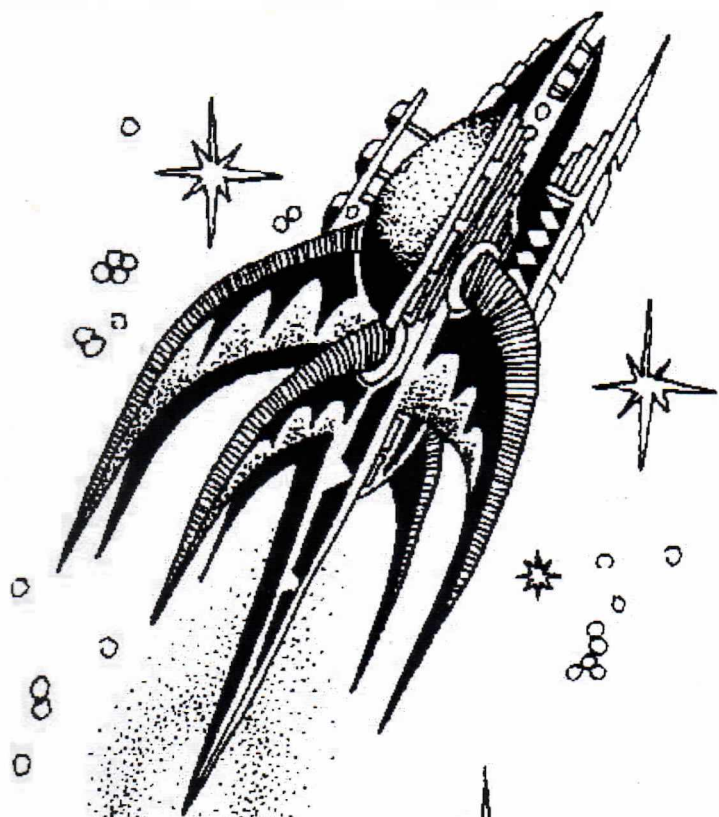


# Probe 130



7/1/51  
SCHIMA


There are no longer any limitations on the artwork supplied for PROBE as we have shifted over to digital printing. Photographs can be accepted but will be converted to grey scale.

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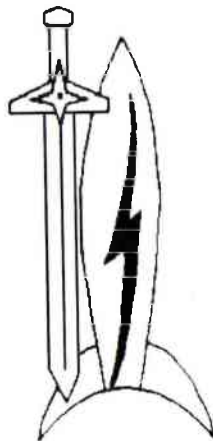
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**Printing.....**  
So Much More Than Just Ink.

# PROBE

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## The Dragon's Clause

### From the Editor

These were my comments on the stories entered this year. Arthur and I have independently covered a lot of the same ground.

"This year there were a lot of stories that came very close to being good, but just did not make it. And there were a lot of other stories that had the most terrible spelling and grammar mistakes. We were stunned by some of them.

"What do I mean by that? Well, as to the second type of story, there were people who 'walked across the desert sands'. Did they get sticky feet? There were many other examples to painful to repeat.

"As to the first type, my comment was 'there is something missing'. Or 'nothing really happens'. The story just wasn't a story.

"Let me expand on that sentence. Just as that sentence 'The story just wasn't a story' isn't a real sentence, just so many of the stories weren't real stories...

"To give an example: suppose that you picked up a book of short stories and opened it to the start of one. It reads: "He rode down the road and into the wood.'

Well, there is something happening there, but would you care? It is not a sentence that would interest or involve you. The words themselves jar, and they hold no interest. You would be turning to the next story before that first sentence had ended.

"Change that sentence. Give the reader some idea of who is doing what and what it would be like to be there.

"The sound of the hooves on the hard hot sand softened as the forest closed around him. He was safe for the moment in the cool resinous twilight.'

"Same events. But the reader begins to wonder who and why. The senses of smell, touch and hearing have been brought into the story.

"Standard fiction can pick up the story from there. Science fiction has to add a bit about what beings inhabit which world and so forth, but the principle is there.

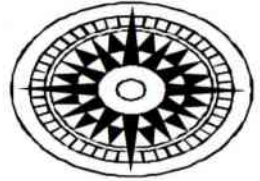
"Many of your stories had reasonable ideas. Some had good writing. Quite a few - even the winning story - were let down by their endings. Before your idea finds its way to paper, or computer, plan the story. All the finer details can be filled in later, but you should have the start, the end, and much of the middle of your story in mind before you start to get it written."

Oh and - after five years and eighteen issues - 113 to 130 - it is time for me to dismount the Editor's chair. Been nice knowing you!!!

Competition Results

**Nova 2005**

The finalists!! The results are on the following pages.



General Section -

Wee Jimmy's Bar by Brian Richard Sheppard

This Time Tomorrow by Liz Simmonds

They by Elana Bregin

Me, Myself and Irene by Liz Simmonds

Too Zany to Contemplate by David John Galloway

Simple Bob by Sean Hampton-Cole

Bus Stop by Liz Simmonds

The Black Wall by Ruby Heloise Rollins

Fridge by Pieter Gerhard Burger [aged 13]

Baby by Daphne Olivier

SA Section-

Thandiwe's Rainbow by Nicholas Wood

Evinta by Jacqueline Dianne Webb

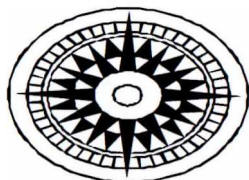
Who Can Say? by Wendy Bihl

Sarelelli by Cosi Mhlanga

Roses Are Red by Alan McGregor Duncan

Initiation by Cosi Mhlanga

Ice by Francis Brian Hill



## Competition Results

### **Nova 2005 General Section**

#### **Judge Digby Ricci**

Report on winning entries in the science fiction short story competition

#### **Winner: "They"**

This is, without doubt, the most disturbing of the stories and the most skilfully written. The opening is genuinely suspenseful; the claustrophobic horror of the lab cages is excellently captured; first-person narration is effectively used and – most of the time – the proselytizing is not excessive. The writer's use of sensory detail is especially successful in creating an environment that is both nightmarish and convincing. The conclusion is over-explicit for my taste – I would have ended with "I can expect no mercy" – but this story is chilling and poignant, and a very disturbing winner!

#### **Runner- up: "This Time Tomorrow"**

I especially enjoyed the wit and the parodic style of this story, with its mixture of colloquial and mock-Mediaeval diction. The plot is very ingenious too, and I found Adrew an engaging creation. I think the story would have been improved by more genuine menace from the Duke and his supporters [they are never more than paper tigers ] but the humour and the sheer inventiveness of the writing sweep one along. An entertaining, intelligent piece.

#### **Third place: "Me, myself and Irene"**

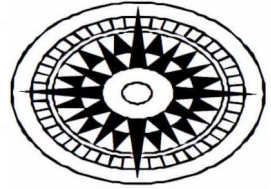
I think that this story's union of what can best be called 'local detail' and the fantastical is very successful, as is the wryly anguished tone of the narrator. The style is, at times, rather slapdash, combining ambiguity ("Perhaps next season I could hunt her" surely should be "hunt with her" or " use her in hunting") with some weird howlers ("seat-stained hose" for "sweat-stained horse" is the oddest!). Such solecisms must be avoided for they mar the impact of the story. This is a touching, intelligent variation of the Dangerous Corner theme, and, indeed, to say that it is South Africanized Priestley is accurate and no small compliment!

Digby Ricci

Competition Results

**Nova 2005 S A Section**

**Judge and sponsor ; Arthur Goldstuck**



Here are Arthur's comments:

There is bad news and good news.

The bad news is that the quality of entries was the lowest I've seen since I started judging the contest, which is a great pity, as we had been seeing a steady rise in quality in recent years. None of this year's winners would have made the final three in any of the previous years.

Perhaps we should offer guidelines for the next one? [See next page.]

The good news is that there seems to be a strong drive to explore South Africa's rich mythological past. Once writers succeed in melding elements of true fantasy and SF writing with that mythology, we may see some great African stories emerge. For now, however, it seems more a case of trying to re-tell the mythology rather than connect it to our genre.

In the light of the above comments on quality, it seems appropriate not to name a winner, as none of the stories were at a level that should earn them that accolade. Instead, this year sees a second-placed story and two in joint third place. The stories are:

2nd:

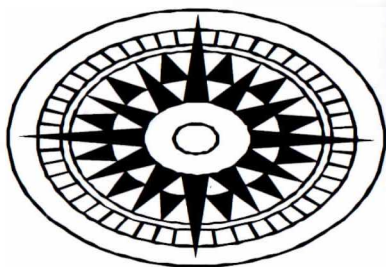
Ice

3rd (tie):

Who can say

Thandiwe's Rainbow

Writing a South African Science Fiction/  
Fantasy Story  
by  
Arthur Goldstuck



In writing a science fiction story with a South African theme, the most important thing to bear in mind is that it must not look like a cut-and-paste location job. In other words, if you could simply substitute American or Uzbeki or the Falklands Islands for the South African location, it just won't wash. The story must be intrinsically South African, with the human or physical environment having a direct influence on the plot, characters or outcome of the story.

South African dialect helps to situate the story and identify the characters as belonging to the location, but in itself is also not good enough. If that dialect could easily be replaced with something out of Harlem or Haifa, without the story losing any meaning, then it is the dialogue equivalent of cut-and-paste.

Beware of well-worn themes, unless you can retell them in novel ways:

- The Aids crisis, the Vredefort Dome, and the Cradle of Mankind have been done repeatedly, but seldom done well. Do it well, and you can get away with it. Do it badly, and it is very bad.
- Stereotyped stupid farmers make for stupid stories, as do stereotyped wise old farmers. If you want to do stereotypes, there is a career waiting for you in animated cartoon shorts.
- Selling one's soul to the devil or (insert name of favourite belief system here) equivalent is a theme as old as literature itself, both in and out of South Africa.
- Animals that can talk are the stuff of fable, not of science fantasy, unless you have a fresh and unusual justification.
- Avoid dressing African tradition up as science fiction and fantasy. For example, the supposed magic of the sangoma is itself not the stuff of fantasy, but the impact of it on a fantasy plot could be highly relevant. The existence of tokoloshes belong to the realm of the supernatural rather than of fantasy, as do other traditional beliefs like the role of ancestors. In short, a traditional belief system does not represent science fiction and fantasy in itself.
- The rediscovered diary or unearthed journal of a South African survivor of a future cataclysm. An alien visitor to a desolate planet finding the last will and testament of a South African survivor of a future cataclysm. And so on and on and on ...

Having said all that, the demands on good SA SF are the same as on good SF in general: a good story, a clear plot structure, well developed characters, and dialogue that doesn't make your reader cringe.



The thoughts and words of a character must be in tune with who and what the character is. A South African who is clearly of Dutch descent would be unconvincing using phrasings associated with Britons or Americans, for example. It applies to culture, socio-economic status and educational background as well. It's not that you have to be class-conscious as a writer, but that you have to be appropriateness-conscious.

The setting in terms of time must be appropriate to the technology on display. Don't set a story five years in the future with technologies that are dramatically more advanced than ours. Even 50 years in the future we won't have manned interstellar travel (barring some cosmic miracle, which in a plot structure had better be convincing!) or anti-gravity boots. Similarly, in a story set outside of time and place, make sure that passing references to events and objects linked to a specific time do not undermine the setting or the ambience.

The story should have a reasonable climax, twist, or at least a denouement - a plot outcome, solution or explanation that gives the story a reason for its existence. Simply recounting a history (a favourite approach to story-telling in many writers' first efforts) makes for boring reading, as does mere plot progression without purpose.

The plot should not be glib; you cannot simply gloss over complex events in a "then this happened, then that happened" style.

Don't rush through the story. Once you have the initial version down on paper, work through it to see where dialogue can be added, improved or removed. Make sure the plot and style are consistent. Do your characters have character? Work on the characterisation, and many a story is rescued simply by adding ambience, i.e. elements of atmosphere, mood and attitude.

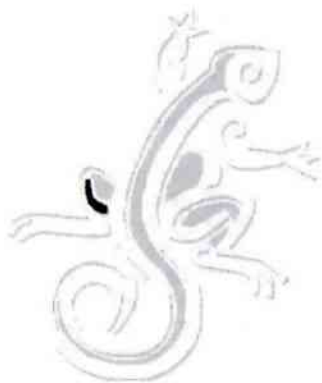
Finally, remember that truth really is stranger than fiction. The kind of hugely unexpected things that tend to catch the planet off guard in the real world, like the tsunami that killed tens of thousands in Asia, the sudden emergence of the Internet as a global electronic communications medium, and the supreme callousness of the likes of Al Qaeda, are most unconvincing as fiction. The reason most disaster movies do not survive the test of time is precisely because they go for maximum impact with minimum plot development. The reason science fiction often translates so badly onto the big screen is because the core ingredients of great SF, like wonderful characters and immersive ambience, are usually lost in the 90 minutes of screen time allotted to them. What's left is the stripped down plot, the hi-tech dazzle, and the fireworks at the end: a combination which is often not enough to satisfy the viewer, since it is simply not convincing story-telling. In writing, this applies equally, since you are trying to persuade readers to experience the story in their minds. Don't expect them to visualise something that is unconvincing. But if you do, try to do it in a way that incorporates the guidelines above.

You can ignore all of these rules if you've won the Nobel Prize for Literature, or make a fabulous living from writing unintelligibly or unintelligently. We won't argue with success. But until then, the rules matter to the judges.

SA Section

**Who Can Say?**

Wendy Bihl



His name is not Mantis. His kind uses unique mental signatures rather than names but most readers of this story will not be telepathic so I will name him in human fashion and call him Mantis.

He looks just like his name. Even those of you who have never been abducted would recognize him from movies, posters, T-shirts and tattoos. Or perhaps the old people told you stories about him: two large, dark, insect eyes set in a bald, bulbous head; nose no more than two slots and the mouth a straight line like a cut in the chinless face. The body is slender and the arms long. Each hand has three fingers and a thumb and each finger has far too many joints. He is no taller than a human child. He lives on strong emotions and considers humans no more than animals to be used for food, experimentation and artificial insemination.

Where he lives, I couldn't tell you – perhaps in a flying saucer far above the earth; perhaps in a cavern far beneath. Either way, you won't see him unless he wants you to.

\*\*\*\*\*

Mantis observed the small, white car with the large red L in the back window as it traveled slowly and uncertainly along the road. Inside were two women – one young, one not-so-young – and a small furry animal in a basket.

Conditions were close to ideal for the abduction. There were no habitations nearby and no other cars on the road. The one possible problem was the small animal. The species had always been antagonistic towards Mantis's people and he didn't want to tangle with it if he could help it.

\*\*\*\*\*

The white BMW rocketed along the road, closed in on the minibus taxi and hooted as it sat on the taxi's bumper, trying to force it to speed up. The taxi driver thrust his arm out of the window and displayed an up-yours sign to the Beemer's driver. Hooter blaring, the BMW swung out to overtake. It sped over the blind rise, on the wrong side of the white line and a light, visible even in daylight, shot from sky to ground (or perhaps the other way round) on the other side of the hill and then disappeared.

\*\*\*\*\*

Mantis slowed his vibrational frequency to match that of most of the life forms on this planet. To the women in the little Ford it appeared that a column of light flashed from sky to ground (or perhaps it was the other way around) and a small being appeared standing a short way in front of the car. Normally Mantis would have caused the engine to cut out but the driver panicked and braked without depressing the clutch and the car stalled without his intervention.

Cynthia and Abigail saw the BMW breast the hill and swerve to avoid the child-like figure. The car clipped it and sent it flying into a ditch at the edge of the road. The light disappeared and the car roared on. The taxi appeared over the hill a moment later, rocking from side-to-side, the luggage on the roof leaning precariously and the passengers screaming and threatening mutiny. The taxi rattled on down the road.

"Cynthia! He hit that child! Didn't even stop!" Abigail was out of the passenger seat and running towards the huddled shape next to the road, leaving Cynthia to struggle with the seat belt that always managed to jam. She saw Abigail crouch down then start back with her hand clapped over her nose, gagging, her eyes watering.

Cynthia would have turned white had that been possible. "Abigail? How bad is it?" She freed the seat belt and went towards her landlady, but slowly. She didn't think she could handle anything too gruesome.

Abigail's mouth opened and closed as she turned unbelieving eyes on Cynthia. She gestured towards the crumpled heap. Cynthia took a step forward then leapt backwards almost in the same movement. "My god! Mantindane! Eish, it stinks!"

