find legends of werewolves, zombies, headless ghosts, screaming skulls, buried fairy gold, Lawrence of Arabia and even a "parkin" eating dragon. You can also find the connection between a real-life meteorite, Philip José Farmer and some of fiction's greatest heroes. "Weird Wolds" is available only on Amazon Kindle: ***www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B00XE3Z9TW***

productive writing

by Adrian Faulkner

about the author

Adrian Faulkner is a writer, record-breaking geocacher, sword fighter and trained storm chaser. He has been inside a mile-wide tornado and lived to tell the tale.

Adrian's first novel, ***The Four Realms,*** was awarded Fantasy Book Review's 'Book of the Month' award in March 2013 and his short story, Jetsam, was given a honourable mention in Ellen Datlow's Best Horror of the Year 2011.

You can find him at ***http://www.adrianfaulkner.com*** or on twitter as ***@figures***

Some writers feel a bit icky when you start to talk about process. After all, the way we write is as individual as our writing style and any attempt to claim any one process is the 'right' way is met with examples of alternative methods that have been equally successful. We might look at others' processes and see things we might like to try or adopt, but ultimately there's no wrong way to write.

So it's understandable that some might approach the idea of more productive writing with apprehension. They associate it with writing more words faster, and question where quality figures in the equation. After all, more words doesn't equal better words.

That's true, and although word count certainly has a part to play in productive writing, it isn't about lacing descriptions with every adjective you can think of, or throwing down a flashback or a dream sequence just to make your targeted word count for the day.

Instead, productive writing is about making better use of the time you have as a writer, whether that be working full-time, or snatching an hour here or there between day jobs and family commitments.

We waste a lot of time when we could be writing. That can be in the form of procrastination - because we'd rather check Facebook or clean the kitchen than sit and write that huge chapter we only have a vague idea about - or because we have so much work to do that we don't know where to start. What we want to do is ensure that writing time is spent actually writing.

How do we achieve that? Like writing, there are many approaches, but here's one that's flexible enough to work for a lot of people. There are three levels, each of which will deliver benefits but, when used in conjunction, mean that you should be completing projects faster than you thought possible, and where word count is a by-product rather than a focus.

Organisation

The very first level, and the foundation upon which the other two are built, is organisation. If we know what we've got to do, by when, we can stop worrying when we sit down to write. We can just focus on the words, knowing that things like looming deadlines, side-projects and any book marketing will be taken care of at the proper time.

The big mistake we all make is to think of our writing life and our jobs or personal life as separate. You may go as far as to deliberately try to separate them to give your writing life the insulation you feel it needs from the outside world and its interferences. But the truth is, if you are sitting down to write in a café or library and a thought pops up into your head that you might have left the gas on at home, what's going to be foremost in your mind during your writing session? The words or the gas?

You cannot separate ourselves from our writing and so things like jobs, families, even bills that you need to remember to pay, run the risk of cluttering your head.

So instead of having a separate ToDo list for each aspect of your life, you need to combine them into a megalist. Any sudden thought of something you need to do, be it buying a pint of milk or inserting a plot point into a previous chapter, gets added to the inbox of our ToDo list and then promptly forgotten about.

Then, at the start of each day, we make a point of visiting our ToDo Inbox and assigning the tasks to various 'projects' - be they writing projects, day job projects or even a project as

simple as "things I need to do around the house". Some tasks will not be urgent and can be scheduled for the days and weeks ahead, depending on your workload or deadlines. But what you end up with, after triaging your ToDo list, is a schedule of things you need to accomplish today across all aspects of your life.

Sounds simple, but the process of emptying your heads of clutter means you won't get to your allotted writing time and wonder what else you need to be doing. You can just jump right in and get on with the writing.

There are a variety of smartphone apps on the market these days that allow you to organise your lives from anywhere, and the trick is to find one that you can trust so that once you enter a new ToDo item, your brain is content to stop thinking about it.

Along with your review for the day, you should also do a weekly review of all items. Big tasks, such as writing a novel, or tasks that you are struggling with can be broken down into numerous smaller tasks to try and move them forwards. As a result, it will become clear very early on if you have deadlines you are likely to miss.

Metrics

The next important aspect to productivity is metrics. We're used to metrics in our everyday life whether they be hospital waiting times or fuel efficiency. Why should writing be any different? If you want to increase your productivity, you need to be able to measure how well you're writing.

There's a big argument on how you can scientifically measure creativity, and there are good arguments for why word count shouldn't be the unit of currency here. But for the level of detail you're after, it's probably the easiest one to record. You can only measure what you can control, so measuring your productivity by number of acceptances really isn't going to help you.

Having a spreadsheet with something as simple as writing project, number of words, start and end time can give you all manner of information. Over time you can get an idea as to what times of day you seem to be more productive, whether you slow down at certain stages of a novel, or whether you are more productive in some genres over others.

There's a tendency to want to chop and change processes from week to week to improve your metrics, but the benefit is to get an accurate picture of how you are writing currently rather than treat words per hour as some high score that needs to be beaten. You want to see steady sustainable improvement over time, not huge peaks where you've set out to burn the keys off your keyboard.

Focus

The final stage is focus, and it relies heavily on the other two. Organisation means you go into writing with a clearer mind, and hopefully by breaking huge tasks into smaller ones you're not overwhelmed by the larger project. You also don't need to spend ten or fifteen minutes wondering what project you should be working on, because your daily ToDo list will tell you exactly.

The human mind only has an average attention span of around forty minutes, so writing for any longer than that will probably result in a drop off in your writing rate. Your metrics will show you what your natural optimum writing session should be. You may find that writing two thirty minute sessions are more productive than a single two hour one.

Even if you only plan to work for thirty minutes, spend a couple of minutes at the start planning out what you need to write, going so far as to bullet point it out. That way when you get to one of those stages where you find yourself thinking "what should happen next" all you need to do is refer to your mini-plan.

If you're one of those lucky people able to dedicate more than an hour of your day to writing, instead of trying to extend your session, intersperse multiple sessions with other tasks from your ToDo list. Doing twenty minutes of housework in between two novel writing sessions not only ensures that your real life duties get done, but can give you thinking time for what you want to include in your next writing session.

Chaining various ToDo list tasks together not only allows you to get more writing done, but it allows you to get more of anything done. And because you are only going to be writing for a small amount of time, it makes it a lot easier to dive in, meaning you'll procrastinate a lot less. After all, writing for thirty minutes is a less daunting prospect than starting a two hour writing session.

Results

As with any writing process, it's about taking any advice and adapting it to work for you. Setting up all three tiers of productivity may take some time but each stage should deliver solid improvements in writing productivity. Start at organisation to give yourself a solid foundation and work your way up. Don't be afraid to try small changes every couple of months or so to see if they work better for you.

By writing smarter you can make better use of the time you have and deliver improved word counts without feeling that you have to beat any records or are under any pressure to write any faster than what feels natural to you.

With any luck, you'll find you not only have a clearer idea of what it is you are doing and deliver results faster, but that you'll also be able to have different projects on the go simultaneously. Best of luck.

fin.

the tyranny of the first draft

by Karen Miller

This article first appeared on Karen's TALKATIVE WRITER website back in Jan, 2013: ***http://www.thetalkativewriter.com/on-writing/in-the-beginning/the-tyranny-of-the-first-draft/***

about the author

Karen Miller was a crazy speculative fiction fan long before she started writing fantasy novels. She fell in love with *Lost in Space* when she was still in primary school! Also *Star Trek* and *Land of the Giants* and other cool nerdy stuff. She started reading spec fic in 4th class and has never stopped. Probably she'll put 'Beam me up, Scotty' on her headstone, if she has one. Now writing full time, she's currently working on the 2nd book of her ***The Tarnished Crown*** epic fantasy series. It will be her 19th published novel. Bk 1, ***The Falcon Throne***, is out now in paperback.

