

Alouette

The Newsletter of the Canadian Region of SFWA

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Writing Science Fiction That Sells

by Michael A. Burstein

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(First Published in *The Writer*, October 1996)

Science fiction differs from almost every other form of literature in that the writer cannot make any assumptions about the reader's expectations. When you begin to write a mainstream story set in contemporary times, or a story set in a known historical period, you can safely assume that the reader has some familiarity with the background of the world, and you can build your story around that background.

But as a writer of science fiction, you have no such luxury. Almost by definition, you can set your story anywhere or "anywhen." Even if you set the story in "the future," different readers will have different ideas as to what the future will hold. How, then, can a writer create such a world? What kind of characters can be placed in that world, and how can we possibly write stories that will seem authentic to our readers?

I am a relatively new science-fiction writer, with only two published stories and two more sales to my credit. But I turned a critical eye to my first published story, "TeleAbsence" (*Analog Science Fiction & Fact*, July 1995), to try to discern exactly what in it made it a contender. What I discovered were some nearly universal principles for constructing good science fiction.

"TeleAbsence" is about an inner city child named Tony who sneaks into a telepresence school using a pair of Virtual Reality glasses — or "spex" as I call them — that he's stolen from another student. When Tony puts on the spex, he takes on that student's image and persona as far as the rest of the class is concerned. The school is heavenly compared to the dilapidated school Tony attends in New York City. Students can "jack in" from all over the country and experience a classroom environment that can be manipulated almost by pure thought. Textbooks automatically adjust themselves to a student's reading level, and the teacher can shake up the classroom to simulate an earthquake. Tony is desperate to stay, but knows that it is only a matter of time before the teacher and the other students discover the truth.

From this description, you may already have ascertained what I consider the first and most important step in constructing good science fiction, and that is to start with a good *idea*. Science fiction is a more

idea-based literature than any other form of literature is. The idea for this story came from a comment I heard at a science-fiction convention, that by the year 2000 everyone would have an electronic mail address. I wanted to point out that the recent explosion of the Internet into many people's daily lives did not mean free access to information for everyone. But, the basic concept I was interested in, the Internet, was no longer science fiction; it was real science.

So I extrapolated. Instead of the Internet, I created a system of Virtual Reality schools, which had originally been designed as a solution for violence in schools. Instead, the public money to fund them never materialized, and the technology was adopted by private school systems that could afford them. The analogy was solid, but subtle enough for the reader not to feel beaten over the head with my message.

Once I had my idea, I needed to develop the *characters* and *plot* that worked best for this idea. I tend to feel that plot and characters must always be developed together, and in science fiction they must be thought of in context of the scientific or technological advance your story is about. As a general rule, you can get the characters out of your idea by asking the question, *Whom does this hurt?* No one cares to read about someone whose life is made happy by scientific advances; good science fiction comes from stories of everyday people dealing with technological developments being thrust upon them.

To illustrate the power of asking the above question, let me tell you about my original idea for character and plot. I briefly considered writing about a scientist who has a friend, a teacher, who is killed because of school violence. The scientist then goes on to develop the technology for telepresence schools, and all ends happily. I abandoned this idea after less than a page of writing, not only because it says the opposite of the message I wanted to get across, but because the story of a scientist solving a problem is a very old tradition in science fiction, bordering on cliché. Instead, I asked myself who would be hurt by the technological development of VR schools, and realized that it would be those same students who were supposed to benefit from it. Not only did I have a better story, but I had dramatic irony and the ability to show the reader what these schools would be like — all by asking one simple question about character.

Also, in a good science-fiction story, the characters should always be comfortable in their world, accepting situations that seem fantastic to the reader. The classic example is from the opening sentence of a Robert Heinlein novel: "The door dilated." None of the characters in this world of the future are surprised at the thought of a "dilating" door. Such doors are as commonplace in that world as hinged

swinging doors are in ours. When turning on a television set, we don't react by saying, "My God! Moving pictures and words are coming out of that little box!" Nor should your characters react to the everyday technology of their world.