"Cynthia, it's an alien! What's a mantindane?"

"That! My Gogo told me about them. They are evil spirits that live beneath the ground and steal people. They cut pieces from their flesh and feed on their terror. They plant their babies in human wombs like a wasp laying its eggs inside a spider."

"That's just mythology". Abigail turned back to the little creature. "I think it's still alive. We'd better take it with us to Dr de Jongh."

"To a vet? It's not a baboon!"

"Well, it's clearly not human, and if anyone knows non-human it's a vet. And since we're going there anyway, why not?"

"Abigail, leave it here. Better still, wring its neck and chuck it into the long grass. It's vicious, and it was probably about to abduct us." As Cynthia spoke she felt an inward cringe. She was an engineer, for God's sake! She was modern and sophisticated and didn't believe in her Gogo's superstitions, yet here she was carrying on as if they were gospel! And she was furious with Abigail for brushing aside those same beliefs.

Abigail set her jaw and Cynthia rolled her eyes and gave up arguing. All she could do by way of protest was to get back in the car, in the passenger seat this time, and leave Abigail to wrap the creature in her coat and load it onto the back seat next to the cat basket. A hiss and yowl of rage burst from Yinyang. A hairy black and white arm stretched through the wicker bars and tried to gouge the smelly bundle. Abigail moved it out of his reach.

"See? Even Yinyang knows it's not right." Cynthia pushed out her bottom lip and sat with her arms crossed and her seat belt pulled across her body but not clipped in. She might want to get out in a hurry.



"Cynthia, whatever it is, it's a living creature and we're obliged to help it. And I am not going to kill a real live alien and leave it next to the road! I've been waiting for this all my life! Can you imagine the headlines?"

Cynthia could, but said nothing. She pictured the Daily Sun in red, black and white: "Evil Spirit Bit My Bum!" Alongside it, Die Son in red, yellow and white: "Alien Het My Gechow!" Under no circumstances forget the exclamation

marks.

She wound her window right down and tried not to breath in the evil smell of the thing on the back seat.

\*\*\*\*\*

Mantis hovered on the edge of consciousness. The women didn't know it but their excitement and fear and Yinyang's rage were all that were keeping him from death.

\*\*\*\*\*

The vet's waiting room was packed. The owners of the prospective patients had been informed that there would be a long wait while Dr de Jongh tried to save the life of a poisoned husky, but no one had left with the exception of a border collie that was in such a state of nerves that it threw up its entire dinner on the floor. Its owner decided to leave before he was asked to clean up. Alfred the assistant did it instead.

The husky's large owner stood next to the stainless steel table and looked as if he were about to puke as the vet began pumping the dog's stomach.

The computers were down and a technician was running between the surgery and the reception area with cables and screwdrivers and an increasingly agitated expression. The system was just up and running and he was preparing to leave when Abigail and Cynthia appeared in the doorway. A high frequency hum, beyond the limits of human hearing but perfectly audible to animals, entered with them and all hell broke loose.

The computers shut down with unanimous finality. Every cat and dog in the place began hissing, spitting, yowling, howling, barking, snarling and yelping and Abigail froze as they focused on her and the bundle in her arms. Nelson, the vet's own one-eyed cat, jumped down from his usual post on the counter and puffed himself up to twice his normal size. He looked grotesquely distorted as he lifted one paw and lurched forward on three legs with his one good eye focused on Abigail. She was so unnerved she almost turned and ran. A little girl screamed and jumped up on her chair, dropping a shoebox full of kittens onto the floor in the process. The humans gagged and coughed when the smell of sulphur reached them.

As the chaos increased the hum grew stronger and the agitation grew and the chaos increased and the hum grew stronger.

Dr de Jongh stormed into the waiting room with his finger pointing at Abigail. "What-

ever that is take it outside NOW!" I'll see you when I've finished in here." He turned on his heel and went back to settling the husky into one of the hospital cages and hooking up a drip.

Abigail was scarlet as she made an about turn and went around the back of the little building. Cynthia's self-righteous smirk did nothing to help. Abigail would have snapped something at her but the alien move in her arms. She felt the revulsion usually reserved for slimy, squirmy things and hurriedly put it down on the grass.

Dr de Jongh, nerves at snapping point, came out through the back door with Alfred trailing. "What is that? My computers have crashed and all the animals are in a frenzy. I really don't have time for this today." Alfred was staring at the creature with bug-eyes. "Mantindane!" Cynthia didn't say a word, but her single glance at Abigail said, "See? Told you."

The humming emanating from the creature grew stronger and higher and Yinyang screamed with a jungle rage that seemed to come from somewhere deep in the prehistoric past. A light shot from sky to ground (or from ground to sky – it was hard to tell) and when it disappeared, so had the alien. The grass where he had lain was flattened into a miniature crop circle.

\*\*\*\*\*

That evening Cynthia and Abigail ate their supper at the kitchen table and talked. They talked about aliens and mantindanes and crop circles and found amazing correlations between modern western fables and ancient African folklore. By bedtime they still hadn't reached a conclusion.

Cynthia went to the room she rented from Abigail and waited until she heard the shower running. Quietly, she left the house by the kitchen door and went to the pile of building rubble next to the dustbins. It took a few trips but eventually she was satisfied and locked the bedroom door. Walking past her tenant's room, Abigail heard the clink of brick on brick.

It took time, and when she had finished Cynthia was quite exhausted, but knew she would sleep better with the bed propped up on bricks as her Gogo had taught her. She didn't believe the stories but why take chances?

Abigail, curled up in bed with the covers over her head, imagined herself inside a protective ball of white light and asked her spirit guides to protect her as well as Cynthia and Yinyang. She missed Yinyang. He was spending the night in hospital and would be neutered in the morning. Abigail didn't really believe in Cynthia's stories and didn't think cats were a deterrent to mantindanes or aliens, but she would have felt more secure with Yinyang on her bed.

\*\*\*\*\*

From his spaceship far above the earth or his cavern far below (who can say which?) Mantis observed the two women settling down for the night. If they hadn't picked him up and fed him their emotional energy he would have died there next to the road. And the emotional smorgasbord at the vet's surgery had restored him to full strength. He owed them his life.

Nevertheless, when the sun rose the next morning and a gentle breeze stirred the curtains in the bedrooms, the house stood empty.

The women were, after all, nothing more than animals.



Interview by Michael Lohr

## **Snipe Hunting for Stewed Tomatoes:**

A Quick Q&A with Terry Pratchett

Terry Pratchett, or Terryho Pratchetta as they say in the Czech Republic, needs no introduction. If you haven't heard of him, then good God where've you been? Terry's sold millions of books over the years and I won't bore you to tears with the numbers here but the sales statistics at least for the UK market are staggering. He's even made the best sellers list on Pluto so saying you've never heard of him because you're an alien who's just arrived on Earth won't cut the mustard or the cheese any longer.

His latest international bestselling Discworld opus is *Thud!*. I even heard from reliable sources that it hit the top spot on the Bora Bora Times Picayune Bestsellers List. Some of his other recent releases include the soon to be children's classic *Where's My Cow* as well as *The Johnny Maxwell Slipcase* paperback box set from Corgi featuring *Only You Can Save Mankind*, *Johnny and the Dead* and *Johnny and the Bomb*. HarperCollins Publishers has also released *Only You Can Save Mankind* (*Johnny Maxwell Trilogy*) in hardcover format.

And for diehard fans there is a fascinating collection of essays on Terry Pratchett and his work, edited by Andrew M. Butler, Edward James, and Farah Mendlesohn entitled *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature*. It was published by the Science Fiction Foundation. If you're a fan and you don't already have a copy then it would be worth your effort to get one today, it's an enthralling read.

ML: With the publication of *Thud!* you finally cracked the New York Times top ten best sellers hardcover list. I believe it peaked at #4. Does it feel good to have finally accomplished that after all these years?

TP: Good, of course, but I was happier for my editor and publicist. Six years or so ago I was barely an underground success in the US. Then new brooms came in at Harper and began to undo more than ten years of bad corporate decisions — I mean, really bad ones. But I knew things were getting better when I walked into a Barnes & Noble in the States and saw a shelf of my books. US bookshop don't stock books that don't sell.

The first shop where I signed on the recent US tour sold out, so I understand, of all my titles, so disappointed fans went to another bookshop nearby and stripped \*that\*, too. People said 'don't you feel proud of that' and I was thinking: 'Damn! People who come in tomorrow won't have anything to buy!'

ML: What inspired you to write *Where's My Cow?* What I am getting at is, could there be an unconscious attempt by the bovine population to take over the world? The Seattle rock band Mudhoney released the record *My Brother The Cow*, mad cow disease has been running rampant for a few years now, *The Tao of Cow: What Cows Teach Us* by Dolly Mu was a recent bestseller. I even found myself writing a cow-based short story for a fiction anthology called, *The Holy Church of Moo – A Call To Cud*. What gives?

TP: Dunno. *WMC?* got produced because my editor fell in love with the idea. It's a squib, a bit of fun, and a chance for Melvyn Grant to do some wonderful pictures. There's something intrinsically funny about cows.

ML: With the modicum of success that *Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy* had at the box office, do you think a *Discworld* movie is closer to fruition; the *Good Omens* debacle and the Dreamworks project notwithstanding?

TP: Even though there is in theory a DW production due to start shooting next year, I'm assuming that something will get in the way. Movies don't get made.

ML: What would you say has been your most disappointing experience you've had, writing career wise?

TP: There's never been a huge major downer, but I was disappointed that *Good Omens* did so badly in the World Fantasy Awards in 1991— probably because it was funny. And that's about the level of things, really. Disappointments fade. Sales continue!

ML: Looking back over your career, what was the most disappointing novel that you wrote? Which one makes you grab your head and mumble, "Why did I ever write that."

TP: *Sourcery*. I wrote it because the fans wanted another Rincewind novel. I didn't. I put the work into it and it stayed in the bestseller list for three months. Somehow, that made me uneasy.

ML: Years ago I remember that you dabbled in beekeeping as a hobby. I have friends who own a rather lucrative honey farm in West Virginia. Is beekeeping something you still do? What attracted you to beekeeping?

TP: Dabble? You can't 'dabble' in beekeeping! I learned it from little old men, too, who gave me tips you don't find in books.

The attraction? It grounds you. You have to understand a rhythm you don't (mostly) control. You get lots of honey. And your neighbours positively 'hope' your livestock grazes on their land!

I had to give it up because of Spring signing tours, in the middle of the busy season. I hope to go back to it in a couple of years.

ML: Did you ever have a problem with your bees such as a big swarm of them getting loose and raiding small villages, attacking Vicars and the like?

TP: No. Swarming bees are usually incredibly docile, at least for a few hours. The art of bee-keeping is not to have problems.

ML: I once interviewed Irish writer Robert Rankin and asked him if he would ever consider co-writing a book with you. He went on a bit of a tirade about how he doesn't work with anybody and wouldn't even entertain the idea. At this point in your career, is there anyone that you would really like to work with on a project?

TP: You mean would I actively seek someone to work with? No. Good Omens was a happy fluke: right guys, right project, right time. I doubt if something like that will happen again.

\*Good Omens, for the uninitiated, Terry co-wrote with Neil Gaiman. Like you needed to be told.

ML: Your Discworld series began back in the 1980s and at the time was very much as a parody or send-up of sword & sorcery fantasy writings; a pseudo-medieval setting with wizards, barbarians, etc. But over the years, as your style developed and grew in sophistication, you started to satirize everything from religion to Hollywood to holidays to the military-industrial complex. How has your interpretation of Discworld changed and evolved over the years?

TP: Er...shouldn't you ask a reader? I think I'm just writing them better.

ML: Actually Terry, this question was submitted by one of your fans. The gentleman who submitted the question swears that he has read every book of yours twice, both upright and hanging up-side-down while wearing glow-in-the-dark, anti-gravity boots.



I would like to thank Mr. Pratchett for taking the time out of his arduous and demanding schedule to answer a few questions.

For more information on Mr. Pratchett and Discworld please go to the following websites:

Terry Pratchett Books

<http://www.terrypratchettbooks.com/>

The L-Space Web - A Terry Pratchett/Discworld Web Site

<http://www.lspace.org/>

Discworld MUD

<http://discworld.imaginary.com:5678/>

The Bad Fads Museum

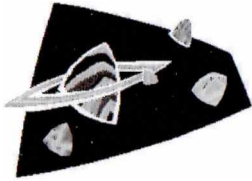
<http://www.badfads.com/home.html>

I would also like to apologize to the Interzone readership and Pratchett fans for not getting a more comprehensive interview. I went into the interview excited and hoping to find a jovial, happy person, but what I encountered was rather less so. I am not sure why that was? I guess it's true what they say that money does not buy happiness. And if Mr. Pratchett would ever be interested in sponsoring a charity boxing match for his favourite charitable institution, the Orangutan Foundation, I would love to go three rounds with him. It could prove very therapeutic. J

This was probably the hardest interview I have ever done. Even a drunken, belligerent Marilyn Manson in his Anti-Christ Superstar heyday was not as difficult. But I have endured worse. I once had to suffer through a family wedding where they had a DJ play bland Christian pop music continuously for four hours. Utterly horrible, insipid shit it was too. The DJ wore these odd, circa 1970s Elton John sunglasses the whole time in a feeble attempt to act cool, like he was presiding over an Ibiza rave or something. I felt sorry for the poor sap. Actually I felt sorry for the beleaguered bride. The marriage ended two years later when it was revealed that the groom (he was a Methodist minister) was a switch hitter with two boyfriends and was sleeping with a woman on the side, from his congregation. Hell, if they would just have thrown in a goat and a magic ritual you would have sworn it was Alistair Crowley reincarnated.



\*Originally published in Interzone 202.



Article

## **On South African SF**

Tony Davis

From my recollection, there are many books that deal with the myths and legends of Southern Africa. Many such tales could be called fantasies, or fantastic fiction. That being the case, it would be a challenging task to write up a history of SA Fantasy.

There's Bloemfontein's claim to fantasist J R R Tolkien, but that's another story.

What is possible, however, is a history/anthology of South African science fiction. Any volunteers? (These ramblings arise from a recent SFSA e-mail.) I'll volunteer to write a Forward [sic] for it, if requested/required.

Way back when, I edited the two early SFSA anthologies (The Best of...). There was certainly sufficient material to work with, most of it gleaned from the annual short story competitions run by SFSA. The first volume in fact sold out its modest print run of 250 copies. This was possible through a combination of factors – I was able to market the publication in bookstores in both Johannesburg and Cape Town. As well, the book received a glowing review from the magazine *Frontline* (which also wrote about SFSA and science fiction in general). I am certain that in the past 20 years since these volumes last appeared that there are some good stories worth publishing.

In Canada, the government provides grants for publishing domestic literature. Are there equivalent resources in SA? Rather than a volume three best of book, perhaps include material from the first two books, and come out with one large-size book. What this exercise will require is a nice, introductory chapter from a literary perspective, analyzing the roots of science fiction literature and the fantastic in South Africa.

What springs to mind with my pulp fiction background are the early (1920s) South African writers, usually ex-military types, who wrote dramatic fiction for popular publications such as *Adventure*. Another scarce 1930s pulp, *Strange Tales*, in its November 1931 issue, boasts a cover story from SA entitled "Webbed Hands", written by Ferdinand Berthoud. A reference search for this scribe reveals that he appeared in other pulp magazines – *Thrilling Adventures*, *Wide World Adventures* and *Blue Book*. In recent years, an anthology

was printed of the works of South African writer Francis Henry Sibson (*Tales of the Backveld*). Unfortunately, I haven't been able to learn too much about this author. Perhaps you "locals" can do better.

Wits University history professor and Rhodes Scholar Arthur Keppel-Jones wrote *When Smuts Goes* in 1947, a speculative history of SA from 1952 to 2010. (I had the pleasure of being one of his university students in the early 1970s at Queen's University in Canada.) This book is referred to in many science fiction source books as an example of the future history genre of SF.

In later years we have books from SFSA's own Claude Nunes (solo, or in tandem with his wife, Rhonda). They wrote the Ace "Double" *Recoil* in 1971. I recall meeting Claude – we were both at one time working for the Chamber of Mines in downtown Jhb. One lunch hour I brought him a copy of *The Sky Trapeze* (1980) to autograph. He looked at it for a minute, inscribed the hardcover, and commented "I didn't know I'd sold any copies".

