FOCUS

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MATRIX is a fanzine containing news and views of the BSFA and the SF fandom world.

VECTOR is the BSFA's critical journal, containing articles and reviews.

PAPERBACK INFERNO reviews all new paperback fiction that might be considered SF, and quite a bit more besides.

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General correspondence should be addressed to the Chairman: Alan Dorey, 22 Summerfield Drive, Middleton, Lancs. M24 2WW.

((All information correct as far as I know, but I haven't had my December mailing at time of writing (Jan 12)))

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Editorial:

Not so much an editorial this time, more a set of useful pieces of information to pass on to you.

The first is that as from this issue, FOCUS will be published three times a year -- i.e. it will appear with every other mailing. This, of course, means we need LOTS more material, so please keep sending in the stories and articles. Many thanks to everyone who has submitted material to us, and please don't let one rejection put you off. Keep submitting...

Now then. I'm slowly building up a panel of illustrators. If you'd like to be on it, to illustrate fiction for FOCUS, please let me have your name and address. I still need lots of filler cartoons as well.

There will be a section in the next FOCUS on "Coping with Rejection". Having work turned down is something that happens to every writer. To start with, it can hurt a lot -- enough to discourage you from writing more, sometimes. I'd like to hear from anyone [this means YOU] about techniques you've developed to help cope with being turned down, about 200 words worth... This will be a sort of combined agony column and mutual support group.

Information from Dave Langford: The Society of Authors produces a series of useful booklets for the aspiring author.

50p each: Copyright, Protection of Titles, Libel, Your Copyrights After Your Death, Income Tax, VAT, Teachers as Authors, Translators as Authors.

£1.00 each: Guidelines for Authors of Medical Books, Publishing Contracts, Guidelines for Authors of Educational Books, Authors' Agents, Minimum Terms Book Agreement.

Available from: Publications Department, Society of Authors, 84 Drayton Gardens, London SW10 9SD

The other important thing that I must tell you is that I've moved. The new main editorial address of FOCUS is 1 Meyrick Square, Dolgellau, Gwynedd LL40 1LT.

Phew! Back to the novel for a bit now...

((FOCUS is all about writing, yes? It will not have escaped the notice of MATRIX readers that a large number of SF fans put a lot of effort into doing writing that isn't professional fiction, or even amateur fiction. It's fanwriting, here defined as -- well, read the articles and see how they define it. For those of you who only know Mary Gentle as the author of GOLDEN WITCHBREED, or Alex Stewart for his INTERZONE stories, or Bob Shaw through his novels and shorter fiction, here is another side to their writing. I asked each of them how they felt about being both a Real Author and a fanwriter. This is what they said.))

For Love Or Money

Alex Stewart

It's usually at a con or a party, when my guard's down, that I find myself blithely agreeing to do an article I normally wouldn't touch with a bargepole. So naturally I came away from the last one committed to knocking off a piece on the differences between fan and professional writing -- a topic I'd have gone out and got a bargepole to measure for if I'd had time to think. It's like trying to describe the difference between scarlet and crimson: obvious enough if you look, but try to quantify it and you'll bog down faster than a panel on critical standards.

To make matters worse, there are huge areas in both fields I'm completely ignorant of. I've no professional experience of writing for television, radio, comics, or the stage, for instance, while my fanwriting falls firmly into the personal/anecdotal mould, with hardly a word of sercon. So you'll just have to pretend I know what I'm talking about, and bear in mind that all this is purely subjective.

The most obvious characteristic of fanwriting is that it's totally self-indulgent. In fact, given the nature of fanzine fandom, where a faned bears the cost of a zine out of their own pocket, it's hard to see how things could be otherwise. The topics addressed are of concern to the writer, and whether anyone else finds them of interest is largely immaterial. At it's most extreme this can result in pieces that are basically exercises in do-it-yourself psychotherapy; the writer's more interested in working out some personal problem in their own mind than they are in communicating with anyone else. In this case fandom becomes a sort of sounding-board, and since most of the response will be supportive and sympathetic the writer will usually benefit twice over.

This sort of thing is relatively rare, however. The usual motivation behind fanwriting is a passionate desire to communicate. Fanwriters are usually compulsive communicators, often geographically isolated, and even the ones with an active face-to-face social life feel the need to stay in touch with a wider circle of people. Most will have started by requesting and loccing fanzines, until the number of issues they receive passes a certain critical threshold. After this they find themselves on so many mailing lists it becomes almost impossible to loc every zine. As the total creeps higher they find they don't even have time to read them all as they arrive. Then slowly, inexorably, the pile of unread zines begins to grow...

It's usually at this point they throw in the towel, put out an ish

of their own, and start trading. This, they reason in their innocence, leaves them free just to loc the outstanding ones. Little do they know they're about to find themselves on a whole new set of mailing lists...

At the moment we seem to be in the middle of an explosive growth in the number of zines being published, and the conventional wisdom puts this down to the recent resurgence of the apa. Though they're certainly bringing a lot more people into the fanwriting arena, I'm still convinced that the primary cause is this snowball effect; the more zines there are, the more new zines will be published.

What I'm trying to say, I think, is that there's a lot more to writing for fanzines than just finishing the article. It's just one aspect of the fannish social network, although it could be argued that it's the most important one. Similarly, the printing, loccing, and trading of zines has to be looked at in context, alongside conventions, Tun nights, parties, local meetings, and all the other forms of social interaction we take for granted.

Professional writing, on the other hand, is something rather different. I tend to define it myself as anything I hope to get paid for, and though there's an element of flippancy in that, it does pinpoint the most obvious difference. When I finish a story and submit it somewhere, that's the end of it so far as I'm concerned. Either it comes back eventually, or they send me a cheque. In the meantime I'll have started something else, something new, and thet'll take up most of my attention. When I finish a perzine I can expect a steady trickle of comment and response for months afterwards. Similarly, when I finish an article for someone else's fanzine I can expect some eventual feedback through the loccol.

This, then, is the element that's missing from professional work; sociability. If writing for fanzines is like taking part in a long and constantly evolving conversation, professional work is like giving a lecture -- with the additional paranoid conviction that the auditorium's probably empty.

Having said all this, of course, I get a lot of satisfaction out of my writing. Since it's less interactive, I find fiction a purer form of creation; this is art, damn it, and there's no other kick in the world quite like breathing life into the phantoms of your imagination.

And if it all gets too much for me, I can go away and write for a fanzine. Just to relax...

Real Writers Don't Publish Fanzines

Mary Gentle

Snobbery is endemic to the profession of writing. It begins, I suppose, with the elite who are literate and the mass who are not --- the fact that these proportions have been reversed, in the West, in most of the 20th century, seems to have made little impact on the popular mental image. And, the corollary: not all people who can write (physically) are writers. Real writers are the elite of the elite....

No kidding?

But that's what I want to talk about. When is a writer a 'real' writer? And, more specifically, what's the difference between professional and fan writing?

I can only draw on my own experience. The usual method, I believe, is to go from fan writing to professionally-published writing --- I did it the other way round, so maybe I can provide a slightly different perspective.

Back in the days when I was fifteen (and dinosaurs ruled the earth) I became sick to death of people asking me what I was "going to do". Here was a whole world, and they wanted me to pick one thing, and devote my life to it? There had to be some way to shut them up.

"I'm going to be a writer," I announced.

They looked at me a little strangely.

At that point I'd been writing since the age of eleven or twelve, and for a very good reason. There was I, with a brilliant fantasy life, all of which passed before my glazed eyes as I stared out of a succession of classrooms; and a bad memory. If only, I thought, I could keep this.... Committing it to writing seemed a convenient way. It was then that I discovered the difference between day-dreaming and written fiction --- fiction has causality, character, realism, grammar and spelling. (The last of which still eludes me from time to time.) You can't get away with things on paper that you can get away with in your head. So notebooks began to fill up. Long narratives, that took a year or more to write, scribbled between going to bed and falling asleep.

At fifteen, came the dawn: people make a living at this. I could make a living at this....

No wonder they looked at me strangely.

It was fan writing, of course, if I'd only known it. I was a Trekkie before I knew there was such a thing, a fan of written sf who'd never heard of fandom. My epics quite often began in the universe of Star Trek, though admittedly they concentrated more on Vulcans, Romulans, and Klingons than on the Enterprise's crew; characters from Dr Who strayed in; most

of my classmates made an appearance; there was a group from the Second World War (the what? I wonder if anyone else remembers Hogan's Heroes....), and all set on any number of alien worlds. There were first, second, and third-person narratives, straight and split; flashbacks, and flash-forwards....in short, crap. And enormous amounts of fun.

I could do this for a living, I thought.

Had I been in my parent's position, I too would have looked at that girl strangely.

The key words here, of course, are "for a living". It was firmly established in my mind that real writers were professionals who wrote books that got published, and were paid for it; and if they didn't get published and paid, then they weren't Real Writers.

Snobbery is simple at fifteen.

Skipping an undistinguished academic career (staring out of windows, remember), and the publication of a children's book, and a good many jobs that had nothing except their salary to recommend them, we arrive at the mid-twenties. Mine, not the century's.

'Real writers get published.'

In the interim I'd discovered fandom, invited myself into Paperback Inferno and had a happy time dismembering reviewing books sent to me by its inestimable editor; locced a number of fanzines, and used this proof of literary ability to con my way onto a BA course.

The special entries committee looked at Vector and Inferno. Then they looked at me a little strangely. But they took me on.

Now writing academic essays and writing critical reviews are not light-years distant from each other. Both require the analytic (and intuitive) mind; both require clarity of style, presentation, and thought.

But was it 'real' writing? You couldn't convince me then. All of its requirements are professional, as you will note. Not unlike professional journalism, without the salary. I suppose I could have stretched a point and said my college grant was my salary for writing.

Somehow that cut no ice.

Money isn't the difference between fan and professional writing. It gives a kind of validity to what's written, but at the same time, attitudes are ambivalent. I'm aware of paradoxes: being published matters terribly, when you're not; and then when you are, it doesn't matter at all --- until the next piece of work comes up for editorial judgement. Money doesn't matter, until you haven't got it; and while there are many ways to get the daily bread, almost all of them steal time that could be used writing. Publicity doesn't matter, sales don't matter; until you realise you want your book to be read, you want the next book to be accepted for publication.

But this is hindsight.

Then, it was rampant snobbery. Fiction in fanzines? Bullshit! If it was good, it'd be published, wouldn't it? In a real magazine, with a shiny cover, and worldwide distribution; and you'd see it in WHS. Mutter mutter. The local Writers' Circle? Pooh! Bunch of lousy amateurs, stories in True Confessions ---

If they're so lousy, Gentle, how come they're published in real magazines, and you're not?

The question continued to haunt me, though if I'd been sensible it might have made me take a closer look at some of my definitions. Most of their stuff was utter bullshit, however; the literary standard lower than most fictionzines. (Whose literary standards? Guess.)

By then I'd written several novels, including a sprawling monster of a thing that had been immense and total fun to write, but that I knew would never sell; and a number of short stories, one of which was accepted by Ad Astra, which promptly folded before it could publish. Call me Jonah. I was going quietly crazy, for a number of reasons, one of which was the heap of rejection slips hitting my doormat.

