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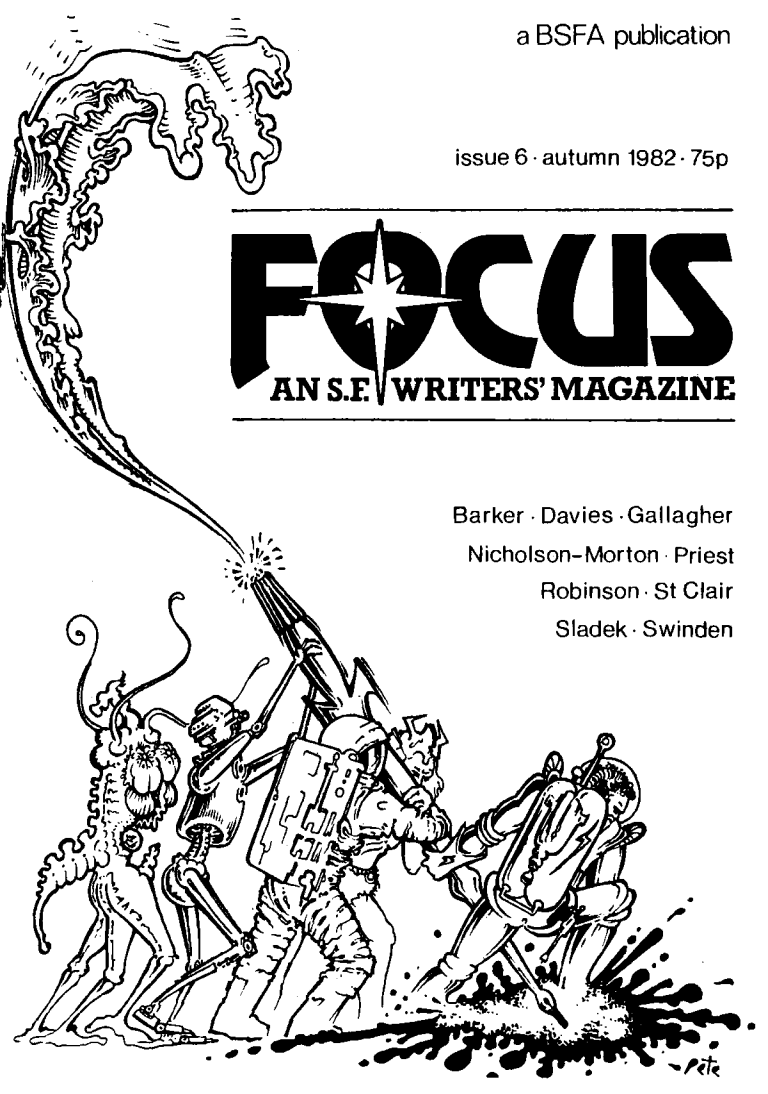
FOCUS

AN S.F. WRITERS' MAGAZINE

Barker · Davies · Gallagher
Nicholson-Morton · Priest
Robinson · St Clair
Sladek · Swinden



FOCUS
AN S.F. WRITERS' MAGAZINE

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MEMBERSHIP of the British Science Fiction Association costs £6.00 per year. For this sum you receive six mailings per year, containing *Matrix*, *Paperback Inferno* and *Vector*, not to mention two issues of *Focus* per year. *Matrix* contains news and views of the BSFA and the science fiction fiction world. *Paperback Inferno* reviews the newly published paperback books. *Vector* is the BSFA's critical journal. *Focus* is a magazine about science fiction writing. Membership also gives you access to a number of other BSFA services - such as Orbiter, the postal writers' workshop described in an article in issue five. For full details of BSFA activities and membership, write to the membership secretary:
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Alan Dorey, 12 Fearnville Terrace, Oakwood, Leeds LS8 3DU

Contents

Our thanks go to our artists this issue:- Pete Lyon (front cover), Jim Barker (11, 13), Iain Byers (29, 32), Phill Probert (4, 43)

Deadline for the receipt of submissions for the next issue of Focus is DECEMBER 1st, 1982.

ONE OF THE ARTICLES in this issue is written under a pseudonym. Receiving an article of this nature sets problems for us as editors because we are responsible for ensuring that the piece you read is hiding under cover for worthy reasons; we're not interested in campaigns of revenge from embittered hacks.

Credentials have been checked in the case of 'From The Valley of the Dinosaurs' by 'Christopher St Clair', which only goes to make his story the more alarming. Nowadays many SF writers in this country are having to turn to hackwork in order to earn a living wage, attending to their proper art only when breathing space has been won and energy allows. In this situation it is hardly comforting to think that even when the work has been completed and accepted, it still has to run the gauntlet of internal politicking at the publisher's; and it's especially distressing when such machinations result in the publisher reneging on his agreement.

It is interesting to compare St Clair's article with that by Chris Priest in this issue. Chris takes an essentially optimistic view of the author-publisher relationship. His piece on 'Novel Contracts' is a succinct account of the process of publishing a book and should be required reading for any new writer planning to submit his first novel. Thankfully, the process as described by Chris still applies in the vast majority of cases; the worry lies in the fact that genuine stories such as St Clair's can still circulate.

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DURING THE GESTATION of this issue, we were struck by the number of people, who, when submitting fiction, voiced the expectation of receiving critical appraisal of their work. This expectation is, to a certain extent, justified, and we have never yet failed to give an honest and fairly detailed critique of a story. However, by far the most important part of our job is assembling the magazine; though we find commenting on the stories both enjoyable and rewarding, and have no plans to stop doing this, we must emphasise that we are giving our opinions. Ours are but three views among many; although we feel that our comments are worth making, and would like people to consider them seriously, they are in no way to be imagined as being inscribed upon the eternal scrolls. If you're unhappy with our judgement on your story, then show it to other people as well.

But we find it disturbing to imagine people sending fiction to FOCUS with the sole motive of bouncing it off us; we can't say for definite whether or not this is happening, but would like to emphasise that we want people to submit a story with some confidence in its worth and a genuine desire to see it published.

Anyone with serious ambitions to be a writer has got to be able to criticise their own work: you are the one who knows what you're aiming at, and you should have enough confidence to be able to dismiss unfair criticism. What gives you the right to such an apparently arrogant outlook is the knowledge that you wouldn't draw any satisfaction from public acclaim if you know the work's not up to standard.

It's perfectly possible that some of the stories we reject seem lousy precisely because they're by people who have it in them to become good writers - that the stories have failed because their writers have had the courage to stay away from easy slick solutions and work towards something more original and distinctive, but haven't made it this time round. It may seem heartless to admit that we don't lose a lot of sleep over this, but it isn't actually our problem. Because if you've got what it takes to become a writer, you're not going to be put off by rejections, even from us.

::*:*:*

WE RECEIVED MORE unsolicited articles and (especially) fiction this time round, which pleased us, though we'd be happy to see still more. We remain surprised at the lack of letters of comment. We promised to have a letters section and, true to that promise, we do have a very few letters in this issue. We'll give much more space to letters if only you'll write them; we consider them to be an important part of the magazine.

On the subject of submissions, we feel that it's necessary to explain the reasons for our presentation requirements, as we're still receiving manuscripts which do not conform to them. As anyone who submits to FOCUS is presumably aware of these requirements, we can only assume that they are not adhered to because they are regarded as editorial whims. This is not so; there are good, practical reasons for demanding a particular format.

Submissions should be typed double-spaced, with at least an inch margin on either side of the text. This is to leave room for editorial marking-up; it is awkward to squeeze comments and emendations between lines of single-spaced type. Each page should bear at the top the surname of the author, preferably in capitals, and the page number (pages can easily become shuffled). The paper should be A4 - which is probably more easily obtainable than any other size - because this allows us to Xerox the piece. This is an important part of the editorial process, as we need to have spare copies to send to each other and to scribble comments on. If we can't photocopy your piece, you'll have to wait longer for a reply and there's an increased chance of it getting lost in transit.

Each submission should have a title page, with the title of the piece, the name and address of the author and an approximate word count so that we can estimate the amount of space the story will take up if printed. Finally, if you want the MS to be returned in the event of non-acceptance, and/or you want comment, enclose a stamped, addressed envelope. If we don't receive one of these we'll assume that you don't want a reply or your MS returned.

::*:*:*

IT HAS ALWAYS been our intention to make FOCUS readable but not facile, and we hope that we've succeeded in this aim with this issue. Besides the above-mentioned articles on novel

publishing by Priest and St Clair. Steve Gallagher returns with suggestions on how to go about writing the thing in the first place; John Sladek has ideas for where you might like to be when you do it. One of the editors has sneaked in to the magazine with an article on correspondence courses - this in response to a request from a reader. Dorothy Davies considers the value of workshops and R. Nicholson-Morton gives a slightly heretical opinion on writing for specific markets. For the artists among you, Jim Barker narrates the tale of how he became a freelance, modestly implying that this was due solely to a fortuitous redundancy. (Whether or not such modesty is called for you can judge for yourself by looking at Jim's illustrations to John Sladek's piece.) Fiction this issue is contributed by Hilary Robinson.

We'd like to record our thanks to Pete Lyon for another excellent cover and to one of the BSFA's great unsung heroines, Eve Harvey, who typed a good portion of this issue; perhaps not everybody realises the immense amount of work she puts in, making BSFA editors' lives that much easier.

We hope you enjoy the magazine. If you don't - then write us a letter!

CONTRIBUTORS

JIM BARKER has long been regarded as one of Britain's premier fan artists; recently, after winning the Cartoonists Club 'Best Unpublished Cartton Strip' competition, he resigned his job with a newspaper in order to pursue a freelance career.

DOROTHY DAVIES is a regular contributor to Focus; she sells both fiction and journalism to a wide variety of publications and is a vigorous writer of letters to all manner of magazines.

STEVE GALLAGHER has written SF for both TV (Dr Who) and radio (The Last Rose Of Summer and others.) He wrote the novelisation of the movie Saturn 3. His first novel proper is due out shortly; he has completed his second.

R. NICHOLSON-MORTON is Chief Writer in the Royal Navy and has pseudonymously sold short stories to various non-SF magazines. He has recently finished a dystopian time-travel novel and found it unsatisfactory - hence, he says, the article.

CHRISTOPHER PRIEST made his first professional sale in 1966. Since then he has had published two volumes of short story collections and six novels; the most recent of these, The Affirmation (1981), reached the last twelve of the Booker Prize.

HILARY ROBINSON lives in Newtownards, Co. Down, and is an enthusiastic amateur writer.

CHRISTOPHER ST CLAIR is the pseudonym of a young English novelist.

JOHN SLADEK, brought up in the Midwest of America, has been resident in the UK since 1966. His most recent novel, Roderick, received considerable critical acclaim; he is currently at work on a second volume, Roderick At Random.

DAVID SWINDEN took a university degree in biochemistry and now works as a sub-editor in the educational books division of a large publishing house; this is where he gets the money which, mysteriously, he choses to spend on correspondence courses.

BUILDING A NOVEL

Steve Gallagher

THE PIECE THAT follows really shouldn't be let out of its cage without some kind of preface or explanation. Reading it now, a couple of months after I wrote it, I can barely recognise my own voice in its fervid delivery. Moses himself couldn't have slammed the commandments down before his people with more authority; it comes over like one of those correspondence course ads, YOU'LL UNDERSTAND THE INTRICACIES OF PLOT DEVELOPMENT... HOW TO CREATE YOUR OWN PERSONAL LITERARY STYLE... HOW TO CONSISTENTLY WRITE THE KIND OF MATERIAL AN EDITOR WON'T BE ABLE TO TURN DOWN!

It was loosely drafted at four o'clock one morning, after I'd put in eight hours on the final draft of a book called Follower. Things had been going well, and I was feeling on top of it. Making the notes for the piece was a way of tailing off, of letting myself down gently so that I could get to bed and sleep through the sunrise. And it wasn't, I ought to add, the result of a sudden urge to record for posterity my thoughts on Art, Life and the Pervasive Influence of Entropy; it was a direct response to a friend who'd asked me to look at his novel outline and to comment on it. Which is something I never do - apart from looking such a berk when you've nothing useful to say, it always seems to end up with you trying to impose the book as you might want to write it onto someone else's cherished opus.

