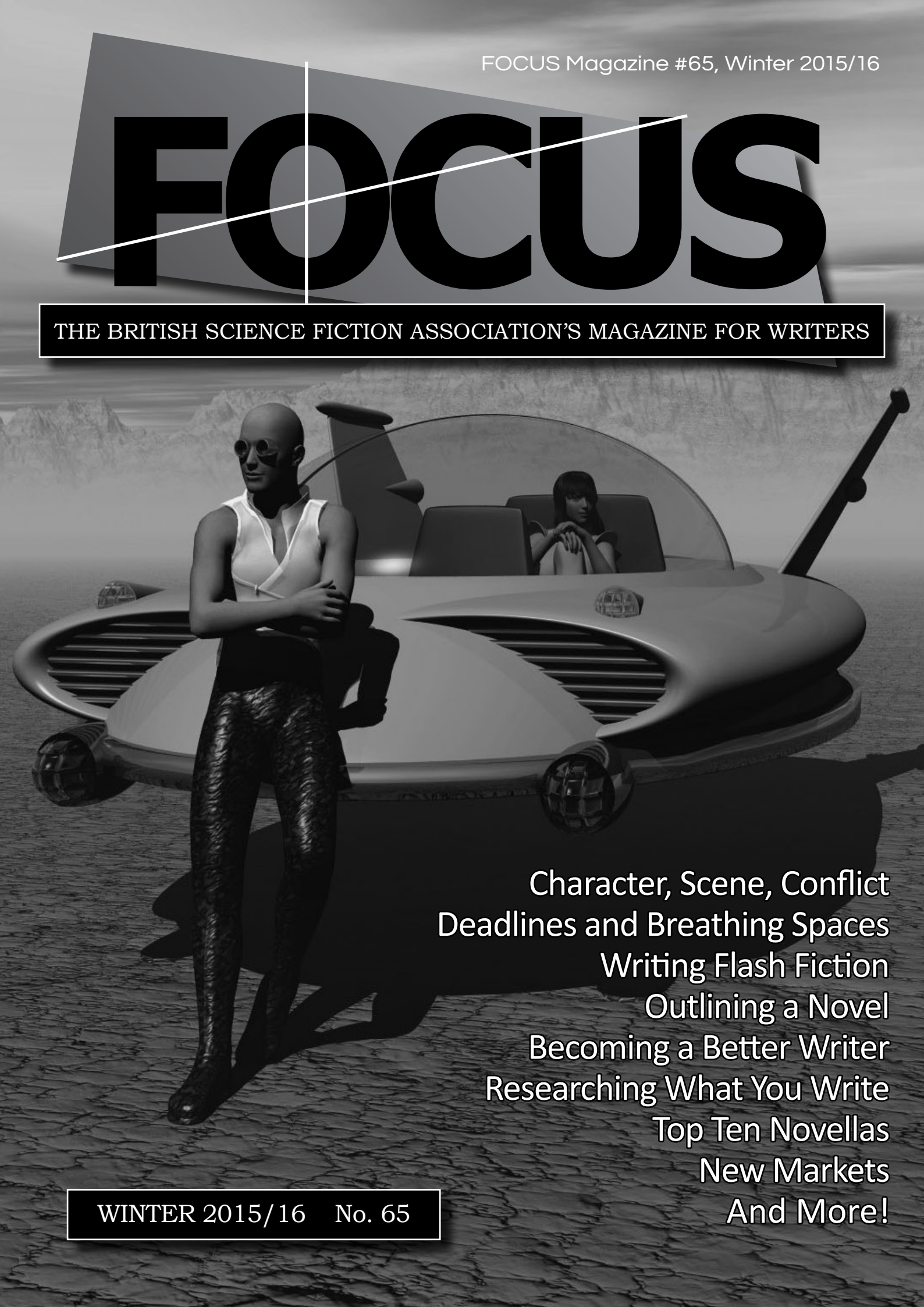
FOCUS Magazine #65, Winter 2015/16

FOCUS

THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION'S MAGAZINE FOR WRITERS



Character, Scene, Conflict
Deadlines and Breathing Spaces
Writing Flash Fiction
Outlining a Novel
Becoming a Better Writer
Researching What You Write
Top Ten Novellas
New Markets
And More!

WINTER 2015/16 No. 65

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FOCUS

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

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

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Dev Agarwal says...

Hello and welcome to *Focus*.

As BSFA members will know, Focus has been edited by a series of guest editors for the last two years.

In this issue we depart from that convention with the appointment of a permanent editor. I have been writing a column for *Focus* since 2008, thanks to an invitation from Martin McGrath, the last permanent editor.

The magazine's mission statement is to provide a venue for writers and people interested in the craft of writing. By long tradition, each edition has been a combination of factual information, opinions and practical advice from experienced writers and editors. In keeping with that mission in this issue, your columnists have taken the time to discuss writing to deadlines, constructing structures, what makes effective flash fiction, recommended reading lists and many other topics. We also bring you poetry, updates on the BSFA Orbiter groups and information about new markets.

This diversity of voices reflects that this edition of *Focus* is a group effort. The magazine would not exist without our contributors, working for free, but also behind the scenes, there would be *no* magazine without Alex Bardy's layout and design and also our proof readers.

As is customary with an ongoing magazine changing editorial hands, we've shaken things up a little. We therefore also bring you a new regular feature, *Re/Source*, a page on writing resources and sources of information for writers.

I have already mentioned Martin McGrath. A number of people writing for BSFA publications were given their break in nonfiction by Martin. Many plaudits for his editorial work (in first *Vector* and then *Focus*) have already appeared in many places. This is now my opportunity to thank him for the years of work he gave to us in the BSFA (on a number of publications) for more than a decade. I became a regular contributor through Martin's tenure. And that was how I learned to write a column that was relevant to an SF readership and to a deadline. I consider that to be an invaluable skillset for anyone wishing to make a career writing in our genre.

(Don't worry, Martin didn't die, he just retired as editor to spend more time with his family and fiction.)

2015 was of course a significant year for our genre. A number of prominent authors launched standalone novels or books in new or ongoing series. Science fiction and related genres continue to dominate film and tv programming (and are increasingly at the forefront of new streaming and non-traditional media). Some of the biggest films released were drawn from existing SF novels by names genre readers were already familiar with (and that's without even starting on the billion dollar juggernaut of a new Star Wars movie).

However, presumably most people will consider that the most high profile incident were the Hugo Awards. The science fiction awards were catapulted into the mainstream media and sent social media, blogs and websites into a frenzy. What this means is perhaps still open to debate and the lasting impact of this will be clearer for individual writers competing for the Hugos in future and for the fans who voted.

One outcome was that the Hugos recorded record-breaking numbers of voters and the status of the awards rose even as their reputation was inevitably challenged. Our genre is likely to survive this round of in-fighting -- even as it changes -- as nothing remains static. We can expect to see the impact of the 2015 Hugos reverberate through the BSFA's publications as well as the wider genre press. We should, in my view, encourage and embrace that debate and the opportunity to widen our understanding and thinking about what the genre means and what fiction we want to see.

All of us who worked on this issue hope that you enjoy it and find it worthwhile as readers and writers of science fiction and fantasy.

— Dev Agarwal
December 2015

Deadlines, Layered Writing and Breathing Space

by Aliette de Bodard

Aliette de Bodard needs no introduction to science fiction readers. She is a multiple award winner and active across the genre in both conventions and workshops. Aliette always brings plenty to the table. She now offers this perspective...

So... a lot of what I write today is to deadlines–and I know I'm not necessarily in the majority here, but I like deadlines. I'm one of the world's natural procrastinators, and without the ~~focus~~ sheer existential dread of a deadline, I would be writing a lot less.

Thing is... it's very tempting to think that, with all the time in the world, I could write a novel/short story that I would be happy with, rather than having to rush to meet a tight delivery date. I'm also aware, because I'm one of the world's natural pessimists, that the correlation between the time I have to write something and the quality of the thing is actually weaker than I'd think.

For starters, "happy with" is a complicated thing. I've read a quote somewhere that writers don't finish stuff, that we merely abandon it, and that's certainly very true with me. There's always something I could do to a piece, always some revisions I could do that I feel would make it better. I'm not convinced that they *would* make it better, in the sense that I've also edited pieces to death. The late Jay Lake used to say that voice is the easiest thing to edit out of a manuscript, and he's right. Prose shouldn't be unformed, but equally being too polished is a sure sign that life has been taken out of it–I'm a big believer in the rawness and energy of it. Which is to say: I do edit my prose, but I'm careful not to go overboard. I also tend to think my stuff sucks whatever the stage it's at (except possibly those very early stages when it's still fresh and new and exciting)–yeah, impostor syndrome–and part of the reason I love the H is that he will just prod me into delivering the freaking thing already even if I feel terrible about it.

Of course, if the delivery date is ridiculously tight and I'm under high pressure to meet it, there's going to be a strong temptation to do a hack job–to deliver for the sake of delivering what really is inferior work (and not what I consider to be inferior work, which isn't necessarily representative, see above). "Inferior" means "not finished" to me, and my biggest "not finished" issue is complexity and layers.

My writing process is all about layers. I build my stories and my novels that way, on the slow accretion of completely unrelated elements–I just throw everything in, and at some point the magical alchemy happens and they all come together for a story (I'm serious about alchemy. My subconscious is in charge at that point, and it really does feel like it miraculously coalesces from a mess of unrelated things into an actual story). For that to happen, I need space, and some research reading, and some cogitating, before I can have the piece click

I've written stuff that was brilliant in a couple of days, and stuff that sucked over a period of nine months.' so again, it's not like more time necessarily results in more brilliant stuff...

for me–before it can unfold in all its glorious (and sometimes) messy complexity.

For a short story, I generally need two completely unrelated ideas: for instance, the latest one I wrote started with the image of a Vietnamese dragon flying out from the sun, and over it I layered the idea of a messy and protracted war between two nascent space federations. For a novel, I need more: I need a good idea of the setting, a bunch of characters I feel comfortable with, and a plot that has enough content and twists to keep me happy. *The House of Shattered Wings*'s setting started as the confluence of Fallen angels whose flesh was being used to make magical drugs, and of a big, WWI-style magical war in turn-of-the-century Paris. But it didn't actually gel together until I got all my characters lined up (most significantly, Philippe, the unexpected Vietnamese ex-Immortal and general wrench in the works), and my plot sketched in (I'm not going to give spoilers, but one major plot point involving the death of a visiting dignitary in Silverspires turned out to be the lynchpin on which I could hang part 1–and part 2 was, in turn, hung on a vivid image of Notre-Dame ruined in a very particular fashion). Accordingly, if I haven't had time to get those layers/unrelated things, or to integrate them properly… Yeah, then it would be a problem.

But. But I've written stuff that was brilliant in a couple of days, and stuff that sucked over a period of nine months; so, again, it's not like more time necessarily results in more brilliant stuff. I think past a certain incompressible time period I need to get the story together, more time just either gives me: (a). more time to procrastinate (and lose some of the original passion and drive for the project as the excitement dies down), and (b). more time to make the story into a Frankenstein mashup of intractable complexity. At some point I just need to put words down I guess? They might need to be heavily edited (or deleted), but they're here. They're not some abstract notion of what the story should be, which I can never do justice to in any case, because the story I write is *never* going to be as perfect as the vision in my head (it never is). They're real, and they're on paper (or on the screen), and I can work with that.

(yeah, my other motto is "you can't fix what's not written down")

So, yeah. Mostly I work with deadlines and I love them (honest!). From time to time, of course, I need a break: I need some space for a personal project that I don't feel I owe to anyone. Works like *The Citadel of Weeping Pearls*, the Xuya novella with the twinned four POVs, or *Of Books, and Earth, and Courtship*, the courtship/caper between two characters of *The House of Shattered Wings* – I just write them for fun, and for a while it feels liberating not to have a deadline or the perpetual feeling I'm late. But only for a while, and because it's a change–I need my deadlines, and if they didn't exist I suspect I'd make them up!

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.

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What about you? How do you handle deadlines? Do you like them/hate them with a passion? Does it not make a whit of difference to you whether you have one or not?

Originally published on September 14, 2015 at 5.00 PM on the Author's own website.

fin.

Writing the Short Story: Characters, Scene, Conflict

by Andrew Hook

Andrew Hook takes us through the essential components of crafting short stories. Here, he identifies three.

Short stories are my passion. I've had over 120 published in the last twenty years – in a variety of genres – and for eight years also ran Elastic Press, an indie publisher dedicated to the short form which picked up a number of awards. I've run writers groups and workshops on the short story, most recently at Edge-Lit in Derby, and this article is based around the structure of that workshop and how simple exercises can create both ideas and short stories (or even the basis for novels) without too much effort. Stories are always out there, just waiting to be written. This article will hopefully tell you how.

Some years ago I was a member of a writers group in Norwich run by David Allen Lambert. Whilst I'm no longer in touch with David, the group revolved around a four week format devised by himself and known as *Alea's Well*. One of the weeks was devoted to *fractal fairytales*, and it's from this format that my own writing workshops have developed.

The idea is simple. Every short story requires the following:

1. Character
2. Scene
3. Conflict

So long as these elements exist, then a story can be written. It's a simple enough process, but I'll expand on it now.

Character

Without being too obvious, your story needs a protagonist. It doesn't have to be human, it doesn't even have to be alive (a short story told from the point of view of a rock or a piece of furniture, for example), but something is required to engage the reader's interest and for them to either see the story through your character's eyes or empathise with their situation.

Scene

A character can't exist in a vacuum – unless, of course, a vacuum is the setting for your story. Whereas on the face of it the setting for a story might seem obvious, it's worth paying attention to the details. A make-believe world should seem just as real as the *real* world, and the real world should be verifiable if it is to feel authentic. Scene is crucial to a short story and can be a character in itself.

Conflict

This is the plot. This is the reason for your reader to have *any* interest in character and scene. Short stories often hinge on one obstacle which needs to be overcome: is there a monster under the bed, what happens if the main character goes blind, what will be the reaction of a character who has found their partner has cheated on them, what should someone do if they have accidentally killed someone? Conflict is the fuel for story.

So far, so nothing new, right? Some writers will find their story idea comes to them as a character, others that the conflict forms the initial impetus to write. Some writers will have all three fall in their lap at once. But without these three you will have no story. With those three you will *always* have a story. Even if you were never expecting a story.

The workshop I run *proves* there will always be a story.

The minimum number of players for the workshop will be four. The optimum number is between 8-10. I have run the workshop (at Edge-Lit) with seventeen participants – and several others trying to enter

once it had started – and this is fine so long as there is time enough for everyone to read afterwards. And you will read because you will have written something. You will always have written something.

Taking character, scene, conflict as starting points each participant gets three small, blank pieces of paper. On the back of one they write 'character', another 'scene', the third, 'conflict'. On the other side of the paper they outline actual characters, scenes and conflicts. These don't have to be connected in anyway, and each should be as specific as possible and mustn't overlap. For example, 'character' could simply be 'an old man' or 'an old man with white hair and wild eyes. He walks with a stick. He slurs his speech' but should never be 'an old man with white hair and wild eyes. He walks with a stick. He slurs his speech. He is on the London Underground and someone has taken his favourite seat' as this would incorporate scene and conflict.

Take it from me, no matter how bizarrely matched the character, scene and conflict might be, there will always be the thread of a story which links them.

The pieces of paper are then mixed up between the group and each person is then distributed with a character, scene and conflict that are not their own and preferably only one from any one person (which is why a minimum of four players is preferable). Allowing each participant to briefly read the character, scene and conflict they have been presented with, the next fifteen minutes are then given over to writing.

Take it from me, no matter how bizarrely matched the character, scene and conflict might be, there will *always* be the thread of a story which links them. Here's one I did earlier:

Fractal Fairytale – 22/2/06 – Written in 15 minutes - unedited

Character – A Clown

Scene – Night time in Irkutsk in Siberia . It's winter, -20 degrees C. Standing by an illuminated ice sculpture

Conflict – Character has lost all his/her money gambling

Vladimir was freezing. It was at least 20 below zero, and the wind chill factor took it many more degrees below that. His features had frozen to the greasepaint on his face. He felt that he might be able to lift it off in one piece if it wasn't for the fear that his skin would be detached too. He stamped his feet in the snow. His footprints were the size of baguettes.

He wrapped his arms around himself in the hope of some warmth, but despite the thermal underwear beneath his white silk clown suit, nothing alleviated the cold. His jacket, like the rest of his stuff, was in his horse-drawn caravan. But it wasn't his any longer, was it?

To the left of him the snow-scape stretched out for miles. Wagon marks on the ground indicated the way that the circus had gone, but he knew that he couldn't re-join them now. They wouldn't have him back. That much was clear. He hadn't disgraced himself exactly, but he had been a fool.

A fool! He almost laughed at the notion. That was the point, wasn't it? Throughout his life he had always played the fool, to the extent that now he really was one. Call it wish fulfilment, call it whatever you will, but call him a fool all the same.

That night in Irkutsk had been a success. The trained bears – those which they were no longer allowed to use in some parts of Europe – had performed their tasks magnificently. Lying on their backs, atop podiums, they had bounced a ball between the two of them using their paws. The crowd had gone wild, their clapping gradually accelerating to a frenzied applause. Vladimir smiled at the memory of the first applause he had heard in England . It had been tumultuous, random, a cacophony of noise. Not like the rhythmic, repetitive, almost one-clap of his fellow Russians.

And after the bears, the trapeze artists, after them the horses, after them had come Olga – the contortionist – the one that he had been in love with. Not that he had ever shown it, but she knew it. And he knew that she knew it. She knew that too. But would she ever say it? No. Never.

Vladimir sighed. This was all because of her. He had promised himself not to gamble again, but then, on their first day in Irkutsk , he had seen that necklace in the shop window in the times between rehearsals. He knew that Olga would love it. Were they diamonds that twinkled like light reflected on snow? The shop owner said so, but he couldn't tell. He wouldn't have put his money on it...but then he had, hadn't he?

His feet were curled up in his shoes with the cold. He stamped them again. Looking in the direction the wagons had taken and then looked at the town. He didn't move in either direction.

Whilst it was night, almost early morning, the streets were not dark. Large arc lights illuminated the ice-sculptures that stood on the edge of the town. Vladimir had been here before, he knew the traditions. Each time the circus stayed for two weeks the local artisans ran their ice-sculpting competition, often picking out some of the performers on which to base their art.

