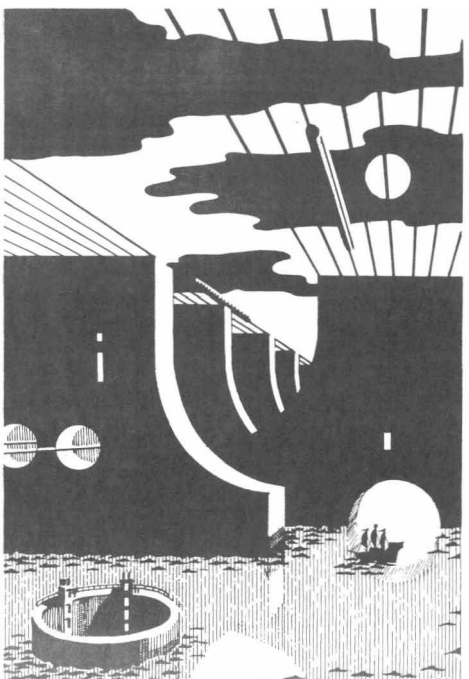
FOCUS

The Writer's Magazine Of The British Science Fiction Association



IAN WATSON
CHRIS PRIEST
DAVE LANGFORD AND OTHERS

75p
ISSUE 15

Editorial

I had expected to be ignored. I had expected that a lot of people might get upset at my "hardline" attitude to submissions. I even expected that a few people might think I was a bit above myself, for taking that attitude and then publishing a truly awful story like *Coat of Living*.

In the event, I was...well, pleasantly surprised would do, if I was into massive understatement. Swamped might be a better way of putting it. I stopped counting letters when I got to 45. I am truly sorry if you have been waiting for a reply, especially if you sent in an article or a story. I have taken the liberty of using some of the writers' block pieces people sent in without getting in touch with their authors first. I hope this won't turn into Focus policy, but I have had to contend with all sorts of problems (burst water pipes and new computer systems among them), and these have slowed things down a bit. However, the summer holidays are almost here, and I hope to catch up with you all then.

A few people did think I was coming on a bit strong (especially given the number of glitches in the last issue. See Chris Priest's article for the ritual grovel!!). A number of people made specific requests for particular articles. I'll do my best to find suitable people to write these: in the meanwhile, please don't stop sending stuff in — I'll try to get a move on with the replies, honest!

Other people asked where I saw Focus going in the future. Well, my position regarding fiction you already know: I want to keep it firmly in the *Workshop*. For the rest, I want to publish a balanced mixture of articles on the art, craft, and business of writing SF in all its forms, which may include comics, films, TV, radio and other media as well as "stories". However, I don't think Focus is the place for literary criticism; if you have anything like that, send it to Vector, not to me.

Finally, for all those kind souls who mentioned it: yes, I'd like Focus to have more pages, too. Unfortunately, the finances of the BSFA make this impossible at the moment: the increase would have to come from one of the other magazines. Ditto having 6 issues of Focus a year (besides, I think I'd go quite mad, doing that *and* teaching!). So if you want a fatter Focus, you'll just have to go and drag a friend into the BSFA -- or give out membership for birthday and Christmas presents. Go on, I dare you.

Until next time,

Liz

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Next Deadline:
November 1st, 1988

Unsolicited articles and stories (for the Workshop only) are welcome, and should be sent to the editorial address above. They should be typed, double spaced on one side of the paper, and must be accompanied by an SAE. For all those who asked — yes, I will read handwritten letters! Just keep 'em coming, that's all!

Focus is a non-profit making magazine, and as such does not pay for material. Material may also be submitted on 3.5 inch disc for the Atari ST (1st Word+, Protext coming soon if finances permit), and on 3 inch disc for the Amstrad PCW (Locoscript 1 or 2, or Protext).

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Word-processors: yes, no, or maybe? If you are using one at the moment, I'd appreciate your comments, particularly on your specific hardware and software. Under 250 words, if possible, please. Also next issue, (other things being equal) a report on this year's Clarion Workshop, an article on research for SF writers, and as much else as I can fit into 12 sides of A4.

DESPERATE PLEA: where have all the artists gone? Focus needs you now!!!

Short Story Contracts

by
IAN WATSON

Story contracts can range from something a few lines long to a couple of pages dense with print. For example, the contract from *Amazing* for one of my short stories in 1982 simply read as follows:

"On the Dream Channel Panel"
6,660 words @ 6
$400 for first North American serial rights.
$135 for each non-exclusive re-use.

And that's it.

On the other hand, a few years ago Davis Publications (owners of *Asimov's*) introduced a "grab all" contract almost 1000 words long, acquiring all sorts of subsidiary rights and forbidding the author to attempt to exploit those rights personally even if Davis had no intention of using them. Thus if a film offer were made to an author for a story in *Asimov's*, the author would be obliged to remain totally silent and do nothing. Protests from Science Fiction Writers of America rapidly resulted in a revised contract, where the author had the option to sign part two of the contract or ignore it. Presumably most authors ignored page 2, since it has now been dropped entirely.

The basic ground rule about a story contract is that you must never sell "All rights". If so, after payment you the author no longer own the story. You do not have the right to include this story in a collection of you own stories without paying a fee to whoever bought all the rights. The story has become the buyer's property, not yours. Similarly, a "Work for Hire" contract means that a publication has employed you to write a piece for them in the role of paid employee; and you would no more own any subsequent rights to that piece than a coal miner owns the coal he has cut.