If you're not published, you're not a 'real' writer....

What amateur and professional writing have in common, I think, is dedication. There are few people who continue writing for any length of time without discovering the desire to improve what they do. And then one is on the slippery downward slope.... Because so many people are literate, writing is supposed to come easier than, say, music. If you're going to be a concert pianist, you're going to have to sit there for so many hours a day and practise. And if you're going to be a writer, you have to practise language. Every day, or very nearly. Year in and year out (unless you're that rarity, a total natural --- but then, Mozart was playing at four, and Mozarts don't come along too often in any field).

You have to practise so that what you've put down on the page is what you meant in your head. So that the images are clear. So that the characters live, and talk, and move, and have their being --- on and off the page. You have to know why one verb and one tense slow a story down, and why another speeds it up. You have to know what your assumptions are, about everything under the sun, so that you know what you're saying, and why.

You have to spend a lot of time gazing into space, not hearing the person who has just spoken to you; you have to spend a lot of time thinking, and then a lot of time not-thinking, so that the unconscious part of the process can act.

I can do this, I said at fifteen. If I'd known what it involved, what you have, what you give up.... how you give counsel of perfection and fail to take it....

I look at that fifteen year old somewhat strangely.

It was in this position, unpublished, and rapidly being convinced that A Hawk in Silver was a one-off, a fluke, and that all my near-miss rejections amounted to a great big heap of nothing; that I happened to see mentioned in Vector that The Affirmation had been bought by Arrow. (You see what the BSFA has to answer for.)

We now come to the essential characteristic of the writer: brass nerve. I didn't exactly sit down and say "They took Christopher Priest so they might take me". But I did send off my vast unpublishable sprawl of a science fiction novel to Arrow. And heard nothing for what seemed like centuries. And, finally, got a phone call from one Richard Evans announcing that they would like to publish Golden Witchbreed....

And he wonders why there was a stunned silence on the other end of the phone?

But this is getting off the point, which is that, safely in the class of 'real' writers (for the time being; it can be very temporary), it wasn't really necessary for me to

worry about the difference between amateur and professional writing. I enjoyed both. Though fan writing might rank below professional fiction.

But why?

I wasn't happy with the commercial distinction: 'real writing is paid for'. When you're an unpublished writer, it's almost axomatic that you do it for love (since it's easily discoverable that there are easier ways of making money). You are, in the true sense of the word, amateur: one who loves. Become professional and the loudest voices seem to hold, with Dr Johnson, that no man but a blockhead ever wrote for anything except money. Real writing is paid writing --- well, yes, it is, when you're professionally published; but not exactly in a cause-and-effect manner. It's almost embarrassing, in a curious kind of way, to be paid for something you did because you had to do it; the recompense isn't appropriate.

Ideally, writers would be subsidised. But by the state, or by personal patron? He who pays the piper.... And who decides what constitutes a writer? What's obscene, what's subversive? That's censorship by cash. And yet one must eat. Puritan ideology raises its head: I enjoy writing, how come I take money for it? Why, it's almost like prostitution....

Well, no, it isn't. It's closer to obsessive-compulsive behaviour. Why one writes, if not to pay the rent, is a very good question. Unfortunately I lack an equally good answer. Would I have given up writing, as I swore (I frequently swear about writing, one way and another), if Arrow's cavalry hadn't galloped over the hill? I doubt it. None of the other umpteen efforts I made to give it up ever came to anything....

You are looking at me strangely.

And so, in 1984, with the last draft of a novel to be worked on, a college project of 10,000 words to complete, a summer vacation job, a review column for Interzone (plug), and books for Vector and Inferno lined up as far as the eye can see; with an apa contribution due, and numerous letters waiting to be answered; it was then that I decided to do the only sensible thing.

I brought out a fanzine of my own.

What I say will doubtless appear obvious to experienced fan editors and contributors. Green Shadows and Sunlight came about simply because I had a non-fiction non-sf-orientated article that demanded to be written. Having done that, the thought that had been floating in my mind for several years surfaced, and I decided to put the article in a zine of my own. Wherein, what you see it what you get: to be responsible for cover, typeface, letraset, order of contents, etc., is quite remarkable --- when you're used to writing the words, delivering them to a publisher (professional or amateur), and eventually seeing them in an artifact you didn't design. Names were selected. A friend lent a hand with cheap rates at a print shop. Reduced to A5 (I like A5) the thing came back. Addresses were written. Stamps were purchased ---

The woman in the Post Office looked at me strangely.

Hello, I thought, déjà vu....

GS&S went off to its various destinations, and it was a few days later that I identified the difference, if not between professional and amateur writers, at least between professional published fiction and amateur non-fiction fanzines. And I can

give it to you in one word: response.

Golden Witchbreed, all 150,000 words of it, has so far provoked something less than half a dozen letters. The response rate for GS&S#1 is over 20% of its (admittedly small) print run: in the first fifteen days I got as many letters. It's rare to get a letter about a novel that says more than "liked it". Fanzine loccers go into detail, they argue, they illustrate with example and anecdote, they disagree, they make remarks cretinous and brilliant....

As well as response, methods of writing differ. For the zine, I wrote about the conditions under which some old people live. I'd seen it, I reported it, I speculated --- because it seemed to follow --- about personal old age, and fears, and death. Very like fiction-writing, except that one must resist the urge to 'pattern', to improve on events. And since it was reportage, I became a neutral narrator, a camera-eye; it wasn't necessary to include my reasons for taking those jobs, how I felt at the time. The focus wasn't on me.

In fiction, the focus is on "me", but "I" may be any one of many characters. Like acting, one takes on the role. It spills over, I look at things with the character's eyes, live and breathe with him or her. My impulse at such times is the opposite of the go-out-and-see frame of mind that set me to looking, curiously, at the old people I met. It's a stay-alone anti-social impulse. (Writing is basically anti-social --- the physical practise of it, I mean.) Isolation allows you to hear what the characters are saying, see what they see.

With the article, I only knew to what degree I'd been successful when I began to get a response back. I could see where a point hadn't been emphasised, where another could be misconstrued; where this had obviously touched a nerve in people, but that hadn't. With a novel, the success is the process of writing; and I know I'm on the right track when it starts to move of itself. That may sound fey. It's nothing of the sort. When I'm pushing names round a page, vaguely hoping they'll do something lifelike and be more than labels, I know I'm losing. When I'm winning --- but I'll give you an example. In the novel I'm working on now, I had a woman whose name never quite fitted her, and who I didn't really know what to do with. The time arrived when she had to do something. I went away and not-thought about it. And when I sat down to the typewriter again, a very tall and angular young black woman walked onto the page.

"And who the hell are you?" I wondered.

"Molly Rachel," she said, "and by the way, I don't do this, I do that."

Which she promptly proceeded to do. It isn't true to say that I thought 'suppose this character were black, what would she be like, what's a good name for her, how will she react to all these other characters'. That may be exactly what goes on at the unconscious level. Consciously one sees a face, hears a name, and knows; like recognising or suddenly noticing something that was there all along.

Obsessive-compulsive behaviour.... yeah. But that applies to fanzines, too.

I would also say that fanzines alone are not subject to market forces, being limited by only the writer's imagination and pocket; but as has been pointed out to me, response is also

a coin.

So can we say that the primary impulse in fanzines is to communicate, while the impulse with fiction is to create? Bearing in mind that one must create an article or review or letter to communicate; and communicate something, however indirectly, when one creates a fiction. That might serve as a rule of thumb for me; I speak only for myself.

The snobbery, the attitude, that I have to watch out for in myself is the one that originates in this supposed professional/amateur split. That doing non-commercial work is unwise. In other words: "What are you doing wasting your time with fanzines?"

To which the answer is: I'm not wasting it. I am exercising a different aspect of written language. It has different goals, and different rewards. Both forms have their attraction. They speak to different appetites in the audience.

Commerce and art aren't mutually exclusive, or rather, they need not be. I have said little about readers in the context of professional fiction, firstly because I don't much think about them (how could I write, with beady little eyes watching me?), and secondly because I don't know what people read --- I know what publishers and newspapers and retailers tell me they read, but I doubt that is the whole story. You'd have to consult libraries, second-hand shops, and individuals (how many 'bestsellers' lay around, bought but unread?), and that isn't my business.

Whether I create a literary world, or analyse one, or comment on the 'real' world, it's all the one thing: the use of language to clarify meaning. That's the similarity between professional and amateur. If you haven't been professionally published, and you care about words, and you use them as a tool instead of letting them control you; and you know you have something to say, and why --- why, then, you're not unprofessional, just undiscovered. You may never be discovered or published, may not desire it, or may have things to say that people don't want to hear. That's immaterial, nothing to do with writing. And if you have a string of novels to your name, and feel the same way, love what you do (and take the money anyway) --- why, then, you're an amateur: a lover of words.

Careless thinking, imprecise use of language, lack of clarity, lack of devotion: these make a person non-professional (and non-amateur) whether they have a publishing career or not.

Perhaps we have the wrong dichotomy. 'Professional/non-professional' is the split, not professional/amateur. (I don't know whether 'amateur' has a converse in this sense, unless it's 'amateur/hackwriter'.) But in that case just what, exactly, do I mean by 'non-professional'?

Non-professional writers don't care. Or they don't care enough. A letter of comment is a work of art, if enough thought and feeling and technique and passion go into it. A novel is a botch, if enough clichés are strung together, stuck down on the page with no thought that this could be better, does this mean what I want it to mean, is this the thing I really want to do?

But, since writing is an art, there's a third category: those who care and who still can't make it. Some of them are professionally published. Admitted this means judging writing by one's own standards, but the construction of standards is part

of being a writer and a reader. Standards should be flexible, it's true, and open to new experiences.... all the same, there's plenty of crap around. To be professional in every aspect of the practise of writing, and still have something missing, is tragic.

Any writer has doubts, dissatisfactions, because he or she can conceive of the perfect written artifact; but because it's perfect, by definition, never create it.

I don't judge myself by what I've written, which is too dismal a prospect to contemplate; I console myself with the thought that I may have potential. How else to keep sanity and a little humour? Hindsight tells me I've perpetrated some rubbish in my time, but I resolutely refuse to apply that knowledge to what I'm doing at the moment --- I cross my fingers and hope I've learned something in the meantime. 'Professional' and 'non-professional' aren't labels for life, they're states we all pass in and out of.

Which brings me to my final definition: a 'real' writer is someone who never stops banging their head against a wall....

I knew it: you've got that look again.

Seducers With Staples

Bob Shaw

I used to have two hobbies. One of them was writing for fanzines; the other was writing for prozines.

Then I became a full-time writer of SF, and for a glorious year or so I still had two hobbies. The main difference was that I was free to follow one hobby all day and get paid for doing so. That was a genuine high sopt in my life.

But human nature, especially mine, is a wayward and fickle thing. If I were to be offered £20 000 a year simply to go to an office at noon every day and drink a bottle of Guinness, I would be deliriously happy — for a while. Then I'd begin to ask myself, "Why is it always at noon? Don't they know I've got other things to do? And why is it always Guinness? Why can't it be lager now and again?"

And after a while the sparkle would go out of things.