But I owed him several favours, big ones. And so writing the piece was my way of sidling around the problem, of commenting without tampering. It first made its appearance in the Bolton groupzine Crazy Eddie, where it didn't actually seem to set the world on fire; so I reckon it's probably safe to let it out again.

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It was George Bernard Shaw who summed it all up so neatly when he said that there's only one golden rule, and it's that there are no golden rules. It applies to writing more than any other field I know, but it seems there's a general suspicion that there's some simple hook, an easily-mastered key to the craft which writers, banded together in tight professional secrecy like some medieval guild, refuse to acknowledge to the rest of the world. The technological fallacy, I've heard it called, the idea that if sufficient of the 'rules' are observed and obeyed then it would be possible for anyone, motivated or not, to produce a competent piece of prose fiction, poem, article or whatever.

Which is, let's face it, garbage. Motivation is everything - the only way to write well is to want to write well, to want it hard enough to force yourself down that long track and to learn as you go. I still get cornered at parties and told, 'I've always wanted to write a book,' and I still don't know how to respond - if I simply say, 'So why don't

you?' it looks as if I'm being smart, or arrogant, or both.

But it's the only honest reply I feel I can make. I believe that the craft of writing has to be learned, but that it can't be taught; that articles, workshops and courses can help the process, but they can never substitute for it. Learning by doing, just like any trade - except that in this case the workshop is your own mind, and no instructor can stand in there with you. If there is a rulebook, you write it as you go along, and you rewrite it every time you sit down to work.

So let's forget about rules, and let's talk about guidelines. This is switching-off time for everybody who might think that they can hack their way to a Nobel prize with nothing more than a ream of A4 Bond and the Writers' Inner Circle book of How It's Done. Guidelines are flexible; they're to be used, not obeyed. They're no substitute for input from the writer, and they won't fill the gap when the writer has nothing to say.

So point number one, obvious though it may seem, is to have something to say. This isn't the same as having a 'message' to put over, and it doesn't mean that you have to work all-out to produce something of leaden literary value fit only for study on university courses; it simply means that the central and dominant idea of your book must be strong enough to support the structure that you're going to build around it. If you don't actually have such an idea then hold back; you're not ready to start. Even if you make it to the last page of the novel without drowning in it, the reader probably won't.

When you know the idea is there, don't wait. Don't get so impressed with it that you decide you'll shelve it until you've learned enough to do it more justice - believe me, other and better ideas will come along, but in the meantime you'll learn nothing if you're doing less than your best. At this stage don't worry about the plot, or about the fine details of character or setting. Too much work on them now will unbalance your creation, and it isn't robust enough to take it. Let the idea grow and find its own shape, always keeping it somewhere in your mind but never trying to push it around; and when you reach a point where you can perceive a wholeness, where the book that you're going to write occupies the same kind of space in your imagination as a book you've already read, then it's time to fix it before it can fade.

Lay it out on one side of a sheet of paper. It can be in the form of a list, a summary, a diagram - any way that allows you to take the whole thing in at a glance, use it. What you'll see won't be a story in the conventional sense, not yet. It may be a few strong character points, some key incidents, some atmosphere, an idea of a line of narrative development. Before you try to work out how they're connected - this is the sweat, the craft part getting close - make sure they're balanced. Look at the biggest gaps, see what surrounds them, and decide what kind of material you'll need to fill them. It may be complementary, it may be contrasting, but try to get the tone right now because it's going to get more difficult later. The closer you get to the individual scene, the individual line, the individual word, the harder it's going to be to keep your view of the book as a whole in realistic proportions.

Give your outline balance, give it elegance. Make it work. Don't put yourself in the position of using half of the book to explain why it doesn't.

What you have now is a frame. Now you can start to build.

The building involves the realisation of the characters and the discovery of the chains of incidents which will take your outline one step forward to become a story. Don't think of it as invention, think of it as detective-work; everything that you've got so far has floated up out of the sea of your subconscious, and the relationships within your material have existed from the start. What you now have to do is apply your knowledge of the world around you (or a world that you've researched, if that's the kind of book you're writing) to move from vague perceptions to hard details. Now that you've given yourself what happened, start to hypothesise on how it happened.

Opinions vary on how deep you should go at this stage. Some writers like to lay down as much as possible in advance, others like to leave areas wide open to discovery as they go along; my advice is that you review your temperament and do exactly what you feel suits you best.

The working outline is no more than a tool to help you get the first draft hammered out. It's a guide to the scenes that you'll need and the aims that you'll have to achieve in those scenes to stay true to your overall structure. Now's the time to start thinking of the technology of fiction, the character viewpoint, the plot and counterplot, daily wordage targets, and the like; now the relationship between intuition and logic gets reversed, and you have to become a hard-nosed craftsman to shape your artistic vision into a self-sufficient artefact.

By now you should be getting some ideas about the voice of your work, because you've built it up enough to be able to look it over and see the general shape that it's taking. You're in deep, you're committed. When you say that you're writing a book, you're saying it without any secret doubts.

What happens next is the magic.

Whatever the book needs, it will teach you. Trust it, let it lead the way. All of the tricks and hooks that you ever read about or heard about, you'll re-invent them as you go. You may be a traveller in a strange country and you may not know the language, but none of this will stop you if you're alert and ready to adapt. Get into the first draft with energy, with a sense of adventure; what you don't need is to be weighed down by a sense of occasion, an awareness of the massive weight of the whole enterprise bearing down on you with every word that you type. Forget that, it's going to come later. For the moment have fun, slang around, make your scenes as sketchy or as detailed as you feel like making them.

My own approach is to view the scenes as three basic types. I give them the names of movie camera setups. The longshot is the simplest, the sparest and the least involving; years can pass in a single sentence. The medium shot is the narrative workhorse, running through hours of plot-time in minutes of the reader's time, selecting and repeating only the key details of action and conversation. The closeup gives the illusion that plot-time and the reader's time are, for the moment, running in tandem; it's like witnessing the events of a scene just as they happen, with the dialogue and the more evocative incidental details being reported in sequence.

Remember this is a guideline, not an attempt to establish a rule. A single scene might include all of these elements in one way or another, or it might be a character's interior monologue or something similar

that includes none of them. The main usefulness of the three 'shots' is the way that they can be employed to control the pace of your story, keeping interest at a steady level - you can stay close on details and developments that are fascinating and relevant, and zoom right out on those that aren't.

Try to ensure that every scene has a central purpose, preferably one that can be stated in just a few words. This ensures that you don't lose your grip on the scene's relevance to the overall narrative, and it leaves you free to do your best to make sure that the scene itself is interesting. As you rework the surface in this and subsequent drafts your structure will disappear from immediate view, always there, never obvious.

So you reach the end of the first draft. It isn't so much a novel as a dossier for one; it may be full of notes, gaps, pencilled-in second thoughts, maybe even whole chapters that impressed you hugely when you wrote them, but you can now see that they'll have to go. It was a big enterprise, but you didn't let it get you down; you made all your decisions easily because you knew that none of them were final. You knew that the major effort, the real performance, lay in the future.

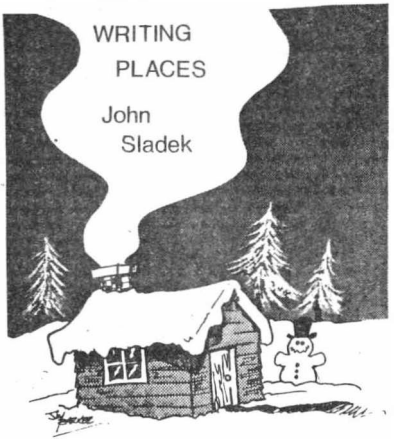
What I'm going to suggest now is that you practise a piece of doublethink. I do it every time, and it's never let me down. I tell myself that I was lying, that the first draft was actually the major effort, that the real work has now been done and what lies ahead is the home stretch, a milk run.

With the broad strokes already down you can now concentrate on the fine work, get in close without worrying that you're losing sight of the rest of the canvas. It's all there, it's all mapped out, and you needn't be afraid that you're going to unbalance it. Concentrate on weaving all of your lines together into a single narrative flow; by now you'll have lived with the story for so long that you'll have come to regard it as something complete which has actually happened, and your job is no longer to create it, but to report it. Keep your language spare, keep it simple, and don't fall for the temptation of overloading the similies and the metaphors and the adjectives in an attempt to create a style. Use these devices to point up your perceptions, not to replace them. If you can't think how to continue a sentence, the chances are that you should have just finished it.

Even now that we've come this far, Shaw's golden rule still applies. If you feel the need to break with what they told you were the essentials of good writing at school, do it - but know why you're doing it. I'm talking about sentences without verbs, one-line paragraphs, sentences that begin with 'and' or 'but'... grammar is just a moment's sample of a long-term dynamically developing system of language. Remember, no rules, just guidelines...

What I've been describing has been only one method, my method. It's not intended as a blueprint, and it probably wouldn't work if anyone tried to use it that way. There are other ways of working, probably as many ways as there are writers; and whilst I find it difficult to believe that there's anyone who types 'Chapter One' and then gazes into space for the opening lines of their first and only draft, I know that there are many who get deep into a book with no clear idea of how they're going to finish it. I respect them but I don't try to emulate them. They've written their own guidelines in the same way that I've written mine.

Good luck with yours.



WRITING, IT SHOULD go without saying, requires solitary confinement. The writer's immediate surroundings must exclude forest fires, screams from mental wards, head-banging music, cries of ecstasy, the anguish of infants, jet aircraft taking off, and so on. While any of these distractions can be turned to some writer's advantage, the general prejudice is against them and in favour of quiet solitude. That is why noisy cities are clogged with writers, who avoid the quiet countryside as though anthrax stalked the land.

Yet writers who live in cities go on fondly imagining that the city is the last place they want to be. I too have indulged in the general fantasy:

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About to begin a novel, I find myself locked away in a snowbound cabin. There is plenty of black coffee and I guess a supply of coarse wool shirts from Lord & Taylor, and maybe one or two absolutely essential reference books. But all of the noises, distractions and irritations of the city are far away, beginning of course with my family and friends. No mail can get through to me, not so much as a postcard from my dentist - certainly not bills, rejection slips, requests from New Zealand high school teachers for a complete bibliography of all my short stories by return mail, fan letters demanding that I explain some dumb joke or reveal my real name - this cabin is beyond the reach of postal services, telephone lines, rail,

road or waterway. Unpredictable winds rule out helicopter visits, while a nearby magnetic mountain or something cuts off all radio and TV. The nearest library and the nearest good Indian restaurant are a thousand miles away. There is now nothing to stop me from rolling the paper in the typewriter, taking a reflective puff on my pipe, and beginning: Chapter One.

The fantasy has to end there to remain credible. In reality I would probably sit dazzled to snowblindness by the white page, or else turn to the reference books and look up 'chapter' and 'one'. Then I clean the typewriter, then sit contemplating the strange paradox, my having to be alone to communicate. Surely there's an essay in that? Solitary confinement - or confinement in the other sense, to bring forth a literary child? Okay then, where's the child? Still a blank page.

It occurs to me that this fantasy owes something to the film Youngblood Hawke, starring I think James Franciscus and written I believe by Herman Wouk. As I recall, the writer in the film collapsed in the snow with pneumonia and nearly died, and he also lost some crucial pages of his manuscript. That probably says something about how Herman Wouk really felt towards this fantasy.

Okay then, I wander around the cabin until I find a cupboard door I hadn't noticed before. I open it. Inside is an old, dusty telephone, and, to my surprise, it still works. I phone my wife.

'Would you get out the Film Guide and look up a movie for me, called Youngblood Hawke?'

'I thought you took it with you.'

'No, no, I took only essential references.'

'Look, I can't find it,' she says. 'You must have put it somewhere. How are you getting on?'

'Touch of pneumonia. Any letters?'