You must always sell specific rights to a story, usually described as "First North American (or British) serial rights". (A "serial" right is the right to publish in a periodical.) Additionally, most magazines want various other rights as well, such as the right to reprint the story (for an extra, smaller fee which will be spelled out) in an anthology of stories from the same magazine. Some magazines also want "first foreign serial rights" too — without any additional fee — because those magazines license foreign language editions, in France or Germany or wherever, and need the bit of additional income for their cash-flow. Thus *F&SF* acquires first foreign rights and may at any future date, in France say, supply your story to the magazine *Fiction*, which translates a lot of stories from *F&SF* as well as publishing a few original stories by French authors and printing French news and book reviews. This can be a bit of a nuisance, in the case of *F&SF*, as there's no time limit or obligation to use these first foreign serial rights, not will you the author necessarily know whether the first French rights have been used or not, as there's no obligation to tell you. *Asimov's*, by contrast, acquire foreign rights which become non-exclusive 6 months after your story is first printed in America. You can then sell the story to any foreign magazine or anthology without consultation (though with due acknowledgement to *Asimov's* as the original publisher). Suppose you include your *F&SF* story in a collection by yourself, and this sell in France? That's OK: we're talking about book rights now, not serial rights. Suppose a Yugoslavian or Polish magazine wants to print your *F&SF* story? In that case consult *F&SF*; editor most likely won't be interested in exploiting Serbo-Croatian or Polish rights and will just say "Go ahead". It would be better if a magazine specified a time period within which such rights existed; but this isn't always the case.

A story contract should ideally specify a time — such as 2 years after signature — within which the story will be used. If not used, the rights would revert to the author without prejudice to the fee paid. Otherwise, theoretically the story mightn't be printed for 5 years — or never. Meanwhile the author would have no right to publish it anywhere else, for example in a collection. Magazine contracts generally don't have a "promise to publish" clause, but in the real world the stories do get published — and payment will already have been made on signature, so what else is the magazine likely to do but publish relatively soon? Usually magazines publish a story within a year. Though not necessarily. Suppose you hope to include your story in a collection real soon, or it's part of a novel which you hope to sell real soon. consult the purchasing magazine, which will usually be quite amenable about scheduling your story sooner rather than later. But remember that magazines have already decided on their schedules for the next four or five issues at least; and don't bother editors with pipe-dream plans that are still foggy.

Anthology contracts usually specify a time within which the story must be published (and jolly well ought to). Here, the time between acceptance and publication *can* be two to three years. The author meanwhile promises not to allow the story to be used anywhere else until a certain period after first publication. In the case of a magazine, because of short shelf life, the delay may be 4 to 6 months. In the case of an anthology, the delay can be up to 2 years. An exception to this delay is invariably a reprint in a "Best SF" anthology, since this is a feather in the editor's cap. Often, too, there is a clause whereby the editor or publisher can relax this delay at the author's request. On the whole, editors are fair and reasonable, though they have rights too. Mike Bishop and I were none too happy as editors of *Changes* when the publishers held up publication, and a notable author let an original story — bought as such — appear elsewhere first, despite our priority and delay clauses. When the anthology did appear, its sales were undoubtedly damaged thereby. If you have suddenly sold 10 stories to a clutch of magazines and anthologies, you mustn't assume that you will necessarily be able to assemble and sell a hardback story collection composed of these to appear in the next year or so.

The fee for a story in an anthology should be an advance against a pro rata share of X% of future income from sales after the advance has been paid off — if indeed there is any future income; there might not be, depending on sales. If the editor has decoupled subsidiary rights

much as translation rights, from the original advance, then there can be further advances against pro rata shares. It is quite reasonable for the editor(s) to take 50% of the earnings from an anthology. At first you might think, "Hey, we the authors wrote the book; the editor only added an introduction a couple of pages long!" In fact there is often considerable labour and stress involved in setting up an anthology and piloting it through to actual publication. Unbelievable things can go wrong, *en route*. Editors earn their money.

Most story contracts these days contain nothing malign in them, and the case of leading magazines aren't intended as documents for negotiation (as book contracts may be documents for negotiation), nor do they need negotiation. But contracts from new or semi-pro magazines may need ammendment, despite one's first instinct to sign and collect a cheque. If "All Rights" are ever mentioned, simply cross this out, insert "First Whatever Serial Rights", sign it, and mail it back. If you spy "reprint rights" and the wording suggests that the editor is buying exclusive rights, change this to "Non-Exclusive Reprint Rights".

Let's glance at the *Interzone* contract, since many readers of this survey might first pitch a story at *Interzone* here in the UK.

You grant world English language rights, since *IZ* needs to sell wherever it possibly can by subscription. There's a 9-month delay clause, with generous exemptions. Payment is on publication, since *IZ* isn't backed by substantial capital, and doesn't sell tens of thousands of copies; but there's a promise to publish within 12 months unless prevented by circumstances beyond the publishers' control. Proofs of your story will be supplied on request if possible. It's a good idea to request proofs because the more eagle eyes that scan a proof, the better. Most magazines and many anthologies don't offer proofs. *Asimov's* not only automatically supply proofs but they return your copy-edited story afterwards. Most magazines and anthologies simply keep your manuscript, or trash it. Yet consider: what if your story wins a big award? Dealers are now advertising to acquire Nebula- or Hugo- winning manuscripts. Collectors are paying tidy sums for these. This aspect is only just beginning to dawn on the consciousness of authors, who remain the owners of the physical object, the typescript. Ideally, editors should return typescripts afterwards. Do they usually? No. Did I, as editor? No. It's a lot of fuss, nuisance and expense. Still, if present collecting trends continue, it would be nice to see a clause in future contracts promising return of the manuscript.

IZ has a broad spectrum indemnity clause. It's standard practice and perfectly reasonable to promise that your story is original, unpublished, and doesn't violate anyone else's copyright, but *IZ* goes further than *F&SF* or *Asimov's*, by including a promise of indemnity by the author in respect of any libel or defamation (resulting in legal damages). This is actually normal practice in book contracts, and thus in anthology contracts too. In practice it's no impediment to including real public personages in a story so long as the intent is not simply to libel or defame them, in such a way that legal action might result in an award of damages. (I speak not as a lawyer, however, but as a fantasist who immediately wonders: Is a story about Norman Tebbitt as one of the Undead (a) defamatory (b) fictitious?)

Finally, if *Interzone* fail to obey their own contract within one month of complaint by an author, all rights which have been acquired revert to the author.

All in all, it's a very author-friendly contract, and indeed the majority of short story contracts are author-friendly. But they still need to be read carefully, not simply signed in jubilation. If you don't understand a contract, or if something seems punitively greedy, try to ask a published author for a word of advice (though not by phoning while the author's eating dinner!)