I still love writing SF, mind you, but now it's work. It's my job. Anything you have to do every day is work, and anything you don't have to do seems fun. As Dorothy McArdle put it in Uneasy Freehold, "To a writer, every occupation that is not his own brain-grating task seems a delightful idleness."

I would love to become a prolific fan writer again and go all out to try winning a third Hugo, but when I have been writing professionally all day it is virtually impossible for me to return to the typewriter in the evening.

To me, fanzines are seducers with staples. I keep getting insane urges to forget about the current novel and use part of the day to write a piece for whichever fanzine came in that morning's post. But if I give in to temptation once, I'll keep giving in, and I'll end up bankrupt.

It's sad, but that's why I'm not going to write anything for FOCUS about writer-as-fan.

Not this year, anyway,..

Caught Being In Love

John A. Connor

Don't ask me questions and I'll tell no lies, for you are but eyes and nothing more. You are mute witnesses from the city Overworld, forced painfully and lovingly from your mortal shell like an egg being blown, prior to being placed in a collection. Gone for the moment is the world of high-rise office blocks, the bustle of people, the heat, the stench and sweat of everyday Overlife. Normality and the world have been temporarily suspended in time and space and, having been thrust through the Soho-like twilight that is both a part of the Over and Underworld — and is the only bridge between the two — you are tugged and dragged downwards, into the very depths of the nightclub.

Dazed and confused, you cannot voice your protest as you are physically battered by the sound of the large bass saxophone as it screams out strained alto notes. It clashes discordantly with the guitar howl accompanying the vocalist's epileptic fit as he fights over the noise of the band behind him and the usherettes at the side of the stage who are yelling: "Amphetamines! Barbiturates! LSD!"

The air is thick with reefer smoke which moves in garrottes and sharp, strangling fingers that swoop and jab at bleary, red-veined eyes.

Pulse, roll, pulse beats the beat in crashing waves as flameshadows lick-lick the black velvet walls to the grind, jump, grind of the ethereal dancers as they shuffle around and around the dance-floor to the thump, thump, thump of the music from the band on stage.

Last night I thought I saw a shooting star. When morning comes, she hides her face. A real disgrace.

And the dance goes on.

At one of the tables lining the walls of the subterranean cavern sits a dude called Ozzie, dressed all in white. Reflectively, he swishes the dregs of a methylbenzene cocktail around in a glass, watching as it evaporates in the heat of his hand. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees a familiar figure moving across the dance hall towards his table. Ozzie looks up into a stony, angular face.

"Frank! My old friend."

Frank leans forward. The cuffs of his evening jacket ride up to expose white shirtsleeves as he rests his hands on the table-top.

"Well well, if it isn't the mortal God himself. Come looking for your chickie no doubt. Don't you ever give up? Don't you realise the boss is only toying with your life? It amuses him to keep you playing his little game, just as it amuses him to keep this place going.

"You know," Frank pauses. "The best thing for you to do now is to pop a few pills, have a good time, then go back above."

Anger hardens Ozzie's thin, white face.

"Nobody makes me dance to their tune, Frank. So where is he?"

"Damn you, no!" Frank shakes his head violently, resentment heavy in his voice. "Not this time round. If you want information, ask one of these poor bastards. Because, from now on, you get nothing from me. You blew it the first time, baby. You really screwed it up for both of us."

Maliciously, he adds: "Dicey's dead. Can't you leave it at that?"

Ozzie looks deeply into Frank's eyes and shakes his head. "How can I leave the one thing keeping me alive?"

Disgustedly, Frank moves off to resume his normal position by the entrance door, leaving Ozzie alone again.

As Ozzie turns his head to look back over the dance-floor to the stage, he sees a shade, tripping high on mescaline or LSD, looking him over. Catching a cross-draft, the restless spirit drifts towards its target. Defiantly, it stops in front of Ozzie and speaks:

"Say, babe, what's a dude like you doing down here? I mean — shit! — you're from above."

Ozzie looks up at the shade. The faint outline of the far wall and dancers is visible through its hazy substance every time the overhead lights flash to the rhythmically thudding backbeat. He shifts his head to get a better look at the shade, his bone-white hair falling past his shoulders. His translucent, pink eyes, shielded by a pair of mirrored wrap-arounds, freeze the lost soul to the ground, cutting through its hallucinogenic wonderland.

"What's it to you, shade?" Ozzie smiles, revealing arctic-white teeth set in pink-tinged gums. "It's no crime for me to be here. You never know, you might have enjoyed it here once."

The shade shimmers convulsively as it spits out a name which Ozzie has learned to loathe, even though he has had to live with it all through his lives.

"'bino bastard!"

Without warning, Ozzie makes a swift gesture in the sweat-sodden air with his left hand. The dextrous sinister.

Caught off-guard, the shade tries to dodge the dark magic, fails, and is trapped in the tight grip of the spell.

Caution creases Ozzie's face as he leans forward in his seat and speaks softly to the shade. He does not want the nightclub's clientele to overhear his questions.

"Where's your main man, shade? Where's the big H?"

The shade's face adopts an odd, faraway expression as Ozzie's power forces it to answer the question against its will.

"He's here, there, everywhere, dude. He's the main man. He keeps us. And we keep him."

Anger flashes in Ozzie's face, his hands form fists. "Don't feed me none of that mystical crap. Your main man stole my chick away from me; and now I'm hurting so bad inside that I don't care who I have to stomp out to get her back. Tell me: where's his body at?"

The shade grinned like an imbecile. "His body, dude? Why, it's where it normally is, down the Dark Steps. But you'll never come back from way down there. Down there is the real End."

Ozzie cocks his head to one side and grins an evil grin — but down here in the nightclub, it's just a grin.

"The Steps don't burn me out, shade. You forget I'm not like you or your cadaver — born kind. Now go, before I dispel you."

With another movement of his left hand, he dismisses the spell holding the shade under his influence. The shade staggers back, snarling as it realises it has been used yet again.

Half-crouching, it lunges suddenly, its ghostly fingers outstretched to rake its tormentor's eyes. But the halogen-quartz flashing of the strobe-lights reveal the outlines of a gun. A pressurised water-pistol is held rock-steady in Ozzie's hand, its nozzle pointing directly at the shade.

The shade laughs, contemptuously. "You can't hurt me with that thing, dude. I'm dead already. Even you can't kill me a second time."

A vicious smile curls the corners of Ozzie's mouth. "It's loaded with good water, shade. Holy water. It won't kill you but it'll burn you good and proper, like you never been burned before. Now blow!"

The sudden look of terror on the shade's face is replaced by a leer, revealing razor-edges of needle-like teeth.

"I'm not going to try wasting you out, dude. The Steps will see that you join us — as a permanent member."

The shade assumes an air of defiance. Swallowing another capsule of hallucinogen, it turns and drifts back into the hot, pulsating crowd.

Ozzie watches it go and, as he does so, his eyes are drawn to the Dark Steps. There, just before the stage, is the midnight-black hole leading down, ringed by an ebony-black banister. Its heavy, sarcophagus-gold inlay winks seductively back at him. At the lip of the hole an obsidian step is barely visible through the swirling, smoky atmosphere.

Painfully, the lights onstage half-blind Ozzie as they suddenly change. Another batch of canisters explodes, sending up red and blue plumes of smoke into the thick, stale air. With a homicidal scream, the lead guitarist leaps across the full length of the stage and throws his axe almost into the banks of hi-stax speakers. What was once a deafening powerchord is turned into a screeching feedback finish; and the band's set is over.

With the final chord ringing in his ears, Ozzie pulls his wide-brimmed fedora over his wrap-arounds and heads out across the polished, scarred dance-floor.The flameshadows flicker across his white suit, adding a hint of rosy-orange colouring to his sickly albino complexion. As he moves nearer his objective, shades and ghouls — the only true clientele of the underworld nightclub — snarl viciously, yet move almost reverently aside to let him pass. A faint murmur of: "Albino" ripples across the spectral death-dancers. Ozzie takes no notice.

The distance between himself and the almost unknown slowly decreases until he finally reaches the head of the stairs. His hand stretches out, automatically fear-gripping the banisters. And, leaning forwards, Ozzie looks down.

His eyes meet an almost tangible wall of darkness that cuts off the view of the depths below, masking any danger which might be lurking. A little voice inside his head reminds him of the stories and rumours which he has heard. Of the pimps with their flick-knives and rings. Of the grease-painted, razor-armed dykes, all selling flesh for a price. Of the acolytes of the big H. Always ready to kill and run with the pack.

But now there can be no turning back; and the only way out, is down.

Slowly, Ozzie turns to face the captive audience — and finds Frank by his side. Frank's face is a mask of worry. He chooses his words carefully, not wanting to hurt Ozzie too much.

"Give her up, Ozzie. She's just not worth all this trouble. Can't you see what she's done to you? You're so screweed up and burned inside out by this Lady Dicey chick that you can't see straight anymore. She's no good for you, Ozzie, not since she's become one of us."

Ozzie stares into his friend's face; and Frank trembles with frustration as he finally realises that his pleas are all for nothing. Ozzie is committed to his quest. There is no turning back.

Suddenly, Ozzie smiles, raises his fedora hat, pauses while his fine white hair falls to its full length, and bows to Frank.

"Don't let this party go cold on me, Frank, I'll be coming back."

Faint, nervous laughter skitters through the disembodied audience; and the new band onstage start playing a rock'n'roll ballad.

Baby baby, tried to phone you. They said you were gone. Baby baby, how I miss you. My love is oh-so strong.., and Frank shakes his head in dismay.

As Ozzie turns and starts to walk down the Steps, he hears Frank calling out a damning epitaph: "You pathetic fool!"

And the band plays on.

Down, forever down, one step, two, three steps, four, time loses all meaning and is useless, for now Ozzie is safely at the bottom of the Dark Steps, looking into a square, rough-hewn room lit by guttering torches set at regular intervals along each wall. He knows that several corridors lead to and from the room, but their destinations are hidden from view by slow-moving shadows. And, deep within his mind, this place awakens long-forgotten memories. Of the first time. The first failure.

As if caught in a delayed, half-forgotten reflex action, Ozzie turns to look back at the Steps. Twenty jet-black slabs of stone meet his gaze. Twenty time-worn steps, the curtain of darkness closing around them, hiding them again.

"Losing your nerve, dude?"

Ozzie's head whips back in a flurry of pure white strands. There, before him, illuminated by the sputterings of the torches, stands the mother of all his nightmares.

A being, humanoid in the most grotesque sense, stands about three feet from him. Tall, with a greenish, faintly luminescent sheen to his rotting complexion, its firmly-muscled shoulders seem about ready to burst through the broad pin-stripe jacket which he wears. Ozzie reads intelligence and some odd twisted compassion deep within the being's soulless eyes. He shudders uncontrollably. Revulsion registers on his face; and Nightmare smiles, revealing yellowed teeth.

"What's the matter with you, dude? Do you find me repulsive?" Nightmare leans closer to Ozzie. "If thine orbs offend thee, then pluck them out!" Nightmare laughs, "Ha, don't tell me that I actually burn you, dude? I can smell that malign 'bino power in you even down here. It's just too bad that it won't work for you deep down here, isn't it?" Then, with unconcealed curiosity: "What do you want, dude? You know this isn't a place for the living."