Terry Pratchett said it somewhere, and I think he said it perfectly: The first draft is just you telling yourself the story.

I strongly believe that the biggest favour any writer can do for him or herself is plaster that piece of advice on every available surface and read it frequently – or better yet, daily. Especially if said writer is tackling a novel. Or, worse, the first novel in a series. Because, dear reader, few things are as intimidating as the prospect of writing a novel. And even fewer things are as intimidating as that when you're a writer without a contract, a writer who's writing a novel on faith, in hope, without any guarantee that the hours and hours and hours of hard work will achieve anything other than time gone by that can never be recaptured.

The reason Pratchett's advice is so important is because many, many, many writers fail to complete the first draft of a novel. They never get to write The End. I was one of those writers for a lot of years. It sucks. It saps your energy and your self-belief. Finishing the first draft of a novel is one of the most empowering experiences a writer can have. And if you truly want to be a published novelist, then hello! ... you've got to finish the first draft first. Because without a finished first draft you're dead in the water.

So why is it so often so hard to finish the first draft of a novel? Basically, I think it comes down to fear.

Fear is a funny thing. Sometimes it can motivate us. I know that ultimately, the reason I was able to finish my first first draft (of the book that ultimately became the Mage series) was fear of reaching the end of my life having failed to give writing my very best shot. Every time I looked at walking away, giving up, something inside me said, No. Don't you dare. The fear of not trying overcame the nearly as powerful fear of trying and failing.

But I was afflicted with other fears as well, that stopped me from finishing that first first draft a lot sooner than I could have. Fear of failure. Fear of success. Fear of losing hope, the dream. While you're still engaged in the process of writing, the dream still lives. The world is full of possibilities. But once you finish you're closer to harsh reality. You're closer to rejection. It's safer to stay in the dream. It also means you'll never make the dream come true. It's up to you – keep on dreaming, or bite the bullet and get into the real world.

Yes. It's a risk. But if you don't take that risk, you'll never know what might be.

Labouring under all that fear meant I did a whole lot of writing and rewriting of the early parts of the story. Trying to make it perfect as I went along instead of surrendering to the process knowing that it was only the first draft and merely stage 1 of the entire novel-writing adventure.

First drafts aren't supposed to be perfect. They're just supposed to be written. It's in the rewriting that you find the true novel. That's where much of the crafting of your novel takes place. How can you know the story you're telling if you don't have it in front of you from beginning to end? If you can't step away from it and see it as a whole? If you haven't groped your way from idea to execution? With a few exceptions, I don't think you can.

Yes, there are some novelists who can produce a virtually perfect first draft. They are in the minority. Don't kid yourself you're one of them, because it's far more likely you're not. Especially if you're writing a big book, or series of books, as most fantasy — for example — these days appears to be. There's just too much information, too many threads and characters and subplots to reasonably expect you've nailed down every last one first try. And expecting yourself to do that is just another way of succumbing to fear. It's an excuse that lets you off the hook.

So. When you find yourself obsessively reworking and rewriting the first chapter, or few chapters, recognise the behaviour as a stalling tactic and knock it on the head, pronto. Bear in mind that your story will most likely change in the process of being written. As part of the creative process you think of new things that will affect what's gone before. Characters will assume different significance, some will fade into the background, some will leap into the spotlight. New characters might appear as if by magic and cause you to rethink a whole lot of plot. This is the fun part, the discovery of the story. Don't fight the process, embrace it! Enjoy it! Who cares, at this point, if the writing's not perfect? You won't be showing it to anyone but yourself.

The single most important thing about your story is that it has momentum, a sense of narrative drive. You'll bog yourself down if you stay in one place too long. Go, go, go. No, the writing won't be superlative in a first draft. It's not meant to be. Think of a first draft as a rough pencil sketch that gives you the framework for the story you're telling. Like an artist, you'll add the colour and detail later. Just get the bones down, so you can step back from the canvas and see what you've done. See what's good about it, and what's bad. What parts are still too sketchy, and what's been perfectly captured. Smile at the latter, get to work on the former.

Writers are schizo people. We need to wear two hats: the Writer, and the Editor. And we have to keep one locked in a box while the other is working, or we won't finish the book. The Writer writes – and must be free to write even though the work is still far from perfect. In the first draft it doesn't matter if the prose is clunky sometimes, if there's some word repetition, if the dialogue is occasionally stilted. None of it matters. It can be fixed on the rewrite. The Writer must not be paralysed by the carping of the Editor, who notices everything that's wrong with the work and wants it fixed now. It doesn't need to be fixed now. It's more important to finish the first draft and fix it later.

Of course, when the first draft is finished the Writer has to sit in the box so the Editor can assess the story, iron out the lumpy bits, fix all the plot-holes and so on and so forth without the Writer bleating and complaining about the cuts and changes. But only when the first draft is finished. Turning the Editor loose in the middle of the writing process is usually fatal. The Editor is critical. The Writer is creative. These two essential personas must be kept apart, or there's a chance that first draft will never be finished.

The only way to do this is to do it. There are no magic bullets, no quick fixes, no secret handshakes that can get you over the finishing line. The only way to run a marathon is by putting one foot in front of the other for 26 miles. The only way to produce a finished novel that you can show to an agent or an editor is complete the journey from page 1 to the end. That's it. It's that simple ... and that hard.

There is no point, if you're a new writer, in showing an agent or editor the first three over-polished chapters and a synopsis. More than anything, these people want to know you can go the distance. Writing a novel is a mammoth task. You have to prove you've got the stamina to finish. You also have to prove you've got a good style and a good plot and engaging characters ... but if you can't finish the book, none of that matters.

Yes, it's scarey. It's a lot of time and energy invested with no guarantee of success. No promise that you'll be recognised, or published. Or, if you do have that contract, that anyone will buy the damned book when it's published. That's the nature of the beast. You either accept it, or you take up knitting. You know what they say: feel the fear and do it anyway. Because if you don't, then it's game over. Nothing happens without a first draft.

So write the damned thing. Get it done. Get it finished. Give yourself permission to write badly. Give yourself permission to write worse than badly. Give yourself permission to stumble, to flail, to thrash around on the pages like a raving loon.

It doesn't matter.

Finish your first draft, so you can turn it into your second draft, and your third draft ... or as many drafts as you need to make it a fabulous novel.

Without a completed first draft that will never happen. The first draft is the first step, it's not the end of the journey. It's where the story begins. Do I need to say it again? Keep your eyes facing forward and write, write, write, till you reach The End.

And enjoy yourself. It's supposed to be fun!

fin.

walking the walk: advices to writerses who are alive and have a life also

by Tricia Sullivan

This was originally written as a handout for the Edge-Lit 3 writing workshop, back in May 2014

about the author

Tricia Sullivan is a physics student. She is also an Arthur C. Clarke Award winning author of eleven science fiction and fantasy novels. Her twelfth, ***Occupy Me***, will be published by Gollancz in 2016.

Random tips

If you can, establish a routine. It will help sometimes. If you can't establish a routine, then at least keep track of your hours/words/progress in some way so you can hold yourself to task.

Learn to say NO to people who want things from you. It gets easier with practice.

If you're going to be a writer you won't have a nice easy life. Others will. So? Get the hell on with it.

When you're working hard, spoil and bribe yourself best you can.

Novelist? Accept low-to-middle-grade misery and sense of encroaching doom as part of your way of life. It's not fatal. It gets you a finished product.