In the same way, Tony in "TeleAbsence" understands exactly what the telepresence school is all about. Yes, he does have the thrill of discovering new things when he sneaks into the school, since he's never been to one before, but he is familiar with the concept. When the story begins, he is completely cognizant of the existence of the telepresence schools. He has heard about them all his life; they are as ubiquitous in his world as a jet airplane is in ours.

The overriding principle in creating a plot is that it must be based on the science-fictional extrapolation of the story. In true science fiction, the story would fall apart if the science were removed.

There is no way that "TeleAbsence" could be about a child who sneaks into a regular school.

Beginning writers often commit this plot error in writing what is sometimes called a "space western." In such a story, a space patroller (sheriff) rides his spaceship (horse) around the galaxy (town), having shootouts with space pirates (outlaws), firing his laser pistol (six-shooter). *If a story does not need to be science fiction to work, then it is not science fiction and should not be written as such.*

Although the same should not be said about the way one works conflict into a science-fiction story, putting elements of science fiction into it can make the conflict much more powerful. In "TeleAbsence," Tony is scared of being found out, but imagines he is safe because the student whose spex he is using can't jack in without them. Then Tony is confronted in a manner very suitable to science fiction, as is seen in the following:

Tony was interrupted by a sharp buzz, and he looked up. At the front of the classroom appeared an older man with thick grey hair. He headed straight for Tony, a scowl on his face, and Tony looked down again, in fear.

He heard Miss Ellis speak. "Mr. Drummond, what are you doing here?"

The man didn't answer Miss Ellis. He went right up to Tony and said, "Give them back! They're mine!"

Tony shivered. It had been too good to last; now he was going to be found out. This man was obviously Andrew's father, come to get the spex back.

"Mr. Drummond!" said Miss Ellis, with an angry tone that was familiar to Tony. "I would appreciate it if you would not interrupt my class to talk with your son! Can't this wait until later?"

"This is not me — I mean, this is not my son!" Mr. Drummond shouted.

There was silence for a moment. Tony felt Miss Ellis move next to him and Mr. Drummond. "What's going on?" she asked.

"This kid stole my — I mean, my son's spex!"

Tony looked up at Miss Ellis, and saw her smile. Facing Mr. Drummond, she said, "That's you, isn't it, Andrew?"

For the first time since he appeared, "Mr. Drummond" looked uncomfortable. "Ummm, yeah, Miss Ellis. I had to use Dad's spex to jack in. Whoever this is—" he pointed at Tony—"stole my own spex."

"Ah-ha. Andrew, go home. I'll take care of this."

"Ummm. You won't tell my Dad, will you? I don't want him to know that I've been careless."

"No, I won't tell him. Now go. I'll contact you later."

The image of Andrew's father vanished, and Miss Ellis turned to Tony. He was on the verge of tears.

We've seen how to develop the idea, plot, and characters of a science-fiction story, but how do you explain the background of your world enough so that readers will understand and appreciate it? Above all, *avoid the infodump*, an expository lump that does nothing but provide information. When contemporary characters make phone calls or fire guns in a mainstream story, they don't stop to contemplate and explain the technology to the reader. When characters avoid taking the subway or walking through certain neighbourhoods, they don't stop to deliver a treatise on the sociological development of their

hometown.

But what about a science-fiction story? I like to call the technique *painting tiny brushstrokes*. I must admit that I cheated a little, as "TeleAbsence" is set in a classroom, and therefore I can have the teacher explain things to her students; that's a lot more logical than having a 22nd-century police officer delivering an interior monologue on the mechanics of his laser pistol while in hot pursuit. And even in the classroom, I tried to keep such explanations to a minimum. For example, here is an excerpt from a scene where the students are discussing their hometowns in class:

Since he knew Los Alamos better than East Lansing, Brian chose to talk about his original hometown instead of where he was now. Tony barely paid attention as Brian talked about the joys of small town life and then displayed some pictures from a family photo album that he was able to pull up using his computer. Miss Ellis then discussed the arid mountainous area where the town was located, and how there had been a scientific laboratory there until the year 2010.

