FOCUS

AN S.F. WRITERS' MAGAZINE

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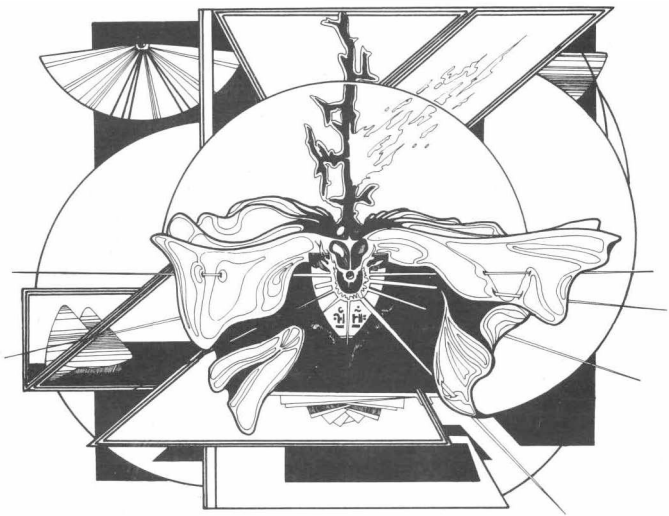

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FOCUS
AN S.F. WRITERS' MAGAZINE

CONTENTS ISSUE 4 SPRING 1981

Edited by CHRIS EVANS & ROB HOLDSTOCK

Editorial Address: 38 Peters Avenue, London Colney, St.Albans, Herts AL2 1NQ, to which all letters and orders should be sent. FOCUS is no longer open to contributions at this address. For further information on BSFA publications, contact the Membership Secretary (see below).

The views expressed by individual contributors are not necessarily those of the editors.

FOCUS is a publication of the British Science Fiction Association Ltd.: Chairman Alan Dorey, 20 Hermitage Woods Crescent, St Johns, Woking, Surrey GU21 1UE; Business Manager Trevor Briggs, 6 The Plains, Crescent Road, Chingford, London E4 6AU; Membership Secretary Sandy Brown, 18 Gordon Terrace, Blantyre, Scotland G72 9NA.

Art this issue is by Jim Barker (pp5, 6 & 7), Richard Litwinczuk (pp9, 10, 11), Edgar Belka (p12), Simon Polley (p14).
Cover by Simon Polley.

FOCAL POINT

We first proposed the idea of a writers' magazine to the BSFA at the Dragonara Hotel during Yorcon I, in 1979. Our declared intention was to produce four issues over the next two years, then review our own positions at that time, perhaps contracting to continue the magazine.

That time has now come. This editorial is the last contribution to FOCUS 4, and when it is finished, we are finished, too. We have decided against a continuance of our involvement with the magazine. Henceforth, if FOCUS appears, it will be under new management, and no doubt will change completely to fit the new editorial style.

May we say immediately that we agonized long and hard about this decision. It was not an easy one to make. Working on FOCUS has been one of the most enjoyable jobs of the last two years: our editorial offices ("The Feathers", Chiswick) will not be the same without us. There have been moments when we could almost bring ourselves to believe that articles by professional writers would start to arrive unsolicited and in numbers, giving us a stock of good material to draw on for each issue. There were moments when it seemed reasonable to hope that bookshops, publishers and institutions would advertise in FOCUS without our continually chasing and begging them to do so. But this has not happened.

The fact is that while FOCUS is a challenge to produce, and good fun in the extreme, it is time-consuming and demands attention too continually. We made a private pledge two years ago that we would respond to all articles and stories with personal letters. This eventually becomes as much of a burden as a pleasure. We imagined in our naivete that once the first issue had appeared and our requirements for articles by writers on writing - anecdotal, theoretical, humorous, serious looks at the publishing world and the business of authoring - became clear, articles would trickle in at a steady rate from beginners and established professionals alike. Alas, few of the articles we have published came unbidden. We had ideas, and we enjoyed talking through articles with potential contributors, but for each issue we ideally needed to be actively chasing only about half the material we required. Instead we were chasing almost all. This dents the time, the energy and the patience.

And it is time that has become harder to find for us both. 1980 was a very difficult year for your two editors. We made sales, certainly - new novels by us both will be appearing in 1981 - but for rates which have changed little since 1977. While the average wage of the community rises steadily from year to year, the wage of the average writer has been shrinking, in real terms, by up to 20% per annum. Not only that, but the outlets for his work have been shrinking, too.

(Pierrot Publishing is a particularly harrowing example of this for the fractionally older partner in this editorial team. Pierrot published large format illustrated books, packaged without cynicism, but with a real sense of enjoyment and "fun". Mismanaged totally, it went bankrupt. Its loss as a market for such books removes not only financial security but also work security from those who had become entrusted by the company. To find commercial work that does not clash with or detract from the serious work of writing fiction is hard to accomplish. If it has been accomplished once, it is maddening to have to start searching again.)

It is with regret, therefore, that we are giving up the editorship of FOCUS.

So much for the misery and excuses. We said - and we meant - that producing four issues of FOCUS has been fun. It has been fun for many reasons, and we'd like to acknowledge those reasons. We have both enjoyed reading fiction by unpublished writers (the tiring part has been writing critical comments, however brief, on all submissions). So thanks to everyone who sent in manuscripts. We hope you make it. We hope all those seriously involved with writing make it. But for one last time may we flog the horse we've always flogged (no, not the one about avoiding rotten metaphors): if you wanted to write it and you wrote it, and you finished it - you've done all that is important. If you published it later, good for you. But the market must always remain the secondary consideration for anyone seriously involved with their writing, since writers who slavishly produce work according to commercial dictates risk losing their individuality and may end up producing identikit fiction.

While on the subject of stories and our responses to stories: when we were reviewing our letter files from the past two years we were simultaneously horrified at the unbearably dogmatic tone in which we have couched many of our letters of rejection, and delighted to find ourselves still in agreement with most of the resonating, patronizing profundities with which we have regaled those who have submitted stories to us. We thought it might be useful (if a little indulgent) to quote from a few of the letters which highlight our strongest feelings about much of the fiction we have seen. (We hope that no one who recognizes a letter we sent to them will feel that we have breached a trust.) These can be found on page 26.

Who else, then, to acknowledge? The answer is: so many. Not for the first time, Andrew Stephenson, one of our great mates, tolerant to the point of martyrdom when we have practically camped in his house for days on end, using his typewriter, getting him to design pages and fiddle with letraset. Andrew has been the third editor/designer of FOCUS, and it would have been much less of a magazine without him. Then there are our "regular" artists: Jim Barker, Rob Hansen, Richard Litwinczuk and Simon Polley. All of them contributed happily to FOCUS and without complaint, even when our requests for artwork tended to be sent three days after the deadline. Thanks to you all, and not forgetting Edgar Bella, Andrew Brown and Tais Teng for your individual contributions, which were very welcome.

We'd also like to thank everyone who took the time to write articles for us, and those who wrote letters. We don't seem to have prompted much aggravation, and we have enjoyed long correspondences with several readers. Keep in touch, won't you?

We have always wished for more feedback to FOCUS - and get very irritated by letters such as the one in MATRIX 34 which casually refers to FOCUS as being "mediocre", but makes no attempt to justify that statement (and is doubly odd, since we have a recent letter in our files from the same person saying: "Thanks to all concerned for such an interesting and informative fanzine"); we're not immune to criticism, but we wish people would write to us with the complaints and praise they have. Overall, though, the support we've had has been most valuable. Comments on this issue are, as always, welcomed: we'll forward letters to any future editor of FOCUS.

Finally we must thank the BSFA, especially Alan Dorey and John and Eve Harvey, who have often gone out of their way to make things easier for us.

In this issue we have tried to bias the content towards the art of writing rather than commercial considerations, and one of us has been unable to resist the temptation to give voice himself to some thoughts on his unfinished career. Two previous contributors return: Chris Priest discusses "voice" in writing, and Randal Flynn presents a provocative view of art as labour. Lisa Tuttle, who moved from Texas to London specifically to write for FOCUS, gives insights into her novel collaboration with George R.R.Martin. Talking Points also has

Continued on page 27

christopher priest

the authentic voice

You will sometimes hear it said that for a writer to become successful an individual "voice" must be developed. Most writers will respond to this advice positively: they are individualists, they are egotistical, they want to establish a name. But what does it mean? Of all the pieces of wisdom handed down from one generation of writers to the next, this is surely the most imprecise, the most generalized. It sounds sensible, it even sounds quite grand, but for vagueness it is without parallel. How do you find a voice? How do you recognise one when you've found one? How do you know it's any good?

And what is it exactly? Are we talking about another word for prose style? Or is it just a different kind of plot? Or is it, perhaps, one of those things established writers say to mystify what they do, or to conceal the fact that they don't quite know how they do it?

I'm not sure I can answer all those questions, but a clue as to the nature of "voice" might lie in an observable fact. This is that one author's work of fiction is usually different from everybody else's. A story by Ian Watson feels different from one by, say, Ray Bradbury. Most readers can sense this, even if they don't know, and don't care, why it might be so.

From the reader's point of view, "voice" is often the product of hindsight, and it's not always a good thing. You sometimes hear it said of an author that "all his books are the same". It can cut two ways: that's sometimes a recommendation. Then you might overhear someone in a bookshop or library asking for "the Hammond Innes kind of story". The reader knows the sort of book he likes, and wants more or similar. Such a reader is responding to voice, even though if tackled on the subject he would probably say he was meaning a particular "type" of novel (as if any such thing existed).

The distinction between voice and style can be seen more clearly outside literature. Consider the songs recorded by the Beatles. When the Beatles first became popular, many people remarked on the unique "sound" of the group. Much of this sound was created by the songs themselves: they were harmonised in novel ways, they were sometimes intriguingly worded and they revealed an outstanding instinct for melody. As everyone knows, many of the songs were written by two people, John Lennon and Paul McCartney, sometimes working in genuine collaboration but sometimes working more or less alone. Throughout the life of the group, the Beatles' "sound" remained distinct, but differences between Lennon songs and McCartney songs became more apparent, culminating in two separate careers after the group split up. Today, most people who take an interest in popular music can instinctively tell the difference between a Lennon song and a McCartney song.

Now, with hindsight we can go back to the songs they wrote during the Beatles period and discover that songs once thought to be a new homogeneous "sound" are actually the work of two distinct talents. To take polar examples, "Norwegian Wood" is obviously a Lennon song, while "Yesterday" is equally plainly McCartney's. Both writers have "voice", and it is a part of their greatness.

We can make a parallel discovery in the work of writers. In the sf genre, Brian Aldiss's novels provide an excellent example. Some of Aldiss's early publications, notably Equator or The Interpreter, might not have seemed especially promising in their day. Both are modest works, and both fit into the general ambience of the science fiction of the late 1950s; both stories lean heavily on plot, and a lot of running around goes on. And yet with the same hindsight we can see that even these minor works have the unmistakable Aldiss stamp on them, with their likeable and indecisive heroes, their love of exotica, their positive exercise of English. (There was no need to wait for hindsight, as it happens. Aldiss's very first book, The Brightfount Diaries, was a work of some maturity.)

But my definition of "voice" is again beginning to sound like a definition of "style", or "stylishness". Here are a few more instances from science fiction:

To many readers the first mention of a rusting gantry or an abandoned hotel or a crashed car signals a story by J.G. Ballard. In perhaps the same way, raccoons and rocking chairs signify a Clifford Simak novel. Paranoiac ambivalence is a hallmark of Philip K. Dick's work. Mad astronauts seem to have been invented by Barry Malzberg. Colourful action is associated with Jack Vance.

How much of this sort of trademark is "voice", how much "stylishness", and how much mere repetition? It's all subjective, but for me voice is a constituent of artistry. Aldiss, Ballard and possibly Dick are, in my view, serious literary artists and they speak with singular voices. Simak and Vance are not and do not. I'm not sure about Malzberg.

Use of the word "subjective" is pretty risky in the science fiction world, because people like Spider Robinson leap upon its use as if it were a password. But this distinction is subjective, and is not for once part of my trying to make out a case. Take the example of Simak, a writer whose work I happen to dislike.

Simak's novels stand for decency and old-fashioned virtues. His characters are sensible, down-to-earth and much given to introspection. They adopt a high moral tone. I take no issue with any of this. What bothers me about the Simak books I've read is that he deals with his material in an imaginatively repetitive way. It is the intensity of imagination which makes a writer great. A writer's soul is revealed by his response to the challenge of ideas. In Simak novels you find the author

responding to the plot in the same way as he has always done. In almost every Simak novel there is a scene where the central character settles himself into a comfortable chair on a porch, and rocks to and fro while he ponders on something. Then his dog dashes into the surrounding woods, presumably chasing a raccoon, but returns in a while with an alien or a bit of an alien. The action is thus advanced.

This is not an author returning to a theme which obsesses him. It is a writer mimicking himself. It is soulless writing, imaginatively sterile.

Now let me offer you two short passages and ask you to try to spot the authors of them. You will probably know both writers' work, but in making a point I've tried to rig it so they are simultaneously easier and more difficult. The first passage is from a recently published science fiction novel, written by American author whose twelfth book it was:

> He reached the boundary of the barracks within half an hour, and lay in a ditch on the inner side of the fence - nothing more now than a series of tilting support posts - scanning the open surface of the compound. The barracks was the airmen's quarters of a small airfield. Beyond the buildings were the control tower and two or three wide concrete runways extending off into the haze. Between the barracks he could see the upright steel skeletons of two large hangars. In the nearer hangar was the tail section of a Dakota that had been tethered by a steel hawser. It slammed and swiveled in the driving wind, its identification numerals still visible.

The second passage might be easier, although it is not from a piece of science fiction. The novelist is a British woman, writing in the early years of the nineteenth century:

> Though we had feared to be late, we found the drawing room empty. A solitary moth, prematurely awakened, flitted among a dozen lighted tapers, as if undecided which would afford him the most glorious demise. Finally, he committed himself to the topmost candle in a stand of four that stood upon the mantel next to a glass-belled clock. The flare of the moth's death drew my aunt's attention to this clock and roused her to wonder whether we had come to the right room.

Both of these passages contain examples of each author's individual 'voice'. Yet neither passage is typical of its author, which is why I chose it.

The first passage is an ordinary piece of writing, a straightforward description, handled competently, of a military post. Although some of the sentences are short, pithy and workmanlike, the first and longest sentence is clumsy and mediocre, disfigured by what seems to be an afterthought put in between dashes. For most of this short section the writing could belong to anybody. But the last two sentences are interesting, because although the actual prose style is not fundamentally different, we have our interest focussed by what the author draws to our attention. We are attracted by the detail that the tailplane has been secured by a hawser: in the next sentence comes the almost obsessive detail that its numerals were still visible. There is an individual eye seeing this moment in the story, and it is an individual's voice which is describing it to us. The book this passage is from is the first, and for many readers the least interesting, novel published by J.G. Ballard. I'm afraid I lied to you about it being the twelfth book by an American author.

But look back at the passage now, in the knowledge that it is by who it is, and does it not seem more "Ballardian"? Of course this is hindsight, but surely our very understanding of the word "Ballardian" was learnt by a gradual discovery of Ballard's texts. I believe that in this early text of Ballard's we can hear his authentic voice. (It's only fair to say that by the time The Wind from Nowhere was written, Ballard had already made his mark with a number of unique short stories, and his 'voice' was recognisable, if only to a relatively small audience in British sf magazines. I might add that I had to hunt through the novel for some time before finding a passage that didn't give the whole game away at once.)

I also lied to you about the second passage, although it is in fact a mature work. It is not a fragment from some neglected epic by Jane Austen. The author is a contemporary American, the novel is a recent one, and is Leonie Hargrave's Clara Reeve. Ms Hargrave is better known to sf readers as Thomas M. Disch. I chose the piece because it again points out that "voice" is not interchangeable with "prose style". The language rhythms in Clara Reeve are ornate and to modern years outmoded, and the choice of vocabulary is consciously within period. I hesitate to use the word "pastiche", but it might do to some extent. The style is manifestly not like the bulk of Disch's other work. Even so, the passage is identifiably Disch's work. He has always been a writer who delights in the macabre or bizarre, and the word "delight" underlines the gaiety of much of his fiction. In this short passage we witness the last erratic flight of a doomed moth, and are invited to be entertained by it (note the phrase "glorious demise"). And yet the moth is not just there because the author feels playful. It advances the plot: the flaring demise attracts the aunt's attention to the clock, and onwards goes the story. Disch is a writer who enjoys plotting, and there is a lot of it in Clara Reeve.

All this is how I interpret or understand the concept of "voice", but I want to restate that I'm not trying to prove a point. I remember at the first Milford Conference I went to, Brian Aldiss asked one of the writers there if what he wanted was a voice or a market. This question was provoked by a story which to Aldiss's mind had been written in an attempt to satisfy a particular American sf magazine. One can obviously work out what "markets" want, by a process of analysis and deduction, and then set about supplying the goods. It is what many hack writers do as a matter of course, and it is not altogether to be despised. But most writers, and most beginning writers, don't want to settle for that. They aren't interested in becoming J.R.R. Tolkien Mk.II, or Michael Moorcock Mk.III, or the new Anne McCaffrey, however much they might admire those writers. What they want to be is themselves.

But if they did mimic those writers, or anyone else, all they would achieve is the distortion of their own voice into an imitation of someone else's. The next step from sounding like someone else is saying the same things as someone else.

Individuality is therefore tied up with originality, with being irreplaceable, and ultimately with being artistic.

A market or a voice... this is what it all boils down to in the end. A writer who has found a market but who lacks a voice makes an empty, comforting sound; he says what is expected of him, he sings other men's words, he sounds familiar and reassuring. But a writer with a singular voice is one who surprises, who unsettles his audience, who does not immediately satisfy the expectations of him, but is one who in the end will develop his own unique following. In Wordsworth's words: every great and original writer must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished.

Notes on an Unfinished Career

ROB HOLDSTOCK

I work in one corner of a large room, whose state of chaos is a frighteningly apt metaphor for my state of mind; my desk is a disaster zone, cluttered with note-books, files, unanswered letters, scraps of paper with telephone numbers and 'things to do' scrawled upon them. The floor of the room is covered with piles of paperback books and magazines, photographs, pictures, and even (I notice as I look around to check my facts) a denim shirt. God knows how long that's been there. There isn't enough room in the office for everything I want to keep to 'hand'; in consequence the jungle of material is awesome to regard. But once every half year or so I spend a week organising the place, tidying up, boxing up the worst of the paperbacks and magazines, filing the rest, putting photographs into albums. Boxes full of items that I was sure I would read or use get shoved into the attic, already full to jamming point with ten years' hoarding.