'The usual. Threat from the bank, urgent request from a Canadian high school teacher for a complete bibliography. And a postcard from the dentist.'

'Did my agent phone?'

'Yes, he's just got back from the Monte Carlo Book Fair. Says he's got some Hollywood deal lined up, you're to phone him back immediately.'

'Okay but could you look for that book?'

'If I find it,' she says, 'I'll send it out on the snowmobile. I just found out they're starting a regular daily service.'

I spend the rest of the day trying to reach my agent, who's at lunch. In the evening I phone my wife and ask her to bring our daughter and come skiing over.

'You're kidding, you wanted to be alone to work,' she says.

'But I'm dying of pneumonia. Besides, I'm afraid of losing some pages of my manuscript.'

'Some pages? Then it's going well?'

'Oh yes, yes.' I turn my back on Chapter One. 'But I'm lonely.'

'And as soon as we get there, you'll say you want to be alone to work.'

'You're right, of course.' I hang up and go back to the typewriter, but it's getting late now. Make a fresh start tomorrow.

The rest of the week is the same. I divide my time between trying to phone my agent and cleaning the typewriter. The snowmobile brings daily requests for bibliographies and more rude fan letters. In a hidden cupboard I find a dusty old TV set; miraculously, it works. A bunch of old friends drop in, on their way to the new Indian restaurant that's just opened round the corner. I'll have to take my wife and daughter there, when they ski over.

My agent's secretary says he's away at the Rio Book Fair.

'Did he say anything about a Hollywood deal?'

'Hollywood? No, you mean Holyhead. There's a chance for you to give a lecture there, to the Holyhead Herman Wouk Society. What shall I tell them?'

'Tell them...' I look out the window. The sky is filled with a wonderful light. The snow is melting and running down to nourish the good earth. 'Tell them Willie Boy gives his regards to Broadway. Tell them tomorrow is probably another day, a day in the Human Work of Herman Wouk. Tell them I'm going home! Home!'

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Where was I? Herman's hostility towards his own hibernation fantasy is, I'm sure, shared by writers at large. Most of us, however ungregarious, resent having to shut ourselves away from the world in order to get work done. Most of us, however gregarious, resent having the world interfere with our work. In short, most of us are as full of resentment as a new shirt is full of pins.

Did Milton prefer L'Allegro or Il Penseroso? Yes and no. Coleridge and Wordsworth, were they keener on the spontaneous-overflow-of-emotions side of things than on the recollection-in-tranquility side? It all depends. As he sat down to write his bestseller, Augustine no doubt prayed, God give me a quiet place to work, only not yet. If writers hanker for the country so much, why do they seem to cluster together in cities? Take for instance the 30 writers of science fiction interviewed by Charles Platt for Dream Makers (1980), all from the UK and the US.

Place	Number of SF writers Actual	Expected*
New York (Metrop. area)	10	1.3
Los Angeles (Metrop. area)	4	0.8
Chicago (Metrop. area)	1	0.8
Other US	9	20.6
TOTAL US	24	23.5
Greater London	3	0.8
Other UK	3	5.6
TOTAL UK	6	6.4
TOTAL (US & UK)	30	30
TOTAL URBAN	18	3.8
TOTAL NON-URBAN	12	26.2

*The 'expected' number of SF writers living in an area is just the area's share of the population (UK + US), applied to a sample of 30 persons. In other words, out of 30 persons drawn at random from the total population (UK + US), about 1.3 will live in New York, 0.8 in Los Angeles and so on. Anyone who says there can't be 0.8 of an SF writer hasn't looked at Omni lately.

Dreams in this case seem to be made mainly in cities, and in properly urban cities like New York at that. There are many arguable causes for this - one could say that for writers to live in a publishing centre like New York is not surprising, or that Platt (himself a New Yorker and author of Twilight of the City) has selected nearby interviewees - but it remains an odd statistic. We might imagine that science fiction writers flock to just those places where life is hardest: New York is not twice as big as Los Angeles, but it gets twice as many writers. This despite New York's high rents, high-rise living, impassable traffic, street crime, intolerable weather, highly visible poverty, ugliness and dirt, civic bankruptcy and so on, all features not associated with Los Angeles. What has New York got? Art? Culture?

Without pushing the argument too far, I would guess that what New York really has to offer science fiction writers is high rent, high-rise living, impassable street traffic, street crime, etc. Some science fiction writers are a rare kind of oyster; they need some grit in the shell to get the pearl started; New York provides the grit. In such a place people move faster, talk faster, work harder. They set their sights higher. Science fiction writers in New York understand very well one of the great moving forces in science fiction: the desire to be elsewhere. I will not go so far as to propose there is a New York school in science fiction, but if there were, I think it would be characterized by a style that is aggressive, witty, cerebral and paranoid.

Los Angeles really has nothing like this to offer. It's hardly a city at all, more like a long smear of California coastline. No one can

desire to be elsewhere if they already are elsewhere. In such a place people move slowly, talk little, work hardly at all. I would characterize a hypothetical Southern California school of science fiction as dreamy, solemn, peritoneal and mystical.

To outsiders, both New York and Los Angeles are incomprehensible. I've tried living in New York for a year and hated it. I've been in Los Angeles for a week and found it empty. It may be that a special kind of neurosis is required for tolerating either city.

My own brand of neurosis seems to suit me for life in London, just now. Its special features are of course invisible to me, though no doubt obvious to any outsider. But it's a wonderful place from which to write about the imaginary Midwest of my childhood on the planet America.

NOVEL CONTRACTS

Christopher Priest

THE LAST FOURTEEN issues of the American fanzine Locus have carried a series of articles by a literary agent on the subject of contracts for novels. He is still in mid-subject, and shows no sign of pausing or coming to an end. His articles make pretty detailed and depressing reading, I can tell you. Now I have been asked to tackle the same subject in a single article.

Daunted by the task, but also by the subject, the truth of the matter is that I have no special expertise in contracts. I use my own literary agent to handle that side of the business, and I have learned to trust his skill. Pieces of paper pass before me, and I sign them on the dotted line. All goes well. What little expertise I have comes from the glimpses I get before signing, and from the undoubted advantage of having been well and consistently published by one of the best and most honourable hardback firms in London.

There are two general rules that I have picked up, however, and you might find them interesting. Before getting down to slightly more detailed stuff I'll pass them on.

The first is that there is usually no such thing as a "contract" signed between author and publisher. A contract is a legally binding document which has to be worded and phrased with extreme delicacy and accuracy. There is a whole body of law relating to contracts. Such documents would be far too cumbersome and restricting for an essentially free-moving and non-litigious business like publishing. In fact and practice, virtually all the deals arranged in publishing are "handshake" or "verbal" agreements, and the document that both parties sign is simply a written version, or memorandum, of what is presumed to have been agreed verbally. Many of the so-called contracts are actually headed by the phrase "Memorandum of Agreement". In common with everyone else in the trade, I'll continue to

call these documents "contracts"...but it is important to remember that the document itself is not necessarily legally binding, or at least is no more binding than the verbal agreement it records.

But this brings me to the second rule, because there have been legal disputes, and authors and publishers have found themselves on opposite sides of courtrooms. In such cases, the piece of paper that the lawyers wave around is the Memorandum of Agreement, and its legality is being tested. As I understand the position, lawyers recognize an intangible factor known as "Conditions of Trade", which in certain instances allows for enlightened interpretation. In the case of publishing contracts, they will take into account the fact that the Memorandum of Agreement is usually a printed form, and that it has been printed and is regularly used by one of the two parties involved. In practice what this means is that if an author signs a contract which has been printed by the publisher, then that document is slightly more binding on the publisher than it is on the author. (The converse is true, of course, if the author or his agent present the publisher with a printed contract form.)

Much more important than either of these slightly technical rules is the fact that on the whole the publishing industry is a legitimate one, that in general publishers and authors do not go around trying to cheat each other, and that by far the majority of the disputes that arise are trivial. The Memorandum of Agreement is therefore much more in the nature of a working outline, a synopsis of the business relationship that will exist during the book's lifetime. It is carefully worded and it strives for accuracy, but the spirit of the deal is generally accepted by both sides to have as much weight as the letter of it.

I believe there is no such thing as an ideal contract. You sometimes hear of writers' organizations trying to establish such a standard. Science Fiction Writers of America have come up with something they call a Model Contract - it is full of fine and lovely things that writers dream about, and that publishers strike out. Meanwhile, the Writers' Guild of Great Britain is trying to establish a Minimum Terms Agreement, but it is one of which a major publisher has <u>already</u> said in public he will not be able to honour. Of course writers in general must strive to maintain or improve the conditions under which they work, but both of these projects are based on different aspects of a common fallacy: that there is an ideal world, and it is one in which books can be published in an ideal way. The reality is that every chemical combination of Author, Book and Publisher produces a different compound of terms and commercial expectation, and so every contract must reflect this individuality.

Therefore, I shrink from the task of describing mythical perfect terms for which every author must strive to obtain regardless of individual circumstances. In my opinion it is much more productive for writers to develop the view that the best contract is a <u>fair</u> contract, and is one which reflects the reality of the deal that is being set up. So what I'm going to do is describe more or less what happens to make a book get published, and indicate with emphasis those parts of the process which are generally covered by a publisher's contract. I hope that if anyone who reads this is later negotiating a deal with a publisher, he or she will be able to find enough in common with this to be able to adapt their book to this general case.

There are three distinct stages in the life of a book, and I'll deal with them one by one.

1. The book is written.

In the simplest form of the process, an author sits at his desk and without reference to anyone else he writes a book. At the end he has a COMPLETED MANUSCRIPT which is LEGIBLE and TYPEWRITTEN. Ideally, this manuscript does not infringe anyone else's COPYRIGHT, it does not LIBEL anyone, and within the fairly liberal standards of the day does not indulge in gross OBSCENITY. The author will accept, probably reluctantly, the need to make any necessary REVISIONS the publisher asks for.

Sometimes, the author will write a book on commission, and therefore he will know there is a DATE by which the completed manuscript should be delivered, and a WORD-LENGTH it should approximately be.

2. The book is published.

The publisher likes the book, agrees to PUBLISH it, and commits himself to a certain provisional DATE and PRICE. He concedes that if he is unable to publish it within these fairly generous bounds then he will allow all RIGHTS TO REVERT to the author.

The physical process of manufacturing the book then begins. Certain of the processes will be subject to contract, others will not. For instance, the publisher will want to COPY-EDIT the text of the book very closely, and the author might wish to reserve to himself the right to approve any changes that are made. The publisher will start work with the printer, obtaining cost estimates, agreeing the typography and design, and choosing the binding and jacket. Normally, these matters are left to the publisher's discretion, but some authors insist on having a say. Some publishers will freely consult the author on these things anyway, if they have worked with him before. (Some authors get a reputation for unhelpfulness.)

The printer supplies proofs of the text, and the author CORRECTS them, and returns them within a REASONABLE TIME. He should limit what he does to the correction of composition errors, but if he wishes to make last-minute changes to the text then he may. However, such changes are expensive, and if the cost of them exceeds a certain stated percentage of the original setting cost - usually 10 or 15 per cent - then the author will be CHARGED for them.

The publisher will undertake all expenses of promotion, warehousing and distribution. In the case of most novels, most of the promotion will be conducted in the form of REVIEW COPIES sent to leading newspapers and magazines. Exceptionally, the publisher will take out advertisements on the book's behalf.

About a month before publication, the publisher will provide the author with a small number (usually six) of ADVANCE COPIES. The author can generally purchase more, at a DISCOUNT.

3. The book is sold.

The way a publisher sells a book is a dual operation. One part is in the normal way of selling it, as a book, through bookshops. He will require the rights to do this through stated TERRITORIES. As a rule of thumb, British publishers will usually purchase rights for Britain and the Commonwealth, while American publishers will want the United States and the Philippines. However, in recent years big Commonwealth markets like CANADA and AUSTRALIA have been competed for by both British and American

publishers, and sometimes these countries can become sticking-points in negotiations. There is flexibility in the OPEN MARKET: foreign language countries (such as those in Western Europe) where sufficient of the population wish to read books in English to make it worthwhile for books to be distributed there. Traditionally, British and American publishers both sell in the Open Market, while tending not to poach on each other's regular territories.

