FOCUS

AN S.F. WRITERS' MAGAZINE

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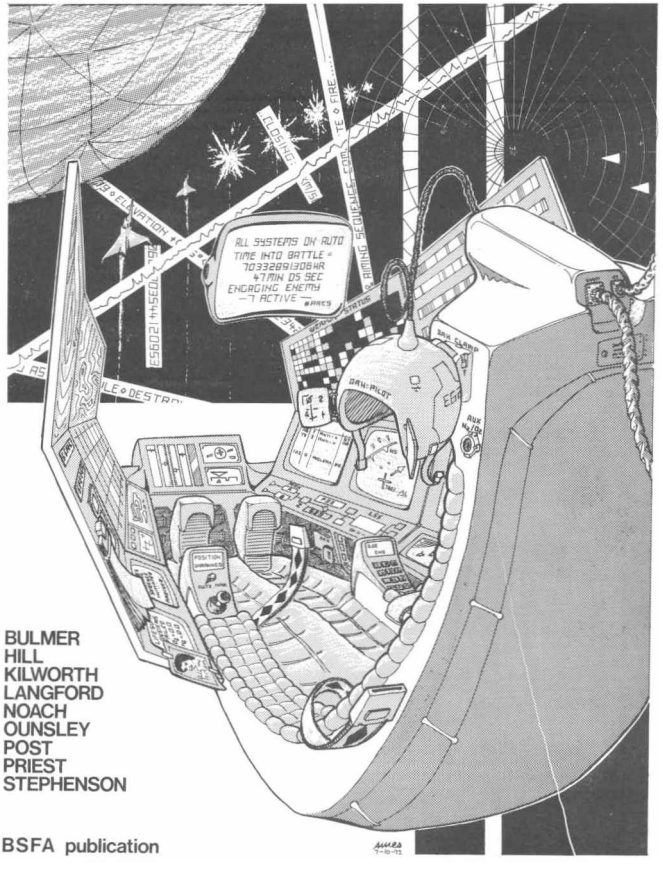

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FOCUS

AN S.F. WRITERS' MAGAZINE

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focal point

The first issue of any new magazine always creates special problems for its compilers. Not only must they have a reasonably clear idea of what ground they would like the magazine to cover (and thus obtain the appropriate material), but they must also cross their fingers and hope that an audience will exist for it--an enthusiastic and responsive audience.

FOCUS is an sf writer's magazine for everybody; or at least, this is the intention. Whilst acknowledging that the main interest for non-writer students of sf is in the reading of a book, and in reading discussions of that book's content, we have made the assumption that there is none the less an interest in the "technical" side, the genesis of a book, from conception through research to marketing. Thus, while some of FOCUS is designed for young writers and some for all writers, it is mostly designed to be of interest to anyone who wishes to read about the creative, and craft, processes of writing. To this end we shall be including articles on: aspects of research, whether historical (as in this issue) or futuristic; on the difficulties of writing in sub-categories of the fantasy market; on market pressures that, after all, are directly responsible for shaping much of the fiction that reaches the mass audience. And we shall print "diaries", accounts of the writing and marketing of books that have relevance to the science fiction field.

This might be considered the first aim of our magazine; to bring alive the behind-the-scenes of science fiction, and indeed fiction in a broader sense. We see our second aim as being a forum for discussion, for the dissemination of information, a place through which the changing shape of the market, and the changing pressures on writers, can be made plain, and perhaps, by response, be useful in an advisory way. Our third aim is to attempt to encourage developing talents in the field by showcasing their work. In this issue we have two short stories by young writers previously unpublished in the UK; the stories stand on their own merits, and we do not want to explain, or justify their inclusion. But it would be appropriate, at this point, to say something about the use of fiction in a magazine, an amateur magazine, such as this.

Amateur fiction magazines tend to perish swiftly, or linger on in a half-dead state with little reader support because the quality of their fiction is poor. As a non-paying magazine we are unlikely to receive potential Nebula Award-winning stories, but on the other hand we have a strong suspicion that many unpublished writers never submit their best work to amateur magazines --even after they have been unsuccessful in placing them elsewhere--because those magazines are generally shoddily produced and eager to print anything which is passably literate.

What sort of stories are we looking for? Impossible to say, really, for the best writers always speak with an individual voice and their stories are usually a little different from anyone else's. This, in itself, is a clue: writers who write about what interests them usually bring much more vitality and conviction to their work than writers who are trying to write like their favourite author; and because they are exploring themes which are personal to them they are more likely to avoid the cliches and the tired old formulae of sf. The best stories, we feel, usually revolve around the characters within them (although this is not a universally accepted view), the writer employing the sf "ideas" in such a way that the personalities of their characters are illuminated. If the writer does focus on character then in our opinion it's more likely that the "ideas" in the story will also interest the reader. The only constraints we would place on fiction submitted to FOCUS are that a) they should contain some element of the fantastic and thus qualify broadly as sf, and b) that they are no longer than 5000 words.

This first issue was put together in rather a short time, and we're very grateful to our contributors for producing the goods so quickly. We are aware that most of the articles are by, and seem to be aimed towards, writers who are to some degree established rather than towards those who are trying to break into print. In future issues we wish to correct this imbalance, and we'd be interested in hearing from anyone who might have specific problems with his or her writing, on which subject they would either like to write an article themselves or see a discussion by someone else. Again we emphasise that it's your response that must guide us.

Keen-eyed readers may also notice a dearth of artwork in this issue. In part this was due to pressure of space, but it's also a sad fact that we've so far received very little artwork and would therefore welcome submissions. We have no firm requirements though we'd like something a little different from the usual run-of-the-mill illustration. And, of course, they must be black and white (no halftones) --at least until we build up a circulation to rival OMNI's.

In the next issue we also hope to run a letter column. But this depends on you. Without some reaction from our readership we won't be able to tell whether we are providing the service you require. We'd like to know what sort of articles you would prefer to see, what questions you want answered, what comments you have on this first issue--whether pro or con.

We will also expand the "question and answer" section--which was always popular when the SF Writers' Bulletin was going strong--so please send in your queries as and when they arise. Questions which we regard as lying outside our competence will be referred to more experienced advisors; in any event, answers to questions will be vetted by writers, publishers and agents who have been on the scene long enough to speak authoritatively.

The next issue of FOCUS will appear in approximately six months' time, floods and plagues of locusts permitting. See you then.

Chris Evans
Rob Holdstock

July 1979

contributors

KEN BULMER is one of the most popular and prolific sf writers in Britain and is a familiar figure at sf conventions. He succeeded John Carnell as the editor of *New Writings in SF* and has done much to encourage developing talent in the UK.

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MAGGIE NOACH is a director of A.P.Watt Ltd, the world's longest established literary agency, whose clients include H.G.Wells, Edgar Wallace, P.G. Wodehouse and Rudyard Kipling. They now also specialise in sf, handling the literary affairs of such leading authors as Brian Aldiss, Thomas Disch, Ursula LeGuin and Richard Cowper, as well as several newer names.

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CHRISTOPHER PRIEST is the author of five novels, including THE SPACE MACHINE and A DREAM OF WESSEX. His most recent book, AN INFINITE SUMMER, a collection of short stories, was published by Faber & Faber in 1979.

ANDREW STEPHENSON was born in South America of British parents but now lives near Maidenhead. He has had published two of novels: NIGHTWATCH and THE WALL OF YEARS (Futura UK/Dell USA) and is currently working on his third. A former telecommunications design engineer, he is now a fulltime freelance writer.

searching for the lost chord

andrew stephenson

How well informed is your imagination? Could it reconstruct a single minute of Reality? Or could you, from memory alone, describe (say) a paperback book? If an alien (in my younger days it was always an eskimo, but times change) asked you to explain the funny marks on the pages, their history and chemical composition, or the methods of binding those sheets of white stuff along one edge, or the reasons why books take the shape they do in Western culture...could you do it?

The need to go and check your facts is what research is largely about. We know so little, individually. Collectively the human race has barely put pen to paper in the logbook of experience, so how can one author alone hope to avoid error when writing of events beyond his restricted horizons? Yet we do; and mostly we get away with it, though much of what we write consists of half-truths at best. Oddly enough, our peers lap it up, as do the readers at large, so obviously there's a trick to the game of selecting facts. And that too is what research is about.

The Schubert Syndrome Like any showman, the writer must dress his sets. Caesar cannot die half so tragically without his last appeal to Brutus: *"Et tu, Brute?"* Latin, of course, as befits the moment. That this may be a misquotation, or totally apocryphal, is irrelevant. What counts is "getting your bluff in". (My source may smile and take a bow if she reads this.) Even so, one must cow that scepticism; the lion tamer must convince his beasts it just isn't worth testing his command of the situation. Everything has to seem right.

Regrettably, few pages have room for every detail. The writer is obliged to find a few to typify all: as Caesar falls, we concentrate upon his hands clutching at his false friend's toga, not upon the staring crowd in the Forum; we hear the blood bubbling in his chest, not the slap of soldiers' sandals on flagstones as they rush to his aid, too late. The right details reinforce realism. The question is: where do we find the missing chord which will complete our great unfinished symphony and make it unique?

Genesis ch.1 v.2 The ideal researcher is never bored. He knows that facts are not "boring", or "dull", or "dry" in themselves. Today's price of cornflakes may be pretty mundane stuff--but how about the cost of corn in ancient Sumeria? Context lends charm. It is the writer's job to reveal the proper context to the reader.

So, we sit before the typewriter, aglow with creative fervour. Or, more likely, we stand scowling out of the window, praying for inspiration or a good excuse to put off writing for the day. Getting started is tough, always, unless you're not quite normal. Most books begin life as a universal void. So it is with research; and the darkness can appear impenetrable.

Cheer up. Unless you were reared in a sensory deprivation tank, the odds are good that you already know something about your subject. Of course, your publisher may have wished on you an exceptionally esoteric commission. However, assuming your love of money does not far outweigh your caution, you will already have assessed your chances of handling the job before accepting it. The darkness is just that touch darker.

Daily life stirs up an amazing amount of random information and most of us retain odd fragments. Later, this assortment of facts becomes available as a supply of handles by which to grasp the bulk of the research effort. In a real way, day-to-day experience is research: generalised, non-directed, speculative, possibly profitless, but potentially useful. Stay alert and you'll pick up a lot of free information.

Possibly as a result of just such a chance encounter with an idea, back in mid-1973 a feeling for a story came to me, and an image with it: that of a Saxon burial ceremony. Beside an open grave stood a group of men, one of whom was a time traveller. I knew he was in danger as soon as one of his fellows asked what gift he had brought for the dead...

That fragment hung around for a long while. All I then knew about the Anglo-Saxons and their contemporaries amounted to popular lore, gleaned from school and such notoriously unreliable sources as films and TV. Alfred Cardinga might as well have been the only king to reign in Britain between the Roman Occupation and Duke William's invasion. A good, clever chap who let a few cakes burn while he was inventing candle clocks and the Royal Navy...Oh yes, and he fought vikings as a sideline, this being the Done Thing in those days, rather like cowboys having to fight redskins instead of leading normal lives. Not much on which to base a book. Yet, by January of 1974 some ten thousand words had been committed to paper, words which were printed much later, only superficially altered, as Prologue, Chapter One and Epilogue of THE WALL OF YEARS, a book which relies heavily on accurate historical detail. Meanwhile, the inspirational vision had been totally absorbed by a new story, largely due to the research which it had triggered.

There are more types of research than most people suppose. Active fact-hunting research, I mean. Quantitative research, such as to answer the question, "When was the Battle of Edington fought?", is the popular image: one envisages a haggard figure poring over tomes in a library, scribbling notes. Close, but by no means the whole picture. Not infrequently, important quantitative facts are in dispute, or apparently unknown to anyone or any source, in which case the subtler and more labour-intensive types of research come into their own.