The self-hate and doubt and general feelings of inadequacy that you may feel are a part of the creative process. Many of us live with their constant background noise. Pushing through these feelings is how you get work actually finished as opposed to just dreamed of or hoped for.

When you're working, work. When you're not working, don't work.

(I'm not quoting Yogi Berra there. I mean it. Stay out of the grey zone of angst and doubt.)

To that end, a kitchen timer is your best friend.

Procrastination can be a tool. If you have many tasks, you can trick yourself into doing something you don't want to do by using it as a means to procrastinate on something even harder. I'm doing it right now!

You have two heads (at least). The one that thinks it knows what it's doing is the stupid one. The one that's really capable is the one you boss around and try to get to obey you. I am being serious.

If you have small children

They do grow up. I know that seems unhelpful. You can't change the chaos of right now and your life may feel like a series of near-catastrophes interspersed with periods of general fuzz, but when you think about the future it's important that you don't put limitations on yourself based on how things are now. It will change.

When my own kids were small and I was under a lot of pressure from that quarter, I did find it helpful if I could work on something that was enjoyable to me and not just another heavy obligation. Babies fried my brain. I wanted to write lighter and simpler in those days. If you have a choice about this, then go with the kind of writing that makes you feel refreshed, that lets you escape a little.

Your time and lost IQ points will come back eventually. A friend told me this when I was in the thick of it. She told me seven or eight times because she knew I was too frazzled to take it in the first time. She was right.

If you're struggling to keep a roof over your head, with or without kids,

I send you good thoughts. You don't need my writing advice, you need a good night's sleep without gnawing anxiety and despair.

It is impossible for me to say anything useful about chronic illness or caring for the elderly, or indeed many other obstacles of life circumstance because I just don't know. If you're going through something like this you have all my respect. Illness and caring are not talked about enough, probably because the people involved are too busy getting on with it to write about their experiences. I do know that the internet machismo of wordcount and publication and endless rounds of squee can be hard to take if you're a writer struggling just to get through the day. Again: respect.

If you suffer from depression, please get help.

There is no law that says you have to write every day

It's true that if you go a long time without writing, the work will lose its immediacy. This can be aggravating, but there can be benefits, too. You will see your work more clearly. You will have built up a headwall of desire. And in the same way that sleep is healing, you may even gain powers in the down time. So don't despair.

Whether you have stopped/paused writing due to being neurotic or due to exhaustion or due to circumstances beyond your control, please believe me: Nothing is to be gained by beating yourself up for lost time. Nothing.

Plotter vs. pantster is a lie

I don't know how this particular dichotomy got started, but it's silly. There is a constellation of successful writing behaviours. It's not even a spectrum, because a spectrum is a linear distribution. There's a constellation. Many many ways to write a novel. You need to try things and see what works for you on a given occasion. Some effective writers are rock solid in their habits; others change it up. Don't be afraid to experiment.

There are no short cuts, though. Sorry.

Housecleaning: literal and metaphorical

Walking is the best thing I've found for my writing brain. But all mindless physical activity is helpful. If you have a house to look after, you can safely say yes to washing dishes, mopping, washing windows, mowing the lawn, weeding—any dull repetitive activity has the potential to throw up insights provided you aren't *trying* to think up stuff (don't force it). For me, tidying up/organizing are a NO unless I really have no choice, because they use parts of my brain I need for writing. (My house is VERY messy most of the time).

About organizing: if you're writing novels you need a way to keep track of stuff. I like Scrivener. Some people like spreadsheets and use them to track progress. In addition to Scrivener, I always have multiple notebooks going and most of what's in them is random blah-blah, but occasionally there will be a scrap of something good. I have got in the habit of fishing through my notebooks and pulling out usable stuff and collecting it. Same thing with digital files. Always keep some kind of ideas file where you jot things down. It will fill up with junk but there will also be usable stuff there—the key is to have it where you can find it when you need it. Periodically clean it out. This is just basic maintenance.

It's never possible to overestimate the amount of extra material you will need to generate when writing a genre novel. You may need to keep a list of character names and places, you may need maps and worldbuilding notes, and you may need continuity charts and flow charts and other visual aids. The thing to be careful of here is that you don't fall down the rabbit hole of making up worlds and forget about the story you're trying to tell. Create what you need and track it—keep records. This is crucial in a long work or in a potential series. Things can get out of hand quickly.

If you're behind, with writing or with anything else—and who isn't?—unless you are on a professional deadline, forget trying to catch up. You won't. Catching up is metaphysically impossible, anyway. We're all dying at whatever rate, so just begin where you are, fight the fires you have to fight, and move on.

Get a life

Most of what I'm saying is directed to people whose lives are overfull and who struggle to find space for writing. When I was younger, I suffered from the opposite problem: lack of real-world experience. I think it's valuable for writers to have a life—you don't have to go dive the Great Barrier Reef, but get out there and live your years, especially if you're young. If all your spare time is spent at the keyboard or with your nose in a book, you run the risk of spinning off too far into abstraction or becoming a derivative of a derivative. Fantastical literature may be imaginative but it still has an obligation to be **true** in some lateral way; it has to come from a place of understanding and sense-making. Books are wonderful. They can save you. Just don't forget to live.

fin.

the eight stages of the first draft

by Jen Williams

This list, by no means exhaustive, originally appeared on Jen Williams' website on March 3, 2015: ***http://www.sennydreadful.co.uk/the-eight-stages-of-the-first-draft***

about the author

Jen Williams is a fantasy writer and Lego obsessive who spends much of her time frowning at notebooks and fiddling with maps of imaginary places. She writes chunky, character-driven fantasy, and the first two novels in the Copper Cat trilogy, ***The Copper Promise*** and ***The Iron Ghost***, are available now.

STAGE ONE

You have been waiting to write this book forever. You have been cradling this first chapter in your mind-bosom for months, and finally it is here. The first ten thousand words or so pass as if in some muffin-scented dream, and everything about this book is amazing. This is it. This is the book that expresses your soul in its purest form. Your writing has never been better and nothing can stop you.

STAGE TWO

The initially euphoric energy has been expended, and you start to slow down. Plots and characters are marching along certain paths now rather than running giddily around open fields, but that's okay, because there is The Plan. It's mostly composed of the densely written post-it notes that cover your corkboard and fill your groaning notebooks, and it will sustain you through this tricky period. Okay, so you might have had to go back and make some adjustments already because The Book is already veering away somewhat from The Plan, but that's alright because this is the first draft and that kind of crazy, seat-of-your-knickers thinking is what the first draft is for. Everything is fine.

STAGE THREE

Everything is not fine. You are perhaps just over halfway through the book, or at least so far into the draft that starting all over again feels a little like throwing yourself willingly into the Sun, and abruptly nothing makes sense. Why are the characters behaving like this? You have no idea. What happens in the next few chapters? The Plan is suspiciously silent. You realise that you've forgotten about at least two characters who last made an appearance thirty thousand words ago, and the names of several key places have changed at least twice. What is this staggering pile of nonsense? In fact, there's this other book project that you've been fiddling about with in your time away from this book, and that one is starting to look a lot sexier. And easier. And like it would make a lot more sense than this current appalling mess. Temptation eats at you, but the wordcount, the wordcount won't let you go. You take to forcing yourself to sit at the desk, even if you end up spending half an hour glaring at your laptop and rage-eating Chunky Peanut Butter Kit-Kats. The Plan gets revisited, half of it is thrown out. You change the ending. You change the beginning. You change your trousers.