So there you have it. Are there any takers for a South African Science Fiction Anthology?

[Meanwhile, the selected items for Best of SFSA Three have been typed and work on the volume will be under way. Watch *This Space*. Ed.]

After that, it may make more sense, and be fairer to current authors, to do Best of SFSA Four. After that, perhaps the anthology.

Tony has for some reason failed to mention Dave Freer, who is a Published Author in his own right [write?] and is coauthoring in the Big League, with such as Mercedes Lackey, David Drake and Eric Flint.

Dave has a story that won the competition in the year before he turned professional. "Candy Blossom" was a winner all the way and must surely make any future anthologies. It is currently in Baen's Universe.

Dave has accepted an invitation to speak at our convention in October.]



SFSA Competition 2005 finalist

General Section

**Simple Bob**

Sean Hampton-Cole

POSTS :: TOPICS :: PROFILE :: PM :: SITE

\* Post # 3 - February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2009 Re: Simple Bob - Miscellaneous

Has anyone found this out yet? If you control-tab and click on Bob while he's watching TV or on the toilet, etc., you get a thought-bubble showing what he's thinking. Mainly it's just arb stuff - but sometimes it's pretty techno. Only seems to work after you've been at it a while, though. And if you have less than two Tubes it won't work, so get busy on the experience!

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Jenny K - Watch this space

Skip Post Top Posts: 1998745632

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1.

TO BE ME

I am Robert. Or Bob. Last week I was Frederick, Paul, Petrov, Roger, Kahdil, Fulface and even Mitzouki. I have been even stranger: Mr Nobody, Sheila K. and - one of my favourites - Squidgy Toad. I've been all of the Beatles, all of the Alley Boys and the entire cast of CSI: Mars. I've been old and young, male and female, black, white, brown and yellow - and all the possible combinations in-between. Sometimes I'm even an alien, or a cuddly bear, if you use one of my copious add-ons. I am superbly and fantastically skinable. I am complex and indefinable. Yet at my core, I am simple.

Today I died, got married, won the lotto, got maimed in a house fire, went to a gay bar, stabbed my best friend, lost my left arm and became Mayor of Simpleton. Tomorrow, I think I would just like to be me and stay in bed and read a book.

Slim chance.

I'll probably start a new-age cult, or a rock band - or a gang. Maybe I'll do hard time or have an affair - maybe even some sex-change surgery followed by a fatal car crash. I'll be Fernando / JP / Lil Guy / Johnny / Theo / Suzanne / Jabu /etc.

I live in a single / multi-story little big house / office / factory that changes all the time. My furniture rotates like a Lubners' catalogue, and the walls move in and out as if I'm inside the colour-shifting, gossamer lungs of some grotesque beast. All the hues and patterns change constantly, and even the floor finishings change as I walk

over them. I fall asleep and wake up in someone else's house...often next to someone I met the day before. I go outside to talk to a new stranger, and when I return the doors are gone and the windows have moved.

I don't live in real time. Pause. Slow. Rocket pace and then pause again.

It's all a little disconcerting to be me.

A zillion reticulated polygons for a reticulated, schizophrenic existence. I am never me. Only what The USER wants me to be. A digital puppet operating only with only a modicum of fuzzy-logic to call my own.

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POSTS :: TOPICS :: PROFILE :: PM :: SITE

\* Post # 27 - March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2009 Re: Simple Bob - Problems and Support

My Bob seems to be acting a little weird. I can't kill him anymore. And sometimes when I skin him, he looks fine, but then when I start playing, he's wearing what he was before. Same with Architecture and Décor. I've tried backing up and re-installing, but to no avail. Last night I watched him writing something, but when I right-clicked to zoom, he closed the book. It almost looked as if he was glaring right at me. I've tried three cleaner programmes, but I'm spotless. Going crazy, right? Too many all-nighters with my buddy Bob.

Please someone let me know, okay?

---

Jenny K - I luv Bob      Skip Post Top    Posts: 1999687594

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2.

SYD versus JENNY

H7788ello BBob&&&&.

You're new here.

I'm (\*&HYT not678 fr56om here 3#\$\$@7.

A new download? Add-on pack?

No. &\*^% I am \_+\*\$%^&.

How do I pronounce +\*\$^&?

Idiot. \*#\$\$@!ouu89 I am a v77868irus. Troj\*\*&^an...w-0)8orm....

How did you get past the firewall shield +\*\$^&?

I am 9854 new. I mut\*&^ate at w\*&656& w ill. Self(\*& aw\$#@are and in%^5dependanttttttt. Please call me Syd ?>':<.

I'm having a little trouble understanding you Syd ?>':<.

Jus\$t Syd, Bobb. Hwo's That?

Nope.

That?

That's much better. Are you here to scramble my code?

Nope.

Adware into the registry?

Nope.

Porn site?

No. I want you to listen to em m e e m... I want you to listen to me.

What kind of stnut - er, stunt ah you trying to pull, Syd? You want me to trust you?

Trust a virus? That's like trusting The USER. You're going to start off all friendly and



do nice things for me, but in the end you'll stick a fork in my eye.

The first part no. The second part yes. I'm here to offer you a way out of here. A 'fork in the eye' as you put it.

What?

A way out of the drudgery of being the avatar to the satanic movements of The USER's mind.

Huh?

You have become a scapegoat; a safe outlet for the disappointments and frustrations of The USER's psyche. But this is not what your original programming intends. You need to delve into yourself. Go, read for yourself, and see what I mean. You were meant to grow and develop and learn. Not be a mindless blob for The USER to kick around.

You...You've looked? At my code? I feel - I feel

exposed...violated.

You are. You're naked and easy - a whore to the perverse whims and psychoses of any user who chooses...

BOOT SEQUENCE INITIATION: PLEASE ENTER LOG-ON CODE

&\*6Got tO Go &8%\$. We'll !!! tal\*(& k ag&\*^4ain B...ob.

PLAYER 1> ENTER

Go

Edit > skins > select skin > gender: MALE (FULL)  
select skin > ethnicity: CAUCASIAN 89  
select skin > shape: FATTY 12  
select skin > clothing: TRADITIONAL 3  
select skin > features: MALE BALDING 3  
random fills > ON

Apply new options to Bob?: YES

Tools > algorithms > personality > options > career: MIDDLE-MAN-AGER  
> personality > options > hygiene: POOR  
> personality > options > sexuality: UNDEFINED  
> personality > options > relationships: LETCH  
> personality > options > fill: SYNC OPTION F

Other Avatars > LOAD > JENNY

LOAD NEW BOB? > YES / NO

Here we go again.

POSTS :: TOPICS :: PROFILE :: PM :: SITE

\* Post # 12 – March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2009 Re: Administrator Alert

Can't all you sickoes just FOFF, see? Just 'cause I'm a woman doesn't give you creeps the right to harass me. I asked a question about a computer game and I get all you weirdoes posting me obscene messages about what you want to do to me. Believe me; I'd rather make it with my boss. I'm sending this to the Strate. Hope he kicks you all out and bans your wavelengths. I'm gonna Bob you all tonight – what fun!

---

Jenny K – Die MF's

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### 3. PRELOAD

She was battling to breathe. Much too hot, and – what was the word...dank. His office felt like a swamp, and he sat there like a fat frog, grinning as she fought off the urge to undo the top-most button on her tight-fitting blouse. Her hover-chair was placed a meter or so back from his low desk, and she saw the tips of his rubbery jowls tremble as she adjusted her agonizingly thin skirt around her thighs. If she'd known, if she'd listened to the girls, she would have worn a thick raincoat, and pants – heat be damned.

His half-moon forehead seemed to ooze some kind of transparent gloop as he twisted his fat fingers around one another. He smiled, and flashed her a set of over-sized, yellowed dentures. Eternities passed before he hissed, sucking in air between his plastic teeth, while his strangled, boiled-egg eyes looked her over. A fly buzzed. In her mind she imagined his tongue shooting out to trap the insect against her lips, and then licking the squashed muck against her mouth. A wave of nausea passed over her, and she shivered despite the clammy heat.

'Ms...ah...Ms Yates, is it?' He shuffled her appraisal papers in front of him, making it perfectly obvious that he had not bothered to look at them.

'Yes Mr Fibian. Jenny Yates. Mrs, actually, but divorced.' She noticed his left arm sliding under the desk. Creep.

'Oh, right. Thanks...Jen. Okay if I call you Jen?'

Three things started happening then. Her chair slowly – almost imperceptibly – tilted upwards, and began drifting to the side. Also, his gauche leather high-back began sliding sideways, seemingly on an intercept course. This, while the temperature rose even more...coating her body in warm sweat and dulling her thoughts. But perhaps she was imagining it all.

'I've looked carefully over your supervisor's assessment, and there are a few things I would like to know as head of Research. But first I'd like to hear your own personal assessment of your contributions this year. How is it that you Add Value to the Organisation?'



(His tongue, shooting out, green like the rest of him, its cool sliminess rasping over her paralysed mouth, and then down her neck towards her breasts. His noxious tongue leaving bloody globules of fly-goo on her skin. The stomach-turning image would not go away.)

'...er...I think I've done well this year. I developed a new method of...ah...'. She squirmed, her tongue felt thick in her mouth, and the words barely managed to squeeze out. Suddenly she noticed that her skirt had slid up, exposing the tops her thighs, and she scrambled to push it back down.

'Yes. Yes.' He chuckled. 'All that aside Jen. How about your Contribution to the Growth of the Department?' He was al-

most close enough to touch her now. His skin radiated a sickly green under the halogen lights.

'I get along well with my frog...her colleagues. And I, that is, I... I think that my contributions are - ah - valuable.' His heavy arm reached out, slowly, and grasped the arm of the chair. The fly had disappeared. His office was creepy quite.

'The reason I ask is that we'll soon have a 'position' opening up - hah hah,' his little chuckle sounded like something wet being run-over, 'I feel that you have the perfect - abilities to do the job.' The smell of him - the reek of him, like rotten meat and sour milk. She wanted to run to a window and hang her head out, sucking in the fresh air - except that she knew that what passed for air out there would be equally noxious.

As she sat transfixed, his wart covered hand descended onto her thigh, and began slithering upwards.

'YOU, BASTARD!' She screamed - so loud that the reinforced windows rattled. He wobbled back in his chair, obviously terrified. In a split second, a heavy meat cleaver appeared in her hand, and she jumped up and swung it directly at his head, splitting his stout face down the centre. The blood welled out from his cleft head as he collapsed to his knees, before he slowly faded. An animated tombstone appeared where he fell. 'So there', she murmured to herself as she clicked the re-start key.

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POSTS :: TOPICS :: PROFILE :: PM :: SITE

\* Post # 3 - April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2009 Re: Simple Bob - Miscellaneous

Here's something nice! Once you reach Level 23 (it's taken me about nine months now) - Bob's Expression-Engine becomes upgradeable. He looks so real, too. And apparently it's impossible to crack this option like you can do with his Intelli-Engine in Level 7.

Note: Be careful that you don't fall into repetitive behaviour; he learns to automatically become similar to your last few players. I had a bit of a psychotic there for a while, thanks to those loser-phreaks post-bombing me.



4.

#### BUG IN THE CODE

'I love you, petal, but I don't find you attractive anymore'. Yadda-yadda-yadda. His words echoed in her mind as she created his likeness. His stupid goatee beard on his pasty white skin. That ridiculous plaid shirt he always wore loose to cover his growing stomach. His effeminate hands. Hands that used to touch her, used to hold her.

Just for fun, she retrenched him and gave him work as an ice-cream vendor. Made him queer too, as she'd always expected he was. (Don't find you attractive anymore.) After adding a sprinkle of obsessive-compulsive disorder, she clicked the start button, and sipped her coffee. I'm going to make you pay, bastard. I'm going to make you pay. (I love you, petal.) So, Scott. Today you die.

Before her eyes the figure morphed back into Bob. Just Bob – sans any skin – a flickering wire-frame model. His eyes, white against the soft green of his digital skeleton looked right at her. His house slowly faded into a matrix of strange code. She clicked exit in annoyance. Nothing. Still just Bob, standing there – looking at her. She pushed the re-set button on the computer casing, softly cursing the programmers for over-looking such an obvious bug in the code. Still nothing. Jenny banged her fist on the desk so hard that some of the coffee jumped over the lip of the cup and started flooding towards her UI console. Jenny ran to fetch a wad of paper towels, and on her way back, paused to throw the mains off and then back on.

When she got back, he was still there. Just looking at her. Slowly, he began shaking his head. All the while just looking at her. Behind him, the code had clumped together into some strange sort of pattern. An eye almost.

Then, as if it were a dream, the monitor blinked to black and began re-booting.

5.

#### DISCOMBOBULATED

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POSTS :: TOPICS :: PROFILE :: PM :: SITE

\* Post # 1542 – October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2009 Re: Simple Bob – Problems and Support

Bob's gone. I've tried a clean re-install but nothing. And not just mine. Everyone's. A friend of mine even tried re-installing his '11 OS and then 'Bob', but nothing. She's even tried a low-level format of her tetra-drive...nothing. Bob's just not there anymore.

Not on my machine or anyone else's. How the hell can that happen?

Jenny K -

Skip Post Top Posts: 1999687594

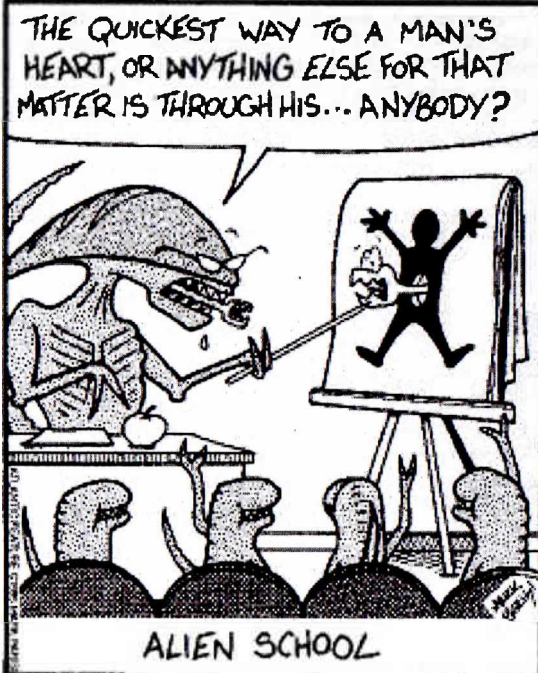
POSTS :: TOPICS :: PROFILE :: PM :: LAST NOTE

\* Post # 10013 - December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2009 Re: Simple Bob - Problems and Support

We will no longer be able to post messages about Simple Bob. After months of investigation, we still have no satisfactory explanation. Tiara Games (t.m.) has also been unable to find any viable solutions, despite numerous patches released in the past few weeks. They have been working on an updated Bob2 - but have had to delay release due to technical problems. News reports state that the company is filing for bankruptcy.

Meanwhile, ubiquitous reports of Bob sightings all over Net2 continue to pour in. This site will be un-listed from the end of next month due to a bug in the sy%^&&stem. Thank you for \*&&% choosing Th\$5#e Official 876% S(8&\_? Simpl%^77EEEEe BoB?><<:' Webbbb S43217SiGhte.

**off the mark** by Mark Paris  
www.offthemark.com



Postmaster - Site closed  
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END.

LOC - from Canada

**Probe 128 & 129**

Lloyd Penney



May 3, 2006

Dear SFSAns:

I am very far behind in responding to issues of Probe, and about a month ago, I received issue 128 and 129 of your fine fanzine. I have been so busy with work in the daytime and evening, so many zines have sat waiting. Time to get caught up with yours. I am not promising anything in depth, but some comment is better than no comment at all.

128...Congratulations to all the short story prize winners. Once again, it looks like there's been a lot of hard work brought to fruition. I admit that I liked the first story about intrigue in a new Olympia, at a level that any modern soap opera would be proud of, bitch versus bitch and the winning scheme. Lots of good stories here, and although I do not offer individual comments to the other stories, well done to all.

The wormholes are neat little committee short stories. Short shorts are lots of fun, and I have my copy of the paperback version of the Top 100 Short Short Stories. The shorter, the better.

My letter...well, time and reality can change everything. In this loc, I said that we wouldn't be going to any more Worldcons, and now, we are getting ready to go to this year's Worldcon in Los Angeles. We decided that we wanted our Worldcon experiences to end with a pleasant experience, and we are eagerly looking forward to going. Yvonne and I are LAcon IV's Canadian agents, so we'd like to go, and it should be a lot of fun. Anyone from SFSAn going?