Janice went next, and again Tony was too scared to pay attention. Janice described San Francisco, and, possibly still thinking about lunch, mentioned the delicious seafood and sourdough bread. Miss Ellis talked about other things, such as the earthquakes that San Francisco had experienced, and the Golden Gate Bridge, which she said had been one of the longest suspension bridges in the country until the earthquake just last year that destroyed it. She showed three dimensional video images of the earthquake, and even made the classroom shake up a bit, so the students could experience a bit of what an earthquake was like.

Notice the details that are merely implied. What kind of future has the closing of a major scientific laboratory? Why hasn't Miss Ellis mentioned an attempt to repair the bridge? These little details can make the world more realistic. Here's another example, later in the story:

The following Monday afternoon, Tony took the subway down to Greenwich Village. He had to show a pass at 96th Street in order to continue under the fence, but Miss Ellis had arranged everything.

That's all that's mentioned. Tony doesn't ruminate over recent history, nor does he explain to the reader why the fence is there and why he needs a pass to go downtown. But the frequent reader of science fiction can draw the appropriate conclusions.

There are two more important points for writing good science fiction. First, make sure you puzzle out all the consequences of the idea you are extrapolating before you sit down to write, or else some astute reader will wonder why, if there is a cure for death in your story, no one seems to mention the overpopulation problem. This is a major problem in TV science fiction such as *Star Trek*: If replicators can create anything people might need, why does there still seem to be a capitalist-based economy? Don't be guilty of this error.

Finally, if you want to write publishable science fiction, try to end on a positive note without losing sight of the story you're trying to tell. I wanted Tony to end up in the telepresence school, which would have been a happy ending, but that wouldn't have made my point. And the obvious, unhappy ending was for him to return to his old school. Instead, Miss Ellis takes him on as a private student in the afternoons. They don't have the advantages that the technology might give them, but the reader feels hopeful for the future. And that's the best way for a science-fiction story to end. ✨

Michael A. Burstein, chosen in 1996 as the Best New Writer by the readers of Science Fiction Weekly, had his first published story, "TeleAbsence," nominated for the Hugo Award. His short fiction appears mostly in Analog, although he has made sales to a few anthologies as well, and is working on a novel. When not writing, he teaches physics and mathematics. He and his wife Nomi live in Brookline, Massachusetts, but are also very fond of Ontario.

SFWA BUSINESS

Canadian Regional Director's Report

by Edo van Belkom

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I'm proud to say that during my time as the Canadian Regional Director of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, a Canadian-born writer (A.E. van Vogt) has received the Grandmaster Award, a Canadian writer (Robert J. Sawyer) has won the Nebula Award for best novel, and a Canadian legend (Judith Merril) was honoured as Author Emerita at the 1997 Nebula Banquet in Kansas City, Missouri.

(Unfortunately, Judy was unable to attend the banquet because of insurance problems relating to a heart condition. She was still the official Author Emerita and was represented at the Nebula ceremony by a long letter read to the attendees. Hopefully, she will have another chance to be so honoured in the near future. But more on that later.)

At first glance, one might think that all of these honours for Canadian writers are merely a coincidence.

Perhaps.

However, I'd like to think that Canadians are finally being justly recognized for their contributions to the field. But if that's the case, then why now?

One reason is obviously the number of Canadians writing and publishing science fiction and fantasy south of the border. More books written by Canadians are being published in the U.S. than ever before, and only the writers themselves can be credited for that accomplishment.

Another reason is the creation of the Canadian Region of SFWA, which came about by the hard work and perseverance of the first Canadian Regional Director, Robert J. Sawyer. He convinced the SFWA Board of Directors to establish the Canadian Region (with full voting privileges) and served as the first Canadian Regional Director.