This was so for me when tracing the movements of King Alfred's forces during the winter of 877-878, and those of his opponents, the "Danes" (most of whom, I learned, actually came from elsewhere in Scandinavia) or "vikings" as hack literature calls them remorselessly. The vagueness of the available sources, and the flat contradictions that abounded, pointed a moral for all who account today's events as being hugely important. The Battle of Edington (May 878) was a climax of one of the significant periods of British history, yet only its date can be deduced with any certainty. We know roughly what happened before, during and after it, thanks mainly to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, but the exact site has kept the scholars feuding for decades. It kept me on my toes, too, of which more later.

Occasionally you will find yourself having to write authoritatively about an entire society, culture, or era. Or some topic with many ramifications. At the outset its complexities may be strange to you. There is then really no alternative, if you are working alone, to immersing yourself in all the information you can obtain. We moderns like to imagine that we invented social complexity, a view about as accurate as saying we invented sex. One dip into Whitelock's *The Beginnings of English Society* (Pelican) convinced me there was an awful lot to learn about the Saxons and their world before I could begin to do them justice. Theirs was no dog-eat-dog society. There were brigands and men of violence aplenty; but there were also laws and strong kings to subdue the lawbreakers. Practically every infraction bore a price, as did every citizen and visitor to the country; and the law was there to enforce payment. Travel and foreign trade were well developed. Away from the British Isles other societies were thriving: the Mediterranean was encircled by sundry vigorous Muslim states, besides the Empire of Byzantium and the remnants of the Italian Roman Empire. Northwards into Central Europe were still more societies, less wealthy or powerful perhaps but actively part of their times. All of this and more was going on; European affairs in the ninth century did not revolve around Britain, any more than they do now.

The bulk of what you read and re-read will be lost on you, even if you take notes to fix facts in your memory. But gradually, if you can repress bewilderment and frustration long enough, sense will emerge from what was once total mystery.

The principal benefit to be had from this process is not omniscience. Instead, it will put you at your ease as the true dimensions of your subject become apparent. Important aspects will be clarified, so that formerly extraneous detail no longer obscures what you ought to be studying. Furthermore, a "recursive" search pattern will tend to establish itself, much like an industrial design procedure: your studies will concentrate upon those facets of your subject which appear weakest or

are of most interest to you, leaving a firm foundation of background knowledge for use at short notice, or to add atmosphere. WALL is full of these leftovers, such as when Alfred speaks of "raising graves", an allusion to grave mounds or tumuli; we moderns would regard that as an odd turn of phrase (unless, say, we were members of those North American indian tribes which use tree burial).

Recursive research accepts inputs from many sources other than books, whether these be in public or private collections. Museums, exhibitions, TV documentaries, chance conversations, for example. However, it is wise to match one with another. My paper Saxon and Danish armies were on the point of joining battle when I paused to wonder whether merely consulting an Ordnance Survey map was thorough enough. From what I'd read of the Danes, I felt they'd never have come up against Alfred in the superficially obvious place, a slope near the modern village of Edington, south of Devizes in Wiltshire. That doubt hit me around teatime on a May afternoon, 1977. (Yes, this was proving to be a slow-maturing vintage.) By ten o'clock that evening I was driving down to Wiltshire to take a look for myself.

Field work is another whole branch of research. There is no substitute; if you can get it (as they say), do so. Standing on the grassy ramparts of Bratton Castle, an Iron Age fort used by the Danes and just west of my original map-derived battlesite, with the wind flapping my jacket around me, I identified with the Danes. I knew what they must have felt, staggering breathless and bloody into their stockade after the battle: their line of flight from the south lies open now as it surely did then, across miles of windy downland turf; to north, west, east the Avon valley recedes to misty hills which would have been cloaked by the ancient Selwood's trees. The larks still sing above the valley and the downs; the kestrels still haunt the long grass. Books don't teach you the spirit of the place. They talk of kings and campaigns, not the chill of a May dawn before the sun breaks free of the headlands and fills the valleys with golden light. Their facts come predigested, filtered, diluted.

Reference books in particular can also be liars: scholars quoting scholars until they create a cosmos of their own, and truths out of fantasy and opinion. You'll not find Alfred burning any cakes in WALL:the indications are that that little tale was invented around the eleventh century for a French text on history.

However, this last example dramatises a serious problem: there will often be occasions when, unaided, you will have to assess ill-supported or contentious data for their probity and decide whether to accept or reject them. On that field trip to Wiltshire I came across a small book in the reference section of the Devizes Public Library (another reason for field trips--local libraries usually contain local history sections or collections). In it was a discussion of the probable site of the battle. It receives a credit in my novel because, of all the sources I could unearth, it made the best sense and extricated me from a jam. This was no country parson's contribution to an opinionated feud, such as I had already ploughed through in the back numbers of the *Wiltshire Archaeological Magazine*, but actually went so far as to calculate, on logistical grounds, where Alfred's forces would have to have been to accord with the Chronicle's account, and what the Danish responses would have been from day to day.

This exercise in reconstruction (by a military writer, incidentally) leads naturally into an area of research I have deliberately left to last.

Deduction must, I think, be the fiction writer's most powerful research aid. We are concerned with the depiction of entire people and settings. Our stories need endings. But reference sources often supply only outline sketches. Having given samples already, I shall not dwell on this point. Informed interpolative guesses will hit the mark more easily if you have immersed yourself in your subject.

Of course, if your writing trades heavily upon scientific realism you may even need to indulge in a relatively modern writer's pastime, numerical simulation. The boom in scientific publishing and the advent of the pocket calculator (not to mention the home computer) have overthrown the old order. Once, only scientist-writers could perform their own quantitative research into rocketry, astrophysics and the like. Everyone else had to scramble for what crumbs of prepared information fell from rich mens' mathematical tables. Today it is different: if you want to, you too can do those sums, readily. Part of my background work for NIGHTWATCH involved "flying" my protagonist's spacecraft from the Moon to beyond Jupiter, all on paper, whilst the planets moved through their orbits about thirty years ahead of reality. And unless I dropped a fundamental brick somewhere, those figures won't be far out, when "tomorrow" becomes "now". Suddenly, we can even research the future—in some ways.

Casing the joint *"Take your hare when it is cased,"* advised Hannah Glasse in her *Art Of Cookery*, and thereby dismissed as irrelevant the whole business of waylaying and bagging the brute in the first place. Too often, the researcher's efforts are overlooked; yet without the filling who could enjoy the pie? So let us hunt hare.

Almost immediately we come to a halt. We must face the fact that neither "research" nor its methods can be taught in any systematic fashion, for the will to learn and the wit to identify what is useful are innate qualities, although they can be developed by practice.

Experience has taught me that one should not be too much in awe of orthodoxy. Straightforward burrowing in encyclopaedias can be a useful start; it is also customary to direct the potential researcher towards newspapers, specialist books and magazines, maps, catalogues, odd documents, even photos and paintings. To the walker I would recommend visits to museums, exhibitions, historic (and contemporary) buildings and sites. However, a treasure house of information opens if you are willing to adopt unusual approaches to the hunting of sources.

Official organisations and trade associations are goldmines. Unfortunately, being bureaucracies to some degree, they will try to shrug you off quickly as an intruder on their tranquil lethargy. So be wily: choose your moment. I nearly always phone, because someone has to answer, whereas letters can be ignored. You should see the astronomical bills; but it's worth it...I think. Get the names of those you deal with. Break the institutional mood they're probably in by avoiding formality, though be polite: draw them out of that place, emotionally. Suddenly, ten-to-one, the flood gates will open. But never overload your source. Back off if you sense you are outstaying your welcome, thank them, and part on good terms. You may need their help again. Besides, good manners cost nothing. (And be prepared, where appropriate, to give credit to sources.)

Not a few official bodies have commercial interests. These will be as ready to give casual help as any civilised person but their very nature requires them to see some advantage in going further. So get your angle right: potential publicity for them or their class of products is strong medicine. By publicity I do not mean blatant advertising; anyone who asks it of you should be resisted, firmly. A positive or balanced attitude in what you write is best; or very often they will respond to the valid argument that you'd rather have the facts correct than misrepresent their product or line of business. I once obtained some extremely detailed technical information on diamonds that way, information which in due course will come in handy (and for which I was most grateful).

Subtler research verges on detective work: you find a man who knows a woman who knows a man...and eventually you track down the one expert in the world who can answer your question. Do not imagine that the information you seek is unavailable, simply because it does not come to hand at once; it may have been filed under another heading. In NIGHTWATCH there are some swallows: in Europe these are drab birds; but I wanted American swallows, which I knew to be comparatively garish, and it took a phone-chase through several departments of the British Museum (Natural History) to find the one man who had recently returned from generalised field work in the Americas and who could describe these birds and their migratory habits. His wider experience was then distilled into the few lines called for in the book.

Then there is the serious detective work, involving real secrets, which is way out of the league of most of us. Any writer who goes further and transgresses the bounds of, say, national security or the privacy of powerful individuals is blundering into a different game entirely. I mention it to show that our territory is not clearly fenced, nor are the landmines marked.

Never be afraid to ask unusual questions. Once your source learns you have a good reason, he or she will often be helpful and forthcoming. In WALL, I had to know how far a horse could be expected to carry a rider over open country, so I asked a riding school. On the other hand, there are moments where extreme caution is called for, as when I quizzed the accident unit of a local hospital on the symptoms of antimony poisoning. Not much effort was required to imagine the thoughts running through my source's mind on that occasion! Still, they did tell me, such is the mystic power a writer wields...

A word of hopefully superfluous warning. I have found

it pays not to belabour the purpose of the research. The proportion of the public which reads books these days is small--about one percent was an estimate I heard recently --so the chances of any charismatic benefit will be commensurately small. Furthermore, most sources are professional people, not easily impressed and liable to react negatively to anyone they feel is trading on the image of his job rather than his personal ability. Your biggest asset is the impression of competence which you convey early in the interview. (Getting your bluff in, remember?) Lastly, there is always the remote chance that you may hit on the one person who swoons at the very thought of talking to a Real Author. Rare folk, but some do exist. In that case, the subject you were trying to research will tend to take back seat to superficial conversation. So, on balance, I prefer to play down why I want the information, once I have justified my impertinence in asking for it.

Some cats scratch, some bite In this article I have shown that cats can indeed be shrewd in many ways. To balance the rosy prospect suggested thus far, of factual bounty awaiting the diligent researcher, I now ought to post a few warning notices. The feline metaphor is useful, for the hazards can be likened to five kinds of cat: a kitten, a tiger, a Cheshire, a Coodle, and a tail-less Manx.

Research is a tool, not an end in itself. Yet the pleasure of discovery can distract the writer from his original objective so far that the vision which once guided him is lost sight of. Like a kitten with a ball of wool, he can become entangled in his toy.

The tiger lies waiting in the long grass with only its tail-tip visible, twitching like a lure. Go after that tail and you have hold of more than you expected--recall the saying? Some research can turn out that way: you don't exactly become lost; you simply find that the size of the job overwhelms you. WALL was one of these: it demanded more and more reference books to feed its appetite for detail.

The Cheshire Cat waylaid Alice with his absurd smile and odd conversation. A colourful enigma, he seemed to promise assistance. For us he represents the dead end we must learn to recognise before we lose too much time. To quote the source: *This time it vanished quite slowly, beginning at the end of the tail,and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone.*

The Coodle is another absurdity. Its clone curls are ostentatious and suggest an animal designed for show, not use. Research often works best if left in the background.

And the Manx? Poor thing, it is undeniably a cat,yet somehow it does not quite appear to work properly as one. Sometimes, despite your best efforts, the result lacks a few details--unless you can arrange to present it to the reader at the right angle.

Why bother? Who cares if the facts are right or not? After all, most of what we write is meant to entertain, not educate.

There are certainly instances where the truth can be stretched to enhance the dramatic effect; whether you carry it off depends on your narrative ability. However, here are six reasons off the top of my head why you should at least check your facts.

One, to satisfy personal taste. If you too hate to see a wall half painted, you'll locate an extra can of paint for the sake of a job well done.