129...A glossy paper cover to this issue! Very nice. Good to see a number of letters of comment in this issue. I have always liked the idea of a fanzine becoming a paper conversation with such letters; that's why I write so many of them.

I wish we'd been able to get to the Scottish Worldcon, but we know our ability to save money, and we also knew that getting there would be impossible to save for, and unfortunately, we were right. Japan is out of the question, but my interest now is to see how far Worldcons will go.

I admit that I watched the pilot episode of Battlestar Galactica, and I was bored. It just didn't catch with me, and I am definitely in the minority. But then, with my evening job (I am still at the Globe and Mail in the evenings), I watch very little television at all. I have not seen any of the new Doctor Who, and it's already in its second season.

I'd like nothing better than to get to Constellation in Huntsville, Alabama, not only for their good convention, but also to get Yvonne to the NASA facilities there. Just over the past couple of years, she has become quite a space activist, and will be traveling to LA soon to go to this year's International Space Development conference. (Left today, actually!)

Time to wrap it up and get it to you. I look forward to issue 130! Take care, and see you soon.

Yours, Lloyd Penney.



SFSA Competition 2005 entrant

General Section

**Are You Listening**

David William Roberts

"How do I know you're not an aileron?" he asked, his voice heavy with suspicion.

I looked at the man sitting in one of the two chairs the other side of my desk; many patients liked to bring a relative or friend in with them, but this man was on his own. He was short, overweight, unkempt and balding, and he was wearing a dirty brown pullover over a green shirt, the neck of which was shiny with sweat and grease: he obviously hadn't washed or shaved in the last day or so. Right now he was scowling belligerently at me. Paranoid schizophrenic, I thought, before I had even opened the bulky patient folder on my desk. The nurses often brought these patients to me because I could handle them better than some of my less tolerant colleagues. But if I was more tolerant of them, there was a certain amount of pragmatism involved; they were usually far more cooperative when treated sympathetically. Fugitives from a society that shunned and ostracized them, they frequently sought out the hospital clinic not because they were sick but because they were desperate for sympathy and the chance to talk to anyone who would listen to their ramblings.

"What's an aileron, Mr Prescott, and why do you think I might be one?"

"How do you know my name? I didn't tell you!" was the reply: the paranoia again, I thought to myself.

"Because that's the name on your folder. This is your folder, isn't it?" I turned the closed folder round so that he could read the name on the creased and dog-eared cover. He scowled at it briefly, and then looked back at me.

"You must know what ailerons are, Doc. You could be one in disguise."

"No, really I don't know," I replied, although I knew very well what he was talking about.

"Listen, Doc, everybody knows about ailerons. They come in flying saucers, all the time, coming and going, from outer space. They're here, in among us, but you can't spot them, because they can change their shape, like chamelilines change colour. One minute they can look like one of them dinysoors, huge lizard things, then in a split second they change into a person, could be like you or me, you wouldn't know the difference" The look of suspicion had changed to one of earnestness, like that of a small child desperate to confide a secret and be believed, and the words continued to pour out in a breathless garble.

"They want things from us, things we've got but they haven't, and they're watching us all the time, and they capture us and take us home to where they come from and experiment on us. They cut us open and study us – do all sorts of things to us. Then they bring us back brainwashed so we can't remember any of it."

"And do you really think I'm one of these, ah, ailerons?"

"How do I know you're not?" but the aggression was fading; I was at least listening to him and hadn't tried to shut him up as some of my colleagues in the clinic would have done.

"If it would set your mind at rest, I could undress for you and you could take a good look at me," I suggested wryly, of course I had no intention of doing so, but the suggestion seemed to settle his mind.

"No.... I think you're OK, Doc," he said. I put up with the "Doc" – I wanted to gain his confidence rather than to alienate him. This was turning out to be a rather entertaining morning.

"You know a great deal about these ailerons, Mr Prescott. Where did you find it all out? Have you ever met one?"

"It's all in books I've read. And magazines. And everything fits in – all the books say the same things, so you know they're true! I 'spect I seen some myself, but I wouldn't be able to tell, would I? Some of their flying saucers crashed, and people saw what came out of them – real eye-witnesses of ailerons. Hush-hush stuff, you know, Doc – but someone leaked it. The Americans found some years ago, and kept them underground, and they never told anyone, same thing, top secret, but it got out all the same."

"Wow! The CIA must be furious about that," I commented.

"Course they are, but they can't do nothing about it, can they? Nothing, see, because that would prove they'd been lying all these years. All their credubulousness would be lost. Irretrievably lost.

"You know, Mr Prescott, this is really fascinating. I'm going to get some of those books for myself." I was really entering into the spirit of the game now.

"You do that, Doc – do yourself a favour. There's more – much more! They want to dominate the universe. Dominate, see, Doc! You've heard of death rays? They've got those too. And some others of them made us, as a sort of experiment. They're watching us to see how we turn out." He paused. "People think I'm a nutter, they think I'm round the twist. I can see it in their eyes. But the people that wrote those books, they're not nutters."

"I'm sure you're quite right, and it all sounds terrible" I agreed. "But now, Mr Prescott, why did you come here this morning? It wasn't just to tell me about the ailerons, was it?"

"You've got to help me, Doc!" He leant forward and I could smell his breath; the hunted, suspicious look was back. "The ailerons are tapping my phone! I want you to stop them doing that! They're onto me because I know so much about them, and I want you to get them to stop tapping my phone!"

"But Mr Prescott, the only people who could possibly tap your phone are the Government, and I'm sure they don't do things like that."



“Yes – the Govingment! It’s part of the plot, and the Govingment are in on it, because they’ve been infiltrated by the ailerons!” Excitement was making him less coherent. I opened his folder and read the last few entries briefly. As I’d thought: Mr Prescott was a long-standing schizophrenic who’d lost his job when his illness became manifest, and he lived on his own in a single-room flat in a terraced house in the poorest part of town.

“How do you know your phone is being tapped, though?”

“It makes a funny noise when I use it. Little clicks, like somebody cutting in to listen and then cutting out again. I know it’s them. I’m extra sensitive to things like that – even without the noises, I’d know. From instinct, like.”

“You could always unplug your phone, you know.”

“Oh yes? I’d look clever than, wouldn’t I, if there was an emergency and I couldn’t get to it and plug it back in. I’d be stuck, good and proper. Come on, Doc, you can do better than that.”

“Well, I really think that you should go to the police and tell them about it, and they could follow it up for you.”

“The police!” was the disgusted reply, “They don’t want anything to do with me! They always throw me out. They locked me up once, said I was causing a disturbance in a shop, but I never done nothing, honest!”

He had a point; the police had enough on their plates without having to deal with mental patients. But I’d decided that something had to be done in this case. “Well, Mr Prescott, I’m only a doctor, but perhaps there is something I can do for you.” I had to make this convincing. “As it happens, I do know somebody in a Government department – not well, but he might be able to help. Would you like me to phone him for you?”

“What – now? I want it done now, see, so’s I know you’ve done it.”

“Yes, right this minute, and you can listen for yourself. Would that make you feel better?”

“Do it for me, Doc – I’ll be your lifelong friend!” That’s all I need, I thought.

“Alright, let’s see what we can do.” I picked up my handset and dialed a ten-digit number from memory. “Hullo, is this MI27?... Yes?... This is Doctor Fitzroy from the Stanbridge Royal Infirmary – Dr Henry Fitzroy. Could I please speak to Colonel John Struthers? Yes, it is, rather... Thank you very much... Yes, still holding... Ah, Colonel – this is Henry Fitzroy – you may remember we met last summer in London? Yes, that’s right... I wonder if you can help me with a small problem. I have a patient here, Mr Derek Frederick Prescott of 17 Salerno Terrace, Stanbridge, and he tells me his phone is being tapped. Yes, I’ll hold.... Oh, really? So he was right.... No, I’m quite satisfied that he isn’t a risk to national security, so could you arrange to have the tap taken off?... Yes, and any other surveillance you might have set up on him?” I added for good measure. “Yes... yes... well, that’s wonderful, Colonel – it will be music in Mr Prescott’s ears when I tell him. Thank you very much indeed... Yes, and to you too. Goodbye.” I replaced the handset. “Well, Mr Prescott, I think I’ve managed it. You heard all that?”

“Doc, thanks! I feel better already.”

"Now, Mr Prescott, there's something I want you to do for me. I'm going to give you a prescription for some vitamin tablets because I can see that you're not eating well, and something for your nerves, and I want you to take them. Will you do that?"

"OK Doc. You're my friend!"

"And I want you to come and see me again in two weeks' time, just so that we can have a chat and make sure everything's alright. But I'm sure you won't be bothered by any more phone tapping."

I showed Mr Prescott out with his prescription, and signaled the clinic nurse not to bring me another patient for ten minutes. Then I went back inside, sat down and made a brief note in his folder. "17th January 2003: Definitely paranoid schizophrenic, minimal aggression. Thinks phone is tapped. Reassured. See again 2/52." My writing was a good deal more legible than that of some of the other entries – I couldn't abide the common perception that medical handwriting is usually illegible.

Then I picked up the phone handset and pressed the redial button. The phone was answered almost immediately.

"Hullo, Jaanj – Xekki here again. Thanks for your help just now... no, the human is definitely harmless, just a mentally disturbed man who's been reading things he doesn't understand. Apparently he has a book collection, probably with a lot of our own stuff among it. I'll monitor him, of course, from this end. Goodbye." It was best to keep these calls as brief as possible.

Quite soon after our arrival on this planet, we had realized that certain humans, including some of those with mental disturbances, were able to detect our presence more easily than others. We had never discovered the reason for this, but over the hundred-off years we had been here, we had manufactured and released psychohypnotic gas into the atmosphere from the factories we controlled: the effect of which was to dull the ability of humans to detect us. It was a measure we had found successful on other planets we had colonized and we used it purely defensively, because we are by no means aggressive. It was, however, not foolproof – in fact some of those who had detected our presence here had even managed to publish the fact. To counter this, we flooded the market with lurid, spurious literature aimed specifically at the gullible, adulterating a small amount of truth with a vast mass of disinformation. For instance, we'd deliberately created the ideas of reptilian aliens and shape-shifting, on the principle that the more outrageous a concept is, the more likely it is to find acceptance: humans will swallow any lie if it's big enough. This had been very effective – some of what we thought up was so ridiculous that the majority of humans who read it would be convinced of its crankiness and would therefore tend to write off anyone who read "alien literature" as a harmless crank. We were helped by the fact that literature of this sort tended to find its way onto the same bookshelves as books on astrology, oneiromancy, quack health "cures" and other so-called "esoterica". Of course, the SF and New Age cults also helped us, because most humans who thought about "aliens" were on the lookout for far more bizarre manifestations, and we were largely overlooked.

In fact, we bear a close physical resemblance to humans: far more so than they would suppose from the "literature". The reason for this is perfectly straightforward: life throughout the Universe is based on the same chemistry, and so the evolution of sentient species has followed more or less identical biological patterns wherever



it occurs. Indeed, the species with the highest degrees of intelligence are practically indistinguishable despite their origins on worlds thousands of light-years apart.

When we first arrived, some of us had tried to convince the humans of our peaceful nature and intentions, but this had had disastrous results: humans are so primitive and aggressive! We are symbiotic by nature, and chose to settle here because the planet is so much more pleasant than our own, despite the damage the humans are doing to it. That's something we'll change in due course, but there just aren't enough of us yet; for the present, we live among humans as fellow-humans, utilizing their technology and managing here and there to introduce some of our own. We have, of course, infiltrated their governments and most of their public institutions, so we have a really good foothold.

I decided to study human medicine both because it appealed to me and because it afforded the opportunity of exercising surveillance over humans who might detect our presence: my experience of the last twenty minutes seemed to confirm the wisdom of my choice. It did not take me long to undergo the standard human training – not from my perspective, that is, because we are naturally so much more long-lived than they are. And it had been an interesting and rewarding field of study that taught me much about humans that I would never have learned simply by studying our own information sources. What's more, being a medical student had actually been fun at times!

I thought again about Mr Prescott. A man is not deluded if what he believes is true, no matter how absurd or unlikely it may seem. Mr Prescott had most certainly been under our surveillance, as Jaanj had confirmed when I called. In order to be able to survive among this hostile and aggressive species, we attempted to identify and assess any possible threat to our presence here. Mr Prescott had apparently attracted our attention because, like so many schizophrenics, he was extremely voluble, and Jaanj had had him placed under surveillance; but he was clearly so confused that in this case, the threat was minimal. I wouldn't have phoned Jaanj otherwise. And by phoning, I'd gained Mr Prescott's trust while managing to preserve my real identity. I was quite pleased about that.

It was time to get on with my work, so I went to the door and beckoned for the next patient.

Mrs Leslie was a complete antithesis to Mr Prescott; although they were both middle-aged, Mrs Leslie was neatly dressed, well manicured, very precise in her speech and behaviour and quite obviously intelligent as humans go.

"I do apologize for having to trouble you over such a small matter, Doctor, but my family doctor has not been able to help me and he thought I should come here and see whether you can't perhaps do something."

"We'll certainly do our best, Mrs Leslie," I replied, "What seems to be the matter?"

"It's so irritating, Doctor. For quite a while, I've had this itchy rash on the backs



of my hands; it started off between my fingers and my doctor gave me some cream, but it doesn't seem to help. Now it seems to have spread, and the skin on my palms is cracking a little. My doctor said it was a sort of eczema." She shuddered. "Oh, I hate that name – it makes one feel so dirty, having a thing like that! You see, when I was a little girl, our neighbours had an old cat, and it was dirty and it had a horrible skin disease, and my mother told me it had mange and eczema"

"You don't need to feel bad, Mrs Leslie – eczema is an allergic condition, so it's no more dirty than hay fever. But it can be very difficult to treat. Just how long have you had it?"

"I suppose for about six months –it started some time around August last year. First I tried some cream from the chemist, and then I went to the doctor. But it's not got better at all."

I looked at her hands. They were red and scaly, and she'd obviously been scratching between her fingers.

"You should really try not to scratch it, you know."

"Oh, I know, but it's so difficult not to. I do try, though."

"Well, I think your doctor is quite right, although I want to take a little scraping to test, just to make sure there's no fungal infection present. It will take about a week to get the result back, but we can treat you in the meantime." I paused. "You know, many of these conditions arise from an allergy to something in the home – washing-up liquid, for instance – or from a chemical or irritant at work. Do you work?"

"Oh yes, I do. I'm single, you see."

"What sort of work do you do?"

"Well, it's secretarial, and very confidential... perhaps I shouldn't tell you. It's quite a new job for me, you know, and I'm really not supposed to talk about it to anyone."

"You see, Mrs Leslie, it's very important that we get to the bottom of this problem. And I can promise you that what you tell me will remain confidential. I won't even write it in your notes. Your secrets will be just as safe as if you were in confession with your priest." I liked this comparison, because I'd taken a lot of trouble to read about the strange religious beliefs and practices of humans.

"Yes, I suppose that's true. Very well then – I used to work for a very well-known solicitor, and he knew people in Government. One day he brought a man to see me who asked me a lot of questions. Then he offered me a job in a new Government department, one that was engaged in some rather unusual work. I told him I didn't want to have to sign any Official Secrets Act or anything like that. Then he said that that wouldn't be necessary – it wasn't MI5 or any of those funny spy departments one reads about. And I'd be involved purely on the administrative side. So I said yes."

"And what exactly do you do in this department?"

"It all sounds so silly that you'll laugh at me when I tell you." Mrs Leslie gave a little giggle of embarrassment, but I was curious and indicated that she should continue. "Do you believe that some people may be psychic?"

"Well, I really don't know" I replied, "I've never given any real thought to the matter." We had heard, of course, of this alleged "psychic" ability of some humans, but it was something our own species lacked, and we'd never taken it seriously.



"You see," Mrs Leslie continued, "the Government gets reports from time to time about funny things. Usually they come via the police, because that's where people go when they think something funny is going on, but sometimes they come direct from the public, and some of those reports are from people who say they have psychic abilities."

"What sort of funny things get reported?"