FORUM: Writer's Block

*Letters marked * have been edited for length.*

There are almost as many ways to cure writer's block as there are definitions of cyberpunk. However, I believe this paralysis takes two basic forms: lack of motivation and lack of ideas. In the first case, you'd rather do your Spock impersonation on *Opportunity Knocks* than face the blinking cursor. In the second, you suspect your futuristic plot lines are already included in *The 100 Best Stories of the Ancient Greeks*. As long as you face up to these problems with courage and humour, there's no reason why you can't return to full productivity.

Lack of motivation simply means you don't want to write any more. I say relax, give yourself a break and examine the reasons you started writing. Fun? Fame? Fortune? Escape from personal problems? My original goal was to best over-achieving older brothers by writing as cleverly as Kurt Vonnegut. Fourteen years later, I find Vonnegut infantile and my brothers mellow. Priorities and perspectives *always* change with age — even if your conscious mind is the last to know. If you can't sort out your motivations by yourself (or with a friend), see a psychotherapist. They're cheap, non-judgmental and effective. You might even learn something.

Lack of ideas is usually a sign of burn-out. You swear if you read (or write) about one more band of humans suffering the slings and arrows of outrageous Thobian mutants, listen to one more conversation about Tolkeinian economics, watch one more video about the Starship Bloody Enterprise, you'll use your Amiga for a boat anchor. Stop. Involve yourself in something completely unrelated to science fiction. The best writers are interested in anything from the philosophical implications of quantum physics to the joys of polishing wing-tip shoes. Wide-ranging minds are less prone to paralysis and (at no extra cost) provide unusual creative connections.

Writer's block is your mind's way of telling you to stop acting like a robot. If you take a good hard look at yourself, you'll eventually discover both the reasons you write and the ideas which interest you. This new maturity makes you a better writer. The alternative is bleak: surrendering yourself to listless mediocrity. As any good editor will tell you, the unexamined life is not worth reading.

— Robert Farago

* ...As for block, I don't believe in it. It's one of those things you convince yourself you've got, like the diseases you read about in magazines in doctors' waiting rooms. There are days when I'm writing and others (most of them) when I'm not. Reasons for not writing are many, internal and external. To my mind, grouping a bunch of them together and calling it a syndrome is unecessary and dangerous. Believing in block renders you liable to it.

Is there editors' block? I hope not.

- Colin Greenland

* You began writing because you felt the need to express your ideas in the written word and you enjoyed doing it. But sometimes the words don't flow and your ideas simply aren't there any more. They call it writer's block, and it's bloody frustrating!

I've heard some writers my theonly to work is to set aside a time and sit down with a pen and paper and eventually you'll write something out of sheer self-preservation! Well, I've tried it: it doesn't work.

Take this weekend, for example. I was about to sit down and write, but the next bit I had to do was the bookshop scene — oh no, not the bookshop scene, I thought! I knew that if I sat there for two hours trying to force myself to write, what came out would be as boring to read as it was to write. So, instead I got out the sewing machine and made myself a dress. The next day I returned to my pen and paper, and wrote a reasonable first draft.

I can't just sit there feeling fed-up. It's not a thing that can be forced. How can creativity come from boredom? My advice is go and do something else to take your mind off it — go see a film, go bird-watching, do the washing up. If you are really interested in writing, this will give your mind a chance to wonder and the ideas and enthusiasm will return. Let's face it, you've got to do the washing-up anyway. Why waste the opportunity?

— Jane Killick

* ...I have lost my flow and the story has sort-of stopped — something it should never, ever do.

My cure?

I look back, and keep going back until I find the last place where I am satisfied with what I have written, however many pages that might be. Then I *throw away* everything after that; it is worthless (often a disjointed waffle); I find it leads to the same faults if I try to recopy even the tiniest amounts. When I have done this, I then slow my writing speed right down, concentrating on every single word and repeatedly rewriting each sentence until I'm entirely satisfied with it. After a few paragraphs painfully constructed like this, I usually find that my flow and speed return, my sentences are saying what I want them to say and soon comes the happy realisation that I have unconsciously passed the point where the "block" first appeared.

Lee Fox

*...occasionally I sit down to write and the words won't come. I have found that there are three main causes for this. 1) Anxiety about other things, which will scatter my thoughts or cast a a shadow on my ego. Sometimes this requires a resolution of the anxiety (which can mean making some serious decisions), sometimes I can put it out of my mind for the period that I am writing. 2) Something has gone wrong. Usually the point where it has gone wrong is some way back, which is why nothing works at the point I have reached. A careful re-read, along with the commitment to doing whatever it takes to put it right, including rewriting the last fifty pages, is the answer. Sometimes it may take a week to pin down, during which time I usually can't write anything. 3) I am being over-critical. This usually comes about because I've been thinking about what comes next or what has gone before, so that the image I have of what comes next is unachievable or else is so thoroughly sorted out that it's dull. The solution to this is to just start scribbling, putting all that thought out of mind and not caring how good it is. Often the result is inspiring.

Cecil Nurse

Layout: Chris Priest Corrects

This article is extracted from a letter Chris sent me on the subject of manuscript layout. I print it here, with his permission, as a corrective to certain cock-ups which crept into "...This is how to do it" last time.

I'd seen Dave Langford's form before, and it's well worth reading through. Funny and accurate all in one. How does he do it?

I think this subject of "how to lay out a manuscript" can be a bit of a red herring. I read manuscripts for a publisher for six years, and I can report as a matter of unvarnished fact that some of the most appalling manuscripts come from famous writers. (One novel in particular springs to mind: the manuscript of Algis Budrys *Michaelmas*, which was an object lesson in how *not* to submit a manuscript. A few years after I read it, I learnt *from* the American publisher of the same book that Budrys' manuscript had become something of a legend over there, too.) From this you can extract the reassuring news that if publishers really want to publish a book, they'll put up with more or less anything.