Since then, Canadian writers of science fiction and fantasy have flourished to the point where they enjoy the best of both worlds. The traditionally American-dominated SF marketplace is now a level playing field for Canadians, and we have all benefited because of it. And while there may be virtually nothing strikingly unique about an SF book written by a Canadian as opposed to one written by an American, Canadian writers still have their own identity and in many cases are able to use that identity to distinguish themselves from the rest of the pack.

As a result, good things have happened in regards to Canadian SF since I have taken over as Canadian Regional Director. And while I'd like to take credit for the accomplishments mentioned above, I can only say that I have enjoyed the benefit of Rob Sawyer's initial hard work.

Having said that, I have undertaken steps to further integrate Canada and make it an active and vibrant part of the North American SF scene. I have volunteered to organize and host the Nebula Awards Banquet in Toronto in 1999.

This event will be the first of three major SF and fantasy-related events to be held in Canada within the next six years: In 2001, the World Fantasy Convention will be held in Montreal, and a Toronto Worldcon bid is currently in the works for 2003.

Sir Wilfred Laurier said in 1904, "The twentieth-century belongs to Canada." If all goes well, the twenty-first century (or at least the first few years of it) will be Canada's, as well. *

MEMBER NEWS

Who's Doing What?

Julie Czerneda sold her first novel, an SF adventure entitled *A Thousand Words for Stranger*, to Sheila Gilbert at DAW Books for October 1997 release. Julie also sold her first SF short story, "First Contact Inc.," to the anthology *First Contact*, edited by Larry Segriff, DAW Books, July 1997.

Trifolium Books Inc., of Toronto, is publishing Julie's guide for teachers who use science fiction in their classrooms, *No Limits: Developing Scientific Literacy Using Science Fiction*, this year. The book is based on workshops Julie has given over the years in high schools. She will be presenting excerpts from *No Limits* at the 1997 Science Teachers' Association of Ontario conference this November in Toronto. Julie also edited the companion student anthology, *Packing Fraction and Other Tales of Science and Imagination*, which contains original short SF stories by Robert J. Sawyer, Jan Stirling, Josepha Sherman, Julie Czerneda, and Charles Sheffield, as well as several poems by Carolyn Clink. Julie will be a guest at Contradiction, October 3-5, 1997, Niagara Falls, New York.

Dave Duncan of Calgary just approved the page proofs of *Future Indefinite: Round Three of the Great Game*, which will be published in August by Avon. Also coming in August: the mass-market edition of *Present Tense*.

The UK edition of *Past Imperative* (Round One) was published in February by Corgi (Transworld) and appeared as number six on the Dillon SF bestseller list even before *SFX Magazine* hailed it as "the best fantasy novel of the decade."

Dave has turned *A Prize for Achilles* in to Mark James at Avon; it's a historical novel which will be published under a pseudonym.

The first volume of Dave's next fantasy series, *The King's Blades*, has been titled *The Gilded Chain*, and is scheduled for October 1998.

Demon Rider, second in the *Years of Longdirk* series by pseudonymous member Ken Hood, will be published by HarperPrism in December. Hood is currently working on Book Three, tentatively entitled *Demon Lover*.

The mass-market paperback of *Shadow of Ashland* by Terence M. Green is now out from Forge, with a whopping 270,000-copy first printing. Terry's *Blue Limbo*, a sequel to 1988's *Barking Dogs*, was published by Tor in February 1997.

Ann Marston of Calgary will be attending ConVersion in Calgary in July. All three books of her *The Rune Blade Trilogy* (*Kingmaker's Sword*, *The Western King* and *Broken Blade*), published by HarperPrism, will be getting a second printing.

B.C. writer Sally McBride's "There is a Violence" was the lead story in *Tesseract 5*, and her "Hello Jane, Goodbye" is in *Northern Frights 4*.