The other way a publisher can sell a book is by selling it as a Copyright entity for use in other forms, either under LICENCE for reprinting, or for appearance in another form, such as being filmed or translated into a foreign language. Although the author's literary agent will sometimes handle these SUBSIDIARY RIGHTS, if the publisher controls them then they should be dealt with in the contract.

Assuming for the sake of this article that the edition we are talking about is a British hardcover, then the principal form of accounting to the author will be the ROYALTIES on copies sold. Normal hardcover royalties are 10% of the published price, although this can be increased whenever sales cross agreed thresholds...such as after the first 5,000 copies sold the royalty might increase to 12½%.

The publisher might run his own paperback imprint, and in the event of the book appearing on this list at some later date, the contract should mention the terms to be paid then.

Sometimes books are sold in BULK, or in FLAT SHEETS for rebinding, or under some kind of SPECIAL DISCOUNT.

In these recessionary times, many books are REMAINDERED. The contract should spell out what the author will receive of the remainder price, but more important it should include the strict condition that the book may only be remaindered after the author has been given FIRST REFUSAL on purchasing the stock at a price no greater than the eventual remainder price.

Of the subsidiary rights, the one most of interest to writers will be PAPERBACK rights. Any proceeds from these are generally split 50-50, but more established authors can negotiate these upwards in their favour. Of less importance in Britain (but of equal importance in the US) are BOOK CLUB rights.

AMERICAN RIGHTS, if handled by the British publisher, will make up a substantial part of the book's earnings.

Other rights which should be accounted for are TRANSLATION, FILM, DRAMATIC, RADIO, TELEVISION, SERIALIZATION, ANTHOLOGY, DIGEST, QUOTATION, ABRIDGEMENT and MICROGRAPHIC. None of these rights is likely to be crucial in the earnings capability of a first novel, but nothing is certain and sales of these rights are always possible.

Against all these earnings, the publisher will agree to pay an ADVANCE. When and how this is paid is usually subject to negotiation, but a typical deal will pay one half on signature of the contract, and one half on publication of the book. The publisher will also guarantee to make up accounts half-yearly (usually to the ends of June and December), and pay over any money due within three or four months of those dates.

Finally, the publisher should make some guarantee that the book will stay in print and available for the TERM agreed, and that whenever the book goes OUT OF PRINT all rights granted under the contract will REVERT to

the author, unless the publisher agrees to REPRINT within a certain period of time.

All the above is the bare bones of what a contract should be, but as our friend in Locus is busy pointing out, it is a subject on which a long-winded book could be written. I've almost certainly missed something out, but then it's a fair guess that almost every contract I've ever signed has probably also missed something out. That is not in itself too important: as I said, the spirit counts more than the letter.

And the same rule applies to your understanding of this article. The essence of a deal is fairness, and of a contract it is a reflection of the real way in which a book will be published and the author remunerated. Provided it is that, and provided both parties to the contract act in good faith, then I believe nothing serious will go wrong.

On the other hand, this glimpse into the world of publishers' contracts might well have convinced you that the business side of writing is a bit like a jungle, one which you would not dare enter without an experienced guide. In which case you should do what I and nearly all other professional writers already do, and that is hire a good literary agent. How you would find one, let alone a good one, is not part of my present brief. But in this mad, uncertain and commercial world, to write without an agent behind you is in my view foolhardy.

FROM THE VALLEY OF THE DINOSAURS

CHRISTOPHER ST CLAIR

EARLY IN 1980, a hardback publisher came close to ruining my newly-begun writing career. You may already have guessed that this is going to be a biased kind of article... well, no apologies for that. Wait until it happens to you.

The days of the hardcover book as a significant showcase for new fiction are, we're being told, numbered. The paperback boom rocked the industry but didn't actually destroy it; that, it seems, is being left to library cutbacks. This near-guarantee of at least a few thousand sales was often the only factor that made a gamble on a new author worth taking, but it can no longer be relied upon. Profits in the hardcover market of the

1980s appear to lie in glossily-packaged nonfiction, books more often bought as gifts than for personal use.

The reason for this is immediately obvious; the discrepancy between hardcover and softcover prices is enormous, so much so that the buyer's choice between two editions of the same work is really no choice at all. And yet, a publisher's editor once told me something that I still have difficulty believing - that the material and production costs of the two differ only by a matter of a few pennies, and that the high markup on hardbacks is justified by the low-volume turnover.

Which may or may not be an exaggeration (after all, it was a paperback editor who gave me the information) but as a business approach it seems to be set on the lines of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Hike your prices to cover yourself in anticipation of miserable sales, and so drive your customers away and prove your expectations to have been right.

Absolute market disaster has been held off for so long by one vital factor, the participation of the hardback houses in the sub-rights market. Standard contracts are written around the assumption that the proceeds of the sale of paperback, foreign, film and bookclub rights will be split to a varying degree between the author and the publisher. An agent can try to negotiate these clauses away, but he or she is unlikely to be successful; having demonstrated that, for whatever reason, they're unable to survive simply by selling books, the hardback houses have come largely to depend on this form of revenue. Lose the clauses, lose the contract.

The response for this has been for many authors to sell their work directly to paperback houses. In many cases this involves no loss of income - since a paperback publisher actually makes money by selling books and not rights he can often be persuaded to part with the overseas and media clauses in the contract - and can often be of real financial benefit in that the loss of hardback revenue is more than compensated by an undivided paperback royalty.

Great, you may say, let's stick with the new arrangement and leave the dinosaurs groaning. But from an author's point of view - or, to be more honest, from this author's point of view - the undoubted financial advantages aren't everything.

Apart from the fact that we have a national press doggedly clinging to the practice of reviewing in hard covers only and largely ignoring new paperback titles, I have to admit that there's an attraction in a hardback book that I can't easily define. Paperbacks are cheap and their sales are huge - tens of thousands as opposed to just thousands of their more expensive counterparts - but they're also disposable. The life of a book is tied to the length of its print run; end the run and the book becomes a piece of ephemera, almost magazine-like, and this simply isn't how I believe a book should be.

Obviously some kind of accommodation needs to be reached, and there's a suggestion that publishing practices have been moving towards this with joint offers on new works. This involves the two publishing companies getting together and agreeing terms between themselves, splitting the costs of typesetting, production and publicity; none of the complications of this need affect the author as it's theoretically a single contractual package. It has many of the advantages of a direct paperback sale with few of the sacrifices involved in dealing direct with a 'hardbacker'. You get the sales zip of a mass-market house allied with the experience and concern for quality of a long-established publishing company.

That's the theory. What can actually happen is the kind of stunt that was pulled on me.

My first novel was put on the market by my agent at the end of 1979, and responses started to come in early in 1980. There were five strong expressions of interest; maybe there was something in the water at the time. Whatever the reason, it was a gratifying start for an unknown.

The best-looking deal in the end was a joint offer in which a paperback house bought book rights (media and overseas rights excluded) and then reassigned hardback rights to their partners in the deal. The contract was sped through and the cheque arrived within a few weeks.

I had two meetings with editors from both houses in which the three of us discussed minor changes and final polishing. In the meantime we got a US hardback sale, the American publisher's gamble being sweetened by the prospect of being able to participate in the production savings (and probably also by how good things were looking over here).

The first piece of bad news related to scheduling. The hardback would have to be late '81 or even early '82, but it was to be the lead fiction title in its season... a setback and a big bonus, all in one package. Another meeting in the hardback editor's office at which I was reassured of the company's commitment to the project; we even started to discuss my next.

By July of 1981 I was thinking that it was about time I should be seeing proofs, so I asked. I got a very embarrassed phonecall from my paperback editor. There had been high-level editorial changes at the hardbackers', and one of the new people had been looking at my manuscript and was now demanding new rewrites. These involved the elimination of the subplot - about 25% of the book - and the rewriting of a major character so that his erratic behaviour could then account for the inconsistencies of plotting that would result from the first change.

In short, it would become another book - downmarket, less complex, and less credible, although it would also become a more easily categorisable genre thriller. At the proposed new length of around 70,000 words and with its revised contents, it would become a perfect candidate for the general fiction shelves in the country's libraries.

It wasn't the book that I'd wanted to write, and they weren't the changes that I was prepared to make.

And suddenly there was no deal.

The technical breach of faith was with the paperback house rather than with me - they still had to cough up the hardback publisher's proportion of the advance according to the contract - but that didn't make me feel any better. Two years had been wasted as the book sat around, and a two-year old manuscript being offered around for the second time carries with it a taint which can be fatal in an industry where hype can make mediocre books into megasellers and faint-heartedness can cripple even the best. Not that I'm claiming the latter category for my own work, but both my paperback editor and my agent backed me 100% in my refusal to make changes that I considered to be inappropriate and unnecessary. The hardback editor resigned and moved to another company shortly after, for what I've been told were related reasons.

Now my American publishers are digging in their heels and refusing to

proceed until they get some assurances from this end. A tight and well-planned career launch is turning into a shambles, and any comeback that I could devise would, at this stage, do more damage to me than to the people who I feel deserve it most. Not only did I lose my British hardback sale, but they screwed my perfectly good chances of getting any hardback sale.

This first inside view of a publishing company's business attitude and regard for ethics has been an eye-opener for me. We're not talking about some dodgy operation run from a couple of rooms over a greengrocers', but a long-established and very highly regarded firm whose fiction list comprises a major part of its output. I don't claim that my case is typical, but the fact that it can happen and that not even a word of explanation or regret should be felt to be necessary makes it a worrisome sample on the pathology of the patient.

Those same business attitudes might have to bear far more responsibility for the declining state of hardback fiction than publishers and proprietors would admit. If my information on costings is true (and I'd be interested to know if any Focus reader can supply details to support or contradict it), then the hard-cover houses ought to be hammering the paperback people at their own game. As it is they're weeding diversity out of their lists in order to favour safe, known-quantity middle-of-the-road performers, showing an embarrassing ignorance of modern promotional techniques (still thinking that 'launch parties' and the near-invisible ads in upmarket newspapers are all that's needed) and boosting their prices to levels which simply aren't compatible with the reality of the product.

Perhaps the best thing will be to let the industry get on with it. At least that would clear the way for somebody to come along and rediscover the hardback novel and make it work.

It may have been possible for some of you to detect the merest trace of bitterness in all of this. Well, I warned you that the piece would be biased. The difficulty is that there's no real way of venting the frustration that such a situation can cause - taking one's case to the Writers' Guild or making it public could bring short-term redress but long-term disaster. An even worse outcome would be that, still unknown, I could drown in the waves that I made without materially affecting the situation at all. It's for this reason that neither of the companies is named here, and it's why the name at the top of this article is not my own - the point of the piece is to warn others, not to give me a means of revenge. If you get a joint offer for some of your work, insist on the extra reassurance of two contracts instead of one; otherwise you may find the situation being exploited by the less obviously-committed party regarding the agreement as a means of keeping the property on ice without any real sense of responsibility, meanwhile watching to see how the market is moving.

If there's revenge to be had, it'll be some time in the future on one of those rare occasions when I'm allowed to set foot on British soil without jeopardising my tax-exile status. Michael Parkinson or Melvyn Bragg will ask me about the early days, and it'll all come out before the watching millions. Heads will roll and bodies will be flung from windows in WC1 as the recriminations get under way; foliage will be stripped from the trees by the searing wave of shame.

I'm already rehearsing what I'm going to say.....

I suspect I've got plenty of time yet to get it right.

IN BRIEF

AN INVETERATE ITCH

R.Nicholson-Morton

As a freelance spare-time writer, I have been a commercial failure, having spent more time and money on writing than I've earned in payments. Looking back on the stories I've sold, I still don't shudder: surprisingly, the style, plots and characters are not execrable. I continue to respond with reservation towards some unpublished pieces - only their plots have potential, and that's why I keep them! The published stories were not, and did not pretend to be, literary achievements. I was spinning a yarn, preferably with a twist ending that did not appear contrived.