Around him, the snow was lit a sparkling white. Almost too white – a non-existent white. As white as the light must seem when entering the world from birth. And within the snow, light reflected like diamonds, precious stones. The irony was not lost upon him.

He looked away from the town, from the tracks the wagons had created in the snow. He looked at the nearest ice-sculpture.

The artist had been an expert, exemplary in his chosen field. The image of Olga was complete down to the sensual expression of her face, the thick strands of hair, and the curves of her body. He looked into her eyes. Could he ever have had a piece of the promise that they held?

The other clowns had laughed as he laid his cards down. They knew what had to be done. And they were jealous, he was sure of that. Not that it really mattered now. They took everything from him. He might as well have given it away.

Standing next to Olga's ice-sculpture, with his clown shoes splayed around the base so he could be as close as possible, he wrapped his arms around the cold, smooth form, and closed his eyes. He wasn't warm enough to melt her. When their lips touched in a kiss, he froze.

Now I'm not saying the above is perfect, or that I would ever use it, but what it does illustrate is that using those three elements – even randomly – a story can come from nothing. A story will always exist, it's just waiting to be written. The above can also be a useful tool to get the brain working and the wheels in gear during periods when the ideas themselves struggle to come.

Whilst I use the workshop to illustrate how story will find a way, I don't consciously consider those elements when writing my own fiction. I've found generally that I start with a title, then a couple of ideas I've had will gel with that title and I realise they work together. I usually find that I can't write a story without a title, which is why – for me – the exercise can be a great way to free my mind and realise that I can still write even if I don't have something specific to write. Still writing is the ideal way to keep writing. Any aids to assist with that should always be welcomed. I hope this article has been of use to those who sometimes need a boost to get started, or alternatively provides a burst of activity at any writing groups you might attend. It's always fun to see how each writer has forged a story out of elements they hadn't even considered before the task began.

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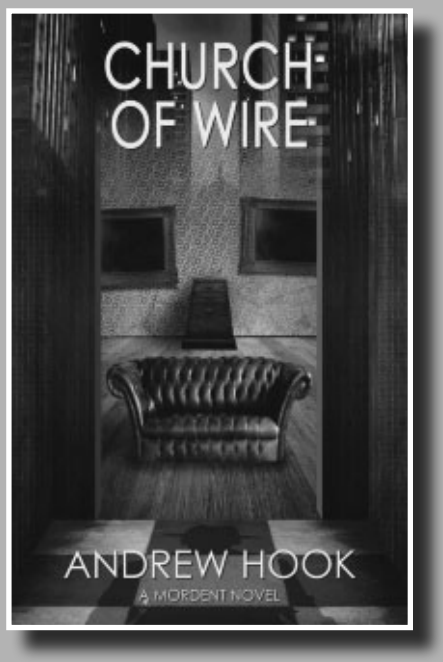

Andrew Hook's current novel is *Church of Wire* (Telos). His short stories have appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies, most recently in *Darkest Minds*, *Strange Tales V*, and *Best British Horror 2015*. With his partner he co-edits Salò Press: their first publication has just been announced and they are also seeking submissions for *A Galaxy Of Starfish: An Anthology Of Modern Surrealism*. Find them online.

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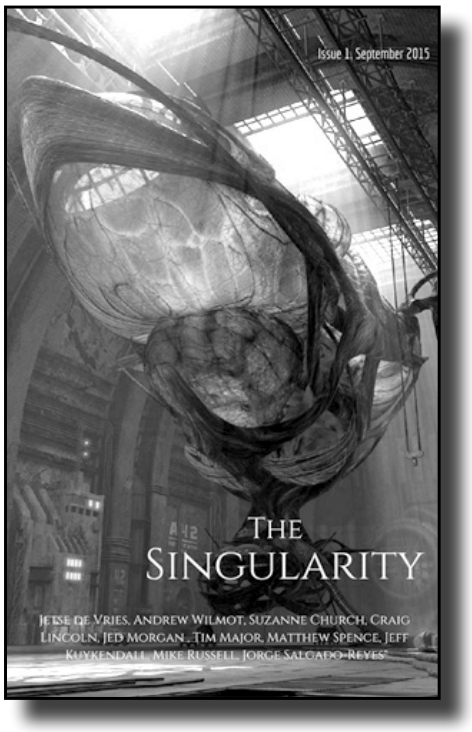
The Singularity is a brand new SF and Fantasy Fiction magazine, based in London, England, that will publishes stories that are singular in voice and style. With the current black hole in the British SF and Fantasy Fiction market, a new magazine has emerged to help fill the void that has been present over the last number of years. It is setting out to achieve a distinct voice that will resonate across the world for all speculative fiction fans, as a fully embracive magazine. A core aim of the magazine is for it to have its own evolutionary arc with the readers as it grows, whilst always maintaining its singularity. It therefore encourages others to get involved in the magazine's Facebook discussion group and through other social media.

The quarterly publication is available on Kindle and in Paperback from Amazon. There are also plans to publish an annual anthology at the start of each year to showcase the best fiction appearing in *The Singularity,* using a diverse selection of story types: SF/ Fantasy/Slipstream/Cyberpunk/ Humorous/Steampunk.

Submissions are currently open for fiction up to a limit of 7,000 words. The magazine is looking for stories that are uniquely descriptive with a literary texture and interesting arcs; stories that push the boundaries of fiction both in form and voice, and are stylistically distinctive. It is seeking fiction from writers of all nationalities and backgrounds. *The Singularity* is particularly interested in SF, slipstream, philosophical, cyberpunk and humorous stories, owing to their relative rarity.

But none of the above is fully prescriptive or exhaustive, and we would suggest that you always keep the following proverb in mind: *Audentes Fortuna Adiuvat.* Please see the website for full submission guidelines: ***www.thesingularitymagazine.com***

We look forward to reading your singular stories.



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How To Write a Novel Outline

by Gareth Powell

After a foray into short fiction, we turn to the other end of the spectrum for BSFA Award winner Gareth Powell's advice on how to outline a novel.

Yesterday, after I mentioned on Twitter that I'd just finished writing a 4,000 word outline for a new novel, several people contacted me to ask how I'd done it. They were hoping for some tips. The trouble is, outlines are tricky things, and what works for me won't necessarily work for you.

Let me explain what I mean.

Some authors like to plot out the entire book in advance, so they know exactly what's going to happen in every chapter before they start writing. Others prefer to wing it, to let the characters guide the story, and make it up as they go along.

There are pros and cons to each approach.

The former can be useful if you need to write your novel quickly, as you know you won't get stuck because you have it all worked out in advance.

Paul Cornell, author of the *Shadow Police* series, says the outline he's working on for his next book currently stands at 15,000 words, and it's still not finished. "Basically," he jokes, "I just need to add 'he said' and 'she said'.

"I exaggerate," he continues. "It's 100 numbers, with a paragraph of described action for each. It's going to take a bit more work to fill in 1000 words of prose for each of them!"

Author and comic writer, Cavan Scott takes a similar approach. "It all starts with my trusty journal," he says, "scribbling down notes, and more importantly questions: 'Why does the hero do this?', 'What would happen if that spaceship explodes?' and so on. These usually morph into mind-maps with ideas spiderwebbing everywhere and sometimes even doodles.

"When I've worked out the general direction of the plot, I break everything down into scenes, using index cards. This used to be physical cards but now, more often than not, I use the virtual index cards in Scrivener on my mac, or an Index Card app on my iPad. These get swapped around and sorted into the order that the story will run until I have an outline I can work from."

The downside of writing a detailed outline like this is that such a meticulous structure can feel constraining, with no room for creative digression. And if you take it too far, you can exhaust the storytelling impulse before you've actually started writing, leaving the book itself as an uninspiring exercise in joining-the-dots. For instance, an editor I know remembers the time an author handed in a 70,000 word outline for a 90,000 word book, and then had to somehow turn it into a novel!

Perhaps with this in mind, Stephen King recommends the latter approach in his book, *On Writing*. He likens stories to fossils that you have to unearth one painstaking

sentence at a time. This gives the author total creative freedom to follow the story in whichever direction it wants to go, which can be great for writers who like to let their characters guide the flow of events, but it can lead to problems (and major rewrites) if you don't stay aware of pacing and dramatic structure.

For some people, a Post-it note will suffice. For others, half a dozen handwritten pages. Some plot each scene on an index card, so they can shuffle them around (something you can do electronically with software such as Scrivener), or just scribble the basic plot points on a napkin or cigarette packet.

Personally, I've written outlines in notebooks and Word documents, on scrap pieces of paper, and even once on the inside of an opened-out takeaway pizza box.

With my 'Macaque' novels, my outlines were two or three pages outlining the basic events of the novel. "They go to the parallel world, grab the Zeppelin and return."

For this latest outline, I've gone into more detail. The book I want to write is a thriller taking place in a confined space (sort of like the movies *Speed* or *Phone Booth*), and so the plot needs to be worked out before I start. I need to know how the main character is going to survive and fight back before I start, otherwise there's the danger I might accidentally paint him (and myself) into an inescapably tight corner.

In order to do this, I started with an Excel spreadsheet. I created two columns. In the first, I wrote the numbers 1 to 50. These were my chapter numbers. In the second column, I wrote a paragraph about each chapter, describing the significant events. I told myself the story, starting at chapter one and working my way through to the end, jotting down these notes as I went.

Once I had it all written down, I began to see the structure. Certain events made more dramatic sense if they happened before others, and so I was able to switch the cells around until I had everything in the right place. It felt like editing a movie or TV show, swapping the order of the scenes around in order to build suspense. Then, when I was done, I cut and pasted the whole thing into Word.

What I've ended up with is a numbered list of 50 paragraphs, which between them break down my story into significant events. And if I write 2,000 words for each of these fifty chapters, I'll end up with a book 100,000 words long.

Gareth L. Powell's third novel, *Ack-Ack Macaque*, co-won the 2013 BSFA Award. He has since published two sequels with Solaris. The latest, *Macaque Attack*, came out in January 2015. He can be found online at ***www.garethlpowell.com***, or on Twitter: ***@garethlpowell***

I know I won't stick to this outline with total rigidity. New ideas will occur as I'm writing, and characters will go off in unexpected directions. But this document will form the foundation on which the rest of the book can be built.

If you want an analogy, I see outlining as akin to planning a journey using a satellite photo. You can see the major landmarks and the general lie of the land, so you won't get lost. But, when you actually start walking, there's still plenty of scope to discover new and exciting details along the way.

And when I'm ready to submit the finished novel to my agent or publisher, that outline can (with some tinkering) form the basis of the synopsis I'll need to include with the manuscript.

The main thing to remember is that different authors prefer different approaches. Some like to plot in advance, others like to fly by the seat of their pants. It depends on the individual, and sometimes on the type of book they're trying to write, and it may take some experimenting before you discover which method works best for you.

fin.

Re/Source...

A page for resources and updates for working writers...

"Proving ground" can be defined as a term for a reservation where technology and tactics are experimented with or are tested. The BSFA runs its own proving grounds, through its regular groups for writers. These are the Orbiter groups and are open to people at any stage of their publishing career (from beginners to established novelists).

Terry Jackman provides us with her regular update from Orbiter's cutting edge:

Orbiter News

Orbits are online critiquing groups. They are available free to any BSFA member.

The only other entry requirements is a commitment to provide feedback to other group members in return for comments.

New members join established groups, until such time as group size dictates 'skimming' to form a new one, by which time you should find that you are comfortable with the system. At the present time the BSFA runs seven groups of 4-7 writers. Each group has a group leader to remind members when submissions are due. Most groups workshop a manuscript every two months. Newly joined members will, of course, not be expected to take on the role of leading the group to begin with.

Each Orbit focuses on both short fiction and novels, and members can choose to specialise in only one form, as they prefer. To join, please contact me at ***terry@terryjackman.co.uk***

Orbiter successes:

Frances Gow: YA novel, *The Prince of Carentan* by Frances Gow and DC Laval, from Double Dragon Publishing

Geoff Nelder: short, 'Voyage of the Silents', published by *Pennyshorts*

Terry Martin: short story, 'Bag' in *Sci Phi Journal*

Sandra Unerman: short story, 'Thorncandle Castle', in *Sword and Sorcery* online magazine.

Sandra's article for us, "High Stilts," appears this issue. Also, Sandra provides her reflections on participating in an Orbiter group:

In Orbit by Sandra Unerman

The greatest benefit of my membership of an Orbit is that my stories are read by other people, outside of my personal circle. That helps to provide me with an outward focus for my writing and an awareness of audience reaction.

The detailed feedback also matters. Two of the stories I have circulated in my Orbit recently have been published, "Harper of Stone," in *Frostfire Worlds*, in May and "Thorncandle House" in *Sword and Sorcery*, in August. In "Harper," I had invented a magical background for the family of the heroine, which turned out not to be relevant to the main story. The Orbit feedback showed me that the background was an unhelpful distraction, which I removed from the version I submitted for publication. With "Thorncandle," positive reaction from the Orbit provided encouragement for a story I was not sure about and enabled me to polish up small details.

Orbiters communicate by email. This allows for considered responses that can be fitted in round other commitments. It allows contact with people you might never come across otherwise (across large geographic distances). Analysing my fellow Orbiters' work to provide feedback is also a stimulating process.

Becoming an Orbiter doesn't mean accepting all the feedback you get. You need to make sure your own voice comes through. Responding to feedback from my fellow Orbiters has helped to develop mine.

Writing Climate Change and Space Science in **Not Dark Yet**

by Berit Ellingsen

Beritt Ellingsen has successfully used her background in environmental science for her novel, Not Dark Yet. Here, she discusses her research.

Recently, we've seen a wave of post-apocalyptic novels, set after the fall of the civilization, caused by pandemic, drought, zombies, or the extinction of bees. The post-apocalypse has become a common theme in both speculative and literary fiction, ranging from *Station Eleven* to *The Southern Reach* trilogy or *MaddAddam*. But even among the novels where climate change has caused the fall, few of them discuss the apocalypse itself in detail. Is global and disruptive climate change too horrific to contemplate, because it's too close to home? Or the subject is seen as too challenging to research and read about?

My background is in biology, including basic ecology and the Earth's large scale natural systems, such as the carbonic cycle that binds carbon dioxide to the Earth's crust, and the hydrological cycle, which describes the journey of water from rainfall to its eventual evaporation from the ocean once more. Morever, I work as a science journalist. Even though I rarely write about climate change per se, I regularly write about the methods by which changes in the Earth's climate or environment are measured and analyzed.

The news concerning climate change and the sixth extinction, the era of mass extinction that we are currently in because of climate change and destruction of the environment, is (of course) rarely good. A terrifying number of plant and animal species have become red-listed in just a few years — or have already gone extinct. Here in Norway one of the largest bird colonies – in the bird mountain of Røst – has died away in less than two decades. The loss of a whole species, both known and unknown, is, for a biologist, perhaps the most distressing aspect of climate change and is indicative of humanity's failure to be good stewards of this planet. The sense of failure was one of the drivers for writing my novel, *Not Dark Yet*.

During the two and a half years I spent writing the novel and submitting it for publication, the tone of both mainstream news and popular science reports about the sixth extinction have changed noticeably. Previously, most reportage about climate change held a clear tone of warning, of wanting to spread the word to implement social and political change. Some reports were even slightly optimistic, emphasizing the possibility of doing something about the challenges ahead, of a great collective turnaround before climate change became truly catastrophic.

Most of the articles in the major media still follow this form. But now other and more dire aspects have started to bleed in, ranging from academics saying they are working with advocacy and activism on the side because they feel they have no other way of bringing about change in the general public, to scientists admitting that they have started to think up alternative places to live and plans to reach these locales once climate change becomes too much for their home countries to handle. There are even reports of scientists breaking down and crying in front of their peers in academic conferences and presentations about climate change. And then there are those who are convinced that climate change will become so disruptive and destructive to our way of life that human civilization will not be able to ride out the hard times, and openly admit that they have given up hope. Such discussion has, up until now, mostly passed unheard in the major media. But it is clear that for the people on the front lines of the climate debate, the gathering knowledge about the growing changes in the global climate, and the deepening of the sixth extinction, what they see of the future gives no reason for optimism at all.