However, I don't recommend trying. The "rule" of manuscripts is in fact a loose one. A manuscript should be attractive to look at, easy to read, and should be laid out *consistently*. The same sort of headings for chapters all the way through, the same typewriter or print style throughout, the same spelling conventions, and so on. (It should also be *safe to handle!* Manuscripts get read in all sorts of strange places. One evening I was on the London Underground, reading the manuscript of John Sladek's *The Reproductive System*. Sladek had bound his manuscript in a terrifying spring clamp. I turned the page, the centre of gravity shifted, the spring clamp snapped shut like a mantrap, and 200-odd pages flew into the air. Because it was summer and all the train windows were open, most of the manuscript pages wafted down the carriage like confetti. Fortunately, I retrieved them all.) So, again, all the conventional wisdom about double-spacing and one-inch margins, etc. etc. is secondary to this main essential principle.

The best reason I know for taking care over a manuscript is that it helps deter interference. If and when you sell something, the manuscript is going to be copy-edited. This is routine. Copy-editing is hard work, and can be pretty tedious to do. If a copy-editor is presented with a badly prepared manuscript, he or she is faced with hour after our of close and demanding work. Copy-editors being mere mortals, once they get into the habit of changing *did'nt* into *didn't*, it isn't long before they start "improving" on the style, too. (This is something British writers commonly experience when their work is "translated" into American. The copy-editor starts by crossing out the "u" in *honour*, and ends up rewriting the book. I speak from experience. When my novel *Inverted World* was serialised in *Galaxy*, Parts 1 and 2 appeared more or less as I had written them, variations in spelling excepted. But by Part 3, boredom was setting in, and many passages, usually whole sentences and paragraphs, showed clear signs of "improvement". By Part 4, my anonymous copy-editor had become my uninvited collaborator . . . and the last 100 pages or so of the book were distinctly different from what I had written.)

But I think if you give detailed advice on manuscripts (as you do on page 4) you have to be a bit more careful. People follow things literally. I looked closely at the sample manuscript page, and saw many errors...Hate to say this! Much of it was misleading. Hate to say this too!

It's a mistake to use right-justified margins (as Dave Langford had said so clearly on the previous page). Most computer printers can't cope with this, and introduces extra spacing to make up the lines. Your copy-editor is going to have to go through and find all these extra spaces, and mark them. (Line two of the sample: 3 spaces lie between *things* and *are*.)

You say that double spacing should be used, yet your sample is in space-and-a-half throughout.

The first paragraph of a book, or of a section or chapter in a book, should not be indented.

The page number should appear at *top right*. Publishers lick their fingers, and slurp through the pages, looking at the numbers. If these are at top right, they can find their place easily.

You say (correctly) that two spaces should follow a full stop. Yet several times you leave only one. (E.g. lines 5 and 6 of the sample.)

There are three spaces after the end of the sentence that tells us to use *two spaces!*

MF (more follows) is not necessary. Put it there, and the copy-editor will have to go through and cross out every one.

I'm sure this was a slip, but the paper-clip should be in the top *left corner!*

One last tiny detail. An ellipsis, such as you use in your title, consists of three dots, not five. (Get a copy of *Hart's Rules for Compositors and Readers*, published by Oxford University Press; £6.50 and worth every penny.)

Well don't let my saying all this detract from the fact that most of what you said was very sound. I suppose my purpose in pointing out your lapses is to prove how careful a writer has to be. But I still hold to my origins) thought, that consistency and clarity are more important than strict adherence to a long list of typographical conventions. This is why publishers use copy-editors: because they realise that most writers don't know the conventions. How close you stick to them is really another way of saying whether or not you want a copy-editor you will likely never meet to have an interesting day at the expense of what you have written.

Oops! I could try to explain which errors were mine and which were James, and why, but I think it would seem mealy-mouthed. Let's just say that I can't tell right from left, while James finds ragged right margins aesthetically displeasing, and has a fixation with fitting everything I give him into the space available. But seriously, several other people made some of these points, or suggested that I was worrying more about layout than content. All I can say is that it's actually as easy to prepare a manuscript well as badly; that if I've spent weeks on a story, I don't want it thrown out as illegible or whatever; and that while editors who know you, either personally or by reputation, may be prepared to read work handwritten on toilet paper in green ink, my remarks were addressed to the likes of me -- to the unknowns -- out there, and not to those who already have one foot in the door and half a dozen books on the shelves. But I'm glad Chris wrote this. Pointing out my own mistakes would have been even more embarrassing. Besides, I didn't know there are only three dots in an ellipsis.

Book Review

WRITING SCIENCE FICTION
by Christopher Evans
(A&C Black, 1988; 97pp; £4.95)

This book can teach you a lot about writing science fiction, *if...* you already write, but you don't know SF; or if you are an SF buff, but you are just beginning to write. To an extent, it depends on which part of the book you look at.

The trouble is, the book is too short to sustain this kind of scatter-shot effect. The first part, which defines SF and does a fly-by of SF themes and sci-fi clichés, seems to be aimed at the writer who has just discovered the genre, and has the desire to exploit it, but not the requisite knowledge of the field. Next, there is some general *how to write* type information. For all the SF examples Evans uses, this could still have come from any general book on writing techniques. At a guess it's aimed at the beginner, one who knows SF but hasn't tried to write much of it. So there are the predictable sections on characterisation, dialogue, narrative drive and so forth that are the stock in trade of any book on writing. These are quite useful, if a little skimpy. But they are far from specific to SF.

In the third major section of the book, the first draft of a complete story, *A Work of Art*, is presented, its genesis explained, and then it is pulled apart both by the author and by members of a writers' group... just like the Focus workshop, in fact. Evans then explains how he reworked the story in the light of the criticisms. (And sold it to Interzone, retitled as *Artefacts*, thus proving that workshopping *can* help.) This is by far the best part of the book: I'd go so far as to say that if you have read any other books on writing at all, this section will outweigh all the rest of *Writing Science Fiction*, since it is the most original and the most pertinent to the genre. Unfortunately, as the author himself says:

Space doesn't permit a detailed analysis of how every line came into being, but we can look at some of the most important stages...