STAGE FOUR

Breakthrough! You are having a shower or rooting around behind the Playstation trying to find a lost Lego figure when BOOOOM part of the book-jigsaw randomly slots into place and not only does the book make sense again, it makes sense in ways you could never have imagined! You scramble for notebooks and post-its, grinning manically as you joy-scoff at least three Chunky Peanut Butter Kit-Kats. You cover the corkboard in your most neon coloured Post-its (possibly enhanced with felt-tip pen), blithely covering over old, stupid bits of The Plan with the new, excellent bits. You contemplate that this feeling might be the best part of being a writer

- finding the solution that makes it work – and how frustrating it is that your mind likes to drop it on you while you're thinking about something else, and not, for example, during the three hours of resolute glaring at your laptop. You are still a genius though.

STAGE FIVE

Serious, unending, stoic-faced graft. You are pounding out the words, putting the hours in, and this book is getting it's ass written, baby. You nurture the idea that you are dedicated and selfless, that every inch of you is a writing machine. You imagine friends and family gently taking your arm, genuine concern writ large on their faces. "But please, don't you think you should rest? I know you are doing important work, my darling, but..." You brush their cheek, your eyes full of gentle regret. "I cannot stop," you say, staring off into the distance. "Dragons do not write themselves."

STAGE SIX

Things are out of control. When will this book ever end? The Plan does not say. The Plan promises there are only a handful of chapters left, but this is a blatant lie. Subplots need to be resolved, new characters are turning up out of nowhere, you've forgotten the place names again and replaced them with new ones, and your desk is awash in Chunky Peanut Butter Kit-Kat wrappers and dirty mugs. You don't know when it will end, but you need it to, and soon. You rearrange the toys on your desk with a perplexed, faintly stunned expression on your face - when did I buy this My Little Pony? – and periodically stand up and wander around the room. You feel as though you have come unstuck in time somehow. Have you always been writing this book? Are you in fact trapped in a black hole somewhere? Will the Chunky Peanut Butter Kit-Kats run out one day?

STAGE SEVEN

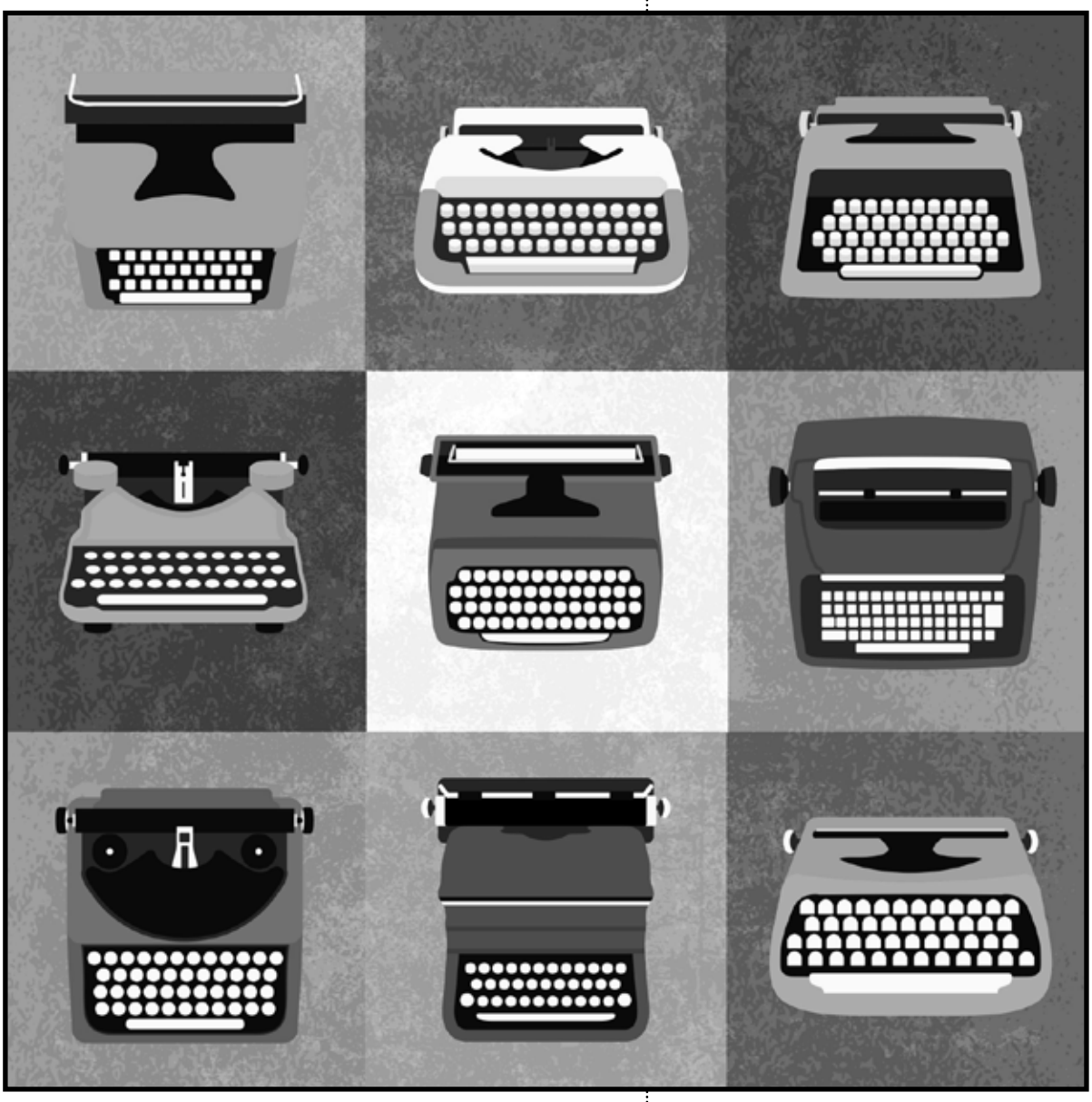
The last chapter is here. You storm through it, alternating between laughing wildly and sobbing uncontrollably. Now it's here, you are sad to see it go – sad to see the characters go, who have been with you all the way: doing their own thing, surprising you, putting up with you when you forget their names or how many weapons they own or what sort of injuries they've sustained lately. How will you cope without them?

You write the final line – something pithy and emotionally impactful, which you know in your heart will change at least six times before anyone else reads it. You pour yourself a drink, and contemplate the Book of Your Heart. You shed a tear or two, and consider giving up kit-kits. At least the chunky ones.

STAGE EIGHT

The edit. You don't remember writing *any* of this, for fucks sake...

fin.



how to get an agent in 530,000 easy steps

by David Gullen

about the author

David Gullen's short fiction has been published in many magazines and anthologies including New Scientist's ***ARC***, and most recently the ***Sensorama*** anthology from Eibonvale press. He has been a winner of the Aeon Award and been shortlisted for the James White Award.

His collection, ***Open Waters*** (theEXAGGERATEDpress), appeared in early 2014. His novel, ***Shopocalypse***, was published by Clarion (2013) and will be re-issued by NewCon Press next year. He recently co-edited, designed and published the charity SF anthology ***Mind Seed***.

David was born in South Africa and baptised by King Neptune at the equator. Since then he has studied biology, worked as a van driver, dish-washer, armourer, leather-worker, and IT geek; and become the father of three children.

So this time around I signed with an agent. It was interesting to look back at previous submissions and think about what I did differently. Apart from one thing, it wasn't that easy to see exactly what that was.