Two, because the facts have to be correct. In "hard" sf, for example, much of the appeal derives from the extrapolation of what is known into the Unknown: so starting from false premises is pointless. Accuracy in text books does not, I trust, require justification.

Three, because the market demands it. Cultural shibboleths are slurred at the writer's peril. One should try to depict any character's system of beliefs accurately, especially if drawn from life: I include religions and obsessions as typified by Trek- and LotR-mania. Self-preservation at least ought to goad a writer into handling the beliefs of others responsibly.

Four, to test the limits. If we are not to outrage the reader's credulity, we should start with some idea of how far to develop our fantasies. That day-to-day experience which was mentioned earlier gives every reader a yardstick by which to measure them. To retain command, to recognise when to include explanation or misdirection, we require a map of the territory we are crossing.

Five, for inspiration. Any writer who draws solely upon his inner resources is asking for trouble. Research will enlarge his stock of creative raw material. It can suggest developments of plot, theme, setting, characterisation and so forth, too.

Six, out of respect for the reader. He knows we're lying to him. All he asks is that we do it well.

my secret life with David & Charles

dave langford

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

1) Getting Commissioned

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

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

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

2) Signature in Blood

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

The haggling ended in a suitably compromising position; towards the end of 1977 I signed a revised contract and tried not to think too hard about the delivery deadline (30 June 1978). It seemed much more agreeable to grab my one-third of the full advance (the other two thirds being payable on MS delivery and on publication respectively) and to treat myself to the new typewriter I'd wanted for so long.

3) Research

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

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

4) The Almost Godlike Act of Creation

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

5) Writing The Bloody Thing

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

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

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

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

6) Aftermath

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

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

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

SONNET ONE BILLION AND ONE

Warbling at my diodes – syntax scintillant
– and fed by sensors, censoring I sit;
Composing a welter of wit and whim, metering
cadences, and making jilted metres fit:
Pondering the advantages of writing
verse not by the line but by the bit
(In this lies my potential – building
up my memory and then recalling it);
And add to that the fact that I am cheap,
convenient and chic...
Yes I, I truly am the perfect bard
– a poet of silicon chip.
Re-entering my programme loop anew,
Soon I shall commence Sonnet One Billion and Two.

Cyril Simsa

skiing the methane snows of pluto

jonathan v. post

(Hi-Times Exclusive: 9#3#51 :Persephone City)

Doctor Leary O'Leary today became the first human to ski the Methane Snows of Pluto. Dr. L., a seasoned veteran of Jovian System competition, twice winner of the Callisto Open, and 4th seeded Vacuum Downhill money-winner, reports live. Holotape on Channel Z81 (CREDIT ENTRY ... NOW.).

"First of all, I'd like to thank my teacher, the legendary Khan Joel Kroll, who taught me on the rugged Volcanoburg terrain of Io, and also my out-of-body master, Tertium Quid. We'll cut to holotapes of my epic adventure after this paid plug from the Sponsor's Combine." (SCAN ###)

Are your Airplants foul? More foul than fair? No air at all? Call MutoBan, for fast, fast chromosome relief.

Hi from Hi-Times, this is your Reaction Reporter from Network Z, with an exclusive view of Doctor Leary O'Leary, here in the lovely Pomegranate Dome of far-flung Persephone City. Dr. L., would you care to give as a quick in-scan of your momentous day?

Check, Luigi. Well, as these tapes show, I'm a star-class skier on all the local slopes. Here I am, setting the course record of 17 back somersaults, with five full twists, at the 2045 Hestia Hotdog Finals. And here, on Ganymede's treacherous Ben-Gurion Downhill, clocking over 300 kilometres per hour on my patented O'Leary Thermomagnetic Racerblades. That's Sir Joshua with the loving cup.

But Pluto is a different bag of fish altogether. Coming up, our landing site tapes, with a terrifying view of the deadly slopes themselves. (SCAN ###)

This yoghurt tastes like crap. Why don't you try mine? True, blue, Cloney Island yoghurt, made from natural RNA-controlled bacteria. Say, this True, blue, Cloney Island isn't bad. I think I'll get some now. Hello? I'd like some True, blue, Cloney Island yoghurt, in my favourite flavour. That's True, blue, and good for you. No crap!

Here we are, falling from Polar orbit, and there is the site of our great adventure. This cliff drops 3 kilometres to knife-blade growths of crystalline ammonia. The pulsing arrow shows my planned descent from here, Wizard's Peak, to Death Valley, a trail no human ever blazed. This is the landing, soft as moss, thanks to grizzled Captain Werthiemer Atari. That's me with the traditional flag. Oops, there it goes into the slush. One must watch out for those Argon patches! Notice my suit, the patented O'Leary Nucleonic Shock Suit, good to absolute zero and 20 G's. Even my airbox is special, 'cause I really gulp the oxy when I'm performing to the limit. Come with me now, on this death defying ride, after a flash from the Combine. (SCAN ###)

Sorry, honey, I can't get it up. Can't get it up? Can't get it up. Have you tried new OrgoneTokes? No, let me try one. Wow, what a boner, baby! Yum, and it tastes good too, and the filter is recessed! Stuff it, honey, I've already had my OrgoneTokes today. Can't get it up? Try new OrgoneTokes!

As you can see, the Sun is just another star, so foto-floods from the orbiting Laserbanks give us this inviting glow. You can see the vapour plumes rise from my skis, and here we zoom to me. Just look at that slalom! A crater rim like that could mean a nasty spill. I've taken a few falls now and then. This cut shows a snowshovel too late in the Callisto Open Qualifiers. Even my airbags couldn't save my ribcage that time! My athletic transplants are fully covered, of course.

Here comes a blind jump over a cave. Did you see those icicles light up? A broken stalactite here nearly cost my suit a nasty rip, and here's a lovely outside roll to clear some Nitrogen rubble. Here's the view from my ski tips, in high contrast ultraviolet. Note the layered effect at the outer edges? Scientists believe that these snows were layed down and compressed over a billion year period, and the layers come from climatic variations.

Let me remind you that no one ever skied on Pluto before, remarkable as that sounds. Colonists (they hate that word!) use flatboots outside, but the tricky thermal effects, and the dangerously heterotropic snow, rule out ordinary skis. My route was tested by a skiing roboid, as this cut shows. Actually, we used 9 roboids before the run was fully mapped. These are killer slopes, here on Pluto. We'll be back in just a moment. (SCAN ###)

Want a mayor bound for glory? Vote for Desdemona Jones! Want an end to Energy Corruption? Vote for Desdemona Jones! Want to see the Grungoids prosecuted? Vote for Desdemona Jones! Your vote counts today! Citizens-for-Jones, Ticket "J".

Here we are again, with Doctor Leary O'Leary, a graduate of Bigbucks Academy, at the nearly fatal denouement of the heroic ski-adventure in the Methane Snows of Pluto. I'm your Hot-Jets Reporter Luigi Lane, Network Z., and now back to the amazing Dr. L.

Ziggy bought it on Ziggy's Peak, on Titan. Rogerson cracked up on Coonskin Cliffs. Baretti never made it down Mt. Wilson, and the Great Duke himself was splattered over a kilometre of Nereid's only live volcano. I thought my time had come right here, in Red Box Canyon.

The snow beneath me opened up, and my last verti-charge misfired. I screamed into this crevasse at almost 200 klicks. Miraculously, I was tearing right along the crevasses axis, parallel to and almost able to touch the deadly walls. The snow on the bottom was oxygen, believe it or not, and my neutron-sampler switched my skis to the right temperature with not a second to spare. Here I am, up the natural ramp, which saved my genes indeed! Now I'm doing a quadruple snap-roll and a double Swan out of pure joy. This touchdown, for all its vapour, was a piece of cake.

My training, my superb co-ordination, and my natural tranquility because of my spiritual teacher, Tertium Quid, who was with me on the Astral Plane, pay off. Here, in slo-mo, is that scene again. Really sets your teeth on edge, eh?

Well, I'm Luigi Lane, your Cronkite-on-the-spot for Network Z., and here's our final scan of the amazing and resourceful Doctor Leary O'Leary. Now here's our Cosell, in the flashing suit, with our award. That's Dr. L. climbing out of a well-worn second-skin, setting down the winning skis, there's the champagne, hey, watch it!, and just look at the bruises on her tits! Dr. L., you are a true competitor, and a sportswoman we can all be proud of.

Don't touch that squee-jee, stay with Luigi! We'll report later on the avalanche in Death Valley, Pluto, and the damage to the archeological site there, where scientists claim visitors from another solar system may have walked 10 million years ago! See it on your nitely news, perhaps.

This has been a Hi-Times Exclusive, cream of the Outer Planets' News, and stay tuned for Muhammed Khatchaturian and "Bronco-Busting the Man-Eating Lizards of Triton". Holotape on Channel Z205.

(CREDIT ENTRY ... NOW)

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LARRY NIVEN

ON SATURDAY 8th SEPTEMBER 1979

writing a novel? do!

christopher priest

An advertisement has appeared in recent issues of Vector in which it is suggested that someone considering writing a novel would do well to consider preparing a "portion-and-outline" instead. The advertisement points out that more and more publishers are actually asking to see outlines in preference to finished manuscripts. It also argues (because it is, after all, trying to sell a system) that preparing an outline is not only a saving in time, money and labour, but can actually help create a better finished work.

(For the sake of the uninitiated, a portion-and-outline consists of a sample of the actual text—usually the first few chapters—plus a synopsis of the remainder of the text.)

I don't wish to argue with the central contentions of the advertiser, but I thought it might be helpful to discuss the merits or otherwise of submitting work in this form. I can write with a certain amount of experience, having sold three of my five published novels in this way.

Two novels, Fugue For a Darkening Island and A Dream of Wessex were submitted as complete manuscripts. No one saw anything of either of them before they were finished.

Of the other three only the first, Indoctrinaire, comes close to having been sold in the form of pure portion-and-outline. I had sold a story called 'The Interrogator' to Ted Carnell's New Writings in SF series. I followed this up with a sequel, which Ted promptly and wisely rejected. Soon after this I gave up my job to start writing full-time. Thinking that the two stories could well grow into a novel (together they amounted to about 20,000 words), I put together a synopsis of the whole projected story, and, through my agent, the book was sold to Faber. I started writing the novel immediately and delivered it almost before the ink on the contract was dry. As I was then a totally unknown quantity (not to mention quality), Faber took a considerable chance on this... but I now know that such a chance is typical of a firm that for many years has been giving much quiet support and encouragement to new poets, playwrights and novelists. Faber authors are notoriously loyal to the firm, for reasons outsiders never really understand.

Inverted World came into being as a long novelette, also first published in New Writings in SF. I was going through a bit of a bad patch, and in some desperation I shared the story to both Faber and my then American publishers, Harper & Row, asking them if they thought the idea could sustain a novel. Both did, and signed it up without pre-conditions (and without my having to provide a plot-summary).

I tried to write and sell The Space Machine as a whole manuscript, but the actual writing of the book took months and months. Halfway through I ran out of money, and in an attempt to subsidize the remainder of the book I sent a long synopsis, with selected textual quotations, to America. As events turned out this mercenary scheme came to naught. The publisher took so long to make up his mind that I had virtually finished the novel before an offer came through.

One learns never to say "never" about writing... but I think I shall never again try to sell a novel before it is written. This is an entirely personal decision, and is not intended to be meant as advice to others. I now find it almost impossible to see in advance the way a book might develop, and whereas in the old days I was sufficiently cheeky to elaborate an imaginary plot, nowadays I'm less confident and prefer to watch a plot grow organically.

Nevertheless, I can still see the temptation of being able to sell a novel without actually writing one... or at least, postponing the awful moment when you have to get down to work.

Because of this temptation, let me try to distance myself from my own experiences and try to expand a little on the idea as an idea.

In the first place, the advertisement says: "Writers' market lists show more and more publishers asking for portion-and-outline submissions rather than full manuscripts". The advertisement doesn't say exactly, but I presume we are talking about publishers of science fiction, or similar categories.