But as far as I was concerned, short stories lacked something. Thereafter I expended time writing novels (five unpublished to date); these books and other non-writing distractions changed me and my approach to writing. Now I look back with surprise: perhaps 'maturity' is like this! I may still create bizarre conditions and action sequences, but at present I am more concerned than ever before with the characters' responses: not merely the physical reactions and their ultimate effect on the characters' attitudes, but detailing how the gradual psychological changes occur. That's an aim I am far from achieving; it is humbling to read Doris Lessing's first novel - she did it so well!

I still believe that writing for the market is a good beginning for a writer: make your analysis of the market deep enough and - if the story is good - you will succeed. Believable interplay of character, humour, telling similes (which I often lack), atmosphere, apt description, all have their place, but story remains the main ingredient. The ending need not be happy or even conclusive, but it must be satisfying, right for the tale. Writing for a market is a worthwhile experience; it tightens writing style, the work is honed (not butchered) to the word-count requirement. This is useful for beginners, for most things are far too wordy; there are shorter and better ways to say things, to describe events. Variety in sentence length should not be discarded, of course, for there are few things as bad as a pile of paragraphs containing clipped sentences: taut it may be, but it's strained and soon becomes irksome.

Unfortunately, there comes a time when the desire to write for oneself and not the market overrides the other less literary considerations, such as selling material! The spare-time scribe has an advantage here, not risking his mortgage at all; there are not many brave souls like Rob Holdstock who risk all and succeed. Now, I fear I am approaching that stage, because, having tailored my style to requirements, it adapts unwill-

ingly to the different needs of more introspective fiction. My last effort is 70,000 words long and has a fast pace, and is packed with incident to the ultimate detriment of character. This is not unusual for SF, but it is far from satisfying. The main characters have reader-sympathy, but barely. Towards the end of the book I realised how much I was being torn in two. I was striving to maintain the momentum of a fast-paced adventure, only hinting at the social and moral implications along the way, yet the incidents and the types of character that I had created were crying out for a deeper treatment than the word limit would allow. I had become hidebound by word-count. Having studied the market, I was convinced that (fantasy and Heinlein apart) the market prefers a certain length of MS. So I had kept too tight a rein on the story. As I had fought shy of giving way to the attraction of the greater potential lying there, I left the whole undeveloped: many important sequences could be stretched (not padded) to improve the work. I still feel that the story is all right, but in parts it is sadly lacking in depth. It brought a rejection slip from Faber and Faber, a publisher in whom I have great faith, for they have published many good first SF novels. I have discounted trying to sell the MS elsewhere because I am no longer happy with it. Now, I either commit surgery on the MS and rescue some portions for improvement and short story treatment, or rewrite the whole, only with more emphasis on the neglected aspects.

No time spent writing is wasted, but often it could have been better spent. Writing for a market is a way to ensure you get printed, and you do learn your craft in the process; but you must be circumspect, aware of the strictures this can impose. I have come to the conclusion that the novel, whatever the content, must be a part of me. This is not commercial, but is fulfilling for oneself. And, if the blend of story, one's style and the state of one's craft are combined with luck, the the work will, regardless of profit motive, be accepted by a publisher who cares. For me, the attempt may fail, and I may have to be content with a compromise marriage between me-and-market, but I will have tried...

Perhaps my belated realisation will be salutory. Writing for the market is useful experience, but don't be controlled by it; write for yourself as well to maintain balance.

I'M NOT A NUMBER – I'M A FREELANCE ARTIST!

Jim Barker

As probably everybody knows by now, I recently gave up a full-time job to seek fame and fortune as a freelance artist. This was, I suppose, one of the toughest decisions I'll ever make, but in many ways it was also one of the easiest...

I used to be a general and advertising artist with my local newspaper, The Falkirk Herald. I'd been employed by them for 8½ years and was responsible primarily for preparing artwork for local advertisers, but I was also called upon to prepare column headings, maps, article illustrations and promotional material. Since we

didn't have one, and I was supposed to be Creative. I also found myself being a copywriter as well. I suppose it was a good all-round training, but after 8½ years of deciphering spidery writing on brown paper bags in order to turn it into a decent advert, or providing instant artwork from the briefest of descriptions, it got to the point where I could do the job in my sleep. And frequently did. By last February I was heartily sick of it.

Actually, I was sick of it well before then. The Herald has this funny attitude towards artists. They're an unnecessary luxury. Anything an artist can do can just as easily be done by advertising reps and the case room. Never mind that in most cases where the reps and case room took over the results were so awful that customers demanded refunds and revenue was lost. Then, and only then, would they come to the art dept for a salvage job. It really made you feel appreciated. It all came to a head with my 'Glass Hand' incident back in 1979, when I was so pissed off with the management's attitude that I was all for chucking up the job and heading South. However, the response to my stuff at that time was lukewarm and I backed down and went back to menial servitude. I was biding my time...

Just after I'd started working for the Herald, I discovered Fandom and soon started a secondary occupation of cartooning for fanzines. I enjoy doing cartoons. After a dreary day of advertising, it was good to be able to cut loose on the type of material I really wanted to do. The response to my fannish cartoons encouraged me to try submitting material professionally. At first I had very little success, though I did begin to make one or two useful contacts.

That all changed at the beginning of 1981. Through a friend, I heard that the News of the World were looking for new strip cartoon ideas and so I contacted them, which led to me doing the MacHinery strips as samples. You might have seen them in Vector. That was because they were turned down "with great regret" by NotW. Ah well...But later that year, I entered a piece in the Cartoonists Club annual competition, in the 'Best Unpublished Cartoon Strip' category.

I won. I WON. I DAMN WELL WON!!!!

I had to go to a presentation at the Cafe Royal in London and shake hands with the Lord Mayor of London and make a tongue-tied speech in front of a room-full of the country's top cartoonists. Needless to say I also made quite a few contacts, which resulted in me wangling a visit to IPC publications, where I showed them my portfolio which I - ahem - just happened to have brought down with me. The response to my stuff was more encouraging this time and I came away with some work. And then some more. And then some more...

So earlier this year, I'm sitting there, not too happy in my job and with a fledgling freelance career. All it needed was a push...

The push came in the form of a £1.75 million debt which the firm publishing the Herald owed to the bank. We'd heard rumours that the firm, which owns printing plants and about twenty local newspapers throughout Scotland, was in difficulties, but this was Crunch Time. To save the firm there had to be 53 redundancies throughout Scotland. One of these was to be an artist.

Actually, I was quite safe. I'd become senior artist and it was my assistant who was for the chop, on a last in first out basis. Naturally, we and our union fought to keep his job. But the management were adamant. One artist was going. End of story.

I went home that night and did a lot of hard thinking. If my assistant left, I'd be taking a step backwards. I'd be doing the work of two men. I'd probably never get the chance to take

up the opportunities for cartooning I'd been developing and I'd be doing the same old job for the same old management. The next morning I went in and asked to take a voluntary redundancy.

The decision was made easier by the following facts: firstly, I'd spent the last 8½ years developing a relationship with many local traders through their adverts and felt that I should be able to rely on several of them for work; secondly, in the Falkirk area there is very little competition in the way of other commercial artists; finally, I had several contacts in the national publishing scene.

I reckoned I should be okay if I could get a mixture of local advertising and commercial work and national work. And I had a fair bit in redundancy cash to tide me over until things started to pick up. Happily, my parents agreed, as did virtually everybody else I told of the situation. A few were a bit doubtful but nobody said I was mad.

Anyway, as of today - two months after leaving the Herald - I'm picking up various commercial jobs around the area. Thanks to a weak traipsing round the publishers after Channelcon, I've sold Mac-Minory to IPC, only he's now called BLEEP! and is appearing in a new kids' comic called WOW! I've landed a strip in a women's monthly called HERS and Chris Evans and I have a revamped version of Elmer T. Hack in the hands of the cartoon editor of the Daily Express. And I've got several other things on the go which look promising. It's obviously a bit early yet to say whether or not I'm going to succeed. I'm very aware that everything could come to nothing but for the moment, things are looking hopeful. In the meantime, if you know of anybody who's looking for a cartoonist...

WHO NEEDS WRITING ORGAN-ISATIONS?

Dorothy Davies

Well, the answer to my title is - I do, for one:

My first connection with a writing organisation came when I subscribed to Freelance Writing. This is a quarterly magazine containing some market information, and short 'how to' items, which I found useful. Then I subscribed to the companion publication, Contributors' Bulletin, a monthly information guide. Each issue contains 60-70 markets, along with competition news, editorial changes, changes of address and obituaries. I need these, as I'm not a single-track writer. You'll find me featured in letter pages in all manner of magazines, from gardening to checkout, and writing anything that comes to mind, articles on human relationships, aspects of my religious faith, how to write this type of story/article or that, and my satirical and science fiction stories. When I sit down at my desk, I never really know what I'll produce by the end of my writing time!

Through a small ad in Freelance Writing I learned of the existance of Success. This organisation also publishes a quarterly magazine, much like Freelance Writing. It also has regular competitions for stories and poetry. The main benefit of membership, though, is the free entry to the folios, of which there

are many. I have joined the SF, article and short story folios, and have benefited from membership tremendously. There is a strict time limit on retention of any of the folios, so you are bound to a degree of discipline. You should have something ready for the folio when it comes, and not hang on to it and write something in haste. The criticisms are fair and honest, and I find that by letting a manuscript go for two months, and having it come back with six or eight different comments on it, I can look at it entirely differently, and often revise it with good effect. There is also the happy task of corresponding with all those people through the folio, something an addicted letter writer like me revels in!

I must also mention Orbiter, but briefly in passing, as my association with it up to now has not been a happy one! The first time the folio went round, it took a year; this time it got lost, and we also lost a member along the way. I'm now organiser for the folio, and we'll see what happens. But there will be plenty of you out there reading this (I hope) who are contented with their Orbiter folio. It is a good way of getting your work looked at helpfully, which is the whole point of doing it.

There is one other organisation I have brushed with, Writers' Ring. I filled in the application form, indicating that I wanted their marketing service, wrote a cheque and posted it to them. They returned my cheque with a note saying they did not feel they could offer me an adequate service. With absolutely no evidence whatsoever, I'm bound to say I feel they didn't think they'd make money out of me, by saying 'this needs altering, could our criticism service be of use' etc. If anyone has any good reports to make on Writers' Ring, let me know.

So, writing organisations, who needs them? I get a lot out of my membership of the two organisations, but then I put a lot in. By joining three folios I've widened my circle of correspondents; by having two magazines to write for, I've got a lot of my thoughts down on paper and into print (one paid for, one free). What you get out of any organisation is about equal, in my opinion, to what you put in.

(Freelance Writing/Contributors Bulletin can be obtained from Freelance Press, 5-9 Bexley Square, Salford, Manchester. Send sae for details. Success is run by Mrs Kate Dean, at 17 Andrews Crescent, Peterborough. Sae to her for details.

THE ADMINISTRATION AND MYAN LIN

HILARY ROBINSON

SIX SCREENS SHOWED the frozen white surface of Set unrolling a thousand metres below, but Fian Var watched them through unfocused eyes. What she saw was the body of the survey team's geo-physicist frozen to death in a crevasse ten metres below the surface. The crew had stood silent in a small, miserable circle while First Officer Kolar Re went through the prescribed resuscitation techniques, but they had all known it was useless. Myan Lin was dead. The silver thermal suit had been pierced by daggers of ice. Fian Var spoke the Farewell to the Dead over the corpse and supervised the placing of the body in a sealed pod. Then the crew completed their mission of mapping the surface of Set. Captain and First Officer together composed the report which was relayed to Aldur. They knew there would be an enquiry the instant they landed.

Fian Var sat stiffly in full dress uniform, the hard collar cutting into her jaw, forcing her to hold her head unnaturally high. Kolar Re, similarly dressed, sat on her left. Three officers of the Administration faced them across a table the colour of coal. If Fian Var felt any emotion - apprehension, grief - it was not apparent. Her pale face was completely still. She waited for the Administrator to begin.