In this way, too, I write. My concession to order is to have a large box of files, each labelled with some appropriate clue as to its contents: Odds and Sods 1978; Belgium Speech & Notes; Novel ideas (promising); Odds and Sods 1981. The projects on which I am working are in slightly bulkier files, propped up on *my desk: a novel*, a short story, an illustrated book, FOCUS 4, Sometimes Sheila asks to read what I've written of the novel. But when she opens the file she finds nothing but a sheaf of densely typed sheets (single spaced, both sides of the paper), unreadable through the typographical errors, interspersed with pages of scrawled, biro-written words that, if left for more than six months, not even I can decipher. The novel material builds up, scenes, narrative, scrawled insertions to be 'polished later'. Eventually I sense an ending in sight. When that is written, the process of tidying commences, sorting out and storing away the bits of narrative that can't be used, organising, and cleaning up the paragraphs, re-experiencing the novel as a whole.

Now begins a process of destruction and intepretation that tests my intellect to its limits. A brilliant and evocative scene (by my standards) in which great truths are about to be revealed, ends abruptly with a hand-written note: "Fill in Great Truths later". A complex but gripping discussion is frustrated by a margin comment: "Don't forget that he's been ixeceted!!" For the life of me I can't make out what the word "ixeceted" was meant to say. After a day's agonising I scribble the comment out and hope that "ixeceting" is not an important biological activity. I begin to dread a review that reads, "Although promising, the whole novel totally falls apart because the author appears to forget that he ixeceted his character in Chapter 2". Names are filled in at this time too. In first draft most subsidiary characters have had simple names, like Chris and Roy. Now I riffle through the telephone book for such beauties as Ben Hawkentok, and Immuk Lee. Main characters somehow always seem to evolve their names naturally, and I never change them after the fact of their establishment. This leads to slight discomforts, such as in my last book where the main protagonists were called Leo Faulcon and Lena Tanoway. I dreaded having to write the line, "Leo and Lena leaned lower". Fortunately I managed to avoid it. Alien names are a cinch, though. I have two foreign language dictionaries, one Irish and one Dutch. If I need an alien name I lift out a word and spell it backwards, or spell it phonetically. Thus Rund-iamha-reach in Eye Among the Blind, from the Irish word for mystery, 'rundiamhair', and VandeZande's World in my more recent effort, from an obscure Flemish name.

I've never seen the point of getting all the technical details in my sf right, and here I stand in a terrifyingly minor minority. I've never been interested in how things work, or even why... all that I care about is that they work if I say so, and continue to work until they don't. I feel much the same way about 'social and economic set-ups' too. I often have whole communities of humans living on a colonised world, and they tend to do what I want them to do, and usually get into trouble for doing it (= story). When I'm asked a simple question such as, "But where does the finance for all those special machines come from? Who pays the bills?" I shiver for a moment, wish I knew more about economics, and perhaps write in a line of dialogue in which the Viewpoint Character says, "What finances all this?" only to be told by a puzzled minion, "I'm not sure. But we manage."

Research is important, of course. I did a great deal for Earthwind and enjoyed it all, and *am* doing a great deal for my current project, which is largely historical; but you learn to distinguish, before you begin the book, between research that will stimulate the evolution of the novel and research essential for background authenticity. For Earthwind I spent six months reading about Neolithic Ireland, and the philosophical use of oracles, especially the I Ching, which would dominate all my characters' lives. But details of police procedure, say, or exactly how the M4 motorway runs, these would all form part of the 'check this later' margin commentary. The trouble with that sort of nit-picking research is that it gets in the way of the business of writing. If I think too hard about my idea, and my characters, before I start to work, everything becomes very mechanical. And if you start off writing character with too well evolved a picture of him or her, then perhaps you will deny that character the chance to take on a more subtle complexity - although, if you will. I can't be totally sure of this, of course. It's just the way I work. I begin writing from images of character, and perhaps a few scrappy sounds, words or phrases. Characters to me are a little like casual social acquaintances; I have to make a considerable effort if I'm to develop a good relationship with them. And as with real life, I don't always hit it off with someone I meet on my pages, and I get bored, or frustrated, and this shows of course in my writing.

Since I've got to know my character, I should say also that things can go wrong at a later stage. You can lose touch with a main character, and the expression of ideas in the novel, even the structuring of landscape, can begin to take on a false edge. In his article "Notes on an Unfinished Novel" John Fowles observed that characters are like children; they require constant attention, constant care, constant love, constant admiration... They are all part of one character, of course, the writer himself, and they extend on to the pages, shaping and growing and taking on a life of their own; eventually they become quite detached, functioning consistently, enriching the story by their very unpredictability, by the way they say and do things that the child at the typewriter has not expected: his fingers fly across the keys, his mind speaks to the page, but he has reached deeper into the relationship between himself and his creations, to a place where consciousness has been considered.

But no matter how real a character becomes, there still exists a thin umbilical cord reaching between creator and created; tiredness, a concern with things other than the simple expression of a story (concerns, say, with finishing a book on time, or what the readers' reactions are going to be), these can block the cord, starving the character of the flow of life. It has happened to me, and I expect that it has happened to most writers; when you tire of your characters, or when char-

acters tire of you, the work is effectively finished.

Concern for how a readership will react to the completed work is of very low priority when I'm writing, but like all of my adopted breed I secretly lust after flattery, and spend sleepless nights trying to imagine people in Birmingham (like Rog Peyton) or Woking (like Alan Dorey) reading my novel, and whimpering and gasping with pleasure. I'm always very aware that even if everything comes together in the writing a novel can still fail to work for a substantial number of readers. It takes quite a while to grasp the simple fact that statements such as "I didn't understand it" or "I couldn't read it... awful, heavy, boring book" or "it didn't do anything at all for me", that these are not statements of failure, or of criticism. They are statements of non-rapport.

After all, there is an enormous gap between reader and writer. "The reader sees us as we were; the writer lives with what he is. It is not so much ideas, subjects, characters that matter to a writer, but the experience of handling them." It would have been nice to have said that before John Rowles.

But how do you communicate so personal an experience to a readership hungry for, and critical of, the finished form? I wonder if it's true to say that a Reader finds a favourite Writer in one whose personal experience with the landscapes and characters of his novel communicates along some hidden feed-tube, linking like-minds through the cold printed product?

- 2 -

Each day is different, and Sod's Law operates mercilessly. I have only to respond to a question about how well my day has gone with a cheery "Terrific, a fantastic day's work, got lots done" for the following day to be spent in distracted, frustrating non-productivity. Such disciplines - often recommended - as "Always write 3000 words a day" or "Always spend at least the same number of hours each day trying to write" are nonsense. If it doesn't come, it doesn't come. It's all right for hackwork. Hackwork doesn't require 'natural expression'. In fact, one of the objectives of hackwork is to correct any natural expression to fit the totally pre-ordained plot and character and formula style. Creative writing involves almost totally unconscious expression, telling as much about the writer himself as of the characters voicing the words. I'm often puzzled, and very often surprised, by how my narrative twists and turns; early in my last novel, for example, when I was still feeling my way with my characters, I wrote that one of them "wept mock tears". I was surprised by that word "mock", as I'd thought only to write that he had wept, and I almost made an on-the-spot deletion. Later, it became transparently obvious why the bastard's tears were "mock". First instincts! And trust, trust in yourself. It sounds arrogant to say this, but it's essential: you have to write what you're writing with the attitude, "I may have doubts and discomforts with what I'm writing, but that's because I'm too close to it; I've not mucked up before; and there is no reason why I should be starting now." Which is not to say that things cannot go badly wrong with a novel. They certainly can. Writing can fluctuate from day to day, weeks can pass when the creative flow seems clotted; out of such anxiety and harrowing frustration come an energy and a power that make the emergent writing sparkle; but to have a fundamental doubt about one's ability seems to me to mark someone constrained by external considerations.

On a bad day, nothing goes right. On a bad day the landscapes and characters seem to hover in a heat haze, miles distant. Hearing them talk is like listening to radio interference. Everything seems to have no colour. On a bad day even the simplest of tasks assumes a gargantuan form; you find yourself writing paragraphs like this:

> "My brother was looking across the street; I looked to where he was looking to see what he was looking at. Standing in a shop doorway was a good-looking girl, looking at us as if she knew us."

I write paragraphs like that even on good days, but on good days I can see instantly where to snip, change, re-order and edit. On a bad day those repetitions become slippery, unmanageable little gremlins. You start substituting "watching", "staring", "regarding" for some of those "looking"s, but you can't decide which to change, which to leave...

> "I regarded to where he was looking... I looked to where he was staring... I stared to where he was watching..."

(Hair starts to fall across the typewriter. Scratch marks appear on the walls of the room. Blood flecks appear on broken fingernails.)

> "I turned to regard the girl at whom my brother was looking..."
> "He was looking at a girl and I looked too, turning my head to look..."

In desperation you end up going right over the top:

> "My own eyes swivelled in the bony orbs of my skull until they were pointed in the same direction as his..."

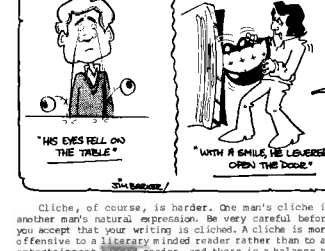
The day ends with a first magnitude Primal Scream.

The following day, of course, is a good day. You read through the offending paragraph and see the solution instantly. You cut the lot, and write:

> "A girl was looking at us from across the street. She seemed to know us."

The same difficulty arises with handling two of the real banes of a writer's life: the subjunctive tension and the cliche. Both of these are areas where a very fine judgement is required, for both are a natural part of language. Over-use of subjunctive tension and cliche is a sign of a lazy, dialogue-dominated writer; but to deliberately not use them denies the reality and the natural laziness of common language.

Subjunctive tension, in case it's an unfamiliar expression to you, consists of such unintentionally hilarious phrases as, "His eyes fell upon the book on the table" or "She cast her eyes through the viewscreen" or "With a smile, he levered open the door" or "He screwed up his face" or (courtesy of the SFWA Handbook) "She shot her big mouth off". When read in a fast-paced, attention-gripping narrative, they pass unnoticed, but they're lazy writing, and that laziness can be highlighted by quoting out of context.



Cliche, of course, is harder. One man's cliche is another man's natural expression. Be very careful before you accept that your writing is cliched. A cliche is more offensive to a literary-minded reader rather than to an entertainment minded reader, and there is a balance to strike, and it is a crucial balance. An awareness of the danger and existence of cliche is imperative. To describe watching the dawn come up... I've just used a cliche, 'the dawn come up'... to describe sunrise in an uncliched way is very demanding, to capture that subtle change from night to light, the first glimpse of that silent reddish orb creeping snail-like above the jagged black skyline of the slumbering city. (Yech.) The trouble with trying to get rid of cliche is that it reduces your language to a bare, factual minimum; it denies, in certain instances, the chance to indulge in a descriptive flourish.

> "The sun rose. All of a sudden I could see what I was doing."

One has to take care. You can try using a more personal imagery, but this is risky, as it almost certainly involves using some clumping simile:

> "The sun, an immense Spanish satsuma, crept above the jagged horizon like a fireball over the ragged, unshaven jaw of the world..."

Perhaps the most testing time is trying to describe simple bodily reactions. Cliche interferes all the way. Try describing a panic reaction. You could say, "I backed

away frightened." But perhaps you want a flourish:

> "I backed away, my skin beginning to crawl..." [note the subjunctive tension, too]. "I backed away, my skin becoming clammy... my pulse beginning to race... my heart thundering in my chest... my head beginning to spin..."

All cliches, of course, so what's left but to try to innovate:

> "I backed away, my goolies tensed against the cold groping of the bony hand of terror..."

And so we come back to:

> "I backed away, my eyes bulging soundlessly from the bony orbs of my skull..."

What happens when you're frightened is that your heart rate increases, and the tiny hairs on your body start to erect. Even describing it thus - accurately - can't escape the fact that such expressions have been used thousands of times before... are cliched.

It comes back to judgement, and the main consideration is: is it effective? The danger of cliche is that the expression has lost much of its power through repetition. That's, after all, what a cliche is. If the imagery and power evoked ("My heart suddenly began to race") is effective, then though the phrase might irritate some, it is appropriate nonetheless.

- 3 -

Sheila is a vegetarian and is forever coping with boorish questions about why she decided to give up meat. She handles them very well these days, and only the faintest sound of grinding teeth can be heard from behind her smiling lips, testifying to her terrible need to thump something. I'm told that sf writers respond similarly to the question, "Where do you get your ideas from?" I imagine that the reluctance to respond to that question is because an honest answer would be, "Mostly from other people's science fiction - but I do it so much better!"

Frankly, I can't see anything wrong with that attitude, since the whole point of story telling is to take an old tale and tell it anew. But sf writers are obsessed with 'originality', and it is not enough that their individual voice, and way of dealing with fiction, is original - ideas have to be original. In this way sf sets itself poles apart from other genre fiction - originality is the last requirement of the Western, or the whodunit, or the thriller, as far as I can see. (A new gimmick suffices for a thriller, and then wheel in the Nazi gold and the CIA.)

I certainly don't mind being asked about my ideas. Anything that starts conversation so easily seems to me to be a very valuable social tool. It's never fans of course, always relatives, new acquaintances or the fannish 'family'. I find it fascinating just how intriguing sf is to someone who knows nothing about it. It focusses clearly upon the fact that sf is strongly identified as at least containing bizarre ideas ("I don't know how you people think them up. You must have such powerful imaginations") if not actually being dominated by them. But questions always stop at 'ideas', which is sad. I've never been asked how I find it is working with character against alien locations. No one ever says, "Science fiction? Can human values be realistically explored in futurescapes?"

No. Sf means 'strange' or 'unknown' and 'bizarre'. As such, it might as well be occult fiction (which genuinely explores the unknown, the hidden, the bizarre). To write science fiction, to let it be known that you do, is to be regarded as in some way 'different', someone whose mind must be filled with the Universe, and all manner of indescribably strange and exotic things.

To say, "Well, actually it's filled with words and fleeting images" is not enough. It doesn't ring true.

It's wonderful, though, how many people use "Where do you get your ideas from?" as a preface to that other bane of the sf writer's social life: "I had an idea once. You might like it. You can have it if you want." To which the courteous response is, "Oh great. Do tell," while your head fills with the sound of an elephant's death-rattle.

Imagine what it does to a writer to have someone else tell him an idea. There are three Nightmares. The First is that the idea being told to the writer is an idea that he already has. There is something sickening about hearing a story that you have been brooding over for some years reduced to basics, told in bare plot form, by someone who - a voice keeps telling you with sickening repetitiveness - will never believe that it wasn't his idea that you took, when the story is eventually published. And this can lead on to the Second Nightmare. The Ideamonger may just have hit upon something that unbeknownst to you (or indeed to him) is a Bob Idea. Take it, he says, I'd like to see it written. Against your better judgement, when you have the time, you write the book, and within a year you have a best-seller; film rights are bought, the film makes money. One day there is a knock on the door, and there before you stands the Ideamonger, with two burly friends. He reminds you that it was his idea in the first place, these are his witnesses, and he's come for his share. Scenes of violence ensue.

Unlikely? Well, yes. Damn near impossible, these days. But the Third Nightmare is a far more familiar one. The Ideamonger burns with his idea, hovering around you - at a party, perhaps - smiling whenever you glance at him, and at length, moved by compassion, you give him the opening he wants: "Have you ever written anything yourself?" The light that instantly burns in his eyes is insufficient to banish the stygian gloom that has suddenly enveloped your last functioning neurones as you await the onslaught. After fifteen minutes standing in silence, listening to the detailed breakdown of his plot, he at last gasps: it has been a retelling of every worst idea you've ever read. The man knows nothing, his idea is tedious, implausible, ridiculous. Relief, however, brings the words "That's a great idea," to your lips, but you never finish, for his hand is raised to silence you. "Now we get to chapter two," he says. The room begins to spin.

That said, there are two or three people of my acquaintance whose ideas I like to listen to. One of them - lets call him PG - could be a very good writer on his own terms, if he had the discipline and inclination to put pen. His most recent idea was quite superb, a sure-fire best-seller of the political thriller type. The mental void that is my political naivete widened terrifyingly as I contemplated the notion, and finally realised that I couldn't handle it. PG is the safest, and most valued source of ideas around. No that I've ever used one, although I almost certainly will one day (probably as a collaboration with PG himself). The reason he is safe, however, is that he actually desperately wants to read the books that he thinks up. I'm always conscious of the fact that if I ever did write up one of his ideas I would make one person in the world ecstatically happy, and there is a fragment of achievement in that notion, something appropriate in terms of writing.

I often fantasise about really taking writing and story-telling out into the streets, becoming a sort of roaming bard of the written word. (Or something.) I see a coach full of hungry writers, each with his own desk, typewriter, plot/character computer, box of paper and tank full of Chiswick Bitter. The coach drives the length and breadth of Britain, stopping occasionally to solicit orders: excuse me, sir, but what sort of story have you always wanted to read?

"Who me?... well, I've always wanted to read a story about gangs of Civil Service filing clerks roaming the streets, ripping the shit out of rich boys."

"Ah, yes, sir, the Revenge of the Inferiors theme. Now, we can do you our standard five thousand worder, with a sub-plot about a young female person from the switchboard whose loyalties are torn, which comes out at one hundred pounds plus VAT. Or we can do you our Revenge Special at two hundred pounds all inclusive, with a double sub-plot, development of secondary characters, message for the 80s, and our special offer of the week: extra descriptive attention to the sense of smell."

"Sounds just the job. I'll take the Special..."

"Right, sir. Now just a few particulars. How many rich boys will you require to be savaged...?"

Somehow, I don't think it could work.

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What have I learned (if anything) after six years' writing full time? The answer is: very little. I've learned self-confidence, but not self-satisfaction; an awareness of my abilities, perhaps, but a greater awareness of my limitations. I still overwrite. I am fascinated by the flow of images. I have not yet learned to take the implied advice of Voltaire who, writing to a friend, apologised for the length of his letter and regretted that he had not the time to make it shorter. And yet I enjoy overwriting. I am most comfortable when I am overwriting. But I take more care, these days, to "craft" my writing after the initial white heat of production. It's a striving for balance which will doubtless continue for as long as I write.