I've just been going through the "market" reports listed in the Bulletin of the Science Fiction Writers of America. Over the last twelve months or so a total of 36 American and 7 British publishers have announced their requirements.

Of the American publishers, only one (Victoria Schochet of Berkley/Putnam) speaks directly against outlines. She says: "Almost all the material we accept are novels and we prefer a completed draft; we rarely buy partials". On the other hand, seven publishers (Dale Books, Argo Books, Crown Publishers, Del Rey Books, Harper & Row, Playboy Press and Prentice-Hall) say that they will consider outlines, although in some cases they do add qualifications. Argo require a complete manuscript for juvenile fiction; Del Rey insist on seeing a detailed plot-summary including the resolution; Playboy Press will accept outlines only from established authors; and Prentice-Hall say they will accept outlines but prefer to receive completed manuscripts.

The remaining 28 American publishers are non-committal on the subject.

Of the British publishers, two (Victor Gollancz and Robert Hale) say they will not consider outlines but will only read completed manuscripts. New English Library offer some hope; Carole Edmunds says, "We find any original science fiction is difficult to sell in sufficient quantity, and we tend to concentrate on reprints from other companies' hardback lists. If so-far-unpublished authors feel they simply must approach us with their work, then in their interest as well as ours, considering the appalling cost of postage, an outline and a couple of chapters or so is preferable."

The remaining 4 British publishers are non-committal.

So there you have it: 7 out of 36 American publishers, and 1 out of 7 British publishers, say they are willing to read novels in outline, and most of those have apparent reservations about it.

This sort of objective assessment of the present "market" suggests that the sellers' market in outlines is not quite as hot as claimed. Publishers seem to continue to prefer reading completed manuscripts, although presumably they will all make exceptions to the rule.

Something else you might have to ask yourself is this: if I submit a synopsis to a publisher, and he agrees to it, am I therefore forced to follow that synopsis willy-nilly? What would happen if I wanted to change the plot while the book is being written?

The advertisement deals with this in passing, describing an outline as "a non-restrictive roadmap"... thus implying that a successful outline suggests a route you might drive along, but does not limit you to the shortest or most obvious way. You will be free, it seems to say, to explore the country lanes or seek a scenic detour.

After my experience with the three novels I mentioned, I concur with this. Once the contracts were raised no mention of the synopses was ever made again. I might just have been lucky... but remember that there's more to a novel than the plot. Publishers recognize this as readily as writers and readers. From their point of view, the true function of a portion-and-outline is to convey a reliable impression of the type of novel the author is proposing to write. They will certainly read the plot-synopsis to gain some insight into how the author is intending to resolve his central concerns, but they will not regard it as they would an estimate

from a builder, say, for putting an extension on a house.

In my view, the principal danger of working out the plot of a novel before it is written is that the plot might gain, in the writer's mind, an ascendancy it would not otherwise have. But in practical terms, unless the author wilfully sets out to write a story that is fundamentally different from the synopsis he has submitted, there is no real likelihood of him selling his integrity for a mess of plotting.

But what about the literary temptations, setting aside the practical considerations of "market"?

I put a rhetorical question to you: is a novel something that has to be sold, or is it something that has to be written?

This is what it really boils down to, and your own answer, without any prompting from me, should tell you where you stand on this. If a novel to you is something that is a lot of words written down on paper that gets into print and thus becomes literature, then perhaps selling a portion-and-outline is as expeditious a way of getting what you want as any other. Alternatively, you might consider novel-writing to be a form of artistic endeavour, something that should be unsullied by the sordid transactions of the market-place.

Probably the sensible way is a pragmatic accommodation with both. Living and working in the West as we do, we are part of a capitalist system, one, whether we like it or not, where literature is disseminated by commercial enterprise. Literature is a form of expression, but it is also a form of communication, and publication is the only sure way of reaching an audience. I tend, whenever I talk about the "market" for novels, to put the word in inverted commas...because the "market"—the publishers, the magazines, the television companies, etc ——are not the actual market, the audience, but the doorways through which we have to pass to reach the people. A publisher at best can only hope to guess or estimate what it is the audience really wants, and thus he or she will lay down what they call their requirements. To follow these requirements too slavishly will enable the author to give the publisher what he wants...but is that the same thing as what the writer intends or the reader wants?

I suspect that to sell novels in outline is to satisfy the demands of the "market", but not to satisfy the demands of the market. The appreciation of literature amounts to a quiet dialogue between writer and reader. Both writing and reading are solitary pursuits. The writer expresses himself in his own way and in his own time, and through the printed word shares his expression with the reader. One of the principal pleasures of reading is the feeling that one is somehow in touch with another human being.

All this seems to be getting off the point, which is whether or not one should submit half-completed work to publishers...but in my view the very question is itself away from the point.

A successful writer satisfies three demands: his own, his publisher's and his reader's. I don't see that the selling of a portion-and-outline will help or hinder this aim, except that it seems to offer the attractions of a short-cut. I've dabbled in outlines myself, as I have said, and I think now I have learned better. Novel-writing is hard graft, and sooner or later you have to get down to the fact that two or three hundred sheets of blank paper have to have words written on them. As the words are the writer's only stock in trade, it is on those that he should concentrate the most. There are no short-cuts to that, or none that I have ever found. Better by far to worry about whether what you write is any good or not...because if you write well you can be sure that the "market" will be seeking you. It will help you find an audience of your own, and might well make you fat and comfy and jolly in the process.

(June 1979)

market space

Not just another paperback house, but an 'aggressive new approach to the publishing and promotion of books'; that's the (most likely to be called) Virgin Books, a subsidiary enterprise of Virgin Records, taking shape this July under the managing direction of Maxim Jakubowski (still putting his team together) and destined to open officially in mid-September.

Virgin Records have a reputation for both quality and hard sell, and Jakubowski expects to extend that philosophy into the assorted book lines that will be produced under his management. He's going to be very selective in what he buys; he wants to 'create the image of quality', producing no more than forty or fifty titles a year (most paperback houses produce twenty or thirty titles a month, most of them sinking without trace) each book being attended to in detail as regards promotion and publicity. 'Aggressive promotion will be important--massive publicity, especially in the music magazines, which reach an enormous audience--gimmicks like crazy!'

For writers working in the sf field the news is that he will be buying only six titles a year, all of them outright originals--no reprints from hardcover--and hopefully buying World English Language Rights (although this is negotiable). Virgin Books will take a percentage of all translation rights. The advances paid will reflect this 'rights requirement': no money is mentioned yet, but in Jakubowski's own words 'we will be more than competitive with other paperback houses'.

Although his personal tastes in sf lie towards the surreal, quieter kind of fantasy, Jakubowski's editorial tastes at Virgin will be totally catholic--hard sf, near and far future, historical bias, fantasy no problem; the emphasis will be on quality of writing and conception. He hopes to make the list a powerful and memorable one.

If six sf titles a year is depressingly low, the good news is that plans are being mooted to run one or two theme anthologies, perhaps a mixture of reprint and original material, and also to establish a regular paperback magazine. But those plans lie in the future, dependent on the early success of the venture.

Other fiction lines to be published, besides sf, include a line of erotic books, of similar approach to Olympia Press, that is to say 'up-market erotica', literary values being of paramount importance. There will also be a line of 'different' books, the strange types of readable types of novel (he quotes Brautigan and Pynchon as examples of what he means) that will be given special market treatment, special promotion. He hopes to establish cult reputations from among this line.

ANTHOLOGIES: regrettably, the hopes of two years ago, that by 1980 there would be three regular anthology series, are now all but dashed. Pulsar 1 (Quartet Books) was more a success, but this is thought to have been due largely to the rather too garish packaging. Pulsar 2 is due in November, and any thoughts of continuing the series will remain unentertained until after that date. Andrew J. (David & Charles Ltd.) has suffered a more definite fate. It was known all along that the second Aries would depend on a good commercial response to the first, which was published in June. But that volume has not, as yet, sold either to the States or to paperback. Volume two would have been shelved, one feels, even if the inspiration behind it, Paul Barnett, had not left David & Charles some months ago.

Andromeda 4 (Future Publications Ltd) is still a strong possibility; it survives all manner of threats, but the brutal truth is that it does not sell at all well; the fiction editor at Futura is 80% sure that no 4 will not happen; Peter Weston, on the other hand, is 80% sure that it will.

This leaves, as far as the British Market is concerned, only the new magazine Ad Astra (managing editor James Manning) a fiction-fact magazine that is growing in size, confidence and stature (and will soon be able to shrug off the cruel epithet that it is a 'poor man's Omni'). Ad Astra pays £10 a thousand, for first British Serial Rights only; reply time is one week (!). Regardless of are for good sf of any kind, not necessarily hard technology; but no fantasy. Manning proposes that Ad Astra will run ten issues a year, once it is well established; stories can be up to 5500 words.

Ad Astra offers a bonus to young writers: it is looking for articles on 'happening-now' aspects of hard science; he is also looking for the 'middle ground' of science, which some might call the fringe: such stuff as pyramid power, psychic talents, faith healing. Same rates, same rights. The address for submissions is: 22 Offerton Rd., LONDON SW4.

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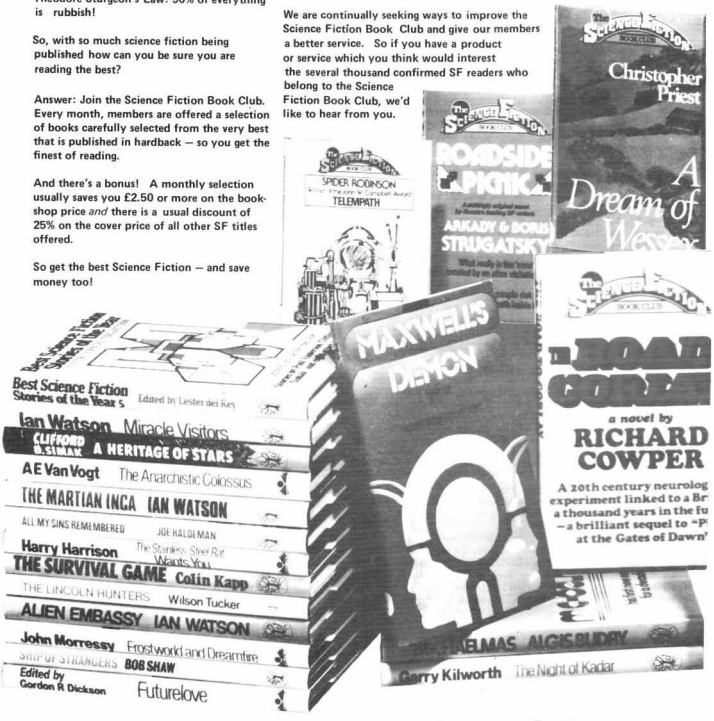

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The SCIENCE FICTION BOOK CLUB

the teeth of the phoenix

simon ounsley

It was not the time that I would have chosen to come to Candelli. The tourist trade was closed for the week and the streets of the capital were quiet and uncluttered: deep deserted canyons in the mountains of empty hotels. I could hear ghosts in the lobby, eagerly whispering plans for the day: a trip to the hills, a walk around the harbour or a day excursion by steamer to the Rainbow Islands. They would have come in their ghoulish millions that week. But Candelli wished, as far as possible, to be alone.

Business with aliens was appropriately slack. Insects buzzed unchallenged round the sweltering out-planet meeting-rooms and the chatter of barter was gone from the underground bars. I drank there alone after the meeting, feeding the juke-box for company and thinking things over.

The dialogue had been too urgent and delicate to postpone. My trip to the planet had duly proceeded as planned. Baker had briefed me over a chilled whiskey in the hotel bar, wiping his face with a handkerchief as he sweated his apologies for leaving. It had no doubt been a coincidence: such a time to take his holiday. He evaded my questions on everything except the contract and the welfare of his wife and children. In such a situation, both subjects seemed equally irrelevant.

Baker left by taxi for the spaceport, an hour before his ship was due to leave. Such behaviour, I hoped was irrational.