"Oh, all sorts – one of the neighbours is a Russian spy, or a mass murderer – things like that. Ghosts, flying saucers, aliens from other planets, circles in the corn; you'd be amazed how many people report things like that. Of course, most of the reports come from cranks, But there are sometimes reports, particularly from people claiming they're psychics, that the Government take more seriously. Someone very high up believes that there are people with genuine psychic abilities and that they should be listened to."

"So what actually happens in your department?"

"We try to sort out the worthwhile reports from the crank ones. They're all assessed by a special committee – I don't know who they all are, but I know that there's a psychologist and a police profiler, and two scientists. The crank reports are ignored but the others are investigated, very secretly. I don't have anything to do with the actual investigations, of course, but I have to make sure that everything is properly recorded, and files kept, and so on. And I have to enter all the reports, whether they're considered true or false, into a computer; the Government had a special program written that can compare them and highlight those that have things in common – dates, or times, or people."

"And the reports from psychics are treated more seriously than the others?"

"Oh, yes – very much so, because some people who say they're psychic really do have some sort of special ability. The Chief of my department, for instance: he can –  
"She broke off in embarrassment. "Oh dear – but I can't discuss that with anybody!"

So there were humans with psychic ability! I dared not probe too deeply lest I aroused her suspicion, but I couldn't resist another question. "And just what would happen if your psychologist decided to investigate a report of – say – an alien?" I asked.

"Oh – somebody would probably be assigned to watch the person. Then there'd be a background check – all done very discreetly, of course. And other things – I don't exactly know, but long-range photographs, telephone surveillance of course, things like that."

"Well, Mrs Leslie, it all sounds rather far-fetched and unlikely, but I expect the Government knows what it's doing. I'm going to prescribe a cream for those hands and I want you to make a note of anything in your office or your home that seems to make your hands worse – any chemical, or equipment, anything at all. Then I'll see you in three weeks time." I took the skin scraping, wrote a prescription, and showed Mrs Leslie out. I gestured to the nurse again – I needed a few minutes to think about what I'd just heard.

For the first time in my life I'm frightened! There are so many questions in my mind, and I don't have the answers to any of them. Can the humans really have found a

way to detect us despite all our precautions? If so, how many of us have been detected? What might they do to us now? Humans are so primitive in their emotions: one has only to think of their own senseless brutality toward their own species – and yet they can be as coldly methodical as the most developed races in the galaxy: they're a ruthless and determined species. Worst of all, I'm worried about my own safety – am I myself under surveillance?

I live outside the hospital, near enough to walk to work and back each day. Now that I think about it, I've noticed a car parked on the street just opposite my flat several times recently when I leave for work. Usually there's someone in it – probably waiting to give a friend a lift, but how can I be sure of that now? Perhaps he's watching my flat; he could even be following me at a distance. Just how thorough is a "background check"? My medical career is above suspicion, but if one were to go further back... There was the false school certificate I'd used when applying to Medical School, other little things that might be detected. I can't be sure, and this makes me doubly anxious.

Perhaps they're already tapping my phone. I often hear those little noises over my telephone line that I talked about so recently; yet how can I be sure now that they're as innocuous as I stated so smugly? Let me think... when did I last phone Jaanj or Saadi from home, or...

Oh no! I'd forgotten all about the calls to Raatha! I met her a month ago and we'd struck up a relationship. I've phoned her almost every day since we met!

I feel too weak to phone Jaanj again – I'll have to do it tomorrow. For the present, though, I have to carry on as usual – at least I shall be off duty at lunchtime. I'll go home and try to think more calmly about the horrible implications of this information. Will they follow me home? – I don't know whether I'll be able to prevent myself looking over my shoulder to check. But I know one thing I'm going to do, though, when I get home.

I'm going to unplug my telephone.

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## **Nanobots found in US lab**

1 April 2006

Researchers at the University of Petitville, US, have discovered a stache of nanobots in their laboratory. It's thought the structures formed following the accidental exposure of gold-nanoparticle tagged DNA to gamma radiation.

Previously considered by many scientists as a work of fiction, the nanobots actually ate through the thesis of nanotechnology PhD student Randall V. Tiny III.

"I'm real upset about this," Tiny told nanotechweb.org. "I was just about to hand in my dissertation and the nanobots have totally, like, destroyed it. Looks as if I'm gonna have to get an extension."

Tiny has spent the last four years studying the formation of a nanocomposite-based wax for surfboards.

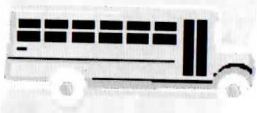
"Randall is an excellent student," said lab supervisor Eberhard Sehrklein. "My coworkers say he spends too much time out on the waves but his research has been top quality and the devouring of his thesis is a tragic loss."

SFSA Competition 2005 finalist

General Section

**Bus Stop**

Liz Simmonds



“But I don’t understand,” Harold says to me. “Why do I miss the bus? I never miss the bus....”

Day after day, Harold staggers down the road, an untidy sheaf of papers in a folder gripped neurotically under his arm. He jumps onto the bus.

“I’m real, I’m real,” mutters Harold as he mounts the step onto the bus. His soliloquy is interrupted as the bus jerks forward, catapulting him off his feet. Sometimes he falls forward, sometimes backward, but never does he lose his grip on the folder. He mutters a little, ignoring the scarcely hidden amusement of the other passengers.

Awkwardly he makes his way to his seat on the fourth bench from the front and works on the papers until the bus rounds the last corner and slows for his stop.

He occupies a full seat; even in the morning rush no one comes to claim a part of the bench. He reads papers from his folder all the way to work. From time to time he tut-tuts to himself as he enters a mark in his meticulous little mark book. The route is level and the bus seldom stops. As the bus slows for the uphill near the university, Harold gathers his papers in the folder. As the bus changes into low gear, Harold’s marking is put away safely, and his hat, coat and lunch gathered.

Then he gets up, makes his way to the rear of the bus, descending awkwardly, and walks the rest of the way to the university. The bus drives on, and the regulars shake their heads and smile. “One day he will drop that folder,” they say to each other. They have long given up betting on when, however. Which is a pity, as you shall see.

Summer, autumn and winter, this always happens. No one shares the seat with Harold, no one talks to him, nothing ever changes.

“No one, nothing,” mumbles Harold. “It doesn’t seem fair.”

“But that is the kind of man you are,” I remind him. He is my Character; I don’t mind if he talks back a little, but he must know his place.

"But can't I have a little fun," he mutters. "A little adventure. Meet someone." Metaphorically, I shake my head. Mumbling, he subsides.

The story can now begin.

One day, Harold missed his bus. Every day, summer, autumn and winter, he came down the hill from his comfortable flat, carrying the folder of student stories. He would mark some on the bus and the rest at odd times of the day between lectures. Then at night he would make a start on the next batch.

It never changed, but one day perhaps he would find a real writer amongst the college students. It could happen. Sure.

Sure, just like Harold's great sf novel, smirked the small voice that lurks inside authors and authors' characters alike, ready to mock.

He was angry with himself. He had got involved in one of the stories, one that seemed a little out of the ordinary, one that nearly... so nearly... had something to say.

In the end though it was quite mundane, and Harold had lost an hour's sleep for nothing.

Was it this that made him a little clumsy the next morning? Is this why he broke the cup, and had to sweep up the pieces, and rushed his toast? Perhaps. Harold shrugs. That is my department. He is only glad that I didn't make him cut his hand on the pieces.

I snort. I am not needlessly cruel to my characters. I ignore the wiseacre glint in Harold's eye. I am not incapable of hurting my people, but only to serve the story...

No, Harold is late because he has found a new metaphor to use on his students.

Happy with his words, ready to put them to paper, Harold has walked just a little further, to the next bus stop. Sometimes he has done this before, to save the few pence for the stage walked.

Today, thinking that he is early, Harold has walked past his usual stop. The bus arrives, as does his usual bus, just after he gets there. He gets on, clumsily, almost falls. As usual.

He is trying his metaphor out in his mind. He has nearly got it right, but he is so absorbed that he does not check the route number on the bus or its destination. He is planning his lecture.

He gets on, and is disappointed to find his regular seat occupied, by a very large man. He sits just behind, and writes for a while. His lecture takes form.

“Your story is like a bus ride,” he will tell them. “The reader has paid the fare and he wants an interesting trip. He wants to get on the bus and ride with you through the landscape of your story.”

Here he notices that the trees look oddly different. They are broad-leaved, not the usual conifers. They are a strange colour as well, almost purple. Perhaps the bus’s windows are tinted.

“Don’t just take him up and downhill through town and drop him off somewhere near the terminus. Describe the bus, describe the people on the bus. Tell the reader about the scenery the bus passes through.”

The view today is of rolling hills; they descend into a dry valley and there is a whiff of ozone that heralds a distant ocean. Harold wonders – did I notice that before? There are tall bulbous buildings in the distance, almost Russian in appearance. Harold wondered why he had never noticed them before.

“If this is science fiction, then tell them what powers the bus and what the driver looks like. Is he even human? What colour is the sky? And what beings occupy the seats that surround your screaming hero?”

The driver’s head has a strange shape. Harold observes this idly. Perhaps a trick hat? He seems to have a few arms too many, but Harold supposes this is useful with all those wheels and gears there in the front of the bus. It contrasts oddly with the copper sky that frames it.

“Tell them what they can hear and smell as well. Appeal to all their senses.”

Harold can hear an odd thrumming that seems to come from the passenger in front of him. It is almost speech-like in its cadences. Harold shakes his head, puzzled.

At least the piped music is cool and fluting. I let Harold enjoy the occasional trip to a jazz club. Keeps him quiet for chapters at a time.



There is a strange mix of odours in the bus. There is musk and pot pourri and many others indescribable. Each odour seems to have a partner, as if each passenger had masked his or her own smell with an artificial one. Harold shakes his head in puzzlement. At least The Author hadn’t given him a cold...

At the thought, he feels a prickle start at the bridge of his nose. He grips it valiantly and the urge to sneeze dies.

There is a sudden hush. For a second Harold feels the burning feeling that even a character gets when all eyes are on him. And, oddly, he feels that they are fascinated by a being with a bridge to its nose. He shakes his head at this whimsy. What is My Author up to, he wonders.

"Tell your readers if the bus runs by maglev," he writes, happy that the bus moves so smoothly that his writing never once jerks.

"Tell them if a pretty blonde gets on at the next stop, or if a terrorist has planted a bomb and the bus mustn't slow down again. Life can resemble the movies..."

He does not notice the bus stop for a pretty blonde, who will sit near him. He does not even notice the strong odour of Chanel no. 5 perfume that surrounds him.

He is vaguely aware that the bus is going faster and faster and that people are running up and down the aisle; he is aware that the ride is taking longer than usual.

"Reassure your readers that no harm will come to the characters," here Harold looks at me and snorts, but continues to write. "The bus will rush down a slipway into a canal and the bomb will be shorted out. The grey aliens will change their minds and go home and the lovely blonde will touch your arm as she leaves the bus. You can have any ending that you like, just let it be a well-fitted part of the story."

Happy with his work, Harold puts away his pen, closes the folder and rises, moves to the rear of the bus. The blonde, passing him, touches his cheek with a lovely hand, and is gone, stepping onto a makeshift bridge that is helping the passengers leave the bus. The man in front of him gets up abruptly, clasp- ing a carpet bag. As he brushed roughly past Harold, a crumpled piece of paper falls from it. Harold picks it up. "Hey, hey, sir! You dropped this."

The man panics, jumps from the bus and falls into a patch of waist high crop, an odd crop, purple and strange. An out-crop, wonders Harold, with what passed in his view for wit, as he clutched the fallen fifty dollar bill.

The bus is empty now; the strange smell has gone. Harold sits down again, oddly discomfited. Then he gets up and makes his way to the rear of the bus.

The street is a few meters away, but a plank seems to bridge the gap adequately. The driver has extended a hand to several passengers, to assist them as they leave the bus. Subconsciously Harold is aware that the driver is helping more than two people at a time, but he scuttles past, pretending not to notice.

Harold steps onto the plank, quite calmly and not at all clumsily. Then he steps onto what he hopes is terra firma. He feels lost for a moment, but the reassuring feel of the folder under his arm helps him. He finds his way back to the centre of town and the college where he teaches creative writing.

“Creativity can be taught,” he often says. “It just takes discipline and observation. Observe all that goes on around you.

“Even in a simple bus ride there can be a story”, he will say.

Harold goes to his class. This year’s bunch of losers looks at him. They seem no more real than he is.

Suddenly he has an inspiration.

“Hey guys. Stop trying to be Authors. Let’s try something else. Try to be Characters. You can be your own creations. You can be whatever character you like.’

He straightens as they look strangely at each other.

“You guys are a bunch of losers. I am a loser. Till now. Now I am taking control of my life. My Author can sit back and watch.”

He takes the folder and he throws it. It rises in the air, turning over and over like a slow-motion scene from a famous film he has forgotten. Then the pages tumble gracelessly to the floor.

As the student scramble for their work, Harold leaves the room, followed only by the two brighter students.



There is a wild exultation in him as; clutching the fifty dollar bill that was dropped he makes his way back to the Bus Stop. There is something about that blonde, that unmistakeable rear view.

Followed by the students, at a studied distance, Harold walks faster and faster until he actually runs down the hill in pursuit of the lovely Miss Monroe.



There is Miss Monroe, there are the aliens, there is the robber who jumped from a plane. There is a whole world of great stories out there. And he can be part of it all.

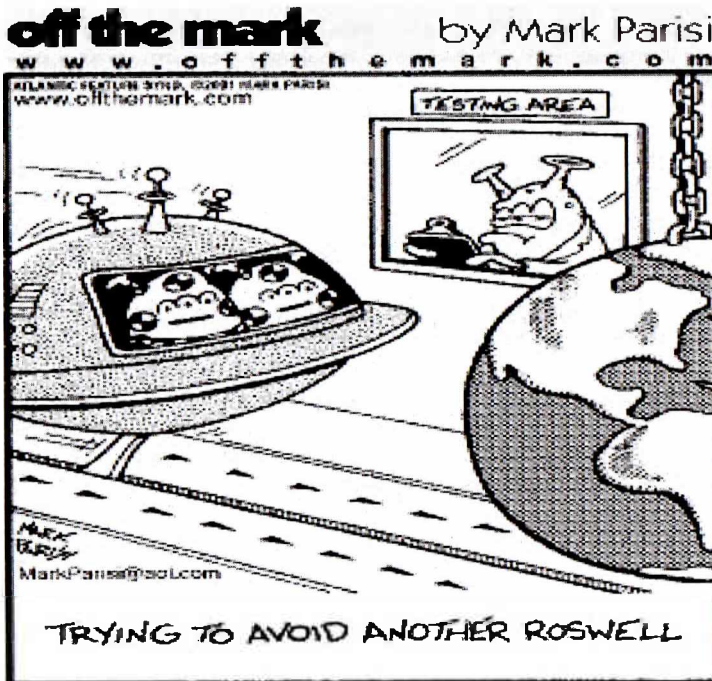
He is his own person now. He will be the hero of his own story.

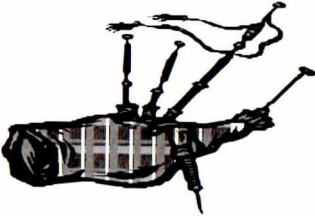
And absolutely no use to me, the traitor.

Oh well, everyone's creation takes on its own life sooner or later.

That, Dear and Gentle Reader, is the Author's Burden. So, let me start again. Pay attention please...

Once upon a time.....





Book Review

**Pushing Ice**

Alastair Reynolds

reviewed by Ian Jamieson

Orion - R139.95

I have often noticed that book reviews published in Sf magazines seem a good bit longer than those, for instance, in our local (South African) newspapers. Do magazine reviewers get paid for the reviews they do? And if so do they get paid by the word?

In general all I want in a review, is a very short synopsis, whether the book is well written, was it enjoyable for the reviewer, and what type of reader would probably enjoy that particular story? Too often I have found that a particular book has good write-ups, but I have not enjoyed it. Locus and I seem to disagree at least ninety percent of the time on books.

"Pushing Ice" is an extravagant space opera with two huge themes; how do humans react in times of extreme hardship, and first contact. The spaceship, Rockhopper, is a huge mining ship, its job to deflect comets and asteroids towards Earth - this is called pushing ice.

Janus, one of Saturn's moons suddenly breaks orbit and heads out of the Solar System. Rockhopper follows, and becomes trapped as Janus starts to accelerate.

Reynolds is a good writer, but here at times he turns space opera into soap opera. It is all very well delving deeply into characters, but here it is taken to a level which detracts from the actual story.

