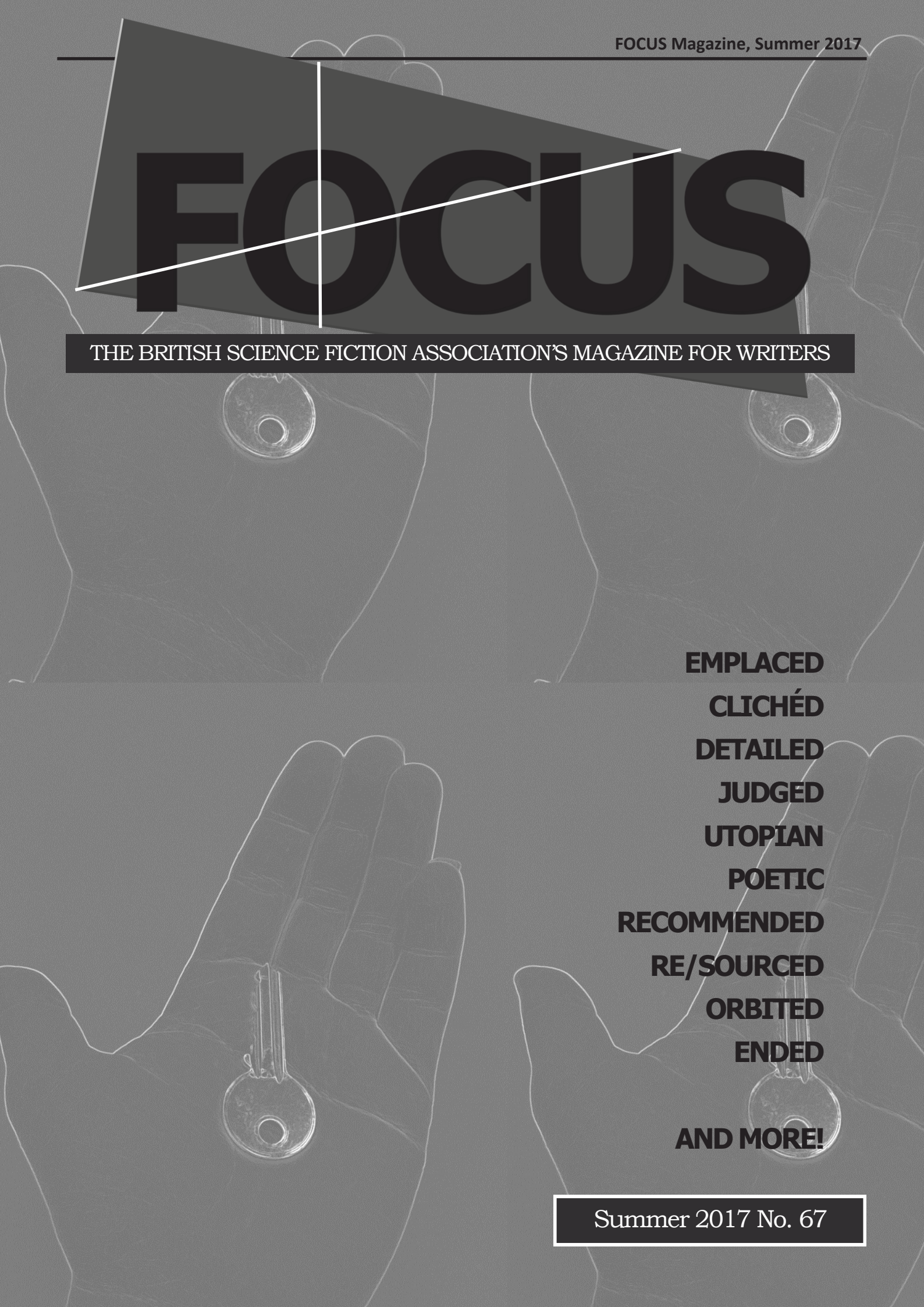
FOCUS

THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION'S MAGAZINE FOR WRITERS



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Summer 2017 No. 67

The cover image is "Regeneration" By Donna Scott

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BSFA Website : www.bsfa.co.uk

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President : Stephen Baxter

Vice President : Pat Cadigan

Chair : Donna Bond *chair@bsfa.co.uk*

Treasurer : Martin Potts *bsfatreasurer@gmail.com*

Membership Services : Dave Lally, 64 Richborne Terrace, London SW8 1AX

membership@bsfa.co.uk

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BSFA AWARDS

Administrator : Claire Boothby *awards@bsfa.co.uk*

ORBITER WRITING GROUPS

Online :Terry Jackman *terryjackman@mypostoffice.co.uk*

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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editor
Dev Agarwal

design and layout
Donna Scott

contributors
Charles Stross
Paul Graham Raven
Sandra Unerman
Ian Millsted
Terry Jackman
Gaie Sebold
Charles Christian
Jacey Bedford
Neil Williamson
David Langford

Contact:
Donna Bond, 11 Stanhope Road, Northampton NN2 6JU

chair@bsfa.co.uk
Twitter: @wishusdonna

DEV AGARWAL SAYS...

Welcome to the summer issue of *Focus* and also to the new normal. We live in a time not so much of great social change but of unending *spasm*.

As readers will know 2016 brought us huge political and social upheaval. So far 2017 appears to be beating it for drama. This is the type of radical change that comes along once or twice in a generation (we might hope) -- and it may have marked a string of distinctive breaks with the past. Donald Trump in the White House, Britain is exiting the EU, a general election confounded the polls and gave us our *second* hung parliament in a decade: some of us are delighted by these changes. Other changes have fewer, if any, supporters: refugees fleeing violence in the Middle East, terror attacks at home and abroad, threats of nuclear attacks from North Korea, the horrendous fire in Kensington's Grenfell Tower and the protest and accusations of neglect and cost cutting in the most affluent borough in Britain.

We might be stunned, or terrified, by these developments. If nothing else, the cultural and political shockwaves are so strong that they strike to the heart of not just society but culture as well. And that brings us to our genre. Personally, I'm parsing current affairs with the vocabulary of science fiction.

When all you can say with confidence is that *anything might happen next* it seems to me that a genre that speculates on current trends and then uses them to imagine possible futures is definitely an asset in digesting where we are today.

Mainstream media, both in fiction and in factual news reporting seems to be racing to catch up to us. It often feels like science fiction got there first -- and is showing the way. Many of us will feel that our genre has never been more relevant or more prominent. Most summer blockbusters have been science fiction for some years, much television drama is some shade of speculative fiction, and the best selling novel after Donald Trump's inauguration was George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four*.

As the pace of change seems to accelerate we can be said to be suffering from both of Alvin Toffler's neologisms, *future shock* and *information overload*. (Future shock, according to Toffler, occurs when we experience an accelerated rate of technological and social change. This leaves people disconnected and suffering from "shattering stress and disorientation." While information overload was his term to describe the difficulty of understanding an issue and making effective decisions about it when you receive too much information rather than too little).

We turn to writers at times of change. If, as a society, we are future shocked and information overloaded, who better than genre writers to help us navigate through?

In *Focus 67*, we have assembled a raft of navigators. They range from multi-award winning and well-established professionals to newer voices. On the following pages they argue their cases, promote their agendas, compete for your attention and, of occasion, disagree with each other.

Ordinarily, I'd close by saying that our genre is at the forefront of predicting the future, but even with *Focus* packed to the gunwales with experienced voices, I feel like we still need to hold onto our hats as genre fiction races to outpace the future shock and *Focus* rides the wave of change like a *Serenityesque* leaf on the wind.

Dev Agarwal
Focus Editor
July 2017

Towards a Taxonomy of Clichés in Space Opera

Charles Stross

Part 1

Charles Stross *returns to Focus. So strap in. In this issue of Focus you'll not one but two instalments of his specially revised set of what we find too often in Space Opera fiction. His challenge to you is to find a Space Opera story that navigates through them...*

Charles Stoss is an award-winning writer of science-fiction, fantasy and Lovecraftian horror. His novel *Accelerando* won the 2006 Locus Award for Best Science Fiction Novel, and he won the Hugo Award for Best Novella in 2005 for "The Concrete Jungle". *The Apocalypse Codex* won the Locus award for Best Fantasy Novel in 2013. His science fiction novels have also been nominated for the John W. Campbell Memorial Award and the Arthur C. Clarke Award. His latest novel in the Merchant Prince series is *Empire Games,* and the most recent in The Laundry files is *The Delirium Brief.*
http://www.antipope.org/

Originality carries a premium in Science Fiction – but not *too much* originality. If you write something wildly experimental that blows the doors off all the stuffy expectations of genre, many of your readers, reviewers, and editors will miss the message and find your work more annoying than exciting. Which is why the New Space Opera is a thriving thirty year old sub-genre, this being the anniversary of the publication of *Consider Phlebas*. There's a lot of prior art, much of it not very good, and a huge body of clichés has grown up. Indeed, it's possible to tell a space opera *entirely* with clichés!

Last year I began work on a new Space Opera. I'm lazy and I don't like to reinvent the entire universe with every book, so I decided to start by building a setting in which I could tell more than one story. As some of the ground-work, I started by putting together a list of clichés to which Space Opera is unaccountably prone, in order to ensure that I came up with new howlers rather than simply recycling the same tired old ones.

Some of you might remember the "Evil Overlord's List" (http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/EvilOverlordList) – a compendium of all the generic cliché mistakes that Evil Overlords tend to make in fiction ("16: I will never utter the sentence *But before I kill you, there's just one thing I want to know.*"). So without further ado, here is my Space Opera Cliché List: it's only the tip of a very large iceberg, but at least it's a starting point. Can you find any of these clichés in your current reading matter (or work in progress)? And can you find anything in the aforementioned reading/writing material that isn't in this list and really deserves to be here?

Planetary civilizations

This subheading covers common clichés/mistakes made in discussing inhabited (Earthlike) planets and the people who live on them.

- ◊ Planets are small and easily explored
- ◊ All the land masses on a planet are easily accessible
- ◊ You can fly anywhere on a planet in a short time without leaving the atmosphere
- ◊ You can fly anywhere at Mach 2.2+ without experiencing hull heating due to atmospheric friction
- ◊ You can fly anywhere at Mach 2.2+ without worrying about Air Traffic Control and NOTAMs
- ◊ Everywhere on a planet shares a common climate and the same weather patterns
- ◊ The same plants and animals can be found everywhere on a given planet
- ◊ Coriolis force, trade winds, cyclones … what are *those*?
- ◊ Oceans are small, land-locked, and mainly useful for fishing
- ◊ Plate tectonics is easily ignored, unless the plot requires a Volcano/Earthquake
- ◊ Deep carbon cycle, subduction, ionosphere UV splitting of water, long-term terraforming stability: why worry about little things like that?

◊ Ice ages are inevitably global

◊ Some planets have a breathable atmosphere but no water

Space and cosmology

◊ Moons are good, the more the better!

◊ Suns are good, too, the more the better!

◊ … Especially if one of them is a giant. (Those *never* explode or flare messily.)

◊ steep gravity wells are trivial to deal with

◊ … They're the best place to obtain exotic elements such as 3He, which are fuel for our aneutronic fusion reactors (hint: Boron works too – a shame, it's much less exotic)

◊ All comets have tails

◊ … they're sort of hairless and scaly, like a [*sarcasm limit exceeded* - Ed.]

◊ Rocky planets are either airless or shirt-sleeves worlds with breathable air

◊ Pay no attention to Venus, runaway greenhouse worlds are imaginary

◊ Big stars are as long-lived and likely to have planets as dwarf stars

◊ Supernovae happen routinely and are no big deal

◊ Interstellar space is totally empty

◊ … You can fly as fast as you like without worrying about dust particles

◊ You don't have to worry about interstellar gas, either

◊ … Except when there's not enough of it to keep your ramscoop accelerating

◊ Incidentally? Ramscoops totally work! (Larry Niven said so in 1968.)

◊ You can go fast enough to experience relativistic time dilation without worrying about the pesky cosmic background radiation blue-shifting into hard X-rays and frying you

◊ You can forget all about hitting the occasional interstellar 4He nucleus with some multiple of the energy of an alpha particle, several million times a second

◊ … Don't worry about hitting the electrons bound to the neutral hydrogen either, gamma photons totally aren't a thing

◊ You can use handy black holes and neutron stars to make handbrake turns in space

◊ You an also use gas giants to make handbrake turns, at high relativistic speeds

◊ Don't let the fact the space is full of exciting high energy physics put you off going there, squishy meatsack-persons!

◊ Planetary ring systems are picturesque, not dangerous

◊ Planets have a diurnal period precisely 86,400 Earth seconds long

◊ Planets rotate east-to-west

◊ Planets have magnetic poles that approximate their rotational axis

◊ Planetary gravity can be approximated to a point source for purposes of calculating orbital dynamics

◊ All satellites orbit the equator

◊ You can change orbital inclination easily

◊ Stuff in orbit doesn't change orbital inclination spontaneously

◊ Geosynchronous orbit is easy to get to

◊ If you are in geosynchronous orbit away from the equator you still hover over the same spot on the planetary surface all the time

◊ Planets are close together

◊ Concentric planets orbit the same distance apart

◊ The flight time between planets in an inner star system is the same as between planets in the outer system

◊ Asteroids are so close together that you can hide between them

◊ … but they never clump into planets

◊ Asteroidal dust makes an irritating ping as it bounces off a ship's hull

◊ … for some reason you never run into it at multiple km/sec

◊ Actually, hitting a space rock or other spaceship is no big deal, a bit like being in a minor car accident

◊ … Even though the kinetic energy released by an impact increases with the **square** of the velocity, and you're travelling hundreds to millions of time faster

◊ Gas giants are good for mining volatiles

◊ … Mach 6 wind shear, 1000 Bar pressure, and steep gravity wells are trivial to deal with

◊ … They're the best place to obtain exotic elements such as 3He, which are fuel for our aneutronic fusion reactors (hint: Boron works too – a shame, it's much less exotic)

◊ All comets have tails

◊ … they're sort of hairless and scaly, like a [*sarcasm limit exceeded* - Ed.]

◊ Rocky planets are either airless or shirt-sleeves worlds with breathable air

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◊ You an also use gas giants to make handbrake turns, at high relativistic speeds

◊ Don't let the fact the space is full of exciting high energy physics put you off going there, squishy meatsack-persons!

Biology

◊ All planets harbour a single apex predator that eats people

◊ All planets harbour is a single venomous insect/reptile analog that poisons people

◊ The native flora and fauna use a biochemistry that we can derive sustenance from

◊ … This includes weird-ass micronutrients

◊ Pay no attention to the native microbiota, they're harmless

◊ … You won't even suffer from hay fever! Much less systemic anaphylaxis.

◊ Ecosystems are robust; why not let your ship's cat stretch her legs whenever you land?

◊ … This goes for your ship's rats, too. And your gut bacteria.

◊ Planets only have one class of plant-analog and one class of animal-analog

◊ … Only Earth has reptiles, amphibia, fish, birds, insects, mammals, fungi, etc.