The report that she and Kolar Re had sent was read aloud and she was asked if she had anything to add. She said she had not. Kolar Re was also asked and gave the same answer.

'Was Myan Lin a competent officer?'

'He was,' Fian Var said.

'was he aware of the dangers of research on an iceworld?'

'Of course.'

'Who surveyed the area prior to Myan Lin's descent into the crevasse?'

'I did,' Fian Var replied carefully. It was difficult not to sound defiant - or defensive.

'Did you consider the area safe for exploration on foot? In particular, did you have any doubts about the wisdom of allowing a crew member into a crevasse?'

'Myan Lin considered it safe and he was the expert.'

'The decision was not taken by you, the Survey Leader?'

'Yes, in consultation with the geo-physicist.'

'Were proper safety procedures observed at all times?'

'Yes. Myan Lin wore one of the new thermal suits, which proved

completely useless against iceshards. On top of it he wore a safety harness and was in constant verbal communication with the ship. Finally, the shipboard winch was manually supervised and a lifaline was used.'

'So you are totally convinced that all safety measures that could have been taken, were taken.'

'Yes. The accident happened without warning. None of the safety precautions made any difference.'

'Please describe exactly the moment when you realised something had gone wrong.'

'I was on the flight deck, speaking to Myan Lin. He had discovered a darker layer ten metres down. He had just said, "These striations appear to be a fine dust." I said, "Are you going to take core samples?" While I was speaking there was a sharp snapping sound and Myan Lin screamed. I called him...but - ' She shook her head. There was silence for several seconds. Fian Var said softly, 'Do you wish me to describe the rescue attempt?'

'We have your report.' The Administrator indicated the papers on the black desk. 'Let me say at this point that we find no fault with your emergency procedures. When you brought Myan Lin up, you are quite sure he was dead?'

A shadow crossed Fian Var's face and was instantly gone. 'He was dead.'

'Nevertheless you attempted resuscitation?'

'We did.'

'Who did?'

'I did,' said Kolar Re.

'You are fully qualified in the latest techniques?'

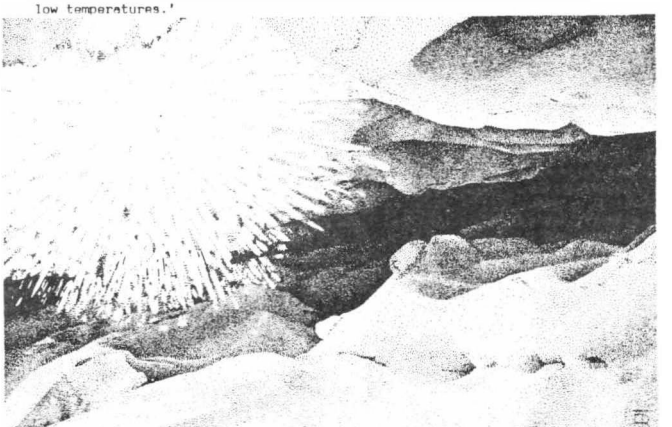
'Yes sir.'

The Administrator turned back to Fian Var. 'Why did the iceshards fall?'

'I don't know,' she said evenly.

'You are an experienced Survey Leader. Why do you not know?'

'Set is in the initial stages of exploration and may well have activities of which we know nothing as yet. We have never before had suits that were supposed to be capable of providing protection at such low temperatures.'



That is the second time you have made deliberate and uncomplimentary reference to the suits. I take it you are not happy with them?'

'Happy!' Fien Var looked away. 'Myan Lin would not have died if he'd had a proper suit.'

'But surely no suit would have withstood the iceshards? I quote from your report...' He searched through the pages in front of him. 'Yes, here it is. You say, "Iceshards overhanging the cravasse varied from a few centimetres to several metres in length. They hung down like teeth. Myan Lin's thermal suit was found to be punctured in seven places. In three places the ice was embedded in the flesh. Myan Lin would have died from hypothermia the instant his suit was pierced." This is still your opinion?'

'It is.'

'You feel the suit should have been able to withstand iceshards some of which were several metres in length?'

'Of course I do! The suit was not properly designed. It was designed for preservation of heat with maximum mobility. It was just not strong enough.'

'Then you hold the suit designers culpable?'

'They did what they were told,' Fien Var muttered.

'I beg your pardon, Captain?'

'They were asked to produce a cheap, lightweight thermal suit. They did exactly as they were asked.'

'Then you do not hold them responsible?'

'No.'

'Then what was?'

'The Administration,' Fien Var said fiercely.

'Have a care, Captain,' the Administrator said warningly. 'Aren't you being wise after the event? Hindsight is a wonderful thing. Why did you accept unsatisfactory equipment?'

Fien Var looked the Administrator straight in the eye. 'I was given no choice.'

'Do not glare at me, Captain. If you have something to say, say it.'

'Somewhere in your files you have a memo from me, indicating that the suits did not meet the specifications I gave. I grant you I had no idea about iceshards puncturing them; I was concerned about them getting snagged on equipment and ripping. Your reply, to the best of my recall, was that within the present financial situation the suits were the best we could hope for and with proper safety measures there was no reason to expect problems with them.'

The Administrator turned to the officer on his left, who shrugged slightly. He turned back to Fien Var, no indication on his face as to whether he accepted her statement or not. 'Even if, as you say, you took all reasonable precautions, a tragedy still occurred. We must establish beyond all reasonable doubt that it was an accident.'

'It was an accident!'

'Accidents,' persisted the Administrator, 'do not just happen. They are caused. What caused this one?'

'Set.'

'Explain.'

'We have never surveyed Set on foot before. The area was stable, seismic readings showed nothing. But it was indescribably cold. We had to spray the ship's landing gear continually to stop her freezing onto the surface. Even in our suits we couldn't stay out in the open more than fifteen minutes at a time. Everything became brittle. It is possible that the iceshards were so brittle that the vibrations caused by Myan Lin just being there made them snap off. And they fell on him.' She glanced down. 'There was no warning and nothing that we could have done to prevent it.'

'Except not go down there in the first place.'

'Of course. We could have avoided doing our job properly.'

'That isn't exactly my interpretation of what I said,' the Administrator remarked drily. He turned to his two colleagues who nodded slightly in response to his unasked question. He looked at Fien Var. 'The Administration will consider your account of events. You will hear our conclusions by this evening.'

Kolar Re opened the door to his apartment without rising from his seat but when he saw Fien Var he got up to meet her. She had a sheaf of papers in her hand.

'Good news?'

Fien Var smiled. 'The report commends Myan Lin's valour in a hostile and alien environment and awards him a courage star.' She paused for effect. 'It also says full compensation for the death of a crewman on duty will be paid.'

'Good,' Kolar Re said. 'Make yourself at home.'

Fien Var looked around the flat, utilitarian and bright, and sat on a hard, white chair, laying the report on the circular table. 'I was very afraid during the interview that the miserly bastards were going to try to wriggle out of paying the compensation,' she said.

'They obviously accepted in the end that it wasn't his fault,' Kolar Re said, sitting by her and looking through the papers.

'Yes.'

He glanced at her. 'You still think he caused it.'

'The area was stable. I'm sure of that. It had to be those seismic bolts he was planting.'

'That bit about the iceshards being brittle sounded reasonable to me.'

Fien Var shook her head. 'I don't think so.'

'But Myan Lin was an experienced seismologist. How could he have let the bolts go off prematurely? Do you think the extreme cold made them unstable? Or did he do something stupid?'

'Who knows? I warned him about those primitive explosive devices more than once. I should have forbidden him to use them but he was such a capable man. Was. Perhaps we should be grateful he took no one else with him.'

Kolar Re looked at her with narrowed eyes. 'I thought you liked him.'

'Of course I liked him! But he could be moody at times. Well, it doesn't matter what caused it. If the Administration had provided us with suits to the specifications I asked for, Myan Lin's mistake would not have cost him his life. But they wouldn't pay for the best quality, damn them.'

'You really hate the Administration, don't you?'

Fien Var smiled humourlessly.

Her eyes are cold, Kolar Re thought, like the ice. He wished she would let go. He knew she was shaken by Myan Lin's death but she wouldn't admit it. 'The bolts are on the ship's inventory,' he said suddenly.

'No. They weren't ordered through official channels since they're considered obsolete. Myan Lin had his own sources.'

'What about the case they came in?'

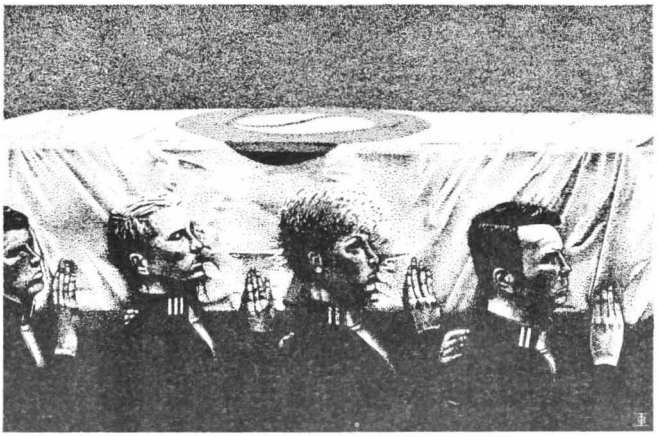
'It's spinning in space somewhere between Set and here. I shoved it out of the airlock on the way home.'

'Kolar Re nodded to himself. She seemed to have covered everything. He turned the top page of the report. 'I see the presentation of the decoration will be after the ceremony. Noon tomorrow.'

'Yes. Tell the others, would you?'

'They don't know what we suspect?'

'Of course not.'



Myan Lin was buried with full service honours following a florid speech by the Administrator extolling his virtues. The padded box containing the silver star was presented to Theba Lin who broke down and sobbed. Fien Var put her arm around her but Myan Lin's mate pushed her away roughly.

'You let him die!' she screamed. 'I hate you!' and she hurled the box at Fien Var. It hit her just below the left eye. The colour drained from her face but she stood her ground. Kolar Re came forward as if to speak.

'It doesn't matter,' Fien Var said tersely.

Relatives led Theba Lin away and the gathering broke up. Slowly Fien Var bent and picked up the box and opened it. The courage star glittered against the black velvet. She stood looking at it.

The Administrator came over and touched her on the arm. 'Shall I take that? I'll have it returned to her.' Fien Var closed the box and handed it to him.

'A difficult scene, Captain,' he continued. 'You handled it well. Myan Lin's mate was overwrought. Being a female yourself I'm sure you understand.'

Fien Var looked at him coldly. 'Administrator.' She acknowledged his presence. That was all. 'Excuse me.'

She slammed open the sliding door, overriding its gentle motion, and strode into her own flat. 'The chauvinistic, patronising worm!' she snarled.

'I assume you are speaking of the Administrator?' Kolar Re enquired mildly, following in her wake. He brushed aside the feathery touch of a hanging fern.

'Don't even mention that rat in my house!' She sat down on the brown settee, curled her feet up under her, interlocked her fingers in her lap and closed her eyes. Kolar Re had seen her go through a relaxation programme before and went straight to the kitchen where he brewed some tea. When he came back she was calm, still sitting cross-legged but watching a recording of the ceremony which a local channel had carried. He stood in the doorway, a glass beaker in each hand. She seemed to be watching the same piece over and over again. A remote

control lay on the settee beside her. As it came to Theba Lin's outburst, clearly seen, she raised the volume a little.

'You let him die!'

'Captain - ' Kolar Re began in protest. He came forward and held out a beaker.

'Listen to her,' Fien Var interrupted. She ran the video back.

'You let him die!'

'You let him die,' Fien Var repeated.

'What?'

'Listen! She says "You let him die". Not "You let him die" or even "You let him die". "You let him die."'

Kolar Re looked mystified. 'I don't see what difference it makes. It's still not true.'

'No.' She switched off and took the tea.

'Don't take it to heart,' he advised.

Fien Var held the glass in her hands absorbing the heat. She looked thoughtful. Kolar Re recognised the signs.

'What's on your mind?'

'I might go and see her,' Fien Var said slowly.

'Are you serious?'