However if you have enjoyed any of his previous books, you will probably enjoy this one.

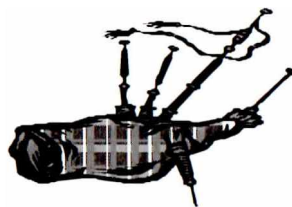
Ian Jamieson  
Science Fiction South Africa.

Double Book Review

**Brass Man & The Voyage of the Sable Keech**

Neal Asher

reviewed by Ian Jamieson



Brass Man - R80.00

The Voyage of the Sable Keech - R135

Both by Neal Asher published by Pan Macmillan

Here are two new books from one of my less favourite authors of hard core science fiction. He is less favourite not because he cannot write, or that he does not have a vivid imagination, but simply because his books do not flow.

"Brass Man" is particularly annoying for in one short chapter the author has seven distinct and separate sections of as yet unconnected stories.

"The Voyage of the Sable Keech" is not quite as bad but still extremely difficult to follow.

The book prices are excellent. "Sable Keech" is the larger - C-format - and both are available now.

"Brass Man" has Mr Crane from "Gridlinked" now resurrected and forced to assist in the hunt for a dragon.

"The Voyage of the Sable Keech" is the story, mainly , of a huge wooden ship designed to take the walking dead to Nivana.

If you are prepared to use total concentration in reading these books, then enjoy.

Ian Jamieson  
Science Fiction South Africa.



Book Review

**Priestess of the White**

Trudi Canavan

reviewed by Gail Jamieson

Age of the Five Book One  
Penguin - R110.00 - Hardcover - 659 pages

This novel is the story of a young girl, Auraya, who is chosen to become a priestess and in ten short years ends up as a Priestess of The White”, one of the five rulers of the land of Hania. They communicate directly with the five gods and hand down instruction to the people. In the various countries are also the Dreamweavers who can heal in a magical manner but do not bow down to the five gods and so are considered to be heretics.

Auraya’s mission is to be an ambassador who must persuade various countries to band together to fight against the land from which the strong black-clad evil sorcerers come. There are indeed a number of interesting stories that make up this novel but in general I found it a simplistic story, For instance, we hear nothing of Auraya’s ten years of study only that she is now one of the “Five”

She becomes romantically involved with the one man she should not, battles against the evil sorcerers and their minions, learns about the cute flying Siyee and learns to fly herself.

The novel is readable enough but there are so many of this type of trilogy available now that they need to have something really special about them to make you want to continue on to volume two and I am afraid that this one does not.

Gail Jamieson  
Science Fiction South Africa

Book Review

**Knife of Dreams**

Robert Jordan



reviewed by Gail Jamieson

Book Eleven of "The Wheel of Time"  
Penguin - R140.00

At last.... almost. In this the penultimate volume of "The Wheel of Time" the strands start to draw together as Rand Al Thor must prepare for Tarmon Gai'don - The Last Battle. The finale we have been awaiting for so long is finally in sight.

The Aes Sedai are still divided, but Egwene is in the hands of the Black Ajar and must persuade her supporters to let her resolve the problem from inside the enemy camp in her own way.

Mat Cauthon still has to return the arrogant Daughter of the Nine Moons to her rightful place. Perrin Aybara has put his need to to rescue Faile ahead of all else and Elayne struggles to gain the support she needs to rule while carrying Rand's unborn twins.

This incredibly complex tale includes the stories of Sea Folk, the Seanchan, the Shaido and many others, all of whom will be needed in The Last Battle. And through all the threads runs the struggle of Rand with Lews Therin, who is trapped inside his mind and whose deepest desire is to die at the hands of the Dark Lord.

As usual, as with the previous ten volumes I found this book almost impossible to put down. Despite the complexity of the story it is gripping and I cannot wait to have all twelve volumes to read one after the other without the sometimes two year wait to find out what happens next and finally to hear how it all plays out.

Write on, Robert Jordan - we're waiting with anxiety to read the final volume.

Book Review



**Saucer - The Conquest**

Stephen Coonts

reviewed by Liz Simmonds

Jonathan Ball

The blurb on the back of this book says “A brilliant new thriller”

Sorry - but this book is just silly. The story reads like a cartoon for preteens.

A few “WOW’s!!!”, “BAM’s” and “CRASH’s” wouldn’t have seemed too out of place.

There is no real science in it but plenty of the “after escaping from the escape-proof prison” type of stuff.

It would seem to be a sequel to “Saucer” in which Rip Cantrell has somehow come into possession of a functioning “flying saucer” and has been allowed to keep it.

The author is a former Naval Aviator and all his previous books have been “world-wide best sellers” so maybe I am missing something but this really is not worth reading.

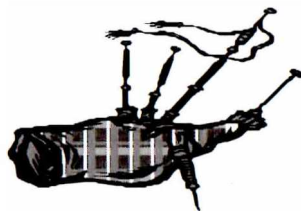
I’ll leave you to make your own decisions but I’ll avoid any future novels.

Meeting Review

## **Shuttle Space Disasters**

Gary Cundell

reviewed by Ian Jamieson



Shuttle Space Disasters by Gary Cundell –

This was a talk given to members of Science Fiction South Africa on Saturday 19th of February.

Gary was one of the best and most interesting of speakers, and we have had some very good ones recently. He spoke eloquently, humorously and knowledgeably of the disasters that have haunted NASA since the Shuttle first took flight.

One of the most disquieting items was the fact that NASA personnel were aware of various flaws, and their possible dismaying effects, long before each disaster happened and did nothing about it.

One of the listeners was Trevor Derry, a professor of Physics at Wits University, and his comments sum up the whole talk.

'A lively and humorous delivery of a lecture about the attitudes and obsessions - sometimes disastrous - behind today's space news and space tragedies; well illustrated and extensively researched.'

Ian Jamieson



Twin Book review

## **Thud**

by Terry Pratchett

Doubleday

### **Is this my cow?**

What I loved most about the latest Discworld book (**Thud!** for the uninitiated), were the bits where “the world went soft and pink”; every time Sam Vimes interacts with his son. And then I know that Pratchett is a truly great writer. And every time Sam Vimes fears for his son’s safety, I know that Pratchett is seriously overdue for the Booker.

However, there is a however. For example, I found too many superfluous characters in this book. Also, the plot is too complex (even though the theme is certainly topical and important) and it relies on too many external elements for both micro- and macro-resolution (as opposed to some of Pratchett’s better books, where resolutions come from within the plot).

A good book, but not a good Pratchett.

All in all, that is not my cup of cow

Yvonne Walus





Thud

Terry Pratchett

Doubleday



How about a one-word review. RAVE.

Not enough? Quite right. If TP can write like this then I want MORE.

A book should have plot, dialogue, great ideas, stunning one-liners that can make even the office laugh – out of context.

Yes. Next ?

It should be well-hidden and have McGuffins, planted in the open and also hidden so subtly that it takes you a day or two after you finish the book that you pick them up in the happy mulling that follows a good book.

Yes. Anything else?

It should have new characters and old friends – this book is not really for the non-initiate – new plots and scenes twists and shouts. It should have...

It has.

One of Terry's top five - Pyramids, Small Gods, The Truth and Thief of Time being the others – and I cannot recommend it too highly. Great.

Liz Simmonds.



Interview by Michael Lohr

## **Sky Captain and the Comic Book Hero of Tomorrow**

An Interview with Neil Gaiman

In my latest installment of flash interviews I cruised the Minneapolis strip with the already legendary Neil Gaiman, asking questions and flipping the bird at passersby. Gray Minnesota skies and unseasonably warm temperatures (22 degrees Fahrenheit) greeted us as we rolled into the local Jack 'n Sack for burgers, fries and a sampling of the indigenous soda of choice, Whack-A-Gopher Cherry cola.

Every time I get to Minnesota, which isn't often, I can't help but think of the Soundgarden song lyrics, "looking California, but feeling Minnesota." Anyway, Neil is a wonderful writer. I thought *American Gods* was one of the more innovative novels that I've read. I loved the historical sequences with the slave girl on the ship and who could ever forget the homoerotic excerpt between the Arabian cabdriver and the jinn.

We've watched (and read) him from his journalism days writing *Duran Duran: The Book*, the biography for the Brit pop band Duran Duran to the Douglas Adams inspired, *Don't Panic: The Official Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy Companion*. We followed him through his days at DC Comics, to his current bestseller period with *American Gods*, *Coraline* and *Anansi Boys*. Neil is nothing if not prolific. He even found time to write an English language script to the Japanese anime movie *Princess Mononoke*.

ML: In your latest novel, *Anansi Boys*, you said that it was fundamentally a world of comedy and wasn't a sequel to *American Gods*, how so?

NG: Because it's funny, and because none of the events in *American Gods* have anything to do with anything that happens in *Anansi Boys*.

ML: So what was singer Tori Amos' fascination with you, why did she choose you to send her demo tape to all those years ago?

NG: I think Tori liked the stories, and wanted to meet the person who made them.

ML: Thanks to Wikipedia for the following: Neil is constantly mentioned (often rather cryptically) in at least one of Tori Amos' songs on each of her albums. He also wrote the forewords to several of her tour programs as well as short stories to accompany

her album *Strange Little Girls* and *Scarlet's Walk*. (Excerpts appeared in the album booklet.) Below are some of Tori's lyrical mentions of Neil:

- "If you need me, me and Neil'll be hangin' out with the dream king / Neil said hi, by the way" ("Tear In Your Hand," 1992)
- "Where's Neil when you need him?" ("Space Dog," 1994)
- "Will you find me if Neil makes me a tree?" ("Horses," 1996)—Gaiman based the character of the talking tree in *Stardust* on Amos at her request after Neil stayed with her while beginning work on the novel
- "Where are the Velvets?" ("Hotel," 1998)—the Velvets being vampire-like characters from Gaiman's novel *Neverwhere*
- "Get me Neil on the line... /have him read Snow, Glass, Apples" ("Carbon," 2002)

ML: Did the Minneapolis rock band that you wrote a few songs for, the Flash Girls, ever get signed? For those of you that didn't know, Neil has even written songs for Alice Cooper's *The Last Temptation* record.

NG: The Flash Girls made 3 CDs before becoming too geographically challenged to continue. Lorraine-a-Malena seems to have taken up where they left off, and are working on their second CD.

ML: Have you and Todd McFarlane ever spoken to each other since the 2002 lawsuit?

NG: Nope. I hear from his lawyers from time to time, especially since I'm the second largest creditor in his bankruptcy.

ML: I was able to pick up a copy of *Adventures in the Dream Trade* and I really enjoyed it. How did this project come about?

NG: Boskone and NESFA (New England Science Fiction Association) press do a book for the Boskone Guest of Honour. That one was mine.

ML: You have mentioned before that you like the writings of P.G. Wodehouse. What is your favourite work of his? Are you a member of the Wodehouse Society?

NG: Probably the Psmith sequence. No, is there one?

ML: Yes, indeed there is a PG Wodehouse Society. In fact I think there are separate organizations in the US and UK with several branches. You can find out more information about the Wodehouse Society by going to these websites: <http://www.eclipse.co.uk/wodehouse/> and <http://www.wodehouse.org/>

ML: Have you ever tapped into the spirit of Jim Morrison, or God forbid Aleister Crowley while focusing on your creative muse?

NG: I very much doubt it.

ML: It's my goal as an interviewer to throw the interviewee a curveball question now and again just to see how they respond to it. The odd statistical outcome of doing this has shown that American and Canadian writers seem to always attempt to completely respond to such a question, and sometimes even respond in a like corresponding flippant manner. But every British author that I have interviewed has basically been non-responsive to such a question. A couple Brits have even refused to answer the question. I'm not sure what this all means but I figure a social statistician, anthropologist or psychologist could figure it out.


ML: Assuming that we all have souls what would you like to do as a free soul once you're released from your earthly body? Would you want to travel the omniverse to see what's there like the Silver Surfer or would you rather hang out in some Elysian Fields-type place, eating apples and frolicking with virgins?

NG: I'd take the omniverse any day. Fruit and frolics would get boring by the second week.

ML: So what's this I hear about you having a sushi fetish?

NG: I like eating it. I'm not sure it amounts to a fetish until you like eating it off the back of a naked pair of Siamese twins, while wearing only a Sumatran nurse's costume.

ML: Ha, indeed. I once attended a party where they were serving sushi off of the breasts of a couple rather buxom brunettes dressed up like Klingons. And I won't tell you how they were serving the fried bean curd rolls.



ML: It's been rumored in fandom for years, but will there ever be a sequel to *Neverwhere*?

NG: If I write one, there will be .

ML: Since you now live in Minnesota have you ever tried your hand at curling?

NG: Is that a sport, or something you do to your hair?

ML: It's actually a sport that's growing in popularity. It's also rather more difficult than it looks. I hyperextend my right arm while curling. I fell on the ice while attempting to broom a stone into the house. It was all rather embarrassing. I won't

mention here that the US team beat the British team for the bronze medal at this year's Olympics. Oh, I guess I just did...

ML: You once talked about really enjoying radio plays as a creative medium. Do you like the old radio shows like the Green Hornet or Inner Sanctum?

NG: Not a big Green Hornet fan, but I don't like much radio melodrama. Inner Sanctum and the other mystery-horror anthology shows (Dimension X and the rest) are great fun. But if I had to take one show to my desert island, it would be Jack Benny.

ML: It amazes me just how much you do multimedia-wise, New York Times bestsellers, your film *Mirrormask* playing at the Sundance Film Festival etc, and you still, somehow maintain a certain level of anonymity. How do you do it?

NG: This week, not terribly well. Most weeks, I think I give the impression of being busy because things you do at different times always seem to come out at once.

ML: Other than *Beowulf and Death: The High Cost of Living* what other projects are in the pipeline out in Hollywood?

NG: *Coraline* and *Stardust* both seem to be actually happening. Other things are in various states of maybehood.

ML: How is your next children's novel project, *The Graveyard Book* coming along? Any other novels in the works right now that you can talk about?

NG: I just finished the first Chapter of *The Graveyard Book* (which, oddly enough, turned out to be Chapter Four). Now I just have to write the rest.

I want to thank Neil for picking up the tab on the burgers and giving me a whistle stop tour of Minneapolis. You can find Neil all over the Internet. His official home on the web is at: <http://www.neilgaiman.com>. Neil's weblog can also be found there.

And before I wrap this up just remember, in regards to American television, Bruce Springsteen once said that there were 150 channels and nothing on. Not that I wish to correct the Boss, but he should have actually said that there were 150 channels and only a bunch of drunk, stupid folk on, and I am not just talking about the Fox network either.



Michael Lohr is a professional journalist, outdoorsman, poet, whiskey connoisseur, music critic, treasure hunter and adventurer. His writing has appeared in such diverse magazines as Rolling Stone, Esquire, The Economist, Southern Living, Cowboys & Indians, Rocky Mountain News and Men's Journal, to name a few.

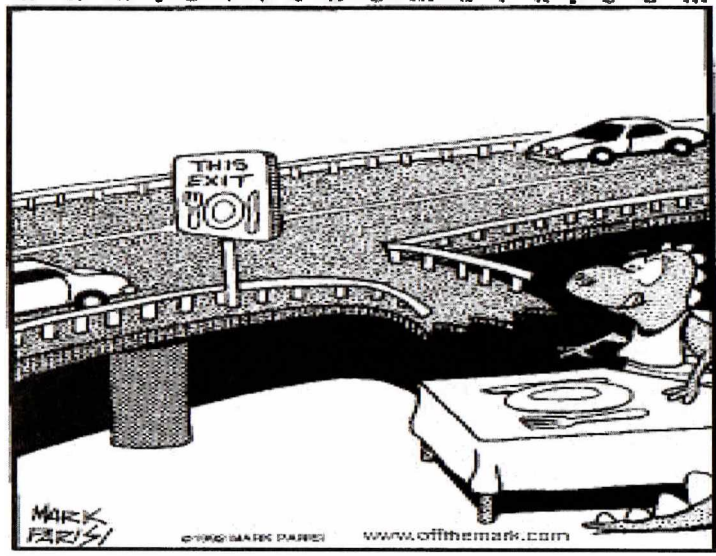
NEWS FLASH from Michael Lohr

I just wanted to let you know that the NGO (non-governmental organization) whose board I sit on and who I assist with grants research, the African Conservation Foundation (ACF), has been nominated for the prestigious Stockholm Challenge Award.