The Candellians themselves evaded the Subject with a highly developed skill. They seemed astonishingly unconcerned about it all. As I walked through the company building, their brisk, efficient chatter sounded all around me, their tails swishing and their claws scraping the floor in eager competition. Events would not be allowed to interfere with business. Not between fellow Candellians, at least.

I was shown into the office of the materials manager. My eyes dwelt upon the white sphere in the corner too long for civility, I fear. The manager held out a claw in welcome, not appearing to notice my stares. I thanked him and took a seat. He offered me a cigar.

The lizard people do not smoke or drink but they keep supplies of both tobacco and alcohol in deference to alien tastes. This is merely good business, as are the multi-planetary brothels which crowd the harbour-side, a favourite place of entertainment for those with exotic tastes and sufficient money.

I took a cigar.

"I am glad to welcome you to Candelli, Mr.Thomson" the manager began, the long tongue flicking constantly out of his mouth as he spoke, like a novice endeavouring to eat spaghetti. "It is not your first visit to this planet, nor indeed to the company, I understand?"

"My second." I replied, "I was here three years ago."

"Really?" said the manager, "You will find that much has changed in the intervening period. We have become more efficient, as you can see."

He pointed his claw proudly to the wall beside me, where lines of many colours interweaved to mysterious ends. Lights flashed and numbers ticked along illuminated scales. Displays were lit to demand the attention or dimmed to reject it. Signs depicting profit or loss flicked on and off, fighting for acceptance like rival lovers.

"The situation at a glance," said the manager, "The most advanced planning system in this part of the galaxy."

"It is impressive." I said and the tongue flicked out in acknowledgement.

"My own development," the manager admitted.

This much achieved, I chose the moment to produce my papers and commence negotiations. I talked of delivery dates, installation plans and maintenance periods. I showed him performance charts and consumer statistics. In the room all was quiet except for the drone of my voice and the buzz of the heat-drowsy flies. The manager flicked at them with his tail as he listened.

The meeting went well. It seemed I might secure a regrading at Baker's expense. My colleague, I believe had let it prey on his mind.

For myself, I forgot about it as I worked, becoming lost in the fantasy-world of my own sales-talk. Only at the meeting's end was I reminded.

"I shall see you tomorrow morning." the manager said, correcting the words too late: "You must come back here tomorrow morning."

I nodded. Had I noticed a trace of regret in those tiny reptilian eyes? And if so, did it signify regret at his mistake or at the way of things?

I poured down a last chilled whiskey and handed the glass back to the barman.

"Better be getting along now." I said. The empty space of the underground bar was depressing and I wanted to change for dinner. The barman seized the glass in his claw and gave it a token dip in the water. He blinked indulgently, the thin lids sliding slowly over the eyes in the manner of his race. "You're crazy." he was saying. "It's afternoon. It's hot outside."

Tomorrow there would be no choice either way, but today he did not wish to chance the heat.

I nodded goodbye and climbed back up into the streeet. An art-pop song was crackling away on the juke-box and it followed me up into the sunshine.

The whiskey made the light even brighter than reality. The street became a vague assortment of faded colours which merged into one insipid entity. In the gutters, brightest and lightest of all, the eggs were piled high. They were like enormous stockpiled snowballs, defiant of the heat. In a moment, I imagined wistfully, the kids would start to throw them at each other, splashing themselves with the light green yoke and the big joke would be over.

But there weren't any kids on Candelli. Not yet.

I walked past a clinic where anxious would-be 'mothers' waited for advice, bellies still bulging like apples. One contracted and noisily laid as I passed, the others gathering round to chatter their jealous congratulations.

As I walked on, their voices faded behind me, replaced by nothing save the humming of the bees in the hotel and town house gardens and, for a short time, by the snoring of a beggar asleep on a step, his tawdry wares spread messily about him on the pavement. Then, unexpected, came the notes of a trumpet: music growing louder, blowing over on a sudden breeze. The disjointed cacaphonic Candellian music, yet unmistakeably a marching tune. A band was coming down the aisle between the eggs.

Dancers formed the vanguard: coloured tassles on arms and legs, hopping and skipping, leaping and twirling, clumsily cavorting on their short lizard legs. Percussionists marched behind them: big booming Candellian drums and jangling, clattering tambourines, followed in turn by exponents of the glanti, the planet's principal instrument, an assortment of strings contorted into strange patterns and plucked to produce a loud and resonant twang, of great offence to aliens.

In the centre of it all marched a tall figure in a black cloak, who was chanting above the music. His arms leapt about in great animation, as though perhaps the very air was scalding them. His shirt bore the symbol of the "lizard" and the egg, the cornerstone of Candellian religions and I took them to be members of a minor and peculiarly extrovert sect. Candellians are usually as reticent concerning religion as they are concerning the phenomenon which will naturally dominate it. Shutters were opened in sleepy curiosity, only to close again in astounded disapproval. Selecting my steps carefully between the eggs, I stepped to one side to allow the procession to pass. Then someone tapped me on the shoulder.

I think there is a xenophobia in us all. In some it is a reckless, uncontrolled emotion, feeding upon fear and discontent and overspilling in the ugliness of hatred and violance, while in others it is hidden and denied, even to the self. Yet it is always there, as surely as all children will fear the dark, for the two emotions are one and the same. They have their dark, deep roots in the fear of the unknown.

I had lived for a day on Candelli and, having visited before, had quickly accustomed myself to the proximity of creatures who so closely resembled, outwardly at least, a member of the reptile family of earth. Yet turning so suddenly to see the green scales, forked tongue and slit eyes within so few centimetres of my own face, so that if the tongue were fully extended it could lick the end of my nose, I could not defend myself from the sudden clutch of fear, nor restrain the shudder which must have been so outwardly obvious. The Candellian, in the grip of a sister emotion, must have mistaken the shudder for rejection of his plea for help. His garbled jibbering ceased abruptly and he backed away from me, colliding with the passing musicians. As an outworlder, one immune from the doom of the Candellians, I must have seemed to him a source of possible rescue. The sight of the holy man, in his mystic cloak, speaking in commanding tones, must have awoken similar hopes in his desperate brain. He forced a clumsy passage past the marching musicians, destroying the rhythms of the drum and the glanti as he pushed them aside to fall at the feet of the preacher.

Seven words he cried, as he looked up in awe at the face of the preacher, simple words which I recognised: not directly translateable, yet by some freak of language succinctly expressing his fears. "I do not want to go (there?)" he said, the last word representing something commonplace, yet at the same time unknown.

There was no reply. The holy man stepped over him without a break in the chant. The band parted like the tide around a battered rock, marching past him on either side.

The man lay weeping on the street awhile and then he crept away into an alleyway, where shadows lurked to hide his shame. I could not help him, I who knew nothing at all.

The whiskey made me fantasise. Did they melt away on the pavements, dripping into little mounds of liquid lizard that were swept away next morning?

I was lying on my hotel bed, staring up at the patterned ceiling and studying its points of symmetry. Soon the long afternoon would have to make way for the evening and the heat would dissipate. I leaned over to the table for the printed note which had been lying on the floor behind the door when I returned, the only direct acknowledgement of the situation I had received since my arrival on the planet. Impressed by its honesty, I read it over again.

TONIGHT IS A SPECIAL NIGHT ON CANDELLI. YOU ARE STRONGLY RECOMMENDED TO HEED THE FOLLOWING ADVICE.

DO NOT VENTURE OUT INTO THE STREET AFTER THE HOUR OF TEN. STAY IN YOUR HOTEL ROOM, BOLT THE DOOR AND LOCK THE SHUTTERS AT THE WINDOW. DO NOT EMERGE UNTIL THE HOUR OF SIX TOMORROW.

YOUR CO-OPERATION IS APPRECIATED.

pp THE COUNCIL OF CANDELLI

I got off the bed and tested the locks. Looking down, I saw that eggs were piled below the window.

I took supper early. Not to my surprise, the hotel restaurant was deserted except for the staff. The service was poor and the steak sub-standard. Was the tension starting to impair their legendary efficiency at last? They even brought me snake eggs and baby spiders instead of the peas and broccoli I ordered. I had never been mistaken for a "lizard" before.

As I ate, I watched the waiter from the corner of my eye. He was leaning listlessly against the bar, tapping time against the oaken panels with his tail. There was only one sign of his anxiety: he was playing with the linen serviette which he held in his claws, tearing it slowly into ribbons.

Would he talk to me now? Would he answer my questions? I met his eyes but they were camouflaged. Was the meal all right? Did I want some more potatoes?

The Candellians' reticence angers Earth biologists. One of the difficultias in encountering other dominant species is that they cannot be submitted to biological investigation without their own consent. The flora and lesser fauna of Candelli have long since been studied and documented, yet the one species which really interests the scientists, this race of intelligent, hermaphroditic "lizards", remains largely a matter of mystery.

This much we know: Candellians have legs positioned vertically beneath their bodies, facilitating locomotion and distinguishing them from the present-day lizards of Earth. Because of this, their appearance resembles most closely the tyrannosaurus, the dominant species of prehistoric Earth, though the Candellians are much shorter and have relatively longer, better developed arms. It is in the matter of reproduction, however, that Candellians differ most utterly from the lizards of Earth. Not long after first contact, it was established that the Candellians were hermaphrodites. What emerged only later, and with great reluctance, was that the children are hatched in a state of complete development, being in full possession of the knowledge of their parents and capable of immediately replacing them. This they do. The life cycles of all Candellians coincide. So does their parenthood. So does their death. Tonight was the night of the re-birth; for the Candellians I had known, life was at an end. All the Candellians would die tonight. Tomorrow I would have to meet their children.

I looked at my watch: it was nine o'clock, an hour before the deadline but I thought it best to retire to my room at once. They would not have warned me without good reason.

As I walked out, I nodded to the waiter. He did not jump to clear the tables as he usually did. Was this a sign of rebellion? To go to "his" death with acquiescence, I had decided, a Candellian had to believe in its necessity. A human knows that he will have to die some day but for most of his life he is not disturbed by the knowledge. Only at its approach does he become alarmed and even then there are those who, in old age or illness, become peacefully resigned or even welcome it. The knowledge that the body is tired and wasted and in need of rest, perhaps this helps us to accept our fate. Yet when the body is young and healthy, when death is sudden and unfair, then we fear and resist it. And our tears of grief are mingled with tears of anger. Would the Candellians become angry? I wondered. Their bodies seemed healthy enough at present, but in the absence of re-birth, their decay would presumably be imminent. This, along with some promise of an after-life, the people would be taught. But as the hour approached, would they continue to believe that their deaths were necessary?

Returning to my room, I locked the door and went to close the shutters. The street outside was deserted but there were still lights at the windows. And all of them were open. Well, it was still very warm. A gentle breeze played across my face, carrying the sound of a glanti and the perfume of the shrubs in the hotel garden. The sky was dark and clear and a-glitter with alien stars. It would be better to die in the winter, I decided. As the breeze rose, the shutters creaked as though in consternation.

I felt uneasy at the prospect of the coming night. I didn't even know how it was going to happen. Lying on the bed, with the music of the glanti still plucking softly in my ears, I turned over a hundred possibilities. Yet I think that even then I knew the truth. Nature, after all, is usually logical. They had told me to keep my shutters closed and lock the door. They had told me to stay in my room. It did not seem humane because it wasn't human; for that I thanked God. I lay on the bed, attracted again by the pattern on the ceiling. In time, the music of the glanti faded. There wasn't any sound except the dripping of the washbowl tap.

It did not begin until midnight.

The first noise outside was a faint scraping, hardly harsher than the rustle of a sheet of paper. Then there was a cracking sound, soft and brittle like the breaking of the host at communion. In my mind I seemed to pry into the buildings all about me: sweating clawa clutching egg-shaped talismans, tearful prayers to mysterious gods, trembling tongues licking cold statuettes. Outside, a sound of shattering, a sound of breaking out, the sound of claws scraping on the warm pavements. Then a pause and scraping and shattering again, more eggs broken by the eager movements of emergent claws, a clumsy thrashing in the wreckage for freedom. The same sounds amplified a dozen times and then a hundred, then a thousand..... their quiet innocence buried in an avalanche of shattered shells. To be born with a mind developed, to look for the first time upon a world of which you have been told yet never experienced, to smell the flowers and feel the evening breeze. This was their experience.