Derryl Murphy of Edmonton had one short story published in 1996: "Day's Hunt" in the fifth issue of *TransVersions*. Eliot Fintushel's review of the story in *Tangent 15* said "... the writing is interesting and rich. Murphy has a keen, underplayed sense of humour ... (and) a fecund imagination, surely ... Kudos to Murphy!"

Nineteen Ninety-Seven is turning out to be a much busier year for Derryl. His critically acclaimed short story "The History of Photography" was reprinted as "His Story of Photography" in *Photo Life*, a gig that paid well but that resulted in nonsensical hackwork by the editors and many letters to the magazine both extremely negative and positive. The reactions were definitely a high water mark in Derryl's career. "Canadaland" appeared in the Spring '97 *On Spec*, and Derryl did a reading at the issue's launch in Edmonton. The next issue of *On Spec* will see his story "Frail Orbits," and then the end of the year will

see not one but two printings of his story "What Goes Around," the first in *Tesseracts 6* and the second in a time-travel anthology from Carroll & Graf. A third reprint due this year is his Aurora-nominated story "Body Solar" in the small-press US anthology *Solar*.

In addition Derryl also has been writing some short-fiction reviews for *Tangent* and has done some reviews for *The New York Review of Science Fiction*. He will be a guest at both Can-Con in Ottawa and ConVersion in Calgary.

John Park of Ottawa gave a reading/talk to the Upper Valley Writers' Club in Pembroke on (appropriately) April 1.

Vancouver's **Spider Robinson** sold (and is currently working on) a new novel, *The Free Lunch*, for Tor Books for hardcover and paperback publication.

Meanwhile Robinson's backlist is getting back into print. He will have three titles released in September, two from Tor and one from Baen. Tor will be publishing *The Callahan Chronicles*, an omnibus of the first three books in the Callahan's Place series (*Callahan's Crosstime Saloon*, *Time Travelers Strictly Cash*, and *Callahan's Secret*). Also from Tor is *Callahan's Legacy*, the paperback edition of the latest installment of the adventures of Jake Stonebender and his friends. And finally, *The Star Dancers* by Spider and Jeanne Robinson, is a combined reissue of the first two books in the Stardance Saga: *Stardance* and *Starseed*.

Callahan's Crosstime Saloon, a CD-ROM computer game designed by Josh Mandel, will be released by Legend Entertainment/Take Two in Spring 1997. At the designer's request, the game's soundtrack includes four songs written and performed by Spider, accompanied by a studio full of pro musicians led by the legendary guitarist Amos Garrett (of "Midnight At The Oasis" fame).

Upcoming appearances for Spider and Jeanne include: June 20-22 — Smithers Folk Festival, Smithers, BC (performer and part-time MC); July 3-6 — (with Jeanne) Westercon 50, Seattle WA (Music Guests of Honour); August 7-10 — Festival of the Written Arts, Sechelt, BC; October 10-12 — (with Jeanne); NonCon XX, Lethbridge AB (GoHs); Oct 22-26 — (with Jeanne) Vancouver International Writers Festival, Vancouver, BC (10th anniversary; theme: Science Fiction & Fantasy); November 27-30 — (with Jeanne) Darkover Grand Council, Baltimore-area, MD (GoHs).

In July 1997, Toronto's **Michelle Sagara** will have her third title published by DAW: *The Broken Crown*, under the name Michelle West. Michelle also sold the third book in the trilogy (it was a duology, but the first book was too damned long to fit into a single volume — a fact which will be borne out by the 768 pages of *Crown*), as yet untitled, in February, also to DAW.

Michelle has written a few short stories for Martin H. Greenberg's DAW anthologies: "The Vision of Men" for *Fortune Tellers*; "By the Work, One Knows" for *Zodiac Fantastic*; "Kin" for *Olympus*; and "Under the Skin" for *Elf Fantastic 2*.