Ozzie's eyes narrow to twin slits radiating pure hatred.

"Where's your boss? Go, Find him. And, when you do, tell him that I've come to reclaim my chick."

Nightmare tries to speak kindly, his voice holding a touch of pity for this mangod. "Go back, dude, You know that you, or your kind, have no right to be down here. It's so cold you could catch your death if you aren't careful. You shouldn't have come this far down in the first place,"

From out of the darkness comes a sneering voice:

"What does it matter now? He had to come down here, sooner or later."

The speaker moves out from the shadows as silently as death herself, Raven's wing-coloured hair frames an ashen face, The stranger, the boss, is dressed conservatively in a plain three-piece suit of pitch black. The dark cloth seems to absorb any light that falls on it, As the boss moves towards Ozzie, the torches around the

room flare violently into life, as if to combat the effects of the suit's malignant power.

"So, you've come back down here again. Listen, you crazy mixed-up dude, why don't you give this whole thing up? You know that you can't change anything now. What's in the past is totally unchangeable. Why not go back to playing your guitar? You used to be good at that, one of the best,"

Impatiently, big H runs his fingers rapidly through his thick purple-black hair.

"Forget the chick, She's happy down here. She's a star now, gets all the leading rolls in all the best Beaver Brothers' skin-flicks. Forget Dicey; and go back to the world where you belong," It sounds like a plea.

Ozzie's face shows the pain which he has had to carry inside him from the very start. "How can I forget her when I love her?" He sneers at the boss: "Ha, love. That's one emotion which you'll never understand."

Sadly, big H looks at Ozzie.

"That's where you're wrong, dude, You're way off the mark, Even Nightmare here knows all about love. He's had more than a lifetime to contemplate and ponder over that particular little four-letter word. Isn't that right, my gangrenous friend?"

Nightmare nods mutely, Ozzie's stern expression softens as he looks once more into Nightmare's face; and sees a tear fall from the corner of his eye.

But the time for sentiment and discussion is passed, Emotions no longer play a part in Ozzie's desperate bid to reclaim his lost love. With grim determination, he asks the inevitable question:

"Tell me, where can I find her?"

Big H sighs philosophically, "Why do we have to go through all this quasi-ritualistic drivel every time you come down into my domain? You should know where she stays by now. Go, and see if you can't make it to the outside this time. But, remember, whatever you do, don't look back."

Ozzie smiles, realising consent has finally been given, He moves off down one of the many passageways which pierce the cold, unfeeling stone walls. Big H and Nightmare follow his progress until he is lost from sight.

Looking down the corridor, Nightmare asks: "Who was that dude, Boss?" His voice is tinged with wonder. But he sees bland resignation in big H's face.

"Him? Why, Nightmare, that's my dear reincarnated friend, Ozzie Orpheus. He keeps on pulling that cheap rebirth trick and comes back down here time and time again to rescue his beloved slut from my supposedly evil clutches."

Nightmare gazes questioningly at his lord and master. "Evil? What's that, Boss?"

"Just a dated concept used to justify a person's hatred of something or someone." Big H gently pats Nightmare on the shoulder. "I wouldn't worry about that sort of thing down here, my friend, It no longer concerns you; and it's something that's never worried me,"

"And what of this dude, Ozzie? Does he worry you coming down here after his chick?"

The boss laughs mirthfully, but the laughter leaves a look of concern in its wake. "I don't mind Ozzie coming down here and trying to rescue his chick, it's just,,, He never seems to learn that he just can't win,"

The pair walk silently and slowly down a corridor in the opposite

direction to the one Ozzie has taken.

Big H, off-handedly, almost casually, continues the conversation:

"Now, as to what really worries me, did I ever tell you I have this almost pathological fear of dogs? Especially those of the three-headed variety?"

The Four Ages of Excuses for Not Writing

Firstly The Age of the Biro: 'Now, if only I had a typewriter, I could write a novel a week!'

Then The Age of The Underwood No 5:

'Now if only I had an electirc typewriter I could really begin to write!'

Next, the Age of the Smith Corona:

'Nice, but what's this thing called a word processor?'

And Now; The Age of the Word*:

'Now what I really need is an IBM X7001 with a 10000K RAM twin disc Winchesters 200K bubble store memory strap cable interface with a 300wpm cold type quality daisywheel...'

(R,I,B.)

((Meanwhile, back at the ranch, Dorothy has been soliciting articles too. The following piece touches on a number of important issues: censorship, pornography, violence; should writing for children uphold differing moral standards to writing meant for adults only, and so on and so on. If I don't get lots of response to this article, I give up.))

The Famous Five Go Shoplifting

Garry Kilworth

Whoever said, "maps are of time, not of place" was only half right. All things are of time and place. The judgement of what is moral, amoral or immoral can only come from viewing conduct or an attitude within its own context. What was moral in 16th century England would not necessarily be moral today. What is moral in a Papuan tribe is not necessarily moral in Iran. Then again, the morals of any society are diffusive and spring from the smallest unit, the individual. My ideas of right and wrong do not necessarily coincide with yours. It could be argued that there are certain universal morals that are irrefutable: that it is wrong to kill, for example, under any circumstances. Then someone, somewhere, has a decision thrust upon them — do they switch off the life support machine of the paralysed patient who wants to die, or do they let that person continue to experience a personal hell?

Morality, in fact or fiction, is an emotive and highly complex question and must, in the end, reflect the ideas of the individual. The acceptance or rejection of those ideas, again, rests with other individuals. The First World War poets wrote on the immorality of war, yet they were there, participating in it voluntarily, and their job was to kill people. Collectively, as a nation, they had felt the war was right. Individually, they thought it was wrong. In certain cases the collective and the individual viewpoints overlap.

Morality in fiction is important, but not for didactic reasons. It is important as a reflection of reality. The real world is moral and immoral, to individual judgement, by turns and in its disparate parts. That fiction will reflect this confused picture is inescapable. Some writers wish to present the world as it is and others as it should be (or as they would like it to be). Others do not care for either and write for effect — to shock or cause a sensation, and thus sell their fiction. I would condemn none of them, not even the latter, for if adults wish to be shocked, then to condemn them for an indulgence that hurts (if it does) no-one but themselves, is arrogant. The reader of 'immoral' literature must have morals in order to be shocked, and the idea that any fiction of this sort is so impressive that it leads to the reader discarding such morals, is laughable.

I believe the morals of the writer will show through the text, whether they are placed there consciously, or whether they find their way in subconsciously. An editor who rejects a manuscript on purely moral grounds is within his or her own rights, but it is up to the writer to understand that the rejection is from an individual. To take an extreme case, if I send a MS to a local parish magazine and the story contains a fictional account of what I see as corruption in the Church, I am likely to have it rejected on moral grounds. I may

believe that it is moral to attack the acquisitiveness of religious organisations, but I would not expect my local vicar to agree with me. The same story might be snapped up by Private Eye.

This argument can be reduced to a highly personal level which may not be apparent to the writer. An editor whose wife or husband has just run off with the next-door neighbour, after twenty years of fidelity on the part of both partners, is likely to take a jaundiced view of a story where infidelity goes unpunished. However, an editor who has seen the film A Touch of Class the night before, might just believe that here was a beautiful love story,

What the writer is doing, whether intentionally or not, is presenting his or her morals to a readership. That readership may be one person (an editor) or a collection of people, some of whom may agree with those morals. An adult readership will decide for itself what is acceptable, and like it or not, the filter is going to be an editor with ideas of his or her own which may not meet with those of the writer, I know at least two writers who abhor violence and will not use it in their work, even though it might mean the rejection of their manuscripts, That takes a great deal of courage. I know other writers who abhor violence but use it in order to influence people against it. The former may believe that violence in fiction breeds violence in real life and the latter that you cannot write an anti-war novel without writing about war, Both arguments have their merits, yet though they produce two quite different forms of literature, the moral standpoints of the writers are basically in agreement.

However, when one strips away the niceties of subtle fiction, there are those stories and novels which appear, to certain readers, amoral or immoral to any taste. George Orwell wrote an essay, Raffles and Miss Blandish, on the amorality of No Orchids for Miss Blandish, and he certainly felt that James Hadley Chase's novel carried no moral, being "a distilled version of the modern political scene (1940), in which such things as mass bombings of civilians, the use of hostages, torture to obtain confessions, secret prisons, execution without trial, floggings with rubber truncheons, drownings in cesspools, systematic falsification of records and statistics, treachery, bribery and Quislingism are normal and morally neutral, even admirable when they are done in a large and bold way". Yet No Orchids continued to sell copies and can still be obtained today, its amorality having had little effect on its popularity.

So, what we would appear to have here is an author who is apparently unconcerned about morality in fiction, a publisher who shows equal unconcern, and several million readers over a period of forty years who share their views. Orwell felt that the ordinary reader ought to have objected to No Orchids, but what he forgot was that most people negotiate with their consciences. Readers are prepared to rationalise fiction and reality, Embezzlement in fiction might pleasantly stimulate the imagination of an accountant who would totally reject the reality of such a situation. Fantasy and fact are separate issues. As a writer, I would not have liked to have written No Orchids because as I have already said, I believe the fiction reflects the writer's morals, but as a reader I am unconcerned by it because I can detach it from reality, I cannot imagine any ordinary adult reader being influenced enough by the amorality of No Orchids to change their own moral outlook, and although Orwell's heart was in the right place and his sincerity is unquestionable, his prejudices show through the lines of the self-same essay, He states, "Evidently there are great numbers of English people who are partly Americanised in moral outlook, for there was no popular protest against No Orchids", thus making the sweeping implication that American morals

are somewhat inferior to English morals, This may be (unconsciously?) immoral in itself,

Where an immoral or amoral story might have influence is on an undeveloped or disturbed personality and this is where there may be a responsibility, If one is writing specifically for children then the moral content may be influential and the responsibility lies with both the writer and the publisher. However, I have said may be influential, because some of the folk and fairy tales I read as a child had more than questionable moral contents, I shall modernise one of those folk tales and leave you to judge for yourselves.

"A company director is having a drink in a pub when he gets into conversation with a baker, The baker, who is a liar, brags that his daughter has found a system which enables a punter to win every time on the race track, (NB — why wasn't the baker rich? But I digress). The company director finds out that the girl is a typist in his firm and threatens to sack her unless she produces a list of winners for him. If she does, he promises her, he will promote her to the Board, She is at her wits' end until a jockey passes her the information she requires in exchange for the promise of a chance to seduce her younger sister, The information is passed on, the girl promoted, but she reneges on her promise to the jockey, He is angry but says he'll let her off if she can tell him what it is he has tattooed on his chest, Now that she has power and wealth, she pays the jockey's contemporaries, who share his dressing-room, to grass on him, When she tells the jockey what he has on his chest, he commits suicide,"

There, in modern parlance, (as some of you will have recognised) is Rumpelstiltskin, In this story the father, a miller, is a braggard and a liar, the king greedy only for wealth, the peasant girl dishonest and willing to hand over her unborn child in exchange for her own life and the promise of power and wealth, and a so-called villain, who is the only one I can sympathise with to any degree, is cheated out of his contract and ends up "tearing himself in half",

The emotive part of the original story — in which we are supposed to sympathise with the princess — is in the handing-over of her newly-born child to the dwarf Rumpelstiltskin. But listen to the dwarf's reasons for wanting the baby:- "Because I treasure all life more than I treasure gold or precious gems." If there is any moral at all, and I doubt whether it would be evident to a child, it is in that statement,

However, though I read that story several times, and many like it, I cannot say that it seriously warped my judgement of what was right and wrong, So are children impressed by the immorality of a fictional story? Or do they see it as something unconnected with real life, as something quite separate and a part of a fantasy world that does not enter into everyday life but remains between the pages of a book once it is closed? Certainly, as a child I sympathised with the princess, but no way would I have promised to give the family pet to the school bully in exchange for a place in his gang, even had I desired such a change of situation beyond all things,

Had a children's story been plotted with a more realistic background — say, the Famous Five going on a shoplifting spree and getting away with it — then perhaps I might have been confused, but not influenced.