WAITING

David Swinden

We walked through narrow, twisting streets, Ephraim and I, rubbing shoulders with the jostling throng. The old city of Skalla was warm with light and life, its substantial native population swollen by offworld visitors such as we, here to obtain information on the coming of the Trani, that legendary, ancient race of whom the visionaries and mystics, those who could see Beyond, had spoken for years.

In Skalla there were many such visionaries: the compact, slightly shabby city provided a focal point for anything offbeat, for creative artists of all kinds. Its relatively primitive standard of living was an attraction in itself for many people. Cafes and dark cellar-bars abounded, and the fame of its red-light district spread far. It was this area that Ephraim and I, by chance, were now approaching.

We were searching for a particular mystic, a woman whom we had been told to seek by Talbor, our friend and mentor back home. When public interest in the Trani had undergone one of its periodic upsurges some months before, he had advised us to obtain permits to visit Skalla, on the planet Klathri, forthwith. He pointed out that limits would be imposed by the Skallan authorities before the year was out; he suspected this time the mystics would have something special to report. And he proceeded to mark on an old map of Skalla the route from the spaceport to Miranda's house.

We had, of course, become lost in Skalla's maze of narrow winding streets. We suddenly found ourselves in a street less crowded than most, cobbles underfoot, high, wood-fronted houses facing each other so close that one could imagine their inhabitants leaning across to converse. Ephraim nudged me, and I turned. His eyes, widely-spaced above an aquiline nose, narrowed as he smiled.

He pointed. "I think she's interested in one of us. Probably me."

A young woman was leaning against the wall opposite, darting her head this way and that to keep us in view through the people wandering by. She was not unattractive; she had short fair hair (a characteristic of the native Skallans), a wide, friendly mouth and a nose verging on stubbiness. She wore a simple short crimson dress, cut open at the front to expose her navel.

Ephraim took my arm, pulling me after him. "Come on - let's give her our greetings from offworld."

I did not resist. I was curious; people on my home-world simply did not smile at strangers for no apparent reason. In a way, I regarded Skalla as an extension of the University, a place to learn.

Ephraim introduced us with a sweeping bow. "Greetings from Taczan," he said.

The girl thrust out her pelvis and rubbed a bare thigh against Ephraim's. "Fifteen guilders for a nice time, stranger," she said, coarsely. Ephraim blinked his bewilderment.

She turned her attention to me. "I'll make it twenty for the two of you. Or if you'd prefer one each, I can easily find a friend."

Not truly believing what was happening, I panicked. Seizing Ephraim's arm, I marched away, muttering, "No thanks." For once my garrulous companion had nothing to say as he stumbled after me. Not until we had turned the corner at the end of the street did I slow my furious pace.

"Was that really..." began Ephraim, his eyes wide with wonder.

"Yes it was, really. That was a whore."

A characteristic wide-toothed smile spread over Ephraim's face. "Marvellous!" he exclaimed, and then in quieter tones, "How about going back? We can afford twenty guilders between us - just about. And it's all experience, after all."

Sensing that he was serious I made a non-committal sound. There was no way I was going to go back. I had shown myself for what I was: an offworld innocent, from a clean, ordered planet where narrow, grubby lanes and whores soliciting in broad daylight were unheard of. Also, like Ephraim, I half-regretted not accepting the woman's offer. The idea was exciting. But... I had heard of horrible diseases. And all those other men! Did whores wash? I wondered. I shuddered.

By dint of much questioning, map-searching and sign-reading we came tortuously nearer to our destination. We certainly had time to become familiar with the cheerful bustling of humanity, the heavy sunlight flooding the streets and lanes, the filthy gutters and the strange, unsavoury smells raised by the heat. We saw many placards advertising the skills of mystics, some beautifully and professionally lettered, some little more than scraps of paper pasted to grimy windows. About them clustered other visitors, from many worlds, different clothing styles clashing in a peculiarly attractive disharmony.

The people compared prices, debated whether something better lay around the next corner, whether to retrace their steps. It was fascinating to observe how the rumours concerning the Trani had entered the realm of public truth. I was glad that we had advice, that we were not forced to take our chances with possible thieves.

We arrived at the house feeling weary but excited, and hesitated before the door, on which the faded number 23 could barely be seen. The houses in this tall terrace varied in size, but were all remarkably narrow; number 23 was perhaps the width of a small room. Three tiny bells hung above the door, serving no obvious purpose, and an old curtain, patterned in pastel colours, blanked the minuscule window. There was no placard, no sign; Miranda must rely on word of mouth. I found this reassuring.

"Well," said Ephraim, and grinned. "Are we going in or aren't we?" And he rapped on the door with great vigour. It opened immediately.

"Good afternoon." A tall, blond man stepped out; he was wearing only a cotton tunic, belted at the waist, and thonged sandals, typical Skallan summer dress. We backed away to give him room, and he paused, gazing down on us. "I take it you're looking for Miranda."

"That's right," I replied hurriedly. For some reason, he intimidated me. "We've come from Taczan. Our teacher, Talbor, gave us the name."

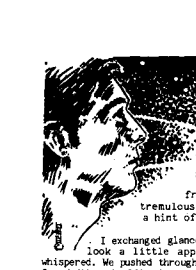
"Ah... yes. I think I may have met him once. Anyway, go straight in." He waved a peremptory farewell, and wandered off down the street.

"After you, Josh." Ephraim bowed with mock courtesy and indicated the doorway with a typically flamboyant gesture. I stepped inside.

The first thing I noticed was the smell, a pungent, musky odour, as of some exotic scent. Ephraim sniffed ostentatiously. "Very mystical," he said. "Do you suppose that's the drug she uses?"

"Maybe," I murmured. "And keep your voice down if you're going to be sarcastic."

We walked slowly down a corridor, the walls of which were hung with ancient carpets. Through the gloom I could just make out the designs on them. They depicted strange creatures moving across alien landscapes, which seemed fitting enough. To our right was the entrance to a staircase, and ahead was a door, slightly ajar, a faint light



shining through the jamb. We paused, indecisive. I felt dreamy, light-headed, as if I had passed into some other dimension, somewhere totally unfamiliar.

A voice issued from beyond the door, thin and tremulous, but nevertheless carying a hint of authority. "Please come in."

Ephraim and I exchanged glances. Even he was beginning to look a little apprehensive. "Here goes," he whispered. We pushed through the door, which creaked, and faced Miranda like two errant students before their tutor.

The room was dimly lit by a small lightglobe set on a curiously carved pedestal in a corner. Some additional pale rays slipped in through a tiny window high on the facing wall. Presumably the mystic liked to create atmosphere.

The walls were all but invisible behind the prints, hangings and peculiar relics adorning them. The furniture consisted exclusively of large cushions scattered at random over the floor. The intensity of the musky odour had increased beyond measure. I coughed.

Why had I imagined Miranda to be an old woman? I suppose because I had always thought of all visionaries as being ancient, crabbed creatures intoning incantations over bubbling pots. There were no visionaries on Taczan, and precious few elsewhere in the galaxy; purges centuries ago had seen to that. The planet Klathris, and Skalla in particular, had become their only refuge for many years. And so I was taken by surprise.

Miranda looked young, a hint of prettiness surviving the ravages of her craft. Her fine blonde hair fell straight to her narrow shoulders, where it lay in twisted strands. Shadows sheltered in the pools of her hollow cheeks, and in the dim light her eyes were a faded blue. Her small, thin-lipped mouth curved in a smile of welcome.

"You seek the Trani?" she asked, in the voice of an old woman. I nodded and noted that Ephraim had been well and truly silenced.

"Please sit." She indicated two cushions; Ephraim and I gratefully moved to them. Miranda adopted a cross-legged position facing us. I noticed how absurdly thin her legs were, poking out from beneath her voluminous robe.

"How did you hear of me?"

"From our teacher," I replied.

"Talbor," added Ephraim, "on Taczan."

"Ah, yes, Talbor." She paused. "A good man. But he knows less than he thinks he does." She smiled.

After a brief silence, I said, "As do we all," thinking this to be the correct reply. To my dismay, Miranda savagely shook her head.

"No!" she exclaimed. "Many of us - and I do not mean only visionaries such as myself - know more than we think." She laboriously shifted her position. "So. Why exactly are you here?"

"The Trani," I said hesitantly. "The rumours are that this time it will be different."

"In what way?"

I grew impatient. "They are coming here."

Miranda shrugged. "You know, then. Everyone knows, it seems. So why come to me?"

Ephraim leant forward eagerly. "They might know here - but I can assure you that where we come from they most certainly do not know. Rumours, all rumours. Besides, we want details."

Miranda smiled. "Oh, I can give you details, but they may not be the details you want." She rose unsteadily to her feet. "I will look Beyond for you. As for the fee..."

Talbor had been unable to say what this adventure would actually cost; if we should be thwarted now, through money...

"You have come from Talbor. You wish to learn. I will charge you a special price." And to our great relief, the figure she quoted seemed ridiculously low.

She was gone from the room for some time.

"Mixing her potions, I suppose," I suggested, making a feeble attempt at levity.

"But why go upstairs to do it? It's not as though she'd be giving away any trade secrets. You can either see Beyond or you can't."

"Maybe it's messy. Maybe it's just a private thing."

"Either way I wish she'd hurry. I'm getting nervous. I'm beginning to feel as though it's me who's going to be taking off."

When she re-entered the room, she seemed unaffected by whatever had taken place upstairs. She moved slowly to her cushion, her twig-like legs gently rustling the folds of her robe. Facing us, she said, "How you must be silent. Ask no questions. Merely wait and accept."

I'm not sure what I expected to happen. Perhaps she would tremble, her eyes would roll up and she would speak in a voice not her own. Perhaps she would become a wild thing and scrabble around the room, barking out her visions. And then again, perhaps she would sink into a near-coma, and drone her messages in a robotic monotone.

None of these things happened. The only visible sign of her condition was a faint glazing of the eyes. She spoke calmly.

They bring gifts. The gifts are of... something obvious.
Not all can see them.
So strange: my mind cannot comprehend their strangeness. It changes them, interprets for me...
They are good: such beauty, such glory.
And yet...

Miranda shuddered and her face grew slack with despair. Then she began crying out in terror and disgust.

Despite her instructions, both Ephraim and I were edging towards her, although how we could possibly help was not clear. Tears trickled down the hollows of her cheeks. Then the crisis passed, and she calmed.

They are good, but you may be repelled. Shocked and delighted by turns.
There is an awesome nobility about them.
They... teach us. Or enable us to teach ourselves. One lesson.
I see their shadows: they are here.

Miranda's eyelids fluttered closed and she crumpled. With an exclamation of alarm, Ephraim darted forward and seized her shoulder. But I heard her deep, regular breathing.

"It's all right - she's sleeping. She must be exhausted."

While we waited for her to wake, I drew notebook and pen from my pocket and wrote down what I could remember of Miranda's vision.

A week had passed since our arrival in Skalla, and the crowds had grown larger with every day. Soon, I guessed, the authorities would impose their limits, as the city was already overfull. Homeless visitors, sleeping in parks and doorways, were becoming a common sight. Presumably, considerations of revenue were delaying the Government's hand.

In the bars and cafes which I had frequented with Ephraim the conversations had taken on familiar patterns. Offworlders would try to convince each other that their own mystics knew more and had revealed certain... secrets. The nature of those secrets remained, of course, confidential. Dark hints would be dropped, vague, cosmic mysteries obliquely referred to. The native Skallans showed contempt for the "tourists" and considered themselves above such petty quibbles. But by so doing they were, of course, participating. By concealing their excitement, they were being dishonest.

I had come to know the centre of Skalla well, as a consequence of spending most of my time walking its streets. In the company of a sometimes reluctant Ephraim I had investigated its lanes and alleyways, and the small squares, all dominated by gushing ornamental fountains. We had sat in cafes, wasting what little money we had, by sipping the local wines - strange, bitter substances heavily flavoured with herbs - while lazily viewing the constant stream of humanity drifting by. It was always an effort to drag Ephraim back onto the street before he had "just one more".

The dirt and the smells still disturbed me. Oh, I could see that they could have a novelty value for a while, a change from routine cleanliness, a breaking out for the sake of relaxation, rather like taking a holiday from reality by getting drunk. But to actually live in this environment, to actually prefer it - that was staggering to me.

They spat in the streets, spattering the walls and pavements with gobbets of mucus. Every time I witnessed this foul phenomenon, I would suspiciously examine the

ground before me as I walked for at least five minutes.

And it was all somehow inappropriate. Miranda had said, "They have a great nobility". That was what I sought, something noble and pure. Skalla seemed a strange and unlikely place in which to find it.

I lay on my bed in our lodgings, a month of Skalla behind me. Ephraim stood before the mirror, smoothing and adjusting the cheap Skallan tunic he had bought one drunken afternoon. He was preparing himself for the night ahead, another round of bars, drug-parlours, and quite possibly worse. Our arguments on this issue had become savage at times, me claiming that if he curbed his excesses we could wait here for considerably longer, he saying what was the point of that, as we might as well spend less time here and enjoy ourselves because the bloody Trani were quite clearly a fantasy anyway. It was his theory that the whole Trani business was a massive fraud, perpetrated by the Skallans for their own financial advantage. When I mentioned Talbor's recommendation, he pointed out that Talbor wasn't actually here, and that had to mean something.

It was true that the feelings of the Trani-seekers were slowly changing from expectation to anger. There had been several cases of night-time assaults on the houses of visionaries, and at least one personal attack. It was curious; if these people no longer believed in the coming of the Trani, why were they still here? And if they did believe, why were they angry with the Skallans? Surely the emotion should not be fury, but sadness. Which is what I felt.

Ephraim completed his preening and sat on his bed. "Look, we've only got two more days here, anyway - won't you come out, have a couple of nights saying farewell to the town?"

I shook my head. I was tempted, but the other call, the call of the Trani, was stronger.

"No - I don't really feel much sympathy with the town. I never have."

"Oh, Joshua, that is simply because you've never tried to!" Ephraim rocked back on the bed, hands clasped round knees. Then he sprang to his feet, bounced over to my bed and landed with a thump beside me. "You've never even given it a chance!" His whole frame trembled with exasperation. "I know there's a lot of stuff out there that we're not used to, but that's just a reason for getting used to it!"

"Like going with whores?" I asked sourly.

Ephraim stormed off the bed to his bag and thence to the door, where he paused, his slim features taut with anger.

"Yes, I've tried it. I suppose that disgusts you?"

"I..." I could not continue and stared at him helplessly. He relaxed, and leant against the wall. "So you're staying in," he said, concern softening his voice. I remembered our friendship, and smiled as I nodded.

"But enjoy yourself, nevertheless."

He laughed, and his face was once again alight. "I will."

When Ephraim had left, I felt an urge to be out of the room for a while, exposed to the Skallan night. A corridor from the entrance hall took me to the back of the house where there was an extensive garden, liberally and anarchically sprinkled with shrubs. A few fruit trees loomed in the light of the moon.

The warm air bathed me. Sounds of small night creatures erupted intermittently from the darkness. An unusual peace settled on me in that garden; for a moment, I even forgot the Trani.

Reflecting on my relationship with Ephraim, I was thankful that he had left in good spirits. It would have been dreadful to picture him haunted by guilt as he sucked the last dregs of enjoyment from the pleasure places of Skalla.

I turned my attention upwards to the clear night sky, unfamiliar constellations. From out there somewhere came the Trani, travelling by inexplicable alien means to this small planet, to this small city... even to this garden. Looking back down, I saw something next to a tree, a dark movement, as of the shifting of some formless thing, blacker than the night itself. Strangely, I felt no fear. I paced towards the disturbed area, and found nothing. Clearly, my obsessive yearning had given substance to a fantasy. Feeling heavy with a sudden weariness, I slowly made my way up the stairs to bed.

I woke early the next morning and noted that Ephraim's bed was empty. Presumably, he had found alternative sleeping arrangements; it would not be the first time. I slid from beneath my rumpled sheet, the sign of a restless night. Padding to the window, I drew aside the tattered curtain. The street was still overlaid with shadow, the sun having barely risen.

I dressed unhurriedly, then, on impulse, found my worn notebook and once again read the words I had scribbled down after the session with Miranda. I had never been able to make much sense of them. They seemed to be nothing more than a sneak preview of things we would discover for ourselves anyway, and a rather obscure preview at that. But surely there must be more to them.

I had latched onto the part about nobility, goodness; that seemed to be the essence. What of the part concerning horror? That must refer to nothing more than physical appearance, the inevitable shock of an alien contact.

I studied the last, hastily scrawled line. "I see their shadows: they are here." I had presumed this to be a vision of their future arrival but... Should it be taken literally?

In an instant I knew.

Not all can see them.
They are here.
That was the message. That was the special secret of Miranda.

I shivered slightly with the dawn chill as I stood in the centre of the quiet garden. Strange how daylight transformed the character of a place; now I could see the shrivelled, thirsty shrubs, the patches of coarse, brownish grass, the creeping advance of the weeds. Last night it had seemed an almost romantic place; now it looked what it was, an ill-kept grouping of vegetable matter.

The nearest tree threw a long shadow towards me, and it was in this shadow that the Trani appeared.

At first, something that was there and yet not there, flickering streaks of absolute blackness like thin tongues squeezing out of the air and withdrawing. It was as if reality was a thin, silken sheet with a small rip in it, and I had to reach out with mental hands and insert them into this rip, to insinuate wriggling fingers and widen my area of vision. And through the window thus formed I saw an old, naked man, appallingly emaciated, as though wasted with some intolerable disease, coughing great, wracking coughs. But when the bout passed and he turned his face towards me his countenance shone with love, his eyes were wide and bright with a nobility transcending suffering. A nobility - they have a great nobility - but why an old man?

A small child formed beside the first figure and grinned wickedly as it did something ghastly to a tiny creature which it held in its hands. I could hear the squeals, and was sickened.

My mind and perceptions swam. These events could only be explained in terms of an alien visitation, but... these beings were human! How could they be the Trani? Was I seeing some form of holo-projection? Were the real Trani hiding, not willing to reveal themselves until I

cont'd. on p. 23

DARKNESS AND GRACE

RANDAL FLYNN

Too often the writer operates in a theoretical vacuum. Not only is the act of writing a solitary one, but frequently there is no larger framework to make the whole business intelligible. Without a framework the writer is as susceptible to false directions and fears as any other worker who is detached from the meaningfulness of his work.