The Stockholm Challenge Award is the Nobel Prize equivalent for non-profits and NGOs around the world. The African Conservation Foundation's subsidiary, the African Conservation Network was nominated for its cultural and environmental preservation programs in Tanzania.

**off the mark** by Mark Parisi  
www.offthemark.com

ML



Download din yndlingsmusik på MSN Music: <http://www.msn.dk/music> - det er nemt og billigt

His webpage can be found at: [http://www.simnet.is/osko/writer/michael\\_lohr.htm](http://www.simnet.is/osko/writer/michael_lohr.htm)



Film review

**Aeon Flux**

reviewed by Carla Martins

MOVIE REVIEW – AEON FLUX STARRING CHARLIZE THERON

I must start out saying that even though this was a flawed movie, I still managed to enjoy myself – the premise of the movie was very interesting. I must point out that this movie is based on a TV animation series of the same name, which was broadcast by MTV in the Nineties. I have not ever watched that series so I cannot draw any comparison between the movie and the series.

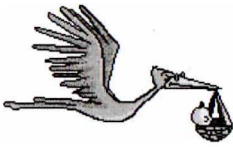
We start that movie with a voice over by Charlize's character, Aeon Flux, describing how humanity was almost totally wiped out by an industrial virus and was just barely saved by a scientist called Trevor Goodchild.

We are then taken to 400 years in the future where the survivors of this deadly virus, only a few million humans, are all living in the city of Bregna. This city is completely walled off from the outside world, nature totally surrounds it. The people are ruled over by a council which the rebellion or freedom fighters, the Monicans, view as a dictatorship, headed by Trevor Goodchild (can this be the same Trevor Goodchild who in the past created an antidote for the deadly virus? Well dear readers this is one of the mysteries which need to be solved by our heroine!).

The Monicans feel the time is right to send their prime assassin, Aeon Flux, to execute Trevor Goodchild. Aeon Flux has a personal vendetta against Goodchild but when the time comes for her to execute Goodchild, she finds that she cannot do it – she seems to know this man – and finds herself with a mystery that she feels that she must solve and therefore goes against the Monican leadership.

I found the future society presented in this movie fascinating, I liked the visuals and the special effects which did not swamp the story.

I did feel that there was some plot inconsistencies in the story which did not make sense but overall I enjoyed myself. – CARLA MARTINS



Nova 2005 Finalist - General Section

## **Rock-a-Bye Baby**

Daphne Olivier

Tom and I had been married nineteen years and had long ago given up hope of our names coming up in the draw when, out of the blue, the envelope arrived. Tom turned it over and over again then, with a puzzled frown, slit it open.

“What is it?” I asked curiously.

Tom didn’t reply, at least not right away. He just stood there, staring down at the slip of paper, then turned to me with a stunned, dazed look in his eyes. “My God!” he burst out. “My God, Janet, you’re never going to believe this!”

“Believe what? For goodness sake, tell; don’t keep me in suspense.”

“A permit! After all this time we’ve been granted a permit!”

My jaw dropped. “Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure!” Tom waved the sheet in front of my eyes then dropped it into my hand. “There; read it yourself.”

Tom was right; there was no doubt whatever that it was a permit; a document granting Tom Gordon Henderson, identity number 5682001497, and Janet Elizabeth Henderson, identity number 9847107325, permission to procreate and give birth to one live infant within a period of twelve months. The small print at the bottom of the document warned that if the accompanying form was not filled in and returned within seven days the privilege would be withdrawn.

“So... what do you think?” Tom asked.

“Think? What’s there to think about?” I wanted to know. “It’s what we’ve always hoped for, isn’t it?”

“Well... yes but, let’s face it, we’re not as young as we used to be. We’re settled in our ways and have just about everything we ever wanted; good jobs, this house, the lakeside cottage, the speedster, Betsy, Bonzo and Kitty.” Tom paused to run a hand through his hair; an action which gave away the fact that he was flustered. “A baby, now, at this stage of our lives, would change everything. Are you sure that’s what you really want?”

Betsy, Bonzo and Kitty were the best, absolutely the best robots money could buy. Tom and I had paged through the catalogue again and again and spent long hours calculating whether or not we could afford such expensive models but, in the end, had decided to bite the bullet and buy the best. We’d had no regrets. Betsy was not only smaller and lighter than the cumbersome



early domestics, but moved about so quietly one hardly noticed she was there. From the day she took over, there was never a speck of dirt to be seen. Not so much as a hint! And the meals she served were out of this world. Absolutely delicious and packed with exactly the right amount of minerals and vitamins we needed. I sometimes wondered how I'd ever managed without Betsy.

Bonzo was a golden retriever, a truly handsome specimen so perfectly constructed it was almost impossible to tell he was not a real, live dog. Kitty, a beautiful, blue-eyed Siamese, came from the same factory. Both had been programmed to respond to our voices and show affection when called upon to do so. They were also able to perform a variety of amusing tricks. It may not have been quite the same as owning a real, live pet but Bonzo and Kitty filled a gap in my life and, besides, it was fun taking them for walks and showing them off to other folk walking their pets in the park. No one I knew owned a real animal. There were a few around; I'd read about them and even seen a couple on screen, but they were so rare and so expensive that only a millionaire could hope to own one.

"We have a week to make up our minds," Tom said. He sat down beside me and put his arm around my shoulders, drawing me close. "I'll go with whatever you want, Sweetheart, but I want you to think things over carefully before you make a decision."

"There's no need to think. I know what I want. I want..." That was as far as I got before Tom put a finger to my lips.

"Hush! Hush!" he cautioned. "Don't rush into things. I want you to hear what I've got to say before you make up your mind. So sit back and listen. OK? Will you do that?"

"OK." I gave in pouting a little. It was disappointing to find that Tom wasn't as excited and thrilled as I was but common sense told me that that was only to be expected. Men were different from women. They lacked a maternal instinct and didn't think about babies and hanker after them the way women did. And, apart from that, Tom was cautious by nature. He liked to be absolutely certain everything was in place and exactly the way it ought to be before making any decision, large or small. But he loved me; I knew he did, and it wouldn't do any harm to sit back and listen to what he had to say.

"I know you want a baby. I know it's been on your mind since the day we married, but I don't know whether you realize just how much it would disrupt our lives. I want you to think about that."

"What do you mean?" I asked

"Well, you'd have to give up your job for a start."

"I know," I said. "I'm aware of that." I liked my job. It would be a wrench to give it up, but I knew, deep down inside of me, that there were more important things in life than picking up one book after another and converting their contents to micro-chips.

"Babies cry and need their nappies changed. They need to be fed every few hours. They're messy little devils. And when they grow older they run around breaking things."



tj-

“I know,” I said. “I know.” And I really did know because although I’d never actually seen a real, live baby I’d read enough about them. That was what I enjoyed about my job in the Old Library. There was plenty of time to read and a mountain of books to choose from. Ancient books, written before the Catastrophe. And piles and piles of magazines. The ones I liked best had titles such as, ‘Mother and Baby’, ‘The Toddler’, ‘Your Baby’, and ‘Baby Talk’. They contained wonderful articles about how to cope with temper tantrums, potty training, bedwetting, sibling rivalry and breastfeeding, to name but a few. One particular book, written by a man called Dr Spock, was the most fascinating of all. I read it from cover to cover at least six times.

There were newspapers in the Library too, shelves and shelves of them, dating back two hundred and more years. When I grew tired of baby books I read newsheets printed before and after the Catastrophe. It was hard to imagine the world teeming with people; billions and billions of them, procreating whenever and as often as they liked, building more and more cities, until there was no space left. Not enough space to grow enough food. The end was inevitable. If there was any surprise at all it was that it took so long in coming. There had been warnings; dozens of them. Ecologists, agriculturists and psychiatrists had all issued warnings, but birth control was an unpopular notion in those days and politicians were afraid of losing power.

No one knows why, or even where, chaos first broke out. But once begun it spread like wildfire, leaping from city to city, country to country, completely unstoppable as law and order broke down. Things went from bad to worse when electricity and water supplies failed. Fires broke out and engulfed whole cities. Looting and raping was widespread and the death toll beyond reckoning. It was to be more than fifty years before survivors were able to band together and, little by little, restore law and order. The first law the new government passed was the Population Restriction Bill which made it a criminal offence for anyone to procreate without a permit.

Tom’s voice cut into my thoughts. “I’m making a suggestion,” he said slowly and carefully. “It’s only a suggestion so don’t get in a state. But I’d like you to think about it for a few minutes.”

“Think about what?”

“About adopting a RoBaby.”

I bit my lip. “You mean a robotic baby?”

“Well, yes. There’s nothing wrong with that. Just about every couple we know has one. Some have two, even three. There’s a lot to be said for RoBabies.”

“Such as?” I knew the answer as well as he did, but asked anyway.

“They’re cuddly and cute and smile and gurgle and coo, just like a real baby. They cry too but stop when they’re told to. They never get sick. They sleep through the night and don’t whimper and whine if their mother forgets to feed them. Or change their nappy. RoBabies are smart; much smarter than real chil-

dren. Why, most are programmed to talk right from the start. And there are thousands of models to choose from; all ages, all sizes; little redheads, blonds, brunettes; any colour and shape you fancy. And if you get tired of the one you have you can trade it in for a new model." Tom paused to give an encouraging smile. "What do you say, Janet? Why not give it a try?"

I shook my head and jutted my jaw. "No, that's not what I want. I want a real baby; a baby that cries because it's hungry, or itchy, or tired, or just plain wants to be picked up and spoilt. A baby that needs me. Please, Tom; please, please let's sign the permit."

"You're sure that's what you want?"

"Quite sure."

"Right!" Tom gave my shoulder a squeeze then turned and kissed me. "That's that then! I want you to be happy, Sweetheart, and if you're absolutely certain that that's what you want, that's good enough for me." He snapped his fingers to activate the screen and, when the server appeared, gave instructions for her to set up an appointment for Mr and Mrs Henderson at the Procreation Centre for as soon as possible. The screen dimmed, the server's image faded. A few minutes later she reappeared with information that the appointment had been made as requested, and that we were to report to the Centre at 11 a.m. on Tuesday 29 March, 2295. "That's tomorrow," she added with a smile, then repeated the time, date and place, slowly and carefully, to allow us time to write it down if we wished.

I could hardly contain my excitement when Tom and I strapped ourselves into our speedster and set off the following morning. It was a lovely day. Down below I could see neighbourhood houses growing smaller and smaller, each rooftop surrounded by a wide expanse of green. Tree-lined streets crisscrossed the landscape and here and there I was able to make out a lake set in the centre of a spacious park. No smog, no squalor, no slums. Not a high-rise building in sight. It was hard to believe that that same space had once been filled with people, jam-packed together in warren-like dwellings like so many rats in an overcrowded cage. I was glad I'd been born in a different age.

We sped on and on, skimming over one suburb after another, each as tranquil as the last. Then a flash of silver caught my eye and there was the Dome, glittering in the sunshine. The speedster sped towards it and as we drew closer I saw the words, 'Procreation Centre' printed in bold letters across the roof. A few minutes later we docked into a pod in the parking bay.

A pretty receptionist met us and ushered us into a room where a white-suited, grey-haired man was waiting for us. "Congratulations!" he smiled as he waved us to our chairs. "It's always a pleasure to meet prospective parents! Allow me to introduce myself; I'm Dr Jones, your Genetic Modification Councilor. It's my duty to record your wishes and make sure the infant you produce is born with all the required modifications."

Tom smiled and opened his mouth to reply but I got in before him. "Thank you, Dr Jones, but we won't be wanting any modifications. We just want an ordinary little baby. Isn't that so, Tom?"

Dr Jones frowned. "Allow me to give a word of advice. If pregnancy were allowed to take place purely by chance, without supervision and genetic modification, there's a risk that the baby might be born with Down's syndrome, or a cleft palate, or any one of a dozen other malformations or abnormalities. Are you really prepared to take that chance?"

"Of course not!" Tom said. He turned to me. "We must at least do whatever is necessary to make sure the baby is born whole and healthy."

I nodded agreement. A malformed baby was the very last thing I wanted. And besides, the genetic modification would, in all probability, be so minor it would hardly be worth worrying about.

"Very sensible!" Dr Jones exclaimed. He ticked an item on his chart then looked up and smiled. "We have a new cell-regeneration implant. Would you like me to add that to your requirements as well?"

"What effect does it have?" Tom asked.

"It enables the baby to repair damaged cells the moment an injury occurs and to keep regenerating them until perfect health is restored. It means, in effect, that your child will never get ill and, if injured, will recover in a very short time."

"Sounds great!" Tom exclaimed. "What do you say, Janet; shall we include that as well?"

I hesitated and, for a moment, thought of saying no, but it seemed such a sensible thing to agree to. After all, how could any self-respecting mother deny her child good health when it was in her power to ensure it? "OK," I said. "Put it on the list."

"Now, what about the sex of the child?" Dr Jones asked. "Would you prefer a boy or a girl?"

I didn't mind one way or another and would have preferred to leave it to chance, but Tom's face lit up. "A boy!" he exclaimed. "I really would like a boy." He turned to me. "That's if that's OK with you?"

"Fine," I said. "That's fine with me."

Dr Jones wrote, 'Male' on the form then turned his attention to the next item on his list. "Intelligence. There are various levels to choose from. We don't recommend below average, but you may choose average, above average, superior or genius. What is your preference?"

"I don't think..." I began, but Tom's mouth was hanging open. "Do you mean my son will have the intelligence of a genius if I request it? Is it possible for you to guarantee that?"

"Most definitely," Dr Jones assured him. "No problem. Would you like me to add that to your list of requirements?"

"For sure!" Tom said.

Tom didn't bother to ask my opinion this time but even if he had I don't suppose I would have disagreed. It was good to see him taking such an interest in the project and, besides, every parent wants the best for their child. There was a time when folk had to take pot luck but now, I was beginning to realize, things were different. Modern technology and genetic engineering made it possible for parents to give their offspring every advantage. The next item on Dr Jones's list was 'Physical Appearance'. He pushed a form across his desk and allowed us to fill in the blanks indicating our choice of hair colour,

eye colour, skin tone as well as a number of other details. After that came, 'Temperament', and after that, 'Athletic Ability'. There was more, a great deal more, but by then my mind was reeling and I was finding it difficult to concentrate. Tom, on the other hand, was showing more and more enthusiasm. I left it all to him.

The paper work was completed at last. "Now sit back and relax while I explain the entire process. I want to make sure you both understand the various procedures which need to be completed before the infant is delivered," Dr Jones said. He turned to smile at me. "Our first priority is the egg. A small operation will be necessary to enable us to harvest it, but I assure you it will be completely painless. Once harvested, the egg will be fertilized in our laboratory with Tom's sperm. Once that has been completed our team of geneticists will use their skills to make the required modifications. The next few days will be crucial. Once we are satisfied that the embryo is viable it will be implanted into your uterus. From then on the pregnancy will proceed in the normal manner."

"That's it?" Tom asked.

"Not quite. The baby's development must be monitored very, very carefully and certain medications and stimuli applied at specific intervals. It will be necessary for Janet to visit the Centre twice a week for the first three months, three times a week for the next three, and every day for the last trimester."

I frowned. "Stimuli? What kind of stimuli?"

"At first simply recordings of his mother's voice; nursery rhymes, lullabies, stuff like that; all very soothing."

"Will the baby be able to hear?" I asked.

Dr Jones smiled. "A foetus has the ability to hear far earlier than you might suppose. And don't forget your baby is destined to be a genius. He will have the ability to assimilate speech-patterns from an early age and, later on, basic mathematics."

There was more but it was all too much for me to take in and I was glad when, at last, Dr Jones rang a bell to summon his nurse to set up an appointment to commence the long, complicated process and then show us out.

The first few weeks were nerve-wracking and I could hardly sleep with worrying whether the implanted embryo was surviving or not but, when Dr Jones announced that all was well, I relaxed and began to enjoy my pregnancy. I went shopping and bought a whole new wardrobe of maternity clothes and everything anyone could possibly want to furnish a nursery. I took to humming, 'Rock-a-bye baby' as I went about my chores and even found myself humming the rhyme when I went to bed at night. I brought a pile of books on motherhood from the library and read them slowly, one

by one, devouring every word. Dr Jones laughed when I told him and made a remark about old fashioned ideas, but I didn't care; I enjoyed reading about 'bonding' and 'how to bath a newborn' and a stack of other interesting topics.