I was once at a writers' workshop where a circulated story was heavily criticised for its lack of morality. Perversely enough it came from the pen of a writer whom I (and many others) considered led a

blameless and useful personal life, One whose morals, to outward view, found general approbation among those present, The fact was, the writer had become so engrossed with the technical ideas behind the story that human feelings had been forgotten. Certainly the story did not reflect the true ethics of the writer, In such a case I am sure the author would probably have been relieved (at a later date) to have had the story rejected, This sort of situation can only come about by hurriedly writing a story for a workshop in the small hours of the morning before the meeting, and no doubt in this particular instance a period of time and a re-reading would have been just as effective as the workshop critics, This is a far cry from consciously writing a piece of fiction, with what the writer believes to be amoral or immoral tenets, simply to satisfy an imagined public taste for immoral literature (whatever that is),

So far I have been talking generally about morality in fiction but have not stated my own position with regard to my writing. I could not consciously write a piece of fiction, which I personally found morally distasteful, for commercial gain. That is not to say my morals are unimpeachable: it simply means that with me, writing is a compulsion which can only be satisfied by getting the story out of my head onto the paper, and if the moral standpoint of the completed story was abhorrent to me, I would not have written it in the first place, It does not mean, however, that the story will satisfy the moral requirements of all its readers, I know what is right and wrong, Caesar knew what was right and wrong, So does my neighbour, and so did Jesus, and Mohamet, and Attila the Hun, None of us agree on all points,

Expressing Myself

Charles Stross

Last month I wrote a story. Shock horror! Not exactly a unique event -- how many amateurs write stories every month or so, even manage to sell them? (I'm hoping...). But the odd thing was --

It's strange. The only SF story I've ever read that read LIKE it was "Poor Little Warrior" by Brian Aldiss. Reason? I wrote it in the second person singular.

This set me thinking about one of the oddities of expressing one's pet craziness on paper for the edification (or frequent vituperation) of other enthusiasts. Surely one of the main tasks of any writer of SF is to ensure that readers relate to the situation in which the protagonist -- or central character, whatever -- finds him/herself in? I imagine so. Which explains the frequency ofstories written in the first person singular ('I shot the BEM with my blaster') -- a kind of shotgun marriage of the reader's self-perception to the main character. Crude and unsubtle; it reeks of authoritarianism, becoming a straitjacket for the imagination of the reader by imposing an external perceptual mold on their awareness of the ramifications of the work. It as good as tells the reader, "You will relate to the narrator or else", with the implication that to view the action in any manner other than first-person awareness is to miss all the characterisation.

What alternative is there? Well, you have staid old third-person narrative; X did this, then he did that. Hmm. It requires more skill to give the characters in such a narrative any idea of independance, to put across some sense of individuality behind the voice-with-the-odd-name. It can be done -- a lot of authors do so. But the third option, using second-person narrative; well you know what it's like to read it. Don't you? You've picked up this copy of FOCUS and settled back in your chair/on your bed/wherever to have a good read. What you find yourself getting out of it is a lecture on the way in which we've disgracefully limited the scope of our experimental writing to certainliterary formulae, which not only impose a spurious artificial constraint on the degree of character-orientated reader involvement, but limit the subjects suitable for treatment in this -- or any other -- literary genre.

What I mean (pause while reading to envisage shaggy-haired wild-eyed amateur writer-thing gesticulating wildly from an electric typewriter keyboard/pulpit), is that quite simply any attempt to write a story -- transfer a message, deep inner meaning or whatever -- is limited by the means of transmission. Obvious? But there's so little experimental writing about that reads well and expresses itself more efficiently than conventional modes without compromising that readability! Try writing your next screed in the second person. At least it's trying to break new ground insofar as it means you have to find a new way of putting your point over without belabouring the reader (try saying "DO THAT" without automatically putting the reader's back up); but isn't the aim of any communication to make the receiving person grasp the conclusion you're trying to transfer? If you can imply a certain degree of reader-involvement in the action of

your fiction that goes beyond the usual "I zapped the BEM" -- something which warrants exploration -- you may have a stylistic hook that will enable your fixed, dead-letter-on-paper plot to compete with interactive computer games and suchlike brain candy.

Which gets me on to another of the far-ranging hobby-horses that have recently spent a lot of time rambling round the dismal corners of my brain. Some of you writers or readers may have heard of a weird, exotic being called Rudy Rucker, known to teach Maths in the heart of deepest USA. He has other pastimes in the somnolent evenings that intrude between classes. SUCH other pastimes... for on nights when the moon is full, Rucker (probably) grows long green fangs and hair in the palms of his hands, and writes some of the freakiest SF since Dick. (I am a Rucker fan. You have been warned!)

Anyway, there's this magazine, called the BULLETIN OF THE SFWA (Science Fiction Writers of America). Thanks to Ian Watson I came across it at the Cassandra weekend workshop in Northampton, and in one issue (Vol. 17, No. 4; Whole Number 82) was an article by Rucker: "A Transrealist Manifesto". Rucker is known to be a bit of a joker, but I'm inclined to take the "Manifesto" seriously. Where, you may well ask, do I get the crazy idea that it was halfway serious? Well...

Briefly, Transrealism is the next BIG THING in SF after the New Wave ran up against THE LAST DANGEROUS VISIONS and STAR WARS. It's all about how to make "the only really valid approach to literature at this point in history. THE TRANSREALIST WRITES ABOUT IMMEDIATE PERCEPTIONS IN A FANTASTIC WAY." Not the immediate perceptions of some artificial plot dreamed up over a beer or two, which requires the remoulding of the participant characters into unnatural (not to say unhuman) behavioural patterns to fulfill the requirements of the precis; more the perceptions of how a set of predetermined characters (human or otherwise, they must be firmly based on reality) react to a trans-real stimulus.

This is true character-orientated fiction, and can only be written spontaneously in that YOU the author have to put yourself in the character's shoes for each and every step of the plot. Weird? Well, I write that way. (Maybe that's why I'm still trying to sell something). Anyway, the point is this. The attraction of role-playing games (Dungeons and Dragons has a whole world of meaning to players and ex-players alike) on paper or computer is that they invite total reader committment, total involvement -- something that 99% of all SF novels fail to offer. How many novels do you read in which your involvement with the narrator/centre of action is total to the extent that you keep dreaming it over again years later, when it's a bare skeleton lying in the leaf-strewn wastes of your memory engrams? Maybe transrealism is a way out of this trap of computer-aided literary masturbation which contributes nothing to the mainstream of human knowledge. After all, once published a book is THERE, a shared and semi-identical experience for thousands of readers; but how many times will a certain combination of moves be repeated/experienced first time round in a game which is randomly determined -- and which will get vastly more variable as the software gets more complex? It's a

one-person experience, and this, to my mind, demonstrates the innate vitality of fixed, non-random literary modes of expression in the mainstream of human thought.

So what I'm saying is this: to keep readers from going overboard on interactive software (THE HOBBIT, for example, is ludicrously simple compared to the things I can imagine being produced within the next five to ten years --consider changes in hardware, the jump from the ZX80 to the Sinclair QL,as an analogy--), it is necessary to provide the kind of reader-targeted barbs of imagination and empathy which will pull them on into the plot. A novel which reads like a bland description of starships and space battles, with bionic heroes and telepathic heroines who bear no relation to anything remotely 'real' (in the tangible sense of here-and-now real), may, within a few years, be as attractive as a university textbook. No reader involvement... let's play with our computer instead! STAR WARS is doomed -- STAR WARS computer games based on today's A.I.-designed expert systems will put the passive entertainment mode to death. The only way to avoid this death is for fiction to evolve as a mode in which the reader is given certain coherent and reality-consistent behavioural patterns, a fistful of characters who can be understood (just as you understand your friends from memory, and can carry on an imaginary conversation confident that they'll converse with you as you expect), and a background for extrapolation. Leave the rest to the imagination, and what have you got? A game that runs in the reader's head; an unforgettable story, a... daydream.

Take the above invective. Heat to a slow boil, season with second-person writing, Transrealism, a word-processor to cut down re-drafting (if you go in for that nonsense of re-writing your original meaning and twisting it out of sense in the process to begin with, a bad habit for transrealists) and --

I TOLD you I haven't sold anything yet, this way! And I don't blame my manual typewriter for that, either.

But I'm trying...

Flightless Birds

Stuart Falconer

The whole world was green, From where he was standing his young, sharp eyes saw it all, every blade, spreading, spreading, He could even see trees, far away, out of reach, A breeze ruffled the grass, made the trees sway, each branch becoming an unsteady perch for innumerable birds,

He ran for pure joy, as the young ones will, feeling the hair of his mane as it waved and settled, his hooves hardly denting the turf, He ran to the grey, hard place and stopped at the edge, Like a thin line it went straight on forever, from side to side of the soft green world. This was where the strange birds lived,

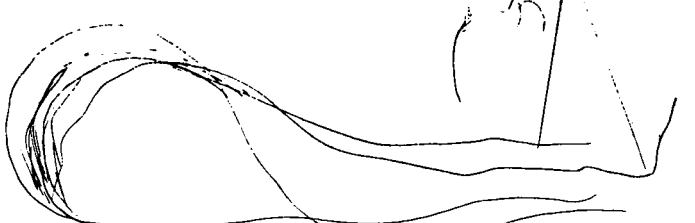
"They rule the whole world," said the old ones, "Both the grey and the green. We were with them once, though not any more,"

Strange, bright-eyed, with hard feathers, they flew on the ground, roaring and hissing. Sometimes he raised his head and called out in greeting, but the speed of their flight was great and they ignored him, At night he had heard them pass. Their eyes were like suns, and they cut the darkness before them,

As he stood at the edge of the grey he could see one, far away, at the rim of the world. Then there was another, coming the other way. They were beautiful and their flight was perfectly straight,

Everything came to a terrible halt as the two birds met, gave a ringing cry like thunder, and fell silent, They had bitten each other.