My first novel was short listed by Virgin Publishing's Virgin Worlds imprint (Remember that? If so, you must be the other guy.) For a brief while I thought I'd made it, and in the months that followed their letter I started writing another novel. Then Virgin wrote to me again: the imprint was closing. From being up, I was more than down. I looked at that first novel again – a fantasy of clashing empires, peaceful explorers, a dying tyrant, dark and dirty evil magics, and a balloon. Even though it had been accepted by a publisher, my confidence in it was gone, I was dissatisfied. I thought it needed more work, a lot of work. I'd seen the first signs of other writers I knew getting locked into re-writing one novel forever. I didn't want to fall into that trap so I put it aside and carried on with the second one, a contemporary fantasy of mermaids and private detectives, undersea monsters, witches and cats, and saving the world.

When that was sent out it gathered a few encouraging rejections. I reworked it and got a few more. I felt I was getting nowhere. I had to try harder. So I put that one aside too, and threw myself into what, in my hubris, I told myself would be the one they could not ignore: near-future SF, a talking car with a boot full of drug-contaminated money, gangsters, mad presidents, runaway consumerism and nuclear war.

I believed in this one, I'd pushed myself harder than I ever had before. The book was demanding to write in its intricacy and invention (well, it was for my little brain). When it was done I worked as hard as I could to find it a home. I did my research, I checked the agencies and agents, their reputations, what genres they liked, how they liked to be queried. I put together my submission packages and emailed or posted them. And they all came back, or were simply ignored. Novel number three gained 136 rejections over two years and taught me some hard lessons about expectations. This was the closest I ever came to giving up.

A chance meeting with Colin Tate at EdgeLit led to this novel being published by Clarion Publishing as *Shopocalypse*. I had some fantastic blurbs from some seriously good writers, we gave the book a great launch party, it collected some good reviews, and the inevitable 1-stars on Amazon (OK, so the USA were the bad guys, but it had a talking car!) I was told it had some fans in the Clarke Awards.

Still no agent. Meanwhile I'd been writing another book .

At this point I should probably explain *why* I wanted an agent. When I first started submitting novels, self-publishing was but a twinkle in the internet's pre-pubescent eye. These days it has morphed into a great option for some projects. And the small press is fantastic, there are many talented and hard-working people working there. Over the past few years there has been a real renaissance in quality online magazines, and print and e-book

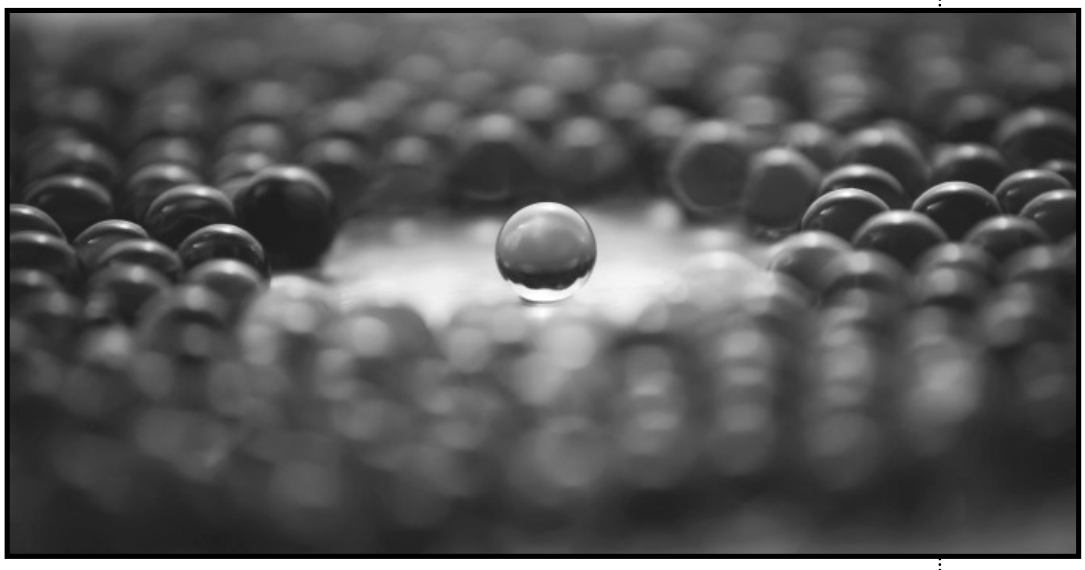
anthologies, collections, and novels too. Nevertheless, an agent can still help in many important ways. Many major imprints are closed to un-agented work (or respond hopelessly slowly), there are foreign and other rights, contract negotiations, career advice, and more. Victoria Strauss at the SFWA puts it very well here: ***http://www.sfwa.org/why-a-writer-needs-an-agent/***

Writing those first three books taught me a lot. In particular, writing *Shopocalypse* taught me about working hard, then harder. 385,000 words taught me a lot about writing novels, and I'd learned more about the world of publishing. One thing I came to understand was that what you wanted to write, which may be a perfectly good book, may not be what mainstream publishers want to see. Therefore, it's unlikely that an agent will be interested either. Another was that writing a synopsis is a very different skill to writing fiction, and you need to master it. One thing you can do is to write the synopsis in the style of the book – give it some energy.

I'd also been to Cons, I'd met people. Sometimes just to say 'Hi', others I got to lean on the bar with, chat, and swap pints. I went to the Milford critique group, which is where I met Jaine Fenn, who later introduced me to Colin at EdgeLit more or less by breezing past and waving. (She really didn't like the work I took to Milford, by the way). My writing group asked agents, writers, and editors to come talk to us. Just about everyone agreed to, and nobody asked for expenses. That's another thing I found out – genre fiction is full of nice people, from fans to authors, agents, and editors. I think the reason for this is that almost everyone starts out as a fan.

I sent my fourth novel out to the five agencies that I knew something about. I knew I would be very happy to work with any of them. Some I'd met, some I'd exchanged emails with, others I knew by reputation. At least one had seen all my previous work and turned it down. I had no expectations things would be different from previous submissions. After two days I had a request for the full MS. Two weeks later I had an offer of representation, which I accepted, and I could not have been happier.

There was no great plan. I just wrote the books I wanted to write using the ideas that excited me, then I sent them out. What did I do differently this time? All the books had been through a similar writing process, a similar critique and review process at the writing group. Before writing this I looked back at those old query letters and synopses. They looked okay. The later ones were better than the first, but the earlier ones were okay – after all, the first one I ever wrote got me that almost-deal with Virgin Worlds. This really made me think.



It was in the books where the difference lay. Those first two really did need some work. In the end it seemed it all came down to one thing: I wrote a better book.

Is there anything you can do wrong during submission? Beyond not providing what you're asked for, and not behaving courteously, I don't think there's much. A poor query letter can probably blow your chances with those US agents who insist your letter and nothing else must be your first contact. Personally, I think that's a crazy way to run a railroad, but US agents are very successful. There is plenty of good advice on how to write these letters, so track it down and follow it. Apart from that, here are my own suggestions:

- Keep your submission letter to one page, your synopsis to two.
- Mention relevant achievements such as awards and publications.
- Don't squeeze the font size in your synopsis too hard, people notice!
- Use standard formatting.
- Pay attention to specific format/style requests from individual agents.
- Publishers like series, so think about this and sketch out ideas for sequels. Mention them in your submission. I appended mine to the end of the synopsis.
- Don't write your query and send it off straight away. Put it aside at least overnight, then look at it again.

Apart from that? I don't believe you need a writers group – some people manage perfectly well without them, or test readers. I think my group helped me. I constantly tweaked and tuned my submissions for the first three books, but I've no evidence it made the slightest difference. There are few short-cuts and no magic buttons – and why would you want there to be? There's no sure-fire guaranteed way to wangle an agent without doing the one thing they need you to do. Some people connect with their first book, others write a dozen. All I can say is this: write a book, write the absolute best one you can. And if that doesn't work, write a better one.