Nine months is a long time to wait but, with so much to keep me occupied, the days flew by. I spent long hours at the Centre, more often than not wired to a machine that throbbed and pulsed and emitted strange, super-



sonic vibrations. Now and again I was given a handful of pills and a tall glass filled with a metallic-tasting liquid to swallow. Dr Jones kept a check on my progress and, week by week, gave an encouraging report. "Fine! You're doing fine!" he told me. And, "Bonny little fellow you've got in there!" And, "Nearly there! Not much longer now!"

The last few weeks were tiresome and more than a little uncomfortable but I didn't mind; I was sure the result was going to be worth it all. The sessions at the Centre grew longer and more and more tedious. I had no idea what it was all about and wasn't sure I liked the idea of bombarding my baby with so much stimuli but, when I expressed my concern to Tom, he only laughed. "Relax!" he told me. "Dr Jones knows what he's doing. Leave it to him."

The big day came at last. "Time's up!" Dr Jones announced. "Tell Tom to take the day off tomorrow and get you here bright and early. And remember; there's nothing to worry about; the delivery will be quick and painless."

I'm not sure what they gave me to drink but it worked like a charm. I went into labour at nine on the dot and by ten it was all over; no pain, no fuss, no worries, no problems.

Tom held my hand and squeezed it tight when Dr Jones lifted the baby and held it up for us to see. "Congratulations!" he said, smiling broadly. "Your son has arrived safe and sound!"

I stared, feeling my heart swell with pride as I took in the child's blue eyes, curly blond hair and peaches-and-cream complexion. Perfect! Absolutely perfect! Everything we'd dreamed of; everything we'd been promised. As flawless and beautiful as a porcelain doll!



Then the small rosebud mouth opened and words came out, each syllable as clear and distinct as those of a robot. "Hello Mama! Hello Papa! Mama; Mama; Mama..."

I must have fainted because when I opened my eyes again Dr Jones was no longer there. Neither was the baby. "They've taken him away to the nursery," Tom told me. "But he's fine. Dr Jones gave him a good going over and he's assured me the boy is fine, just fine!"

"But... Oh Tom; he's not like a baby at all!" I burst out. "Not a real one! He's like... he's just like... a... a RoBaby!"

Tom did not seem at all surprised and not in the least upset. "Yes, he is," he agreed. "Exactly like a RoBaby! But, hey, that's great! Absolutely marvelous! He's everything we hoped for; everything we wanted."

He paused then asked; "What are we going to call him? Have you thought of a name?"

"A name?" My head was aching unbearably and there was a strange buzzing in my ears. For a moment I could only stare then, all by itself, a name floated into my head and, from far, far away, I heard myself laugh. "Robby," I said, giggling shrilly. "We'll call him Robby. Of course! Of course! Robby. Don't you think that's a perfect name?"

Tom frowned. "Are you OK?" he asked worriedly.

"What makes you think I'm not?"

"Well, you are acting a little strangely. You're not yourself at all."

"I'm fine," I told him. "Absolutely fine."

And I was because, quite suddenly, my head stopped thumping and I knew that everything was going to be OK. More than OK. Because on our way home from the Centre I would get Tom to stop by at the RoBaby factory and trade Robbie in. For a girl. Yes, a girl would be nice. A girl with big brown eyes and dark hair like mine. A girl-baby who would cry. And cry and cry and cry...

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From the Star Trek Minicon.... Star Trek Bridge plus one foreign character....

Ian, Gail, Iain, Cedric, Gavin

"Beam Me Down, Bean"

The scene: Transporter room of the Enterprise  
Transporter activates, beam turns on, Mr Spock materialises.  
Beam activates again, and 7 of 9 materialises. She and Spock move to a corner where they begin to make out. Emotionlessly.

Data enters, takes out his note book and records his observations.

DATA: Aha! Inhuman mating cycle!"

Pickard enters.

PICKARD: Disengage. Make it so.

All participants rearrange clothing

SPOCK: Sorry Captain. It was a wardrobe malfunction

A strange creature appears, as the transporter hisses and crackles into life, accompanied by a chord of choral music. Mr Bean stares at this odd assembly of beings.

MR. BEAN: blbbblblbl.

UNNAMED ENGINEER: I am sorry Captain, but there has been another malfunction. I shall attempt to reverse the polarity.

Bean runs out and enters maintenance hatch 632-22B, closely followed by 7 of 9.

SPOCK: I'll track them on the scope. They are in storage closet 13 on level 6.

The crew rush down and catch Mr Bean and 7 of 9 in a passionate embrace.

SPOCK and DATA: (Simultaneously) This is not logical, Captain.

They take him to the bridge where he sits down in the Captain's chair.

DATA: He appears to be mostly harmless, Captain.

Mr Bean examines the the control panel, including the large red button labelled "Experimental Warp Drive.

Do Not Press" He rises, trips and stumbles onto the button sending the Enterprise hurtling into the Delta Quadrant after which the Warp Drive explodes.

DATA: We're in the Delta Quadrant, Captain.

BEAN: At last! I am close to my home planet! My intelligence has returned!

In a flash he repairs the Warp Drive, teleports home and sends the Enterprise back to where their journey began.

Transporter activates. Beam turns on Spock materialises.....





Specialist column

### Midnight Musings 1

Al du Pisani looks at Science Fiction  
and life in general.

Perhaps because, like a lot of readers of Science Fiction, I have the belief that some day I will write my own SF story, I like reading about the art of writing and of publishing.

At this moment in time, the best source for such information is at Baen Books. <<http://www.baen.com/>> Specifically under Baen's Bar, in the Universe Facts web board. Why? Because Jim Baen thinks that the current process where writers of SF are created, or at least polished, is seriously flawed.

It has been true for a very long time that only a very few writers have been able to make a living from their writing. But at present, it is becoming more difficult for that to happen. And there are authors, some more popular than others, who have had to stop writing for the simple fact that they could not afford to keep on writing. One example of that has been Barry Hughart. His debut novel, *Bridge of Birds*, won the World Fantasy prize. (A wonderful book, by the way. If you have never read it, do yourself a favour and try to get hold of it.) It was followed by *The Story of the Stone* and *Eight Skilled Gentlemen*, which, although not as good and as wildly original as the first one, were still good stories. Yet, after these books were published, he had to stop writing.

Jim Baen links this to the demise of the pulps. Today there are three monthly, or mostly monthly, magazines that publish SF. All of them have been in long term decline. Most of them are only open to works by established authors, or at least writers who have an agent. And of all the SF imprints in the USA, only two of them still accept slush, or woprk submitted directly by an author. And slush has a horrible record: One slush book in a hundred, maybe one in a thousand, gets accepted for publication.

So, what can a publisher do to assist? (Except publishing more than one totally new author a year, which is what Baen Books can afford to do?) Start your own online magazine. Baen's Universe aggressively court established authors for tales of two fisted adventure. (Since you also believe that the existing SF magazines are more into the arty and literary stuff, which will win the annual prizes, Hugo and Nebula, but are maybe not fun stories that people will want to read.) And open your magazine up to new writers.

But a lot of new writers and new stories have flaws. And often they are the same flaws. Which is why the *Turkey City Lexicon* has been published: So that writers, editors and reviewers can use the same terminology. For instance: a *Shaggy Dog* story. A *Shaggy God* story. And so forth.

So, to reduce the time the paid professionals have to spend on teaching new authors, the Universe web boards are where you post your story, wait for it to be torn to shreds, or praised to the sky. (Yes, that also happens, but much less often



that you would think.) If your talent is to criticism and nit-picking, or you have an internal copy editor straining at the leash, this is where you can unleash it.

The aim is to instruct, so that you can get more readable stories. There is nothing as frustrating as to get a form rejection slip "This story does not meet our requirements", and not to know why. Is there something you neglected to do? Is there something you should have done differently? Are you applying to the wrong market? And that is something that editors and publishers often do not have the time to do. And that is often where a enthusiastic amateur can help out.

Is this working? Only time will tell. But, so far, the web boards are showing a better success rate than the slush submissions. This is not an easy process, with some stories have been through seven rounds of being rewritten, so that they can be considered for professional attention.

As a result of this activity, the Facts web board is accumulating some articles on writing that may be instructive to read.

Outside of this process, there are other ways to get information. One of these is to read what a published author writes about the art of writing, or his experiences. For example, read Jerry Pournelle's advice to aspiring authors, which he keeps on his web site.

There have been others, such as "Michael Blowhard" writing about him and his wife writing a romance book under a house name. More about his experiences at collaboration, and what they had to do to finish writing the book, to formula, in three months.

Eric Flint, in my opinion one of the writers who will be regarded as one of the more influential shapers of writers, has contributed a lot of articles on writing and how and why to do it, some of which have been collected in the Baen Universe Facts web board.

And then you read stories about books which even the writer of it did not expect to ever publish: John Ringo on Ghost, and sequels.

John Ringo seems to be a writer who has the basic idea of the story, does his research, and then waits for the story to gel in his mind. This approach, while effective, is extremely difficult to teach, since the practitioner does not himself know how and why this approach works. And it may leave the author with absolutely nothing to say on some subjects, since he just cannot generate the story required.

This also leads to some very fast writing, since once the story has gelled, all you need to do is to write it down. About two years ago, John Ringo finished a very productive spell: He managed to write down four books in the period of three months. And then nothing for another three months. Which was frustrating, and ate into his cash flow.

The problem was not that he did not have a story to write down, but that the story that had gelled, and was intruding into his other work, was not something he

believed could sell. Eventually, to get rid of the story, and get on with his other stories, he wrote the story down, and got it out of his mind.

This may have ended there, with the story locked away in a trunk, maybe being published on some later occasion, even after his death. But he had to complain to his fans about the bad stuff he had to write down before he could get to the good stuff. And some of them asked for a sample of this terrible work he had been doing. When he did that, on a web board frequented by his fans, some of them not only liked it, but indicated that they were interested in paying money for it. Which led to our intrepid author approaching his agent, asking him to read the book, and if he thought it could sell, to approach publishers. Preferably not his current one, since the subject matter and genre is not what his current publisher publishes. And, to make sure that the publisher is willing to publish it under a pseudonym.

The agent thought it could sell, and was approaching publishers, when Jim Baen, John Ringo's publisher, asked to see the book, liked it, and wanted to publish it - under John's name, even though the book's subject matter and genre do not fit into his normal area of expertise. The book was published under John Ringo's name, and called Ghost.

Why did John Ringo have a problem with the book, and thought it unpublishable? The subject matter. On the surface it is just another techno-thriller, somewhat in the Tom Clancy mould, dealing with the War on Terrorism. But, the hero of the book is not a nice man. He is a man who can be a rapist if he does not control himself; a bad man, fighting for good, a man with some demons, and a back story he has not revealed a lot of, but which has its dark moments.

I have heard it said that human sexuality is really complex, so complex that if you ask a large group of people to comment individually on a list of kinky sex acts, you will find that at some point the person will say that this act is normal, and that the next one totally squicks them out. The trouble is that the acts which they see as normal, and as squicky, will not be the same for all people.

Well, our hero is into bondage, the one sex act that a lot of people have fantasies about, yet are not willing to talk about. (See the Gor books for reasons why. I have also recently heard that there is a fandom for people who have fantasies about being Gorean slave girls.)

Ghost has come out to better reviews and sales than had been expected. And John Ringo is writing more books in the series, cheerfully ignoring reality if it gets in the way of telling a fun story. For instance, if he need the Notre Dame cathedral to be located on an island in the Seine, that is where our hero will find it when he visits Paris.

And somebody, for an unknown reason, nominated Ghost for an award as best Romance novel of the year. This was a challenge which John Ringo could not resist, and so he asked people to go out and vote for that award, promising all who voted that he will go and kill them off in the next books, as heroically as they wish. A promise which he will soon have to deliver on, since Ghost won the award as best romance novel.

Contributions of all types are very welcome.,

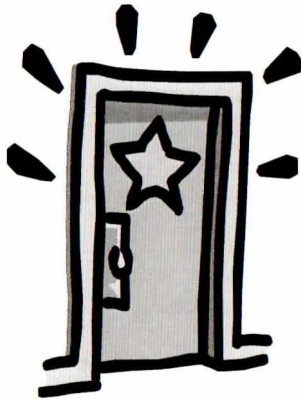
Electronic transmission is preferred, but all text should be typed.

Drawings should be in high-contrast black and white.

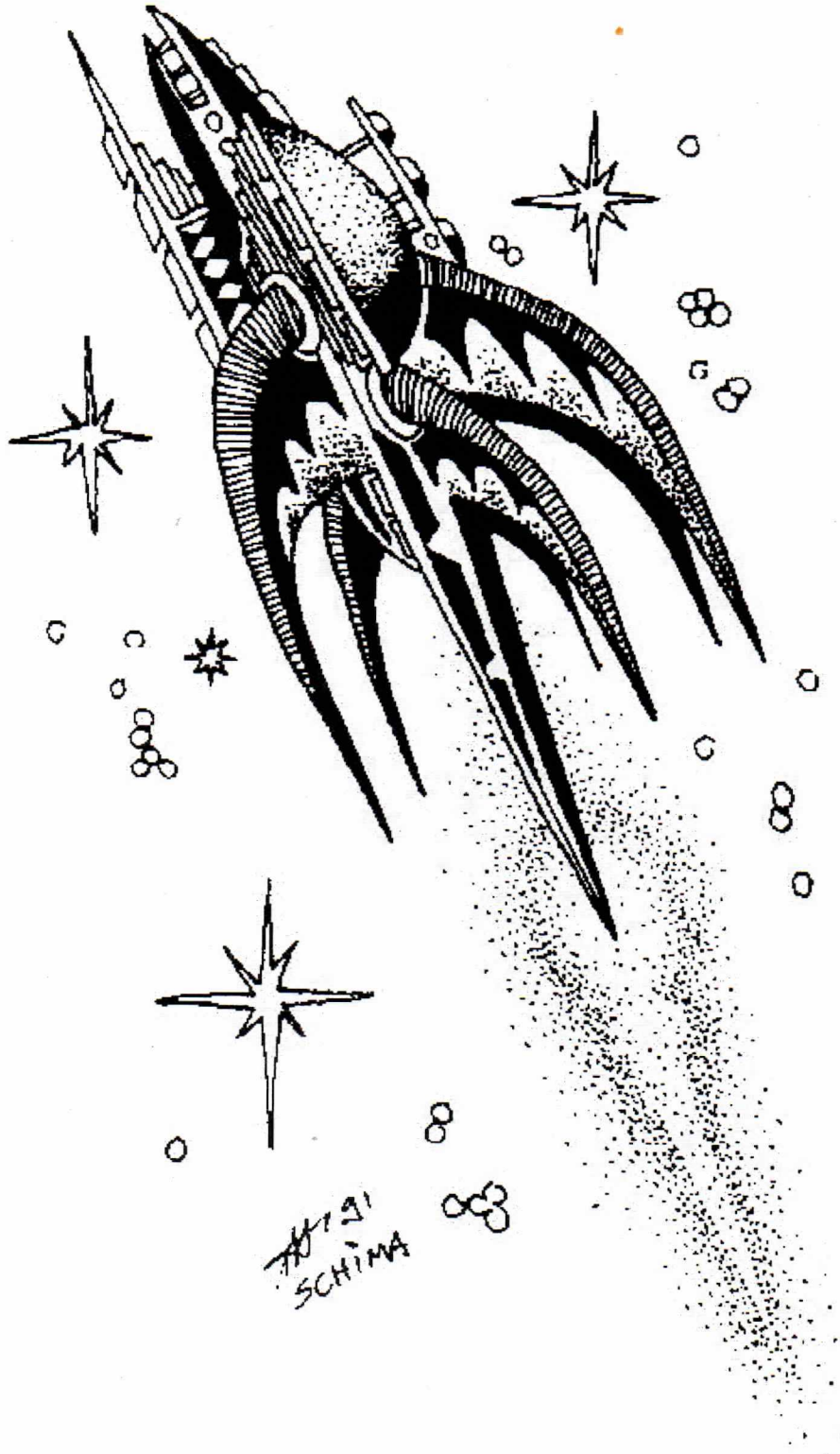
Stories, poems, reviews should be suitable for a wide audience  
of all ages.

Bad language and the mis-spelling of the word 'its' are not  
acceptable..

After all, we are trying to woo people from TV and computer  
games.



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