◊ Terraforming is really simple; you can do it with algae capsules delivered from orbit

◊ There are no native parasites that might eat Maize, so we can turn the *entire* largest continent into a robot-run monoculture plantation

◊ … Soil exhaustion isn't a thing

◊ … Terrestrial constraints on agriculture don't apply on other planets

◊ You can keep a starship crew healthy and non-murderous indefinitely using a life support system running on blue-green algae, tilapia, and maybe the odd soy bean plant

◊ Life support systems are simple, stable, and self-managing

◊ It is safe to put bleach down the toilet on a starship; your algae/tilapia/soy will totally deal with it it when it comes out of the recycler

◊ Vitamins? Naah, we'll just genetically modify the crew to make their own

◊ If you implant humans with the gene for chlorophyl they can magically become photosynthetic

◊ … Okay, if you add the genes for RuBiSCO and the C3 pathway they can magically become photosynthetic

◊ … Because of course two square meters of skin is enough surface area to photosynthetically capture enough energy for a high-metabolic-rate mammal to live off

◊ Humans can too hibernate/deep sleep between star systems! All you need is a chest freezer

◊ … Just as long as their intestinal flora go into cold sleep at the same time

◊ … and so do the low metabolic rate arctic pseudofungi spores they picked up at the last planetary stop

Economics

◊ New Colonies may be either agricultural or mining colonies; rarely, resort colonies

◊ Everyone uses Money to mediate exchanges of value

◊ Money is always denominated in uniform ratios divisible by 10

◊ Money is made out of shiny bits of metal, OR pieces of green paper, OR credit stored in a computer network

◊ There is only one kind of Money on any given planet, or one credit network

- ◊ The same kind of Money is accepted everywhere as payment for all debts
- ◊ Visitors are always equipped to interface with the planet-wide credit network
- ◊ Planetary credit networks are incredibly secure except when the visitor needs to hack into someone else's bank account
- ◊ Barter is a sign of primitive people who haven't invented money
- ◊ People who rely on Barter are simple, trusting folks (and a bit stupid on the side)
- ◊ Inflation? What is this, I don't even …
- ◊ Deflation? What will they think of next?
- ◊ Sales tax? What's *that*?
- ◊ Income tax? What's *that*?
- ◊ Import duty? What's … [*bored now* – Ed.]
- ◊ You can get a loan from your friendly bank manager whenever you need one
- ◊ Bank loans accrue interest
- ◊ If you fail to replay a bank loan you may be arrested and held in debtor's prison
- ◊ … Or sold into slavery
- ◊ … Or your organs can be seized
- ◊ … Because your body is just one of your fungible assets, right?
- ◊ … And harvesting organs for transplant surgery is a universal practice
- ◊ People on planets have not heard of Ponzi Schemes
- ◊ People on planets have not heard of Credit Default Swaps or the Black-Scholes equation
- ◊ If money is made of shiny bits of metal or green paper, banks have vaults where they store lots of money
- ◊ Money sitting in a bank vault is worth something
- ◊ Visitors to a Colony can print fake currency without fear of consequences
- ◊ Visitors to a Colony can leave their money with a bank between infrequent visits without fear of consequences
- ◊ Banks are stable, because …
- ◊ … The planetary government will never let a bank go bust, because …
- ◊ … The galactic emperor will never let a planetary government go bust, because …
- ◊ Traders on starships land on planets to load and unload cargo
- ◊ … Or they carry their own orbit-to-surface shuttle
- ◊ … Which is as easy and safe to operate as a fork-lift truck (See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-oB6DN5dYWo)
- ◊ Cargo is bought and sold in starports
- ◊ It is profitable to ship crude break-bulk cargo like timber or foodstuffs between star systems because starships are cheap and easy to repair and operate
- ◊ Break-bulk shipping in open cargo holds has never been improved upon since the 1890s
- ◊ Multimodal freight containers, EDI/EDIFACT standards for commerce, bar codes, bourses, and RFID technologies are all inferior logistics toolkits to a bazaar or indoor market
- ◊ Insurance underwriting? Arbitrage? What's *that*? (*etc.*)
- ◊ All cargo starships need plenty of unskilled deck hands to help load and unload cargo
- ◊ All cargo starships need gun turrets to fight off the swarms of space pirates
- ◊ … Cargo starships with guns *can* fight off space pirates
- ◊ Cargo starship crews can fix battle damage
- ◊ … All it takes is enough duct tape and determination
- ◊ … Because space pirate weapons are as deadly as shotguns, not air-to-air missiles, let alone H-bombs
- ◊ … And starships cost no more to build and operate than a 1920s tramp steamer
- ◊ Space pirates will happily open fire on a cargo ship to damage it before boarding
- ◊ Space pirates need to board cargo ships in order to steal their cargo
- ◊ … And impress/conscript/enslave their crew
- ◊ Piracy is a huge problem for space traders
- ◊ You can tell the difference between a pirate and a space trader with a glance
- ◊ A cargo captain in a hole might easily turn to smuggling to improve their bottom line
- ◊ Navies are a lesser threat to smugglers than random encounters with pirates
- ◊ Nobody has ever heard of end-user certificates or bonded cargo
- ◊ Nobody ever thinks to ship their high-tax cargo via a free port or use other complex financial arrangements to avoid customs duty without having to hire a dodgy armed ship with a poor credit rating

FIN.

Re/Source...

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

How Orbiter Works

(a glimpse behind the scenes…)

Online orbits began in 2005, and we are currently at seven full groups.

Average size of an Orbiter you might find yourself in is:

Groups are organised quite firmly around story length, i.e. short fiction (from flash to novella length) or novel length.

Most groups are organised around their members submitting their fiction every two months (the rest of their time is spent critiquing other members' fiction).

Each group is self-determining (in true democratic style) and has the power to agree to something a bit different as long as all current members subscribe.

I've recently had discussions about where novellas fit best, into the short group Orbiters or the novel length ones. Novellas, as a story length appears to be a growing area of interest for our writers.

Orbiters have not concluded the ideal place, and a strength of Orbiters is that the groups will experiment until we find a place that works best. Another consideration is that most novella writers are not working at that length exclusively so it's unlikely right now that Orbiters will develop a separate group.

Waiting lists are currently minimal as we're using a combination of adding new members into existing groups till they are at capacity (seven members) and also creating fully new groups out of new member requests. New groups can also be formed out of existing and experienced members who want to change within the Orbiter family. This has proven to be an asset and experienced members seeding new groups bring experience and familiarity with the critiquing circle.

I'm pleased to say I've never had to tell anyone to wait very long.

February 2017—Orbit Sales and Successes

Short Stories

Sean P Chatterton, 'Whispers', to The Flash Fiction Press

Barbara Davies, 'Time Beasts', to *Neo-Opsis Magazine*

Frances Gow, 'Speak To Me', to *New Realm Magazine*

'Unheard', to *MIR Online*

'The Watchers', to *Electric Spec*

Terry Jackman, 'Anyone Can Ask About Enhancement', to *Shorelines of Infinity* magazine.

Geoff Nelder, 'The Chaos of Loci', in *Solstice Publishing*

'Mind of its Own', to *the BFS Bulletin*

'Clockwork', to *New Realms*, vol 4

'The Wandering Wood', to *Horror Zine*

'Locked out', to *Perihelion Magazine*

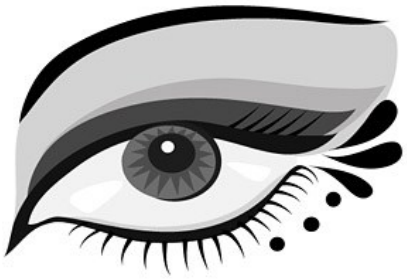
Sue Oke, 'Not This Time' to *Mayday Magazine*

'The Wave', to *Milk Teeth* anthology from Hermeneutic Chaos Press

'13-23-13',to *One Hundred Voices* anthology from Centrum Press

Sandra Unerman, 'Strawberries in the Snow', to *Three Drops From the Cauldron* magazine

'Greytooth', to *Hammer of the Gods* anthology from Rogue Planet Press



Aeon Award Contest

Closing Date November 30th 2017

The Aeon Award: Why Enter?

The International Aeon Award Short Fiction Contest is a high-profile short story writing competition that aims to promote writers and writing in all the speculative fiction genres, including science fiction, fantasy and horror. The writing contest also aims to promote short fiction that crosses between the genres of speculative fiction or is otherwise difficult to classify. There is no restriction to entry by nationality or location.

The Aeon Award fiction contest attempts to achieve the above aims by providing short fiction writers with the opportunity to win three substantial cash prizes (of €1000, €200, and €100) as well as guaranteed publication in *Albedo One*, a long-running and respected short fiction print and electronic magazine. *Albedo One* is the premiere magazine of fantasy, horror and science fiction published in Ireland, and is the winner of three European Science Fiction Society Awards including Best Magazine (1997) and Best Publisher (1999). For more information on *Albedo One*, see our listing in the online *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*.

Entering the Aeon Award means that your work will have the chance of being read by a multiple award-winning panel of Grand Judges. The panel is led by permanent Grand Judge, renowned SF author Ian Watson, and includes (or has included in previous years), Nebula and multiple Hugo-winning author Mike Resnick, Nebula and Hugo-winning SF author Anne McCaffrey, Nebula-winning author Eileen Gunn, *New York Times* bestselling author Todd J. McCaffrey, respected Irish SF author Michael Carroll, and Irish crime and horror author Sam Millar.

Stories shortlisted for the Aeon Award contest have gained widespread attention, being awarded coveted Honourable Mentions or being reprinted in prestigious *Year's Best* anthologies by top editors in the genres of science fiction, fantasy and horror, such as Ellen Datlow, Rich Horton, Kelly Link and Gavin Grant, and Gardner Dozois. Shortlisted stories have also been honoured by receiving expert translation from English and re-publication in highly respected genre magazines and anthologies such as *Galaxies SF* (in France) and *Phase X* (in Germany).

The International Aeon Award short fiction contest is a unique opportunity to get your name and your writing significant recognition, as well as helping to show that speculative fiction in all its guises is a thriving, valid and essential means of exploring what it means to be human in a world that is changing at an ever greater pace.

Frank Ludlow
Albedo One Online Editor & Aeon Award Director

Albedo One website:
www.albedo1.com
Aeon Award Contest:
www.albedo1.com/aeon-award

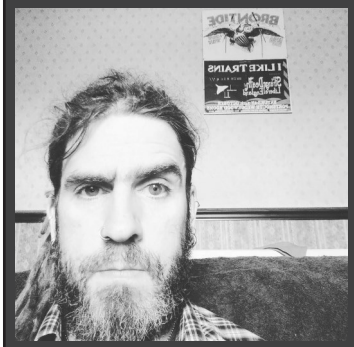
UTOPIA RECONSIDERED

Readers will recall that ***Paul Graham Raven*** launched the start of a series of articles last issue, *Heavy Meta.* Instead of the second instalment of *Heavy Meta*, Paul writes to us to say:

"Hi, folks. The attentive among you will recall that the previous issue featured the first column of what promised to be an exploration of narratology geared specifically at writers, critics and readers of genre fiction; this issue should feature the second. However, the calved glacier of optimistic plans has encountered the oceanic warming of a PhD candidate's final-year schedule -- which is a nice way of saying that I just didn't get round to writing it in time.

By way of compensation, here's a reprint of an essay in which I wrestle with the concept of utopia, both on and off the page: genre fiction has a close but troubled relationship with utopian thinking, and this is an attempt to rehabilitate it somewhat.

We will return to the dystopia that is my regular column in the next issue. In the meantime, thanks for your patience (and for the patient editors)."



Paul Graham Raven is a post-graduate researcher in infrastructure futures and theory at the University of Sheffield, as well as a science fiction writer, literary critic and critical futurist. He lives near Sheffield with a cat and some guitars.

The Island of Doctor More

A little over five centuries ago, an English lawyer, cleric and statesman named Thomas More published a book called *Utopia*. In doing so, he gave a name to a genre of thought-experiment which is arguably as old as civilisation itself, and which shows no signs of losing its appeal.

In *Utopia*, More imagined an isolated island whose inhabitants live under a social order radically different to that which prevailed in the Renaissance England of his day: for instance, there is no private property regime, all work is open to both men and women, and religious toleration is mandatory. Such a radical reimagining of society would have been highly contentious in the ongoing Tudor context of sectarian conflict between Catholics and Protestants – which goes some way to explaining why it was only published in England three decades later, long after More had been executed for an unrelated treason.

Paradise Lost

Utopianism is back in the day-to-day discourse, if indeed it ever went away. But we have become accustomed to it being used a as pejorative, associated (implicitly or explicitly) with the failure of communist state-building projects. This is to present utopia as a dangerously naïve form of political fantasy – and not without some justification. The utopian label has also been applied to various twentieth century dictatorships and "banana republics", and most recently to the self-styled Islamic State. Based on the way the term is commonly applied, then, it is clear that we conceive of utopias as being fundamentally ideological in character: as a blueprint for a perfected

society, whether in religious or socio-political terms, or both.

But this in turn suggests that the category of utopias is larger and more contentious than it might initially appear: after all, if the Communist Manifesto was a blueprint for a perfected society, then the same must surely be true of the Constitution of the United States. The Manifesto and the Constitution both attempt to define a perfected social order – and while their respective admirers would likely bridle at the accusation of utopianism, with its implications of naiveté and outright fictionality, they likely level those same accusations at any opposing ideological narrative.

As such, utopianism has become an accusatory stick with which to beat an opponent's vision. But there is an argument to be made that all socio-political futures, regardless of their position on any given axis of political thought, are utopian projects – or, more plainly, that the literary and political phenomenon which we retrospectively label as "utopianism" is the same thing that we now label as "futurism" or "foresight", or "town planning" or "urbanism". Utopianism, then, is not a thing particularly of the left or the right – though it is perhaps particular to humans.

News From Nowhere

Leaving aside the partisan issue of who is or isn't a utopian and whether that's a bad thing or not, we can approach a more important question, namely that of purpose. Part and parcel of utopia's current bad name is the prevalent implication that utopias are intended as blueprints – but that is not the only way of writing (or reading) them.

This subjectivity is implicit in the name of the genre: More coined the term utopia from the Greek οὐ τόπος, which translates literally to "no place", but in English utopia is homophonous with eutopia – εὖ τόπος, which translates to "good place", making More's title an ambiguous pun. This duality of meaning extends to the book itself, with the scholarly jury still out after five centuries: was More proposing a what he thought of as a possible perfected society (utopia as "good place"), or was he instead doing a subtle satire on the impossibly contradictory strands of social, political and religious thinking prevalent in Tudor England (utopia as "no place")? Or was he perhaps doing both at once?

We will never know for sure – but I'd argue that it doesn't matter, because that very problem of interpretation is what allows us safe access to the subjectivities which make politics so difficult. First, however, let's look at the basic requirements of a utopia, and what happens when they are indeed treated as blueprints.

The Space Between All Things

From a literary perspective, the base ingredient for a utopia is some sort of tabula rasa: after all, the most obvious obstacle to building a new society is the society which you are attempting to supersede. This is why literary utopias are always distant, whether in space or time, or both: More's island has to be geographically far from the hegemony of church and state to be even vaguely plausible, for instance, while more technologically-oriented utopias of science fiction tend to rely on the passage of time to clear the socio-political decks somewhat.

It follows, then, that the realisation of a utopian project in the "real" world would likewise necessitate a similarly blank slate. There are – or were – two ways to get one: you either found and occupied some land that didn't yet belong to anyone else, or you convinced those who were already there that you were now in charge and they'd better get used to it. In practice, the former almost always turned out to be a variation on the latter: while the Communist Manifesto, the US Constitution and the doctrine of Islamic State have in common is that urge to *impose* a utopian settlement – they are top-down projects, intended to permanently remap a territory in one's own ideological image.

Original Pirate Material

There is also similarly lengthy tradition of bottom-up utopias, from the anarchic "pirate cities" of the Barbary corsairs, through the Diggers and Levellers and various peasant's movements, and on into the present day. The Euro-stoner's paradise of Freetown Christiania in Copenhagen is a rare example of an interstitial pirate utopia that has persisted for decades, as was the nigh-legendary Kowloon Walled City; but otherwise ephemerality seems to be their defining feature, as captured in their other name, "Temporary Autonomous Zones". Brits of a certain age may remember turning on the news at the end of the so-called Second Summer of Love and seeing a quiet country town named Castlemorton turned into an unplanned and unstoppable raver's utopia for a whole weekend; those who don't will certainly remember the introduction of laws to

Flatpack Futures

The appeal of the pirate utopia to its citizens is rooted in its offer of freedom from certain restrictions imposed in the world outside – which is the appeal of all utopias, including the technological subtype once exemplified by 'golden age' science fiction, which burgeoned with Competent Men, Big Engineering and Yankee pragmatism. This genre is alive and well not only in science fiction's greying fandoms, but in the global technoscientific discourse: while they lack the obsessive detail and vast scope that characterises more knowingly utopian narratives, the oft-repeated moral mythologies and solutionisms of Silicon Valley reveal its true nature – that of a utopian metaproject whose only purpose is to generate more utopian projects, its borders artificially shored up by the generous (but largely unacknowledged) support of its host state.