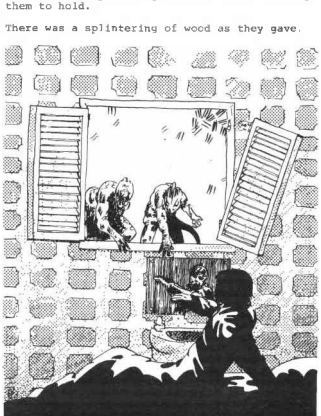
They began to chatter. Already they were organising. I could see them in my mind's eye, finding ladders or climbing upon each other's shoulders to reach the bedroom windows. Perhaps some ladders had been left out for them. The peace of the night was shattered by their shouts and arguments. Using their voices for the first time, they were not inclined to whisper. It was like a thousand babies crying. Then there was a smashing of glass. The windows had been left open but it must have felt good to smash the glass, to feel the impact, hear the shattering sound, like playing with a rattle. For a moment I could think of them as children up to mischief, raiding the larder, stealing apples or jumping

about in the mud.

Then the screams began. I tried to hide my head beneath the pillow but it wasn't any good. The screams got through to me. I was listening to the death of a generation. There was nowhere on the planet I could have gone to avoid those screams that night. It seemed the Candellians didn't want to die after all. From the floor below came the sound of sobbing. Somebody, perhaps that waiter, was crying. I heard this one die. I heard the shattering of glass at the window just below my own. I think that two of them entered, jabbering and bickering over who should do the killing. They knocked over the furniture as they came, doubtless clumsy and unpractised in the use of their limbs. I could feel the commotion through the floorboards. They must have taken their victim in the throat, for his scream was mercifully short. Then I heard them arguing and falling about again, slowly making their way back to the window. They must have remounted the ladder: I could hear their claws upon the rungs. I listened intently, trying to shut out the sounds of pandemonium that were ringing in my ears. If you could hear one of the paintings of Hieronymous Bosch, it would sound the same, I think. I could hear the steps on the ladder. They were coming closer. They were climbing up to my own window. Suddenly, the background blanket of screams seemed more pleasant than the sound of those advancing claws and the frenzied discussion as to who should be my murderer.

They scraped with their claws at the shutters. Then they banged against them, trying to force them in. I muttered a prayer and the shutters held. They jabbered for a while, voices raised in argument, then they tried to pull at the shutters, hoping to break the hinges. I sat on the bed with my back against the wall, willing them to hold.

There was a splintering of wood as they gave.



Two green faces peered in at me, skins glistening in the light of the stars. In their faces was a lust for blood. Their jaws were hanging open and slavering, eyes bright and demented like creatures of the wild on the track of their quarry. Then the hate in their eyes became confusion. For a moment, their instinctive desire to kill gave way to bemused intelligence. They seemed almost embarrassed. And then they were gone, descending the ladder in search of more appropriate prey. They only desired to kill Candellians.

I sat for a while, trembling and clutching at the wall, as though that could somehow save me. Then I got up the courage to walk across and drag the dressing-table against the window. The screams were still ringing in my ears but I think I no longer really heard them. I lay myself down on the bed and stared numbly into nothing. That sudden glimmer of intelligence in their eyes: that had made it so much worse.

It must have been mid-morning when I opened my eyes and locked about me with something that approached comprehension. Delicate shafts of sunlight filtered past the dressing-table in a pattern like a light-show, while from the street came the urgent but innocent sound of traffic.

Finding shaky feet, I snatched up my briefcase and left for my appointment. I had considered but rejected the idea of moving the dressing-table away from the window. In my mind I could see green faces behind it, bright eyes burning with hereditary hate.

In the streets they were clearing the egg-shells away, labourers in blue overalls shovelling the fragments into the backs of lorries, whistling yesterday's tunes as they worked, while others were sprinkling sawdust on the patches of blood. The bodies, I assumed, had already been removed.

The company building was alive with activity. They were shifting the desks around and clearing up the mess. Nothing seemed real to me. I was walking in a dream. When I spoke, the words seemed to come from someone else.

"I'm sorry I'm late." I said, as I walked into the office and shook the offered claw. The blood lust was gone from them now: they looked just like their parents had done yesterday. The manager smiled and blinked in condescension. We couldn't all be as efficient as Candellians.

He in turn apologised for the noise of the workmen as we talked: hammers and drills bit into the conversation. They were taking down the electronic wall chart.

"I have some new ideas." said the manager, proudly. "You'll notice some changes the next time you come to Candelli."

After the meeting, I wandered aimlessly around the streets. I had televiewed the spaceport from the lobby of the company building and secured a berth on a commercial liner leaving later in the afternoon. The meeting had not been a good one. I can't remember what I said but I think I must have got my facts mixed up. There had been other things on my mind.

The egg shells were almost gone now. The sawdust and blood had been swept away. The sound of a glanti drifted down from a town house verandah, and I wondered if they liked their parents' tunes: they would want to write some of their own, I supposed. The orphaned music echoed round the stones of empty streets. The day was a scorcher again.

I consulted my watch, counting the hours till the liner was due to leave. I was eager to return to Earth, where the violence of time was more subtle in its coming. For me, the planet of Candelli was haunted by the ghost of a scream.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talking points

who needs an agent?

maggie noach

Why have an agent? There is no reason at all to do so. If you are in touch with editors from all the major publishing houses, can assess the market value of your book, are confident enough to promote your own work, can draw up satisfactory agreements, negotiate the sale of U. S., translation and film rights, collect money from publishers often unwilling to part with it, check royalty statements, deal with VAT and cope single-handed with the many crises which inevitably arise in an author's life.

However, most authors prefer to employ an agent to deal with these and the many other problems which contribute to and result from earning one's living as a writer.

There is little point in approaching an agent unless you have already completed a full-length work. Few agents now represent authors on the strength of short stories alone, unless those stories are outstanding. Do not be surprised if, when delivering your precious manuscript by hand to an agency, the agent for whom it is intended will not agree to a meeting on the spot. This is not a brush-off; without having read your work, the agent will not be in a position to discuss the possibility of representing you.

Several criteria are involved in an agent's decision to represent an author, apart from the potential market value of his work, a major one being personal enthusiasm for his writing. While it is by no means always possible for an agent to place a book about which he is enthusiastic, it is certainly from from easy to represent an author whose work does not appeal to him.

It is important, too, that an agent should have sufficient time to see to each author's needs and to provide sympathy and good advice whenever necessary.

Agents also sometimes approach authors often on the recommendations of other authors already on their list. However, it is an unwritten rule that agents must not "poach" authors already represented by another agent.

An author/agent relationship is largely based on mutual liking and trust and is very much like a marriage. If the marriage goes wrong, divorce is the best answer. There is no point in an agent trying to hold on to an author who has got no faith in him, nor is there any point in an author trying to convince an agent to take him on or to continue representing him if the agent does not feel that this would be beneficial.

Having agreed to represent you, the agent will then approach publishers with your work. The ideal publisher reaches a rapid decision on a book; if he decides to take it on, he quickly makes an offer which does not require a great deal of haggling and acrimony; he accepts the agent's standard form of agreement (which is generally the result of many years' experience and expertise), signs it promptly and pays the advance immediately. He then gives the author sympathetic editorial help with the book, supplies proofs in good time for correction, has a cover designed which does not cause a frisson of horror when the author sees it, distributes the book efficiently and publishes it on time. He does his best to get the book reviewed and publicised and, later on, renders accurate accounts and pays royalties promptly.

There are publishers who fulfill all these requirements, but an enormous number fail to do so. It is part of an agent's job to try and ensure that the publishing process runs smoothly and, of course, a publisher's efficiency in these matters influences the agent's preference when it comes to offering books.

When negotiating contracts, the most obvious area of dispute is that of the terms which the publisher is to pay. Another is the territory in which the publisher may sell the book (eg. whether it can be marketed in Canada, a frequent cause of discord between U. K. and U. S. publishers) and the subsidiary rights over which he will have control. Normally, agents insist on retaining control of U. S., translation, serial and performing rights in a book while often publishers—especially when dealing direct with authors—try to retain these rights and generally take a much larger percentage of the proceeds from their sale than an agent would take as his commission. However, if an author does not have an agent, he may not have the necessary contacts for placing these rights, so if he can negotiate a reasonable division of the proceeds it might be worth allowing the publisher to control them.

In general, agents take 10% commission on all proceeds from the sale of U. K. rights; 15 to 20% from the sale of U. S. rights, and approximately 20% from the sale of translation rights (including payment to a local agent in the country where the sale is made); and up to 20% from the sale of film, television or other performing rights (including payment to a specialist in this field).

Overseas sales can contribute enormously to an author's income. While British authors are often denied the large advances which a number of American authors get nowadays for paperback rights, the advance paid by a U. S. publisher should at least equal to that paid by the British publisher and can often be considerably higher. Advances and royalties for translation rights are generally lower than those paid for U. K. rights because of the cost to the foreign publisher of translating the book. However, it is possible to earn a great deal from translations, especially if sales are made to several foreign language markets. The best for science fiction are France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Holland and Spain.

Although the market for short stories in the sf field is better than in general fiction, it is not easy to place stories by totally unknown authors. Occasionally, a publisher starts up a series of anthologies in which stories by new writers are included, but, all too often, sales are poor and the series peters out after a few volumes. Even with well-established series of anthologies it is hard going nowadays and the tendency is, more and more, to include a majority of stories by big-name authors.

SF magazines on general sale in the U. K. are few in number; the situation of anthologies and magazines is not all that much better in the U. S. and Europe, especially as far as new writers are concerned. However if a short story is outstanding, it might be reprinted countless times in anthologies all over the world and the author could earn a good deal from it, providing that the contract for its initial publication is a fair one. All too often, publishers try to acquire wide-ranging rights in a story when these rights should be confined to its publication in a particular anthology, perhaps with an embargo on its publication elsewhere for a limited period after the anthology appears.

An agent has his ear close to the ground and, through personal contact with editors, is often first to hear of the founding of a new magazine or anthology; important changes of personnel and editorial policy; financial difficulties or successes in publishing companies; and many other factors which are involved in placing rights.

Perhaps I should leave the last word to Alexander Pollock Watt who, in 1875, became the first professional authors' agent:

> "When I started to sell copyrights, the literary agent was an unknown factor in the world of letters. My friend, Dr George MacDonald", asked me to sell his stories, which I did—and I think I may say with success. Dr MacDonald found that my acting on his behalf in this way relieved him of an immense deal of trouble and worry and he then, and has ever since, placed the management of

his literary affairs entirely under my care. At the time I was doing this for him, it occurred to me that other authors might be glad to be relieved of what Mr Walter Besant has called 'the intolerable trouble of haggling and bargaining', and one author recommending my services to another—for I have never advertised, you know—I gradually came to occupy the position I now hold."

*Author of At the Back of the North Wind.

sprechen sie starshipese?

garry kilworth

Research is the sometimes interesting, always frustrating, but rarely untroublesome aspect of producing a high degree of authenticity in a piece of work. There will doubtless be other articles in this magazine dealing with the problems of general research. I would like to concentrate on one specific area—jargon, terminology, nomenclature. Let the mathematicians worry about the surface area of a steamrollered toad while we discuss the problems associated with writing a chapter or story which takes place on board a ship. Or on top of a pair of skis. Or sitting astride a horse. I do not intend to discuss the problems associated only with sf jargon in this article—possibly that may come later at the editors' discretion—but more the kind of language barriers which face the writer of any category of fiction. If I may draw from my reservoir of obscure analogies, the body of an sf novel consists of a high percentage of ordinary water, although its appearance belies that fact. If one is writing about falconry in any setting the terms will effectively remain the same as those in common use.