Such a framework requires a redefining of art (writing), and the rejection of an irrelevant emphasis, in order to see art for what it is; and by such an act to make it more relevant and therefore more useful, since ultimately the nature of art is to be used.

Art is simply one type of labour.

It will be necessary to use the term "true-labour" to make this distinct from the myriad forms of labour in the modern world. ("Labour", as opposed to true-labour, has low job satisfaction and creates the need for substitute satisfactions.) The principles of true-labour can as readily be extended to the non-artistic labours and labourers as to the artistic endeavours, giving to both a personal meaningfulness they may not have possessed before.

Now you may disagree, but for me the purpose of labour in a person's life (and too often unfulfilled) is for them to organise and make meaningful all levels of their existence: the emotional, the spiritual, the social, and the physical. True-labour is the linchpin, the unifying force, of the diverse fragments of a passage through life, and hence possesses immense job satisfaction. Such job satisfaction is, of course, the feeling of having made intelligible and whole this natural fragmentation of life and experience.

As an example, the true-labour of Carl Jung's life was a deep commitment to investigating the vague signs and trails of his own mind, its memories, its elusive qualities, its dreams. He drew many parallels and insights between his mind (his inner images) and his outer life, as I wish to between the inner art and life. Jung observed: "... but I had taken the step into darkness. When that happens, and then such a dream comes, one feels it as an act of grace."

By "inner art" I mean that art must be seen to be an internal process, not something that happens solely in the world: when this is done, the darkness becomes visible, and Jung's step may be taken. Not until then, until the step into one's self is taken, can such a dream or story come.

At the same time, life and art, life and true-labour, must be seen to be the same thing, so that C.L. Bennet can retract his statement that, "Lives of authors are usually among the dullest'. No such separation exists. (It is an unfortunate irony that those who see writing as a "business" to be conducted in the world still hold it apart from the business of living.)

1. It is clear that there are many different kinds of writers, but those I am concerned with here are the kind of writers who have to write, for whom writing is a compulsive activity that they could no sooner give up (permanently) than eating or sleeping. The other kind, who have no need to write, are the writers who write purely to earn their living. If it ceases to accomplish that, then they would seek other employment. Those compelled to write will do so whether, in market terms, they succeed or fail.

Subsequently, I am concerned with what sort of thing these writers create when they are writing compulsively. There are many kinds of stories - journalistic fiction, psychological tales, autobiographical half-fiction, stories designed to examine a particular topic - and all of them can be seen as having greater or lesser relevance to the author as a person. It seems to me that writers too often do not allow this compulsion to express itself fully, partly because they do not attach much meaning to the notion of "compulsiveness", and also because they rarely ask where such a need could come from, thus making the source of this compulsion invisible and insignificant.

Also, there are historic and economic pressures on writers to mystify such source-searching, substituting instead false frameworks for these writers to work within. They may decide they must make their living from their writing, which immediately involves ideas of marketability, success, quantity, speed of production, peer-group opinion; and historically, because writing (and all the arts) have a strong aristocratic heritage, and may be seen as ways of avoiding an ordinary nine-to-five existence.

At the same time, this heritage and the capacity of art to be mass-marketed and mass-produced (and thus become a product, to be purchased by consumers seeking substitute satisfactions) has made art and artists into some kind of elite group. Such a crazy notion of elitism is merely another false framework (believed implicitly by most artists) and rather than making writing intelligible will only perpetuate the confusion and misdirection, creating imaginary goals and anxieties.

The following are examples of such imaginary "problems":

Originality: New writers are sometimes dismissed for having nothing new to say, or no new way to say it. Worse, they will dismiss themselves. But originality is in your own rediscovery of everything, including yourself. Everyone must be born, grow old, and then die. It would be fatuous to say that each life was repetitive and unoriginal, unless you were too concerned with external evaluations, that is, what the market and your peers have to say.

Content: My whole world was shattered when I was seventeen. At that time I had been writing about five or six years, and then one day I suddenly realised that I had nothing to say. I had no messages. I could not find one thing in myself that seemed to me would benefit another person. I had always wanted to be a really famous writer like Dickens or Tolstoy. This hope now seemed dead. Dickens and Tolstoy had had messages, but not me. In the end I decided that if I didn't have a message, then it must be because I didn't need one: if there is an act of communication, it is with yourself, to make your private universe intelligible and more complete.

Criticism: The case for criticism I mentioned in FOCUS 2. Essentially, the only relevant criticism is that which you intuitively know is relevant to your story. Otherwise, to take criticism generally to heart is only to learn how another would write your story for you, always bearing in mind that that 'other' might also be the market personified. The story itself and the image of it in your mind will reveal, under a bombardment of advice, which bits and pieces are needed. You will recognise what is missing from the whole.

Competition: There is no competition between writers unless your are competing for market space. Since Harold Fotheringay is the best and worst writer of Harold Fotheringay stories, how is it possible for him to compete with Miriam Hawthorne, who similarly is the best and worst writer of Miriam Hawthorne stories? Each will have a different market anyway, because each writer is an individual talent. If you can compete with another writer, then you are writing someone else's story: your own is unique, it is the unmistakable expression of yourself. Obviously, it may take some time and effort to unearth this individual expression, but time and effort are exactly what you have committed yourself to.

Completion: Many writers regard their job as finished when they type "The End" on the manuscript and send it off. In fact, the novel or story is only the middle stage of a process of creating a particular work. The equivalent of Jung's intimate relationship with his mind and

inner images goes on as much after the dream as before, and it may be years before the full effects of having experienced that dream or story take place.

Observation and Experience: The maxim that you must "Go out and experience life before you can be a writer" is of limited value, even for the beginning writer. It mistakes quantity for quality, and implies that one can adopt a more or less successful method for "observing". Chekhov was of the opinion that a refined young woman could, upon pausing the window of an ironmonger's and glancing briefly inside, go home and write a novel of army life. Or, as LeGuin put it, it's not what you experience, but how. Thus, there are hierarchies of experience, where to experience a "small" thing in different from a "large" one only in degree, and the difference may be bridged by imaginative and dramatic means. For instance, death may be identified and "felt" from the poignant loss of someone's friendship. There is no need to die...

These problems (the notions of originality, content, criticism etc.) and many associated difficulties, arise only when writing is seen as something generally outside yourself, because then your only criteria are external ones, and such criteria will always undermine the truth of yourself, and will try to devalue you to the role of "producer". When writing is seen as an internal experience, then many such problems are seen to be organic, and are natural expressions with natural solutions, as when you regard a "writer's block" not as an obstacle but as a necessary fallow time.

To write as your form of true-labour is to write from your own depths - to write yourself, as though you were the story...

2. When people start out writing science fiction they frequently begin so far from themselves that they may never reconnect. Stories are set on other planets, or futures, with aliens and alien dialogue. This need not be irrelevant to life, though usually it is. The only cure is to engage yourself into the act of writing. You could start, instead, by writing up personal anecdotes from your own experience, and writing them with an imaginative flair and an attempt to evoke atmosphere, the atmosphere that will already exist in your memory when you think of these experiences. From there one could go on to write short vignettes, character studies of people seen in the street who excite your thoughts and curiosity (and we all see lots of those) so that you must then speculate about them fictionally and imaginatively.

From the first glimmer of an idea or the unexpected arrival of a "subject" a story will tell you from the darkness how it must be written, if you listen, if you allow it to grow, and participate in the growing. The story will demand specific literary formats (e.g. the thriller, the biography, sf, etc.). It doesn't need you to imprison it within a genre. George Orwell, in Nineteen Eighty-Four, wrote a story that demanded an sf format. He did not set out to write a science fiction novel, nor was the end result limited by the limitations of the genre. All the best novels (and works of art) instantly create their own category. This is such a vast freedom for a novel or a story to possess, because it may demand anything and everything, probably much more than you can deliver. But if you could deliver it easily it would be like a set of feeble exercises that produced no aches and pains.

It is necessary, therefore, to understand what a story is, so that you will allow it to make these demands, and of here, and that you will accept and recognise the many parallels between your discovery of the story and your discovery of yourself, for the two are inseparable.

The story is a context.

It is a microcosm that is self-consistent, and self-truthful. It will have truths and insights in it that you were not aware of and which, at the time you wrote them, you would not have understood. But the context yields up its own truths, by years later, the fact that it is an organic whole, and in the growing it instinctively filled up the gaps in your own understanding. Some scenes and sentences you put in without thinking - they seemed right, or useful, though unremarkable. But sometime later in your life, perhaps years later, something happens and suddenly you see with utter clarity the truth of those scenes or sentences, though at the time they meant nothing to you. There is reason to have a greater faith in yourself and in the story, for the story has a life of its own, and you must give it that life. You must take the step into your own darkness without knowing what is there. If you make the story submit totally to your will then its own truth will be smothered and lost. One must be wary of the deceit of consciousness, because of its arrogance.

The step into darkness is not without hazards. You will have to do things you don't like doing. You will have to let the story go out of control. It is like sitting in a speeding car where there are no brakes: for a long time it feels wrong. You want to hang onto your story as you originally, and consciously, conceived of it. But your characters want to do other things: the deeper part of your brain wants to do other things: your must give in gracefully. The joy in writing is in not knowing where you are going, or where you will end up. Life can have a similar joy, but you will probably do neither or do both. In each it is a process of discovery. If, in the middle of a sentence, you think of something else to put in, or there comes a mad desire to go off at a tangent and utterly abandon your original framework, then do it. You have nothing to lose, except a sale.

This fear of losing control is as natural to writing as it is to life: the two are proportionate, because art is life, life is labour. It is destructive to separate them, but this is what has happened.

3. Art has been described as a neurotic compulsion. I would add that all labour is a neurotic compulsion: it is the blind drive of people who must knit themselves together in relation to their world. To describe true-labour, and art-as-true-labour, I want to borrow the term "self-creation" and say that this is the essential aim of true-labour and the unfulfilled condition of ordinary labour.

The term I've borrowed implies a very special relationship between your inner universe and the outer one, and how from the two, something new is constantly emerging, or can be, if the process of true-labour is invoked. But there is a confusion of emphasis that militates against a conception of writing as self-creation.

The art-as-experience has always had the misfortune to be judged (as has labour) not by the experience itself, but by its product. This has reduced the art-experience to a subordinate and secondary level, obscuring the vastly important relationship between the experience and the product. This damaging primacy causes the art-product to be observed, praised, even deified: all the benefits of art seem to come from the product. It produces money, fame, it alleges to communicate, it entertains, it educates. Meanwhile, the art-experience of which this product is merely an effect is lost from sight and devalued as a meaningful and imperative experience for the artist.

All forms of labour are affected by this disastrous separation. The plumber is assessed and judged by th. pipes he has mended, the car assembler by the cars he had helped to put together, but neither is a valuable account of a human being. Writers who are wholly concerned with the end-product see writing (as employees and labourers see their labour) as a form of production largely detached from their own lives. For them it is a hobby, their bread-and-butter, or merely a way to avoid an ordinary working life that probably would have far less job-satisfaction in it. While means and ends are divided and the emphasis given to the ends, rather than to the relationship between the two, then all labourers will suffer.

They will suffer because they are blind to, or have been deprived of the capacity or opportunity to engage in, the potential quality of true-labour, and to meld these with the general pressures of life and personality in a living context, a counterpart to the fictional one described earlier. Since true-labour is intrinsic to art, it is equally intrinsic to ordinary labour.

This article has been written to suggest that there is a differing view of the traditional notions of art, particularly where these apply to writing, and science fiction. I don't think beginning writers should have to undergo their development under a view that says the market is the criterion of quality and purpose, or that the end product is of paramount importance, a view that is almost religious, judging by the defence of its adherents. My final summary is simply that writers, like anyone else, are "fragmented" people and so must engage in true-labour to make themselves whole, an unending process of self-creation.

One must write from one's own depths, and have faith in those depths, and to do so is to take Jung's step blindly. If the product and the experience of producing it are separated, and the emphasis placed on the former, then it is unlikely that the step into darkness will be taken, for no darkness is perceived.

This climb is endless, why the hell don't we go round? Why must we climb hills, just because they are there? What's wrong with going round them, that's what I want to know. It's all right for him, he hasn't got this baby lying on a nerve, the pain down my leg is -

"Come on, Sally, nearly at the top."

"So help me push the pram, I'll get there a bit quicker."

"No, you wanted the damned thing, you push it."

Thank you, Tim, for the kind, loving husband you are, it's as much your baby as mine, and you know I'm determined the baby will have somewhere to sleep, even if we don't.

Why did they do it? Why did they destroy it all? Will I ever be able to forget the burning the screaming the dying -

"Sally, a wall, I can see a brick wall!"

I can see you black all over, burned, only your blond hair left, your mouth hanging open, screaming soundless agony, I can see the skin falling from your bones, I can see -

"A brick wall?"

"Yes, look!"

No mirage this time. A brick wall.

"Tim, would you be able to - "

"Let's get down there and find out, shall we?"

"Help me push."

"All right, but why you wanted to bring this I don't know. It's all we can do to walk - "

I'm tired of hearing it, tired of walking, tired of pushing, tired of carrying this baby, and look just look must I look at the world I shall deliver it screaming into, burning, screaming, dying -

"Sally, it's real, and look, it's tall enough, I'll be able to - "

Shelter at last, somewhere to stay, somewhere to lie down, somewhere to call -

"Is anyone there?"

"I can't see anyone."

The downward slope is as endless as the climb up, I must hold on hold on hold onhold on on-

"Snap out of it!"

"Sorry."

"It goes right through me."

"I said I'm sorry."

"I'm suffering too, you know."

"ALL RIGHT!"

"If this is what pregnancy does for you, it'll be the last one we ever have!"

Promise? But oh Tim, it's not the pregnancy, it's the burning screaming dying black nightmares. I think we're the only people left alive. I think we'll call this baby Abel. Or Cain. Who cares, we're the only ones left -

"I think I saw a movement."

Movement. Movement pulls more skin from bones, the mouth hanging open a little more, saliva oozing from the corner, the skeletal fingers clawing at the air the poisoned air we're breathing -

"There is someone down there."

I don't understand, Tim, can you tell me why all of you is so black so burned but your blond hair is so white and curly and beautiful and my fingers reach out to touch it and I can see with my burned eyes that my skin is falling from my fingers, my skeletal fingers reach out to touch your blond hair which comes away in my bones, curls wrapping themselves around the bones of my fingers as though they were living vibrant things crawling along my fingers down my black arms pulling the skin as they go reaching reaching reaching to curl round my throat to cut off the poisoned air cut off the poisoned air cut off the poisoned -

"Sally, for God's sake, stop it!"

Whole fleshy arms hold me tight, to hold me as tight as my bloated belly will let him, to chase away the living waking nightmares.

"Tim, I'm sorry, I can't help it, I just keep seeing things - "

"I know, I know, I see these things too, I just don't scream like that."

"You bottle it all up inside you. It'll explode if you don't let it go sometime."

"Would you be able to stand me screaming?"

"No."

"There's someone down there, I saw a movement, I know I did."

"There's no one there, Tim. I've decided to call the baby Cain, or Abel if you like, we can start a new society."

"What if it's a girl?"

"KEEP OFF!"

"I told you there was someone there. Old lady,

there's room enough for us too by your wall."

"Keep off!"

"Look, we come in peace."

She is black and burning and screaming and dying in front of my eyes, she is black and burning and screaming and dying but she holds the gun so steady and points it at my belly not my baby I need my baby I need the living proof of the baby that all is not lost even if the baby is burned -

"What's the matter with the woman?"

"She's seen too much."

"Haven't we all?"

"We came out of the fallout shelter - there were people outside - still alive."

"Nasty."

"Very. She keeps seeing the burned bodies moving."

"What's the pram for?"

"The pram is for my baby, my baby must have somewhere to sleep even if we don't."

"We found the pram, somehow it missed getting damaged."

"Come on."

Come on, does that mean come on she'll share the wall with us? Or does it mean come on and I'll shoot you all of you and there will be no more black people burning and screaming and dying -

"Sally, come on now, we have a friend."

Friend.

There are no friends left.

They are all burned, they screamed as they died.

"My baby must have somewhere to sleep, even if we don't."

"No one's taking the pram away from you, love. Look, put it here, where you can see it. Look, isn't this a nice shelter? I might be able to make one for the three of us like this."

"Far gone, isn't she?"

"Afraid so. She might come back to her old self when the baby's born."

"Due any time now, by the look of her."

"Yes, any time now."

Any time now the screaming will start, the pains will be able to stop the nightmares coming at me, the nightmares reaching out for all the corners of my mind where people are not burning and-

"My name's Alice Herfield."

"Tim Standing, my wife Sally."

"Are you hungry?"

"I think I am."

"You must eat, you know, feed that baby."

"Thank you, Mrs Herfield."

"Miss. I never married, and I'm glad I didn't. I learned to take care of myself."

"We can see that, this is a good shelter you've built."

"Built my own fallout shelter too."

"Have you some water, Miss Herfield?"

"Yes, there's water, here you are."

Water, cold clear, poisoned like the air we're breathing deep deep deep -

"Sally!"

"Sorry."

"I've got something here, but I think I'd better keep it until the baby starts to come."

"I think that would be better."

Pills. Drugs perhaps, drugs would stop the nightmares, stop the black people coming at me, stop the screaming in my head, stop the skeletal fingers reaching out for me -

"I'm strong enough to stand the labour pains, if you've got any drugs at all, could I have something now?"

"Sally dear, I'm sure Miss Herfield knows what's best."

"How do you know that?"

"I was a nurse, dear, I know what I'm on about, I stocked my shelter with stuff. You're lucky you found me, you know, you'll need me when the baby comes."

"I want something now, please give me something now, I need something to stop the black people coming at me, to stop the screaming in my head - "

"I don't have anything for that, dear, only something for your pain."

Burrowing burrowing like a squirrel in the box looking for nuts looking for drugs scamper scamper like a squirrel tiny lady thin lady where's your black bushy tail or is that burned up black and she must have something for me something for me -

"All right, try this."

Needle hurts, see the black comes, comes to grab the corner of my mind -

Night.

How long have I been asleep?