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glass ceilings of science fiction

by Rosie Oliver

A glass ceiling is an unseen and seemingly unbreakable barrier for people to progress in achieving their aims, whether it is in their careers or in their artistic attainments. We've all come across them in our lives, where despite trying every which way we can, we end up feeling so frustrated and angry. Our goals seem as impossible as ever.

Such glass ceilings exist for science fiction writers. They should be viewed more as significant milestones on the way to becoming a successfully published science fiction author. Each achieved milestone denotes the writing has taken a major change in quality or direction. So what are these glass ceilings?

Let's break it down by the results to publishing:

1. For a small circle of family and friends who are more interested in what you are doing rather than the quality of the writing
2. In small circulation magazine as a new writer, which gives you your first unknown audience
3. In a small circulation science fiction magazine as a genre writer, which still gives you a small unknown audience
4. In a medium circulation science fiction magazine, which actually gives you a reasonable (rather than token) fee for the story
5. In a high circulation science fiction magazine, which gives you a professional fee (as per SFWA criteria for joining them, say)
6. A novel by a minor publishing house
7. A novel by a big publisher

In theory you can skip some of these steps, but these days, unless you are very lucky or very talented, it is unlikely. The reason? You are learning to improve what and how you write at each step.

So what does it take to jump between the steps?

Everyone who is competent at writing can do step 1. But what makes a story good enough to reach step 2?

First off, you have sufficient skill to write a story with a beginning, middle and end to the magazine's requirements of theme and word count. And you have the ability to spot the opportunity to submit your stories. But remember you may have been given some leeway in skills because from the publication's view you are new, and therefore of possible interest to readers.

So how do you go to step 3, being published in a minor in-genre magazine? Well if you have completed step 2, you've lost the opportunity of newness. But you are sufficiently skilled to bring an interesting new writing style or innovative minor issue or a slightly different story line to it. Notice the emphasis here is something NEW! It doesn't have to be anything mind-blowingly major, just an adjustment here or there. Re-hashes of old themes they are not!

Going from a minor to a medium circulation genre magazine, is doing step 3, but noticeably better in ALL the skill areas. It's not good enough to just improve the writing style. The ideas have to be more mind-bending and the storyline more unusual. Often the unusual story line follows naturally from the bigger idea, but not always. This is where you find the stories start to write themselves. In part this is

about the author

Rosie Oliver has an MA in Creative Writing from Bath Spa University, where she wrote half a science fiction novel that she is currently rewriting. She has had several short science fiction stories published in various magazines and anthologies. Her robo-cat (C.A.T.) series of three novelettes has been published by TWB Press. The fourth recently got an Honourable Mention in the Writers of the Future Contest. Her blog is at *rosieoliver.wordpress.com*

due to your deviating so much from published science fiction that you're on a green field site. You have more freedom to pick and choose what your story does and it still having that 'fresh' feel. Yes, you can go for a new literary style to bring a new voice to science fiction, but finding one that's not been used before will be very difficult.

Moving on to step 5, the big circulation magazines, is more about acceptance and reputation. You are entering the commercial world here, big time. You will have to act in a professional manner in your dealing with the publisher. Your science fiction stories will of course be even better than they were at step 4. And by this stage you will have a following of some sort, which can either be by popular demand of the readers or, more likely, support from people within the publishing industry.

Moving onto step 6, you are writing novels. These long pieces of work take time and plenty of revision to pull together to make an acceptable product. The plot will be more complex or the drawing of the characters more nuanced or novel theme more difficult to explain or the presentation is difficult to control e.g. several threads of a story from different parts of the future being progressed in alternating chapters. It takes skill to juggle a novel into shape with all its different threads and by-lines. And it has to be sellable. Which means you have to pick a subject that the readers want to know more about. Because of the long haul time-wise between starting a novel and getting it to market, you have to be able to anticipate what you think will sell. Not easy I know. Usually, people opt for variations on current popular themes for their first novel, which usually doesn't make it. So the only advice I can give here is get a reliable crystal ball.

Step 7 is when you become a big name author – well I don't have any experience of that at all, so can only comment on what I observe. A lot of people say that it's luck. I don't. It's having a big enough imagination and the ability to control the complexity of big projects. These are skills that can only be developed with practice. Did I hear you say that you can't build up your imaginative skills? Of course you can. Keep trying. Believe me, it gets easier every time. Here's the real but – the public only has so much money to spend. So there can only be a limited number of big list authors. It's a case of the best athlete wins here. You've got to go somewhere in your writing where nobody else can hope to follow to have that competitive edge.

Almost everyone goes through these steps as part of the learning to write science fiction curve. All too often writers try, reach a peak of skills, hit the frustration barrier of a glass ceiling, give up and settle to bumbling along at the level they have achieved. What they probably don't realise is that with practice, their writing continues to improve. They should keep on trying to reach the next level, break whatever glass ceiling is in their way. With time, people can get to step 6. Getting to step 7 depends on how well your interests align with readers.

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r o i
(or adventures in self-publishing)

by Robert Harkess

about the author

Robert 'R B' Harkess, Bristol-born 'author in exile' currently lives in a cardboard box painted to look like a space ship, just off junction 25 of the M25. Metaphoric Media, self-publishing, and selling books at conventions came about as the result of a well lubricated post-BBQ conversation. In what is left of his free time, Robert continues to write Science Fiction and Urban Fantasy, and usually manages to inject a whiff of Steampunk. He blogs at ***www.rbharkess.com***, and his website is ***www.metaphoric-media.co.uk***

For some reason, I always hear the wrong acronym in my head when I see these three letters; somehow I always end up with 'Republic of...' and then scratch my head trying to remember if it should be India or Ireland. Neither, of course, is correct – at least not in this reality.

In this context, they stand for Return on Investment. About a year ago, this august publication was kind enough to commit some of my ramblings to its pages, casting a glance at my first attempt to self-publish.

A year later, I now have four books self-published, with a fifth in planning. One was unexpected, and two had been previously published through 'traditional' channels and returned to me for various reasons – but none with rancour, I hasten to say.

It has been an interesting process, from which I have learnt a great deal. There have also been down-sides; principally financial and 'lost time', but also in a bit of 'dream bashing'.

In a nutshell...

So, what have I learned? In a nutshell, I suppose it's that publishing, self or otherwise, comes in three phases; inside, outside, and (imagine the twist to my lips, as though someone just farted in the lift) marketing. Not exactly a revelation. I'll guess most people reading this probably understand that at some level. Thing is, each phase has a cost, and that's the bit that most people don't prepare for in advance. Time and money, folks, time and money.

The right editor

Here comes the public health warning... Edit, edit and re-edit.

Then get someone else to edit it for you. Unless you are very, very lucky this is going to cost you serious money. I've had two novels edited 'professionally' – meaning payment other than mutual favour or beer credits.

Making sure you get the right editor is essential, and something it's nice to have control of. Going down the traditional route, you get the editor you are given, and if you can't work with them – well, there are plenty more writers in the coffee-shops. Ask other writers you respect for their recommendations, or who does their editing, and never jump in without a test drive.

My editor charges by the hour, and takes a 'sample' of the work first to estimate how long it's going to take. Not only that, he did me an hour's-worth of editing for free and sent it for my approval before we started any financial relationship.

Editing is a very personal thing. I have, on the whole, had editors with a light but perceptive touch (Steve Haynes, previously of *Proxima*, for example). I have also had an editor who came back at me with over 3500 changes in a 50,000 word novel. The latter I doubt I could have worked with on a long-term basis.