Her first column for new *Fantasy and Science Fiction* editor Gordon Van Gelder should be delivered shortly. "It's the first one that won't have the more restrictive mandate and title of 'Guilty Pleasures,'" says Michelle, "and I'm curious to see what direction he nudges things in."

Starplex by **Robert J. Sawyer** of Thornhill, Ontario, was the only novel to be nominated for both the Hugo and the Nebula awards this year. His *Frameshift* came out in May in hardcover from Tor, and his *Illegal Alien* will be out in hardcover in December from Ace.

In May, Rob turned in his tenth novel, *Factoring Humanity*, to David G. Hartwell at Tor. Rob's next short story is "The Hand You're Dealt" in *Free Space*, edited by Brad Linaweaver and Edward E. Kramer (Tor, July). Rob and his wife Carolyn Clink edited the anthology *Tesseracts 6*, the first volume in the series to contain all-original material (no reprints). Rob and William Gibson read together at the Harbourfront International Festival of Authors in October 1996, and he and Nancy Kress are teaching a week-long SF writing course in July 1997 at the State University of New York's Brockport Campus.

At Christmas time, Calgary's **Alison Sinclair** received word via Millennium/Orion that her second novel, *Blueheart*, had sold to HarperPrism (US). She's just signed with Millennium/Orion for a third novel, also SF, with the working title *Cavalcade*. She will be taking leave from her position at the University of Calgary in June in order to finish the novel and assorted other projects and will return as a full-time medical student next April.

"The Piano Player Has No Fingers" by Brampton's **Edo van Belkom**, from *Palace Corbie 7*, was nominated for the Arthur Ellis Award by the Crime Writers of Canada for Best Short Story of the Year. Other recent publications include "Rat Food" (co-written with David Nickle) in the Spring 1997 issue of *On Spec*, and "The October Crisis" (a Canadian alternate history) in *Alternate Tyrants*.

Edo taught a creative-writing course at Sheridan College in Mississauga, continues teaching short-story writing for the Peel Board of Education's Continuing Education Program, and will be teaching story writing at the Peel Summer Academy (for gifted students) in July.

In May he was Toastmaster at the World Horror Convention in Niagara Falls, New York, and in October he will be Author Guest of Honour at Concinnity '97 in Ottawa. Other convention appearances include Ad Astra in Toronto and Contradiction in Niagara Falls.

Edo's non-fiction book of interviews *Northern Dreamers* is nearing completion and will be published in Spring 1998 by Quarry Press of Kingston, Ontario.

Recent short-story sales include: "Letting Go" to *Brothers of the Night*; "Roadkill" to *North of Infinity* (a story which recently appeared in *Parsec*); "Icebridge" to *RPM for Truckers* (a story which originally appears in *Northern Frights 4*); "Roadside Desistance" to the World Horror Convention program book; and "Hockey's Night in Canada" to *Arrowdreams*.

Toronto writer **Andrew Weiner**'s "The Purple Pill" appeared in the February 1996 issue of *F&SF*. His story "Messenger" was reprinted in *Tesseracts 5* and his "The Map" was reprinted in the anthology *Bloody York*. He sold "Bootlegger" to *Tesseracts 6*. He also sold a collection of short stories entitled *Envahisseurs! [Invaders!]* to the French publisher Orion Editions; the stories will be translated by A.F. Ruaud. The book will be out in October 1997. *

AWARDS NEWS

Aurora Nominees

Here are the nominees for the 1997 Aurora Awards in the English-language fiction categories. Three of the short-fiction nominees are by SFWA members (Bedwell-Grime, Sawyer, and van Belkom); copies of their stories are included with this issue of *Alouette*.