When I first started writing *Not Dark Yet* I wanted to use the knowledge I had about climate change to make the setting and the changes that occur in

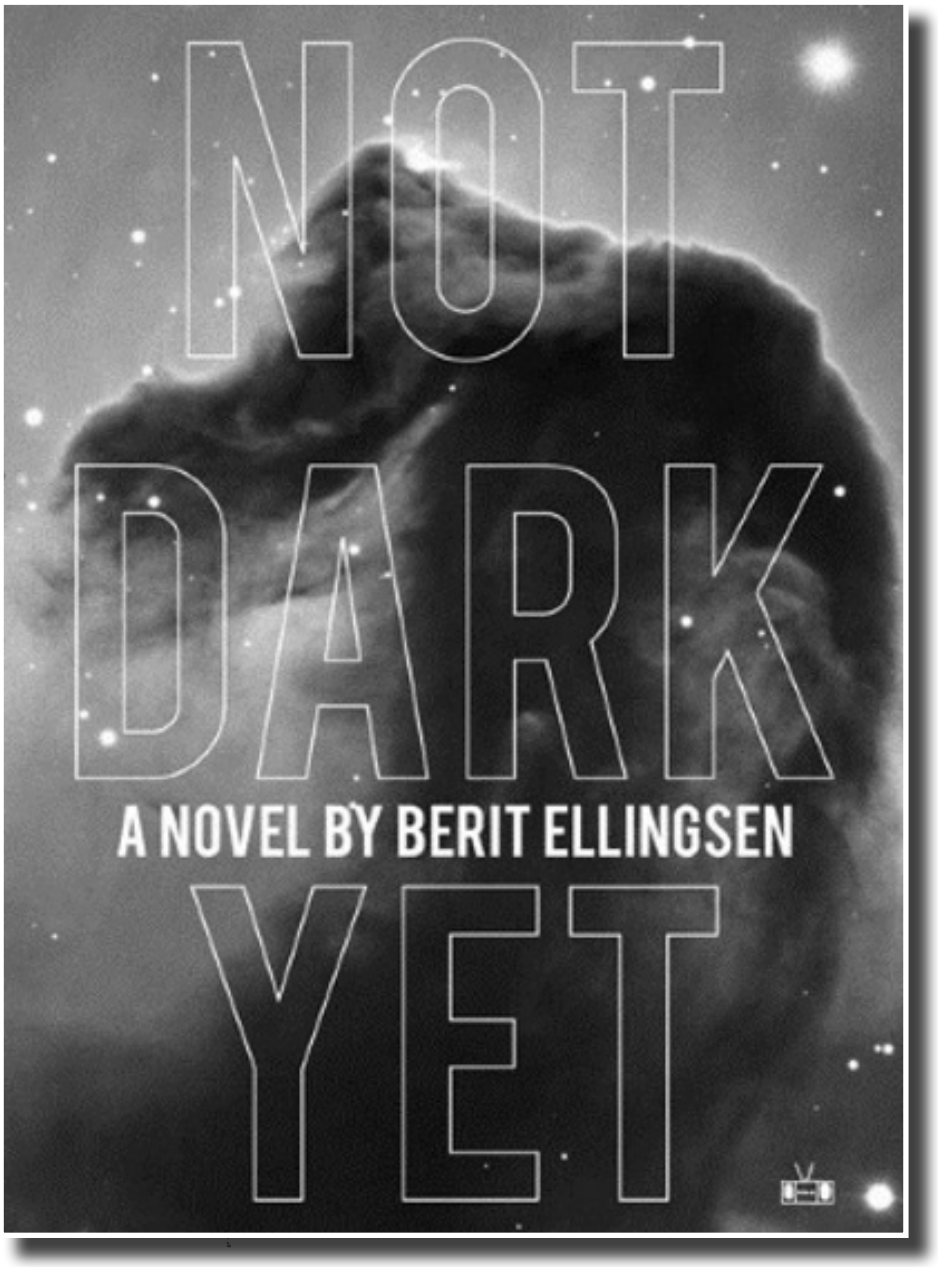
the novel as realistic and as close to current science as possible. As a result, the speculative element of the novel may be slight – unless one regards our knowledge of climate change and the sixth extinction as fantasy. I included in the novel, among other aspects of climate change, the rate of extinction of species, the speed with which global warming is happening, the projections for the populations of fish caught as food today, and the collapsing of the world's ice masses.

But today, just two and a half years later, the data I used as background for the novel is no longer accurate. Most of the changes described in *Not Dark Yet* have happened faster and at a larger scale than any scientist anticipated just those few years ago. This is especially true for global warming and sea level rise. Currently, I can't think of a single aspect of climate change that has happened more slowly than the scientific community anticipated.

In the discussion of climate change science, we rarely hear that one of the major activities of space organizations such as the European Space Agency and NASA, is the monitoring of the natural environment. Space agencies are also engaged in researching new technologies and ways to measure climate change, and analyzing and modeling the data. Collectively, this is known as Earth observation, and includes satellites measuring wind speeds or methane content in the various layers of the atmosphere, and mapping the Earth's gravity field in order to measure sea levels and the thickness of the polar ice. Both ESA and NASA have launched satellites to monitor all types of aspects of climate and the environment, on a local as well as a global scale. These activities are on a par with space exploration and the development of telecommunication systems and satellite navigation that the space organizations do.

In *Not Dark Yet*, a new selection of astronaut candidates has been announced from one of the major space organizations, and the novel's protagonist applies for the testing. He is driven by curiosity and a dream of going to Mars, and is selected to travel to astronaut training with a group of candidates. I tried to keep the descriptions of the astronaut selection process as realistic as possible, while at the same envisioning a little of what the very near future of space exploration might look like, as I did in my BSFA award nominated story, *Dancing On The Red Planet*.

Currently, American and European space agencies are having considerable success with their astronaut programmes, with new astronauts steadily being launched to the International Space Station (ISS). And the ISS is turning into a real stepping stone for longer space flights for the near future. It is also nice



to see two major space science projects, the European Rosetta comet landing, and NASA's New Horizon Pluto flyby, receiving a lot of interest by the public, not the least on social media. The dream of space seems to be alive and well, at least in some part of the public. However, when it comes to climate change, things are a little different. In the World Climate Summit (COP 21) that is to take place in Paris in December 2015, a binding deal to reduce greenhouse gas emissions will hopefully be worked out to include all major countries, not least the big emitters, China, the US, the EU, India, and Russia (in that order). However, things are not looking good, as the political will to commit to a binding agreement and a slowing down of the fossil fuel industry seems almost nonexistent. In addition, there is strong doubt about whether current emissions reductions are enough to keep global warming from rising above the critical two degree target. On 2nd September 2015, Climate Action Watch, a cooperation project between several climate institutions, reported that with the current emissions and temperature increase the two degree target would be overshot long before 2100.

In light of all this, it very much feels like the numbers I used for creating the climate change future of *Not Dark Yet* in 2013 are already obsolete and that we are heading for a similarly disrupted and troubled world as in the novel.

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Berit Ellingsen's novel *Not Dark Yet* was published by Two Dollar Radio in November 2015. Berit is the author of the short story collection *Beneath the Liquid Skin* (firthFORTH Books) and the novel *Une Ville Vide* (PublieMonde), and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the British Science Fiction Award. She is a member of the Norwegian Authors' Union, and divides her time between Norway and Svalbard in the Arctic.

http://beritellingsen.com

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How Long Does It Take To Write A Novel?

by Tony Ballantyne

Tony Ballantyne offers us his experience on the fundamental question of a novel — how long is it?

Question: How long does it take to write a novel?

Answer: Fifteen days, twenty hours and fifty five minutes.

I know that because I clocked the time I spent working on my novel *Dream Paris*.

The time includes the writing of the first draft of the novel and three redrafts: first redraft, the second following feedback from my wife and a third following feedback from other readers.

Some statistics you might find interesting:

- I started on the 18th February, 2014 at 9:58am
- I finished on the 20th February, 2015 at 3:00pm exactly

If I'd been writing an 8 hour day the novel would have taken around 48 days to complete.

The book is almost exactly 100 000 words as it stands. Given that it took just short of 381 hours to write that gives an average word rate of a rather pitiful 262 words an hour. As the first draft took around half the total time to complete, that makes the word rate a more respectable 524 words an hour. As I normally average around 850 words an hour, the missing words are partially accounted for by the fact that I cut around 60 000 words from the novel due to mistakes, changing my mind or because it just felt right at the time.

But of course, the above figures don't tell all the story, because I started writing that novel a long time ago…

Some years ago I was standing outside Dobcross Brass Band club, just an hour before midnight. The dark hills rose up to touch the sky and the sky rose up forever. The sounds of brass bands faded in and out of hearing as the breeze stirred the warm June air…

I was there to watch my daughter march to the last competition of the Saddleworth Whit Friday Band contest. Around thirty children lined up in rows and, at the signal, began to march. This was their home town gig: the people of Dobcross applauded loudly as they marched away. The scene reminded me of other times that young people, not that much older then these, had marched away in uniform to the applause of villagers.

I wrote that scene down in my notebook, because I wrote things down on paper in those days (Nowadays I type things directly onto Evernote on my phone.) That scene became part of *Dream London*, and *Dream London* was the inspiration for *Dream Paris*. So is it fair to say that the time spent in writing down ideas should be included in the final clocking of *Dream Paris*?

If that's the case, I should talk about Occupy London, of visiting the protesters camping outside St Paul's Cathedral, back when people were still indignant about the Financial Crisis. I actually made a special trip on the tube in order to meet the protesters, as well to show my own support. I wrote down some descriptions, I chatted to the people there, I walked around soaking in the atmosphere of the place. Some of what I saw that day surfaced in *Dream London*, some of it inspired the events in *Dream Paris*.

But if I count the above, then I'd have to start clocking events from even further back still. The main reason that I wrote *Dream London* was that I wanted to make sense of something that had been living in my imagination for years. I had a place in my mind that was inspired by my time living in London, but I didn't understand what the place was. I'd imagined walking some of the streets; in my mind I'd spoken to some of the inhabitants. I'd even dreamed about visiting an abandoned church there, painted purple and decorated with stars. The trouble is, none of the things that I imagined made any sense.

Over time I built up a collection of scenes and impressions of another place, I developed a plot of sorts and a disparate collection of characters, but no story. This may sound like I'm being deliberately awkward, but I'm sure many other writers will have had the same experience: that of thinking you have a story, of trying to write a story, but for some reason not being able to. The time I spend writing *Dream London* does not include the time spent writing drafts only to abandon them and then turning to other projects.

Here's what I always suggest when other people have trouble writing.

- Go for a walk
- This is the age of the word processor, you don't have to write your story in a linear fashion. Write a later section, one that interests you.
- Always have two or three things on the go at once of different lengths. If you don't feel like working on the novel, have a go at the short story. Don't feel like fiction? Work on non-fiction
- Stop trying to get it right. Just follow a character and see where s/he goes. You don't have to use everything you write.
- Change things around. What if a character was the opposite sex? What if they were younger/older?
- Still can't write? Then take a break. If you're not enjoying writing your story, then it's unlikely that anyone's going to enjoy reading it.

The above originally appeared on my website as *Six Ways to Overcome Writer's Block*.

I did all the above, and perhaps I should have included the time I spent doing all of these above in my time calculation. But I didn't.

The starting point finally arrived when I realised something.

I didn't know why I wanted to write the story.

There has to be a reason for wanting to spend a year completing a novel, and I realised I didn't know what that reason was. What was it about *Dream London* that made we want to write it?

And so I thought about it, and I realised that the thing that fascinated me about Dream London was Dream London itself. What fascinated me was the logic behind the place, because Dream London does have a logic, even if it is illogical. I'm a mathematician, that's the way I think.

*There has to be a reason for wanting to spend a year completing a novel, and I realised I didn't know what that reason was. What was it about **Dream London** that made me want to write it?*

So I thought about the logic, I thought about what would exist in Dream London and what wouldn't. I thought about how people would react to the city, because I believe that's the key to a successful book: not trying to make the story fit your ideas, but rather letting the story arise from the reaction of the characters to their situation. Dream London fascinated me. Once I understood how it worked I would just have to turn the characters loose…

… and there it was, the book, ready to be written. An exercise in Dream Logic. All I needed was that last spark that would ignite the process. And then a friend told me the story that made everything crystalize, but I've written about that elsewhere…

And that was *Dream London*. And as I wrote *Dream London* I realised this was raising a whole load of other questions, and these were becoming the story behind *Dream Paris*.

So how long did it take to write *Dream Paris*? Probably about 25 years. But there will be ideas from before then of course…

One last thing to note. I may have spent a lot of time thinking about the books, but there came a time when I sat down and wrote them. I'm a teacher for part of my working life, a writer for the rest of it. My wife often points out that those are two things

everyone thinks they can do. And maybe everyone can, but one thing that makes someone a writer is the fact that they sit down and actually write. That's what I spent fifteen days, twenty hours and fifty five minutes doing in order to make *Dream Paris*.

So that's how long it takes to write a novel. Rather, that's how long my solo effort took, because then my editor made some excellent suggestions, and then there were two more redrafts, and then there was the copyedit...

*

If you're interested how I collected this data and how a diverse group of well known authors go about the process of actually writing, take a look at the *How Writers Write* section on my website:

http://tonyballantyne.com/how-to-write/how-writers-write/

If you found the tips on beating writers block useful you can find more such tips here:

http://tonyballantyne.com/how-to-write/six-tips-on/

If you're really interested in how I use the software to write and record the data here, you might find my tech blog interesting:

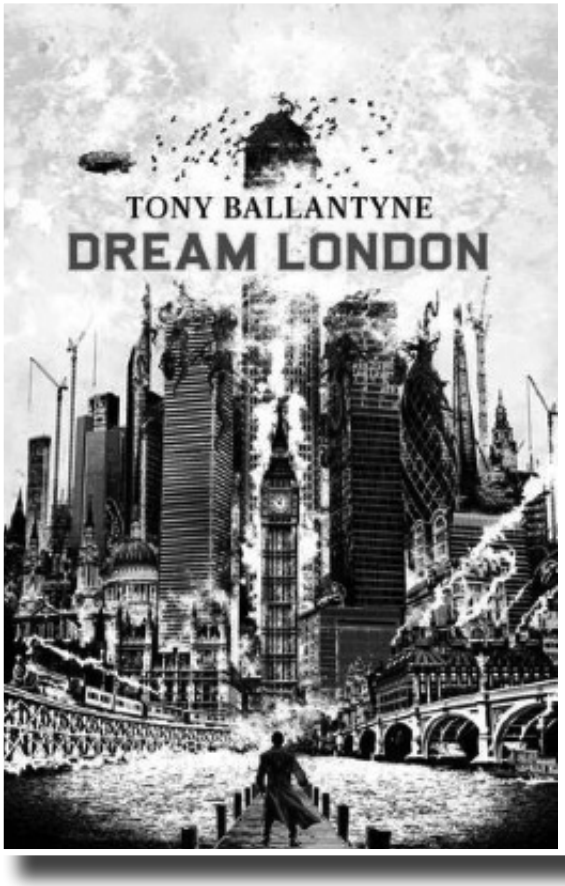
http://tonyballantyne.com/tech/

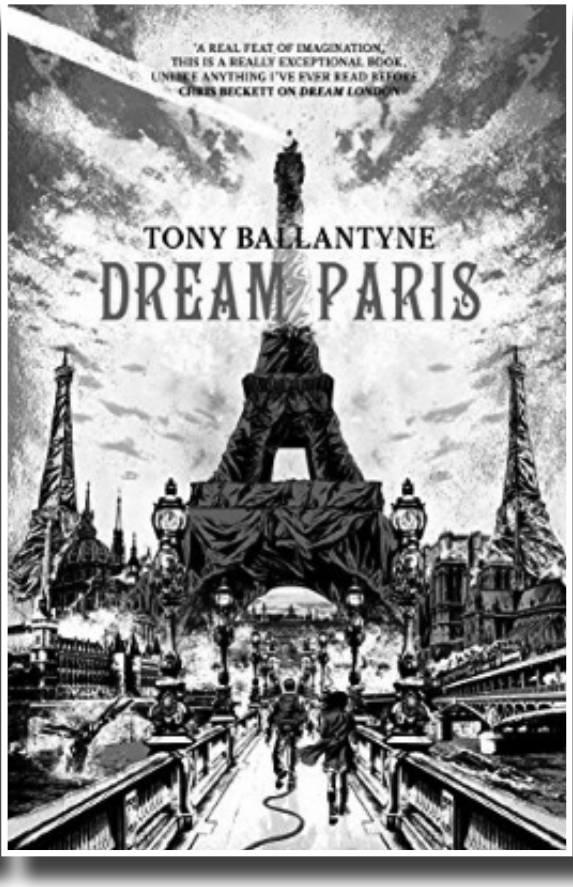
fin.

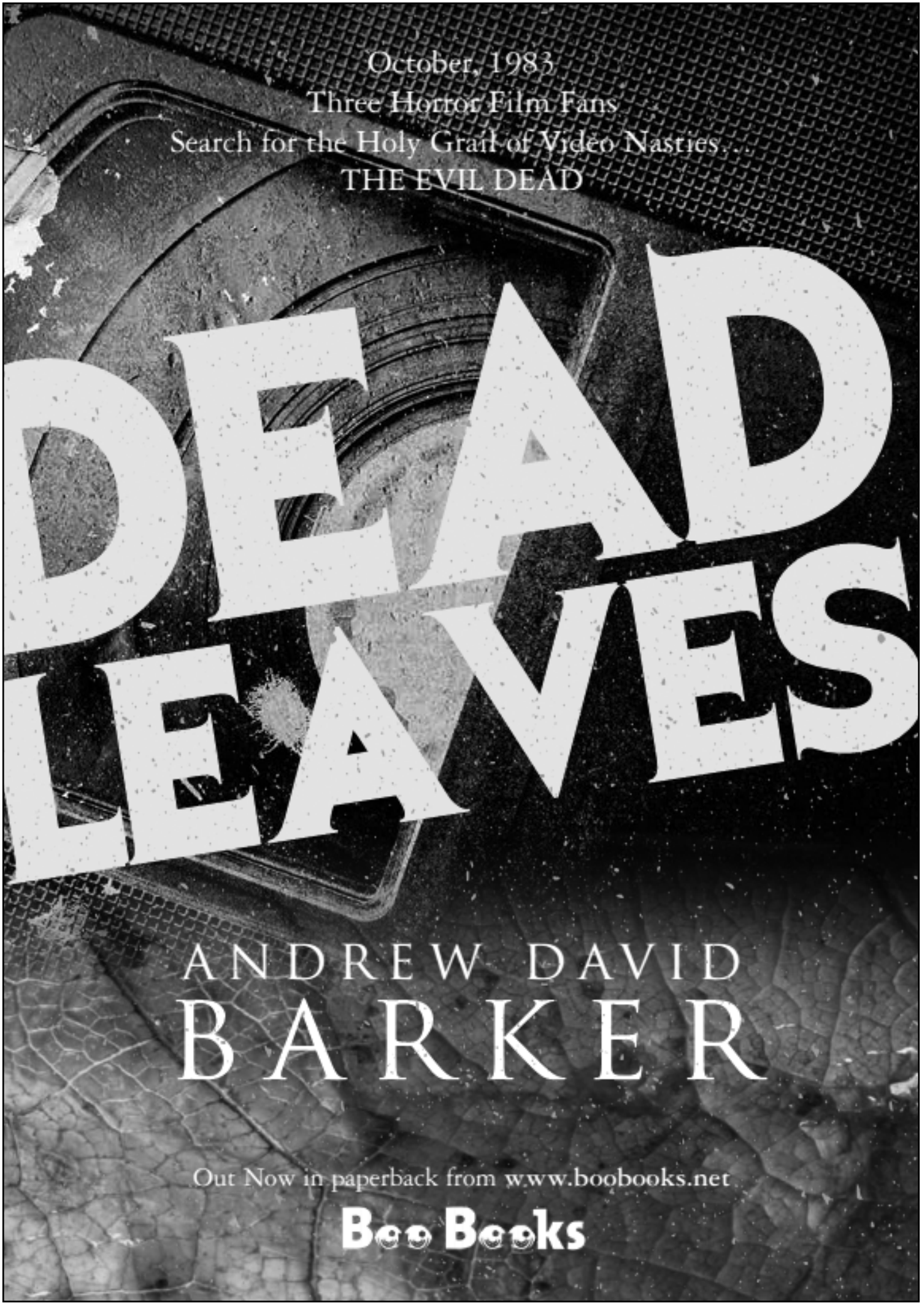
Tony Ballantyne is the author of the *Penrose* and *Recursion* series of novels as well as many acclaimed short stories that have appeared in magazines and anthologies around the world. He has been nominated for the BSFA and Philip K Dick awards.