The pram, where's the pram gone? They've taken the pram away while I slept, my baby will have nowhere to sleep, oh dear God where's the pram gone, Tim, you've taken the pram away, my baby will have nowhere -

"Sally, Sally, hold on, love, hold on, I've got something to tell you."

"Where's the pram, where've you put the pram, baby must have somewhere to sleep!"

"Sally - listen!"

"All right, I'm listening."

"Are you sure?"

"Tell me."

"Some people came by with a baby, carrying their baby, they needed the pram for their baby, Sally, I traded the pram for something to help you."

"And where's my baby going to sleep? How could you take the pram away, my baby will have nowhere to sleep, Tim, how could you take it away, and leave my baby with nowhere to sleep?"

"Sally, listen to me!"

Listen, all right, I'm listening, but I don't believe a word you're saying, he isn't dead, Tim, it was only yesterday I realised he'd stopped moving, that isn't long, he's getting ready to come, that's all, he'll be all right, Cain'll be all right, as soon as I can give birth to him, he'll come screaming into the world full of screaming people -

" - and Miss Herfield is a nurse, Sally, she knows what she's talking about, she'll start the labour and we can give the baby a proper burial - "

"NO!"

She left it there so trusting now that we are in her trap but I've got the gun now and I can shoot her first, shoot the treacherous woman who ensnared us with shelter and food just to drug my mind, steal my pram, shoot her and watch her go black and scream as she dies her skeletal fingers clawing at the poisoned air as she falls -

"Sally - NO!"

and watch Tim fall, watch him go black and scream as he dies, tell me my baby's dead would he trade my pram would he look how his blond curls reach out reach out - and now I'll go and find those people those black people and watch them scream as they die and take back my pram and then my baby will have somewhere to sleep even if I don't -

TALKING POINTS

Confessions of a Collaborator

LISA TUTTLE

People sometimes ask "How do you collaborate?" (They also ask "Why?", and the answer to that varies with my mood.) Depending on how you work, and how long you've been writing, collaboration may look like the easy way out ("I'll get somebody else to figure out how to end this story") or like an impossible task, which could result only in a too-many-cooks mess.

Windhaven began as many collaborations do - casually, and at a convention. It was in Philadelphia in November 1973, and George R.R. Martin and I were sitting in the hotel bar watching Gordy Dickson fall over when George turned the conversation from the ever-fascinating subject of his middle initials to the suggestion that we write a story together.

It was inevitable. We were both new writers then, with less than half a dozen published stories between us, and were aware of ourselves as part of a group, a whole generation of young writers: friends and friendly enemies, competitors and collaborators, a mutual support system which met at parties and conventions and workshops and wrote lots of letters in between. Spur-of-the-moment collaborations were inspired by the nearness of a typewriter at a party, or an abundance of booze at a con, and people brought their unfinished stories along to workshops hoping another writer there would feel an affinity for it.

But George lived in Chicago, and I was on my way to Los Angeles, with a stopover in Texas. Collaboration between us would stretch out over weeks and rely on the mail. We didn't even have the beginning of a story between us. I had one request: I wanted to write an ANALOG story. In those days I wanted to sell to ANALOG (I know, it sounds bizarre now) but felt it was beyond me - I didn't know any science, for one thing. George, however, was making his name in the pages of that very magazine. After the obligatory "There's no such thing as an ANALOG story" lecture, and the startling revelation that he made up his science, George agreed that our collaboration, whatever it might be, would be suitable for ANALOG.

A month later George sent me a letter containing two story ideas. One was about people who had been transformed to live beneath the ocean; the other described a planet called Windhaven.

In a brief paragraph or two George sketched a stormy, ocean world dotted with islands, populated by the descendants of a starship which had crashed there many years before. Among these non-technological people was a guild of Flyers - people who travelled safely and swiftly from island to island by riding the storm-winds on artificial wings. The wings, made from a tiny supply of metal cloth, were passed from father to first-born son. Our story would concern twins fighting for the right to inherit their father's precious wings.

The background caught my imagination at once, but those twins aroused a negative response. I wondered about the mothers and sisters of the lucky flyers. But the story of a woman breaking societal bonds and entering a male enclave was a dreary old thing. If we were going to create a whole new world, why mess it up with patriarchy? We could still have our conflict without that particular kind of oppression if the wings were passed on by inheritance. Perhaps our heroine was adopted by a flyer, and taught to fly. After she has learned to love the sky her adoptive parents have a child of their own, and she realizes she will have to give up the wings that mean so much to her.

I was off. A few days later I mailed George the first ten pages of what was to become "The Storms of Windhaven".

It went on astonishingly smoothly after that. My tendency to under-write was compensated for by George's occasional tendency to wordiness: we balanced each other out. George fleshed out my rather skimpy first pages with more detail before going on with the story, then sent the manuscript back to me. I pruned and tinkered with what he had done - minor rewriting for the most part - and added more pages. Some things we discussed and worked out before actually writing, but for the most part the story simply flowed, one of us taking up where the other left off as easily as if one person was writing alone. By rewriting each other we maintained a consistency of style. There were a few - amazingly few - disagreements. The one I remember best was about the title. That was one argument we never did settle, and it was Ben Bova who titled it "The Storms of Windhaven" in preference to either of the half-hearted suggestions we offered when we sent it in to ANALOG. (If I remember correctly, they were "My Brother's Wings" and "Winged Women of the Lost Planet". I've forgotten which was mine!)

This collaboration was not by any stretch of the imagination less work than writing alone - if anything, it was more, but it didn't feel like more. We inspired each other, and learned from each other, and the resulting story was something neither of us could have written alone.

But although we had finished the story, we weren't finished with Windhaven. As we wrote "Storms" (and it wasn't entirely by mail - George made a trip to Los Angeles on business and stayed on a few days afterwards, during which time we worked out the ending) we found out more and more about Windhaven, and thought of things we'd like to write about which simply wouldn't fit within one story. We began to think about writing a whole series of stories, spanning many generations, set on Windhaven.

By the time "The Storms of Windhaven" had been published we had started the second story - or, at least I had. I sent the first ten pages off to George and waited.

And waited... and eventually forgot about it. Those pages languished in George's desk for more than two years, during which time he won awards, had a collection of short stories published, edited an anthology, and wrote his first novel. I, meanwhile, was working for a newspaper and worrying about my inability to write a novel.

When one day a package came in the mail from George (he was then living in Iowa; I was back in Texas), an unfinished manuscript titled "One-Wing". As I read it, puzzled, I recognized the beginning of a story I had called "A Dream of Falling".

Writing the second Windhaven story wasn't as easy as the first. The story was more complicated, there were more conflicts between us, we had to compromise. Over the years we had developed our individual voices and acquired working habits which didn't fit smoothly together. George rewrites each page as he goes along, weeding and reworking the individual sentences until he is satisfied. Once he has reached page ten, he is extremely reluctant to go back and make any changes on page one. I, on the other hand, complete a rough draft, and usually a second, before typing out the final manuscript. Major changes take place between the first and final draft, and I rewrite more now than I did ten years ago.

Where once I had felt our styles balanced one another and that we both contributed equally, now I was feeling somewhat overwhelmed. "One-Wing" was clearly turning into a novel, an idea I found extremely daunting but which George took in his stride. At times I felt I was contributing only details and making minor changes; that by sheer volume of words it was becoming more George's book than mine. Fortunately for my peace of mind, I felt our contributions evened out again in the final section of

the book.

As a whole, I am happy with Windhaven. I feel slightly more detached from it than I do from things I have written by myself, because I can't take full responsibility for it. Praise or criticism may be directed at something I did, something George did, or something which grew, in a way impossible to plan or predict, out of the meeting of our imaginations.

The writer alone is King and God. (There are editors who disagree, but never mind.) Writing is a solitary act, and either frustrating or joyous because of that. Collaboration is tempting because it offers a way of bridging two solitudes, the pleasures of sharing. Collaboration is one of the best ways of learning how another writer works, of understanding another mind. There are problems, though, that the writer alone never has to face. You'll share not only the difficulties and the work, but also any money, praise, compliments or complaints. And that after-the-fact sharing can be as difficult as working together.

We began as equals - three or four stories published, three or four more sold; we'd both been nominated as promising newcomers for the John W. Campbell Award, and both lost, that year - but since then George has gone on to become much more successful and well-known in the field than I am. I don't begrudge him this, but it does make me a little defensive that I am chiefly known for Windhaven, and usually identified as "author, with George R.R. Martin..." I'm afraid some people might think my name is on the title page out of George's kindness, for minor contributions and making the coffee. Unjustified paranoia? Maybe. But I can't forget the fanzine review which speculated that George had plotted the story and written it, while I had put in the fiddly bits - like characterization.

When I began writing this article I meant to write a stern warning against collaboration, advising the uninitiated to think again and stay away from the murky entanglements of joined by-lines. But as what I wrote became more general, it also seemed less meaningful, and far too one-sided. Other collaborators work differently and have had very different experiences. Howard Waldrop, while working with Jake Saunders on their novel 1999: The Texas-Israeli War, complained that collaboration was like marriage with none of the benefits. But he went on to collaborate with George Martin, Joe Pumilia, Bruce Sterling, Al Jackson and Steven Utley. (Saunders gave up writing and opened a bookstore.)

In the end, all I can offer is my own experience, for whatever use it may be. Collaborate if you want - but not with me.

Beware Mutations

ROWLAND TAPPEN

Between delivery and printing, many strange and wondrous changes will come over a piece of writing. Someone from the editorial staff will perhaps consult the author and perform some loving surgery to increase accuracy, literacy and suchlike qualities sometimes not 100% present in writers; later, the vile printers will do what they can to remove these qualities altogether, adding a generous fistful of random changes which affect the book rather as gamma radiation affects the chromosomes. The editor, however, you can argue with; the printer you can correct at the mere sacrifice of your eyesight, patience and leisure time while swathed in great winding-sheets of galley proofs. Another entity, however, may thrust its horrid fingers into your meisterwerk; this is usually a junior copyeditor, often one moderately innocent of style or literacy, but who is nevertheless trusted to enforce a rigorous code making Napoleon's resemble the soft-headed indulgence of your favourite granny. In a word, your publisher may have a house style.

Take Publisher A. Publisher A would prefer that certain uniform conventions be observed in its books... for example, it prefers the 'ize' rather than the 'ise' endings of verbs, and wherever you say 'the Second World War' or even 'the 1939 to 1945 war', you will be tenderly corrected until the text reads 'World War II'. (Anyone who writes, say, 'World War 2' probably needs a publisher's house style to save him or her from ruin.) Unless you're a fanatic about verb endings, this species of correction is not liable to result in bloodshed more than one time in a hundred... and what's more, Publisher A sends out a handy booklet of preferred usages, so that you know where you stand and can fight, sometimes successfully, on points of peculiar importance to you. Of course nobody is perfect, and Publisher A has a few odd things in the booklet, for example the implication that either metric or imperial units will be fine for the technical bits: personally I felt that imperial might mean more to the ever-loving public, gave notice that I would be using said units, and in due course was delighted to find the junior copyeditor had done a painstaking job of translation... "about a yard long" becoming "about 0.9144 metres long", etc. A sillier instance came when the question of a bibliography arose: Publisher A was suffering slightly from company chauvinism when compiling the house style booklet, and demanded that citations of sources should not include mentions of publishers (i.e. other publishers). Agonized phone call from editor: "You haven't bloody put in the publishers of these books!"

Myself: "Well, your house style booklet says —— "

Editor: "Oh my god, does it? I've never read the stupid thing myself... "

Publisher A, as it turned out, didn't take its own house style too seriously. The booklet was intended as a set of guidelines rather than a straightjacket, and you could argue successfully about it. Now we come to Publisher B.

Publisher B apparently did not have a house style, since I knew a friend had passed through their toils unscathed. Mind you, they'd insisted on changing the dedication of my friend's book, which is a very unusual and high-handed thing to do; but they seemed liberal enough as regards the words you used. With a high heart I set out to scribble some words of my own for Publisher B.

Approximately a month before I delivered the MS, Publisher B acquired a house style. Publisher B didn't actually see fit to mention the guidelines in advance; but when the MS finally arrived, a hoard of illiterate copy-editors fell on it with cries of glee. This new house style was a beaut. Consider:

Publisher B likes verb-endings in 'ize'. Thus the copyeditor conscientiously altered the MS to generate words like 'advertize', 'advize', 'lazer'... (Oh all right, they changed this back when asked - just thought I'd mention it.)

Dots were out. Did I want to end a sentence with three dots in order to leave a witty line hanging in the air, or to introduce a quotation? Naughty author! The copyeditor changed such things to full stops.

Contractions were out. Did I want to say don't, can't, I'm or isn't? Naughty author - that's colloquial. The copyeditor expanded them to 'do not', 'can not' etc., making sentence after sentence indescribably leaden. (I should mention at this point that Publisher B doesn't, or does not, handle fiction. To impose these restrictions on fiction would be wholly intolerable rather than, well, mostly intolerable.)

In large part, jokes were out. The book was supposed to be a humorous one, but Publisher B felt that, you know, actually making jokes would detract from the tone. Certain passages which might be considered unflattering to clergymen and to W.H.Smiths were also removed, with no appeal allowed.

Oh... and the dedication was 'wholly unacceptable'.

Oh... and some months earlier the publisher had changed the title - to, incidentally, a bad and derivative-sounding one which bears the stamp of 'instant remainder' all over it. The subtle process of consultation with the author was performed by letting me find out when U.S. rights were well into negotiations - "so we can't possibly change the title now". Meaning, we can't change it back.

After several weeks of very arduous struggle some slight compromise was reached - one or two token contractions allowed back in, one or two items of punctuation allowed to stand as in the MS. The dedication, however... I suggested that if Publisher B felt it was so terrible (it contained a j*ke, you see) that millions of sales would be lost, then Publisher B should do what many other publishers do when they don't like or don't have a spare page for a dedication - which is to bury it in small print on the copyright page. Oh no, they said then. We couldn't possibly do that. We think it would be a great disservice to the author to have his

dedication treated in such a cavalier fashion...

About much of this, there was little to do short of pulling out of the book altogether. On the other hand, I do know that one Huge Name Author recently had no trouble in opposing a similar blanket decision on style from Publisher B - it wasn't so much his cogent arguments, of course, as his Huge Name. The moral is, I think, to ask for a copy of the house style guidelines whenever writing a work of non-fiction on commission. As hinted above, they may very well change before you actually deliver - but that's your hard luck. The evil of the house style is that too often, in the hands of unintelligent copyeditors, it becomes not so much Publisher A's guide to consistent usage of a few terms as Publisher B's determined attack on the least originality of expression - even when such originality is well within the bounds of English syntax and intelligibility.

The name at the head of this piece does not appear on the writer's birth certificate or books. There is a reason for this. When recently the Society of Authors magazine published a poll, taken among their members, of how authors felt publishers treated them (a poll in which one of those mentioned above scored incredibly low, the other not being listed), there was much outcry from - you guessed it - publishers. One suggestion which came up was that just as authors have apparently produced a blacklist of troublesome publishers via this poll, so publishers should maintain a blacklist of troublesome authors.

This troublesome author is a coward.

On Being a Publisher's Reader

PHILIP POLLOCK

It is essential to have a large letter box if you wish to be a publisher's reader. What is more, it must be prepared to engulf a manuscript of at least 150,000 words because that is what will, quite likely, arrive on your front doormat. Here lies the real pleasure of reading a manuscript; plain and unadorned, perhaps with a publisher's or agent's address on the outside; inside - who knows what? Masterpiece, rubbish, four or five hours of blissful escapism, or a week's drudgery. You never know until you snip the string, open the corrugated cover and trepidatiously read the sometimes apologetic note from the agent or publisher. Sometimes craven because they know it is bad, and hopeful that it isn't quite as bad as they think it is; demanding, sometimes, because they know it is good and they want instant corroboration.

I have been a publisher's reader for twenty-five years. I started with Penguin, freelanced for about two or three years, and now work almost exclusively for Faber & Faber. I still get a thrill when I handle a pristine manuscript; it has no blurb, it gives me no preconceived ideas and, providing it is a clean, well-typed copy (alas, a rare thing) one can immerse oneself in a personal world, perhaps where few people have been before. The excitement of venturing on to this untrodden land is tempered by many factors, perhaps the last being whether the book is good or bad for your publisher. This can only be a decision based on one's previous reading experience, on the attitude of the publisher for whom you read, whether his list needs balancing towards romance, fantasy, space opera, or what you will. Is it well written, is there too much sex, too little (!), is there a good plot or too much plot; is there any plot?

The reasons why one likes or dislikes a book are various and must be analysed, investigated and studied without bias. This is the difficult thing, the divorce of bias from reason, the application of dispassionate judgement by a head free of any emotive imbalance. The reader's craft is so different from the critic's, which seeks to entertain, or the pedagogue's, which seeks to correct. His task is to measure up to his master, whether or not the product on which he gives judgement is worthy of getting to a larger public. Not whether it is good or bad, but where it stands in its own genre.

The relationship of Reader to Publisher is rather akin to Spy and Control. They tend to meet in obscure but good restaurants, to exchange their fusty manuscripts (to save postage) rather furtively, as though there were something to be ashamed of in the exchange of these packets of paper. A quick discussion of the menu, a glass of wine, and then a measured summation of the worthiness of the current offering, the offering, alas, all too often not nearly as good as the last!

When the occasional "goody" comes along, it is rather like a minor win on the pools, or even occasionally, eight draws!

Twice or three times in my reading experience has come the realization within the first four pages that I have got the equivalent of the Bible condensed by Graham Greene, adapted by Harry Harrison, from an original story by Christopher Priest; time flies out of the window, as do appointments, the manuscript pages flip by as the rustle of autumn leaves in a London street, and a phone call to "Control", usually before anyone arrives, made to ensure that the following lunchtime is free for a full and frank discussion of this new masterpiece. Alas, this happens very seldom.

I suppose some of the things I hate about the job are bulky manuscripts in torn green cardboard folders with the ends of the bindfast insecurely held by sellotape, so that when you are three-quarters of the way through, the whole thing falls to pieces. I hate also a manuscript which leads the Reader up the garden path, by being printed beautifully for three chapters, then the next two chapters are the seventh copy, then back to the fifth copy; perhaps worst of all is the manuscript which is a tenth copy! Then you feel, be the story ever so good, that you need new glasses and a big bottle of Anadin!