The analysis is over far too quickly and deals mostly with the broad brush strokes of the creation, not the fine detail. Evans is good at explaining why he made certain creative decisions, for instance in developing the background to the story, which makes it even more annoying that this section is not longer.

Having said that, I must admit that I have a sneaking suspicion that Evans is working to a format here, and that he was instructed to make his material fit a certain (too short!) length. No evidence for this at all, and if I'm wrong I apologise now, Chris. It's just a hunch. I have another one that says the publishers thought that they had better aim the book at a fairly general segment of the market, rather than at the fans. This would explain that over-long introductory section, and perhaps the lack of anything really meaty on (say) extrapolating scientific ideas, or developing consistent background material (which is given 15 *lines* in *Writing Science Fiction!*) I'm thinking here of the kind of thing Niven did when he worked out the logical consequences on society of different types of matter transporters, or of his piece *Man of Steel, Woman of Kleenex* which, for anyone who hasn't come across it, is a sort of natural history of Superman's sex life — or lack of it. I can't help feeling that this would have been of more help to thee and me than telling us one more time not to rewrite Genesis.

Reading this back, I realise that I have been perhaps a bit more negative than the book warrants. I have to say that I think it would have been a far better book if it were 50% longer, or if it had restricted itself to a smaller section of its potential audience. But bearing that in mind, if you haven't read much on the art (craft?) of writing, or much SF criticism (and I don't just mean PI!), then this book would make a good starting point. And the chapters *Anatomy of a Story* and *Rewriting* are well worth reading even if you have read everything else you can get your hands on.

— *Liz Holliday*

WORKSHOP

Carol Ann Green writes:

Once a week I go to a friend's house to spend an evening writing. "Voices" came about on one of those evenings, from an exercise we set ourselves. What if... you were suddenly endowed with a magic power, or found you could do something you had previously believed to be impossible. "Voices" is what I came up with.

VOICES

by

Carol Ann Green

Hearing things. I'm hearing things. At my age! I still couldn't believe what was happening. I had kept skirting round the word that had popped into my head shortly after I had started hearing things, but it was no good, it just wouldn't go away.

"Telepathy."

There I'd said the word out loud. Telepathy. I kept repeating it to myself for a few minutes to get the feel of the word. Yes. That must be what it was, or is that just my imagination, maybe I'm going mad. No, that can't be it. I must push that thought out of my head. Telepathy. That's what it is.

It began early this morning. I had got up at my usual time, had breakfast, read the newspaper and headed out for my usual early morning walk. That's when I thought I'd begun hearing things. There was I just walking down the street when all of a sudden:

"...mustn't forget to call in on Jim, on my way to the dentist, though I don't know why..."

I started, and looked around me but there was no-one there. I shrugged and continued on my way, maybe the wind had blown a few stray words in my direction. But then it started again:

"...god, there's that old bastard from No 76, I suppose I ought to..."

Now that one really got to me, for walking in my direction was Mrs Greenlady from No 30, she always had a good word for me, surely she couldn't be talking to me.

"Good morning." she smiled as she passed, then: "...silly old coot, really thinks he's it, just because..."

"I beg your pardon?" I turned to ask her.

"What?"

"I thought you said something."

"No." she replied, "Only good morning."

"Oh, sorry."

As she moved off I caught a few more words. That's when I began to think I was hearing things. It's amazing what I've learned today, all sorts of things, that people think but never say out loud. I've certainly revised my opinions about certain people today.

Telepathy. The more I learn about the word, and the concept, the more I realise just what one could do with something like this. Already I'd been able to get one up on Johnson, who had come to my office this morning with some information which he had hoped to shock me with. I'd picked the stuff right out of his mind and told him exactly what he was going to tell me. He'd gone white and stammered something about having an appointment somewhere else.

The possibilities seem endless. At the beginning I just seemed to be picking up on stray thoughts, things people seem to have on their minds. But maybe if I could learn to read behind those thoughts...get to the really juicy stuff? Maybe...I can start to plant thoughts in people's minds, start to control people. Appealing. I decided to head down to my local to try it out.

Entering the pub I was assailed by people's thoughts, stepping back in amazement frantically pushing barriers down, I managed to limit it to only one or two.

"...I wonder what old Mac'll give me for those two..."

"...missus is really getting on my nerves, wouldn't mind if..."

"Evening, Joe, pint of the usual, please."

And from Joe:

"Why does he have to come in here, with his toffee nosed ideas..."

That did it. Without thinking I reached out and planted the thought in Joe's mind to drop the pint. He did! He did! Crikey, what a look on his face.

"Uh...I'm sorry Al, don't know what happened there."

It worked! Elated, I moved over to sit down in my usual place. There was a teenage couple already sitting there, ones I'd had trouble with before. I decided to try out my powers on them. There! Without my having to say anything they got up and moved to another table. Amazing!

I tried a few more things, making people drop things, pick up other things, making them look like fools, but had to stop as they were beginning to give each other funny looks and I decided to give it a rest for a while. I was just sitting back enjoying my pint when I started to pick up a conversation. This was worrying. That someone else may be able to do the same things. Concentrating hard I managed to pick up:

"...have managed to track subject down to a pub called the "Rampant Horse". He's very clumsy and has been making a hell of a racket. Trying out his new powers, all the usual tricks." The voice sounded bored and disgusted.

"Okay, I understand. Any hope?"

"No. Don't think so. Doesn't seem to have grasped the idea properly subject is causing quite a wave in the area. I think it unlikely that he will progress beyond stage one."

"Understood. Terminate experiment."

I jumped. They were talking about me! Me! Who did they think they were? Calling me clumsy...noisy. I'd show hearing things, that's what it must have been, still, doesn't mean I'm going mad though? No. Definitely not. At least...

"Hey Joe. Give us another pint over here."

This story trots along nicely in a chatty, not-to-serious manner, promising a mystery and touches of humour, when it trips over the Mysterious Strangers Experimenting On Unaware Victim idea. The ending is unoriginal and unsurprising. This is particularly disappointing as there is much about the story which is good.