So 'my' editor, the one I pay, edits in chunks, reports back at the end of each chunk, and keeps me advised of the ongoing cost rather than presenting me with an uncomfortably over-budget bill at the end of the process. The first novel he worked on was 'broken' (structurally – a 'bad' character) and he

fixed it; its now the first of a two book traditional publishing deal. That cost me about £400. The second was pretty much just a copy-edit with limited structural work, and came in at about £300. That one's still looking for a home if anybody has an opening for a strong, gritty dystopian SF/cyberpunk mash-up – or I may decide to self publish it.

So there is cost number 1: A good edit – and frankly, from what I've seen of other editing deals (particularly those per-word deals), I am getting a serious bargain. The UK-based editors I looked at would have charged me £600-£800 for the same work (at their website published rates).

But you cannot, repeat-under-line-bold cannot, skimp on the edit. And you cannot edit alone.

Laying it all out

Next step is laying out. You are best doing this *before* you get your artist involved. They are usually helpful creatures, but can get cranky if you keep going back for little changes. You won't know your page count until you've done your layout, and a difference of just ten pages can make Amazon reject the image file as being the wrong size.

I don't have that much to say on layout. So far, I have only published through Amazon's Createspace. It's a fairly easy process, and just needs you to send them your formatted and laid out Word file. KDP [Kindle Direct Publishing], on the other hand, wants formatted html for Kindle editions, which is a bit more problematic. In theory, it's just saving things in the right format from, again, a properly formatted Word file. The trick here is, if you set everything up in Createspace first, there's a tick-box option that says 'Create a Kindle E-book', whereupon Amazon kindly does all the work of setting up the e-book version for you, and even sends you a copy of the files it creates. Never seen an option to do it the other way.

So, the 'do's and don'ts' of formatting? Don't cramp things up to save on paper. Leave decent margins, especially for the spine/inside margin. Personally, I like to make the start of a new chapter something of an event, so I give it half a page and a big font, usually different to the text font. I often use the same font as the cover title.

Lots of people like to use graphics in their chapter breaks – this seems particularly common in Steampunk. I don't. Yet. I've heard horror stories about embedding graphics.

Then check it. I mean it. Use the online proofing tool and flick across every page. This is not a copy-edit. This is just to look for things like pages with only a line or two on them, or missing page breaks at the start of chapters. Do not, at this point, pay for a proof – although you can download the pdf if you want to check it offline.

Getting the artwork

Art is the next drum I'm going to bang. The outside bit. The cover. If you're an artist comfortable working in digital media, please move on to the next section. Nothing for you here... for the other 97% of us - get someone else to do it.

Yes, I know. You can get the old version 2 of Photoshop for free (think on that – its on about version 6 now) and there is always GIMP (which I use). You might even be able to get a half decent cover out of it yourself, using an image-mill like ShutterStock. I did so myself with the cover for *Aphrodite's Dawn*. The first one you try will take an eternity, the second less so, the third... etc. But this is all time away from writing. A great excuse for procrastinating, though.

There are pretty much two methodologies here – artists who composite from image-mills, and ground-up artists, who create the entire image themselves. They charge anything from £80-£140 (and sometimes way more), depending on style and package: a simple e-book cover may be cheaper, as part of a bundle (paperback, ebook, 3d, bookmark).

Picking an artist is a tricky process. Conventions are, obviously, a great place to find people, and there is much mutual backscratchery and 'old boys/girls network' going on. Nothing wrong with that. Just be aware that the more 'famous' the artist, the more it could cost. The difficulty is usually summoning up the bottle to actually ask – or at least it is for me.

There is also the issue of balancing the book against the artist's usual output. I would not have asked Andy Bigwood about a Steampunk YA cover, for example, but would have loved to have him do *Aphrodite's Dawn*. I wouldn't go into any financial relationship with a new artist until I'd seen at least a sketch treatment of the ideas discussed.

But, and I don't know if the more attentive of you have picked up on this yet, *you* get to choose. Not your editor, not your publisher. You. That's a big plus, but also a big responsibility as its one less thing you can blame somebody else for.

I'm lucky enough to have found *Amygdala Designs*, as the result of a simple web search for 'book cover designs'. The first cover they did for me came from their 'pre-made' range (they just add

the title/author/back cover bumpf) and cost me around £60. If you want to see it – buy *Maverick*. I fell so much in love with the image I bought it just in case I ever got the book published – at the time I hadn't even thought of self-publishing.

They are also doing the art for my *Underland* young adult trilogy. This is bespoke and is costing more, but it's oh-so worth it.

The importance of cover design

One more bash of the art drum. People who profess to know about the mechanics of writing preach, quite rightly, about the importance of the 'hook'; the first phrase, the first paragraph, the progression of ambushing and netting the reader, setting out the tone of the story, drawing the reader ever deeper into its clutches. Absolutely right.

Except...

That's no damn good at all if you can't get the potential reader to pick the book up in the first place. It's all very well to say 'never judge a book by its cover', but who has the time to read the notes on every book? This is relevant to e-books too, but I cannot emphasize the importance of the cover in paperbacks. It is the first thing the reader sees, it is the thing that stops them, that holds their eyes as their feet try to make them walk past. It makes them pick the book up, turn it over to read the back, open it to read – ah, there's that hook we were talking about.

Real-life example: I was recently stall-sharing at a con with a fellow writer, and between us we had nine titles on the table. His covers were beautiful, moody and atmospheric with hints of art-deco, and I believe him to be a better writer than me by a long chalk. He outsells me 100 to 1 on the Internet, but on that stall, his books didn't catch passing eyes. I'm not crowing about that (well, not much) but it was noticeable that people were drawn to two covers – *Maverick* and *Underland: White Magic*. Research other books in your genre, see what others are doing – particularly those that sell. You don't want to copy them (obviously) but it will give you an idea of the broad specification of what the readership is finding attractive.