Best Long-Form Work in English (1995-96)

Shadow of Ashland, Terence M. Green (Forge, January 1996)
No Quarter, Tanya Huff (DAW, April 1996)
Child of the Night, Nancy Kilpatrick (Raven, 1996)
Starplex, Robert J. Sawyer (Ace, October 1996; serialized in *Analog*, July through October 1996)
Resurrection Man, Sean Stewart (Ace, 1995)

Best Short-Form Work in English

"In Your Dreams," Stephanie Bedwell-Grime (*Parsec* Apr-May 1996)
 "Peking Man," Robert J. Sawyer (*Dark Destiny III: Children of Dracula*, White Wolf, October 1996)
 "Face Dances," Rebecca M. Senese (*On Spec*, Vol. 8, No. 2)
 "Memory Games," Dale L. Sproule (*Tesseracts 5*)
 "The Piano Player Has No Fingers," Edo van Belkom (*Palace Corbie 7: The Piano Player has No Fingers*, Merrimack Books)
 "Bethlehem," Peter Watts (*Tesseracts 5*) *

ON WRITING

Secret Weapons of Science

by Robert J. Sawyer

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Okay — I admit it. I've got an arts degree. There, the cat's out of the bag: despite the cosmology and relativity and paleontology and genetics in my novels, I haven't taken a science course since high school.

But, hey, I'm not alone in that among practitioners of hard SF. Look at Fred Pohl, who writes about artificial intelligence and black holes and quantum theory. He never even graduated from high school. And, yeah, sure, Kim Stanley Robinson, who is detailing the terraforming of our neighbouring world in his *Red Mars* trilogy, is indeed *Doctor* Robinson — but his Ph.D. is in (gasp!) English literature.

So how do we non-scientist SF writers keep up with science? Well, I can't speak for everyone, but I rely on six secret weapons.

First, and most important, there's *Science News: The Weekly Newsmagazine of Science*. You can't get it on any newsstand (although many libraries carry it). I've been a subscriber for thirteen years now, and I credit it with fully half of the science in my novels and short stories.

Science News is published weekly, and each issue is just sixteen pages long — you can read the whole thing over one leisurely lunch. Aimed at the intelligent lay person, it contains summaries of research papers appearing in *Nature*, *Science*, *Cell*, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *Physical Review Letters*, *The New England Journal of Medicine*, and hundreds more, as well as reports from all the major scientific conferences in Canada and the United States, plus original feature articles on topics ranging from quarks to the greenhouse effect to Neanderthal fossils to junk DNA. There is simply no better source for keeping up to date.

(Of course, the key is to actually make use of the material. Both Michael Crichton and I read the same little piece in *Science News* years ago about the possibility of cloning dinosaurs from blood preserved in the bellies of mosquitoes trapped in amber. Me, I said "Neat!" and turned the page; Crichton went off and made a few million from the idea.)

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My second secret weapon: *Time* magazine. Yup, that's right: *Time*. Each year, a few issues will have science cover stories. Buy them — they're pure gold. You won't find better introductions to scientific topics anywhere. Recent examples: *The Chemistry of Love* (February 15, 1993); *The Truth About Dinosaurs* (April 26, 1993); *How Life Began* (October 11, 1993); *Genetics: The Future is Now* (January 17, 1994); *How Humanity Began* (March 14, 1994); *When Did the Universe Begin?* (March 6, 1995); and *In Search of the Mind* (July 31, 1995). Not only will each one suggest many story ideas (my eighth novel, *Frameshift* [Tor, May 1997], owes a lot to the two 1994 issues I mention above), but they will also give you all the background and vocabulary you need to write knowledgeably about the sciences in question.

In fact, I find that magazine articles tend to be better than books for giving me what I need quickly and efficiently. And that brings me to secret weapon number three: Magazine Database Plus on the CompuServe Information Service, the world's oldest commercial computer network.

MDP contains the full text of over two hundred general-interest and specialty publications, many going all the way back to 1986. Among the titles of obvious use to SF writers are *Astronomy*, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, *Discover*, *Omni*, *Popular Science*, *Psychology Today*, *Scientific American*, *Sky & Telescope*, and, yes, good old *Science News* and *Time*.