The style is neat and clean with good control over adjectives and adverbs. Sentence structure and rhythm are varied. And the mix of narrative, thought and dialogue works well and suits the story. Also the unsavoury character of the narrator is established well before megalomania moves in.

I feel, however, that the story betrays itself technically in several ways and I offer the following personal opinions which may be of help:

Firstly, cliches. When I read *Stepping back in amazement* my eyes stood out on stalks. Was this intended to conjure up an image of Eddie Large? If so, it was unwelcome. Also, less strikingly, *sitting back enjoying*. How often have you heard that? Avoid cliches like the plague (and even that joke's getting a bit clichéd). They disrupt the attention and destroy the illusion of reality.

Be specific, not general. The line beginning *I tried a few more things, making people drop things* ... is clumsy and uninteresting. What is a thing? Help the reader to experience events as real by providing accurate details and sense impressions. An ashtray clatters to the quarry tile floor, the old soldier's specs fall into his pint...

A couple of minor points are worth mentioning. Too many exclamation marks in the narrative are often taken by an editor as a sign of the amateur. Excepting their use in dialogue, they are better saved for the point of maximum impact -- if at all. In a similar way the single word sentences just didn't work for me. One or two are okay, where a particular effect is required, but too many means a rough read.

Finally, slow down. The story is told at a sprint. There's no time to develop character, tension or believability. Perhaps the scene with Johnson at the office could be dramatised. This would help turn the narrator into a real person.

The main problem for with this story is that it falls flat at the end. However, I believe thatthe merits mentioned earlier make it worthwhile to look again at the ending and hope to find something surprising or unusual or simply thoughtful to leave with the reader.

Colin P. Davies

1) Telepathy isn't new to readers of SF; SF being part of 1980's culture, it isn't new to most people; therefore any treatment of this theme has to have

a) a new idea about the use of telepathy, and/ or

b) a new concept of what telepathy might involve, or

c) standard telepathy used as a method of exposing the inanities of a human character(s) in a way that naturalistic fiction can't.

Voices doesn't have the first, may have the second but I'm not sure; and I think is aiming for (c) but doesn't really make it.

2) If this is standard SF telepathy, i.e. overhearing thoughts, then the additional powers of controlling people's actions need an explanation in the text.

Or, if this is a new kind of telepathy, the reader needs to know how and why it functions as it does.

3) This is not really a story, being more anecdotal in structure: a man is given para-normal powers by something or someone, experiments in a minor way, and has them removed. The story of this would involve why the powers were given and removed, and why the central character makes no real use of them.

4) The above are not necessarily faults if this is actually a story about a central character who signally fails to respond to transcendant powers in any transcendant way, and that is the point of the narrative.

If so, however, the reader needs to be taken back a step from this, and realise the character's failure, rather than being limited by his ignorance of what is happening and why. At the moment the reader experiences a boring, limited character in a boring, limited way, and may well transfer that response to the text itself.

Mary Gentle

I always feel there is something vaguely sadistic about any form of criticism, as it often seems to involve tearing to shreds something an author has laboured over for many hours, a selfish act indeed. The old adage "If you can't do it, teach it" might equally apply to critics whose own abilities are distinctly questionable. Focus is different. I know what it is like to have a treasured piece of fiction torn asunder, but it has made me a better writer, because my devotion to my creation had made me oblivious to the inherent errors and contradictions. If you are writing for a market then it is essential for you to know how it is likely to be received by a public largely indifferent to the work you have put into it.

This little discourse is included simply as a ruse to convince myself that what I am about to say is justified. Taking my poisoned quill in hand, I begin...

The problem with this story (to my mind)is that, in common with many other "telepathy stories", it is flawed. The story features an untrained "telepath", who would surely be unable to walk into a crowded pub without being totally overwhelmed by a cacophony of thoughts. The character also seems to be able to exercise a degree of control over his new found abilities that I find surprising. Only extensive training would enable him to pick out a single sentence from the background "noise" of the myriad flashes of thought that course through our brains every second. Without such training, I doubt an individual could even sleep at night without being disturbed by his neighbours dreams. Worse still, his thoughts would not be safe from other telepaths, a point the story makes very apparent towards the end where we are introduced to... well... who exactly? Russians? Aliens? I would suspect (though it is not specified) that the point of the "experiment" is to find people with a natural flair for handling "telepathy" (shades of *The Tomorrow People*,

(continued on p.11)

Wisdom Of The Ancients

by
DAVE LANGFORD

The works of Lewis Carroll are not the likeliest source of advice to aspiring writers (apart possibly from "Take care of the sense and the sounds will take care of themselves"). On holiday, though, I browsed through some of his less famous stuff and found a poem I hadn't read for years. Full of dubious advice, it takes a poke at contemporary "formula" poetry; it's called *Poeta Fit, Non Nascitur*, which I immediately translated as "Bloody hell, there's a Focus article in this!"

> *"Then if you'd be impressive,*
> *Remember what I say.*
> *That abstract qualities begin*
> *With capitals alway:*
> *The True, the Good, the Beautiful —*
> *Those are the things that pay!"*

Straight away you think of today's formula fantasy novel, in which the Fell Sword bearing the Great Rune of the White Gods is raised by the One King against the Dark Bane of the Chaos Lord in the Black Tower of Inner City, etc. Gosh, isn't it easy to make all your stage-props seem more important by allotting them capital letters?

Three problems follow. This is such an effortless, clichéd gimmick that assiduous use no longer achieves much beyond proclaiming you a lazy and formulaic writer. Enough repitition of such low-budget spotlighting may make the Fell Spell or, for that matter, the Black Hole seem progressively more trite and silly. And sooner or later, plot requirements will force several of the capitalized phrases to cohabit in the same paragraph: producing a clotted and reader-resistant mess like my sample above. Spurious capitals (to pinch Chris Priest's phrase) need to be used with enormous caution.