He waited to see what else would happen. Their tiny, useless wings hung, half spread on either side, One of them bled from its damaged mouth, He could see between their torn eyes. It was very odd, He saw something which took the magic away. For all their fine feathers, and their eyes like the sun, they were only people inside; only soft, broken people,



Mucking About In Bytes

Chris Priest

In what now feels like the good old days, the correspondence pages of writers' magazines used to be filled with horror stories about late royalties, remaindered books, crooked agents and terrible covers. These days, all such stuff is a bit infra dig. What authors write to magazines now is long letters about the word processors they have just bought.

One by one, the writers of the world are succumbing to the mystic lure of the dimly glowing monitor screen, the floppy disk, the letter-quality printer and the blinking cursor. With religious zeal these converts to the new technology feel obliged to pass on the gospel, exhorting others to follow. Miraculous cures and great happiness are promised: writing is more fun, writing is easier to do, time is saved, drudgery is reduced. Above all, text is easier to handle, and hours of time-consuming retyping are avoided.

The main serious argument is one which is at first sight fairly difficult to deny: the word processor is the next logical step from the typewriter, just as that was once an improvement on the pen, which in its turn has replaced the quill. One cannot and should not, say the word-processing apologists, stand in the way of progress. If modern technology can be applied to writing, then writers should apply it.

I still perfer to use a typewriter, and will go on using one as long as I can. My reservations about word processors have nothing to do with the technology itself, except indirectly and in minor ways. In fact, I rather like modern gadgets, and so long as I'm not expected to repair or understand them I enjoy fiddling around with photocopiers, electronic calculators, video-recorders, and so on. I daresay if I had a home computer or a word processor I should enjoy fiddling around with that too.

The only objection I have to a word processor, viewing it strictly as a gadget, is the expense. £1,500 seems to be about the present minimum for a system that can cope with a writer's professional requirements, and although such a sum would be from time to time attainable, in the up-and-down finances of a writer's life, that sort of money is still a major investment. The same sum would buy two good electronic typewriters, a second-hand car, a long holiday, or food for two people for a year.

Money is therefore a problem, or perhaps an excuse, but my real reservation is in what a word processor actually does and how it might affect the act of writing itself.

A processor displays words in the form of electronic images on a screen. From a writer's point of view, the words are therefore simultaneously fixed and fluid. They are fixed because they look permanent, like typewritten words on paper, set out in straight lines, reassuringly written in the sense that work has been achieved and it looks good; but at the same time they are fluid because the program allows letters, words, sentences, even whole paragraphs or chapters, to be deleted with the touch of a key, or replaced, or moved around, the machine obligingly shuffling the results into still more neat lines.

So, the defending argument goes, a word processor actually helps a writer in the act of composition because it enables the text to be reconsidered, rephrased, rewritten, without the chore of either hand corrections or endless retyping. All writers produce drafts that need extra work, and a word processor facilitates it.

My own belief, however, is that such a facility encourages a piecemeal approach to text. A sentence doesn't read smoothly? Then muck about with it until it does. It's in the wrong place, perhaps? Shift it around until you find somewhere better. Halfway through a novel, and the central character's name is wrong? Then touch the right keys and 'Sidney' will become 'Sebastian', and 'Sid' will become 'Seb'.

I think most writers would concede that picking and pecking at their work will not actually get to the heart of what might be wrong with it. A sentence will often be wrong not because the words are badly chosen, but because the thinking behind it is not clear enough, or the sentences leading up to it (which themselves might read well enough) set up the wrong dynamics. To approach an unsuccessful passage as a piece is to evade this possibility. But if the machine you are using encourages you to tinker around with what has been written, without taking the context into account, then it's inevitable you will leave alone the bits that look all right.

The names given to characters are another example of this. If I'm writing a story about someone called William, who therefore would think of himself by that name, then I'm going to make all sorts of unconscious assumptions about how he will behave and relate to other people, and these assumptions will be integral to the rest of the story. If I later decide that he thinks of himself as Bill, or Willie, then something will be subtly wrong if the word processor changes only the name.

When a writer completely redrafts a piece of work he is forced to go through the whole thing. The good bits and the bad bits all recieve equal attention, but are taken as parts of the whole. Non-fiction is therefore re-argued or re-stated in the writer's mind, and in the sequence in which it all appears; fiction is re-imagined, both as a whole and on a line-to-line basis.

A word processor, if used in the way it is designed to be used, can only re-arrange words, or accept superficial substitutions.

Of course, all this is personal, and every writer works differently. But when I have put these arguments to converts of the new technology, the invariable answer is that using a word processor does not force a writer to pick and peck. Old methods can be continued: you can print out a 'hard copy' of the first draft, correct it by hand, and if that's the way you prefer to work you can then slog your way all through another draft.

Yes, say I, but then why spend fifteen hundred quid on a gadget, when my elderly typewriter functions just as well?

All this said, however, there is a persuasive argument in favour of having a processor.

Some books are already being printed direct from authors' floppy disks, if the software from their machine is compatible with the typesetter's. This not only saves time, but obviously saves the publisher a great deal of money.

Looking at it realistically, it seems to me quite likely that within a measurable time -- maybe five years or less -- a sufficient number of authors and publishers will have used this system for the publishers to think of conventional manuscripts as an unwieldy and expensive alternative, and thus expect all authors to provide them with software for the printer.

What worries me about this is that there is a precedent. In the past, authors routinely submitted handwritten manuscripts to publishers. (The very word means 'hand-written'.) Once typewriters became widely used, publishers' expectations changed, and today there are few editors prepared to read handwritten MSS.

Many writers do still work with pen and paper, but they have to employ a typist to prepare their texts. I believe it is almost inevitable that writers like myself -- who have worked all their lives on typewriters, and do not wish to change -- will in the future either have to learn to use a word processor, or will be forced to pay a word-processong bureau to copy their MSS on to disks.

For the reasons I stated above, I suspect the spread of writer-operated processors will be to the general detriment of the quality of writing. The psychological adjustment from pen to typewriter has been hard enough for some writers, but it is as nothing compared with the change to a processor. A word processor is not a better or more efficient kind of typewriter; it is a profoundly different type of machine, and it will have a fundamental long-term effect on literature.

I believe that writers who are thinking of moving into the new technology should reflect on the fact that these machines have been designed by computer people, not by other writers. Everything about word processors bespeaks the computer 'mind', from the lay-out of the keyboards up to the misguided idea that words exist just to be mucked about with.

The Baines Fragments

Andy Sawyer

There have been those who have seen the scattered papers left by Philip Baines after his death as merely the abortive scribblings of a mediocre mind, although it is difficult to know how this opinion can be maintained now that the posthumous publication of his Collected Works has been the occasion of fulsome praise by many of our most eminent critics, and has established Baines as perhaps our foremost proponent of minimalist art.

Probably the first major writer to realise that literary merit could be inversely proportional to length, or even completion, Baines created his so-called 'unfinished' novels and stories as -- it is now generally accepted -- art of the first water. Possessing all the simplicity and lucidity, the depth and potential energy of Japanese haiku, these works enlist the traditions of popular art to the cause of saying as much as possible in the fewest possible words.

"Brevity is the soul of wit", as the old saying has it. "I maintain that the phrase 'a long poem' is simply a flat contradiction in terms." writes Edgar Allan Poe in "The Poetic Principle", an essay which must have greatly affected Baines. Baines, however, took this principle further in that act of staggering imaginative braveness which -- at first -- confused the more timid souls of Academia. In not completing anything he started, Philip Baines at once opened his work up to incorporate far more extensive 'readerly' choices than those pusillanimous 'modern' novelists, postmodernists and the like who merely offered ambiguous or alternative conclusions, and he liberated the writer himself from the demands of the text. In complete contrast to the so-called 'post-structuralist' approach of Derrida and his followers, who offered an architectural complex of linguistic arrangement, virtuoso deconstructions of the text, and mystical evocations of High Culture godfigures such as Nietzsche and Hegel (see, for example Derrida's Glas and Geoffry Hartman's essay on it, "How to reap a page" in Saving the Text), Baines presented a simple and superficially derivative literary fragment to the reader, and allowed the genre-expectations familiar to his audience to run free rein: but only in the reader's imagination.

The nexus between 'reader' and 'writer' which Baines explored in his fictions is a particularly complex one, and many critics have allowed themselves to become lost in a wasteland of competing narrative stances and ideologies, while writers themselves took sides in a critical dispute which tended to mar the creative impulse itself. Baines did not reject critical theory -- indeed his every word shows a perceptive mind at work charting the critical labyrinth -- but he used it to render fertile rather than barren the Muse which he served. His works are more than collaborations between reader and writer: this rather staid and certainly wooden praxis is completely subsumed by Baines' own stance, which suggests rather an act of lovemaking, a fruitful union in which the naked text is blessed by the procreative mind of the reader.

Take, for example, the novel Middle Sister; perhaps a 'transitional' work rather than one which shows Baines' technique in all its limpid brilliance, but for that very reason one which repays study through the very fact that it establishes the author's modus operandi in a fairly obvious form. This work of "crude genius" -- as it has been called elsewhere -- exists in 'temporal' form as approximately 3,000 words of what appears to be a science-fiction novel of the same title. Here, on an Earth-seeded world whose population seems to have adapted a 'heroic' culture, the un-named (in fact nameless: she is 'Middle Sister' of three) heroine escapes from the sacking of her 'clanhold' by members of a rival clan. She kills her assailants, dives into a lake, and swims to safety, not before witnessing the murder of her brother with some unknown weapon. Finding a safe hideaway in the mountains, she sleeps the sleep of exhaustion and grief and, viewing the natural ferocity of her 'clanbird' the raven killing its prey, vows not to give in to defeat but to seek revenge, to remain a nameless 'Middle Sister' until she has avenged her siblings and can honourably take a name.

Here, a lesser artist would bring his work to a close in nineteen more chapters. But no; Philip Baines appended an extra sheet entitled 'Chapter Two' in which a few simply constructed sentences give us one Duncan Street, apparently a member of an Earth-based Communications/Exploration unit called ComQuest. Street's mission is to stir up trouble between the clans in order for his own faction to step in as 'honest broker'. He is travelling in a rough carriage with two companions, feeling increasingly doubtful about the ethics of his task.