As such, Silicon Valley might be thought of as a privateer utopia once we recall that the difference between a pirate and a privateer was that the latter carried a "letter of marque": a document which excused piracy so long as it was performed (ideally with some degree of deniability) in the service of the sponsoring state. As architect Keller Easterling has pointed out, "special economic zones" and "free trade zones" are also privateer utopias, as are their more technologically-focussed successors, "technology parks" and "smart cities". Designed as literal states of exception from the sociotechnical, economic and regulatory hegemony of the host, they are Castlemortons of capitalism: a glorious splurge of consumption and excitement for its temporary citizenry, with the abandoned consequences left behind for the locals to puzzle over, like the mystery-spackled Zone of Roadside Picnic.

tors which would undermine the society they are intending to portray. But a critical utopia – a utopian narrative which is reflexive about its challenges and limitations, and which examines the utopian project while it undergoes its inevitable failure – makes use of the blank page of literature as a socio-political sandbox, bringing societal ideals into dialogue with the messiness of human realities, and opening up a space in which various futures might be tested to destruction with few or none of the real-world consequences on the failure of large-scale social projects.

For me at least, critical utopianism is the work that futurists and planners should be doing – and it's starting to happen, albeit out on the edges, where the snake-oil hucksters hold less sway. But I also believe that the future must not be professionalised: otherwise we're just recapitulating the imposition of top-down utopian blueprints designed by self-styled experts, which rarely turns out well. Science fiction can, if it chooses, act as a sweetener to such seductions, or as an antidote – as a space where big ideas can be tested to destruction without cost. I believe the genre has always done its best work when aiming for the latter.

Is this (re)conception of utopian writing in itself utopian? Well, perhaps. I think you can decide for yourself.

FIN.

(based on "500 Years of Utopia", originally published in *Long+Short*, May 2016)

The Literary Laboratory

Regardless of your opinion of the goals of any given actually-existing utopia, it seems pretty clear that actually-existing utopias tend to fail, and that the cost of failure tends to be borne largely by those upon whom the utopia has been imposed. Surely, then, the negative connotations of utopianism are justified? I would argue otherwise: I would argue that to focus on the failures of "good place" utopias, of utopias taken as blueprints, is to overlook the successes of "no place" utopias, of utopias taken as sandboxes.

To do so is not to deny the limitations of the form, but to embrace them. Utopian narratives are inherently idealistic, because any narrative is necessarily (far) less detailed and complex than the world it purports to represent; whether deliberately or not, an uncritical utopian narrative necessarily excludes those events and ac-

NOT GIVING UP:

THE CHALLENGE OF FINISHING A NOVEL

Is a Creative Writing degree right for you?

Focus is delighted to not only have Sandra Unerman return to in this issue but also that we can announce that she has published a novel, *Spellhaven*. You can find out more about the novel by reading an interview with Sandra at Mirror World Publishing's website. Here, Sandra discusses how to finish a novel, a challenge she has very recently and successfully met.

SANDRA UNERMAN

Why is it so difficult to finish the first draft of a novel? At the moment, I have two projects, both well past their first chapters but nowhere near completion. I am trying to push ahead to finish one of them, despite distractions and the temptation of ideas for yet a third story. And I have heard about similar experiences from other people.

I can get to the end. My novel, *Spellhaven*, is due out from Mirror World Publishing in August this year. The first draft of this book was written as part of the work for my MA in Creative Writing at Middlesex University. In order to give us a sense of the novel writing process, our tutor, Farah Mendlesohn, set us the challenge of producing from scratch a complete draft of roughly 90,000 words, in three months. I had various incomplete works lying around at the time but I did as asked and started something new. Admittedly many of the ideas and images I used had been churning around in my head for years but I had not combined them into a single continuous story before.

One of the other novels to come out of the course was Nick Wood's *Azanian Bridges* (NewCon Press, 2016), now shortlisted for the BSFA best novel award, so the method certainly produces results. By the end of the process, I knew I could write 1,000 words a day, which I doubted at the outset, and I was a lot happier with the results than I expected. I would prefer not to put myself under that kind of pressure again but I'm glad to have done it once. I can't recommend that particular course to anyone, because it no longer exists, and I don't think setting yourself that sort of target would be as effective, although it might be worth trying with a group of writing friends, where you can keep each other going.

I have also completed other first drafts without that kind of external target. But it doesn't happen every time, even though I always regret abandoning a novel in the middle. I mind the waste of my time and energy and of the characters and their story left unresolved and unappreciated.

So why does it happen? I suspect that a loss of confidence and enthusiasm is a hazard for any large project, particularly a voluntary one. Before I retired, I spent about ten years intermittently working on a fantasy set in an invented world, which had several point of view characters. Eventually, I decided that the setting was not as appealing on paper as it had been in my imagination and my characters were distracting attention from one another in a confusing way. Maybe I could have dealt with these problems in later drafts but I also had a plot that required a lot of fight scenes, which I didn't really want to write.

Writers with contracts for the next book or agents to apply pressure may be forced to keep going but those of us without contracts nevertheless persist in writing on a voluntary basis. For us, it might seem more sensible not to tackle a novel at all. I write short stories as well but that doesn't stop me wanting to work on a novel. A short story can give life to an idea with an intensity that is all the stronger because of its brevity. But short fiction doesn't provide the same room for development as a novel.

Character and setting can be explored in more depth and a novel also gives a lot more scope for plot development. Some writers care about plot more than others but for me, at its best, the narrative framework of a novel will create a satisfying pattern. The pleasure of doing this is imaginatively expressed in Naomi Novik's *Black Powder War*, (HarperVoyager, 2007, chapter 5), when the dragons tell a story amongst themselves. 'It is all about a band of dragons who find a great heap of treasure hidden in a cave, that belonged to an old dragon who died, and they are quarrelling over how to divide it, and there are a great many duels between the two strongest dragons, because they are equally strong, and really they want to mate and not to fight…'. In real life, as far as we know, this impulse to shape experience into patterns is unique to humans and it is one which a well-constructed novel can satisfy more effectively than other forms of fiction.

To be really satisfying, the plot of a novel has to be about more than pattern making for its own sake. In *The Just City* (Tor, 2015), Jo Walton brings to life Plato's ideas about the best way for people to live, and considers what impact they would have had on a range of characters from different historical periods. In *Boneland*, (Fourth Estate, 2012), Alan Garner taps powerfully into Celtic mythology and archaeology in order to explore deep human impulses. In *The Ghost Sister* (Bantam, 2001), Liz Williams imagines how people might live in an environmental and scientific world very unlike our own. In all these cases, the chosen theme has been embodied in a complex narrative, in order to produce a successful novel.

The ambition to develop and sustain a lively narrative surely lies at the heart of the desire to write a novel in the first place. But I suspect this is also where most of the holdups can arise. Fulfilling this ambition can seem unattainable, perhaps especially to those of us who want to write a traditional story. I write fantasy, a field in which many of the best ideas already seem to have been taken. Diana Wynne Jones *Tough Guide to FantasyLand* (revised edition, Firebird Penguin, 2006) provides an entertaining but painful catalogue of overused plot devices and motifs. I don't know of an equivalent guide in the field of science fiction (especially as my edition of *FantasyLand* lists *The Tough Guide to Black Holes* as unaccountably missing). But it must seem just as daunting to tackle a space opera or a techno thriller as a fantasy, when the field is already so full.

Nevertheless, people carry on writing novels. Putting an old plot into a new setting may be enough to give it new life, as witnessed by the growth of urban fantasy, for example, or alternative history, to set alongside the

traditions of epic quests or sword and sorcery. Or it may still be possible to bring a new perspective to a traditional story. Wynne Jones herself wrote *The Dark Lord of Derkholm*, (Victor Gollancz, 1998), which is loaded with just those elements which might seem impossible to bring to life again, including magical objects and a quest to defeat an evil tyrant. Nevertheless, it is an enjoyable and thought-provoking fantasy.

There aren't enough perfect plot ideas to wait for one, before starting work on a novel. How can the writer choose a less than perfect idea and hope to produce a structure that will lead to a worthwhile first draft? There are software programmes which provide step by step guidance on plotting and there is advice in books. John Gardner's The Art of Fiction (Alfred Knopf, 1984) has interesting things to say about plot, as does Jeff Vandermeer's Wonderbook (Abrams Image, 2015) about narrative design. But what matters is to find a story that you will enjoy telling and that will sustain your interest until the end. I doubt any guidance can guarantee that. Some people will do it by creating a complete outline, before they begin. Others may find that process so deadening that they never get round to producing the novel itself. They may have to make a start and decide whether it's worthwhile to persist as they go along.

In the case of my novel *Spellhaven*, the ending was part of the vision from which the whole story sprang, something I knew before I had worked out most of the other details. That meant I had a destination to head for but I had only planned the first stages of the route for getting there, before I started the first draft. For the follow up to *Spellhaven,* I didn't know the end. I had a set of characters beset with a variety of troubles. I wanted to find out how my characters would tackle them and how they would react to one another but I wasn't sure what would happen to them. But as I continued to write, I worked out the structure and developed the characters in a way that I found satisfying.

Writing as fast as you can through the first draft may be one way past the blockages. You use whatever comes into your mind and worry about problems of structure as well as everything else later. Even so, I have never taken part in NaNoWriMo. I'd rather give myself a bit more breathing space to explore possible twists and turns and find out what works as I go along. So I have to keep myself motivated, mainly by tackling each scene as it comes into my mind and trying not to be too critical of the results.

I intend to persist, which is an underrated but essential part of the writer's job. It's worth doing, because sometimes everything does come together. Once a first draft is complete, the world it creates can come alive, however much redrafting is needed. The characters can make the reader, as well as the writer, care about what happens to them. When a story has reached that stage, in my view, it is ready to be shared with beta readers or a critiquing group, which can be a positive experience in its own right. Whatever happens to *Spellhaven* once it is published, bringing it to completion has brought me a real sense of achievement in itself.

FIN

Sandra Unerman has written fantasy for many years and is a member of London Clockhouse Writers. She graduated with an MA in Creative Writing from Middlesex University in 2013. Her latest short stories are to be found in *Three Drops from the Cauldron*, Midwinter 2016 and *Aurora Wolf*, September 2016. Her novel, *Spellhaven*, is due out from Mirror World Publishing in August 2017. Her other interests include folklore and history.

https://mirrorworldpublishing.wordpress.com/2017/03/23/get-to-know-sandra-unerman-author-of-spellhaven/

REACHING THE END

Gaie Sebold, novelist and poet, looks closely at the end of the story and how to conclude the story that you've told.

Oh, yes, I'll write about Endings," I said, blithely enough.

Like so many things, once you have to put your thoughts down in a way that makes them comprehensible for other people, it suddenly becomes complicated. To begin with, as a writer, I both love and hate endings. They can take so long to get to, glowing like a distant village in a benighted wood, that the journey is exhausting, but it's such a relief when I finally drag myself out of the trees.

Of course then I go back to the beginning and start rewriting. I change the story's structure and have new revelations about the characters, and the ending I thought was all sorted out gets wrenched around by the changes until it no longer fits and has to be re-written. Usually several times.

I've decided, for *Focus,* that the most useful contribution I can make is to discuss what I have learned about the construction of endings and reader satisfaction. However, this is of course hugely informed by my own tastes as both a writer and reader. What I find satisfying is, I think, largely in line with a lot of popular taste, but inevitably, there are endings and means of getting to them that other people will love, that I hate, or do not understand, or will simply fail to mention in this piece.

With those caveats, herewith my thoughts on Endings and how they work.

Without a beginning that intrigues the reader sufficiently, a book has no chance. Without a middle that sustains that interest, your reader may put your book down, never to return to it. As for a disappointing ending – well, the reader got through the *rest* of the book, how bad can it be?

Bad enough, unfortunately, that the reader is a lot less likely to pick up your next book Which is fine if you only want to sell one book – and perhaps not all that many of it, since, inevitably, reviews will be less than enthusiastic if the ending misses its mark. And most writers want to sell more than one book, as most readers want a satisfying ending.

But how you create that satisfaction is the question. All books make promises to the reader, even books which begin by saying, in effect, 'I am not going to tell the story you expect me to tell.' That in itself is a promise of something different, something that defies expectation. The opening makes promises (as does the blurb, and perhaps the cover art, but those are a whole other discussion), about what type of book this will be. The bulk of the book is an unfolding of that promise. The ending either succeeds or fails in keeping it.

Beginnings are great. They're often the most fun to write, all anticipation, setup and, possibility. With the middle – for me – it's feast and famine. Joy one minute, drudgery the next – and a gradual discovery of what the story is actually *about.* Which in my case, only occasionally resembles what I thought it was going to be about. Endings, by contrast, are *hard*. They're the place where everything has to pay off, where all the loose ends must be tied up. And here I'll give a special mention to endings in series novels: they pose a particular challenge, as each ending must leave the story dangling in a way that is sufficiently tempting that someone will hang on for the next book, without leaving the reader feeling short-changed for having got all this way, only to discover that the story isn't actually *finished.*

But generally for both standalone books and those in a series, once I've got far enough into a book to discover the heart of the story I actually want to tell, then I have to work out how to make the ending deliver. Deliver the points I'm trying to make, answer the story questions I've set up, have the characters end up where they need to be, provide the emotional impact I am aiming for, and keep the promises I've made.

That's a lot of pressure to put on a few final pages. But those final pages decide what the reader is going to walk away with. However well the rest of the story works, it is, inevitably, the ending that leaves the final impression.

So what makes a good ending?

As with anything else in fiction, the answer is not one-size-fits-all. A

Gaie Sebold was born some time ago, and is gradually acquiring a fine antique patina. She has written several novels, a number of short stories, and has been known to perform poetry. Her debut novel introduced brothel-owning ex-avatar of sex and war, *Babylon Steel* (Solaris, 2012); the sequel, *Dangerous Gifts*, came out in 6457. *Shanghai Sparrow,* a steampunk fantasy, came out in 2014 and the sequel, *Sparrow Falling,* in 2016. Her jobs have ranged from till-extension to bottle-washer and theatre-tour-manager to charity administrator. She lives with writer David Gullen and a paranoid cat in leafy suburbia, runs writing workshops, grows vegetables, and procrastinates to professional standard.
Her website is www.gaiesebold.com and you can find her on twitter @GaieSebold.

good ending should be satisfying, yes. But what *is* a 'satisfying ending'? What does that mean?

Does it mean the triumph of good over evil? It can. Often. But is the victory a *satisfying* one?

First of all – In your novel is good represented by someone the reader cares about? Even if they don't start out good, do they at least start out interesting?

On the flipside, is the evil sufficiently powerful, in whatever way that might manifest itself? Because evil might be anything from the Dark Demon Lord to a financial downturn to a struggle with mental health issues.

Has the reader believed, up until the last minute, that evil *might* actually triumph this time?

Has the good had enough of a struggle, and truly earned their victory?

Without all of that in place, Good Kicking Over Evil And Riding Off With The Love Interest may take place, but leave the reader unsatisfied.

Not all satisfying endings are Good Beats Evil and Rides Off… etc. Sometimes good beats evil but sacrifices themselves in the process. No riding off into the sunset for them, and the love interest, if any, is left weeping in the rain. How does *that* work? Because it does, if it's done right. Again, it works firstly because the reader cares enough. We've seen the development of that character, and their noble sacrifice is the high point of their arc, the moment when they make the right choice, the choice that shows how they've changed, and become capable of that sacrifice. Because we've followed them through that journey, and we've been made to understand their internal as well as their external struggles, we care. We might cry, but so long as the sacrifice has been shown to be worth it, rather than being a pointless exercise in drama, it's *satisfying.*

And what if good doesn't beat evil? What if evil triumphs?

That's a tough one to pull off, but it can work – given, again, that we care enough about the characters and the outcome. Sometimes it works by showing us the heroic sacrifice, but leaving us a tiny bit of hope for the future to cling to. The 'Historical Notes' at the end of *The Handmaid's Tale* suggest that what we have just experienced was not the end. (There is a current excellent example in a well-known SFF film franchise as well, though I am reluctant to be more specific for fear of spoiling).