I personally dislike fantasy, but I read it and sum it up as fairly as I can. I like "a cracking good yarn", not crammed with too much detail, and I wish more science fiction writers would arise with the story-telling talent of a Dick Francis, whose ability to paint characters in the round puts most science fiction writers in the shade. I like a crisp, well-bound manuscript, preferably top-copy, and (in an ideal world) typed on an IBM Executive. It helps if the story is good as well!

But the thing I like best of all, is the thump of a new manuscript on the carpet in the hall.

Hints of Failure...

R. NICHOLSON-MORTON

This article could be regarded as the height of arrogance: a failed writer supplying hints on writing! Still, perhaps the editors may accept it for the vitriolic response it may precipitate. That's an arrogant assumption too. Indeed, the act of writing professionally must be arrogant, for you expect someone to pay you for the words you write. Soul-searching aside, I have been writing intermittently for ten years and in that time I have always found fellow writers to be helpful, free with their advice and experiences, and I too have tried to be the same. That, then, is my raison d'être for this presumptuous piece of writing. My chest is bared - sling your arrows!

Persistence pays. I hope that persistent failure as a writer pays - I suppose it will, if in experience and strengthening one's artistic soul. Moral: learn from failure. Like many an sf writer, I often ruminate on the questionable masochism of embarking on this crazy pursuit of sense-of-wonder speculation. Perhaps my comments will hearten budding sf writers.

By the age of 16 I had written two spy novels with a smattering of sf. Scanning them now, they appear juvenile but the plots and storylines could be rewritten to advantage now, if I felt like it. I tried stories for magazines but came to the conclusion that I was lacking something. So I sent off to a correspondence course writing school and earned the fees inside six months, selling woman's confession, spy adventure, sf, and humorous fiction, plus articles. Moral: learn discipline, do market research, aim at these markets. Discipline is very important. I'm not advocating that you prostitute your ideas and skill; but writing hackwork is not a crime - it provides you with necessary experience in a competitive world. You can write what you want or feel, but if it isn't commercial or if you're not blessed with an editor of like mind, then you're not going to get published in short story form. Novel form is slightly different - though times change...

Recently, I wrote to a successful journalist asking for his advice on an sf-oriented espionage book. (In the subject of markets, he said, "Many publishers want only smut and sensation for morons..." So what's new? Further, when he was in America, the million dollar rights auction for Judith Krantz's Princess Daisy was sending vibrations through the New York publishing world. Any publisher shelling out so much money for one book has less to spare for more offbeat novels. The supermarkets and pop bookstores - massive outlets indeed - knowing that the product (note, product, like soap powder) will be scrambled by an avid backup, devote great shelf-space to, say, 500 copies of Princess Daisy, and other books are squeezed out. The author has, in effect, to contend with pressure from both ends - publishers' reluctance to gamble on a book requiring some reader intellect, and also with limited shelf-space should he actually get to the published stage.

Certainly, I can talk from a standpoint of my experience as a failed writer. What glowing rejections! Always keen to find a new slant, I even resorted to peddling quotes from my rejections to other publishers - and the ploy worked...

"Our readers' reports have in fact conflicted, but the consensus of opinion is that whilst the writing is competent and there is plenty of incident and action, the basic premise of telepathic communication is not wholly convincing. The work is up to publication standard and indeed better than many that are published." That was a reject? Another: "The concept and plot-line we felt were most original and impressive." Or another: "With some reluctance I am returning your typescript." That bit is familiar, but read on... "I would like to compliment you on the quality of the writing and the soundness of the plot. It's a very professional piece of work and stands, I imagine, a good chance of publication... Our problem is that our schedules are chockablock..." Full schedules are familiar, too.

Before I attained this apparent professionalism (eh?), I worked at over a hundred short stories. Whilst I have sold a quarter of that total, the remainder still gather dust. Never desert a story. Put them on ice, but never discard those rejected tales. In retrospect, they may be rubbish - some of mine were - but keep them. They are ideas in the mind-bank, written down, saved; hesitant life has been breathed into them, and one day I will be able to return to them and eschew much that is rubbish: there will be a foundation to build on. That's one secret of writing. If you don't write the idea or storyline down, it will be lost. Upon these jottings you might later build a better story.

Discipline is necessary: write regularly, even if only an hour a day, and you'll be surprised how much you can produce. I usually manage a thousand words of my current novel at dinnertime.

Over a decade ago I wrote an offbeat, quite uncommercial psychological story; it didn't have a hope of selling. But I liked the style, even if none of the editors did... Then, seven years after conception, I slanted it at a particular magazine and it was swept up quite eagerly, payment generously prompt. I probably altered one-tenth of the story; the style, unusual layout and storyline, remained unchanged.

Another story, only 800 words long and written some years ago, was recently accepted for publication. It had been rejected by the same magazine twice before. I had to let it lie, gathering dust for a couple of years whilst moving on to new tales. Always move on, don't get bogged down with one form or one set of ideas. Expand, stretch yourself. Rather a slight revision with hindsight - a marvellous thing, hindsight, pity it only crops up afterwards! - I sent it off and it was accepted.

Normally, I wouldn't advise sending the same story back to the same magazine time after time, particularly if unaltered - unless the story-editor changes, of course. But unwittingly, I did this once. Having received a rejection from one magazine, I sent the story to the magazine's sister periodical, and by return of post arrived an acceptance from the first magazine! That was my first acceptance, too...

The biggest temptation for the beginner when he gets his first acceptance is to send out all the other stories which have been wallowing in mothballs. Yet the best value an acceptance can give - outside the monetary consideration - is that you are able to study the story and find out why this one hit it off. Usually it's a combination of the right idea at the right time, an unusual treatment, good characterization in a limited medium, and good plot-construction.

Don't be fobbed off into producing second-rate work. A short story can contain characterization, plot and even sub-plots. Naturally, length will dictate depth, but a good short story - short, not novella length - has crisp dialogue which contributes to the telling of the tale, an effective atmosphere accomplished with a few deft lines, and subtle characterization which can be achieved by making every descriptive and spoken word count... and by steering clear of hackneyed themes and rusty twist-endings.

It took me eighteen months to realize that my four-times rejected sf-spy story had enough potential to become a novel - it was expanded to fifty thousand words from its original thousand (the "glowing rejections" quoted above refer to it - it's as yet unaccepted). Eight years ago I embarked on a lengthy sf story involving breathalysers of the future. Rejected five times in a year, it found a home four years ago, though it still hasn't seen the light of day, nor have I been paid. Moral: don't enter into open-ended contracts!

Some of my own favourite short stories still haven't sold. One, after ten years and twenty-seven rejections! Another, which I know is uncommercial but nevertheless a good love sf story, involving (O cliché!) time-slips, has winged its way back to me nineteen times. But stubbornly, and against all the advice offered here, I have faith in it as it stands... yes, one day.

Over a year ago, within six months I wrote a series of short stories totalling 78,000 words. I have been unable to interest any publisher in this collection, apparently because books of sf short stories by unestablished authors are regarded as bad risks in the trade - what trade is left after the Krantz type of circus is finished... So I performed surgery on the book and sent individual tales off to various periodicals. Of the twenty-four stories, I have only sold six so far, and am presently enlarging another into an sf novel, Time with a Gift of Tears.

Since then I have collaborated on a science fantasy book of some 100,000 words which has been rejected four times (at the moment I think it is holding up a publisher's desk...). I simply put the flesh on bones supplied by my co-author, Gordon Faulkner. It was a marvellous experience, sparking off ideas from each other about his mythical world Floreskand. Our Wings of the Overlord received good rejections, but not a positive yet... We are currently planning two other books.

For the last year or so I have been in a kind of literary limbo, writing nothing at all before embarking on Time with a Gift of Tears. Now, the fever is growing apace, and I am eager to palpate my iron mistress daily with typewriter-nurtured fingers... Yes, keep clear of flowery speech like that!

Some folk will say you can't make rules about art, about writing. Agreed. But if you want to get published in a highly competitive field, you have to conform to some degree to give yourself a chance. Once success has beckoned, perhaps you may be secure or fortunate enough to dictate your own terms, to change the system. Not from the outside, as a small unpublished voice. Get published first. But cardinal discard principle - I turned down an offer which I though derisory, once; it is necessary to protect yourself from editors who attempt to short-change you.

In ten years I have not sold much, nor have I made a profit. But I'm not bitter or disillusioned. Patience and perseverence are essential for the writer. Writing is damned hard work; it has to be tackled properly, both professionally and artistically, and with much self-discipline.

Don't tell them, mind, but we enjoy it...

One Finger at a Time

IAN WATSON

Up until my last novel I wrote all my books in longhand in blue A4 Feint ruled books purchased from Smith's. I got into this habit because I wrote the first drafts of my earlier novels on the rocky morning train, commuting from Oxford to Birmingham; and it occurred to me that greater spontaneity and freedom of flow was achieved this way, since I couldn't very easily read what I had just written - which was sometimes a bit of a problem when I got to the second draft stage, of decoding these cryptic manuscripts on to the typewriter, at the same time reorganizing and rewriting them considerably. Since my last novel (Deathhunter, due Autumn 1981) I have been composing directly on to the typewriter, though the first draft remains very far from neat, if considerably more legible.

Stage two is typing up a second draft, revising as I go along. Then I go over the whole of this second draft in ink, revising it. And then I type a third draft, which I am convinced is perfection, so I mail it. (To John Bush at Gollancz, not to my agent - I haven't clicked with any agent yet, and my most recent flirtation with one left me hugely unimpressed.)

Gollancz get a reader's report, and read the book themselves - in great detail - and suggestions emerge, to my initial surprise, but they all turn out to be dead on target. A while having passed since I finished the 'perfect' draft, I now see that it isn't quite perfect after all, so I set to and make it perfect this time.

Actually, I've been having to do much less to that final draft in the last couple of years, as the suggestions have been fewer and less extensive; and I quite miss those editorial evenings at the Bushes home over a bottle of whisky when the book was on the dissecting table for total surgery. Now it only requires a few amputations and grafts, minor surgery which can be performed over lunch, or even by letter. Still, John assured me that Deathhunter could be revised quite easily with a bit of pen work on the typescript, and I rewrote the whole darn book anyway from beginning to end. I think the moral is (as someone said) that a novel is never actually finished; you just stop writing it. And as I'm a Protestant Work Ethic workaholic I rewrite my books rather a lot, doing about six times as much as is asked, in the end. But I work quite swiftly (or at least so I'm told; it never seems so to me.)

Schedules? Yes indeed, and on the whole I manage to keep to them. Deathhunter was even finished a week ahead of my own schedule, at all stages. I'm very orderly; I don't see the life of Art as a life of mess. I work Mondays to Saturdays, 7 a.m. to midday, with excursions now into the afternoons, partly because new things are piling up to be written all the time, partly because of the recession made ten times worse by the insane Tories.

Plot outlines? I did use pretty tight plot outlines for my earlier books, and even card-indexed them. Latterly I have increasingly been seeing what develops of itself out of the initial situation. And of course when I had a tight plot outline, things would still go their own way as they willed - which is as it should be. Weird things always happen; for instance in God's World a murder occurred, and I remember writing on the manuscript, "who the hell killed him?" and staring at this sentence and realizing that my dear heroine must be the killer, and raging at this, and arguing it out with myself on the page, because your heroine can't be a sex murderess, and deciding to play along with this, and yes, it was the true answer.

I typed all my books up until Deathhunter on a faithful old Hermes Baby Portable, which usefully had French accents; now, when I write a French letter (as it were) I have to cover it with inky crow's feet. The Hermes packed up a few months ago, shortly after the publishing industry sank on to its knees, and immediately after I'd lost a windscreen on my car, burst a tyre, snapped off the window winding handle, and run into a Volvo. I replaced the Hermes with a manual Olympia Regina de Luxe for about the same cost as repair estimates for the Hermes. Its only sophistication is a tabulator key, which saves time for indenting for new paragraphs, thus encouraging more use of dialogue (cf. Marshall McLuhan on the impact of technology on art).

Actually I'm quite mediaeval compared with all these writers with self-editing visual display IBMs, agents and accountants. I work out my VAT in my head, probably to compensate for a traumatic episode in my youth when I worked in a shipping office in Newcastle briefly after leaving school, and got five different answers when I was totting up a portage account. Yes indeed, Chris Priest is not the only ex-accountant in our midst; I too was one, for three weeks! But actually, I owe my current skill at numeracy to playing darts most evenings.

Research? This is why I moved from central Oxford to the countryside: to stop myself from doing too much research, and to encourage free invention and the fantastical imagination. But yes, I have researched things in great detail in the past. I have reams of paper on the Cetacean central nervous system, the grammar of Quechua (did you know that was what the aliens were speaking in the bar scene in Star Wars? True Fact: they were talking the language of the Incas, to the astonishment of all Bolivian and Peruvian peasants who have since seen the film), the vegetation of Sakhalin, mediaeval Islamic metaphysics, the orbital character-istics of 61 Cygni (which I wish I had never discovered, since once I had, Mike Bishop and I had to locate Under Heaven's Bridge in a different star system entirely - we both being scrupulous individuals - thus losing a sale to Dave Hartwell, the editor at Pocket Books, who is fond of 61 Cygni. But I haven't got time to go into the Cygni incident here, owing to the savage space constraints which the editors of FOCUS have imposed upon me, save to say that too much research can be bad for you).

In fact, I have developed a much more effective method of finding out what I need to know than research - a kind of Zen technique of hitting the bull by not looking at it. (Curiously, this doesn't work when I'm playing darts.) The method is random serendipity accompanied by willed intention. I will walk into a library and at random, without searching, I will find exactly what I need to know, and even what I didn't know that I needed to know. I realize that this is a paranormal talent, but I assure you that it's true. Other writers have experienced this too. It's probably very common.

Turning to my preferred reference works, listed below, you will notice that these are scrappy in the extreme, apart from The Merck Manual, the Bible of the American medical field. The University Atlas is 20 years old left over from the time when I ran the University Bookshop at Dar es Salaam pending the appointment of a full-time manager (who turned out to be a fascinating chap, Charles McKinnon, Laird of Dunakin, author of the Observer's Book of Heraldry and under various pseudonyms of a dozen Romance novels). The English Duden is useful at times for reminding me what things look like, and which widgets are attached to which sprockets. Actually, there's a story on every page of Duden and I heartily recommend it to John Sladek, whose short story "A Game of Jump" is built so hilariously upon, and only upon, the vocabulary of a Ladybird book.) Duden, published in Germany, significantly omits all references to War in any form, which is why my characters increasingly shoot each other with Hunting Equipment such as The Carbine employing The Telescopic Sights. Duden is useful too in lieu of an American-English Dictionary for transatlantic terminology. ("He lined up the alien in his sight graticulate" becomes "He lined up the alien in his cross-hair diopter".) And I use the Penguin English Dictionary to rein in and simplify my huge vocabulary, since it had become obvious that I was using too many long and exotic words. ("He pared his words to points like stars / Leaving them pure but very few" - Lawrence Durrell's poem about Horace.) The Concise Atlas of the Universe is pretty useless. All it says about 61 Cygni is that it is "the faint star 61 Cygni, in the constellation of the Swan, was found to lie at 11 light years". And: "A visual binary with a comparatively great proper motion". That's a fat lot of use (even leaving aside the etiquette of referring to a visual binary as "the star"): nothing about the separation of the components or their spectral class. The trouble with the New Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology is that you have to know the mythology already before you look it up. The only real reference book I have is The Merck Manual, 11th edition, 1850 pages of Bible paper, an indispensible tool when your characters fall ill.

With these tools and techniques, and with one finger - none of my other fingers knows how to type - I conduct my career. In an orderly way. One finger at a time.

REFERENCE BOOKS

Ian Watson's comments (opposite) on reference books were prompted by our request for his ten most-used items, plus his favourite English Language dictionary. We also asked several other writers for their lists, and the feature article which follows (introduced by John Brunner's response) was the result.

JOHN BRUNNER

Yours is an impossible question to answer! If I were simply to list my ten most-used reference books (which I just tried) eight of them would have to be dictionaries, ranging from The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology, which I suspect I shall be using a lot less now that I own the compact edition of the OED and can go to the source, by way of Harrap's New Shorter French-English and an old Cassell's German dictionary I had at school, to that highly unreliable work, Wentworth & Flexner's Dictionary of American Slang.

So what I'll do instead is list the ten items I absolutely could not manage without, because so often they turn up an answer to a problem I could not otherwise solve without visiting a major library.

Favourite dictionary first: Chambers Twentieth Century - the best for words, scrabble-players and crossword addicts. I have the 1972 edition; I think there was a revision in 1977. I cannot too strongly recommend this one.

Now for the ten least dispensable:

1. Life Pictorial Atlas of the World

   I have the 1961 edition - immeasurably useful for someone setting stories in the USA, as I so often do, but also magnificently illustrated with photographs that give at least a superficial impression of what life and landscape are like in all the major areas of our planet.

2. Collins Authors & Printers Dictionary

   Oxford University Press, 1973 - not so much a regular dictionary as a style book, full of practical advise on punctuation, preferred usage and preparing scripts for the printer. I prefer it to the Rules for Compositors and Readers at the University Press Oxford.

3. Roget's Thesaurus (Penguin)

   To which there are now plenty of rivals, like the Webster's Collegiate Thesaurus which I also use occasionally (it's like a dictionary so you don't go via an index, making it sometimes quicker), but I like old Peter Mark's quirky categories, and the current recension by Robert Dutch is first-rate.

4. The Penguin Dictionary of Quotations

   My best source of story-titles! I suspect, again, I may use this one less now that I also have the new Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, but it's given me years of excellent service. There's a companion Dictionary of Modern Quotations, by the way.

5. The Times Atlas of World History

   A creditable attempt to produce a less-than-usually Eurocentric account of our species. (The small Penguin atlases of Ancient and Medieval History are probably more convenient for certain purposes, as well as being excellently laid out.)

6. The Guinness Book of Records

   Chiefly as a rough guide to the rate of advance in various fields, which one may have to extrapolate further progress in while working out an SF plot.

7. The Shell Book of Firsts

   A wholesome corrective to many received ideas about what is and what is not "modern"! (If you want a fuller account, try Leonard de Vries's Victorian Inventions; did you know the term "aeroplane" goes back in print to 1879, when a certain M. Tatin made one fly very well with a steam engine?)

8. The Book of Key Facts

   (Ballantine 1978, originally from Paddington Press.) An immensely useful tabulation of what was going on at the same time as things one already knows about.