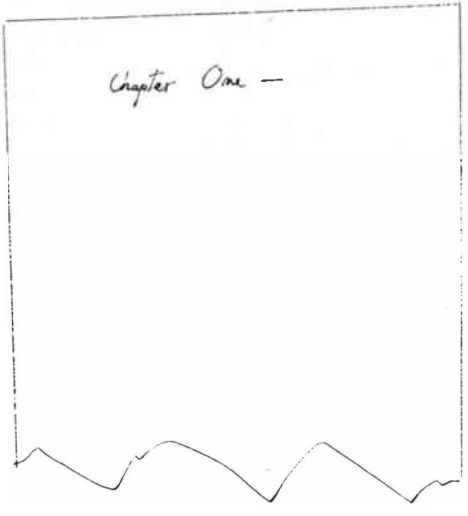
There, Baines does finally end his novel, in so far as it is written. The rest of Middle Sister exists entirely on the 'spiritual' level, in the link between writer and reader. Having brought the reader along thus far, Baines retires completely but -- given what has been learned and what the author no doubt assumes the reader to be aware of given the genre-conventions of the hundreds of similar novels within the SF field -- we know that one of the novel's major themes will be the clash of different cultures and the ethics of interference in cultural development and neo-colonial exploitation. We know that Middle Sister herself has considerable intelligence and battle skill and furthermore that she is 'sensitive' rather than 'barbaric'. We can assume, then, that she will end up victorious. As for the mysterious Duncan Street, he is youthful, somewhat callow -- there is a half-fearful remembrance of an enigmatic superior, Miss Bedi, who instructs him in his initial course of action -- and morally confused. The reader picks up these clues to deduce that he will meet Middle Sister, she will further his moral education; and as Chapter Two follows Chapter One and yet they are integrally linked as part of a larger more unified work, he will be first antagonist, then ally. (And as Two comes after One, as the memory of what we first read is more distinct than what comes later, we can deduce that Street will keep a subordinate role). As for the conclusion -- this is where Philip Baines is particularly subtle, for we are offered neither a choice nor a totally random 'open' ending, but one which is firmly based upon the rather limited options open to a genre writer. Thus 'probability' rules the reader's decisions. Most critics have assumed, probably rightly, that the shadowy ComQuest organisation will be defeated: those who assume, however, that Middle Sister will then take a socially and sexually subordinate position to Street have, I believe, overlooked the growing trend for more feminist-influenced conventions. I certainly maintain that Middle Sister will be seen to make her own choices in this matter and that sex or domesticity will remain unimportant.

This is despite critics who quote such passages as the following as evidence of a sexual-image tendency in Baines:

> Pulling herself ashore a little beyond where a stream bubbled into the lake, Middle Sister unwrapped her bundle and dressed herself in tunic, breeches and boots, after squeezing as much water as possible from the garments. They did not protect her in the slightest from the chill air -- in fact their clinging clamminess probably made things worse -- but they removed the psychological disadvantage of nakedness and offered some protection against rock and thorn.

The complexities of Baines' use of language may mislead us here. More 'overt' writers, anxious to impress, would have produced visual images of the girl's nakedness and of the surrounding terrain, using any amount of the considerable number of literary techniques available to the writer to create a vivid impression. Almost contemptuously, Baines eschews such an approach. Not only is there absolutely no reference to 'Aphrodite rising from the waves', I would like to point out that Baines is in fact reversing the image so frequently found in such books as he is 'writing' and giving us a flat, emotionless pencil-sketch of a nubile young woman assuming clothes. Nudity is here negated, and I would expect the image to be developed and remain a constant motif throughout the book.

If 'book' is the correct expression. Middle Sister is one of Baines' longer works, and his later progression towards terse, more enigmatic prose makes the terms 'book', 'novel' -- even 'short story' -- seriously misleading. Take the untitled fragment usually dubbed The Galactic Rebellion. This is merely a few hundred words apparently setting the scene for a novel of epic sweep probably -- if we can judge from precedent -- of three or more volumes. "For millenia," it begins, "The Outworld League and the Confederation of Earth remained indeadlocked rivalry, with the Church of All the worlds in uneasy mediation between them." By the end of the fragment Baines has managed to evoke the cliches of all such 'cosmic epics' and fuse them into something magnificently greater. Would this book, if conventinally 'finished', have matched inscope or grandeur some of its predecessors, or would it merely have lain flat on the page like others, a heavy-handed, derivative failure? It is not the task of the critic to judge. Rather, each word of the text propels the reader from one judgement to another, a perpetual motion of appreciation. "This work contains all epics!" enthusiastically wrote one critic, and one can see her point. It is more fully underlined, perhaps, by those numinous words "Chapter One" written at the top of an otherwise blank sheet of paper. (Here reproduced in facimile).



How can I explain the full implications of this marvellous text in the space I have left? Here are the ghosts of all stories: romance, quest-epic, thriller, detective: all genres and the 'literary' novel in all its guises are suggested by those magic words which tantalise the reader with mystery.

Little has been written of Baines' ability to adapt his minimalist approach to satire. This is a curious omission. On one sheet of paper appears the line

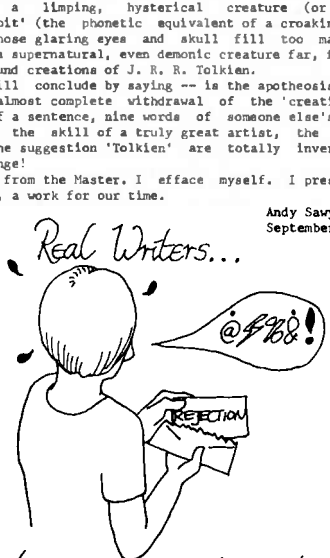
In a hole in the ground there lived a hibbit.

No more, no less. Yet this surely exemplifies Baines' ability to recreate textual allusions covering whole oevres while, in a stunning linguistic coup d'etat, slyly overturning them. Here we have Baines evoking the whole of Professor Tolkien's work -- from The Hobbit to the Lost Tales; but more, we are reminded of the entire 'Tolkien Industry' from the ubiquitous calendars to the endless conveyor-belt of scholarly commentary. But look closer at the line. Does not Tolkien's word 'hobbit' present the image of something like his characters -- the mixture of 'hob' and 'rabbit', biengs furry, rural and stolid; unimaginative and a bit slow, but dependable? Baines' change of the sonorous 'o' to the frivolous 'i' creates a more flippant image; a limping, hysterical creature (or critter.) 'Hibbit'... 'ribbit' (the phonetic equivalent of a croaking frog)... even 'Tebbit' (whose glaring eyes and skull fill too many of our nightmares)... a supernatural, even demonic creature far, far removed from the earthbound creations of J. R. R. Tolkien.

Here -- I will conclude by saying -- is the apotheosis of Philip Baines' art, an almost complete withdrawal of the 'creative writer' for nine words of a sentence, nine words of someone else's prose and then, with all the skill of a truly great artist, the resonances established by the suggestion 'Tolkien' are totally inverted by the subtle vowel-change!

I take my cue from the Master. I efface myself. I present -- The Baines Fragments, a work for our time.

Andy Sawyer
September 1984



Market Space

Dorothy Davies

Send any market information you may come across to Dorothy Davies, 3 Cadels Row, Faringdon, Oxon.

Pocket Books (Baen Enterprises, 8 W. 36th street, New York City 10018) are distributing a new line of SF, fantasy and computer science books. They are particularly interested in technically orientated SF and high-tech fantasy. Send a query, with appropriate IRC's to James Baen at the above address. They hope to print about 60 titles a year. Room for you, perhaps?

Another American title, The Paris Review. Edited by George Plimpton from 45-39 171st Place, Flushing, New York 11358. Paris Review has the widest circulation of all small presses, so they say, and are devoted to helping talented original writers find larger audiences. Electricity intensity and the unmistakable roundness of a fully realised work of art are being sought. They receive several hundred MSS a month, and buy only 2?3, so send your best. Buys 1st North American rights, pays on publication, between $75 and $300.

Mockersatz, PO Box 437, RR 2 Front Royal, VA 22630, USA. Ken Sutherland is looking for short stories, artists, poets, anything that will interest the editor. No information on money, therefore assume none!

Small Press nearer home. Onoma, Rue de l'arbre Saint-Roch 92, Dupeys, B 4480, Belgium. Jef Bryant wants articles, short stories, etc. Send 30p in stamps.

Quartz from Geoff Kemp, 23 Raygill, Wilnecote, Tamworth, Staffs. Gaming by post. Anything from Scrabble to Judge Dredd. Contact Geoff for details.

Colin Greenland kindly informed me about Tears in the Fence, a new independent literary arts magazine. Poetry, fiction, graphics, reviews and articles. One section will be devoted to ecology, conservation and related issues. No payment, except copies. Literary editor, Dave Caddy, 12 Hod View, Nr. Blandford Forum, Dorset DT11 8TN. General Editor, Harry Seccombe, 26 Jardine Road, Witton, Birmingham B6 6JH.

3 Competitions

The Writers of the Future contest. This is a quarterly competition for new and amateur writers. SF and fantasy under 10 000 words, or novelette length, under 17 000. This is sponsored by L. Ron Hubbard. Prizes are $1000, $750 and $500. Entries have to be postmarked no later than midnight for the quarterly contest deadlines. Sept. 30, Dec. 31, March 31 and June 30. Contest rules can be obtained from Writers Award Contest, 343, '2210 Wilshire Boulevard, Santa Monica, California 90403, USA.

Drue Heinz Literature Prize. The Howard Heinz Endowment and the University of Pittsburgh Press, 127 North Bellefield Avenue, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15260, USA. Annual award "to support the writer of short fiction at a time when the economics of commercial publishing make it more and more difficult for the serious literary artists working in the short story and novella field to find publication." They are looking for unpublished MSS, in book form. Open to writers who have published a book length collection of fiction or a minimum of three short stories or novellas in commercial publications or literary journals of national distribution. The award amounts to $5000. Request complete rules of the competition before submitting, please. Entry deadline, August 31st. Submissions should be sent during July and August. There is no entry fee.

Jonathan Cape and the Times have a new competition for young writers (under 30) (leaves me out, sob sob). Prize of £5000 for an exciting and original work of fiction or non-fiction. Closing date April 1st 1985. The Times will print an extract in June, and Cape will publish the entire book in Spring 1986. Details of the prize and conditions of entry from Cape, 30 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3EL.

"Your comment about 'professional insights' delighted me. Something has always nagged at the back of my mind when it has come to zines like FOCUS which set out to assist the beginning SF writer. It has always inhibited me from becoming involved in them in any manner other than as an avid purchaser of multiple copies to cut up and stick on sheets under subject headings and such like for future reference, and I have stopped even that now, the whole zine is a much neater instrument.

As to what this nag is it can be summed up by this following little what if...?

What if you got two postcards in the mail that read as follows:

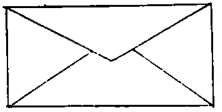
Dear FOCUS
The secret of successful authorship is to use plain white A4 paper, keep your typewriter keys clean and unclogged, your text double-spaced and your left-hand margin at least 1.5 inches wide.
Yours sincerely
Isaac Asimov

Dear FOCUS
The secret of successful authorship is to use plain white A4 paper, keep your typewriter keys clean and unclogged, your text double-spaced and your left-hand margin at least 1.5 inches wide.
Yours sincerely
I. Unpublished

which one of these postcards would you include in your letter column and plash the name of the author of it on your cover to excite your readership?

I think you get my drift."

R.I.B.



Letters for publication in the June issue should be sent to:- Sue Thomason, 1 Meyrick Square, Dolgellau, Gwynedd LL40 1LT.

There was a good response to the last issue, and I hope a more frequent FOCUS will make the letters page[s] more of a genuine forum for debate... Editorial comments are in double brackets like this [[hi Mum]].

JOHN BRUNNER

I'm glad to see FOCUS back in business after all - there was a while when I was afraid it might die the death. Hastily, so as not to lose it among the piles of overdue correspondence among which I struggle to work ("Real writers don't have time to answer letters" strikes me as a possible cartoon caption)...

In re word-processors:

Publishers do indeed dislike dot-matrix copy, but I've seen a few dot-type printers which have descenders on letters like "g" and "y", the lack of which used to be a severe drawback unless you were C. J. Cherryh, and which can be set to overprint each character three times, thereby eliminating the dot effect. Unless you specifically need symbols not amenable to this procedure, machines of this type should be quite acceptable.