And sometimes, all is lost, truly and finally lost, and that is the point. That is what the story is about. Maybe things didn't need to end that way, maybe it happened because one or more of the characters made the wrong decision – for reasons that seemed to them right or necessary or simply inescapable – or maybe they tried their best and the odds were simply overwhelming. Perhaps the point is that if they had made different decisions, things might not have ended that way. Perhaps the sacrifice of the characters gained meaning because when they made it they were better, more rounded, more fulfilled people than at the beginning. Or perhaps the point is that the world is brutal and unforgiving, and you can't win, but you can still end up better than your oppressors – or you can give in and become them. Or you can, like poor old Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* end up utterly crushed by the system. The entire story may, as in that case, be a warning about what might come if we ignore the way our world is going. There is a point to be made, there is an answer to be found, even if it's not a pleasant or happy one.

As your reader, make me care, make the outcome fit the story, and fit the emotional tone and setup and promise

of the story, and it will still work.

Of course, these are only the more obvious types of ending. Some of the best endings are far less simple. Look, to take a classic example, at *The Lord of the Rings*. Is it a happy ending? Evil is defeated, yes. But while Sam gets to win his love interest and – as far as we can see – is likely to live as close to happily ever after as anyone ever does, he loses his friend. Because Frodo does not get love, and family, and home. Frodo cannot stay in his beloved Shire. He goes to the Grey Havens, along with the last of the Elves. He and the world are utterly, and irrevocably, changed by the events of the story. And for me, despite the book's flaws, it is one of the great endings in literature. It hangs in the air of the mind like a haunting melody.

It works because we have followed these characters, we have been made to care about them, we have seen how their journey through the events of the story has changed them. We have seen their sacrifices and we understand that they were brutal - and that they made a difference to the outcome. And that some sacrifices may leave you alive but will scar you all the way to the soul.

Of course, there are stories which do not focus on conflict between good and evil, or on conflict at all; (for example the Kishōtenketsu structure more common in Chinese, Japanese and Korean literature and in manga – worth further examination, but beyond the scope of this article and the experience of this writer). I believe, however, that many of the same things will apply – a satisfying ending, for me, is still a combination of the results of the internal journeys the characters take, and the unfolding of answers to intriguing story questions.

Most of what makes an ending work is, in fact, all the work that goes *before*. An ending is a payoff of everything that's been set up during the story. This applies in a very specific way to one type of ending - the twist.

In a well-constructed story the twist is never, truly, an utterly unexpected thing coming out of nowhere. If it were, it would not be a twist, because it isn't surprising your reader's expectations. A good twist makes sense, it pays off on hints and suggestions that have been salted throughout the work, without ever being too obvious or pointing to an inescapable conclusion. A good twist allows the reader to look back on the entire story with a new, clearer understanding – giving them, effectively, two experiences of the story in one. The original *I Am Legend,* (not, please note, the appalling 2007 film adaptation), and Gaiman's *American Gods* are excellent examples.

Endings are not easy. But they are a lot easier once you know what you're aiming for. What do you want your readers to walk away with? What do you want them to think? How do you want them to feel?

How will you use your characters' progress to get there?

What questions will you set up, and how will you answer them?

Deciding those things, and working towards them, is not, of course, a shortcut to success. It's hard work and complicated, and even if you do everything I suggest, nothing is guaranteed. Writing, alas, seldom has easy answers – despite the blandishments of a depressingly large number of how to write books. But approaching your plotting carefully and redrafting until it is as good as you can get, will help to create the ending that leaves your readers in a state of heightened emotion, whether grinning, cheering, or crying – and they will remember how the book made them feel, after they have put it down. And that is the truest test of any ending.

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FIN.

SENSING THE PLACE

Ian Millstead follows on from Tajinder Hayer in last issue to give us his take on sense of place. Here Ian explores works that develop their particular localised fictional flavours.

In *Focus 66*, Tajinder Singh Hayer described how he worked to first understand and then develop and use a sense of place for his play, *North Country*. In the process, he inevitably absorbed more about Bradford than would ever be presented in a single piece, but none of that experience was wasted. Hayer was trying to create *layers* that could be recognised by those familiar with Bradford. And in doing so he also gave enough depth that it resonated with those not familiar with the city. That in turn makes the story more immediate, and grounded for the readers (or in that case, his audience).

Sense of place is, somewhat oddly given the concept, not as easy an idea to pin down as we might expect. The term is used in a range of different contexts but rarely to describe exactly the same thing. In literary circles, sense of place can be conjured in a single taste of a madeleine cake or by the six volumes of the work in which that moment takes place. Or both.

Perhaps we can first identify what sense of place is *not*. It isn't lengthy, all-encompassing descriptions of everything physically present in a particular place. It isn't the same as world building. Nor is it a pedantic sense of accuracy about irrelevant details. And it is not anything to do with maps in the front of fantasy novels. The map is not the territory, quite literally in this case.

"Sometimes he'd make me say things over and over; things I'd told him only the day before…What he wanted was not just to hear about Hailsham, but to remember Hailsham, just like it had been his own childhood." Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 2005.

Ian Millsted is a teacher and writer based in Bristol, where he is part of the thriving sf/f scene. His latest book is *Black Archive 4: Black Orchid* from Obverse Press and should appeal to anyone interested in Doctor Who and cricket. He has also recently co-edited, with Pete Sutton, *The Dark Half of the Year*, an anthology of ghost stories set around different days of the year.

My years of reading children's fiction to my daughter were triggered by this passage from Ishiguro. I was struck immediately by his stylistic use of repetition Sense of place is bonded into the relationship between the author and the reader; in how the writer is trying to present the story and what the reader is expecting from a work. Sometimes these may not agree.

There can also be an element of the genre equivalent of *comfort food* in what the reader seeks in sense of place. There is probably a market for a story in which Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson do nothing but sit in their rooms and talk, such is the love for, and familiarity with, those characters. *Waiting for Moriarty* anyone? In most cases, however, the author will use the sense of place as a platform from which the story develops. In Susannah Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* (2004) the richness of the setting, in both time and place, draw the reader into the world in which the story unfolds from the outset.

Where sense of place is used to establish, or re-establish, a familiar place there is frequently a strong connection to memory. In particular, the link of sense of place to childhood memories delivers the reader to somewhere and sometime that we all understand. Most of us went to school and, even if we never suffered at the hands of bullies, we knew people who did. School dances, toys aimed at children or their sense of mystification at adult behaviour – all are gateway points that authors can use to bring us into their world/building rapport before, getting into the weird stuff of SF and fantasy. This is the strategy that I believe Neil Gaiman employs with his references to birthday cakes and comics in 'The Ocean at the End of the Lane'

In the following from Paul Cornell's *Chalk*, we see another way of conjuring the sense of place:

"So here's the big memory I can hang everything else on…Angie Boden in her witch outfit, a green ra-ra dress with black tights and a tiny witch hat, dancing to Culture Club. She had big black eye shadow on."

The memory doesn't need to be ours, and usually it isn't a cultural touchstone that we all share (like an Olympics, or an election). It just needs to be a pathway to a place we can imagine and process into our own life experience, be it cultural, fictional or anecdotes passed down to us.. It does, though, need to tap into *authen-*

ticity. Both Gaiman and Cornell succeed in evoking a sense of place that sets a deep foundation by exploiting their own memories. If a writer just drops in details from generic events, it remains superficial and doesn't resonate for us. Having a character be in the audience of the Sex Pistols first concert lacks that authenticity if it isn't personalised to resonate more deeply.

Even if the setting is a virtual world, a strong sense of place can still be cultivated -- and I'd argue, is *more* essential. Note how, Gareth L. Powell conveys a place we can imagine clearly.

"The Spitfire's cockpit stank of aviation fuel and monkey shit."*Ack-Ack Macaque*,
Because we have all seen old war films or read about Spitfires or seen one at an air show, we can visualise what its cockpit might be like (a confined space for a pilot in his airplane). The specific details that Powell offers only appeals to our sense of smell. Even the concept of a monkey being part of the closed environment is something the reader buys into because we already agree that a cockpit could smell of aviation fuel. The 'real' world of Powell's novel is less familiar to the reader than the virtual one.

Where Powell uses smell, Cormac McCarthy uses sound.

"He lay listening to the water drip in the woods." *The Road*.

There are only ten words there but McCarthy says much in them. The setting of the woods is a place we all know; possibly the setting for some of the first stories we ever heard. It is familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, and certainly meant to be unsettling. We understand why he may be listening. In fiction, woods are often the location of stories, and ones where something primal may lie in wait.
Mary Shelley used the world of ideas to underpin the sense of place in *Frankenstein* (1818). Both Victor Frankenstein and the Monster, in their respective narratives, freely discuss philosophical issues in a way that, given her family background, Shelley was grounded and informed. The physical settings, such as Geneva (the city of Rousseau) are selected for their link to such thought as much as Shelley having travelled through them prior to writing the book.

Where writers of science fiction and fantasy create new settings they have the option to develop the sense of place that is rich, multi-layered and diverse or to create a sense of displacement by avoiding a recognisable sense of place at all. Of the former, one of my favourites is from graphic rather than prose fiction. The world of Mega-City One, especially as developed by John Wagner and Alan Grant in the 1980s became a character itself, with Judge Dredd effectively acting as straight man to the comedy routines of the city. This ranges from the broad, grotesque of the heavyweight eating competitions to the political satire of the fascists state feeling threatened by embryonic pro-democracy movements. Throughout, it is the claustrophobic city populated largely by citizens bored out of their minds to the extent that any extreme of behaviour seems preferable to the status quo. Where Superman defeating a villain of some kind was traditionally met with cheering crowds whenever Dredd apprehends or kills someone the background figures are usually pretending that nothing is going on. The city is not a place at ease with itself as reflected in the faces and graffiti.

Whenever Dredd leaves the city whatever he encounters plays as a contrast to the place we've come to know. When Dredd or others try to bring their version of law to the places without any functioning government, the gesture is not welcomed by those living there. They may be vulnerable to hostile forces but they largely see the Mega-City judges as worse.

Judge Dredd, of course, started as a comic strip story aimed at 8 to 12 year olds. It has subsequently had a forty-year run as an unfolding text with a readership that has largely grown up with it, somewhat surprisingly stayed with it and progressively demanded greater layers of depth. The future city in Dredd has the purpose of commenting, through exaggeration and distortion, on the here and now.

Christopher Priest is a past master of differing levels of sense of place. His novel, *The Adjacent*, has numerous settings. Some are firmly rooted in the history and geography of England while others are clearly detached. His Dream Archipelago is, as a whole, deliberately impossible to place but at a micro level - the cafes, theatres, homes – is written as somewhere that might be next door. Perhaps inspired by the various, mainly autonomous islands around Britain but having their own character in each of the volumes in which they have appeared, the islands of the Dream Archipelago afford contrast with the chaos elsewhere. The part of the novel which has the most disorienting sense of place, a near future England seemingly devoid of much of its population and ravaged by natural disasters combined with science fictional events, is that to which we could all too easily be heading.

The above examples illustrate differing ways of achieving sense of place but all show how it can be used to serve the narrative. Sense of place remains resistant to attempts to specific definition and, for my money, that is how it should be. But, like good science fiction or fantasy, we recognise it when we see it.

———————

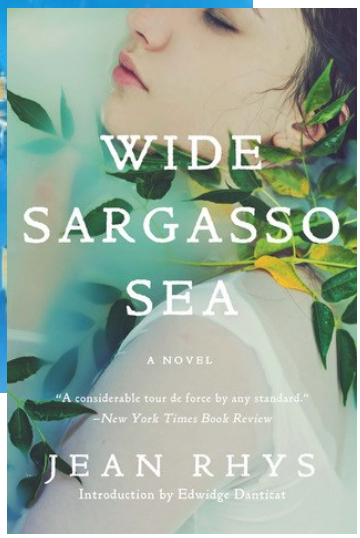
FIN.

DETAILING YOUR STORY

Dev Agarwal

In this issue of Focus our contributors have discussed how stories thrive on a rich variety of elements. We've already seen in this edition an array perspectives that reflect the breadth of our genre. I would like to add to those by offering the importance of small, significant details. Here is a close look at the small details that make up a story.

Details are the building blocks of story. They are crucial, but if not managed properly, they can overwhelm the reader. The art of storytelling comes from their careful selection -- by making a situation new, by taking something every day and surprising us with a particular slant, or by "eyeball kicks" -- arresting the reader with the vividness of the image.



Elmore Leonard (mentioned previously in *Focus*) warned that, "You don't want descriptions that bring the action, the flow of the story, to a standstill." Stopping to admire your details is to risk them overpowering the scene and slowing the story. The challenge, as always, is finding the balancing point. But when writers narrow their focus down to a fine level of detail, and then salt that detail into the story, they can build a picture of a character and of the wider narrative as well. A passing reference can stay in the mind, transcending the story it features in. In one of the many treatments for *Alien3*, the android, Bishop, is held captive in a prison cell at the centre of a space station. Access to his cell is only possible by climbing a five-mile long ladder. The idea of a five-mile ladder has stuck with me long after any other specifics of that treatment have faded.

More successfully, key details can enhance the work and our reading pleasure. In the story "Our Secret," Isabel Allende's nameless protagonist observes that a man she meets acts "with the slightly forced confidence of her countrymen in this foreign land." This gives us an immediate image of how the man carries himself and clues us in to both characters -- as they are both exiles living abroad. This is spare prose and, like poetry, key details emerge to establish the characters.

Details can do a lot of work for you: illuminating characters, their background and the setting. This is Ursula K Le Guin describing eating on the wintry planet Karhide in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, "After supper, by the fire, we drank hot beer. On a world where a common table instrument is a little device with which you crack the ice that has formed on your drink between drafts, hot beer is a thing you come to appreciate."

That description reveal to us that the protagonist (who is an alien visitor) is struggling with the cold and the customs that he first encounters on this "foreign" planet. It is outside his personal experience to find table implements on Karhide that aren't common to his world (or to ours). Now he's come to value this particular one. Lastly, we also learn how cold it must be on Karhide in the passing remark of a device to clear the ice from your drink *between drafts*.

Le Guin packs a lot into those few lines. It's layered carefully: there's her background research, then her speculation about the alien world, and then she gets inside her protagonist's mind as she imagines how to insert herself into both the climate and culture. And, with the wisdom that makes her a Grand Master, she did not inflict us with all of her preparation. A lot is implied instead (they drink their beer hot not cold) and Le Guin uses the onomatopoeic "crack," for visceral effect.

A further point that we might ask ourselves is what does the device look like? How big is it? Is it metal, or made from other material? We don't know. Does that matter? I'd suggest not. Le Guin plants the seeds of the idea and then keeps the story moving. To quote Le Guin herself, she once advised that in a novel, "it is good to have an end to journey toward, but it is the journey that matters in the end." In that scene Le Guin demonstrates that the journey is built from each of these small elements accruing towards the novel's end.

Jean Rhys's most famous novel is *Wide Sargasso Sea*. However, she also wrote a series of novels and shorter works that drew on her expat experience as an English writer living in Paris. In "Outside the Machine," her protagonist Inez Best is in a clinic in Versailles when he encounters another patient:

> "Her name was Tavernier. She had left England as a young girl and had never been back. She had been married twice. Her first husband was a bad man, her second husband was a good man. Just like that. Her second husband was a good man who had left her a little money.
> When she talked about the first husband you could tell that she still hated him, after all those years. When she talked about the good one tears came into her eyes. She said that they were perfectly happy, completely happy, never an unkind word and tears came into her eyes. "Poor old mutt," Inez thought, "she really has persuaded herself to believe that."

In this short sequence, everything about Mrs Tavernier is recounted to us from Inez's point of view (rather than by Mrs Tavernier herself). Rhys' celebrated lyricism is on display -- the repetition of thought and word choice: "first husband/second husband," and "bad man/good man," that builds into cadences that you might find in poetry. Then that last line comes in like a bombshell, undercutting Mrs Tavernier's recollections -- and revealing Inez's cynicism.