9. New Scientist New Society
10.

    Yes, I know these aren't actually books, but I get most of my scientific information from the former and a hell of a lot of my story-ideas from the latter! A subscription to both of these will turn out in the long run to be better value than a good few reference books...

Come to think of it, I might as well list a few disappointments while I'm at it: items which I had high hopes of, which in the upshot turned out not to be very useful after all. I have not found the following half as valuable as I expected:

1. The Joy of Knowledge Encyclopaedia

I have the complete set, and all but two of the volumes are still in their cellophane wrappings.

2. Asimov's Book of Facts

Isaac didn't put this together himself, and it's riddled with errors; I sent a list about eight pages long to the publishers.

3. Chatto's Modern Science Dictionary

Very bare, very basic, and simultaneously pointless for the expert (who knows it already) and the layman like me (who can't make it yield the information he wants).

4. Wentworth and Flexner's Dictionary of American Slang

(Harrap 1960) - I sent about ten pages of corrections on this one... but the current edition may have been revised. (Much more useful is The Underground Dictionary, Simon & Schuster paperback; my edition is from 1971).

5. The Penguin Encyclopaedia

I think I have yet to find any entry in this for what I wanted to find out, and the endpapers are covered with my notes of commissions and mistakes.

6. The Cadillac Modern Encyclopaedia

About which I can't be quite so scathing, for it contains useful historical tables such as lists of the US Presidents and a great many appendices on scientific and mathematical matters, so it may well be useful e.g. for a college student. But here again I've covered the endpapers with lists of items I couldn't find in it, and it's very badly proof-read.

7. The Reader's Encyclopaedia

(Book Club Associates 1973) - an idiosyncratic compilation by William Rose Benet whose idea of what readers are looking for differs wildly from mine!

8. Language in America

by Charlton Laird, which I bought expecting a useable guide to the separate development of American English. The guy is wrong on most counts, especially his total disregard of black, Spanish and Amerind influence on the modern language. Buy J.L.Dillard's books instead: Black English and All-American English.

(Now for the heretical bit...)

9. Wilson Follett's Modern American Usage and Bergen & Cornelia Evans's A Dictionary of Contemporary Usage.

10. Fowler's Modern English Usage revised by Sir Ernest Gowers.

These, and the other books I have like them, rest on the shelf gathering dust for years at a time. When I do consult them it's generally out of desperation, and I am almost invariably totally disappointed; either there's no entry for what I'm interested in, or I run into a blank wall of generalised pontification. The only people who could perhaps benefit from such works seem to me to be those too smug to entertain the idea: politicians and civil servants. (Yes, I know Fowler is supposed to be required reading for the latter - but have you read any government forms lately??)

This has been a very pleasant way of passing the morning! Thanks for asking!

KEY

jb: John Brunner
ce: Chris Evans
rh: Rob Holdstock
gk: Garry Kilworth
dl: Dave Langford
cp: Chris Priest
as: Andrew Stephenson
iw: Ian Watson

BOOKS

1. Language and Literature

PENGUIN DICTIONARY OF QUOTATIONS — jb,dl,cp

PENGUIN DICTIONARY OF MODERN QUOTATIONS — jb,dl,cp,as

FOWLER'S MODERN ENGLISH USEAGE — ce,rh,gk,dl,cp
The only reference book every writer should possess. Not quite the last word on the English language, but penultimate. Some people are known to read this for pleasure.

ROGET'S THESAURUS — jb,ce,rh,gk,cp,as,iw

CONCISE OXFORD DICTIONARY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE — cp

A DICTIONARY OF HISTORICAL SLANG — cp,as

LONGMAN ENGLISH LAROUSSE — gk

USAGE AND ABUSAGE — ce,gk,as

OXFORD DICTIONARY OF QUOTATIONS — gk,as

PENGUIN INTERNATIONAL THESAURUS OF QUOTATIONS — as
Similar to "Roget's": useful in a different way. Interesting quotations, not just obvious ones.

MIND THE STOP — ce
G V Carey - Penguin
Good practical advice on punctuation. Short and informative.

THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE — ce
White & Strunk - Bantam
Highlights common pitfalls in writing. Brief and to the point.

BARTLETT'S FAMILIAR QUOTATIONS — ce

GOOD ENGLISH / BETTER ENGLISH / THE BEST ENGLISH — ce
G H Vallins - Pan

2. Business

COLLINS AUTHORS & PRINTERS DICTIONARY — jb

WRITERS' AND ARTISTS' YEARBOOK — dl,as
pub: A & C Black

WRITING FOR TELEVISION IN THE 70s — as
Malcolm Hulke - A & C Black
(Recently revised.) Not the whole story about tv writing, but outlines basic principles - can save much time at first.

3. Science & Technology

THE CHEMICAL RUBBER COMPANY HANDBOOK OF CHEMISTRY AND PHYSICS ("The Rubber Bible") — dl

ASIMOV'S BIOGRAPHICAL ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY — dl

PENGUIN DICTIONARY OF SCIENCE — dl,iw

NEW SCIENTIST (weekly magazine) — jb,rh
pub: IPC

NEW SOCIETY (weekly magazine) — jb
pub: IPC

SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN (monthly magazine) — rh

PENGUIN DICTIONARY OF PSYCHOLOGY — cp,iw

MAN'S BODY - AN OWNER'S MANUAL — gk
pub: Corgi

ASIMOV'S GUIDE TO SCIENCE, Vols 1 & 2 — gk
pub: Penguin
Good for layman - basic essential science. Better than "Nightfall".

CAMBRIDGE ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF ASTRONOMY rh
Very theoretical, very tough, very good.

A FIELD GUIDE TO THE STARS AND PLANETS gk
Donald Menzel - Collins

CONCISE ATLAS OF THE UNIVERSE iw
Patrick Moore - Mitchell Beazley

NEW DICTIONARY & HANDBOOK OF AEROSPACE iw
Marks - Bantam

THE MERCK MANUAL (OF DIAGNOSIS & THERAPY) iw

CHEMICAL ENGINEER'S HANDBOOK as
John H Perry - McGraw-Hill / Kogakusha
Not a 'must' but if there's a copy handy it might yield those hard-find-scientific facts, eg speed of sound in methane at -100^{o}C...

4. General

ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF SCIENCE FICTION dl
ed: Peter Nicholls - Granada

ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA dl

GROSS'S CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION (1934) dl

LIFE PICTORIAL ATLAS OF THE WORLD (1961) jb

THE UNIVERSITY ATLAS iw
pub: Philips

TIMES ATLAS OF WORLD HISTORY jb,ce,rh

GUINNESS BOOK OF RECORDS jb

SHELL BOOK OF FIRSTS jb

THE BOOK OF KEY FACTS (1978) jb

THOMAS COOK INTERNATIONAL TIMETABLE cp
Full of place names. Full of romance. Full of railway maps. Full of timetables. Crammed with information (average temperature in Tbilisi in April is 61^{o}F). Above all, it's full of trains (the Glass Train, the Freccia della Dolomiti, and the Nyphenburg).

AA MEMBERS' HANDBOOK cp

THE HOLY BIBLE / rh,cp,as
NEW TESTAMENT IN MODERN ENGLISH

ORDNANCE SURVEY MAPS rh,cp
Imaginary landscapes: can look at map and see landscape [cp].

COLLINS WESTMINSTER DESK COMPANION gk

THE BOOK OF LISTS gk
Wallenchinsky, Wallace & Wallace - Corgi
Good reference point for ideas (eg spontaneous combustion) with examples - direct references to ten cases.

LAROUSSE ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF ANCIENT HISTORY gk
pub: Hamlyn

CONCISE OXFORD DICTIONARY OF rh
ENGLISH PLACE NAMES

NEW LAROUSSE ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF MYTHOLOGY rh,as,iw
pub: Hamlyn
Excellent introduction to mythology, detailed if slightly basic; an invaluable beginning point. Easily accessible once layout is comprehended.

THE COMPLETE SHAKESPEARE as

ART AND IMAGINATION (part work) rh
pub: Thames & Hudson
Stimulating series of books, massively illustrated. Deals with fringe subjects, eg Tao, Zen, Mystic Spiral. Text interesting, but important because of illustrations.

PENGUIN ENCYCLOPAEDIA as

ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF DATES AND EVENTS as
pub: Teach Yourself Books

PENGUIN DICTIONARIES: as
ARCHITECTURE / GEOLOGY / ASTRONOMY

PEAR'S CYCLOPAEDIA (annual) ce,rh
Usefulness depends on subject matter sought. Good pointer towards more detailed reference. Good on medicine, science. Gazetteer useful, atlas useless, general information handy.

ENGLISH DUDEN iw

CATCH-22 ce

5. English Lanaguage Dictionaries

COLLINS ENGLISH D.
CONCISE OXFORD D.
COMPACT EDITION OF COMPLETE OXFORD D.
HARRAPS ENGLISH/FRENCH D.
WEBSTER'S SEVENTH NEW COLLEGIATE D. (U.S.)
M.I.T. D. OF SHORT WORDS FOR SCIENTISTS
CHAMBERS TWENTIETH CENTURY D.
THE PENGUIN ENGLISH D.

A list from Rowland Tappen, who insists that all these books really do exist:

AN ANTHOLOGY OF INVECTIVE AND ABUSE - Hugh Kingsmill
CHARIOTS OF THE GODS - Erich von Daniken
PARODIES: AN ANTHOLOGY - Dwight Macdonald
THE PENGUIN BOOK OF UNRESPECTABLE VERSE - G Grigson
THE DICTIONARY OF MISINFORMATION
THE ANATOMY OF SWEARING - Ashley Montague
DR BOWDLER'S LEGACY - Noel Perrin
LARS PORSENA: THE FUTURE OF SWEARING - Robert Graves
SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY PSEUDONYMS - Barry McGhan
THE NECRONOMICON
THE LIFE ACHIEVEMENTS OF
ELMER T HACK (illustrated postcard)

LETTERS

ANDREW HUDSON, LONDON E17
After reading Paul Mason's letter in FOCUS 3, I view his suggestions with a certain amount of concern. On the one hand the idea of a marketing group to assist writers of sf seems a necessity in view of the obstacles that face a new writer in what is a buyer's market. However if the group succeeded in setting up a series of contacts to submit work to, it could have the opposite effect. The idea of a group deciding what material they consider suitable to submit is surely creating a barrier between the writer and the publishers. He also suggests that the new group should select from BSFA members which work to submit. Are we now hearing of an attempt to introduce a closed shop into the sf arena? I feel that any attempt to control whose work is submitted is harmful.

As for the work of promoting sf - isn't that what the BSFA should be doing anyway? I am dubious as to whether the Space Opera type of sf film's popularity is evidence for a far wider market. Do we really want to encourage the production of more programmes like Buck Rogers or Galactica or are we interested in writing serious sf?

JAMES CORLEY, HALESWORTH
John Hitchen's spirited defence of Penguin's sf activities (in your last letter column) certainly convinced me that someone was alive and kicking in the publicity department. If he wants us to believe that this vitality and commitment extends to the editorial offices perhaps he could now explain why the "programme of new books" he seems so proud of consists entirely of old foreign reprints.

ROBERT HEATH, STOKE-ON-TRENT
I must admit that initially I was taken aback with the appearance of my story in FOCUS 3, purely because the print contrasts so much with the types of print used elsewhere, but the layout is great. And the illustration pleased me no end; I could never have expected one so detailed and well drawn, so thanks to Simon Polley. I can't say much about the overall issue, though, because it was diverse and interesting. Brunner's and Wingrove's features were the most interesting - Steppenwolf is a great book, and Hesse's writing is beautifully clear, precise and uncluttered, unlike that of Borges.

Eds: We, too, were dissatisfied with the appearance of your story - we were hoping that varying typefaces would add variety to the overall appearance of the magazine, but it was an experiment which failed in this case.

TONY RICHARDS, ROMFORD
Congratulations on another good issue of FOCUS. My one criticism, and this is going to seem pretty unfair, is that FOCUS remains merely good; that is, it hasn't got any better or worse since issue one. And consistency has this nasty habit of transmuting into stagnancy. Beware! After a bit of time, one article on how to write a novel looks pretty much like the next. What's needed is a little more innovation, a little more dynamism.

I make writing look like building an Airfix model, Noel Chidwick? "Writing in the Dark" (FOCUS 2) was nothing more than a survival manual, a list of tactics useful in the war between one's writing and the hordes of external pressures every part-timer faces. Having walked that pot-holed path, I was trying to make life easier for those who choose to follow. I wasn't talking about the actual art of writing.

I'm glad the piece struck a chord with Dot Davies (FOCUS 3) because her thoughts on short stories struck a chord with me. Like her, I'm a great Bradbury fan. Like her, I love to read and write short stories - in fact, I regard the short story as a far purer art form, in general, than the novel. I feel the same frustration at agents' unwillingness to handle short fiction. But what Dot doesn't seem to realise is the reason for that apathy. Nothing to do with artistic sensibilities, I'm afraid. It's that old monster Financial Practicality rearing its eyeless head again. You see, 10% of the sale of a 3000 word story to the average British sf magazine brings in the grand total of £3. Minus postage, minus stationary, minus working time, minus secretarial time, minus lighting, heating, telephone, office rent. Minus income tax, national insurance and VAT. All that adds up to a minus profit. It's a sickening situation, I know, but you really cannot blame the agents.

As one who makes most of his admittedly pauperish living from the sale of short stories, let me offer one piece of advice to Dot - or, indeed, to anyone who loves writing short fiction. If you have any interest whatsoever in fiction beyond the sf field don't, for God's sake, merely stick to writing sf. There is a horror market, though you have to be on your toes to catch it. There is a mystery market: ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE, ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MM, LONDON MYSTERY DIGEST, WEEKEND, TITBITS. The top men's glossies - MAYFAIR, PENTHOUSE, PLAYBOY - take fiction of all kind and pay well. Small circulation literary magazines pay badly but do buy. BBC Radio reads short stories on the air. And if you are writing tales with human interest/human relationship themes, then the better women's magazines should prove a ready market.

STEVE INCE, HULL
The third issue of FOCUS was the best one so far, and I thoroughly enjoyed working my way through the articles. I think the worst thing was that it seemed to be too short. One small problem is that because there is such a long time between issues, it is very difficult for a reader to relate anything to the previous issue that might be in the current one. I found the piece on Contracts to be very enlightening and would never have considered the first thing about asking for such-and-such rights. Thank you very much for such an informative piece.

ANDREW TIDMARSH, PETERBOROUGH
I would offer the following comments on Robert Heath's story "Contacts Linked with Ice": an allegory about isolation, the deadening of affection induced by city-life, whose core concept - the turning of a man into a block of ice - could not have sustained a longer work. The prose was, appropriately, flat, bereft of emotion, but marred by repetition of the word "I". From experience, I realise that it is always a mistake for a short story to be written as a first-person narrative: because the story is - can - be written rapidly, the writer forgets that he/she is not the hero/-heroine (a story is a work of fiction, not of autobiography); consequently the reader is distracted by the presence of the writer). I think this might explain the fluid metaphor "...helpless, caught in the rapids, I was heading for the fall..." that has no place in a story about ice. These are minor points, which it is difficult to avoid making: nit-picking. A more subjective comment is that I would have preferred the prose to be more connected, the periods longer, so that the story fused at its climax. And, I feel a few words to describe the physical appearance of the city and its inhabitants would have been beneficial. On the whole, though, I think I understood the story; I think I liked it.

DAVID REDD, HAVERFORDWEST
"Short Story Contracts" is exactly the sort of feature every young writer needs to see when starting to sell, especially if he's trying the original anthologies and doesn't realise exactly what rights are floating about. This piece may well be the most valuable article FOCUS has yet published: well done, great stuff. But why is it unsigned?

I look forward to seeing how other people cope with internal censors, self-editing of work and so on (letters, William Bains). Personally I either hack everything to pieces with endless re-writes, or try to rush it out virtually unaltered in the hope of avoiding over-revision. Neither approach works; after fifteen years I haven't found a happy medium that works for me. It's a hard life being a perfectionist with blind spots. What have I burned? Er, half a dozen novels, numerous shorter pieces, lots of ambitions. Come to think of it, most of the novels got shredded rather than burned. Generally they were rubbishy adventure stories - I used to submit to paperback cheapo houses like Digit and wonder why I wasn't selling. The main lesson I learned I suppose was not to over-react; I learned this when I tried hacking a cheap adventure novel for Ace after abandoning greater ambitions, because the resulting disaster and non-sale was far worse for me than previous failed novels had been. What moral can I salvage from this experience to advise newcomers? Moderation in all things, that's usually a good moral, and it's true here. Stand back, look objectively and ask "Is what I'm doing now (writing or revision) worthwhile?" Oh well, I'll be interested to learn how others approach self-appraisal.

Eds: Glad you liked "Contracts". It was prepared by Rob, and second-read by Chris Priest and Maggie Noach of A.P.Watt. Unfortunately, we haven't obtained the material we sought on "internal censors". Perhaps a future editor of FOCUS will cover this topic.

The following letter, although not addressed to FOCUS, was passed on to us by Garry Kilworth. We are printing it because it makes some interesting points on the subject of cover art. We also feel it makes an inadvertent point about the attitude of the 'media'; to the best of our knowledge, it has elicited no response:

GARRY KILWORTH, SHOEBURYNESS
Dear Russell Harty,

Much as I enjoyed your first programme in the "All About Books" series, I felt there was a great deal of emphasis on adverse criticism directed at cover illustrations. It is the publisher who has the responsibility for the cover, not the author, and I feel this should be pointed out to your audience. The author rarely, if ever, has any influence over the artwork on a book.

This raises a question which, as an author of several science fiction novels, has been worrying me for some time. Firstly, one has to ask what is the function of a book's cover. I don't think there would be any argument if I were to state that it is to attract the potential purchaser. (Publishers might therefore argue that so

long as this function is fulfilled, it hardly matters that the illustration does not reflect the true nature of the story.) If one accepts this statement, then does it not follow that the cover illustration is a form of advertisement? Sometimes it is the only indication to the buyer of what lies between the pages. Thus it could be debated that a book's cover should be subject to the same laws that govern advertising – ergo, it should not make false statements, whether those statements are in words or pictures. Can I take a publisher to court if I buy a book with a blue-eyed blonde on the cover, about to be ravished, if the story is fact about a dark heroine with strong feminist principles?