Dream Paris, a follow up to the critically acclaimed *Dream London*, was published in September 2015.

http://tonyballantyne.com



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Ten Rules for Flash Fiction

by Charles Christian

Charles Christian is another longstanding contributor to FOCUS (his work compiling our poetry slot appears later in this issue). However, probably less well known is Charles' long involvement with short fiction contests.

For the past four years I've chaired the judging panel for SCI-FI-LONDON's annual flash fiction competition, and for the past two years I've edited ***Grievous Angel***'s SF&F flash fiction webzine. This means that I've not only read a lot of successful flash fiction but I've also read a very large number (on average ten a day for the past 18 months) of flash fiction stories that I've had to reject. I'd estimate that for every story I accept, nineteen others are rejected.

It is also worth noting that approximately 90% of all submissions come from North America. The point I'm making here is that American writers generally (I see the same with poetry submissions) seem to be more geared up to researching markets and submitting stories than writers in the UK. I'd obviously expect more as the US has a bigger population but not by such a huge proportion. Not so much a case of UK writers needing to raise their game as needing to be more active in making submissions.

Based on these experiences, I'd like to propose Ten Rules For Flash Fiction to ensure that your submissions, whether to publications or competitions, are supercharged to compete...

(1) **The Usual Suspects** - I'll start at the most important point (the basics). Before you even submit, have you ascertained whether or not the publication pays for submissions? Then have you checked out the copyright position: what is the publication asking for? I would also never ever give up all your copyrights to the magazine.

Hopefully the publication will have a submissions guidelines page on its website that clearly spells out its Terms & Conditions. If it doesn't, it cannot acquire your copyrights without you agreeing to it – so check to ensure there are no weasel words contained in any acceptance emails they send you, along the lines "By accepting our offer of publication, you assign the copyright of this work to us." If you don't like what you see, immediately contact them and say you are withdrawing your submission AND keep a copy of all your email correspondence.

Then, the next step is that you *must* follow the publication's manuscript and file formatting requirements (no one ever wants PDFs) and follow the particular publication's caveats, which may include: no reprints, no simultaneous submissions, no multiple submissions, and providing adequate contact details for yourself.

Leaving aside the inevitable shaking of head and muttering of "Don't these people ever read the T&Cs?" when I receive a 4000 word short story for a 700 word flash fiction slot, my own personal bugbear is people who leave a double space after a full stop. A WP is not a typewriter, you haven't needed to do that for 30 years.

(2) **Length** - The definition of flash fiction actually varies from market to market, and from competition to competition. Always check. With the lower limit for short stories generally at 2000 words, it is not unusual to see *maximum* word length for flash vary between 1500, 1000, 750, 500 or even 250 words *or less*. (Also note that the very shorter lengths may also be termed micro-fiction.)

Also, there may be a *minimum* word length – publications (particularly with print versions) that use a conventional page layout may set a minimum length to ensure that they're making effective use of the space at their disposal. Incidentally, a well written, *focused*, 300 word story is far more likely to be accepted than a padded-out 1500 word story.

(3) **Genre** - Although there is a tendency to lump all "speculative fiction" into the same genre pigeon hole, separate publications will have preferences. You need to check what they are, before you submit. Getting this wrong is on you, not the market. For example, the British magazine ***Dark Static*** is very much in the dark fantasy/horror market, so is not going to be a home for military science fiction or a high fantasy story. If in doubt, a handy guide for defining what these terms are (high fantasy, horror etc) can be found on Wikipedia under "Genre Fiction" and "Speculative Fiction". Another useful guide to markets that is regularly updated is Ralan's and this also includes a breakdown of the different market segments, such as Pro, Semi-Pro, Token, Anthologies, Books, Under 1000 words etc.

(4) **What Flash Fiction Is** - Flash Fiction should contain all the elements of a self-contained short story, including a beginning, a middle, and an end — even if some aspects may be implied. Yes, that simple, it is a proper story all in a very short word count.

(5) **What Flash Fiction Isn't** - Flash Fiction is not an extract or vignette from a longer story and should never end with the words 'To Be Continued...' Yes, also that simple, it has to be a story and it has to have a definite ending.

(6) **Immediate Action** - Start the action rolling *immediately*. You do not have the word-length luxury of a novel or even a 7500 short story in which to develop your tale. Be ruthless with your editing. Cut out waffling and any unnecessary dialogue or description. You are not writing an "Aga-Saga," you are writing the equivalent of a Ramones song "1-2-3-4 Gabba, Gabba Hey."

(7) **Gadgets & Tech** - Yes, this is SF and fantasy but readers still want characters. Editors want people in your story that their readers can engage with and care about. If your characters are cardboard cut-outs whose only purpose is to operate your gadgets, then why should anyone care whether they live or die?

(8) **Don't Offend** - Most editors will not object to sex, violence and swearing. They *will* object to gratuitous shock tactics. So if you want to write about sex, violence or swearing, make sure you set it within a legitimate context and that the reader and editor both understand why it is pertinent to the story. Submissions advocating racial or religious hatred, sexism, child abuse, etc will rightly be rejected by any decent editors. Use your commonsense. Edgy: Yes. Yes. Over the top XXX rated content: No.

(9) **Cliché endings** - This is flash fiction, but your flash is still a short story. It is not a preamble to a punchline which (a) probably isn't as funny as you think it is, (b) isn't going to be a twist that surprises the reader, and (c) is one the reader will have read before. "We appear to be the only survivors on this planet. My name's Adam." "Oh, hello, my name is Eve!" (These are also known as "Twilight Zone" endings.)

(10) **Finally**, **originality** - Never copy or plagiarise another writer's work (of course) but more than that you should strive to come up with new ideas at all times. Editors, and readers, crave originality. Fresh spins on established trope are also permissible (but tough to pull off). Too often editors and readers encounter stories where the denouement is predictable from the first paragraph. Oh yeah, it's the one where the protagonist has been dead all along (aka *The Sixth Sense* twist) – or is a vampire/werewolf/android/ghost but hasn't realised it yet.

So, be bold, make it fresh.

And lastly (yes, this is the unwritten Eleventh Rule that you should be prepared to break the other Ten Rules for)... **Have fun!** Seriously, if you are clearly having fun with your writing, this will be infectious and your audience will enjoy it too.

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Charles Christian can be found at ***www.Urbanfantasist.com*** and on Twitter: ***@Christian Uncut***

Charles is also the **FOCUS** poetry editor for our *Poems From The Stars* section. More details on page 34...

The Most Political Story is a Good One

by Keith Brooke

Keith Brooke is another writer with a long list of publications to his name. He has featured in FOCUS many times and previously acted as Guest Editor.

Sometimes things you've written down don't become relevant for years.

That's both the premise for, and the history of, my recent YA thriller (published under the name Nick Gifford).

Some time in the early 1990s I made this note in one of my ideas notebooks:

> *A boy helping sort his dead father's belongings. Keeping himself busy. He finds a diary, only the dates are in the future. Fanciful, clearly, but it must have been written recently, as events relate to current affairs. And then they start to come true: his father must have seen the future; or come from it. Even the things that have already happened were written in the future tense - odd...*

It was intriguing, and every few years I'd come back to it, but the story wouldn't come; all I had was that fragment, a father writing things down whose relevance will only later become clear.

I spent much of 2011 editing and compiling a non-fiction book about SF: *Strange Divisions and Alien Territories* (published in 2012 by Palgrave Macmillan). As well as including excellent chapters by the likes of Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Justina Robson, James Patrick Kelly and others, I wrote a chapter about what I called topian fiction: utopias and dystopias. Among other things, I argued that fiction doesn't come much more political than science fiction. Every time an SF writer sits down to write about a near future, or even a far future, she or he is making political choices: in that future, there either is or isn't climate change or resource depletion; humankind has survived by making certain choices, or survival hasn't been an issue because these problems were not genuine. We can't get away from confronting these questions, though, whatever our beliefs; even if we sidestep these issues, we're making a political statement by doing so.

This is an issue that has played on my mind throughout my writing career, and I've often been labelled a political writer, whatever that means (as I've already argued, how could I not be?).

But the last thing I'd ever try to do is to write polemical fiction! I don't want to write stories with a moral. The morals in my story are a consequence of that story's events, they're not its raison d'être.

That note, that story fragment, finally came to life after I'd been working on *Strange Divisions*. To me that note suggested thriller, near-future, cataclysmic upheavals and their repercussions for my protagonists: Luke, the grieving teenager, will have to deal with events yet to happen, and chances are they'll be events on a broad canvas. Let's make it dramatic!

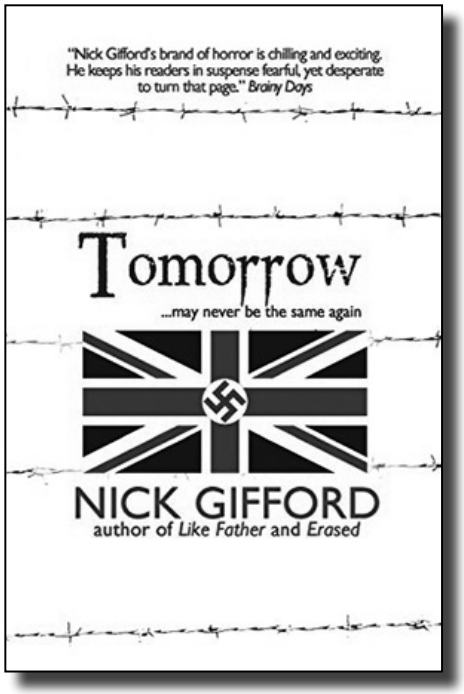
But how to write a near-future time-travel thriller about the collapse of Western civilization (as it looked like being), without getting bogged down in the politics?

That held me back for the longest time before realization struck: I do exactly what I've always done. I write about characters I care about, and their challenges, and forget the rest.

One of the most basic rules: it's all about the story.

And the story is all about the characters.

Luke, sitting in his father's office. Grieving for a father who had been distant, at best (and of course, as the story unfolds, we come to understand the reasons for his father having been so distant). Wanting to comfort his mother but not knowing how. The least he can do is sort a few things out. So he goes through his father's laptop, saving things that his mother might need (photos, details of bill payments, that kind of thing), and deleting the junk. And then he finds the electronic journal. The first entry is a seemingly innocent note about



an unseasonal snowy Easter. A note that had been written a month before that Easter... a reminder of severe weather to come.

The next note, dated for the day when Luke is reading his father's files, is about the death that day of his uncle... From that point, Luke is drawn into an ever-more-complicated tangle of events, warnings of things to come, and attempts to change those events based on warnings from the future.

At the same time it emerges that others are aware of what Luke's father had been involved with, and they start to close in. In a desperate race to work out who he can trust and who is an enemy, Luke and his friends find themselves in a battle to prevent a future that is unfolding already: a massive refugee crisis triggered by environmental change, and the rise of fascist right-wing groups determined to shut out the refugees and 'defend our own', a world tearing itself apart as things get tight.

You see? It's that politics thing, slipping in again.

But for me, this is exactly how it should be. Story and characters must come first, but for the scenario to be credible, the extrapolations should take everything into account: we can't ignore the uncomfortable probabilities of the near future. Last month's IPCC report on the impact of climate change couldn't have been better timed for *Tomorrow*: this is the future; this is the backdrop of any believable near-future story.

Is it crass of me to talk about things like climate change as mere mechanisms to make my stories credible? I really hope not. Because credible stories, with characters we care about, help us to see the world for how it is, and how it will very probably be.

So yes, I write political science fiction. I can't imagine *not* doing so, because for me, 'political SF' is a synonym for 'good SF', and that's what I always set out to do.

Tomorrow, a time-travel novel about the destruction of the world and those who might just be able to save it, was published in March 2014 under Keith Brooke's pen-name Nick Gifford.

Ebook: *Amazon US - Amazon UK - Barnes and Noble - Kobo - Apple - Smashwords*

Paperback: *Amazon US - Amazon UK*

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Keith Brooke is the author of fourteen novels, six collections, and over 70 short stories; his most recent SF novel ***alt. human*** (published in the US as *Harmony*) was shortlisted for the 2013 Philip K Dick Award and his story "War 3.01" was shortlisted for the 2015 Seiun Award. He is also the editor of *Strange Divisions and Alien Territories: the Sub-genres of Science Fiction*, an academic exploration of SF from the perspectives of a dozen top authors in the field. Writing as Nick Gifford, his teen fiction is published by Puffin, with one novel also optioned for the movies by Andy Serkis and Jonathan Cavendish's Caveman Films. He writes reviews for the *Guardian*, teaches creative writing at the University of Essex, and lives with his wife Debbie in Wivenhoe, Essex.

http://keithbrooke.co.uk

The Arvon Writers' Workshop

Since 1968, Arvon has been offering people time and space to write. It runs an annual programme of residential courses at three rural writing houses – in Devon, Shropshire and Yorkshire. Tutored by leading authors, the week-long courses offer a powerful mix of group workshops, one-to-one tutorials and individual writing time. At the heart of Arvon is the desire to encourage anyone, regardless of their background, to find their voice through writing. Arvon is a charity and 45 residential weeks each year are with groups from schools, youth and community groups and arts organisations. ***www.arvon.org***

Together Joanna Kavenna and Liz Jensen will lead the 2016 Speculative Fiction course at Arvon's country house in Shropshire. Here, they talk about what experimental fiction means to them and why it matters.

Speculative Fiction:
Writing about what you don't know
Nov 28th - Dec 03rd 2016
The Hurst

What if there were a writing course that covered all the basics – story structure, characterisation, setting, and themes – but took things further? We're often told to "write about what we know," to base our stories on our own real lives. But in Speculative Fiction anything goes, from historical 'what ifs?' to parallel realities, to sci-fi to satire and fantasy. If you have ever wanted to fashion an alternative reality, govern your own imaginary civilisation, or stray beyond the boundaries of daily life, then this is the course for you.

Single room price: £ 750

The experimental fiction course will take place at the Hurst (Shropshire). Places available: 16
Cost: £750 single room £650 shared room
More info and bookings: ***http://www.arvon.org/course/speculative-fiction/*** of phone 0207 324 2554

Liz Jensen on 'Speculative Fiction'

'Speculative Fiction — the broadest church there is, which is one of the reasons I'm looking forward to teaching it at Arvon: there will be huge variety.

My version of "speculative" always starts with the same question. It's the question that Shakespeare, Swift, Wells, Huxley, Orwell, Asimov, Carter, Ballard, King, Murakami, Atwood, Mitchell and a thousand other wonderful writers all ask repeatedly: "What if?". Ask it of anything that fascinates or puzzles you, and whole worlds start to unfold. It's simply the most stimulating question I know.

Research is a great springboard. But the truth is, I like building castles in the air. The imagination is a muscle: use it or lose it. So in some ways I am quite anti-research. My attitude is: write the story you want to write, then find the facts to fit it. Or twist them to fit it. Or if you can't do that, just go ahead and make them up! I repeat, *make them up*. Your readers are there to enjoy a good story, and in fiction, everything's allowed. That's why it's so liberating. It can take you anywhere and if you do it right, your readers will come with you. If your castle in the air appears rock-solid despite being a figment, then your fiction is doing its job.

The biggest challenge for speculative fiction writers is rooting their "otherworlds" in the recognizable. You need the reader on board from the beginning. They must be able to feel, viscerally, that they are in a strange world – but not an alienating one. Creating plausible characters is crucial to this. It is all too tempting to let the ideas drive the fiction. But if the ideas have no fully-rounded flesh-and-blood representatives, champions and opponents, they will feel arid and theoretical.

One of the most useful pieces of advice I heard when I was starting out as a writer was, "You can do anything you like." I never forget that. So simple, so obvious, so crucial – and so easily forgotten. When I teach, I pass it on. Another tip is to think big. Be as extreme as you can. Flex that muscle.

Joanna Kavenna on 'Speculative Fiction'

1) What does 'Speculative Fiction' mean and why did you choose this genre for your next Arvon course?

To me 'speculative fiction' is a gloriously fluid and eclectic genre, which includes anything in which the conventions of literary realism are being tested or even obliterated. In a conventional realist novel you can't create a parallel world, or metamorphose into a forest creature, or merge every character into a great pan-human super-being called 'Wherim.' But in speculative fiction you can do this, and much more besides. You can fashion your own sub-genre; you can subvert and innovate. It is a versatile, exciting and constantly-evolving genre, and I think that makes it a great starting premise for a course…

2) How important is research in speculative fiction writing?

It depends utterly on the sort of novel you're writing, and the sort of writer you are. The imagination is completely personal. If you're the sort of writer who produces novels from the deep well of your psyche, without any research at all, then that's great. If your novels usually emerge as a result of leafing through musty tomes in libraries, then that's great too. 'Research' for writers can also involve informal enterprises such as overhearing conversations on buses, talking to people, and just, in general, being alive... It is a strange profession, in which no experience is wasted, and influences get buried, only to emerge decades later.

3) In your experience as both a tutor and a professional writer, what is the biggest challenge for speculative fiction writers and what is the first piece of advice you'd give to someone just starting out?

The major challenges include:

- Trying to find the time to write your first novel, commensurate with earning your living and looking after your family.
- Trying, then, to find a publisher who is sympathetic to your kind of writing.
- Trying to get the time to write your second novel, commensurate, still, with earning your living and looking after your family.
- Finding a publisher for that novel, which might well be almost as hard as finding a publisher for your first novel – and so on...

I'd say to anyone starting out: that you will encounter people along the way who tell you, with absolute certainty, that your kind of fiction 'isn't right for the market' or, more strangely, that it just 'isn't right.' These people are mere mortals, however; they cannot see into the future. They cannot determine, for all time, the precise parameters of what is 'right' and what is 'good.' So, it's best to thank them for their advice, listen to any constructive and specific criticism, and politely ignore their wider prophecies of doom.