'Why not? Maybe I can help her.'

'Would you like me to go with you?'

'No.' She glanced up. 'Thanks. I hate emotional scenes but I think I should do this alone.'

'Give it a day or two,' he suggested.

'I was thinking of next week.'

Kolar Re nodded.

Theba Lin slid back the door, saw Fien Var standing there and tried to close it again. Fien Var put her boot against it.

'I want to talk to you, Theba Lin.'

'You don't give me orders.' Theba Lin snapped.

'Please.'

Theba Lin stopped pushing the door. Her face was yellow and tired, but there was anger too. 'What do you want, Fien Var, survey Leader?'

'I went to talk to you.'

'About him? No.' She shook her head vehemently.

'Please,' Fien Var said again.

'I suppose if I don't let you in you'll kick the door down?'

'Theba Lin - '

'Come in then.' She turned and walked away, leaving Fien Var to slide open the door and follow.

Theba Lin perched on the edge of a chair, tense and wary, and indicated a seat on the other side of the immaculately furnished room. 'I see you put on your best uniform to visit me,' she said in an odd, high-pitched voice. 'One of the boys, aren't you, in your trousers and black boots? I suppose you do it for safety, play down your femininity I mean. Do you abandon the sexless pose when you're well away from Aldur?'

Fien Var frowned. 'What are you suggesting?'

'A nice set-up, one woman and four men alone in space for months at a time.'

'Two women and three men,' Fien Var said absently. 'Are you accusing me of something?'

'Oh, innocent, innocent! I know what you get up to!' Theba Lin's voice verged on hysteria. 'I know you and Myan Lin were - ' she stopped with the word half-formed on her lips. There was a terrible silence.

'Were what?' Fien Var said icily.

Theba Lin refused to continue.

'How can you think such a thing?' Fien Var said unhappily. 'Myan Lin would never - '

'You think you know him so well, don't you!'

'I knew him well enough. I worked with him for two years, and never once, in all that time - '

'Were you disappointed?'

'Theba Lin! What's going on in your head? Myan Lin was part of my crew. That's all. That's all. He was a colleague and a friend. What makes you think there was more to it?'

'I know there was!' She jumped up. 'You took him from me and you let him die!' She strode up and down the thick carpet, crying. Fien Var watched her, shocked, searching for anything in the past that might have provided the basis for suspicion. She could think of nothing. She said quietly, 'Myan Lin was ten years my senior. I give you my word there was nothing between us. Ever.'

'I'd expect you to say that,' Theba Lin sniffed.

'What do you mean, I let him die?'

'It's your fault he's dead. Why didn't you see?'

'See what?'

Theba Lin stopped pacing. 'The way he was going.'

'What way was he going?'

'Peculiar! He'd sit staring at the wall for hours on end! I'd talk to him and he wouldn't hear me. I'd get mad at him and shout at him and ask him what he thought he was doing and he'd say, looking at the stars. It scared me. Maybe all space crew go like that in the end?'

'I hope not.'

Theba Lin resumed her pacing. 'I can't understand why anyone would want to hurtle through blackness in a metal box and at the end of it risk injury and death.'

Can't you? Myan Lin loved his work. So do I.

'I was always at him to get a sensible job so he could come home at night.'

A sensible job? He was the best geo-physicist in the service! How could you?

'He'd talk to himself sometimes and at other times he'd go for days without speaking. You can't pretend you never noticed that.'

Fien Var shook her head. 'He wasn't like that with us. Quiet, certainly, moody on occasions, but not - disturbed.'

'He'd get depressed and talk about ending it all.'

'What?' Fien Var said softly.

'Oh yes. More than once. I knew something about him that you don't know, then? He often said that he'd like to die on one of the expeditions and not in his bed. With you, you see, not with me.'

'Are you telling me you think he deliberately...' she couldn't finish it. 'No, I don't believe that.'

'Don't you? Don't you, Fien Var? Because it reflects on your leadership? Maybe you're not the leader you think you are. Look good on your record, wouldn't it, one of your precious crew committing suicide? That worried him. Your career. He worried about you. Not about what it would do to me! Oh no, I'm only his mate! About what it might do to you! Well, has it blighted your career, Fien Var, survey leader? Has it?'

Fien Var turned physically from the onslaught. No no no...She saw Myan Lin's body already stiffening less than a minute after he died. She heard him scream when he realised what was happening. Not the sound of a man who wanted to die. Terror. She saw the blood frozen on the wounds. The piercing voice of Theba Lin went on and on.

'What's the matter, survey leader? You've gone very white. Nothing to say? Not even a tear for poor Myan Lin?'

Not now. Not in front of you. You'd hardly understand. She forced

herself to say calmly, 'I'm sure you must be mistaken.'

'Still think you know my mate better than I do,' Theba Lin taunted. 'Believe me, he didn't mean to come back.'

With all the determination she could muster, Fien Var got up, giving the impression of being cool and detached. 'If you spread that story around and the Administration gets to hear, they'll claim back their miserable compensation and charge you interest on it.'

Theba Lin lost her supercilliousness. 'But I need that money! I have young ones! They wouldn't...'

Fien Var smiled without warmth. 'They would.' She walked towards the door. Theba Lin ran after her.

'You won't tell them?'

Fien Var stood with her hand on the panel as the door slid open. 'No, I won't tell them.' She looked at the worried face, now puffy with crying. She's only hitting out at me because she's hurt and I'm an easy target. Why can't she see how much I hurt too? 'Farewell, Theba Lin. If you need help, come to us. We are all Myan Lin's friends.'

'Were,' Theba Lin said.

'Are.'

Theba Lin watched her get into the aircar. Damn you, Fien Var. You won't even give me the satisfaction of seeing you cry.

'She what?' said Kolar Re. They were alone on the ship's flight deck.

'You heard me.'

'You don't believe her, do you?'

Fien Var did not reply at once.

'You can't believe that Myan Lin would do a thing like that!' he protested.

'Why not? Anyone can be pushed too far. When I put that armoured bolt case out of the airlock, it was empty.'

'So?'

'So Myan Lin took all six bolts down the crevasse with him. What would he do that for?'

'I don't know. What's your theory?'

'Suppose he intended to set off all six at once?'

'Well, the crevasse would have collapsed on him,' Kolar Re said slowly.

'Exactly.'

'But - only one - '

She nodded. 'Yes. I think one went off prematurely before he had the others set and it merely brought down the iceshards. He didn't expect that. That's why he screamed when - it - ' she let it trail off. Kolar Re frowned.

'What did the bitch think?'

'She thought that Myan Lin and I - we - '

'Oh. So that's it. She decided to express her jealousy in sexual terms. Don't let it bother you.'

'Jealousy? Why should she be jealous of me?'

'Look at yourself, Fien Var, survey leader! Can't you see anything a planet-bound woman with responsibilities might be jealous o'?' He smiled, then gave a soft laugh. 'She doesn't know you very well or she'd realise that if there was anything developing between you and Myan Lin, you'd be the first to get him shipped off to another crew! She should know the rules. No hanky panky on survey ships.'

Fien Var gave a choking cry.

'I'm sorry, Captain. I didn't mean to be facetious. Do you want to talk about it?'

'Yes. I don't think I know how.'

'Just say what you feel.'

She spoke in a low, tight voice. 'I feel angry. I keep seeing him lying on the snow. I hear him scream. It tears me apart to think he

might have done it deliberately.' The tears came quite silently. Kolar Re let her cry, more than relieved to see it. He waited for her to stop.

'There's no proof he did it deliberately.'

'No.' She wiped her face with her fingers. 'Make tea, Kolar.'

When he came back to the flight deck she was her usual self again. He handed her a steaming glass of red liquid, a herb tea reputed to steady the nerves. She smiled when she saw it.

'Very funny, Kolar Re.'

'Can't have you cracking up, Captain. If the administration ever suspects a suicide, you're going to have some fight on your hands.'

She nodded.

'A toast?' suggested Kolar Re.

She raised her glass. 'Myan Lin.'

'Myan Lin. And confusion to the administration.'

'I'll drink to that.'

THE ART OF COURSE WRITING

David Swinden

THE ABOVE TITLE was chosen for its catchiness rather than for its descriptive accuracy. This article is not concerned with the art of writing for correspondence schools. It is, rather, a comment on the usefulness of those courses to the aspiring writer. I must state at the outset that the following is a personal view, based on personal experience. It is not intended to be a review of available courses, nor is it a definitive statement on correspondence education.

It seems to me that the essential questions are these: What are the drawbacks of correspondence education in general? Can correspondence schools teach creative writing? Do they try to? Whatever it is that they are trying to do, how well do they do it?

In what now seems like the distant past I was employed by a well-known correspondence college for a year. This college didn't deal with creative writing, but provided tuition for a great many professional and GCE examinations. One of its biggest selling points was its eschewal of text books; it produced its own course booklets, the cost of which to the student was included in the basic fee for the course. This was where I came in; a good part of my job was to convert the semi-literate manuscripts of those writing the booklets into something resembling English. I was responsible for the various accountancy courses, about which I knew, and still know, absolutely nothing.

Now the essential, and obvious, problem with correspondence education

is lack of genuine communication between teacher and taught, and in this respect my college was no exception. The tutors were part-timers, working from home. All of the students' exercises and queries travelled by post, via the editorial office. There was no face-to-face contact, no dialogue. Every student, when signing up for a course, was promised a personal tutor; and this statement does tend to suggest, to the unsuspicious mind, some kind of personal relationship. However, this is an erroneous assumption. Whereas every student had only one tutor, each tutor had a myriad of students. It is doubtful whether the tutors even recognised the scripts that came tumbling through their letterboxes.

Problems of understanding were horribly magnified. What may have been an elementary conceptual error on the part of the student could drag on for months, casting a shadow over the rest of his efforts, when a short conversation, even over the telephone, would have solved the problem.

Perhaps this is obvious, and perhaps I'm labouring the point, but it's important to realise that all correspondence schools must have these limitations, whatever they're trying to teach.

And that brings us to the next important consideration; what was my college attempting to do? What were its aims?

The obvious answer is that it was trying to get people through exams; and this is presumably the strength of correspondence schools. Certain subjects are generally taught in a corrupt and perverted fashion as a direct result, I would suggest, of the continuing evil of examinations. Factual recall assumes a disproportionate emphasis, at the expense of a real understanding of the nature of a subject (for example, science is commonly regarded, wrongly in my view, as a body of knowledge rather than as a cultural, intellectual process). This is why correspondence courses thrive. They can thrust received truth into the heads of people at a distance, thus enabling these people to pass particular exams - which is not the same, of course, as teaching them the subject.

How successful they are at even doing this is open to question. My college used to send out 100 questionnaires, asking people how they managed in their exams. If they received ten replies, revealing nine passes, they would claim a 90 per cent success rate - a practice likely to send shivers up the spine of any statistician.

So, given the constraints under which they're operating, can correspondence schools teach people to write? Before attempting to answer this, we have to deal, briefly, with that hoary old question, can creative writing be taught?

There's a standard response to this: 'You can't teach someone with no talent, but you can bring out what's there.' In other words, you don't teach people rules. You encourage them to make their own rules, let them do what they want to; your job is to help them do it well. I have no quarrel with this response, and if we accept it, serious difficulties with correspondence education become apparent. The body of 'facts' has gone. The examination has gone. Yet one sees adverts for various Schools of Writing sprinkled liberally throughout the press, so they must, presumably, be doing something.

It so happens that I have personal experience of one of these schools,

this time from the point of view of a customer. I sent them a story (which was dreadful); they wrote back with what seemed like intelligent criticism, and indicated that it would be worth my while taking their course, which was in short-story writing.

Each lesson consisted of a small booklet, in which the topic of the lesson was discussed and examples of this and that were given, and an exercise or two. You can imagine the sort of thing: 'Write 500 words using dialogue to introduce three characters, throwing in a bit of conflict for good measure.' Well, not exactly, but almost. The lessons were intended to become harder as the course progressed, and had titles involving the words 'plot', 'dialogue' and 'characterisation'. I felt the first stirrings of suspicion. The neat, analytical breakdown didn't seem to be compatible with the somewhat muddled act of creation. Then comments such as 'I think you might be going over the heads of your readers' crept into my tutor's pronouncements. The truth dawned, although I had no good reason to be surprised; I simply hadn't thought things through before paying my money. My curiosity (and, perhaps, laziness) had fogged my mind.