It is unbelievably easier to edit text on screen than on paper, and the only drawback I have so far found is that it has actually reduced my per-day wordage by allowing me to be far more of a perfectionist than I was before. I don't mind, though. The other day I happened to look back at the last novel script I submitted before acquiring my Nexos 2200, and I was appalled to see how much Liquid Paper, how many "A" pages, how much inking-out marred the finished product. It sold anyway, but it was a hell of a long way from Clean Copy!

Can you keep a giant epic on computer? Yes, provided you are meticulous about backing-up your text [I do this twice a day when I'm writing for publication] and keep careful track of what passages are on which disc. If you're afraid you may decide to discard a later version in favour of an earlier one, make a separate back-up of the latter before erasing it; or simply copy the original to the same disc, keeping track of its new reference, and then compare the two. If you're really worried about this, print hard copy of both and compare them at leisure.

Power-cuts? Well, I suppose it depends what machine you opt for. In my own case, the most I seem to lose (yes, it has happened to me!) is one screenful - 20 lines - and that's no particular hardship. With the text that fresh in my mind, I can type or write a note to myself from memory. Much worse would be if your working disc proved to be faulty - but so far, after two years, that has only afflicted me twice, and in neither case was I actually writing a story.

My system is an expensive one, a so-called "dedicated stand-alone", which I chose because of its Ricoh printer; it has 124 characters on the daisy-wheel, and I can access all of them including the ones which don't appear on the keyboard. [[He gives examples, which I can't reproduce...]] There is a generous choice of typefaces, too, if you fancy them.

The program which drives the whole affair comes from Logica and is

called Wordskill; on the basis of my limited experience, I suspect it to be more convenient for authors - especially anyone who has to include foreign-language text using diacritics - than many of the more widely touted ones, but I honestly don't know what other systems it can be used for, if any.

MARY GENTLE

I have to admit that 'Vulcan's Spanner' is my favourite piece [(in FOCUS 9)], and not just because I identify with it - I think most people who write are going to identify with that realisation that they're stuck with yet another obsession. If it weren't for the obsession, no-one would carry a novel-length fiction to completion. But 'Vulcan's Spanner' is also a very well written article, very balanced and well thought-out. Similarly, Margaret Hall's article is very revealing.

The fiction I didn't like, and I'll tell you why (for some reason it's a common failing with 'fan' fiction - by which, I suppose, I mean fiction published in fanzines, not specifically written for them), and that is that, although something highly emotional is obviously going on at the end of this story, I'm damned if I know what it is. This is frustrating. It is also a lack of communication between writer and reader.

Haven't looked at W & A for some time, but I don't doubt Langford's correct in what he says; 'Ximoc' - I don't take to people, in comics or otherwise, who ban 'sexist stories, party politics, and...four letter words'. You won't stop people writing sexist stories by damming the outlets (how you do do it is another argument); I love political cartoons, and what about Fluck and Law? And as for four-letter words... ah, sh_t.

Nick Lowe's 'exercises' impress me no end (having a snail-speed brain myself, I can but admire); extremely funny. 'Guiding the Dream'... well, I've only seen one issue of Cassandra, so I'm not qualified to judge. When people start to talk about 'constructive' criticism, though, I do cringe a bit. If you're in an editor's position you're going to make judgements (on the basic level: accept or reject), if you analyse you're going to do it from your own standards, whatever they may be; and you should, I think, let the author being analysed know from what position you do it. When Bernard Smith says "we are writing on behalf of a wider reading public", I wonder who they are, and how he knows what they [each] want. It's just a thought.

Yes. I liked FOCUS... I hope you get some feedback on the word processor problem; myself, I think the way I write, in fiction, wouldn't be helped by one (the old 5th-version-in-the-wpb problem). But that doesn't mean I won't experiment, if I ever get the chance!

DAVID LANGFORD

In [(todays)] post came the naff little magazine they send Giro account holders, and I was delighted to find a small ad for THE WRITING SCHOOL. "Make money writing & earn while you learn... founded in 1949... Top professional writers give you individual tuition... personal advice on selling your articles and stories to publishers... If you have not recovered the cost of your tuition by the time you have completed your course, your fees will be refunded.

Point one: why doesn't Focus make ironclad offers like this? Your

BSFA membership back if Alan Dorey does not enthusiastically accept your work for his beloved fiction magazine, etc. {{How about it, Alan?}} Point two: there must be a Focus article in this. {{I'm working on it. Anyone out there have any more experience with this or similar organisations that they're willing to divulge?}}

{{From a later letter}} I must admit, I spent the first ever decent book advance I received (the bit on signature of contract, anyway) on a nice typewriter - fairly nice - an ex-demonstration Sperry-Remington SR101 marked down from some ghastly price to £450. It's an IBM Selectric lookalike, hence all the typefaces in Ansible when Ansible actually happens to appear. The beastie is now a veteran of the fair copies of six fat books, hordes of stories and articles, 38 Ansibles, etc etc... but it has broken down several times. And it has cost money each time to repair. And as you say, one has to keep feeding it ribbons; not to mention the infinitesimal chance of a golfball breaking on the machine, which happens "practically never" (say the makers) or "about every other year" say I. Meanwhile I covet something which would interface with the computer and let me produce nice computer-mag articles with BASIC programs incorporated into the text rather than, as at present, provided on seperate bits of hideous matrix print.

NIGEL RICHARDSON

Focus seemed to be aimed towards the resolutely "amateur" writer rather than the would-be "professional". As you say in the editorial this is deliberate, but I don't think that it is all that healthy in bulk. We may all be amateur writers, but some of us are looking at the stars! No-one should be content to remain an amateur writer. If you can write something that pleases a non-paying editor then the next logical step is to go for the paying editor... At least try...

I'm not against amateur fiction, but I despise Bernard Smith's attitude that seems to say that amateur writing is better than professional writing because it is written for love rather than money. What he says in Matrix is laughable self-deluding nonsense, trying to make a virtue out of a failing. Some professional writing is bad therefore all amateur writing is good, is what he says. As long as this attitude persists people like me will continue to be a bit wary of "fan-fiction"...

But what the heck - some people like fan fiction, some hate it, but no-one seems to have any idea what the silent majority of BSFA members think about it. I think that if Cassandra is doing so well as it is then it would be foolish to add it to the BSFA.

Focus 9 was interesting, but I don't think I can take another why/how I write from an unpublished writer...

TERRY BROOME

In reply to William Baines' letter (Focus 8), in which he concludes that writing for small presses, rather than 'financially successful publications', is better, because you (a) don't get a rejection slip, and (b) get constructive criticism, I'd suggest that there is no harm in trying the top first and working down. You might get rejection slips, but this does give you some help. It informs you that you need to improve your work and it hardens you to your failures. Financially successful publications may give you constructive criticism if your work is good enough, to accompany that rejection slip, and there is always the chance of publication in a magazine that

will provide more rewards than small presses. By starting at the top and working your way down, you stand a better chance of getting published, by a better publisher.

It is also the case that small presses are not obliged to give you constructive criticism. I suppose that by 'genuine' criticism, constructive criticism is meant - 'genuine' meaning authentic, sincere. I doubt that any publisher would bother to criticise the wotk of an author that they didn't feel had talent; and that is a sincere gesture of help to any new author, who should have enough brains to see it for what it is.

PAUL A. D. WARD

Yesterday I received the latest BSFA mailing, containing FOCUS 9. Since this is the rarest BSFA publication I turned to it first and had a quick flick through prior to reading. I found the general layout and presentation of Focus to be of a very low standard, which I feel detracts the reader's attention from the generally high quality of the magazine's content.

The first thing I noticed was that the logo on page one is not square to the rest of the page. This prompted me to look closer at the rest of the magazine where I found several other faults. Most notably, every one of the letrasetted headings was crooked and badly executed with a poor choice of mixed typefaces. The actual page numbers were on different levels and of different sizes and the page content was reduced by different amounts.

{{Paul went on to offer advice and help, which I gladly took up. Barring the three different typefaces for text in this issue, have I done any better this time round?}}

STEVE LOCKLEY

I wondered if you could let me know if it is possible to obtain copies of the manuscript guidelines that the various American magazines produce, via the BSFA? Bulk buying by the BSFA would enable far more writers in this country to get hold of copies, and hopefully provide a useful insight into what the magazines require.
{{I'll look into it. But as far as I know, guidelines sheets come free [i.e. send two International Reply Coupons with your request] from the major American magazines. And I'm not sure how they'd feel about supplying copies in bulk to be distributed by someone else. But I'll ask...}}

ANDY SAWYER

I enjoyed Focus 9, especially Nick Lowe's piece - I kept wanting to work out some of the cliffhangers. I wonder if Focus might not benefit by using some of those ideas - encouraging people to write solving those problems, rather than just asking for fiction. On the other hand it might fall into a horrible morass somewhere between one of Dave Langford's whackier competitions and a 'workshop' approach.

{{Send in the stories! Come on, then, let's see how you'd get your disembodied brain out of a tank of pirhanas...}}

As for other things I'd like to see; well, the obvious mix of things by/about established writers, and exposure for newer ones. Dig out someone who's just made a very minor step into prodom (like selling their first story) and get their reaction. Perhaps pieces on

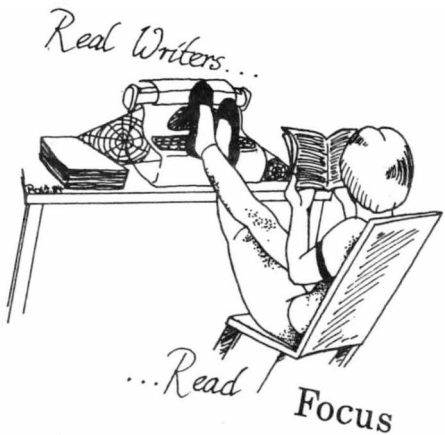
the wider aspects of the booktrade - publishing, bookshops, even libraries. A useful issue though, especially Dave Langford's piece on the inadequacies of the W & A Yearbook. As an addendum to that, I'd like to stress the obvious value of using a current edition. It sounds a bit of useless advice, but I was phoned the other day by someone wanting to check publishers entries for the latest edition -- it turned out she was using a 1978 edition and sending stuff off to magazines which had long since folded...

[(Well, er, actually I've just sold my first story to The Womens Press for their anthology Sisters of the Galaxy (plug). How do I feel? Delighted that I've done it, and terrified that I may never be able to do it again, because I can't for the life of me work out what I did, or what was so special about that story...]]

KEN COCKS

For me Focus is by far the best of the BSFA publications - any chance of three issues a year? [[Yes.]] I don't want to see more fiction in it: one or two pieces in each issue is enough. I find most of the articles interesting, even if they do not at present seem to apply directly to me. Items on research, reference books and markets are always helpful. I am also very much looking forward to the feature on typewriters and word processors. Oh, and congratulations to Dave Langford on upstaging Market Space with so many suggestions!

WAHF: Terry Broome (again), Bernard Smith, Chris Evans, Alan Dorey.


Real Writers...
...Read
Focus