4) Who do you think would benefit most from this 5-day residential course?

Anyone who has invented parallel worlds, or devised alternate civilisations, or imagined, dreamed and speculated! Anyone who has been working on a crazy and wonderful story for a while, and is looking for a way to finish it. Or, anyone who has a crazy and wonderful story in mind, and is looking for ideas about how to structure and begin it. Or anyone who would love to write a crazy and wonderful story, but is normally committed to a routine that doesn't permit time to write.

5) What's the first thing to bear in mind when trying to imagine a new civilisation from scratch?

A writer once told me, when I was starting out, that any imaginary civilization must be rooted in the concerns of the real world, or it won't convince a reader. I disagree. To me, the great thing about creating a new civilization is that you get to decide all the rules. It's your civilization, and your imagination. So you can decide whether it is rooted in the concerns of the present-day real world, or whether it is rooted in the concerns of a world that you have invented as well.

The first thing to bear in mind is that, in the world of your imagination, you are free.

Setting The Scene

by Dev Agarwal

Previously a regular contributor under Martin McGrath's tenure as FOCUS editor, Dev Agarwal describes his thinking around writing necessary but transitional scenes in a story.

As readers many of us will be familiar with the idea that a story comes about through a number of ingredients coming together — setting, structure and exposition, for example.

Some of these ingredients become so overused — or used without enough forethought — that they become superficial or cliché: such as when characters are detectives who don't play by the rules, or politicians who ruthlessly launch power games against everyone around them. However, if those character types are necessary for the story you want to tell, it becomes a particular challenge for the writer to deliver them and avoid the trap of cliché.

Just as this applies to characters it also applies to the other ingredients as well.

Most, possibly all, drama is driven by conflict (in the sense that the protagonist is given the conflict of a problem that he or she must resolve). In setting up the conflict, the writer sometimes has to provide what we might call "necessary exposition," when the writer moves the characters through scenes that present the conflict to us. The author ideally does so without interrupting the momentum of the story. The dilemma is not just to avoid cliché, but how to deliver exposition in a way that is clear while not heavy handed. I'd suggest that a successful example of this appears in the film, *Escape From New York*.

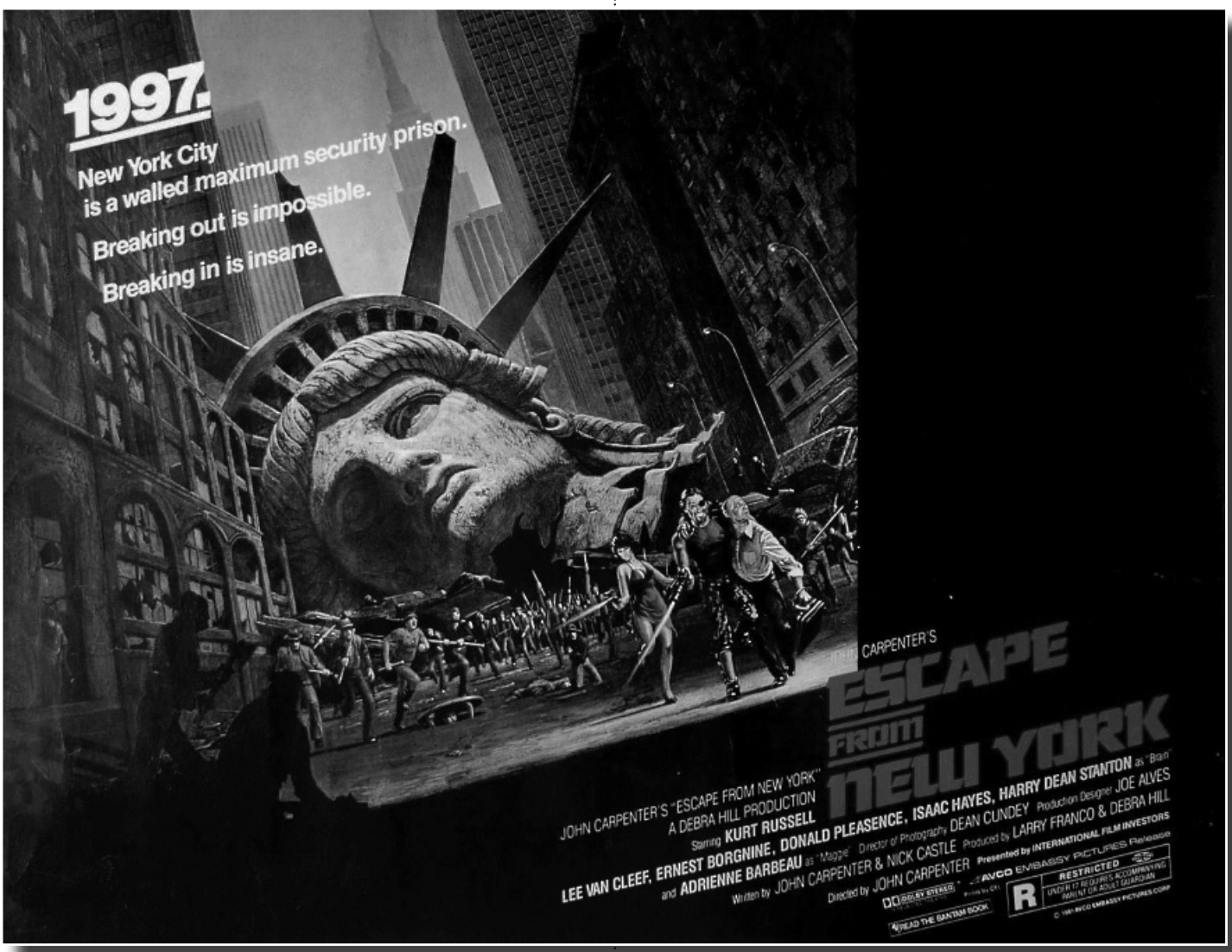
The film's premise is that, in a dystopian future, America is in a perpetual war with the Soviet Union and China. The nations are locked in a stalemate and at home, America has descended into a police state, with New York as its sole maximum security prison. If you're sent to New York, there are no rules, just the lawless world inside the prison. The president's plane is sabotaged and crashes into New York. The president survives and is taken hostage by the inmates.

Simultaneously, Snake Plissken, the film's protagonist, has been arrested for robbery and is about to enter New York as a lifer prisoner. His punishment is interrupted by the warden, Bob Hauk, who offers him a deal: go into New York, but as a government agent, and rescue the president. Plissken will be pardoned and released if he cooperates.

This scene is pivotal. Without it, there's no explanation for us of the film's premise or Plissken's part in the rescue. John Carpenter, *Escape's* director, establishes the set up with noticeable economy of both language and film time. A choice he makes is that many of the background details are deliberately minimal. By this point in the film, we know no more about the overall worldbuilding than I've just described. There's a global war. The president was on his way to the "Hartford Summit" to meet his Chinese and Russian enemies. He is carrying information that could either win or end the war. He has a tape recording (very 1980s) that contains information about nuclear fusion that is somehow crucial (the implication being that the US has a superweapon to threaten its enemies with). But beyond that, we aren't told anything more. Carpenter strips the detail down to the least context and motivations. The film's background is about a global war, one that is apparently gruelling and long running. Plissken, off screen, served in the war in the past. Also off screen, is what life is like in America. Crime is running out of control and the president is accused of being a Nazi. His police force bears the iconic imagery of a fascist regime and is armed with assault rifles, its policemen masked and faceless.

The majority of *Escape* is the journey through this world by Snake Plissken, who is an extreme outsider and anti-hero. But in the establishing scene where Bob Hauk interviews Plissken, our focus is initially not with Plissken, but with Hauk. He tells Plissken that "A plane went down. The president was onboard."

This encounter also provides an opportunity for Carpenter to reveal Plissken's reactions to the proposal. His responses to Hauk aren't expositional in turn. This neatly avoids a staple of bad science fiction dialogue, what the Turkey City Lexicon calls "As you know Bob," writing, where two characters "tell each other things they already know, for the sake of



getting the reader up to speed." In fact, we aren't *ever* fully up to speed.

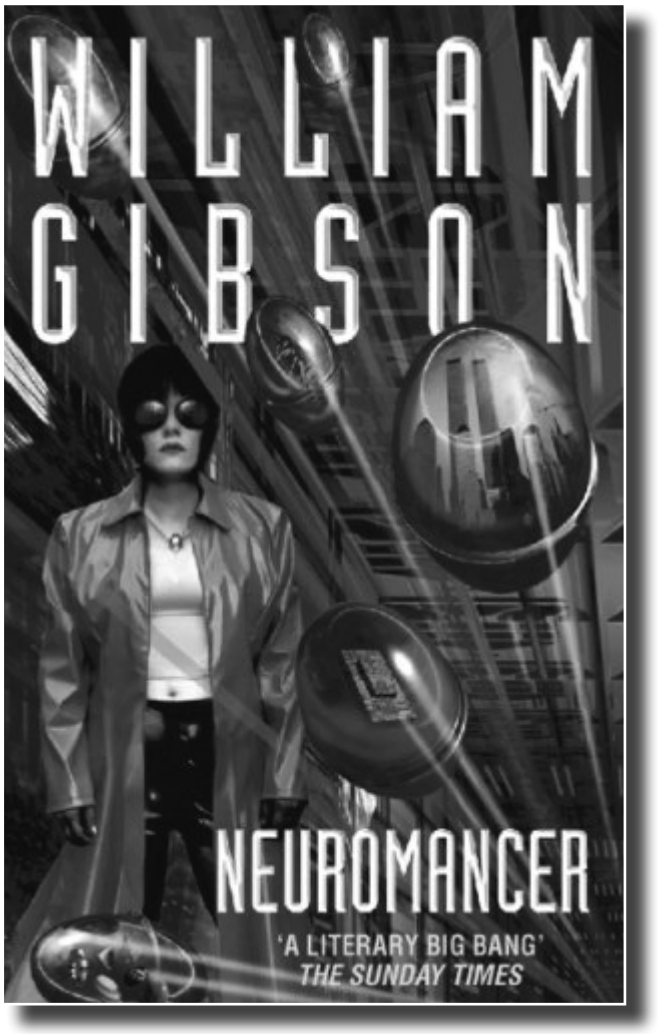
When Hauk tells Plissken that the president is missing, Plissken's initial responses are: "President of what?" and "Get another president." As Plissken isn't giving Hauk expositional responses this allows his remarks to become revelatory about his tone and attitude. His sarcasm reveals his hostility to Hauk's authority. He does not care about the plight of the president, or the urgency that the government places on his rescue.

This is where the character of the protagonist — and the tone of the story itself — is established for us. Another lesson for the writer is that this scene reveals how exposition can be delivered simultaneously alongside characterisation.

The essential "bones" of this scene is Hauk recruiting Plissken and Plissken agreeing to go on the rescue. It forms the gateway to the actual caper in New York prison. But wisely Carpenter uses this scene to establish Hauk's intransigence and also the resistant attitude at the heart of Plissken's character. These attitudes form a duality that carries through the rest of the film — Hauk directs Plissken by radio from outside the prison and Plissken reports back and argues with Hauk from inside New York. At one point Plissken demands that he comes out because the president must be dead and "someone's had him for dinner." Hauk's response remains as stubborn as at the start of the film. He not only refuses to stop the rescue but he lists the ways he'll stop Plissken abandoning it and trying to leave New York ("Plissken, if you get back in that glider, I'll shoot you down. You climb out, I'll burn you off the wall."). Plissken's responses are to continually resist Hauk while working with him. Theirs is a forced partnership that lasts until the final showdown at the end of the film, where the hostility between them reaches its dramatic climax. Carpenter establishes the dynamics of that relationship in their initial meeting.

Another challenge with this type of scene is how to make it engaging when we already have some expectation of what will happen. The scene's purpose is to explain the central conflict of the story — the

president is trapped and Hauk needs to rescue him. Carpenter keeps it fresh by revealing characterisation. Plissken is shown to be — surprisingly for the hero — a nihilist or sociopath and definitely in opposition to the people controlling him.



The underlying premise of the film is that Plissken is the one reliable element of individualism and freedom left in a world gone wrong. Carpenter describes every other character in the film as: "I think I made everybody corrupt in this world. It's entirely a nihilistic corruption blanket of this future. Snake Plissken is really the only man with honour because he doesn't care about anybody." One interpretation is that America is a fascist police state and therefore anyone who cooperates with them — including Plissken — is assisting fascists. We wouldn't want him to help. So Plissken has to be forced.

Plissken enters Hauk's office under guard. His first actions are to ask Hauk to remove his handcuffs and then, without asking, to take a cigarette. His attitude is constantly looking for the advantage — alert to the peculiarity of this meeting.

We also learn about Hauk. Hauk comes across as a powerful man. He sits in a large office, important behind his desk, and in control of the entire prison, but also he's under pressure. He answers to politicians above him. Confronted by Plissken's sarcasm and indifference, he becomes annoyed. And, in turn, Plissken *still* doesn't care. He's been caught, he's going to the worst punishment the dictatorship has — permanent exile in New York. *Irritating* someone doesn't even register with him — if anything it's a final pleasure.

Hauk presses Plissken to give an answer about the rescue. We know Plissken will accept, but even his acceptance brings more conflict: "I guess I go in one way or the other, doesn't mean shit to me."

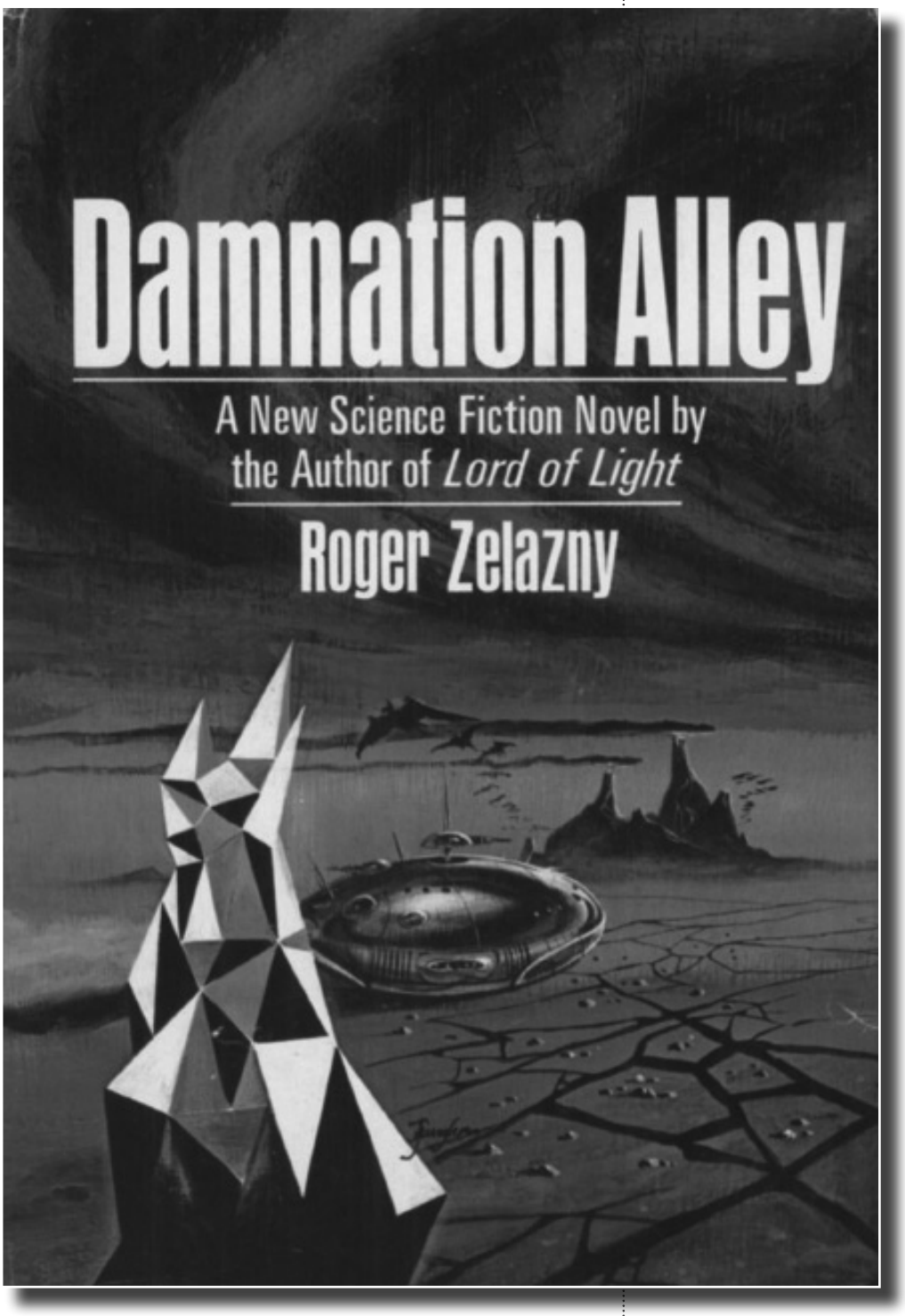
The scene ends and in one sense it stops interrupting the flow of the story. But if you have a scene, the lesson we might draw from it is, why not make it work twice as hard? Reveal not just the next step in the plot but also the motives of your protagonists.

Given that this scene is a common staple of caper and adventure stories, other variations of it exist, including of course, in the genre:

William Gibson has said that *Escape From New York* was highly influential for his debut novel, *Neuromancer*. In *Neuromancer*, Case, the cyberspace cowboy, is strong-armed into meeting Armitage — the shadowy figure who directs their mission. At their first meeting, Armitage immediately starts trying to manipulate and recruit Case. Case's reactions are similarly revelatory to Plissken's.

> *"Case." He looked up, seeing the man for the first time. "My name is Armitage"...Blue eyes so pale they made Case think of bleach. "Sun's up, Case. This is your lucky day, boy."*
>
> *Case whipped his arm sideways and the man easily ducked the scalding coffee...*
>
> *The man smiled." p38*

This moment of Case throwing his coffee at Armitage is really a very minor act of rebellion. But it allows Gibson to show that Case rejects normal behaviour and social rules. And, at the same time, as with Plissken and Hauk, it sets up Case's cooperation. He's rebelled, but not enough to derail the story. Gibson shows that Case and Armitage are reluctant and distrustful partners, but partners nevertheless — the same dynamic in the relationship between Hauk and Plissken. Their resistance sets the tone of the story, while their cooperation allows the plot to continue.