I was, of course, being taught rules. I was being persuaded to use whatever talent I had to produce 'what the readers wanted'. I was being told to write to a formula, as if writing was the same as an arithmetical operation.

Obvious, really. These people had found their 'facts'. They could standardise their approach, thus saving time, as they didn't have to consider the work submitted in the context of the person producing it. They'd even found an exam equivalent to put at the end of the course - they promised to refund your money if you didn't sell something to somewhere as a result of their tuition. This practice is not uncommon among such establishments, and has always seemed to me to be a rash undertaking. Perhaps the people running the courses have good contacts.

The point is not merely that the course wasn't about creative writing; it couldn't be about creative writing. Let's look at the problems more closely.

Correspondence schools tend to give you a particular tutor, for administrative reasons as much as for any others, so in effect you have a one-to-one postal relationship with someone. If that person happens to be out of sympathy with what you're trying to do, you're up the creek without a paddle. And even if your tutor <u>is</u> on the same wavelength, all you'll get is criticism and advice, at rather large expense. They can't teach you to write, provide you with a key; they can only teach you to hack, so that's what they do.

I suspect that many people take these courses because they want feedback. There are two points to make about this. Firstly, as I just mentioned, it's an expensive way to get it; and secondly, it probably won't be the kind of feedback you want.

It doesn't seem very promising, does it? So far the argument has been that correspondence education of any type is less than satisfactory; that it can be made to work, after a fashion, for some subjects; that creative writing is not one of these subjects; and that any correspondence course you undertake is not likely to be about creative writing.

However, let's assume that you're determined to do a course. How well do the schools accomplish their objectives, whatever they may be? How

competently do they go about their business?

This is where it becomes even more difficult to generalise, and it's a good point at which to emphasise yet again that this is a personal view, formed as a result of experience. I can only write of the two organisations with which I've had contact, and whereas the above arguments concerning the possibilities of correspondence education may have some validity as applicable theory, questions of competence and conscientiousness are necessarily more specific. Nevertheless, here, for what they're worth, are my experiences.

I've already mentioned the lackadaisical attitude of many of the tutors involved with my former employers. The attitude of those who ran the operation was not so much lackadaisical as unscrupulous.

They regarded the creation and revision of course booklets as a production line; they made it impossible for the editorial staff to do a satisfactory job, by refusing to alow them time to properly check their work. They weren't at all interested in quality, only quantity.

The editorial office was under constant pressure to shove things through (which was absurd, as there was a bottleneck in the production line at a later stage). They did everything on the cheap. For example, artwork was not done by professionals - that would have cost too much - but by relatives of the management hierarchy (the printing manager's nephew was one such, as I recall). This wouldn't have mattered if the people concerned could actually draw. Unfortunately, they couldn't.

In short, profit was the only significant motive. Naturally, one could say the same about any capitalist organisation; but there are degrees of greed.

It's slightly more difficult to criticise the writing course, as my opinion of it is coloured by the fact that I didn't want to learn what the school was trying to teach me (it would have been more of a hindrance to creativity than a help). Consequently, I can't remember the competence, only the idiocies. There were plenty of the latter.

The comments I received were badly typed and ungrammatical. They seemed to have been produced as the tutor read the piece; there was no reflection involved. This meant that I would be criticised for not giving an item of information or a character's name when I had in fact given it - the page after the tutor had typed his comment. Occasionally, I'd be criticised for doing things that I hadn't done. It was all very vexing.

Perhaps the apotheosis of this curious approach was reached when I presented my tutor with a story involving large, intelligent reptiles. I was informed that many of my readers might find the idea of giant reptiles rather repulsive, and would consequently be put off the story. I wrote back as politely as I could manage, pointing out that we were discussing a science fiction story, and that many weird and wondrous creatures habitually erupted from that genre, without any apparent detrimental effect on sales or popularity. In his reply my tutor informed me that he hadn't realised my piece was SF. This is particularly strange, as the course had an SF supplement, which I had been intending to take. My tutor was responsible for the SF supplement.

Now it may be that I had a particularly incompetent tutor. Perhaps he

was a drunk. Perhaps most tutors are responsible, intelligent people, and some of the advice they give may be useful - but only for formula writing. You can forget the literature.

By now, you may be getting the impression that the establishments I've been describing are maverick outfits, and that respectable organisations would have to be better. This is not the case - both of my examples are highly respectable. Like most correspondence schools that one sees advertised, they are 'approved', which means that an official body has examined them or their courses, or perhaps both, and pronounced them to be satisfactory. I can't say what qualities are necessary to win approval, as during my time working for the correspondence college, I never once saw the process in action.

To be fair, one has to admit the possibility that those schools and colleges without some sort of approval are absolutely dire; so if you're determined to do a writing course, you should probably ensure that the establishment of your choice has credentials. But do not be deceived - they're no guarantee of quality.

It must be obvious by now what my advice is to those of you contemplating a correspondence course in creative writing - quite simply, don't do it. If it's feedback you're after, join a workshop, join Orbiter, start a workshop. They'll cost a lot less, and are more likely to give you what you really want.

But if you do decide to take a course, be on your guard. Don't let being consciously open to criticism destroy your ability to detect unfair and stupid comments. Make sure you get your money's worth - don't accept second-rate and half-hearted critiques of your work. Try to select the criticism that's relevant to you, lest the 'rules' cramp and block you. That way you might come out of the experience with your creative faculties intact.

However, I really think you'd be better employed writing what you want to, rather than what somebody else tells you to.

LETTERS

DOROTHY DAVIES

Needing a job, I wrote to fifteen publishers asking if they needed a freelance reader. Apart from those who simply ignored my letter (and the large organisations that did that surprised me) I had the usual batch of 'sorry, we're full' replies. I also had this 'chicken and egg' reply from one publisher, who shall remain nameless -

'It is generally felt necessary that a freelance reader for a publisher should have worked previously for a publishing house rather than merely being an interested reader.'

Yes, I did tell them that I was a writer, and how else do you get experience anyway, except by someone trusting you enough to give it a try in the first place? Not, as you might have gathered, the most helpful of letters in the week's mail!

I do have some work, and I'm grateful for that. But I do feel sorry for anyone who is trying to break into anything these days. No wonder there are so many unemployed!

EVE HARVEY

Colin Greenland's article interested me for two reasons, other than the intrinsic subject matter, that is. Firstly, as an ex-teacher, I found his teaching methods extremely interesting, since I was putting myself in his place and wondering what the hell I'd do - give up probably! Secondly, he made me start discussing woman's lib and forced me into a complete rethink of my own 'liberation.' Still, I won't go into that here.

What I really want to comment on is Dorothy Davies's piece of fiction. I read this on the train into work one day and found it extremely good. When I returned home that night I started to relate to John the essence of the story, when I suddenly realised I was adding a complete and detailed background to the whole scenario that wasn't actually there. This stopped me in my tracks - why had I read so much into it? Admittedly, I had recently finished reading Doris Lessing's Memoirs Of A Survivor, so post-holocaust survival (well, this isn't exactly what Memoirs is about, but it's close enough for there to be a link) was reasonably close to the surface of my mind. But this wasn't a good enough answer. I came to the conclusion that it was because I am a science fiction reader. Certain ideas and themes become standard and the author can use them as an artist can use letraset/stock figures, landscapes, spaceships, etc.. The result is that Dorothy could use the small space available to her in elaborating on the story's important elements instead of wasting time on what to an SF reader would seem tedious background details.

Great for the author - he can write for that genre audience assuming a certain level of knowledge on its part. Less time on background, more emphasis on the important factors.

But wait a minute - that's fine for those who are in the know, but shouldn't literature be open to all? We're gaily building our own elite here. What would a non-SF reader think of Dorothy's story? Would he or she be able to fill in the background detail to the same extent and thus feel that the story has far more substance than it actually presents?

I finished my mental gymnastics balanced precariously between two stools. Yes, I did think that literature could gain from presuming a certain basic level of understanding on the readers' part - after all, mainline fiction does this all the time, since it is based on our past or present culture (do they have to explain what a train is and how it operates?) However, SF will never be included as merely one element of 'literature' rather than a subgenre (with the emphasis, definitely pejorative, on the 'sub') if we exclude the majority of the reading public. We are merely reinforcing SF's inferiority, since it is human nature to feel that something not understood is poor quality.

Good luck with the next issue, and do try to get it done on deadline, eh?

JOHN FRASER

I'd like to take this opportunity of congratulating you on your first issue and to wish you every success for the future.

I was interested in the idea of a workshop section and would personally find it very useful. One thing that I would like to see is an article on, or at least making some mention of, correspondence courses in creative writing. I have just paid out what seems to be a small fortune (at least, that's how it feels to me) on one of these, although I shall not be able to do anything with it until the summer. If anyone else has already had experience of these, perhaps he or she could write an article giving advice to those who may be considering enrolling in one of these courses.

I just hope that I have made a sensible decision!

MARKET SPACE

In the editorial of Focus 5 we put a proviso to the effect that the magazine, with its leisurely publishing schedule, is not the ideal place to disseminate up-to-date market news; this was just as well, since two magazines vanished and a third changed editor and address during the short period in which Focus 5 was being printed and distributed. We still believe that the Market Space feature has a use as a handy register, but would direct you to news magazines, such as Locus, SF Chronicle, Ansible or Matrix for a check on the very latest events. To the best of our knowledge, the following entries are correct at the time of going to print.

THE TRIPLE FIRST AWARD is a new annual literary prize for a first novel, sponsored by The Bodley Head, Penguin Books and Book Club Associates. All categories of novel are welcome, including SF. The winner receives an advance of £5,000 and guaranteed publication in hardback, paperback and Book Club editions. For a copy of the rules and full details, write to The Bodley Head, 9 Bow St., London WC2E 7AL.

ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE Short, hard SF stories seem to be preferred. Rapid reply time. 5.75c per word for short pieces, grading to 3.5c per word for anything longer than 12,500 words. Edited by Kathleen Moloney at 380 Lexington Ave., New York NY 10017, USA.

INTERZONE is looking for 'the very best imaginative fiction of all kinds, from hard science fiction to the avant garde, and especially fiction that's too original to label!' Rates are good, at least £35 per thousand words. Interzone, 28 Duckett Road, London N4 1BN.

ANALOG Hard SF stories of 20,000 words or less are favoured. As far as we know, rates are still the same as those given in Focus 2; 5c a word up to 7,500 words, $375 for stories of 7,500-12,500 words, 3c a word thereafter. Stanley Schmidt, 304 East 45th St., New York, USA.

THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION hasn't taken on many serials as such recently, though getting one story accepted seems to provide opportunities for intermittent follow-ups. Anything goes - hard SF, space opera, fantasy, horror, occasional poetry - with lengths up to 20,000 words approx. Rates start at $30 - $35 per thousand words. Edward L. Ferman, Box 56, Cornwall, Connecticut 06753, USA.

EXTRO welcomes SF and fantasy submissions of 2,000-12,000 words. 'Rates are negotiable, normally in the range £15 to £25 per thousand words.' They also accept non-fiction that is relavant to SF; the rate is £15 per thousand words. Fiction submissions to Paul Campbell, 27 Cardigan Drive, BT14 6LX; Non-Fiction Editor is Dave Langford, 94 London Road, Reading, Berks. RG1 5AU.

THE CATHERINE COOKSON CUP Just a reminder about this short story competition, as last date for entries is 31st August 1982; details in Matrix 42.

AD ASTRA and SHORT STORY MAGAZINE both appear to have folded; THE OMNI BOOK OF THE FUTURE will not be appearing; likewise CPW INDUSTRIES of Australia's projected magazine. They were going to call it Focus, cheeky whatsits. For the requirements of the real Focus, see the Editorial.