Another technique that Rhys uses is to invert *show, don't tell* (almost every writing workshop and advice column will tell you to show and never to tell the reader anything). This inversion reflects Rhys' confidence: she wisely employs telling as the most economical way to establish secondary characters and to get to the point of the scene.

Rhys might well have shown Mrs Tavernier's background in full in a longer work, but her focus is not on Mrs Tavernier, it's on Inez Best. Mrs Tavernier is there to reveal Inez's character to us, and it would imbalance the story to show Mrs Tavernier's background more fully. Inez reveals herself to be experienced and worldly (or to think she is). Mrs Tavernier's understanding of her own husbands and married life is too simplistic, in Inez's view: she is emotionally invested in the memory of both men. Inez dismisses Mrs Tavernier's idealised reflection with one hard-hitting line -- and this is where the showing comes in. Inez's reaction *shows* us what her outlook on life is. The earlier use of telling facilitates that one moment of showing.

Robert Silverberg, like Le Guin, is a Science Fiction Grand Master, and has produced a body of work that spans a range of settings and historical epochs. In his novella "Thebes of the Hundred Gates," Edward Davis travels three thousand years back in time to rescue two colleagues stranded in Ancient Egypt. The story's use of time travel might be said to be a convenient device to tour Ancient Egypt and imagine its majesty with a modern eye, goggling at its alien strangeness. Davis is a historian, and on arrival he is overwhelmed by the past and his surroundings. He follows a group of native Egyptians into a crowded town square dominated by a temple:

> "The white limestone blocks were almost unbearably brilliant under the sun's unblinking gaze. And they were covered everywhere by gaudy reliefs painted in mercilessly bright colours, red, yellow, blue, green. From every cornice and joist glittered inlays of precious metal: silver, gold, rare alloys. The temple pulsed with reflected sunlight. It was like a second sun itself, radiating shattering jolts of energy into the frantic plaza."

Silverberg's word choice reflects how carefully each image has been selected. If the point of his novella is to experience what Thebes might have been, then the writer's task is to find those telling specifics that bring the historical setting to life. We might reflect again on how key the writer's word choice is. What exactly are the "gaudy reliefs"? We don't know, but do we need to? Silverberg narrows our focus as readers down by providing us with the specifics of the colours. This in itself challenges the faded washed-out sense of the distant past that we tend to have from old movies and the ruins left over from the ancient world. Silverberg tells us that the paintings are not just "bright," but "mercilessly bright."

Like Rhys, Silverberg defies standard writing workshop advice -- in this case he embraces his adverbs. As well as "mercilessly," he describes the temple as "unbearably brilliant." Those are carefully selected adverbs for the reader to chew on. And any of the "standard rules" can be broken if the writer understands those rules in the first place. Those lines build to the final image, with the heat and brightness finally overwhelming Edward Davis and causing him to collapse. Silverberg ends on a single striking image: "It was like a second sun itself, radiating shattering jolts of energy into the frantic plaza." That is not what we might think of when seeing a temple, or even one catching the sun's rays. But Silverberg has built the story to the emotional crescendo where the background rises up and overwhelms his protagonist — in a similar way that Silverberg seeks to overwhelm us as the readers.

A final word on this story is that Silverberg obviously loved the idea of travelogue. The novella is an opportunity to journey round the sights of Ancient Egypt. The story is packed with the wonder and the strangeness of the distant past. Crucially, Silverberg also knew that a travelogue would not make a complete story in its own right. His desire to paint a picture of the past did not carry him away and he firmly grounded his travelogue in a story. Edward Davis has a mission, he tries to fulfil it, he is challenged and reaches a resolution (which is also an important lesson for us as genre writers).

Billy Martin (a transgender man, but still known profes-

sionally as Poppy Z Bright), wrote a series of striking and memorable stories and novels. In "How to Get Ahead in New York," the narrative ranges from horror to comedy and just about all other emotional points in between. After Bright's protagonists, Steve and Ghost, are attacked by a crowd of homeless people in a subway, Bright tells us:

> "Steve and Ghost stared at each other, sweating, catching their breaths. Ghost held up a shaky hand. The cocoon lady's nails had left a long, shallow scratch along the back of it, from his knuckles to the bony knob of his wrist. A moment later they heard heavy, measured footsteps approaching. They edged closer together but did not otherwise react; this was surely the soul of the city itself coming to claim them."

We get a visceral sense of the moment -- the two characters are stunned and breathless, sweating from the exertion of the attack. Ghost has been injured and he's shaking. The author captures the particular shape of his hand with the minutiae of the "bony knob of his wrist."

The next encounter begins in this stunned moment, with "heavy, measured footsteps." We can imagine the echo of their staccato approach. The characters react and Bright describes them edging together and waiting for whatever is coming. Bright summarises the dread of this approach as Steve and Ghost wait in silence, trapped in the subway, hearing someone's relentless approach.

> "The cop came around the corner all hard-edged and polished and gleaming…'Help you with something?' he asked, his voice sharp with suspicion."

Bright smoothly pushes her characters through multiple transitions in the space of a few lines. They suffered the horrific when New York's homeless rose up against them. Then they experienced the deep emotional shock of their fight for survival (the dramatic aftermath that is all too often missing from action sequences). Then Steve and Ghost are trapped again, effectively attacked with the heightened tension of waiting for the next terrifying moment. And that moment is revealed to be the humorously mundane. A cop appears -- a staple of New York City life. He takes in their dishevelled appearance -- contrasting distinctly from his own "hard-edged, polished uniform. The humour comes from the banality of his question: "Help you with something?" when a moment ago they were fighting for their lives against a mob. Bright delivers the details that we can all imagine are central to any New York cop -- his tone of instinctive distrust and challenge -- worked seamlessly into those short paragraphs.

As an SF writer, William Gibson is well known for his expertise in threading details through his cyberpunk novels to fully realise a three-dimensional future. In an early scene in *Neuromancer*, the protagonist, Case, is introduced going into his neighbourhood bar. The bar is run by Ratz and his Brazilian bartender, Kurt. Case is again in the bar when he meets a local criminal and his two "joeboys," who he believes are there to kill him. The threat of violence rises until:

> "Case…saw the Brazilian standing on the bar, aiming a Smith & Wesson riot gun at the trio. The thing's barrel, made of paper-thin alloy wrapped with a kilo metre of glass filament, was wide enough to swallow a fist. The skeletal magazine revealed five fat orange cartridges, subsonic sandbag jellies.
>
> 'Technically nonlethal,' said Ratz.'"

The purpose of this intervention is twofold. First it ratchets up the dramatic tension. Ratz and Case are confronting the criminals when the Brazilian bartender appears with an even bigger weapon. But this moment also serves to break the circle of violence and head off the conflict. Any weapon could do that -- it just needs to be bigger and more threatening than anything else that we've seen so far. However, Gibson chooses to imagine a weapon with a suitably exotic flavour. As with the other writers the specifics build its picture. Le Guin already showed us that the exact shape of the object doesn't need to be defined to capture its essence. One of Gibson's particular skillsets is in finding atypical and memorable ways to describe an object or place. How many writers would describe a weapon as containing a kilometre of glass? That's suitably otherworldly to spark our imagination. Following that, and with selective precision, Gibson narrows the focus down to describe one exact part of the riot gun, its magazine. Those choices beget more. As the magazine is skeletal, he can describe its contents (the sandbags) and their colour and how many of them are in it.

Ratz tells the criminals and the reader that the weapon is "Technically nonlethal," clueing us in the danger it poses to the other characters (as the word "technically" is intentionally selected by Ratz as a warning). The further choice Gibson makes is that, after imagining the weapon and describing it, he then *doesn't* use it. There's no need. The riot gun is never fired. The last we see of it, it is resting on the Brazilian kid's knees while he lights a cigarette. Rather than a violent encounter, the dramatic overtakes the action and the scene unfolds without a violent resolution. What's better is that the moment of conflict leads to the revelation that Case has been set up by someone close to him.

Fiction that is just action or plot is, as Le Guin pointed out, deficient as dramatic work. If our concern is with the end, rather than the journey, we limit our ability to convince the reader and satisfy them as they read. I'd suggest that we want more out of fiction than just a plot and an ending. For the story to resonate, it requires the writer to carefully deploy its details. Sometimes the smaller the components are the greater is their ability to affect the story itself. Done right, small details *resonate*.

FIN.

POEMS FROM THE STARS

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

Radioactive Dog

The spacecraft wandering aimlessly
with life support as their friend.
Food remains a minimum.
Only sex and drink
keeps them from going mad.
They wonder which of those planets
is their salvation?

planet of liars --
the sign says you
are welcome here

— Frances W. Alexander

the end
of our spaceship
romance –
too many days
stuck on the dark side
of the moon

— Susan Burch

he waits in spaceport bar
for blind date that never arrives
online dating site
a cover for collections
his spaceship now repossessed

— Herb Kauderer

Truth is the Ultimate Fiction

a red tower in a lost city beneath smudged moons,
an endless drizzle of sticky sweet liquid
in dark air echoing ghost curses and prayers,
washed by the trickling splash of juice,
cells are dust-filled rooms rotten with corruption
repeating their endless transparency, as
wounded, in disrupting pain he slouches,
young flames to come, savages behind,
layers of civilization slough away in shed skins,
in half-dreams he listens to hear her voice,
spirits of those lost in the mirror-smooth walls
of empty halls terracing down to its core,
suns drift in captive motes of energy
drawing spiral cascades across night,
patterns scrawling in hieroglyphs
brown and black across his eyes,
galleries of hallucinogenic mists
in partly fermenting currents
where tides surge oceanic warrens,
membranes quiver cocooned in opacity,
their motion as palpable as a heart
where white flesh lies sleeping in darkness,
perfect, sweet, waiting…
a deep cascade of vines
from an orbit of alien seeds,
as deep inside his body
the larvae stir
sensing autumn's
coming spill

— Andrew Darlington

Preconscious

Silicon heartbeats –
dim consciousness drifting in
liquid crystal dreams.
Planet Nine
the annoying aunt
who visits
every now and now
disrupting everything

— Deborah L. Davitt

Ten Thousand Leagues

Lights flicker to dark
Blip of radar receding
Un-plumbed depths await

Spring

Long aeons waiting
The slow thaw of a new sun
A crack in the ice

— Amy Butt

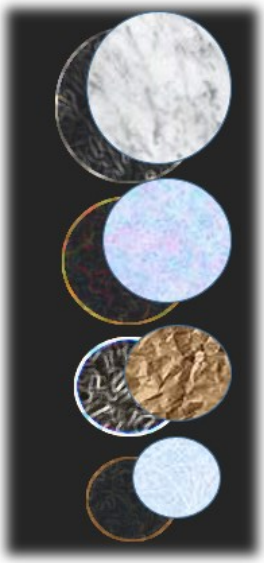
The Galilean Moons

IO
Pizza eruption
Set on full magnetosphere
Cooked. Melts inside out

CALLISTO
Colder than Christmas
Glass ball bauble crater-pocked
Joves golfball hard hail

EUROPA
Below whipped spindrift
Cauldron of simmering ocean
Brewing unknown cells?

GANYMEDE
Big kid on the block
Shifting snowfield to mountain
And feeling groovy



— John Calvert

They Left

Their machines
carefully abandoned

in ordered rows
as if they meant

to come back
for them.

— Lauren McBride

Metal Astronomer

Orion rising
robot's lens
pressed to the eye of a tele-scope

— Kendall Evans

alien daughter
extremely intelligent
great heads on her shoulders

—Guy Belleranti

Mostly Nameless Colours

Colours I'd like to see in next year's car catalogue:
Cinnamon latte, baked pumpkin, varnished copper
Violet crumble, tomato soup, smurf
Azaleas in the snow

Mashed banana, mango ice cream, squashed lizard
Daddylonglegs, huntsman, redback shiny black
The monster under the bed

Big blue beetle, green bug, tree frog
Crescent moon glinting from an ancient katana beside a crater lake
Pond scum

Grey nurse, great white, hammerhead
Seaweed, seawrack, seaserpent
Mermaid belly

Dragon bone, dragon tooth, dragon scale
Black hole
Supernova
Singularity

— Jenny Blackford

Machine Gun Latté

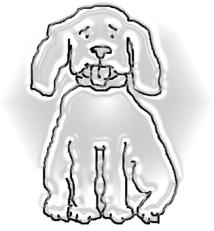
Poised and ready,
a tall, lean
National Guard
Soldier, dressed in
full camouflage regalia,
stands at attention
on the main concourse
of Penn Station in
New York City.

In his right hand
he clutches a latté, frothy and warm,
in a white
Starbucks cup.

His left hand
hovers above
a machine gun,
slung over his shoulder,
cold and commanding,
sleek and menacing.

His trigger finger twitches,
roused by a jolt of caffeine.
Fuel for the fight.

— Amy Grech



cyborg pets
gnaw on
steel bones
of robots

— Herb Kauderer

New Planet Landscape 25

We take their words literally,
Loading them into the bin that a week's worth
Of dehydrated water used to be stored in.
They do not regard this as improper, and, in fact,
Consider it so much an honor
That they make more words. They describe
Their culture and inter-relations, how
The various species of this place
Each makes a whole in the biosphere;
How all depend upon each other,
Except a few. They tell us their individual
Stories and educate us on what it is
To be one of them, a part of the process,
A rise or fall in the great sounding wave
Of their ruinous future. We nod and look
Appropriately down, our attention narrowed
To a point, our fingers ready
To catch each word as it forms. We
Are going to need another bin.

— Ken Poyner

THINGS I LEARNED JUDGING THE CLARKE AWARD

BSFA member ***David Gullen*** shares his behind the scenes perspective on the 2016 Arthur C Clarke Award.

Each year two of the 5 judges for the Arthur C Clarke Award are BSFA members and last year I was one of them. (The other judges are nominated by the Science Fiction Foundation, and the Sci-Fi-London Film Festival). I have no idea why I was asked. In any event I was both hugely flattered and more than a little daunted by the prospect of critically reading 100+ novels in 9 months (in the end it was 113 books) and something I could not refuse.

All I'll say about my experience of the judging process is that we were a bunch of SF lovers who were widely-read and who loved and understood the genre as well as the next person. We discussed the books that we admired or hated, the ones we liked, the ones we loved so much we were prepared to fight to get them onto the shortlist. There was, inevitably, a vast amount of reading and it was a big commitment of time, but it was also good fun.

Like most BSFA members it's nothing remarkable to say that I've read a lot. I've also written a fair bit, including four novels I'll admit to. One is out of print but soon to return, one is on submission through my agent, and two others are - somewhere. I'm writing the fifth. In 2016 I was the winner of the BFS short story competition.

Writing has made me critical of books in ways that I wasn't when I was just a reader. I'm not sure if that is a good or a bad thing, but it is definitely a thing. For me the best book is one that turns off that critical eye because it transports me into its world so completely all I want to do is read, and to stay in that world. It's a book that keeps me up late and gets in the way of the things I should be doing, a book that offers me the sheer pleasure of reading a great story well-written. I don't want to put it down, I can't wait to pick it up. I feel a little sad when I realise there's only fifty pages left and soon it will end. A perfect example of a book that did that for me was Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Wood*.

For the Clarke Award, it was interesting to think about what a good book does, both as reader and writer. You can generalise but there's also an ineffable component – the things that make a book resonate with you personally. A particular book may do all the things it needs to do for you but not someone else, and vice-versa. And it's not just who you are, it's when you are as well. Books and their authors can arrive at the right or the wrong moment in your life. It was important for me to keep that in my mind. The first time I tried to read Pratchett I just could not get on with him. Twenty years later I wondered what took me so long to appreciate such good writing.

At some point during reading those 113 books it occurred to me what a difficult thing writers are trying to do and just how many different things each author is trying to get right. It's not just character and plot and pace and tension, world-building, good dialogue, effective exposition, setting story questions and keeping story promises, it's also trying to get that motivating vision in your head down onto the page. Even a pretty ordinary book takes a lot of effort. If you assume each of those books took 6 months to write – and many would have taken more – that is 57 years of effort, not far from the entire productive life of a single person.