There is another side to the coin. The person who is commissioned by a publisher to produce a cover illustration is normally an artist in his/her own right. An artist sees his/her rôle rather differently from the author or publisher. It is a chance to display talent, and although the result is a commercial illustration the artist will want to put something herself (dammit, I'll stick to one gender) in the finished product. Artists are wont to deal in impressions rather than exactitudes. Therefore, the cover artwork might be a compromise between what the publisher wants to see and what the artist wants to paint, draw or photograph. A complaint from a buyer that a book about Hurricane Fighter Aircraft displays a Spitfire on the cover might draw a sneer from the artist. "What about the cloud formation?" she might say. "Doesn't that say something to you?"

However, the truth I suspect lies closer to the heart of commercial intrigue. Blondes sell better than brunettes. Spitfires are more aesthetically attractive that Hurricanes. These things are known by the publisher's art department and they steer their commissioned work in that direction.

Spaceships are a cliche in the science fiction genre and publishers seem to do their damnedest to get a spaceship on the cover of an sf novel, whether the story calls for it or not.

The first story I ever had published was in the Sunday Times Weekly Review. It was called "Let's Go To Golgotha" and concerned travel back to the time of Christ's Crucifixion. There was a large spaceship in the accompanying illustration, despite the fact that the story was not even remotely connected with space travel.

American publishers tend to lean more towards sensationalism than British, but is it true that sf readers are attracted by spaceships? If Brave New World was a first novel by an unknown author, how many readers would have approved of a cover illustration depicting the Starship Enterprise? (Would Aldous Huxley have been pleased?)

Eds: The next letter is an extract from a Spider Robinson circular passed on to us by Richard Cowper. It highlights a common problem in book reviewing:

from SPIDER ROBINSON:

Ever since I began reviewing sf some five years ago, my lead time – the time it takes me to get a review into print – has been growing slowly but steadily. The recent sale of ANALOG to Davis Publications has added only a single month to my current lead time – but that month is enough to change a chronic problem into an emergency. Henceforward **it will take at least six months from the day** a **column leaves my house until the day it sees print.**

What do you care? Well, let's follow it through. I review quarterly, and my next deadline is November 25, 1980. Say I receive your new original paperback in the mail on November 20. Say I read it at once, and it's love at first sight – I make room for it in the column already in progress. That review will see print in the issue datelined May 25, 1981 – by **which time the book has long since stopped being available for sale.** One of my editors tells me he feels he is doing very well if he can keep a given book available for sale five months after release date – after that, an interested reader must hunt through mail-order outfits and second-hand bookstores to **find** your masterpiece; he probably can't even order it direct from the publisher.

And that was a **best** case. Far more likely, your new baby arrives on November 26, and the review sees print in the August 17, 1981 ANALOG, almost NINE months after release.

Eds: Finally, a few letters from our "Special File". These are all genuine submissions, unadulterated by us:

R.C. O'GONNAM

I refer to your article "Short Story Contracts" in which you, or the unnamed writer, maliciously maligned the Neanderthal race. May I respectfully point out that there is a Race Relations Act in this country and may I further point out that Neanderthal physical and mental characteristics are by no means absent from the human race.

You assert, without just cause, that Neanderthals are not only habitual drunks but are incapable of learning the art of typesetting. This is base racism, and one can only pray that Fascist attacks on innocent minority groups will remain confined to crass magazines such as FOCUS. The Neanderthal race was absorbed, not destroyed, and even at this late stage in the evolution of Man, it is not unusual for a pure Neanderthal to be born of Modern Man parents. The suffering you would cause such an individual is on your own conscience.

I can only conclude that the writer knew of these facts and was coward enough to remain anonymous. I expect an apology, or at the very least, a withdrawal of your insulting, libellous remark to appear in FOCUS 4.

Eds: We hang our heads in shame.

THE INNOCENT READER

Dear Action Man Masturbators:

Know all: What is double spacing?

Innocent reader: (not having the foggiest) Putting two letter spaces in between each word.

Know all: The answer is not as obvious as that, dummy. Double spacing is putting a whole one (singular) line of space in between the lines of words.

Innocent Reader: Urger! (as if hit by a brick) Why didn't somebody tell me that? I've heard all the preaching about double spacing and I didn't know what it meant.

Eds: The above letter was tastefully written in red biro. We appreciated the capital letters throughout. It was not double spaced.

COMMANDER PAUL KESSEL, LINCOLN

For some years now I have been writing science fiction for future use in TV and films. When I started writing I began to get more and more ideas for science fiction projects. Up-to-date I have over 700 science fiction projects, but the problem I face is that I have no one I can turn to for help. I made contact with a producer at BBC Radio Oxford who said that if the projects were correctly produced, over 10 years they would bring in the sum of £782 million. I will enclose 10 project titles so you can understand the sort of projects I have in mind:

1. THE TIME TAPES
2. THE PRE-EMPTIVE STRIKE
3. GOD 3000
4. FLESH AND TIME
5. THE TENTH CONNECTION
6. HELL 4000
7. THE FIRST CONTACT
8. MOSQUITO
9. THE DRAGON'S DOMAIN
10. THE TIME DRAGON

The other projects I have will in time supersede Star Wars, Alien and Star Trek. The projects will surpass any film that has been produced, they are that fantastic.

You may say that is too fantastic to believe, but I assure you it is fact. I would be very grateful to FOCUS for the names and addresses of writers to whom I could go to to get the projects off the ground. Remember, this is a chance in a million for FOCUS to supersede the other magazines and film units.

Eds: Does anyone else have anything further to add?

"WAITING" contd. from p.11

had absorbed and understood their message – whatever that might be?

The figures melted into others. I saw lovers caressing with gentleness, followed by violent perversions. I saw greed as a fat man snatched a loaf from a starving child, and this same man weep over the sufferings of a sick animal. And I saw much more, a pageant of humanity, with all its glory and corruption.

I remembered Miranda's words.

I see their shadows: they are here.

And I realised that I was seeing the shadows of the Trani; my mind interpreted what I saw, imposed familiar patterns on their alien strangeness, a strangeness so great that I literally could not perceive it.

I had to go deeper, fling my mind open completely. A rip had to be made in the next barrier.

I relaxed, in that curious way which only comes with intense concentration. The figures before me fused into a shapeless black mass – no, it had a shape, but the shape was wrong.

My mind was stretched out like a wire on the verge of snapping. I held on, breathing deeply, grinding my teeth.

Vague appendages waved and drifted like the fronds of some marine plant. My guts knotted and I vomited. Wiping tears from my eyes, I saw the vision fading; my mind was retreating to save itself. And when the black shape was barely perceptible, two human handshapes sprouted from the sides and turned their palms towards me in a gesture of helplessness. Then one of them pointed over my shoulder.

I fainted.

Foul acid taste and dust on my lips. I rose painfully.

One lesson.

I thought of the others, waiting for the gift of perfection.

I thought of Ephraim, sleeping off a happy, drunken night in someone's arms.

Simultaneous elation and awe drowned my discomfort.

I turned and walked back to the angels and the demons, the nobility and the corruption, the sweat, the noise... towards life.

EDITORIAL COMMENTS ON STORIES

As can be seen from the selection of letter-quotes which follows, the most common problem with stories sent to us was that writers tended to tackle stock sf themes without bringing anything new to their treatment. Our overall impression was that most beginning sf writers read science fiction far too exclusivley, with the result that their imaginations are constrained by the conventions and cliches of the genre. What most of the stories lacked was a sense of the person who had written them. In our responses we've stressed the importance of dealing with themes which are of personal interest to the writer rather than producing stories to genre formats. We also believe that characters are in general the best starting point for a story, no matter how grand or original the "sf idea". Inevitably there's some overlap and repetition in the quotes, but at least they illustrate our prejudices, if nothing else...

"Your stories certainly show a grasp of narrative and an ability to evoke atmosphere. The main problem with them is that they tend to use mythic figures - God, the Grim Reaper, Dracula etc. - as their central characters, and these have been well-used by many other writers, thus making it difficult to bring a fresh slant to them. The stories seemed familiar, despite your passion, and they have a fascination with an evil end to the world which is rather old-fashioned, recalling the sf of the late '50s and early '60s. Basically we feel that the stories contain too much of the standard imagery/props of sf. Science fiction can be an incestuous genre for writers - ideas, situations, themes, symbols get handed down from generation to generation. Cryogenic capsules, atomic wars, vampires, the creation myth etc. have all been terribly overused. (This is not to say that they can't still be written about effectively - only that it's very hard to do so.) The best writers, we feel, are the ones who break with tradition and bring a particularly fresh and individualistic vision to their work. We suspect that they do this not by setting out to write 'An sf story', but by writing 'A story which happens to be sf'. The difference between the two is not merely one of semantics."

"Overall we felt that the story was slightly old-fashioned in style and content. Why do characters in sf stories always have names like Xandos and Zarkan, for example? Why aren't they called Fred or Ivan? That's just a minor point, but characters are important, and in this story your idea seems to have overwhelmed their personalities. Xandos seems a very typical sf character, saying things like: 'I wish to investigate this phenomenon'. Have you ever heard anyone speaking like that? In our opinion the characters should be the starting point for any story, whether sf or not. If they are well realized,they help the ideas in the story to come alive."

"Our feeling about this story is that it's very familiar in tone to many of the stories published in NEW WORLDS at the height of the New Wave - the alienated, directionless narrator, the sense of depression and ennui which hangs over everything. As it stands, the story simply reiterates familiar sentiments without bringing anything new to them. At the risk of sounding like arch-traditionalists: How about letting us see something with a bit of plot?"

"It seems to us that you can write well enough in a stylistic sense but have yet to find your own voice and hence an individual approach to the staple materials of science fiction. The important thing in writing is not to write the kind of story which you think will be acceptable to others, but to write about what interests you; if you succeed in doing this in a fresh and entertaining way, then you're sure to find an audience regardless of your subject matter. Too much sf is written from the point of view of 'ideas' or 'gimmicks', rather than being based around the characters in the story. If you can create interesting characters (always difficult) then it's more likely that the reader will be interested in whatever predicament you choose to put them into in your story. The best writers in sf (and outside) always speak with an individual voice, and there's usually the feeling that they are tackling themes and subjects which interest them rather than writing 'for an audience'; they do this by putting their characters into situations where their problems/conflicts/obsessions are likely to be highlighted rather than writing a story full of tricks in which their characters act only as detectives or dupes."

"The central idea of this story is very interesting, and in places the story is very well written. But its main flaw is that it reads more like a documentary than a piece of fiction: too much information is given in indigestible wodges rather than being integrated into the natural flow of the story; this results in the reader feeling lectured and the story lacking drama and character interplay."

"In general we feel that it's not a good idea to go back and rewrite all your old stories. A writer should always look forward, tackle fresh themes, ideas and formats. Those earlier stories with which you're now dissatisfied were the natural product of their time, an essential part of the process of developing your art. You can't keep backtracking and rewriting all your old stuff - that's running fast to stand still. We're not suggesting that you forget them entirely, but our advice would be to put them away for a year or two (seems like a long time, but it'll pass quickly enough) and get on with other things. Then when you do finally go back to them, you'll be in a much better position to judge which ones you want to rescue and which are better left in mothballs."

"On a line-to-line basis the story is clearly and cleanly written, and it's nice to see an individual imagination at work. We were intrigued by your idea in this story, but were left slightly puzzled and dissatisfied at its end. The central question which any reader must ultimately ask of a story (no matter how well written) is: 'What is it saying to me?' Secondary to this are the questions: 'Does it give its message effectively?' and 'Is the imagery which the author uses consistent with his intent and is it properly sustained within the internal harmony of the story?' In this case we feel that your message is only partly clear, mostly because your images become muddled, ambiguous, thus diminishing the impact of the story."

CONTRIBUTORS

DOROTHY DAVIES is presently at work on a novel, and is having a collection of children's stories illustrated. A prolific and energetic writer, she gave some insight into her working methods in FOCUS 3

RANDAL FLYNN is presently completing a short novel entitled The Swallowed Woman. He is currently unemployed and itinerant.

ROBERT HOLDSTOCK is co-editor of a well-known writers' magazine. In his spare moments he has written three sf novels: Eye Among the Blind, Earthwind and Where Time Winds Blow, due from Fabers this spring, and is currently at work on a fourth.

R. NICHOLSON-MORTON is Chief Writer in the Royal Navy, and has pseudonymously sold short stories to various non-sf magazines. He is currently at work on a dystopian time-travel novel.

PHILIP POLLOCK is owner-manager of a furniture factory in London. He has been Faber & Faber's sf reader for many years.

CHRISTOPHER PRIEST has a new novel, The Affirmation due from Fabers in the UK and Scribners in the USA this summer. His fourth novel, The Space Machine is to be reissued in paperback by Pan in May.

DAVID SWINDEN is a 27 year old biochemist, currently working as a scientific editor for a publishing company in Basingstoke. While at the University of Bath, he helped to edit the Union Newspaper, and his ambition is to write full-time.

ROWLAND TAPPEN's work had mainly appeared outside the sf field since his crippling collision with an Isaac Asimov's rejection slip in the 70s. A former Boy Scout, his hobbies include beer, schizophrenia and making wax images of selected publishers. He lives in the Northern Hemisphere and is currently at work on a best-seller.

LISA TUTTLE has published short stories in all the major sf magazines. Her co-authored novel Windhaven (with George R.R.Martin) is due out from Simon & Schuster in March, in the USA. She has recently completed her first solo novel, Familiar Spirit. A native of Texas, she has been living in London since December 1980.

IAN WATSON's latest novels are Under Heaven's Bridge (co-written with Michael Bishop) and the forthcoming Deathhunter, both from Gollancz. He is British Guest of Honour at the Easter Convention, YorCon II, in Leeds this April.

MARKET SPACE

SHORT STORIES MAGAZINE

A NEW MONTHLY MAGAZINE that will present the best work of of short story writers, past and present, is to be launched in November (cover-dated December 1980, on sale from 24 November). Every issue of Short Stories Magazine will include several complete classic and modern tales by writers such as O.Henry, Nathanial Hawthorne, Saki, Katherine Mansfield, Guy de Maupassant, Arthur C.Clarke and Ian Fleming.

Additionally, Short Stories Magazine will serve as a show-case for the work of previously unpublished writers, with every issue containing at least one contribution by an author whose work has not appeared in print before. New writers will also be encouraged through the magazine's Short Story Of The Year Award.

Apart from its fictional content, Short Stories Magazine will feature articles by and about authors, reviews of newly-published collections and anthologies, advance news of authors' appearances at signing sessions and on radio and TV programmes, details of international literary competitions and awards, and a comprehensive directory of all short story titles currently in print in the UK, in hardback and paperback.

Editor John Ransley comments: "The short story continues to be an extremely popular literary form, as is evidenced by the fact that more than 50 new collections and anthologies appear in UK publishers' Autumn lists alone, so I am sure there must be a place for a monthly magazine that presents the very best examples of the genre, with an interesting mix in each issue of crime and mystery, science fiction and the supernatural, humour and sophisticated romance.

"Also, there is undoubtedly a large number of both novice and professional writers who feel their talents are best applied to the short story form - and therefore a tremendous pool of unpublished work, the best of which Short Stories Magazine will now be able to present alongside stories by popular and established authors." Adds John Ransley, "And who knows? We might even discover a new Somerset Maugham, Roald Dahl or Daphne du Maurier along the way."

Short Stories Magazine will be produced in A5 format with 128 pages initially, a full-colour cover and perfect bound. Print run for the first three issues will be 40,000 and the cover price is 90p.

Editorial Address: 222 London Road, Burgess Hill, West Sussex, RH15 9RD.

The BRITISH FANTASY SOCIETY

FANTASYCON VII will be held in Birmingham over the weekend 10-12 July 1981 at the Grand Hotel. A full and varied programme is now in preparation. Supporting membership to FCVII is only £1 or $3; all cheques, orders, &c should be made out to "British Fantasy Conventions" and sent to Mike Chinn, 1 Buttery Rd, Smethwick, Warley, West Midlands B67 7NS.

FANTASY MEDIA is, alas, no more. The BRITISH FANTASY SOCIETY, however, continues forward. The Society publishes a number of items including a newsletter, the BULLETIN, and a journal, DARK HORIZONS. Besides organising the fantasycons, it is the guiding force behind the British Fantasy Awards. Past winners include Michael Moorcock, Piers Anthony and Karl Wagner. Membership to the BFS is only £5 or $15 a year. Please send all cheques &c to either Rob Butterworth, 79 Rochdale Rd, Milnrow, Rochdale, Lancs OL16 4DT, UK, or to Paul Ritz, P.O.Box 6485, Cleveland, OH 44101, USA.

Editorial (continued)

Rowland Tappen (a name to conjure with), who tells of the irritating practices of some publishers; Philip Pollock, sf reader at Faber & Faber, who reflects briefly upon his business; R. Nicholson-Morton, who talks about his encounters with various cover artists; and Ian Watson, who reveals all about his working method. Our feature article this time is on reference books - a selection, with some comments, introduced by John Brunner. And for fiction we have a story by Faringdon dynamo Dorothy Davies, and a quiet, elegantly observed tale by David Swinden.

May we remind you that back issues of FOCUS are still available at £1 each, which is inclusive of postage and packing. Please make cheques payable to the BSFA.

May we also point out an error in the feature article on Contracts in FOCUS 3: notes 11 & 12 on page 18 relate to clauses 12 & 13 on page 19. Our apologies for this mistake.

(And so they passed away from FOCUS. "What moral is to be drawn from their story? Only that life is arbitrary and capricious, bestowing its joys and sorrows to no fixed pattern, linking lives then sundering them, bringing unexpected delights and disappointments, turning frustration into triumph, hope into embitterment, and always youth into age in its inexorable course. They were creatures of their time; they lived lustily and died fruitlessly, and all they left behind was the teeming earth and the restless sea."

Respectful pause while editors weep into beer.)

ROB HOLDSTOCK & CHRIS EVANS

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Charles Sheffield's first novel is squarely in the hard SF tradition; it prompted *Publishers Weekly* to describe him as 'one of the most imaginative, exciting talents to appear on the SF scene in recent years.' Sheffield, a Yorkshireman, lives in the USA; his second book, WEB BETWEEN THE WORLDS, is due from Arrow in December.
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And watch out for new novels from Gene Wolfe, Norman Spinrad, Stuart Gordon and many more...
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