Let's take a few examples. As sf authors we may possibly wish to write about spaceships, and being European we like to get a good healthy dialogue going by the third paragraph. Spaceshipese is probably handled best if it is compatible with seaship nomenclature, so that our First Mate says to the Leading Deckhand, "Take a stroll along the main corridor aid chap and see if the walls of the loos have been cleaned—the boatswain's coming to inspect at 8 o'clock". You then lean back with narrowed eyes, realizing that there is a distinct lack of shipboard twang to this order and finally you change "boatswain" to "bosun" and replace "cleaned"with "swobbed" and feel that the second draft is a far superior effort.

So far so good. We all know "o'clocks" become "bells", albeit on a different scale, and "loos" are "heads", "walls" are "bulkheads" and "corridors" are "gangways". But did you know that on modern British ships the main gangway is termed the Burma Road? You did? Okay, how come you didn't pick up the fact that steamrollers are now called rogrollers since they don't use traction-engines any longer?

Shipboard language is not one of the most difficult to master but it does hold hidden dangers, one of these being the assumption on the part of most Fat-writers that they already know enough about ships to get by. They don't need to research. All they need to do is scan the multi-syllabled terms (fo'c'sle for forecastle) and nobody will know the difference. Don't be fooled, it's not that easy. A sheet, for instance, is not necessarily a sail—it can also be a piece of rope attached to the sail. A sail is also called a sail. Cunning, eh?

By the way, when you're arranging that galactic war and the battlefleet commander orders his entire fleet to "Fire!" upon the Rigelian singleships—don't let him. The navy never gives the order to "Fire". They use the command "Shoot", so that these below decks are not confused and don't come stampeding from the hold with buckets of sand at the ready.

Let's go on to talk about a really difficult area of terminology in order to expose ignorance, confuse the reader and prove how bloody clever us authors are. Falconry. Got you worried at last? The falconer's jargon is not for beginners. It is full of dark, medieeval incantations and demon-like yells. The falconer speaks of lures, jesses and bells, whistling-down-the-wind and slicing. Lures are bits of meat whirled around the falconer's head on a piece of string to—yes, you've got it—to lure the hawk or falcon back to his wrist. By the way, falcons don't swoop—they stoop, and when they slice, don't stand by with your mouth open. Slicing, to put it in delicate terms for the lady authors, is shitting like a machine gun. A healthy hawk is often gauged by the lateral distance of its slice and the force of the impact when the forces strike.

The paragraph above highlights another problem: when is a falcon a hawk? Well, it's, er, it's a difference in wingspan, the requisite inches of which escape me. Obviously there are breeds of falcon and of hawk but there is a quick and easy size reference (if only I could remember it). Some hawks make the thing laughably easy by tagging the word on the tail and of their species (goshawk, sparrowhawk). If you need a falcon in your story, you'll have to look it up. Anyway, the hawk is the featherweight.

Similarly, when is a horse not a horse? The answer is: when it's under thirteen hands. Then it becomes a pony. Hands? What's a hand? (You're beginning to sound like the Bill Cosby record of Noah asking God what the hell is a cubit.) I don't know the exact definition of a cubit except that it's something to do with an average knuckle-to-elbow measure (the Black Power movement uses the cubit as a salute), but a hand is approximately four inches. You can measure ponies, horses or women using this method. ((Garry is a fully paid-up M. C. P. —Rob &Chris))

Horse terminology, generally, is not too difficult. We all watch westerns on television (don't we?)and apart from our keen observations revealing that horses are always mounted from the left, we can also pick up a bit of jargon on the way to being entertained. This kind of empirical evidence is invaluable and should be retained for use against drunken room-parties at cons. A few choice phrases from "True Grit" takes the wind right out of their sheets. . .tails.

However, a knowledge of cowboy terminology will not help you very much in a truly European epic involving fox-hunting or hacking. You have to join one of the anti-blood sports leagues to get that kind of knowledge.

During times of war, nations encrypt their secrets before transmitting them over a communicating device of some kind. These codes communications are often intercepted and the cyphers subsequently unravelled. To further confuse the enemy, therefore, communicators often throw in a false message with the good ones and presumably their foes are fooled into bombing the local rubbish tip instead of the factory. Terminology has one or two traps like this. For instance a bullet in the armed forces is never called a bullet—it is a round. And a gun is a rifle, pistol, machine gun, but never just a gun. Things are not always what they seem to be. Beware the obvious false message. Likewise there is the syntactic overlap, where two leisure pursuits appear to have the same or similar references. Tack, for example, might be a verb, meaning to change course obliquely through the wind, or a noun, i.e. a ship's course. In horse parlance, it's a collective noun for the trappings that encumber the poor beast when it has to fit a human on its back. Sometimes the references are linked, like telemarking in skiing and canoeing. A telemark, I'm sure you all know, is a sharp turn in both sports.

This leads me neatly into my winding-up paragraphs. If you are thinking of writing a story or novel which involves a sport, pastime or whatever—do that thing. Have a skiing holiday in Austria and let the tax man pay one third of it. There is no better way to research, believe me. The other way involves frustrating searches of inhibiting libraries (with the added danger of contracting illicoils from dusty archives), or having to grovel before public

servants in record bureaux for the privilege of viewing documents contaminated with 19th century tubercular viruses. You are entitled to claim tax for travel in order to obtain local colour. Doing a chapter on skydiving? Get up there and start jumping—on the taxmen. How about hang-gliding or windsurfing? Book yourself in for a few lessons. Cling by your fingernails from the edge of a cloud and enjoy it. What about skin-diving in shark-infested waters? Go to the Caribbean and experience real fear—get some authenticity in those few important lines where the shark comes in for the last fatal chunk of the hero's flesh. At the same time pick up some of the terminology of those wonderful Caribbean fishermen who collect the places afterwards.

The whole idea can be taken to extremes of course. Just because a protagonist takes a sip of wine at a yacht party, there's no need to sail across to France and spend three weeks getting smashed out of your mind, only to learn that the French say "Chug-a-lug", too.

Some authors, I know, do go to distant places in order to gather their references. Rob Holdstock travels to the dark recesses of Southern Ireland to listen to standing stones talking to each other. Chris Evans spends most of his time in bars listening intently to the publicans ordering their stock. It's in your hands buddy. Do that thing—but don't go to extremes. I spent fifteen years in the Royal Air Force learning that a gazemie is a going-home party thrown by bar-girls in Singapore. And for the information of dissipated males, if a Singapore bar-girl calls you a butterfly, she's not being complimentary. They hate butterflies, believing them to be promiscuous creatures.

By the way, I don't want dozens of letters of the sort, "You stated that a pony is thirteen hands, but where I come from, Wisconsin, we call a pony etc. etc." I will state categorically, here and now, I am probably wrong.

the problems of genesis

ken bulmer

If you wish to be a writer there really is no substitute for writing. You have to take up your quill or operate your golf-ball miracle, and place on those virgin sheets of paper words that attempt to convey what you have in mind. That is the difficult part in being a writer. In every person's mind ideas are floating around freely. The problem for a writer is to get the thoughts into words and to let the heart stand revealed. It is a matter of sincerity, of faith in what you have to say and the way in which you intend to say it, of emotions seeking a natural outlet; the clarity of your vision and the lucidity of your expression should flow as nature flows.

But when they don't—that not only sorts out the fulfilled from the frustrated, it also illuminates depths of your own character that you might prefer to remain shrouded in obscurity.

An example of the difficulty in staring me right in the face.

Receiving the suggestion that I should do a piece for Rob Holdstock and Chris Evans' new writers' magazine must have started me thinking. I began to visualise things to say. I resisted these ideas. I have deadlines, I am in the middle of doing my Income Tax; but writerly thoughts obtruded and so I gave in and pandered on what I was going to say.

I am told I am what is known as an organic writer. The sentences form around the ideas and emotions like growing crystals. But you have to put down the words and then you have to look at them; and after the initial shudder you make the attempt to improve and refine and strip away the dross and rearrange and polish. (But be warned: too much polishing can wear away the sparkle.)

If the ideas in the mind can be likened to the original cosmic formlessness, charged with undirected energy, then the words poured out can be likened to the first physical chunks of clay. Now you, as Creator, as sculptor, mould them into the gleaming image you seek which will arouse response and fully convey your reasons for going through the agony of creation. And, of course, you'll never 'fully' do it. Beware of the writer who tells you he has 'got it right', or that 'It's absolutely first class'. Yes, sometimes a writer will find just the right word or phrase or even the whole scene; but it is a sobering fact that no writer of any worth ever feels he's got it right all the time, no matter what he might say.

Nevertheless, if you've got the words down on paper you can work with them. But how to get those words down in the first place? What happens if you have the ideas but the words won't come? Ah...

Most writers have their own personal methods for overcoming difficulties in writing. I dislike using words like 'trick' or 'gimmick', but perhaps these are the right words for what is a purely mechanical solution to a primarily psychological and emotional problem. At the beginning of the day I often find it a good idea to sit down quietly and read poetry. I do this from time to time and it does work surprisingly well. The point is to read the poetry in the normal way, for all the right reasons, and not to sit down and think: "Ah, now I shall read some Hopkins or Owen and then leap up and write a masterwork". If you read the poetry with your spirit, and sink into it, you may emerge refreshed and with your own thoughts and emotions shaped and vitalised.

If you are sitting before a blank sheet of paper and you know what you want to say but the 'words won't come', you can succeed. (If you sit before a blank sheet of paper and think: "Really, I don't know what to write", perhaps you'd do better going back to being an accountant or a dustman). If you have the unrealised form of what it is you wish to say, but cannot frame it into grammatical structures—put down what you have. It will be near gibberish, perhaps. You may find that verbs are elusive, or that plurals and singulars and cases are at wide variance. But get it down. Speak it aloud, if necessary. Say what it is you want to write, and write down what you say. You may not express yourself in perfect language, but it is words on paper with the clayey potential for reshaping and improvement. I've often heard people say: "I just can't get it down", and then they go on to speak a series of coherent sentences saying what it is they wish to write. The idea that the written word is so vastly different from the spoken, though true, does need re-examination.

Some people always finish their day's work at the end of a page with a dangling sentence. Next day they read the first part of the sentence and, click, the rest is recalled. They write that, and they are launched. Others retype the last page of the work written and use that as a launching pad. Others continually consult text-books on writing and "authorship"; these books often contain elementary tricks in writers of that ilk's trade. These are all old mechanical tricks, and can help to get you moving. You can start from the other way around and use language itself as the tool to discover what you have to reveal. But ultimately the impetus to write must spring from a much more profound layer of the imagination, and the orderly marshalling of your floating thoughts and feelings into coherent English is the real 'trick'.

I have been talking of the mechanical devices you may use to put the words on paper at the beginning of the work. I think it is important to point out that there is a vast difference between that and the process of writing itself, which is a subject complex and arcane, a matter of art and spirit and intellect, and probably subject to enquiry until the end of the world—and after.

I have been told that writers outside of sf do not get writers' blocks. I do not know whether this is true or false. The theory advanced is that science fiction writers wish to write really good works of literature but instead are turning out rubbishy science fiction and so their sub-conscious rebels and stops them from

writing anything. This might arouse some useful comment, pro and con. Probably, to be fair, one ought to add to rubbishy sf, rubbishy genre fiction in general. Blocks are generally not much spoken of by those not suffering from them, and incessantly by those who are. We must all understand the virulent antipathies aroused in the breasts of blocked writers by the nonchalant statement by a well-known sf writer: "A block? Oh, yes, I had one of those once; it lasted a good ten minutes." Some equally well-known sf writers claim they haven't written for astonishingly long periods, like 12 or 18 months. I'd hazard a guess that the majority of people reading this Holdstock/Evans compendium of fun and frolic are not bothered by blocks because their attitude to writing is conditioned by a different set of needs from those operating on writers who are being regularly published.