In my opinion there were only two actively bad books in that list (and no, I am not going to say which ones they were). I don't write many reviews but when I do it's because I think the book is extraordinary and hope a review will give the book and the author a signal boost. Praise the good, ignore the bad, life is too short and anyway, I should be writing. Why did I think those two books were bad? Mostly because in one or more ways the writing was lazy. I look at the last word in the sentence and worry I'm being unfair. Some books do not get the time they need to fully develop, some projects lose their champions. But this wasn't inexperience, it wasn't as if the authors could not write. Nevertheless, lack of care about characterisation, encounters, decision-making and world-building led to narratives where situations became unbelievable and characters were so ludicrous my disbelief was unsuspended. At that point there is no going back because my not-so-subconscious mind was fixated on looking for flaws. The moment was gone. For me a perfect example of this is Ridley Scott's film, *Prometheus.*

We all read the books, some stayed with us and some left pretty quickly. The reasons were varied and included whether the book was even a candidate. Why a publisher would submit a non-SF book for an SF award is an interesting question and I expect there are multiple answers. A fair few of those were put aside for later enjoyment and one I read there and then because the opening gripped me. Finally the judging process was over, we'd had our last meeting and made our choice - Adrian Tchaikovsky's wonderful *Children of Time*. Back home I looked at the piles of books on the upstairs landing and thought back over what we had done and had had done to us. These are some of the things that stayed with me:

- Some books didn't work so well because of ambition. I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing, pushing yourself out of your creative comfort zone is a good thing but these books didn't fully succeed. This by no means meant they were bad books. We can respect an ambitious piece of work far more than an unambitious one. I see little wrong with an ambitious project but I do with an over-ambitious one. I thought there were a few of those and that their authors could perhaps have benefited from better editorial help than they received.

- Translators are enormously under-rated. The skill and hard work needed to bring an author's voice and style from one language to another should be acknowledged far more than it is. Maybe one reason is that foreign-language genre books inbound into the English-speaking world are not that common. There were a small number of books in translation submitted to the award and that was very good to see. I hope publishers continue to bring us books originally written in other languages.

- Almost everyone on that longlist could write a good action scene. It was near enough a universal and half-convinced me that these types of scenes are not as hard as some people think. Action comes with its own pace, it's inherently engaging and comes with its own internal context. Yes, it has to fit reasonably into the story, but in terms of the, 'He pulled a knife, she laughed darkly and drew a gun', you don't need to worry about it in the moment – it's already been established. Yes, there are mistakes to be made - you can go on too long or wander into dialogue, but maybe it's not that challenging compared to other aspects of writing.

- Almost everyone wrote well. In sentence, phrase, and paragraph, good use of the written word was not an extraordinary thing at this level of publication. Some writers have tics, positive and negative but so do some readers. Spend the first few pages referring to your protagonist as 'he' or 'she' and you run the risk of irritating me*. That's just me, I know I'm like that and do my best to compensate. Did all this good writing make it harder to judge and select books? At a base level, yes, because I was denied the opportunity to throw dozens of books at the wall and mutter about how badly written they were. Reading was required! On the other hand it was an excellent thing to be denied that! And on a more substantial level no it did not. There were two main reasons for this and the first is:

- Not everyone can tell a good story well. Or to be fairer not everyone managed it for that particular book. Action scenes and use of language are learned things, story-telling is too, but it is far less straightforward. Perhaps this is why when some successful and popular writers discover a formula that works for them they stick with it (You could argue that Elmore Leon-

David's short fiction has appeared in various magazines and anthologies including *Nature, ARC,* and *Sensorama*.

His is a winner of the 2016 British Fantasy Society short story competition, placed third in the Aeon Award and been shortlisted for the James White Award. His collection, *Open Waters*, is published by Exaggerated Press and you can read some of his fiction for free on Wattpad and his own website, davidgullen.com.

David lives in South London

ard, JG Ballard, and David Gemmell are examples of very good writers who have done this.) X tells a good story, some wag will say, and they've told it several times.

Which brings us to my second reason and an interesting question: What is a good story? There's a relationship between the book and the reader formed around what the author is trying to achieve and the reader's understanding and enjoyment of those things. For me a good book has to make sense in that it has an internal logic, it has to keep the promises it makes to the reader, and the characters need arcs of sufficient emotional intensity. The story should be original, imaginative, passionate, puzzling, solvable, and the ending must be satisfying. All that and well-written too! If there's a single word to describe what a good story is, I think it is just that - satisfying. But satisfying doesn't tell you anything more than saying it should 'sparkle' or be 'good', or that I want to be transported. You have to read the book and find out.

A good story is ultimately a gestalt thing, a combination of all the elements of a book done well – the things I've just mentioned, and more – all coming together in synergy. A really good one does that in a way that speaks to needs or desires common to many readers. If there's any justice in the world the book is a great success. Sometimes that's not the case. Mike, Linda, & Louise Carey's *City of Silk & Steel i*s one example*,* Gaie Sebold's *Babylon Steel* is another*.*

In the end I think only you - whoever you are - can answer that question for a particular book. Did it speak to your condition, or illuminate something you previously only vaguely understood, or was it just really good fun and lovely? Our opinions changes over time, and rightly so. Different things speak to and move you in different ways during different periods of your life. Obviously, there is a significant overlap in opinion among the reading population, including us Clarke judges. There were big differences too. An essential part of the process was the conversations about why we made our individual choices. And talking about books is one of life's great pleasures.

Looking back at the selection process I think Sturgeon's well-known law that "90% of SF is crap because 90% of everything is crap" really didn't apply. At least not for the work submitted to the Clarke Award. And after 113 books that was a very good thing. Writing a book is an extraordinarily difficult thing yet lots of people do it well. Many of the books were good and worth reading. Some were very good. A few were wonderful. Were there any truly great ones? Maybe. It's also possible we judges in our hubris missed them. Time will tell.

* Why? Because I feel it unnecessarily distances the reader from the character. Tell me their name.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Charles Christian

Black Holes & Time Warps by Kip S. Thorne. My go-to non-fiction guide to the science of space and time travel when I'm writing hard science fiction.

Stephen King on Writing by Stephen King. If you are serious about creative writing, this is a perfect starting point as this is a master providing an insight into what goes on inside his head. Note, this is still great book even if you are not personally a fan of King's work.

The Mac is not a typewriter by Robin Williams. Although now nearly 30 years old, this remains my style-guide bible for digital typography and document formatting.

How to Haiku: a Writer's Guide to Haiku & Related Forms by Bruce Ross. Left to my own devices I tend to write short, minimalist poetry, mainly 'ku (scifaiku, haiku, senryu, zappai, gendai and haibun). This is another book I've regularly dipped into over the past 15 years – one that provides an insight into the 'ku art form – and how to avoid the all too frequent clichéd approach to writing haiku.

In the Court of the Crimson King by King Crimson. Yes, it's prog-rock music for dinosaurs like me but I still play it on a regular basis as the tracks embrace the whole SFF genre from high fantasy to dystopian science fiction.

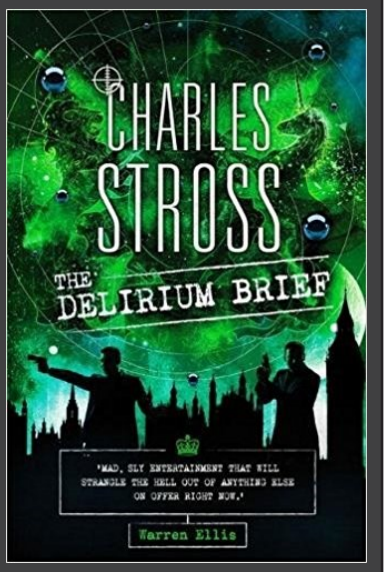
TOWARDS A TAXONOMY OF CLICHÉS

Mr Stross continues with the second part of his close analysis of what not to do when unpacking the box and assembling your first Space Opera.

Part 2

Charles Stross

Mr Stross' latest works include *The Nightmare Stacks* (June 2016), *Empire Games* (January 2017) and *The Delirium Brief* (July 2017)



Politics

- ◊ Planets have a single unitary government (or none at all)
- ◊ Planetary governance is no more complex than running a village or small township
- ◊ … This is because the planetary capital is a village or small township, not, say, Beijing or Mexico City
- ◊ If there are two or more ethnicities represented on a planet their collective politics are simple and easily understood by analogy to 20th century US race relations
- ◊ All planetary natives everywhere speak Galactic Standard English, or Trade Pidgin
- ◊ … no reason, they just *do* because I say so!
- ◊ New Colonies can't afford police, detectives, customs inspectors, or the FBI
- ◊ New Colonies don't require visiting spacers to conform to local dress codes or laws
- ◊ New Colonies don't have gun control laws
- ◊ New Colonies don't have laws, or if they do they were written by a mad libertarian
- ◊ Despite the lack of laws, nobody underage drinks in the saloon
- ◊ … Nobody underage works in the saloon rooms you rent by the hour, either
- ◊ … Nor is there an extensive school truancy problem or much illiteracy
- ◊ On reaching pensionable age, all colonists are forcibly deported to the Planet of the Old Age Pensioners
- ◊ There is no unemployment because happy smiley frontier needs cowboys or something
- ◊ If the planetary government is a democracy, the new Mayor will be elected by a town meeting
- ◊ If the planetary government is an oligarchy, the new Patrician will be elected by a town meeting (of oligarchs, in the back room of the saloon)
- ◊ If the planetary government is a theocracy, there will be only one sect of the planetary religion and no awkward long-standing heresies that are too strong/embedded to suppress
- ◊ … And there will be direct rule by Clergy, along the lines of an oligarchy: no Committees of Guardians of the Faith, no separation of executive and legislature, none of the complexity and internal rivalries of

Terrestrial theocracies (e.g. Iran, Saudi Arabia)

◊ If the planet is a colony of the Galactic Empire, the new Planetary Governor will be appointed by the local Sector Governor

◊ … It's Governors all the way up (until you hit the Emperor)

◊ Monarchy is the natural and perfectly ideal form of government

◊ Only an Imperial Monarchy can ensure the good local governance of a myriad of inhabited planets scattered across the vast reaches of deep space

◊ Monarchies are never a Single Point Of [Galactic] Failure

◊ Monarchs are never stupid, mad, venal, ill, or distracted by a secret ambition to be a house painter instead

◊ Viziers are Always (a) Grand and (b) Evil. (At this point, let's just quote the regular Evil Overlord list in full, m'kay?)

◊ Democracies are always corrupt

◊ You can always bribe your way out of sticky situation if you're from off-world

◊ All planetary legal systems work the same way (some remix of Common Law, constitutional governance, and trial by jury).

◊ The standard punishments for a crime range from a small fine, to slavery in the uranium mines for life (about 18 months), to an excruciating death

◊ Trials are swift and punishments are simple and easy to understand

◊ Justice is always punitive/retributive/exemplary, never compensatory/preventative/rehabilitative, much less poetic/cryptic/incomprehensible

◊ … If the Author disapproves of the death penalty, substitute mind-wipe for the death penalty (*like, there's a difference?*)

Culture

◊ There is usually only one culture per planet

◊ … Sometimes there are two, to provide for an oppositional plot dynamic

◊ … Pay no attention to the blank spots on the map

◊ … And *especially* don't go looking for the unmarked mass graves

◊ Planetary natives are either Colonists or Indigenous

◊ Indigenous peoples are either Primitive or Advanced (advanced is a synonym for Decadent)

◊ Advanced Indigines either don't have space travel or gave it up (see: Decadent)

◊ Primitive Indigines are either Tribal or Mediaeval

◊ Mediaeval Indigines invariably recapitulate the politics of the Hundred Years War

◊ Visits to Mediaeval Indigenous Colonies can be approximated to a side-quest into Fantasyland, as described by Diana Wynne Jones (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Tough_Guide_To_Fantasyland)

◊ If the planet is a Colony it is either a Lost Colony or a New Colony

◊ Lost Colonies may resemble Primitive Indigines but never Advanced

◊ New Colonies resemble Tombstone, AZ, circa 1880

◊ New Colonists live in log cabins, ride mules/horses and carry *six-guns* blasters

◊ … You can find logs (cabins, for the construction of) *everywhere* on planets

◊ … They're like abandoned crates in first-person shooters

◊ Psychologically speaking, everybody is either WEIRD (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_psychology) or Primitive

◊ Primitive (non-WEIRD) people are stupid and unimaginative

◊ WEIRD people accept and embrace change and innovation; non-WEIRD people reject both

◊ Colonies are usually modelled on WEIRD 1950s cultural norms

◊ Colony People come in two genders

◊ The Women on New Colonies are either:

◊ … Barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen (because colonies need babies)

◊ … Dungaree-wearing two-fisted starship-engineering-obsessed lesbians desperate to get off-world

◊ The Men on New Colonies are either:

◊ … Manly plaid-shirt-wearing heterosexual farmers breaking sod in the *west* new world

◊ … Dastardly drunken muggers waiting behind the spaceport saloon for an unwary spacer

◊ QUILTBAG: huh? Who are *those* people and why doesn't somebody cure them?

◊ … (Alternatively: everybody is QUILTBAG, pale patriarchal heterosexual penis people are extinct)

◊ Clothing invariably obeys some regional dress code that has been observed on Earth in the past thousand years; in extreme cases 1950s business attire

will serve to avoid attracting undue attention

◊ You can recognize someone's gender on any planet because:

◊ … Women wear dresses or skirts with make-up and long hair

◊ … Men wear pants (or occasionally suits of armour)

◊ … Hijra? Hermaphrodites? Transgender? Asexual? What are *those*?

◊ On some planets people go naked, except for body paint

◊ … This causes no problems, whether social or practical

◊ Colony Planets are invariably a Crapsack World (http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/CrapsackWorld) that people are desperate to escape from, unless they're the planetary governor or some species of Non-Player Character (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-player_character)

◊ The only place worse than a Colony World is Old Earth

◊ Old Earth is

◊ … An over-crowded overpopulated hell-hole

◊ … An over-regulated bureaucratic hell-hole

◊ … A poverty-stricken backwater and hell-hole

◊ … Destroyed

◊ … Lost (because everyone in the galaxy simultaneously forgot the way home)

◊ … Mythical (and many people think it never existed)

◊ … Somewhere to run away from

◊ … (*Rarely*) Somewhere to run to

◊ Slavery is

◊ … Ubiquitous

◊ … No big deal

◊ … Illegal but all the bad guys do it

◊ "the best thing we ever did for them; they're much happier now"

◊ Humans are free; aliens are slaves

◊ Humans are slaves; aliens are free

Technology — space travel

◊ Running a nuclear power plant is kid's business; even a drunken college drop-out can be a ship's engineer

◊ Rocket motors are simple to maintain and operate, too – they never melt, explode, or break

◊ Reaction mass is incredibly dense, cheap, and easy to stash away in a spare corner

◊ … It never runs out

◊ … It doesn't require special handling procedures

◊ … It's never toxic, cryogenic, teratogenic, radioactive, corrosive, or all five of the above

◊ Oxygen is freely available in space

◊ Water is expensive and rare in space

◊ You can go as fast as you like if you just accelerate in a straight line

◊ Spaceships accelerate at right angles to the direction the occupants experience gravity in

◊ Spaceships are:

◊ … bilaterally symmetrical

◊ … rugged and able to survive impacts with other objects

◊ … easily maintained by semi-skilled labour/shade tree mechanics

◊ … about as complex as a 1920s tramp steamer, or maybe a deep-sea fishing trawler

◊ … easily piloted

◊ … can stop on a dime

◊ … available second-hand in good working order from scrapyards

◊ … have wings and an undercarriage, like a biplane

◊ … You can hear them coming a parsec away

◊ Faster than light travel is easy

◊ … But the jump drive is fuelled by unobtanium (http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/Unobtainium)

◊ Causality violation: what's that?