Carroll's tongue-in-cheek mentor would draw a second moral from that spoor fantasy sentence. He advises that

> *...there are epithets*
> *That suit with any word —*
> *As well as Harvey's Reading Sauce*
> *With fish, or flesh, or bird —*
> *Of these 'wild', 'lonely', 'weary', 'strange',*
> *Are much to be preferred."*

The budding writer is quick to seize on the possibilities:

> *"And will it do, O will it do,*
> *To take them in a lump —*
> *As 'the wild man went his weary way*
> *To a strange and lonely pump'?"*
> *"Nay, nay! You must not hastily*
> *To such conclusions jump."*

It's sadly true that — again in fantasy more than SF — the all-purpose epithets have become devalued. If you take a long view, the beginnings of the rot are visible in the poetry of Swinburne, alternately praised as "the supreme master in English of the bleak beauty of little words", and disparaged (by Angus Wilson, no less) for his "generalising vinegarless moneyliables". Tolkein was rather fond of such handy words as "dark" or "cold" or "grim", which to the uncritical eye produce a vaguely evocative effect irrespective of sense.

Over-use of the effect (besides making you look like another bloody Tolkein imitator) leads to poorly focussed writing. One has to supply one's own associations when no precise image emerges from the text. Lazy readers tend to find the result soothing, since there's no need to give the prose any particular attention when it merely pushes standard, familiar buttons. This characteristically woozy, monochrome fantasy style recalls E. Wilmon's nasty suggestion that Swinburne had invented a new genre — "alcoholic poetry". For example:

> *And the high gods took in hand*
> *Fire and the falling of tears,*
> *And a measure of sliding sand*
> *From under the feet of the years,*
> *And froth, and drift of the sea;*
> *And dust of the labouring earth;*
> *And bodies of things to be*
> *In the houses of death and of birth...*

The sounds are nice but the sense ("take care of the sense...") has got somewhat hazy and diffuse. The analogous bread of Tolkein imitation, all rolling empty cadences, slips down with far less effort or memorability than something ruggedly individual by (say) Mervyn Peake.

When writing a computer program to generate cod fantasy titles, I made up a shortlist of terse "epithets that suit any word". Here's an edited version: black, blind, bright, chaos (this seems to have become an adjective, don't ask me why), chill, cold, dark, dead, deep, dim, dire, doomed, dread, false, far, fell, fire, foul, great, grey, grim, high, iron, lone, long, lorn, lost, mad, old, one, pale, sea, stark, stern, strange, tall, true, vast, vile, white, wild. Yes, I know a couple are nouns, legitimised (like "chaos") by years of Fire Dragons and Sea Changes. You will doubtless be able to think of more, you clever person.

Obviously, many of these are going to turn up naturally from time to time. But if you find you're addicted to using them a great deal, especially in generalised or indiscriminate contexts ("dark" referring to baddies or foreboddings rather than illumination, "cold" to matters unconnected to the thermometer) or in capitals, you should perhaps be worried. Or you should perhaps be a best-selling sword and sorcery author. I forget which.

All writing is a tightrope-walk, and when trying to avoid the pitfall of easy generality, you can fall off on the other side...

> *"Next, when you are describing*
> *A shape, or sound, or tint,*
> *don't state the matter plainly.*
> *But put it in a hint;*
> *And learn to look at all things,*
> *With a sort of mental squint."*
> *"For instance, if I wished Sir,*
> *Of mutton-pies to tell,*
> *Should I say 'dreams of fleecy flocks*
> *Pent in a wheaten cell'?"*
> *"Why, yes," the old man said.*
> *"That phrase*
> *Would answer very well."*

You can't add much to an example like that. Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon poets went in a lot for "kennings", allusive phrases which didn't cause confusion because everyone understood the code; when the skald said "bone-house" people knew he meant the human body, and not the local crypt. The terror of being obvious leads to ad-hoc kennings, euphemisms and neologisms which all too often misfire. Tennyson gave us "ocean-spoil" because it seemed too down market to write "fish". Boxers used to "tap" each other's "claret", to save past centuries' sports-page readers from the ugly sight of printed blood. Stephen Donaldson's *Riddle-Master* books irritated me by talking, for some reason, about a riddle's "stricture" instead of "meaning" or "moral" (*"And the stirre of that is ..." said the duchess*). Stephen Donaldson... but enough. I could go on and on.

So you write *"It was getting dark and cold"* and feel dissatisfied with the phrase, possibly because the Dark Ruler with his Cold Spells has already been endemic in the narrative. You scratch your head and laboriously substitute: "An inspissated squid-ink photonlessness of Cimmerian intensity commenced to permeate the surroundings, whose calorific ambience now recalled the supernal frigidity of Cocytus itself." I am naming no names, but some writers think this sort of thing is posh. It must be what Quiller-Couch had in mind when he gave his basic rule of style:

Whenever you feel an impulse to perpetrate a piece of exceptionally fine writing, obey it — whole-heartedly — and delete it before sending your manuscript to press. Murder your darlings.

Throw away your Roget, and walk again! How, then, do we convey a bit of fairly banal information? Indirection is a useful tool, blending the facts into the narrative flow: *"Bloggs peered ahead, finding it harder to see the the track in the failing light; he found himself shivering"*. All writers have to find their own approach. A plain the *"The forest ahead could no longer be seen"* implies darkness, but might allow the possibility of fog, sun-dazzle in Bloggs eyes, temporary obscuration by land contours as Bloggs walks on, the dissipation of an illusion or mirage, or even (though the calmness of the sentence does rather tell against this) that Bloggs has just been struck blind by a passing Dark Lord.

There are always two questions worth asking. Does the reader actually need to know it's getting dark and cold? If so, dare one risk everything on the hazardous chance of simply saying (especially if a lot of fine writing has been perpetrated just lately), *"It was getting dark and cold"*?

If this sounds like a morbid level of concentration on a puny six-word sentence, remember Delany's extremely triffic essay which spends two and a half pages discussing a sentence of eight words, with a whole paragraph devoted to the opening *"The "*. (Which he instinctively visualises as *"greyish ellipsoid about four feet high which balances on the floor about a yard away."* Imagine his images of words like "concatenation", "molybdenum" and "gleet".) It's another trap, of course: if you burst your brain over every definite article you'll never finish anything, whereas — I do believe I feel an epigram coming over me —if you never think about words you'll never write words worth thinking about.