Considering *Escape* once more, there are even alternative versions of the very same scene.

The establishing scene (and basically the rest of the film) was reprised by Carpenter, Kurt Russell and producer Debra Hill, to less effect in *Escape From LA*. This again shows that Plissken is reluctant to cooperate with the totalitarian regime but as everything is clumsily signposted it loses its dramatic power. *Escape From LA* unfortunately appears to show us that even the people who created Snake Plissken could not find a way to visit the ingredients successfully a second time.

Yet another variation of the scene comes in Mike McQuay's novelisation of *Escape From New York*. McQuay's novelisation added additional dimensions to the film, including widening the details of the totalitarian American state and the nature of the war. In his version, the global war is not only being fought overseas but also in America itself and the nation is polluted with hallucinogenic poison gas. This drives everyone into a permanent state of mental imbalance. If anything, his version makes the story grimmer and bleaker.

What McQuay gets wrong, in my view, is that he adds extra dialogue to Hauk and Plissken's scene and unwisely humanises Plissken as a consequence. In McQuay's version, Plissken appears more equivocal and cooperative with Hauk rather than persistently resistant.

Lastly, I should add that Carpenter's scene also looks suspiciously like it's lifted from the opening of Roger Zelazny's *Damnation Alley*. They both begin with an interview in an office where the details of a criminal anti-hero's recruitment to a nearly impossible mission are hammered out.

However, even with that caveat, Carpenter's version of the scene works because it delivers both necessary exposition and establishes the essence of the characters. It also reveals much of its information through showing, rather than telling. And ultimately, it moves the story forward. A neat trick for under three minutes of screen time.

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Processions that lack high stilts have nothing that catches the eye.

What if my great-grandad had a pair that were twenty foot high,

And mine were but fifteen foot, no modern stalks upon higher...

(*High Talk* by W.B. Yeats)

High Stilts: The Use of Language in Fiction

by Sandra Unerman

Retired government lawyer, current novelist and active Orbiter, Sandra Unerman now discusses...

High style in language is not in fashion these days. Anyone who tries to write with the flourishes of E.R.Eddison or H.P. Lovecraft will be advised to cut down the adjectives and adverbs and to rid themselves of elaborate sentence structure and purple prose.

It is certainly difficult to take Lovecraft seriously when he writes '...I shall never sleep calmly again when I think of the horrors that lurk ceaselessly behind life in time and space, and of those unhallowed blasphemies from elder stars which dream beneath the sea, known and favoured by a nightmare cult ready and eager to loose them on the world...' (*The Call of Cthulhu*, Penguin edition, 1999) - and much more along the same lines.

Cynicism about anything but plain English has spread throughout our contemporary culture, so that 21st century readers are liable to distrust any rhetoric which draws attention to itself. This causes a problem for the writer of fantasy or science fiction who wants to depict a world widely different from the one we live in now, whether set in the past, the future or a wholly invented milieu. It is implausible to make the people in our fictions share the current aversion to rhetoric. Moreover, writers should have the scope to conjure up strangeness without being limited to the style of a realist novel.

Ursula Le Guin discusses this problem in her article *From Elfland to Poughkeepsie* (collected in *The Language of the Night*, Berkley, 1979). She focuses on dialogue as particularly important in establishing style. Dialogue in fiction is liable to become unreadable if it simulates real speech too closely, with all the incoherence and repetition of ordinary conversation. But Le Guin contends that dialogue in fantasy fiction ought to be further removed from the everyday than dialogue in a naturalistic novel. She prefers Eddison's archaism, although she warns of the dangers of his style, seen in this passage from an early chapter of *The Worm Ouroboros* (1926, Dell edition, 1991).

'The King looked sourly upon Lord Gro and said,

'Thy counsel is unacceptable and unseasonable. What lies behind it?"

'Gro answered, "There have been omens, O King."

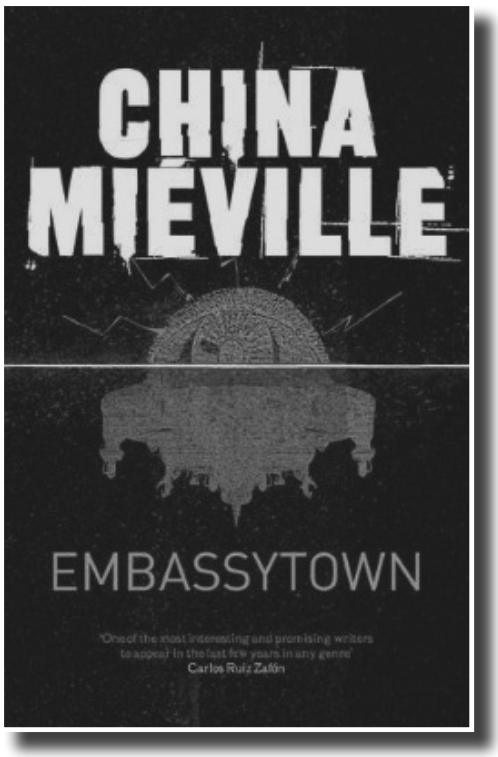
'And the King said, 'What omens?"

'Gro answered and said, "I will not hide it from you, O my lord the King, that in my sleep about the darkest hour a dream of the night came to my bed and beheld me with a glance so fell that the hairs of my head stood up and pale terror gat hold upon me."

This expresses the writer's vision of the world with every word, as Le Guin says. But the overall effect is off-putting to some readers and not easy to sustain without Eddison's deep familiarity with Jacobean and biblical prose.

Le Guin's aim is to warn against a flat, journalistic style, so she does not address in detail the question of how to write imaginatively without rousing the reader's distrust or disapproval – and I think the risk of that has increased since her essay was first published. How can writers use language to introduce variety and distance from the ordinary into their fiction? Dialogue is certainly key but the thoughts of the characters and the voice of the narrator are also critical.

In *Embassytown* (Macmillan, 2011), China Miéville makes the use of language a conscious theme, since the difficulty of communication between humans and aliens is key to the plot. This allows the characters to discuss the relationship between



language and thought in a way that makes for a fascinating but not always easy read.

On a more limited scale, Breq, Ann Leckie's first person narrator in *Ancillary Justice* (Orbit, 2013) has trouble speaking a language which marks gender, since her own does not. 'She was probably male, to judge from the angular mazelike patters quilting her shirt. I wasn't entirely certain. It wouldn't have mattered if I had been in Radch space. Radchai don't care much about gender and the language they speak - my own first language – doesn't mark gender in any way. The language we were speaking now did and I could make trouble for myself if I used the wrong forms.' This worries the narrator throughout the novel and the deployment of 'she' as the default third person pronoun reminds the reader of the strangeness of Breq's world without unduly complicating the story.

Ancillary Justice provides an interesting comparison with Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (Ace, 1969), which depicts aliens whose gender is variable. Le Guin conjures up the strangeness of their society powerfully by her descriptions of the way they live and think but the use of 'he' as the default arguably makes it too easy to envision the characters as predominantly male.

Frances Hardinge allows her characters to play with language in *Fly By Night* (Macmillan, 2005). Eponymous Clent is rescued from the village stocks by young Mosca Mye, who wants to travel with him. He asks if she knows what his profession is and she says, 'You tell lies for money.' Part of his response is 'Pray do not confuse the exercise of the imagination with mere mendacity. I am a master of the mysteries of words, their meanings and music and mellifluous magic.' And so he demonstrates, by changing the career of a highwayman through writing a ballad about him, amongst other things. Clent's eloquence gets him into trouble as often as out of it and becomes central to the plot.

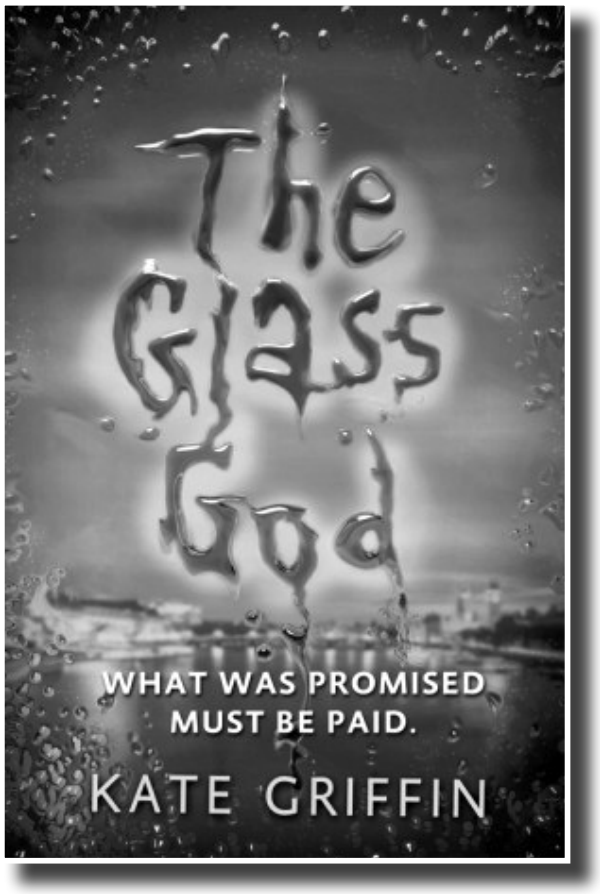
Not every story needs characters who acknowledge the power of words as openly as this. But writers can use their characters' awareness of language and its impact on society to powerful effect.

Humour enriches the style of many novels. Terry Pratchett's Disc World novels are exemplars of extravagant language whose humour both deflates the rhetoric and disarms the reader's suspicions. *Wyrd Sisters* (Victor Gollancz, 1988), begins with a description of a wild thunderstorm, 'the kind of night, you could believe, on which the gods moved men as though they were pawns on the chessboard of fate.' An eldritch voice shrieks 'When shall we three meet again?' and the answer comes 'Well, I can do next Tuesday.'

"Pray do not confuse the exercise of the imagination with mere mendacity. I am a master of the mysteries of words, their meanings and music and mellifluous magic."

***Fly By Night**, Frances Hardinge*

Some novelists take the voice of the narrator further away from current norms. In *Redemption in Indigo* (Small Beer Press, 2010), Karen Lord uses a folk-tale-like narrator, who provides a commentary in a distinctive voice – '…a life story is not a tidy thing. It is a half-tamed horse that you seize on the run and ride with knees and teeth clenched, and then you regretfully slip off as gently and safely as you can, always wondering if you could have gone a few metres more.' The choice of words is plain but the voice comes through the reflective tone and particular images. As a result, the story has a quasi-mythical quality quite unlike the ordinary fantasy adventure.



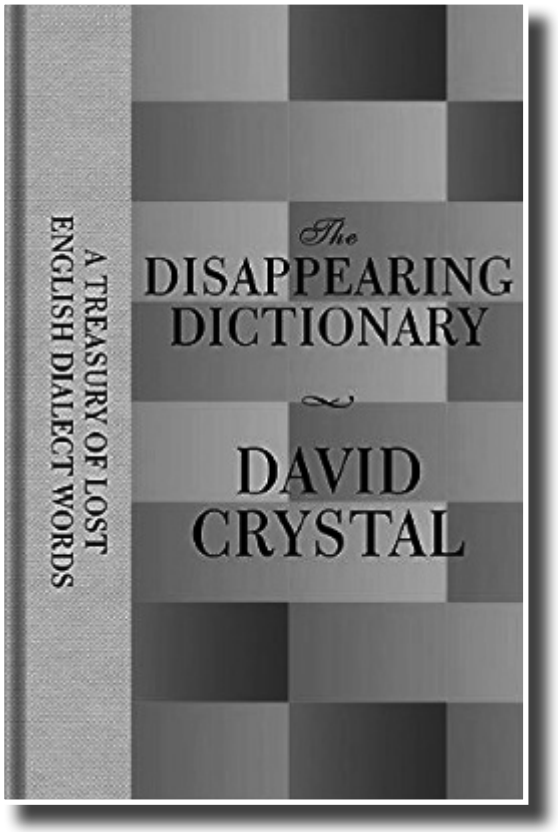
Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* (Bloomsbury, 2004) is set in the 1800s and the narrator sounds more like a contemporary of Jane Austen than of ours, not just in vocabulary but in the rhythms and syntax. Like Lord, Clarke resists the usual expectations of a modern reader. Her opening sentence, 'Some years ago there was in the city of York a society of magicians.' has no action or emotion and does not directly concern any of the main characters of the novel. But it says enough to intrigue the reader and draw us in. The formal voice is detached but its humour and lightness carry a lot of charm. But this approach will only work if it can be sustained without becoming stilted or cumbersome.

In *A Game of Thrones* (HarperCollins, 1996), George R.R. Martin takes us into the points of view of a sequence of characters and tells the story from inside each perspective in turn. The language is much closer to the modern than in Clarke's book and includes current expressions such as 'That had been fun' as well as contemporary swearing. Nevertheless, the careful use of details marks out the distance we have travelled from our own world. Early on, Ned Stark's children call him 'lord father' and he himself has to choose his words when he speaks to his king, for all the closeness of their long friendship. This formality helps build the picture of a hierarchical and dangerous society, without getting in the reader's way.

Even in a novel set in a contemporary, alternative London, language can be used to provide a way into strangeness. In Kate Griffin's *The Glass God* (Orbit, 2013), this is achieved through long, carefully constructed sentences and an accumulation of details. 'And I used to be a barista until I became one with the city and the city became at one with me, at which point I began to blend into the background of all things and become a part of all things round me, which are in fact in me, and I saw the truth that is hidden beneath the reality we make for ourselves, the world of perception, you see, and the walls of things were as shadows before me, and I had panic attacks sometimes because in my sleep I walked through the dreams of men.' *The Glass God* is a fast-paced action adventure but the style, even more than the unusual things that happen, gives it a very different impact from an ordinary thriller.

In his Rivers of London series, Ben Aaronovitch sets an easier pace but the voice of Peter, his first person narrator is both vivid and chatty, filled with curious information. 'Being a seasoned Londoner, Martin gave the body the 'London once-over' – a quick glance to determine whether this was a drunk, a crazy or a human being in distress. The fact that it was entirely possible for someone to be all three simultaneously is why good-Samaritanism in London is considered an extreme sport – like base-jumping or crocodile wrestling.' (*Rivers of London*, (Gollancz, 2011). This sounds familiar and colloquial but a closer look shows a complex sentence structure, with a variety of subordinate clauses. Peter's individual perspective introduce us to a London distinctly different from the one we know, full of ghosts and dangerous magic.

One aspect of language that matters in any story is the choice of names for characters and places. Tolkien is known for inventing the names that flavoured his



work, along with the languages they were drawn from, although he also drew on Anglo Saxon, Norse and Middle English sources, for example for Gandalf, Smaug and the term Middle Earth.

Many authors have drawn inspiration from Tolkien in inventing names, sometimes unfortunately just producing unmemorable or unpronounceable collections of letters. It is safer to draw on history or mythology, provided the associations evoked are the appropriate ones. Or it may be possible to use vocabulary words, as Frances Hardinge does, with names such as Eponymous or Blythe, which fit the characters they belong to, without being a mere capitalisation of attributes (unlike, say, Mr Quiverful in Anthony Trollope's Barchester Towers). She also uses names which combine recognisable elements in new ways, like Beamabeth or Goodman Palpitattle.

For a writer in search of inspiration for names, there are plenty of baby name books and websites.

Some include names from other cultures, which may be tricky to use without a full understanding of the implications. Instead, one can delve into the principles used in forming names in different times and places, which may be adaptable to a new context. A useful book along these lines is *The Origin of English Surnames* by P.H. Reaney (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967). This describes the elements which have gone into the development of current surnames, including medieval place names, occupations and nicknames.

As well as names, some authors make use of invented or forgotten words, such as quidditch or hobbit. I've recently come across a book that can enliven any writer's choice of words: David Crystal's *The Disappearing Dictionary* (Macmillan, 2015). This is a selection from the Joseph Wright's dialect dictionary published from 1898 to 1905. Some of the words here would only be convincing if used in dialogue from the regions they belong to. But others might plausibly add flavour to the vocabulary of a narrator or characters in any setting: 'rightle' for example, to mean 'set to rights' or 'shram' to shrink with cold'.

The key to an effective use of language lies in establishing a strong, individual voice. How this voice is established can vary widely. Humour, formality, playing with language can all work, when used appropriately but sharp images and lively rhythms matter above all. The stronger the voice, the further away from the ordinary the reader travels, which enables the writer to produce fantasy or science fiction at its most powerful.

fin.

Sandra Unerman has written fantasy for many years and has an MA in Creative Writing (Science Fiction and Fantasy) from Middlesex University. Her recent publications include stories in *Frostfire Worlds*, May 2015 and *Sword and Sorcery*, August, 2015. She writes book reviews for *Vector*. She is a member of Clockhouse London Writers and of an Orbit online writing workshop. She lives in London and her other interests include folklore and history.

POEMS FROM THE STARS

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

Markets for Science Fiction Poetry

Along with ***FOCUS***, and our friends over at the British Fantasy Society (BFS) –who also publish poetry on a regular basis– where else can an aspiring genre poet find a home for their work?

The starting point has to be with the listings websites: *http://www.Duotrope.com* and *www.Ralan.com* are musts to visit, although Duotrope does charge a subscription to access the service. The Science Fiction Poetry Association at *www.sfpoetry.com* carries a listing of publishing outlets and it's also worth checking out The Open Call: Science Fiction, Fantasy & Pulp Markets group on Facebook: *http://www.facebook.com/groups/440107622678110/*

These sites will also help in clarifying whether or not they are paying markets and, if they are, what kind of rate you can expect to earn. (The Science Fiction Writers of America (SFWA) define a "pro" paying market as one offering a minimum of $1 dollar per line of poetry.) More importantly, they will also tell you whether they are online zines, digital publications, print publications, or print+digital. It is worth knowing this as it will also determine when your poem is going to be published: within days, weeks, months or even years. The last thing you want is for your work to be locked away in some publisher's cyber vault without knowing whether it will ever see the light of day, not least as this usually means you can't submit it elsewhere or enter for competitions.