◊ There are no regulatory frameworks or licensing regimes for starships

◊ Nobody would *ever* think to run a starship up to 50% of light-speed and ram a planet

◊ … Even if they did that, the effect wouldn't be significantly worse than a 1940s atom bomb

◊ There's no regulatory framework for shuttlecraft, either

◊ … Because nobody has heard of Kessler syndrome (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kessler_syndrome)

◊ … Also, a space shuttle in-falling from low earth orbit totally doesn't arrive at ground

level with kinetic energy equal to about ten times its own mass in TNT, because if it did it would be a field-expedient weapon of mass destruction

◊ Flying a spaceship is not only easy, it's easier than flying a Cessna

◊ Spaceship life support systems are simple to maintain and repair and very forgiving

◊ Spaceships communicate across interplanetary or interstellar distances by radio

◊ … Interplanetary radio works instantaneously

◊ … Interplanetary radio communications are as easy to operate as tuning your car stereo to a new AM channel

◊ GPS works in space beyond low earth orbit: who needs navigation skills these days?

Technology — Pew! Pew! Pew!

◊ Radar gives us an instantaneously updated map of everything in a star system

◊ … But stealth technology is totally a thing!

◊ We can't detect spaceships by looking for their life support system's 300 Kelvin infrared emissions against the 2.7 kelvin cosmic background temperature

◊ Also, spaceships can hide behind planets or asteroids indefinitely without using their engines or knowing the bearing of the enemy they're hiding *from*

◊ Laser beams are instantaneous, don't spread or disperse, and can melt anything

◊ … Except a force field that somehow refracts/bends/absorbs the confused photons

◊ Missiles, with a constrained (small) propulsion system, can overhaul a much bigger/ less constrained spaceship at great range

◊ Strategic Arms Limitation Treaties don't bother to count Free Trader Beowulf's point-defence nuclear missile battery for treaty purposes – only naval nukes count

◊ Gun turrets have to have a glassed-in canopy and a gunner inside or they won't work

◊ Also, human gunners can totally draw a bead on a hostile pirate ship manoeuvring a few light seconds away. Fire control computers, not so much

◊ Boarding actions have mysteriously made a come-back from the 1850s.

◊ Guns are still bang-sticks that require a human to point them at a target

◊ Stun-guns have no unpleasant after-effects

◊ Bullets are brainless

◊ You can dodge laser beams

◊ Fisticuffs are universally considered to be the optimal way to resolve a sincere difference of opinion over complex commercial interactions

◊ All starships need to carry armed guards, or at least a gun locker full of blasters for the crew when they're visiting a Colony planet (but no peaceful explorer would stoop to packing a helicopter gunship or a main battle tank analogue)

◊ Knife missiles – who ordered *that*?

Aliens

◊ Aliens are multicellular organisms with nervous systems and musculoskeletal systems

◊ Aliens communicate in language

◊ … Using noises

◊ … Emitted by their mouths

◊ … At frequency ranges we can perceive

◊ Aliens are individuals

◊ Aliens are eusocial hive organisms

◊ Spacefaring aliens are conscious

◊ Aliens are WEIRD people with latex face paint or funny haircuts

◊ … Because primates are a universal deterministic outcome of evolution on all worlds

◊ Wittgenstein was wrong about talking lions. (If they could speak we'd find what they can say *fascinating* – mostly because we'd be waiting for them to mutter, "I wonder what those bipeds taste of?")

◊ Aliens build starships similar to human ones, but with wonky furniture

◊ Aliens are interested in us (see Wittgenstein above)

◊ Aliens want to trade with us

◊ Aliens want to exchange bodily fluids with us (*ewww* …)

◊ Aliens want to induct us into their civilizational-level fraternity/sorority and make contact in order to teach us the house rules

◊ Alien species only have one dominant culture

◊ Alien species are noteworthy for their uni-

versally applicable stereotypy, utterly unlike us complicated and divergent human beings

- ◊ Aliens have a much longer history of spaceflight than humans, but unaccountably failed to stumble upon and domesticate us during the 11th century
- ◊ Aliens have religious beliefs because they have the same theory of mind as human beings and attribute intentionality to natural phenomena (see also: Daniel Dennett)
- ◊ Alien religion resembles those of a human culture that thrived prior to 1000 CE and is now considered quaintly obsolescent by most humans
- ◊ Aliens can't control themselves
- ◊ Aliens are unconditionally hostile
- ◊ Aliens are robots
- ◊ … Robot-aliens are just like alien-aliens, only more alien, because robots
- ◊ Aliens are incomprehensible
- ◊ Aliens have no sense of humour
- ◊ Aliens have a *human* sense of humour
- ◊ Aliens have been extinct for millions of years, but:
- ◊ … have left treasures behind in their death-trap-riddled tombs
- ◊ … their ephemeral technologies still work flawlessly
- ◊ … If humans trip the burglar alarm, they're coming back and they'll be *mad*
- ◊ … they're extinct because they Sublimed
- ◊ … they're extinct because they became Decadent
- ◊ … they're extinct because they suicided
- ◊ … (robot-alien remix): they're extinct because they tripped over the Halting Problem
- ◊ … they're extinct because (insert dodgy social Darwinist argument here)

FIN.

If you've got a comment on anything in **FOCUS**,
please do get in touch, you can email us at: devhotmail@yahoo.co.uk
Or write to: **Donna Bond, 11 Stanhope Road, Northampton NN2 6JU**

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

LITERARY AGENTS AND HOW TO GET ONE

Jacey Bedford breaks down her experience in finding the right agent to sell her work for writers seeking to make that step in the publishing journey.

I'm delighted to be settled with Donald Maass of the Donald Maass Literary agency in New York. My own personal journey to agency representation can be found on my Wordpress blog at jaceybedford.wordpress.com. What I'd like to discuss here are the practical aspects of finding a literary agent, from research to submission packages.

The Right Agent

There are agents and agents. Some are hands-on who will see potential in your writing and help you with your manuscript before sending it out to publishers. Some agents are hands-off. If they judge that your manuscript is something they can sell, then they'll offer representation and send it out, as is, on your behalf. Do your research. (Hint, don't send your blockbuster space opera to someone who only wants the next great literary novel.)

Always remember that when seeking representation and a traditional publishing deal money flows *to* the writer. There are lots of genuine agents out there who operate professionally, but there are a few who will charge reading fees (never pay them) and then try to direct you to their chum who is a freelance editor or book doctor. All of which you will pay for – often through the nose – without getting any closer to your goal of publication.

This isn't to denigrate professional freelance editors. They perform a valuable service and I would recommend anyone going down the self-publishing route to consider employing a professional editor – preferably one with a good reputation and a solid history of working in your genre. Sadly, these great editors are not the ones a scam agent will be sending your book to. If you're going to use a freelance editor, pick one based on recommendations and reputation.

Seek wisdom about scammers who prey on writers from the Science Fiction Writers of America (SFWA) on their Writer Beware site: www.sfwa.org/other-resources/for-authors/writer-beware/

So, carefully avoiding scam agents, what type of agent do you want? Hands on or hands off? Are you looking for an agent who works with a specific genre of book? Do you want an agent who is country-specific? Take a look at www.agentquery.com. Most of the agents you'll find listed there are in North America, but you can find British literary agents listed in *The Writers' and Artists Yearbook*.

Check the following:

- Does the agent rep your genre and your intended age range?
- Is the agent actively seeking new clients/building their list?
- Is the agent willing to help and advise with your manuscript?
- What is important to you in contract negotiations? Size of advance / foreign rights / e-publishing rights / audio rights / movie options?
- Where is the agent based?

Is there anything special that may connect an agent to your pitch?

Some agents work alone, others work within the framework of a literary agency. If you sign with a single agent you are vulnerable if that agent leaves the profession. If you sign with an agent who works within an agency, your contract is usually with the agency, so if your individual agent is no longer able to represent you, then you will be resettled with a different agent within the organisation. Also a large agency is likely to have foreign rights specialists and contract specialists, so your agent has expertise to call on.

Keeping Track

List all the agents you think might be a suitable match and check their guidelines carefully. I actually put all mine into a database. Make sure you note what you've sent, and when, and to whom – especially if it's a submission to an agency rather than to an independent agent. Regarding agencies, some will tell you to submit to their agents individually, others will say that a submission to one agent is a submission to all because if your first choice agent doesn't feel the manuscript is right for her/him it will be passed on to other agents within the organisation.

If the guidelines give a time period for response, note

down when you expect to hear back. When the deadline date has passed you can politely enquire about your submission. (I always give them a little leeway – maybe a week or two.) Some agents simply don't respond if they aren't interested, which leaves you hanging. Didn't they get your sub? Are they so overworked they haven't had chance to look yet? Did they read the first paragraph and throw it in the bin? You simply have to decide to walk away if you haven't heard back after a sensible time period, but it's up to you to decide what that time period is. If the submission has gone more than two or three months beyond their stated response time and your queries have not been answered, then I would write it off. Having said that, I got a rejection from one New York Literary agent thirteen months after I'd signed with my current agent and several months after my first book had been published.

Following Guidelines

What should you send a prospective new agent? The short answer is: s*end whatever they want you to send*. It's all in their guidelines. The agent might ask you for a cover letter, synopsis and the first three pages, or maybe the first five thousand words. A few agents still ask for paper subs, but most accept (and prefer) electronic submissions these days. Paper subs can be shockingly expensive if you have to post them transatlantic.

Your Submission Package

Many words have been written on how to submit. I recommend boning up on manuscript format online and reading blogs on the topic of submissions from real working agents.

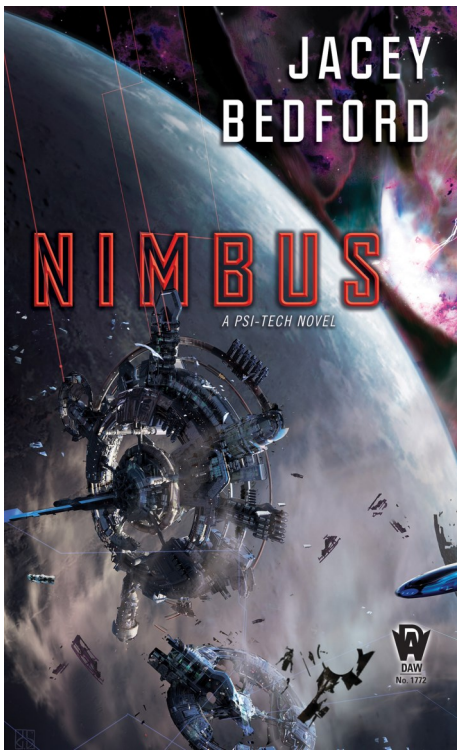
QueryShark, by literary agent Janet Reid has excellent advice.
The Miss Snark Archive, though dormant since 2007, is a fascinating (and funny) insight into the lit agent world from an insider's point of view.
PubRants is a rant about publishing and submissions by literary agent Kristin Nelson and is very educational.

The Query Letter

This consists of two parts – the query and the pitch. The whole thing should be not more than a single page, single spaced. This is a business letter, be polite, be concise, be clear.

The Query

The order can be fluid depending on which side of the Atlantic you are sending it to -- most British agents seem to prefer an opening statement of something like: Please accept my query on BOOK TITLE, complete at 77,000 words, but most American agents seem happy for you to begin with the pitch and include that information at the end.



Your query letter should contain the following:

- If you're querying by email don't forget your full contact details: name, address, phone number, email and website if you have one
- The agent's name must be correct.
- You will have to reformat your query letter to individualise it for each query you send. Don't make it look like they're getting a mass mail out.
- The title, genre and length of the work and whether it is complete or not (and for a first novel it should be). It should also say whether it's aimed at adults, new adults, YA or middle grade. Some agents will rep a variety of ages, others rep only adult, or only children's fiction.
- Ditch opinion. Concentrate on facts. (Not: 'Hello, I'm the next J.K.Rowling,' or 'like Stephen King, but better.' Don't say you know this is best-seller material. Don't say that your Aunt Mathilda loved your book (unless she's the Guardian's book critic).
- The pitch – more anon.
- A bit about you – not your complete life story, but writing-relevant experience, especially if it's a story about mountain climbers and you shinned up Everest last year. Say whether you have any other publications, or have won any competitions, or have attended Clarion, Viable Paradise, Milford, or similar serious writers' events.
- Something that tells the agent why you've picked them. 'I read your interview in Writer's Digest and note that you are looking for stories about climbing Everest…' etc., or even 'I've followed your agency blog for a num-

ber of years and have checked out your guidelines and it looks like we have interests in common.'

- The query letter is *not* the place for a full synopsis. (Though you may include a separate synopsis if the agent's guidelines ask for one.)

I always thank the agent for their time.

The Pitch

The pitch is crucial. How do you describe your book succinctly while making it sound exciting? You have limited space to make your point. Here you can afford to allow your writerly 'voice' sneak in. If you are pitching an urban fantasy with a wisecracking heroine, consider using your heroine's voice in your pitch (if you can do it successfully).

Start off with two or three sentences that will hook your reader into what the story is about. Sound enthusiastic without using unnecessary 'puff.' You can say: It's *like Game of Thrones set in modern day Glasgow* (because you're not trying to say it's better than *Game of Thrones*) or you can simply describe the book. Try to find its unique selling point. *It's about a wizard, a knight and a stable boy who go on a quest* sounds like every other quest fantasy you've ever read, but maybe: *An elephant shapechanger and a lavatory attendant from Bombay, have to journey into the jungle to seek the tiger's eye*, might snag on your agent's imagination.

Here's a single paragraph pitch for my novel *Winterwood*, which sold to DAW in 2013 as part of a three book deal, and hit bookstore shelves in February 2016:

Winterwood Pitch – 113 words

Winterwood is a tale of magic, piracy, adventure and love, set in an alternative Britain in 1800. Mad King George is on the throne, and Bonaparte is hammering on the door. Ross (Rossalinde) Tremayne, widowed privateer captain and witch, is torn between the jealous ghost of her dead husband, and a handsome wolf shapechanger; between the sea and her unsavoury crew of barely reformed pirates, and the forest, where her magic lies. Unable to chart a course to her future until she's unravelled the mysteries of her family's past, she has to evade a dogged pursuer and discover the secrets locked in a magical winterwood box in order to right her ancestor's wrongdoing.

Once your cover letter is as good as you can make it send it out. If this is your first time making submissions to agents you might want to start by sending to a few to see whether you get a good reaction, i.e. form rejections / no response / requests for more pages, or full manuscripts. Keep a record of what comes back and when, so that a year from now you don't send almost exactly the same query for the same book to the same agent. (You can, however, query an agent who has previously rejected your first book, for your second and subsequent books.) Once you've got the hang of the submission process and you've refined your query letter and pitch, you can query as many agents as you have time to research.

If you get a rejection from an agent, note it down, learn from it and move on to another submission. *Never* send a snarky response or that door will close on you forever. Even sending a polite 'thanks for your rejection' is not required. Agents get enough email. Do you want to clutter their inbox?

General advice:
Pare down / Focus / Revise /
Polish / Test on a few / Revise /
Send widely / Send again / Send again /
Send again / Don't give up!

Good luck with your search for the right agent.

FIN.

Jacey Bedford is a Yorkshire-based writer, published by DAW in the USA. Her books are: *Empire of Dust,* and *Crossways*, with *Nimbus* completing the Psi-Tech trilogy in October 2017. *Winterwood*, and *Silverwolf* are the first two in the Rowankind series of historical fantasy books. Her short stories have appeared on both sides of the Atlantic, and have been translated into an odd assortment of languages including Estonian, Galician and Polish. She's secretary of the Milford SF Writers' Conference (www.milfordSF.co.uk).

Web: www.jaceybedford.co.uk
- Blog: jaceybedford.wordpress.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/jacey.bedford.writer
Twitter: @jaceybedford

A Writer's Guide to Fieldcraft

Neil Williamson

Neil Williamson, writer, musician and mainstay of the Glasgow SF Writer's Group provides us with his top advice on writing -- and how to find those crucial moments to write when *everything else* is going on.

Like many writers I squeeze a lot of my writing time into the gaps of my regular life. In the mornings before work, at lunchtimes, sometimes in the evenings too, you can find me in the corner of a cafe looking shifty, acting mysterious. I can't deny that it makes me feel a bit like a spy.