From time to time everybody must suffer from that terrible feeling that you just can't get it right and you don't feel like working and yet you know nothing else will be any damned good if you don't write. I doubt that this is a block, but it must be desperately debilitating. It is at these times, too, that what you write turns out in your eyes as the most awful junk. If you throw it away you may be doing the wiser thing. If you keep it, it may turn out later to contain hidden gems you'll be glad you've saved. This is a matter of personal discretion. A point to watch is that each story is a whole, true to itself, and you can't just patch in bits here and there to improve a particular aspect. Well, you can, and it is done; but it shows. It shows not necessarily in a simple way, like being able to spot the patches, but in the much more fundamental way of the feeling of the story.

Even so, there is a condition I sometimes call the Skill Syndrome which operates like this: when you don't feel up to writing and are so out of sorts you know nothing else will do, a professional will sit down and write with all his skill, carefully, painstakingly, slowly, making damn sure every word is working, and rigorously examining every structure and every concept. Under these circumstances, his professional skill will often enable him to produce excellent writing. I say nothing about the feeling or emotional content; but the reader response, as I know from personal experience and from conversations with other writers, very often completely fails to detect any difference. And this isn't because there is no emotion there anyway; it's more because the writer has gone back to basics, and because of this does it right.

It is often recommended, and I have subscribed to the dictum, that you should always finish what you begin. There is sound common sense in this, and it's probably excellent discipline for the beginning writer. So don't accumulate a drawerful of just-begun and half-finished stories. Finish them. That I still believe to be good advice when you're starting out.

Some people write to expose their inmost parts on paper; others write extraordinarily well and expose nothing. You may write purely for your own self-satisfaction, or you may want to see your name up in lights. But after a time, these are not the reasons for writing, even if they might have been at the outset. The act of writing is antisocial. Its rewards vary widely and unjustly. And what you don't have to know why you want to write, it's quite likely that if you do know, it will help to give you a better understanding of what to write. If you know exactly what you want to write but haven't thought of why you want to write it--no sweat, you're a natural.

But if, when you roll the sheet into the platen, you see it as a blank sheet of paper with an overt threat, challenging you to fill it up with words, that, in my view, Just Won't Do. That sheet of paper is merely a part of the medium you have chosen to express those floating concepts and emotions, merely the top sheet of the ream, and when the ream is all gone you nip down to the cellar for a fresh box.

If you really want to write there is nothing for it but to sit down and write.

writing SF for children

douglas hill

Here is a question, with some implications: is there a market for children's science fiction?

Here is the same question, altered slightly to counter a sharp monosyllabic answer: is there an audience for kids' SF?

Naturally I have to shove the term around a little. Some readers will remember Arthur Clarke defining kids' SF as any SF with the sex taken out. Which may just underline the fact that Clarke hasn't ready any good SF since about 1964.

Then there was Tom Disch's cutting remark that all SF is children's fiction, which means that every fan is a peer asterous unable to elevate him/herself into reading what the big kids read. But that's the kind of thing said by people who don't want to be called SF writers anymore so that the New York Review of Books will take them seriously. It's just as true and just as useless to say that all fiction is children's fiction, in the sense that whatever children read becomes children's fiction. If by some miracle the nation's fourth formers started reading Recherche a Temps Perdu, Proust would become children's fiction.

More usefully, we can settle on the radical notion that "kid's SF" is the kind of SF that kids want to read. I know that a lot of older kids read any kind of SF, and that's as it should be, depending on the ready capabilities and interests of the individual. Younger readers would probably gravitate to simpler forms, with more of an accent on dramatic action that stylistic pyrotechnics or socio-philosophical depths. It often seems to reflect, loosely, the principle of ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny: the new young reader starts with 1940s space operate and works his/her way up through the stages of SF's maturation to the present. . .um, er. . .heights.

But do they? I mean, are there hordes of kids out there wanting to read good, exciting, rewarding SF on whatever level? Is there an audience?

I think there is. Declaring the interest, this August sees the publication of the first book in a series I'm writing that might be called "space operetta". I want very much for there to be an audience for it. End of commercial.

But opinion is divided about whether there is an audience, and what it's like if it exists. And that is the nub of this piece --- to outline some of the problems that might confront other writers thinking of diversifying into "juveniles".

If, as I said, kids' SF is simply the kind of SF that kids want to read, then the arguments rage around the word "want". There are no sure ways of measuring want: only stacks of opinions, informed to varying degrees, tending far too often to be coloured by the opinion holders' memories of their own childhood reading. Librarians, teachers, posh-paper reviewers and book-buying parents are of course the most articulate and influential of these opinion-holders. They're sure they know what kids want, not to mentioned what they ought to want.

And of course they are, almost uniformly, charter members of a particular stratum in the social class structure, bringing to their choice of books for their children all the preconceptions and requirements and taboos of that milieu. Publishers, being in business, invariably reflect those requirements and so on. And

these facts help to explain why so many thousands of children in this country have never developed the reading habit, and probably never will: because from the outset they were sharply turned off by the kind of books that were offered them.

For a long time SF was almost entirely beyond the pale, for the opnion-holders, except for supervised forays into "classics" like Wells, Verne and the highly improving fancies of C.S. Lewis. Then, when that taboo began losing some of its power, the British juvenile SF that emerged usually reflected the standard twee precosity of traditional British kiddywink fiction --- on the level of "Noddy in Space" or "Pooh Bear Goes to Mars".

On a somewhat older level, the standard formula has a kid or two as central character, in the future or on another planet, with a problem to solve. Adults other than heavies are as well-spoken as Dr. Who, often with comparably endearing eccentricities if they are scientists. The youthful heroes are generally precocious, opinionated and hugely indulged by Mummy and Daddy. They tend to say "Bother!" when stymied, and to find things "frightfully interesting".

Now I don't doubt the publishers' assurances that there are kids who like that kind of book --- or anyway for whom that kind of book is bought --- and that they are the primary audience for kids' fiction of any sort. But such a statement seems both a cop-out and a terrible condemnation.

And in any case the kind of SF for kids' that I've just described (there wasn't much exaggeration in it) isn't really SF at all. It's Jill and Her Pony or the Famous Five wearing space-age fancy dress.

I don't believe that kids who read that sort of book are the likeliest audience for SF juveniles. I believe we have to look beyond the "primary audience for kids' fiction of any sort". And when we do I think we'll find a whole generation of younger readers, junior school and secondary school age, who are already SF addicts. Because, while many of them may have been turned off reading by the sort of books favoured by librarians, teachers, etc, these kids have other ways of feeding their imaginations. They buy comics. They go to films. They watch television. And do you need me to spell out what they find, more often than not?

Thankfully, there are a few publishers --- mostly paperback houses --- who try to keep abreast of what turns on the majority of kids, as opposed to the ultra-literate elite. They are aware of the startling volume of SF (and borderline SF) in the popular media. (They're also cannily aware that kids today have more pocket money than in grandad's time, and would be able to buy their own books --- in paperback --- rather than having to put up with the filtration system of librarians, teachers, etc.) At the same time, though, a powerful palace guard of the opinion holders is furiously resisting the idea that what kids like might be relevant. They refuse to see significance in the vast distribution of Marvel comics, the impact of Star Wars (and many other less ballyhooed films, like Rollerball), the vast following of the Bionic duo and all the rest. They seem to be asserting that kids ought not to have such low-brow (and Americanised) tastes indulged. And I don't doubt that many FOCUS readers will right now be echoing that assertion. Am I really saying that kids' SF must lower itself to the level of the Hulk or Blake's Seven to reach an audience?

Not really --- or anyway not quite. I'm not about to defend the degradations of SF. But is Star Wars so degraded? for me it's a hell of a good kids' film --- in terms of SF's "golden age", 30 years or so ago. Just as Star Trek is a hell of a good series in the same terms. And the kids have to start somewhere. They're not going to fling aside their weekly Spiderman and plunge straight into The Left Hand of Darkness. Ontogeny recapitulates..

Equally, whatever the librarians and so on may think, most kids aren't going to switch off Steve Austin for the sake of reading Wind in the Venusian Willows or whatever. Films and TV have brought them a whole different set of fictional conventions, excitingly new to them even if pathetically dated to us blase old deriders of space opera. In other words there's an enormous, ready-made audience out there, queuing for Battlestar Galactica and Superman. I want to reach that audience. I want to convince them that the kind of SF they like comes in books, too. And from that might come a side-effect that goes some way beyond merely improving on SF writer's royalty statements.

The ultimate point is that if all those kids are so deeply into media SF, then written SF could be one of the surest instruments to help kids develop the reading habit --- and retain it. Providing that the written SF bears definite resemblances to the SF they get elsewhere. And any book writer ought to favour a likely way of increasing the number of book readers. So ought the librarians, teachers, publishers.

The next time, then, that you get an urge to write a slam-bang, action-packed space opera, don't instantly quell it and penitently force yourself back into your ambitious, significant, multi-dimensional and symbolically supercharged magnum opus. Write the damn thing, and enjoy it. There's an army of kids out there who'll probably enjoy it too --- and, as I found, a few publishers who recognise their existence.

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questions

Q: I've just written a story which I want to submit to a professional magazine. In what format should it be presented and do I need to provide any information about it?

A: Stories should be typewritten on one side of the paper, double spaced, with each page numbered. The first page should carry the story's title and the byline under which the author would like it to appear if published. The title page should also carry your name and address and the word length of the story to a good approximation. The manuscript should be accompanied by a short letter to the editor saying that you are enclosing a story for consideration plus a stamped self-addressed envelope to cover return. The editor will judge the story on its merits alone, so don't try to explain what you are trying to achieve with it or how it was written—be brief and to the point.

Q: I'm just starting to write a story and I'm worried about getting the right balance between dialogue and prose. Is there a simple formula to follow?

A: No. Each story is different from all others and should not be written to any formulae. If you have a good idea of what you want to say and how you want to say it, then write the story—the balance between dialogue and prose will dictate itself.

Q: How do I get off the slush pile?

A: How do you know you're on it? All manuscripts get read eventually, and if your work shows ability you can be sure that people will soon be reading you with interest.

Q: A story of mine which was rejected by a magazine a year ago had a time-travel gimmick in it that I hadn't seen used before. In a recent issue of the same magazine a story appeared using my gimmick. Have I been ripped off?

A: It's possible. Editors have been known to farm out good ideas to other writers—ideas have no copyright on them. But it's also possible that the other writer might have arrived at the same idea as yours independently, so it's best to put it down to experience and get on with your next story.

Q: I live in Sunderland; I'm broke, I don't have a car and I feel isolated. I'm working on a novel and I've got lots of short stories, but I can't sell anything. People just like me in and around London seem to have much more success and they say personal contact is everything. Is this the case?

A: Personal contact with editors and publishers can be very useful but ultimately it's the quality of your work which counts. Publishers are always looking for new talent and it doesn't matter where they live. Keep plugging away by post; apart from innate ability, the other major quality which a writer must have to succeed is sheer determination.

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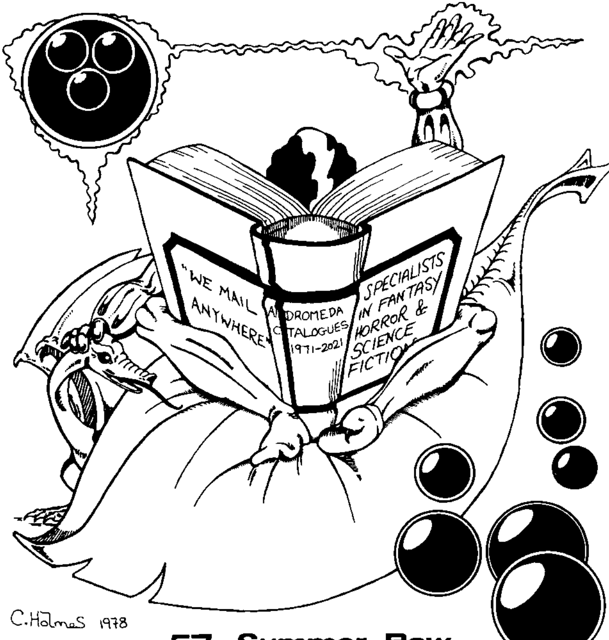

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