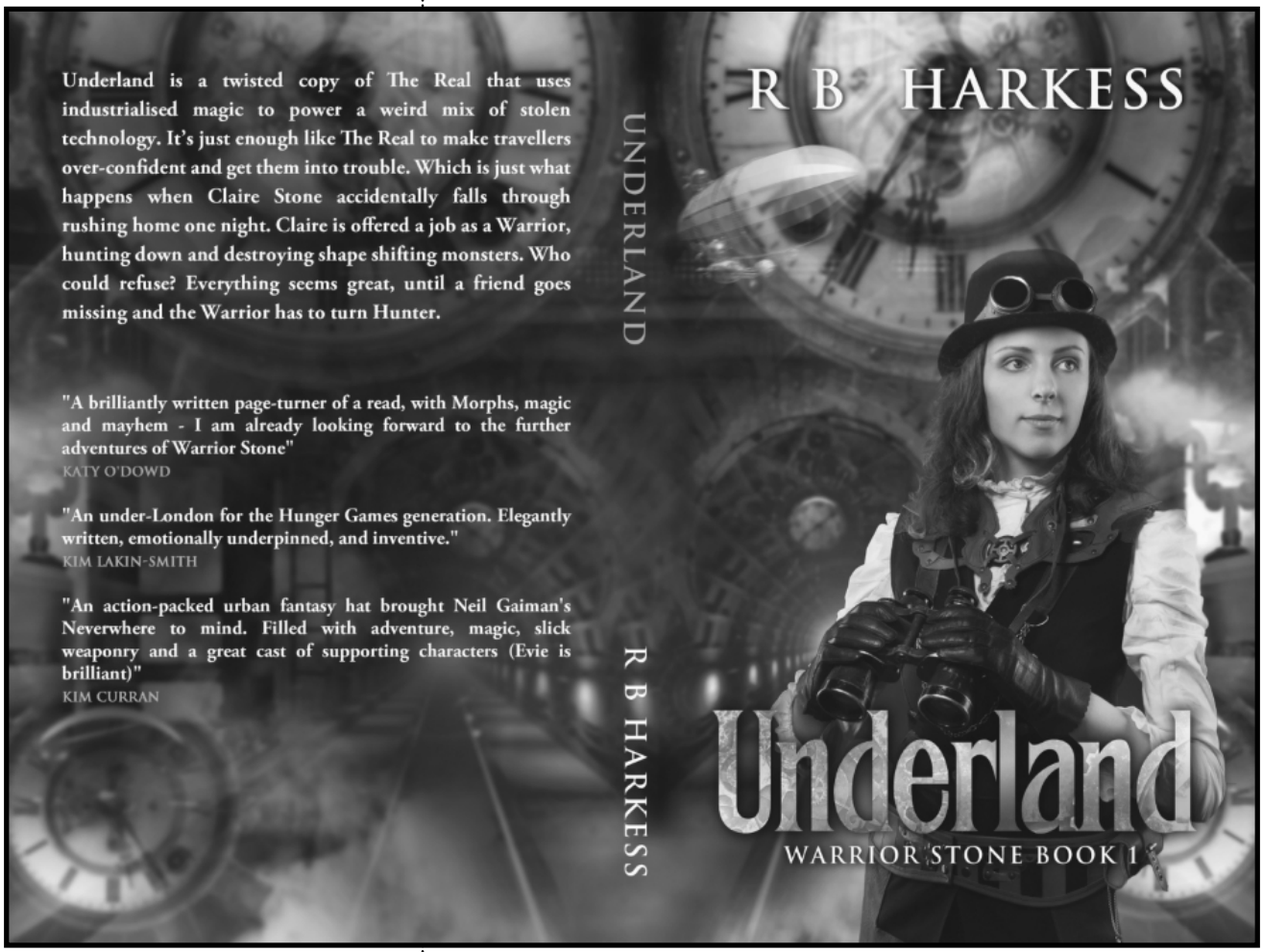
Oh, and one last thing about covers; for heaven's sake remember to put a description of the story on the back. If you don't you will spend an eternity in hell explaining the plot to everybody who picks up the book until you can dump the stock, change the cover and re-proof it.

So that's editing (£300 to £800) and art (£80 to £140). Plus however long it takes to re-edit the book after the editor has finished with it, versus saving yourself about thirty hours of frustration with a graphics package.

And the rest?

The rest is easy. Stick it all together on Createspace, order your proof copy. Read it. Seriously. With attention. Be horrified by how many errors there still are. Edit the MS, loop back, order your proof again. DO NOT skip this, unless you like looking an idiot.

And then you're good to go. Start selling. Or have I forgotten something?



It is right on the tip of my tongue...

Ah, yes... Marketing

Most authors I know get a chill down to their fingers when you mention marketing to them. I'm no exception. For some, it's the prospect of appearing in public, or at a con. I think for most, it's the whole concept of promoting not only one's latest masterpiece, but also one's *self*.

I've heard the same complaint many, many times. 'Look, I want to be a writer. I just want to write. Isn't that what the publisher is for?'

For a start, no, that is not what the publisher is for, at least not in the current climate. Some, possibly, might shave off a sliver of their jealously hoarded budget for you, but for the most part (unless you are Stephen King or James Patterson) the majority of the responsibility for marketing a book rests squarely on the shoulders of the author – although a good publisher will stand beside you and at least help you keep things steady. And there's no shame in that. We all know there is very little money in this stupid business, and both marketing and advertising can be black holes when it comes to cash. The publisher is picking up all these costs we are mentioning. Marketing budget is a luxury on top of that.

I do feel some publishers are taking liberties, though. One I saw recently wanted (in addition to the standard bundle) a marketing plan, a list of competitors, a target audience, and a couple of other things. All up front. A classic reason to explore doing it oneself.

Some writers will find the marketing side of things a breeze. We all know one or two people who are natural self-publicists. The rest of us have to work at it, and it comes about as naturally as breathing underwater. I've seen it said that if you want to market yourself effectively, you should spend 80% of your time on marketing and 20% on writing. I suspect that is an extreme, but it would not surprise me if a figure of 50/50 turned out to be close to the mark.

A couple of Facebook pages and an infrequently updated blog won't do it. Joining the 'Excited Indie Self-pub Writers' on Facebook won't do it – you're simply advertising yourself to a bunch of other people in exactly the same situation as you, which is akin to a form of self-abuse we should probably draw a discrete veil over. And lastly – and I know this is going to sound bitter – don't expect solidarity and support from those *you* support. It's a dog-eat-dog world, and they're all trying to climb out of the crab-bucket too. Do it, deal with it, and appreciate it all the more when it happens.

So that's the next personal mountain I should climb, at least as far as writing goes. 'Should' is the operative word in that sentence. I look at it with slightly less enthusiasm than going to the dentist.

A final twist...

Where are you going to sell your books?

The reason I ask is because if all you intend to do is sell online, then we're just about done. Anything up to £800 for your edit, £140 for your art, plus however much you think you should or could spend on marketing. Call it a grand for round numbers, or a monkey if you can get a good deal on the edit.

But I'll let you into a little secret. Online doesn't always work. At least, it hasn't for me, traditional or self-publishing. I'm going to do something very few authors do; be honest about my sales. Ask someone how their book is doing, and you'll normally get the puckered out lip and the stock answer 'good enough' or some other such platitude for an answer. I don't blame anyone for that. It's much more personal than asking someone how much they earn. It's a pride thing.

To quote Barry Kripke (*The Big Bang Theory*) my sales 'suck the big hairy meatball'. I'm not going to quantify them, but online sales have been very disappointing. You can see it in the 'ranking profile' of so many books; a short surge on release as family and friends buy their copies, then the slow slide into ignominity.

Then, for reasons too complex to go into here, I ended up at the 'Asylum Steampunk' convention, with my two books perched on a corner kindly donated by *Telos Publishing* and – to my huge surprise – they SOLD. To people I didn't know!

One drunken conversation later, and I had a plan – of sorts. By really pushing the boat out I could get four books ready for the 2015 season. Seemed like such a good idea at the time. But like everything, there are costs, not least of which was that I spent a whole year editing the best part of 400,000 words, and didn't write a single original word. That was hard and, frankly, I'm finding it difficult to get back into the swing of writing new stuff.

So what does it cost to start doing the whole trade stall thing? First off, stock, at around £4 per book (including shipping). That mounts up quick; four titles, thirty copies of each, £480. Trade stands themselves are anything from £90 through to £280 for something like the London Film and Comic Con. Promo material, like fliers or bookmarks, are going to cost you for artwork, but the more you buy the cheaper it gets, so budget a good £100 for that. Fuel. Hotels. Food. And so forth.

Was it worth it?

Financially – not even close. It would have cost me less to print the books then stand on my local high street giving them away. But that's not why I'm in this game. Oh, making money is a goal, but not a reason. It doesn't cost me more than a decent hobby would, or a season ticket to the footie, so on that score (heh heh) I am content.

Only I can know what value I put on getting that package through the door with your first proof from Amazon, or opening a box full of books with your name on them. Only I know what value I put on someone I just signed a book for asking for a photo, or a reader/friend I met at a previous signing dragging her boyfriend over to meet me when they find me at a con. We all have our own reasons for dancing to this particular music, we all have things we value, many more than just money.

And I'm in a fortunate position; I have a healthy scattering of traditionally published books and short stories as well as the novels I have published myself, which gives me a small amount of extra validation. I still have much to do and much to learn, both in my craft and in marketing it, but that's part of why I do what I do.

So for me, for now, the joy of being a storyteller still shines through.

Worth it? Hell, yeah.

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