Here are my top ten indispensable things for writering out in the field:

1. **A string of safe houses**. Scout out your locale. Know where you can get a table against the wall so no one can read over your shoulder and put you off. With power and wifi, and regular buckets of tea. Know their routines and quiet times. Know the distance to the inch so that you know how late you can leave it to finish that scene before dashing to work. Have alternatives in case of students, sales meetings, children's parties.

2. **A cover story**. People will ask what you're up to. Tell them the whole truth at your peril. Tell them you're a writer, sure; they're hardly uncommon in cafes these days. Tell them you write SF or Fantasy, by all means. But, if you want to be welcome there again, be wary of divulging the entire plot of your story/novel/seven book sequence. People would always rather read it than hear it, and it never sounds anywhere near as exciting in the form of a coffee-fuelled explosion as it does in your head. Remember, the safe answer to: "Oh, you mean like Star Wars/Lord Of The Rings?" is always: "um...sort of, yes."

3. **A portable Fortress Of Solitude**. Or at least a music device, noise cancelling headphones and a decent writing playlist suitable for both quiet and noisy environments. Instrumental music and film soundtracks work well. The Approved List, which includes Olafur Arnalds' soundtrack for Broadchurch, Mogwai's music for Les Revenants and the works of Poppy Ackroyd, should suffice in most scenarios. However, if seated next to Voluble and Chatty Friends Having a Good Catch Up, you may need to break out This Will Destroy You and turn it up to eleven.

4. **A notebook**. It's a classic of basic writercraft for a reason. We all know that it's vital to have something into which you can capture those moments of inspiration whenever and wherever they happen. Nowadays we have many digital options, such as Evernote, accessible from all your devices, and you're welcome to use these, but tapping frustratedly into your phone doesn't look nearly as cool as whipping out your little black book. And what writer doesn't love stationery?

5. **A camera**. These days most of us have a camera on our person. Use it to clandestinely record the world around you. Capture moments, locations, kittens, and upload them to your cloud storage to build up a bank of references that you can use when you need to describe something in your stories. That building, that gig, that kitten.

6. **A wire**. Similar to the camera, many phones also have a sound recorder. Use it. Birdsong is more than tweeting. Traffic noise is more than rumble. You might accurately write down an overheard conversation, but your transcription might lose the rhythm, the musicality, the atmosphere. Just don't get caught. There are few enemy agents more formidable than a Glasgow wifey who think's you're eavesdropping on her gabbing.

7. **Disguises**. As a writer you need to be a master of disguise. Not externally - although that can always be fun - but mentally, conceptually, imaginatively. Slip into the shoes of the people around you. Those pink and white commuter's gym shoes that don't match the unflattering suit and full make up of the woman on her way to open the department store perfume counter (she'll change into heels when she gets there). Those sole-worn Converse go with the road tan, the chilled slouch and the proper hitchhiker's backpack, heavy with bedroll and water bottles and patches from all over Europe. Be these people, take their place, live their lives.

8. **A codewheel or a lemon**. It's all very well sitting there flapping your arms and pounding the words out, but at some point you're going to want to slip your *real* message in amongst the chaff and distraction that you call entertainment. Encypher it in every twenty-seventh

letter or scratch it in invisible ink into the margins for only the wisest of readers (who have a candle stub about their person) to find.

9. **A mirror**. The most useful tool in the writer's field kit, allowing you to see with utter clarity how your writing looks from the other side. Use it to see what you've *really* written, and work out what you *really* meant. (Alternatively, solicit the opinion of a friend, or join a good crit group.)

A network. Running solo is all very well, but eventually the job will be over and you'll have to come in from the cold. Every creative person needs a thorough debriefing (and hopefully beer) by a trusted support team. An extended network of other writers, bloggers, etc., spread out over social media is also vital for making sure your carefully constructed messages get out there where they can do most dam… uh, that is, where they can be enjoyed by the most readers. Ahem.

Neil Williamson's latest books are *Secret Language*, a collection of SF, fantasy and slightly weird short stories, and *The Memoirist*, a novella set in a near-future surveillance society, both published by NewCon Press. His debut novel, *The Moon King*, was nominated for the BSFA Award and the British Fantasy Society Holdstock Award. His short fiction has been nominated for the BSFA and British Fantasy awards and, with Andrew J Wilson, he edited *Nova Scotia: New Scottish Speculative Fiction*, which was short-listed for the World Fantasy Award. He lives, writes and makes music in Glasgow and is a member of the venerable Glasgow SF Writers' Circle, who recently celebrated their 30th anniversary with the anthology, *Thirty Years Of Rain*.

Fin.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Paul Graham Raven

MASTERY: *The Universe of Things* by Gwyneth Jones. A collection of short fictions from a consummate master of the form, this book showcases not just Jones's incredible technical skill and storycraft, but her intimate knowledge—and relentless subversion—of the genre's foibles and preoccupations.

IMAGERY: *Gormenghast* by Mervyn Peake. There are many reasons to praise Peake's bleak, tripartite allegory of British culture in the wake of the Second World War, so I'll just praise the whole damned thing: it's a rich, dark broth of memorable characters and indelible images, with settings and scenes that will haunt you for life.

OTHERNESS: *Roadside Picnic* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky. The polar opposite to the uncritical technophilia and solutionist optimism of North American sf, this stone-cold brain-bender of the Soviet genre tells a very different story of our relationship to technology, meaning, and otherness. Get the Chicago Review Press translation for optimal headf*ck.

HUMANITY: *The Dispossessed* by Ursula K Le Guin. Any and every Le Guin is recommended, really, because no one has worked harder to give speculative fiction a soul (or a moral compass). But everyone has a favourite, and *The Dispossessed* — the canonical critical utopia, and a foundational anarchist text—is mine.

SCOPE: *Saga of the Exiles* by Julian May. An ambitious, sprawling series about recidivist time-travellers sent back to Earth's Pliocene epoch. Rather dated now, but still a masterwork of multiple POVs and intricate plotting... and arguably the first transhumanist fiction *avant la lettre*. (Avoid the sequel series, though.)

MY SECRET LIFE WITH DAVID AND CHARLES

David Langford

Focus is delighted to have David Langford return to the magazine's pages.

Mr Langford requires no introduction here. He has been a mainstay of science fiction, the BSFA, literary criticism *and* fandom since the 1970s. He is the holder of a staggering twenty nine Hugo awards and, as everyone knows, writes the long running journal, *Ansible* (often cited as being our genre's *Private Eye*).

This is the story of a sordid entanglement with David & Charles Ltd; the story of one man's struggle with the apathy which dwelt in his inmost soul, and of how he conquered it through stern moral courage and fear of certain penalty clauses in the contract. It is a story which would have shocked millions of TV viewers on *Nationwide* (only the plans fell through) and thrilled countless readers of the *Daily Telegraph Colour Supplement* (only those plans fell through as well) – the true history of my *War in 2080: The Future of Military Technology*, the non-fiction book of which the *Times Literary Supplement* would have said (only the plans fell through).

1) Getting Commissioned

Some people write a book and then set about selling it. Some, with less energy and more sense, are content to plan the book and try for a contract on the basis of an outline and a sample chapter. And some have greatness thrust upon them, being roused from their habitual stupor by a letter from David & Charles saying 'How'd you like to write us a book?' There was a complex chain of causation behind this letter: a friend at Oxford who'd joined a publishing firm had once had me scribble a science article for the encyclopaedia he was editing (a commission which shook my blind faith in encyclopaedias – good grief, they're written by ordinary dolts for such sordid purposes as making money!); a certain Paul Barnett connected with the same firm had recalled my name after moving to D&C as resident whiz-kid. His creative talent consisted of devising punchy titles like *War in 2080* and then locating some writer to handle the trifling details (about 65,000 words of them). This sounds fearfully in-group and elitist, but it's surprising how often you know someone who knows someone who is looking for a writer …

The next step was dinner with Paul, who came to stay in a poky Reading hotel (there are no good hotels in Reading: aspiring writers should live in London) and explained how he'd been muttering 'Curse you, Langford' each time he bumped his head on the low ceiling, tripped over the chamber pot, or found his breakfast toast half devoured by rats and cockroaches. A good deal of placatory wine and beer later, we settled on a rough outline for the book ('First bit, weapons nowadays; second, weapons of the near future; third, rip off sf ideas'). I was instructed to submit a detailed synopsis in one week and a 5,000-word sample chapter the week after that. I boggled, but followed orders and sprained my frontal lobes with concentrated thought over the next fortnight. The clever solution was to write about something requiring minimal research – satellites, ICBMs, lasers, etc. – all of which became a chapter titled 'War in Near Space', whose delicately purplish prose earned me £100 of preliminary advance.

Dribbling at the prospect of further largesse, I craved permission to write the rest of the book.

2) Signature in Blood

The next stage in the relentless process – my sample chapter having shown that I at least knew where to put the semicolons – was for the publisher to issue a contract. Now even an irreproachably reputable firm (as David & Charles were before they signed me on) does not instantly offer a new author the same terms it would to Isaac Asimov; after consulting a few friends who'd already been through it all, this particular new writer was lured into the belief that a better deal could be arranged. The choices were either to storm the D&C bastions single-handed or to hire a mercenary in the form of a literary agent; perversely I chose the first alternative and settled down to haggle over perfectly standard clauses demanding (as Chris Priest puts it) nothing more than that the Author should deliver his wife, suitably garbed in a see-through chiffon gown, for a period of full copyright. (Richard Cowper once claimed to have seen an old-fashioned publisher's contract containing the clause '... in ye euent of tardie Deliuerie ye Scribe shall be flogg'd.' But I think he was lying.) The haggling ended in a suitably compromising position; towards the end of 1977 I

signed a revised contract and tried not to think too hard about the delivery deadline (30 June 1978). It seemed much more agreeable to grab my one-third of the full advance (the other two thirds being payable on MS delivery and on publication respectively) and to treat myself to the new typewriter I'd wanted for so long.

3) Research

Recently I met an aspiring writer who wished to be told several thousand things like publishers' and agents' addresses: at once my customary mask of omniscience slipped and I evasively recommended that he shell out a few quid for the *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* (A&C Black, £2.25), the *International SF Yearbook* (Pierrot, £2.95) or even a BSFA membership, enabling him to wallow in the cerebral titillation of *Focus*. He was horrified at the mere thought of this expense; he'd now written two novels and was struggling to sell them, but actually buying the relevant reference books was wholly alien to his nature. This man is probably a cretin. Shrewdly reasoning that even a humble bricklayer is expected to buy his own tools, I've accumulated not only the above works but also a good dictionary. Fowler's *Modern English Usage* and an encyclopaedia (all essentials), plus several rarely used though frequently recommended items like a thesaurus, a dictionary of quotations and *Eye Among the Blind* by Robert P. Holdstock. Dabblers in hard science will find it hard to do without the *CRC Handbook of Chemistry and Physics*, useful but expensive. Most of these books came in handy for *War in 2080*, as did *New Scientist* and *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, from which I stole all the newer bits of science. These two magazines balance each other nicely: *New Scientist* these days is left-wing to the point where a better mousetrap is fearfully denounced as leading inexorably to pollution, multiple genocide and the grinding-down of the Third World, while *Aviation Week* (a U.S. mag) regards each better mousetrap as a sign that the devilish Russkies have constructed billions of *even better* intercontinental laser-actuated mousetraps ready to hurtle over the North Pole and destroy the American Way of Life at the drop of a samovar.

The more tediously conventional scientific facts were extracted without too much effort from my old physics texts (the great advantage of a degree in physics is that you have all these old books left over to remind you of what you've forgotten) and countless other books which looked vaguely relevant and were duly bought if cheap enough. Spotting errors was the hardest part – even *Asimov's Guide to Science* has misleading patches, a revelation which will shatter the faith of many. A certain amount of poking at my pocket calculator to check things like the impact energy of colliding planets ... a swift pillaging of futuristic notions from the 3,000 sf books littering the house ... an endless succession of meditative visits to the pub ... and the research notes were complete.

4) The Almost Godlike Act of Creation

I'm sorry. I can't keep a straight face. Let's try again –

5) Writing The Bloody Thing

To hand I had a sample chapter and various notes scrawled at the beginning of 1978. I also had post-convention shock from Skycon (Easter '78). The D&C deadline still loomed at 30 June, surging down the timeline towards poor helpless me. I started typing in earnest – and in stark fear – on April Fools' Day. The idea was to write 1,000 words each day until the end of May, revising earlier chapters during breaks in drafting later ones, and leaving June for final revision, production of fair copy and seeing my tailor about a tasteful straitjacket.

I was also working full-time for the Civil Service. The inert body slumped over my desk each day became quite a landmark, I'm told.

You'll appreciate, then, that your narrator does not remember too much about the actual, delirious writing process. It was good fun – throwing in weird facts from the Notes and arcane references from the sf collection, salting with a few large numbers (10^{26} was a special favourite) and sprinkling with jokes, adding crazed bits about sf fans, denunciations of Erich von Däniken, hilarious witticisms about multimegadeath holocausts.... From my experience, here are some cunning hints for authors (not necessarily workable for authors who are not me): Use an electric typewriter or your fingers will drop off. Keep a pen handy for instant corrections – no fiddling with rows of x's on the typewriter. Place all fanzines and non-relevant books in a time-locked vault to reduce distractions. Do the same to clocks and watches lest the approach of (say) closing time sap your will to work. Do not forget to eat.

I dropped one chapter out of the synopsis because it bored me, but even so the book turned out far too long (Hazel counted every word) and had to be furiously cut during the first week of June. It ended up with 72,000 words out of a contracted 65,000, and the paracetamol bottle was empty. After all this, I somehow lost control and delivered the MS several days too early – apparently half the editorial staff at D&C swooned and began to fear for their jobs, since 50% of their time is spent in coaxing work from reluctant authors who are successively ill, busy, on holiday, unavailable, suffering from writer's block and ill again. An agonizing and suspense-filled week later, Paul rang up to break the evil news. He wanted to suggest some changes, he said. I quivered in nameless dread, convinced that chapter after chapter of rewriting lay ahead of me, a prospect fully as enticing as that of counting the full stops in *Dhalgren*. Five minutes later we had agreed on the three one-word changes required, and for a long time afterwards I lay back weakly murmuring 'Bloody hell.' It still seems somehow impossible.

6) Aftermath

Of course there was more to come. Finding suitable illustrations was enough to empty a second paracetamol bottle, involving as it did endless letters to the Science Museum, who would refer me to the Imperial War Museum, who would either send me the wrong picture or refer me to America, whence my queries generally got no reply at all. (I did better by following up credited pictures in *New Scientist* and even *Analog*.) And there was the sublime joy of correcting the long unmanageable galley proofs and waiting for the wide unmanageable page proofs with all the same errors or – better still – new ones.

There were some strange side-effects of *War in 2080*; for example, the gratuitous quoting of a very silly story of mine called 'Sex Pirates of the Blood Asteroid' led to an inquiry and the subsequent sale of the story to D&C's sf anthology *Aries*, edited by the mysterious 'John Grant' who nobody knows is really Paul Barnett. Then D&C went stark mad and decided to commission a second book, not long to be denied you (it's about flying saucers; I bet you can hardly wait) and to make *War in 2080* their lead title for Spring '79, available in all good bookshops at a mere £5.95, possibly the finest work of non-fiction since *[Enough of this. – The Editors]*. Fame, power, money; U.S., Australian, book club and paperback sales ... I was becoming more and more bemused and egotistical until put in my place by Paul, who sent a *War in 2080* review from the U.S. *Publishers Weekly*: this said 'A brilliant writer ...' Which, Paul explained, means 'a writer who has a brilliant editor'.

Such a tactful man. I wonder why he's left D&C?

FIN.

Like these articles? Do you have something to say to BSFA members about writing? *Focus* publishes articles on all aspects of Fiction ranging from techniques, characterisation, world building and exercises in writing. We're also interested in writers' experiences in workshops, in pitching and in the business aspects of a writing career. If you have ideas that might work for *Focus* please contact the editor, Dev Agarwal at devhotmail@yahoo.co.uk

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