How to bring this ramble to a close? The poem points the way:

"First fix upon the limit
To which it shall extend
Then fill it up with 'Padding'
(Beg some of any friend);
Your great Sensation-Stanza
You place towards the end."

Oh. Mr Carroll, they're still at it. Because *The Lord of the Rings* ran naturally into three volumes, this has become the limit to which fantasy must extend, because the publishers demand it (say the authors), because that's what author's produce (think the readers), because that's what the readers insist on (loudly assert the publishers).

So Book 1 of the trilogy establishes the characters and the problem. *"Unless the Scrotum of Pulverulance is joined with the Chaos Runefork at the Blue Moon's latter eclipse, Plotdevice the Foul will triumph and introduce VAT on books."* Book 3 sees lots of rousing battles and the ultimate, sensational nobbling of the Dark Lord. *"What Plotdevice the Foul failed to realise is that by triumphing over us so utterly and frustrating all our noble designs, he inevitably brought about his own defeat!"* Book 2 inserts a suitable narrative delay between introduction and resolution, and tends to consist of padding — usually in the form of a journey which advances the plot by approximately as far as the average glacier get between breakfast and elevenses.

But they get published. God, how they get published. I sometimes wonder whether every reader's secret desires are met by the Focus aim of sending you on how to write originally and well. Is this an ivory-tower attitude? (*Gee, thanks Dave — Liz*) If a Focus reader is consumed with impatience to get into print, and the ephemeral, identikit junk on the bookstands seems to show that working hard at good writing isn't necessary, is it kind to preach about long-term damage to one's talent and reputation? Is about Cyril Connolly's definition of a successful book as one which lasts ten years? It all depends on whether you take writing seriously, or whether...

"Now try your hand ... ers Fancy
Have lost its present glow — "
"And then," his grandson added,
We'll publish it, you know:
Green cloth — gold-lettered at the back —
In duodecimo!"
Then proudly smiled that old man
To see the eager lad
Rush madly for his pen and ink
And for his blotting pad —
But when he thought of publishing
His face grew stern and sad.

*

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John D. Rosenberg: Introduction to *Swinburne: Selected Poetry and Prose* (Modern Library, 1968)
Charles Swinburne: *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865)
Alfred, Lord Tennyson: *Enoch Arden* (1864)
J.R.R. Tolkein: *The Lord Of The Rings* (1954-55)
Edmund Wilson: *The Shores Of Light* (1952); *The Bit Between My Teeth* (1965)

MARKET SPACE

While Focus has so few pages, I've decided not to print general market information. However, Sue Thomason has a computer listing which she will send to you, in return for a large SAE and a polite request. New information should also be sent to her.

Sue Thomason, 111 Albemarle Road, South Bank, York, North Yorks, YO2 1EP

Meanwhile, here are a few things I've heard about:

David Garnett's *Zenith* anthology is now closed for submissions....*Fear* editor John Gilbert is putting together an anthology of new talent (I've no details, but contact him at 119, The Drive, Bexley, Kent, DA5 3BY)...Competition: **Freelance Writing & Photography**; 1500 words on subject of your choice, £2.50 entrance fee & SAE, £500 first prize, closes 31/10/88; contact Freelance W&P, Victoria House, Victoria Road, Hale, Cheshire, WA15 2BP.

Workshops

I have been asked to run a writers' workshop at the next **Eastercon**, in Jersey. I will certainly be setting things up, but may not attend, as I am planning to apply for next year's Clarion Workshop, and won't be able to afford to do both. More on this later...

I haven't finalised plans for the London **Workshops**, but if you are interested, try to make the next Plough social, and we can discuss venues and dates then... if you sent me an SAE, be patient, I promise I'll write when I can.

City University (London) is rumoured to be starting a writing group. Phone 'em, if you're interested. I haven't had a chance to check this out. Same applies to the **Arvon Foundation**, who will be having **Iain Banks** and **Lisa Tuttle** as guest tutors at their **Lumb Bank** centre. Sorry, I haven't been able to dig out their address, but I've been on two Arvons, and they are well worth the effort.

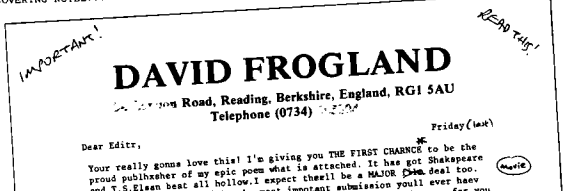
CASSANDRA WORKSHOPS

Simon Ings, of Cassandra contacted me about their work. Here's an edited extract from their press release:

The "Cassandra Science Fiction Workshop" was established in 1982. It aims to promote the production and publication of speculative literature. We run workshops chaired by professional authors (next year John Brunner will take the heim), and publish magazines of short fiction and articles of interest to readers and producers of SF. We encourage new writers, keeping them up to date on markets, workshops and contacts.

Simon had a lot more to say, but unfortunately I've run out of space and if this goes on not even James will be able to fit it all in. So if you like the sound of Cassandra, contact them: C/O Simon Ings, 10 Marlowe Court, Lymer Ave., Gipsy Hill, London, SE19 1LP

COVERING NOTES...



...How NOT to do it
(Sent in with the article inside)

(continued from p.8)

perhaps. Remember them?) and I thought the "hero" was doing quite well. He was quite old, though.

I think that a short story can only really give an inkling of the range of possibilities that "telepathy" can afford the writer, and although it has stimulated me into exploring them for myself, less cerebral readers might need more to chew on -- perhaps to novella or even novel length. There are certainly some good ideas here trying to get out.

One small, final point. I feel the story might benefit from a change of title to one that is echoed in the text -- namely to *Hearing Things*. But that is really only my opinion (for what it's worth).

More, please, Carol Ann Green.

Nick Cheesman