As to individual titles, the ones I see most frequently cited by authors are ***Abyss*** and ***Apex***, ***Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine***, ***Asimov's***, ***Scifaikuest***, ***Star*Line***, ***Strange Horizons***, and may I also mention my own zine: ***Grievous Angel*** (which, incidentally, pays pro rates too).

ON THE OTHER HAND

King Kong would have made
a lousy husband.
Sure, he'd be good for a romp in the hay –
and as "big" as all outdoors –
but even though Fay Wray was athletic too
and game for adventure,
she would have found life in the jungle no picnic.
It's dirty and smelly, with spiders and snakes,
not to mention occasional dinosaurs,
monsters,
mercurial natives,
all easy enough for Kong to cope with
but constantly in and out,
tracking mud over freshly waxed floors,
and that's not even mentioning tigers and lions.
No, Fay was a city girl when it came down to it,
wishing for nothing more than a nice apartment to go to
when quests have ended,
a restaurant and dancing, a slinky low-cut gown,
and no excursions up sides of skyscrapers
or battles with biplanes.

... James Dorr, Indiana

SEVEN WENT TO SIRIUS

all right, I'll start at the beginning
you can see me? you're in the minority,
there are other goons that can't,
my concerns are human, not machine
but the framework of time is still warping
we shut doors that should be open
and open doors that should be shut,
I watch the achingly familiar swing of slim hips
aware we unbalanced non-entities can never touch
all right, I'll begin at the start
we grab that swift FTL-shift across the sky
racing the antic malice of star-clusters
the predatory plots of dark-matter nebulae
1000 galaxies brushing past like smoke
while relativistically suspended, standing still
diverging on infinite co-existing time-tracks
quicksilver slivers, sparks shatter, zones spin,
splinter out of skew, returning vague as spooks
scrabbled up a temporal side-avenue
touching only what remains familiar,
still fixed at the exact point we left, blink,
cities fade around us, reshaping as ghosts
remind me, I'll write it all down some time
while I can still touch screen,
but not yet, not yet...

... Andrew Darlington, Yorkshire

DARK ENERGY

dark energy
extending the universe
not unlike
bittersweet chocolate
expanding my waistline

... Pat Tompkins, San Francisco

BEST LAID PLANS

Eugene Cernan dedicated his life
to carrying mankind
into outer space

only to suffer
all the remaining decades he lived
being known as the LAST man

to walk on the moon.

... Herb Kaudere

AT THE BLACK HOLE HOTEL

Twist and turn the genetic skein,
and produce a viewing machine.
Here is the peculiar woman, born and bred
for the uncanny.

In the Black Hole Hotel
cusping singularity held in stasis,
dark shadows stutter on the walls.

Standing at the foot of your bed,
Your future-lives, bled from her head.
Here made real.

Don't get too close to the peculiar woman.
Don't look into her ink-space face.
Or twist and turn, you'll fall,
within her mystery.

And you'll never leave
the Black Hole Hotel.
Add your life to the residents' list.

You never had a future,
only the longing.

... Kelda Crich, London

THE HEART IN DARKNESS

The heart of Pluto
is a heart in darkness

The god of the underworld
circles in stygian darkness
where even the brightest sunshine
only dilutes the dark –

On the surface,
the heart of Pluto
is a heart of ice
frozen forever

But still
the heart shines bright
in darkness.

... Geoffrey A. Landis, Ohio

UNLONELY PLANET

Always for an eon or two I doze –
but then comes that fateful moment
when the sheer number of creatures
scuttling across my hide swells
enough to disturb my slumber.

The yawn I release punches a hole
in the atmosphere like an awl
through cheesecloth. My core
trembles, heaving millions
off their feet, into the azure –
before they pinwheel into space.

And I am left alone again,
naked and cold, singing myself back
into a sleep that will last
until life once more creeps up
from subterranean dreams.

... Noel Sloboda

SCIFAIKU

a hundred light years
from all civilization
check engine light winks

avoiding wormholes
and more numerous black holes
phoning highway crew

LaserJet Pro
autonomously printing
future obituaries

... John Reinhart, Colorado

beautiful legs
he walks them home
hoping to meet the rest of her

rude partygoers
enough noise to wake the dead
zombie smiles

dinner table
mother monster knows best
eat your vegetarians

dark woods
horrible howling
werewolf going bald

... Guy Belleranti

pale brown dot
abandoned a long ago
humans' first homeland

next to the infant's grave
stands motionless
the robot-nanny

... Manos Kounougakis, Greece

one foot on Mars
the other on Atlantis
up the wormhole stairs

... Karen A. Romanko

space pirate –
his robot wears
an aye patch

fetching the bones
of the first colonists –
Mars rover

... Susan Burch

(The Andromeda Galaxy)
Our closest neighbor,
Yet too far to reach for us.
Keep stock of sugar.

Lying on his side
Uranus tires of the
Inappropriate jokes

... Christina Sng, Singapore

peeling back your skin
the expiration date
now clearly visible

after we meet
my exoskeleton
gathering dust

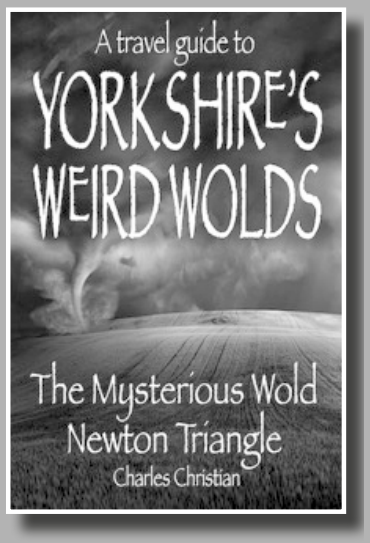
.. Julie Bloss Kelsey

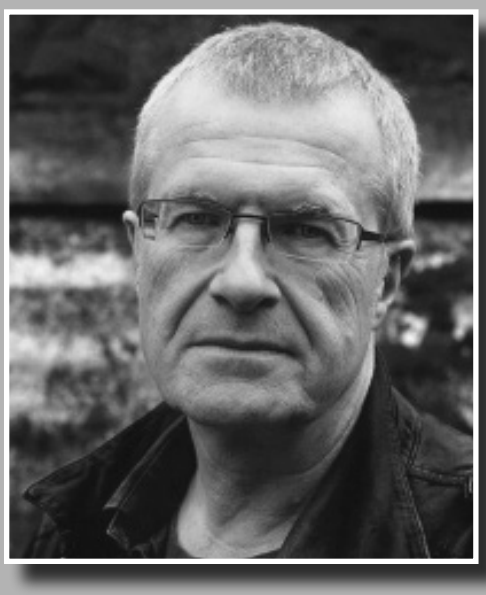
fin.

About Charles Christian...

Charles Christian's latest non-fiction 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, Lawrence of Arabia, buried fairy gold, and even a "parkin"-eating dragon. You can also find the connection between a real-life meteorite, Philip Jose Farmer and some of fiction's greatest heroes.

"Weird Wolds" is available only on Amazon Kindle.





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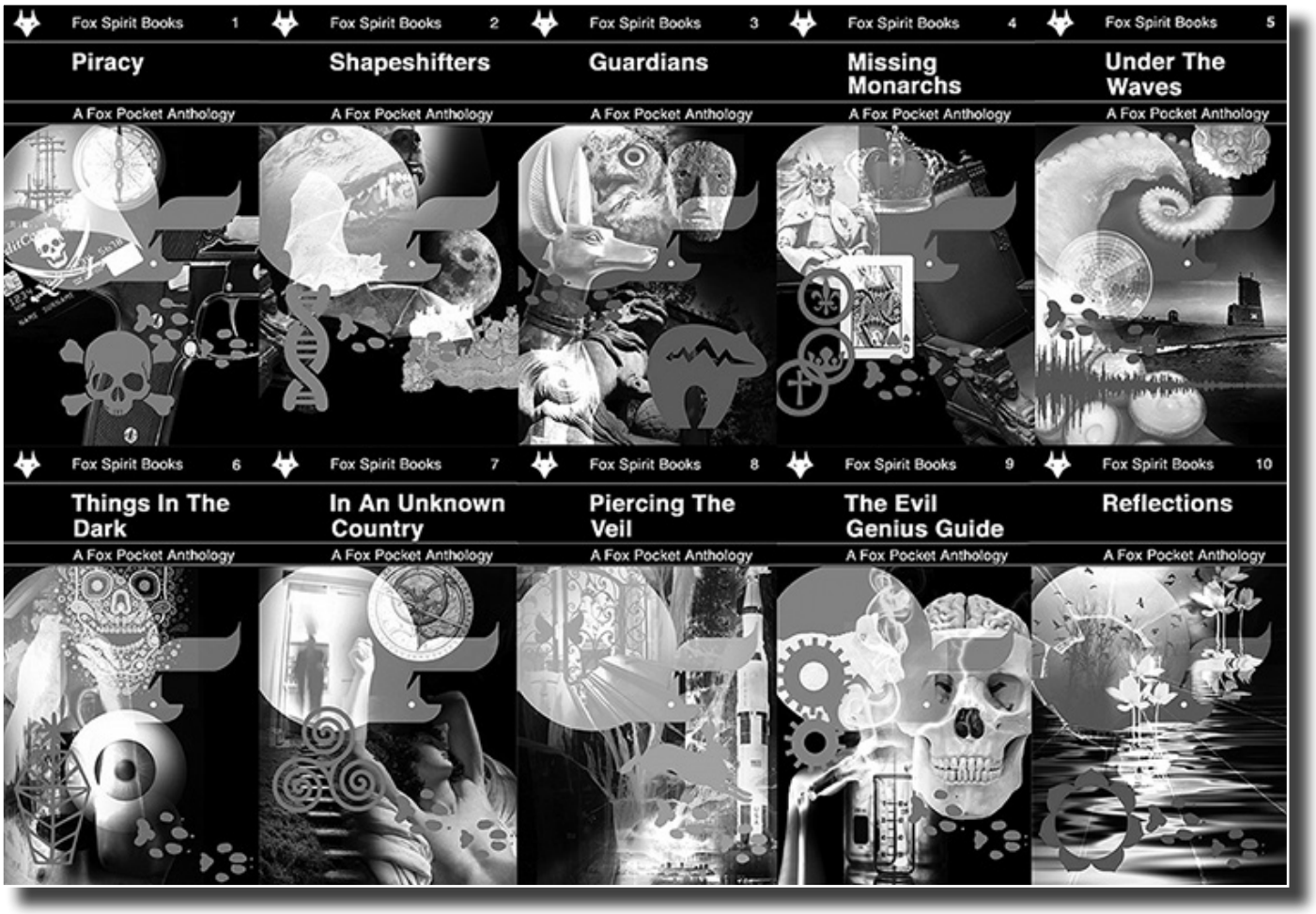

Writing Monsters

by Paul Kane

Paul Kane discusses his experiences in publishing his latest collection.

Along with my better half, the author and editor Marie O'Regan, I run writing workshops around the country. One of the sessions we offer is 'Monsters'. The people who invite us along to speak to budding writers often ask, "Why Monsters?" before we arrive. By the time we've finished, the question has answered itself. 'Monsters' is our most successful and fun genre workshop hands down – especially when we get people to shout out and create their own monsters.

Whether you're reading science fiction, horror or fantasy, like as not you'll find a monster between the pages. From Smaug the Dragon in *The Hobbit* to the invading aliens of *War of the Worlds*, from the ghosts of Charles Dickens to James Herbert's famous *Rats*...the imaginative genres contain many examples. And perhaps the most frightening monster of all is human, the serial killer of the crime genre. For instance, Hannibal Lecter might well be charming and funny, but his heinous acts remind us that he's definitely a monster at heart.

Most writers you talk to came across monsters as a subject in film and TV first. I certainly remember being equally terrified and fascinated by the monsters in *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who* when I was growing up, not to mention *The Incredible Hulk* (which also nicely segues into comics; those are chock-full of monsters of all shapes and sizes). I remember being petrified, aged seven, when my mum and dad let me watch *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, the '70s version, on TV. But as the closing credits rolled, I wanted to watch it again, because I just couldn't get enough of this new take on the 'monster inside'.

These formative experiences influence and inspire us as writers , and everyone will have their own particular fears from the real world they can draw on when creating their own monsters. It could be spiders or reptiles, or our own bodies working against us (a prevalent concern in the Body Horror sub-genre; if you're looking for a place to start I'd suggest our *Mammoth Book of Body Horror* anthology on the subject featuring the likes of Shelley, Matheson and Gaiman), or even vehicles – something Stephen King zeroed in on for his short story 'Trucks' (filmed as *Maximum Overdrive*) or his novel *Christine*.

I've been thinking about monsters a lot of late. You can't really blame me... The latest instalment of my post-apocalyptic *Hooded Man* series, part of Abaddon's Afterblight Chronicles, pits genetically-modified humans against Robert Stokes and his Rangers. Using these in *Flaming Arrow* also allowed me to do a siege-style story – something I've always wanted to have a stab at. My follow-up to *RED*, the short novel *Blood RED* from SST Publications, is a modern-day horror reworking of the *Little Red Riding Hood* fairy tale, which gave me the chance to do something very different with the wolf-ish mythology. Something that tied in well not only to my novelette from Hersham Horror, *The Curse of the Wolf*, but also my newly-completed 'Life Cycle' trilogy of stories, published in my most recent collection.

A collection that just happens to be called... you guessed it... *Monsters*!

With a superbly memorable painted monster on the front from Clive Barker (a man who knows a thing or two about the subject himself, being the creator of both the Cenobites and the Nightbreed), and an introduction by Nicholas Vince (who has played one of each of those: Chatterer and Kinski), this book from Alchemy Press covers the full range of all monsters. There are witches, vampires, zombies and werewolves, plus everything in-between. Not to mention more unusual fare, such as my award-winning short 'A Chaos Demon is for Life', a story I'm still incredibly proud of: an exploration of what might happen when you cross the idea of unwanted pets at Christmas with movies like *Cloverfield* and *Godzilla*. Then there's 'Rag & Bone', which was inspired by watching the titular collectors going round the streets where I lived as a child, and doing a little research into their history. The result? A supernatural killer that would hopefully give the

likes of Freddy, Jason and Michael Myers a run for their money... But it wasn't until I started thinking about gathering all these tales together under one roof that I realised quite how much I had written about them, in various forms. It was quite surprising really, though maybe it shouldn't have been.

So, monsters, they're everywhere. If you're using them in your own work, always try and do something different with them. That's easier said than done, but when you look at it, what's *Jaws* but a reworking of *Moby Dick*? What's *Battle: Los Angeles*, but a successor to the aforementioned H.G. Wells novel published well over a hundred years ago? All variations on a theme.

Monsters also tend to be scary, unless – again – you're trying to do a variation on that theme. A recent short of mine called 'Michael the Monster', which was published in *Darke Phantastique*, takes stories like Ray Bradbury's *The Homecoming* as its lead, blending this with a bit of *The Fly* and *Splice* (quite appropriately, given the subject matter of these) to create a heart-wrenching story about a boy who wants to be free, but is only allowed out of the facility he was created in at Halloween – when he won't stand out from the crowd. This flipped the idea of monsters being frightening on its head, but in general they're designed to scare rather than comfort, no matter which genre you're working in.

Whether your setting is a far off world, a fantasy land that you've created, or simply a street near where you live, think about how the monsters you populate it with might shock your characters and – it almost goes without saying – your readers too. And it's worth mentioning that your characters need to be more than just cardboard cut-outs, otherwise no-one will *care* how they'll react to such threats. There's also the opportunity to allow your characters to rise above their own fears. Say they were bitten by a dog as a child and have been frightened of them ever since – if suddenly they're confronted with a huge *Hound of the Baskervilles*-type canine, then it gives them a chance to overcome those terrors. In fact, it makes for excellent jeopardy and suspense – and conflict is at the centre of any good tale worth telling.

Other than that, it just remains really for me to say happy monster making – and monster *hunting* – because the other side of having monsters as antagonists is creating the protagonists to battle them.

I look forward to reading the results of both...

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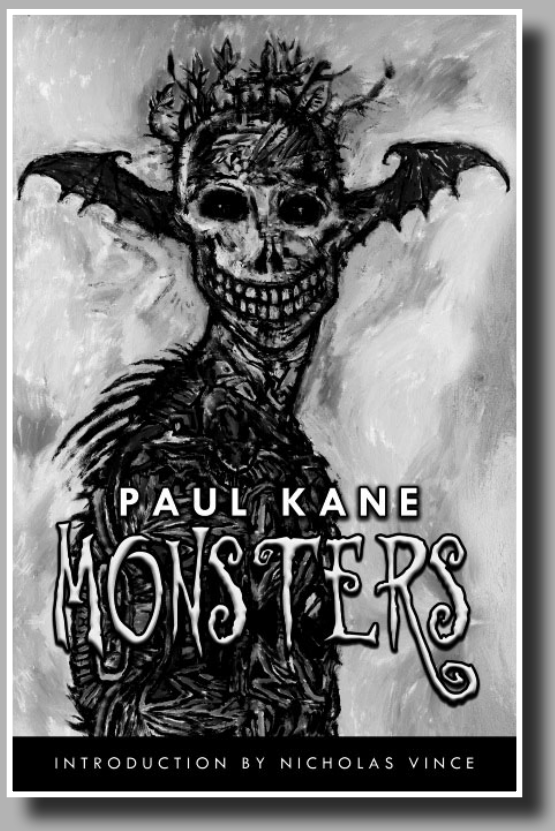


Paul Kane is the award-winning, bestselling author and editor of over fifty books – including the *Arrowhead* trilogy (gathered together in the sellout *Hooded Man* omnibus, revolving around a post-apocalyptic version of Robin Hood), *The Butterfly Man and Other Stories*, *Hellbound Hearts* and *Monsters*. His non-fiction books include *The Hellraiser Films and Their Legacy* and *Voices in the Dark*, and his genre journalism has appeared in the likes of *SFX*, *Dreamwatch* and *DeathRay*. He has been a Guest at Alt.Fiction five times, was a Guest at the first SFX Weekender, at Thought Bubble in 2011, Derbyshire Literary Festival and Off the Shelf in 2012, Monster Mash and Event Horizon in 2013, Edge-Lit in 2014, plus HorrorCon and Liverpool Horror Fest in 2015, as well as being a panellist at FantasyCon and the World Fantasy Convention. His work has been optioned and adapted for the big and small screen, including for network US television, and his latest novels are *Lunar* (set to be turned into a feature film), the Y.A. story *The Rainbow Man* (as P.B. Kane) and *Blood RED*. He lives in Derbyshire, UK, with his wife Marie O'Regan, his family and a black cat called Mina. Find out more at his site ***www.shadow-writer.co.uk*** which has featured Guest Writers such as Stephen King, Neil Gaiman, Charlaine Harris, Dean Koontz and Guillermo del Toro.

Top Ten Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Novellas

by Nina Allan

Nina Allan is busy making her name in SF in Britain, the US and on the continent. She needs no introduction for BSFA members who regularly nominate her fiction for Awards (culminating in a win for her "Spin" in 2013). Here she takes us through her candidates for novellas we should all read.

I love the novella form. I'm no longer very good at producing 'short' short stories. Most of what I write depends on character: on characters' memories and internal thought processes and backstory. There's not a lot of room for backstory in a piece of short fiction, and so the novella, with its heftier word count, seems to suit me better. For the writer, the form provides room to experiment, combined with the satisfaction of engaging with a substantial project. For the reader, the novella, which can be devoured in a single sitting, offers a truly immersive experience that can feel even more intense than reading a novel.

Fortunately for fans of speculative fiction, the world of science fiction, fantasy and horror is alive with novellas. So many, in fact, that the selection of a favourite ten has been a difficult task. Of those I have listed below, the earliest was published in 1972, the most recent a mere six months ago. I could easily have added a dozen more. The beauty of the novella is that it offers huge diversity. A whole world in a hundred pages. What writer could resist?

1) The Fifth Head of Cerberus by Gene Wolfe

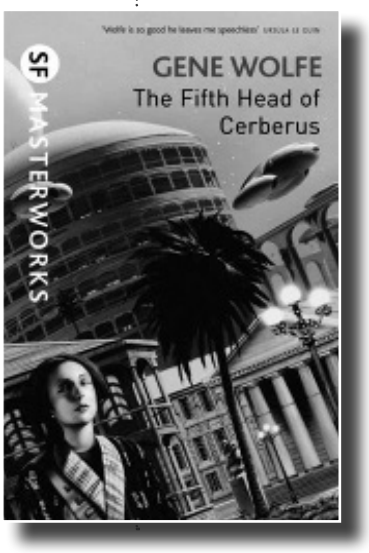
One of the greatest science fiction novellas of all time, *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* is that rare beast: a work of science fiction in which ideas, pacing, characterisation and language are all in perfect harmony. One of my desert island reads, no matter how many times I come back to this it always seems new.

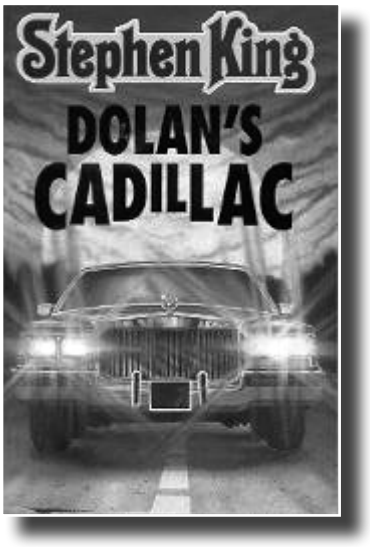
2) *Her Deepness* by Livia Lleyellyn

A major force in Lovecraftian horror, Livia Llewellyn blends contemporary themes and influences with Deep Weird in a seamless continuum, resulting in that elusive quality of timelessness that is the hallmark of the best weird fiction. *Her Deepness*, the story of a young woman's journey to a ruined outpost of a once mighty city and what she finds there, is a masterpiece to be savoured and reread.

3) Dolan's Cadillac by Stephen King

Whilst I accept that King can't always get to grips with endings, I would hesitate to castigate him for his love of what some have chosen to call extraneous detail. King's fixation on detail is one of the things I enjoy most in his writing, and he puts it to magnificent use here in this tightly plotted revenge thriller. *Dolan's Cadillac* is the story of 'nobody' schoolteacher Robinson, and his desperate plan to fell the eponymous Dolan. Never before has the subject of highway maintenance been so compelling.

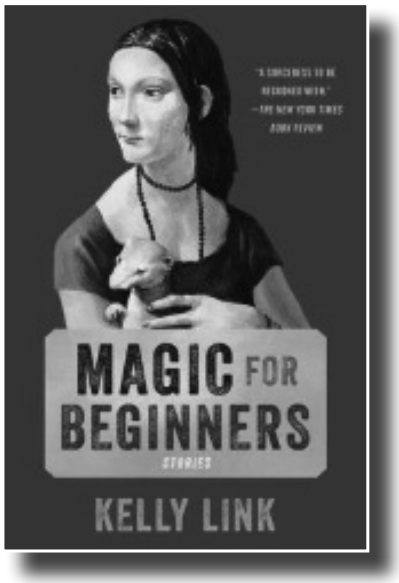




4) *The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule* by Lucius Shepard

It's difficult to choose only one of Shepard's Griaule novellas, so I've gone for the earliest in the certain expectation that anyone encountering this exceptional beast for the first time will immediately proceed to reading the rest in the series. With his instinctive talent for storytelling, his unerring feel for language, Shepard was one of those writers who immediately and effortlessly transcended all genre boundaries. Barely known outside science fiction, Shepard's writing is still waiting to be discovered by the literary mainstream. There is little reason to hurry – the work will last forever.

5) *Magic for Beginners* by Kelly Link

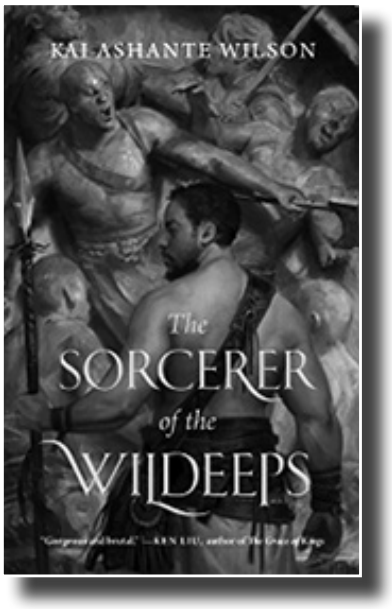


This award-winning novella is the work that started to get Kelly Link noticed. It was also the first thing by her I read, and it was love at first sight. Link uses the fantastic in such a supple, natural way it can bring nothing but joy, even when the story she's telling turns out to be terrifying. What I love most about Link is the way she writes people, with their stories seeming to arise spontaneously out of the peculiar situations in which they find themselves. *Magic For Beginners*, with its intricate layering of metafictional narratives, remains one of my favourite Link stories, and one I know I will never tire of revisiting.

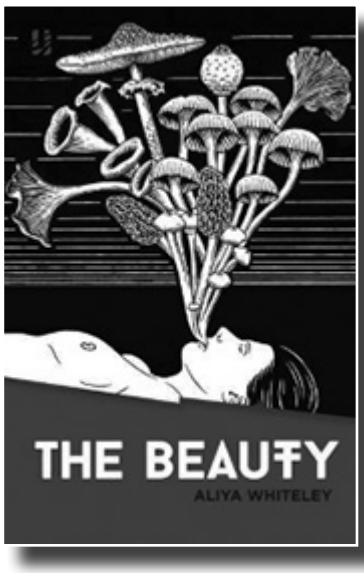
6) *The Man Who Ended History: A Documentary* by Ken Liu

What distinguishes Ken Liu most as a writer is his hunger for ideas, and his fearlessness in using fiction to examine them. Liu's techniques – a bold use of exposition, a heart-on-the-sleeve willingness to tug blatantly at our emotions – really should not work, and yet they do, because Liu's enthusiasm for the story he is telling is infectious. That the ideas and themes that course through his fiction are of personal importance to him never feels in doubt – and like all the best storytellers, Liu clearly knows that rules are there to be broken.

7) *Sorcerer of the Wildeeps* by Kai Ashante Wilson



Wilson's 2014 novelette 'The Devil in America' was nominated for both the Nebula and the World Fantasy Award in 2015 and with good reason. I found it extraordinary, one of the most important pieces of SFF short fiction I'd read for some time, and I was eager to see what Wilson published next. That turned out to be this novella, *The Sorcerer of the Wildeeps*, and I could not be happier. Wilson switches effortlessly from the recognisable historical setting of 'Devil' to a more overtly fantastical, alternate reality to tell a story of men (and demigods) facing extreme situations and making extreme sacrifices in the process. Wilson's gifts – for language, for characterisation, for invention – are prodigious and we are lucky to have him working in the genre.



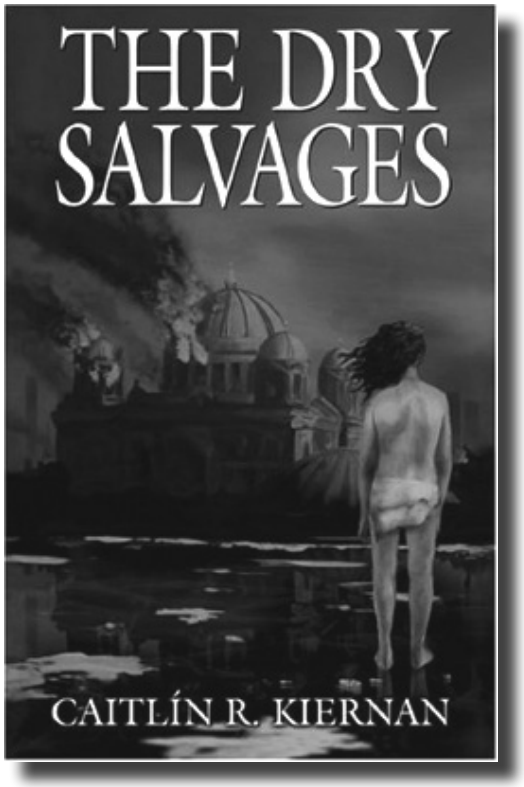
8) *The Beauty* by Aliya Whiteley

Aliya Whiteley is one of SFF's most innovative and original writers, and deserves wider recognition. Weird ideas seem to come naturally to Whiteley, and never more so than in this addictively disturbing novella, in which men living in a world

without women must try and reassess their roles in an increasingly dangerous environment. Whiteley's command of her material is superb. This story will not leave you easily, I guarantee it.

9) *The Necrophiliac* by Gabrielle Wittkop

You'll need a strong stomach for this one. Wittkop's novella is audacious and deliberately provocative, but with an elegance and poise that consistently belies its subject matter. A total must for horror fans as well as fans of European decadence. Only recently translated from the French, *The Necrophiliac* is one of the few works of Wittkop's so far available in English. Let's hope there will soon be more.



10) *The Dry Salvages* by Caitlin R. Kiernan

Cthulhu Mythos meets *Alien* meets *2001*. Kiernan is one of my favourite writers bar none, and this haunting, horrifying novella – a story of deep space exploration and its unintended consequences – is perfection, both in terms of its exquisite language and its emotional and psychological impact. When horror and science fiction collide, the results can be extraordinary, as Kiernan proves again and again in spades.

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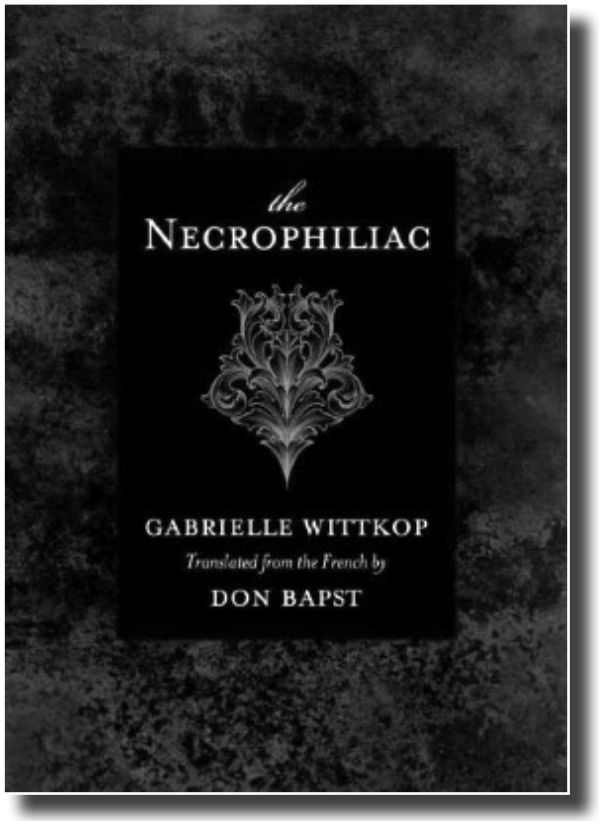


photo c/o Christopher Priest

Nina Allan has been the recipient of the British Science Fiction Award, the Liverpool John Moores Novella Award and the Grand Prix L'Imaginaire. Her short fiction has appeared in many venues including *Best Horror of the Year #6*, *The Year's Best Fantasy and Science Fiction 2014* and *The Mammoth Book of Ghost Stories by Women*. Her debut novel *The Race* was shortlisted for the John W. Campbell Memorial Award and the Kitschies Red Tentacle. She lives and works in North Devon.

http://www.ninaallan.co.uk

BECOMING A BETTER WRITER...

...in just fifteen minutes!

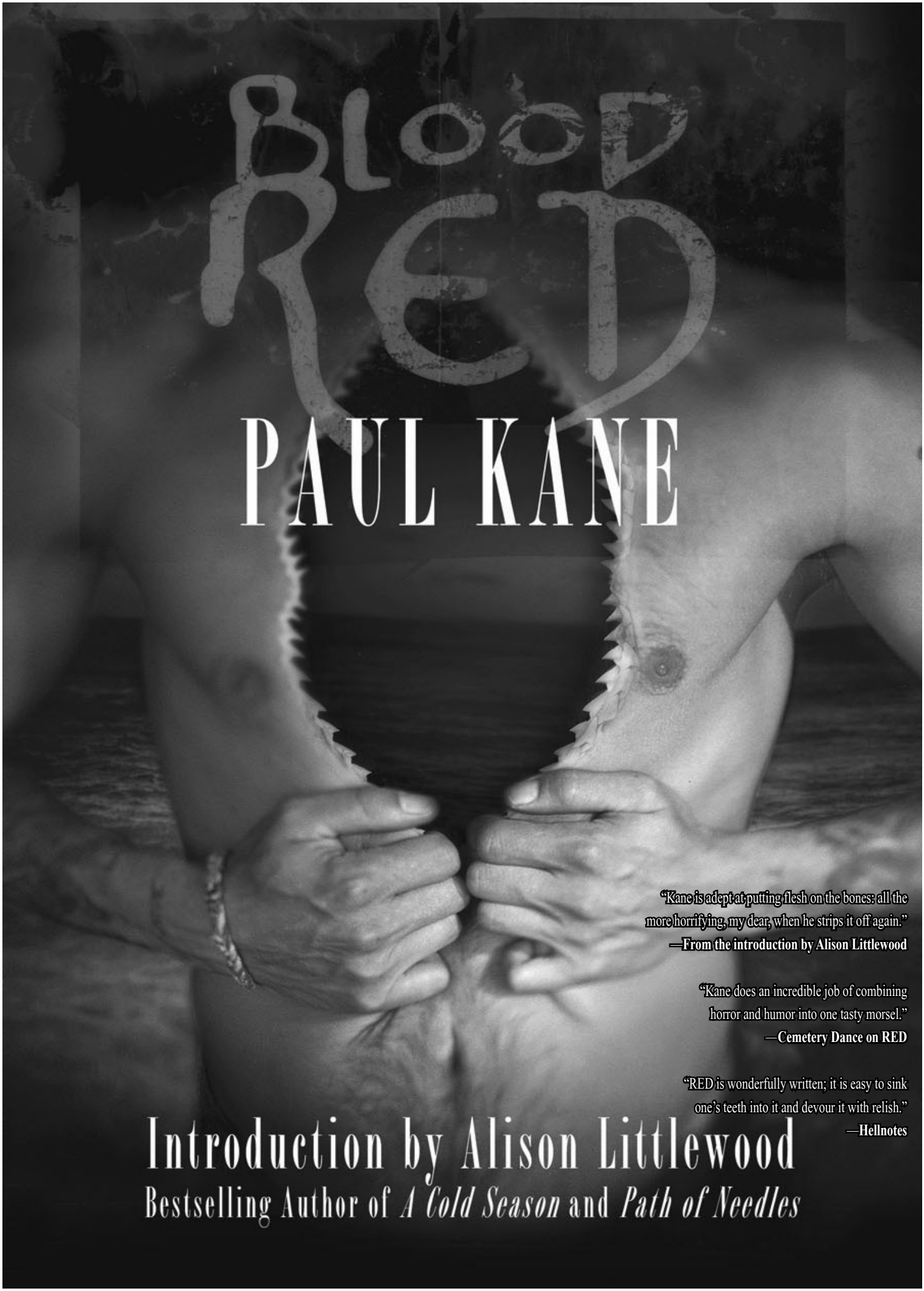
by Martin McGrath

No. 6 Images

When words simply won't flow one of the tricks I often use to distract myself and spark some creativity is to enter three words into image search. I like abstract words. Then I take a random picture from each search (I actually use a random number generator to pick my pictures but that's probably unnecessarily geeky) and then try to string them together into a scenario or the opening few paragraphs of a story.

Here are three pictures (I'm not telling you what the words are, but the third one might be obvious!) – try to create a story.

(All photos Creative Commons: 1. Sjoerd Lammers; 2. Juan Rax; 3. Mike Krzeszak – via Flickr)



"Kane is adept at putting flesh on the bones: all the more horrifying, my dear, when he strips it off again."
—From the introduction by Alison Littlewood

"Kane does an incredible job of combining horror and humor into one tasty morsel."
—Cemetery Dance on RED

"RED is wonderfully written; it is easy to sink one's teeth into it and devour it with relish."
—Hellnotes

Introduction by Alison Littlewood
Bestselling Author of *A Cold Season* and *Path of Needles*