In 1994, when I was writing my novel *Starplex*, I needed to learn about "dark matter" — that mysterious, invisible substance that we know, because of its gravitational effects, constitutes ninety percent of our universe. Well, in less than a minute, MDP provided me with sixty-nine citations of articles on that topic, ranging from lay discussion in the newsmagazines *The Economist* and *US News and World Report* to twenty-one articles in — of course — *Science News*. There's no charge beyond normal CompuServe connect-time for generating such a bibliography. You can then either head off to your local library and dig up the articles there for free, or you can download the full text of any that interest you for US\$1.50 a pop. To access Magazine Database Plus, type GO MDP at any CompuServe prompt.

My fourth secret weapon is being a couch potato. When you get tired of staring at your computer monitor, go look at your TV screen. The Learning Channel has several truly excellent science series that they repeat *ad infinitum* (*PaleoWorld* and *The Practical Guide to the Universe* are tremendous; *Amazing Space* isn't quite as good).

My fifth secret weapon is Richard Morris. Never heard of him? Well, he writes science-popularization books. He's not as famous as Carl Sagan or David Suzuki or Stephen Jay Gould, but he's better than all three of them combined. His slim, completely accessible books *Cosmic Questions: Galactic Halos, Cold Dark Matter, and the End of Time* (Wiley, New York, 1993) and *The Edges of Science: Crossing the Boundary from Physics to Metaphysics* (Prentice Hall, New York, 1990) will suggest enough story ideas to keep any hard-SF writer going for a decade or two.

Still, once you've read all the magazines and books, and watched Tom Selleck tell you about cosmic strings, nothing beats talking to a real scientist. Secret weapon number six is the knowledge that many scientists are SF fans. I've never had any scientist I approached refuse to help me. If you don't know any scientists personally, call up the public-relations office of your local university, museum, or science centre and let them find someone who you can talk to.

And when you do have your story or novel finished, ask the scientist if he or she will read it over to check for errors. I'd never met Dr. Robert W. Bussard (inventor of the Bussard ramjet starship) or Dr. Dale A. Russell (curator of dinosaurs at the Canadian Museum of Nature) when I asked them to look at the manuscripts for my novels *Golden Fleece* (which features one of Bussard's ramjets) or *End of an Era* (which is about dinosaurs), but both instantly agreed and provided invaluable feedback. Of course, when your story or book does see print, do be sure to send a free autographed copy to anyone who helped you out. But that's not a secret weapon . . . it's just the golden rule. *

Rob's "On Writing" column appears in each issue of *On Spec: The Canadian Magazine of Speculative Writing*. The text of older columns is available on Rob's World Wide Web home page at: <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/sawyer>

Column titles to date:

- "Great Beginnings," Spring 1995
- "Constructing Characters," Summer 1995
- "Secret Weapons of Science," Fall 1995
- "Show, Don't Tell," Winter 1995
- "Heinlein's Rules," Spring 1996
- "Seek and Destroy," Summer 1996
- "Two Heads Aren't Better Than One," Fall 1996
- "Speaking of Dialog," Winter 1996
- "Cover Your ASCII," Spring 1997

MEMBER INTERVIEW

Michael Coneyby *Edo van Belkom*Copyright © 1997 by *Edo van Belkom*Forthcoming in *Edo's* collection *Northern Dreamers* from *Mosaic Press*

Edo van Belkom: You've lived in Canada for more than 20 years and almost all of your work has been published while you've lived in Canada, but I still think there's a strong perception of you as being a British writer. Has that been the case?

Michael Coney: I've been asked that question many times and I still don't know the answer; after all, I've written enough short stories set in Canada and the States. It must be something about the style. Unless I'm writing in the present day I try to avoid current North American slang or issues because of their inappropriateness for a tale set in the future. Maybe this strips my style down to a timeless, perhaps mildly pedantic Standard English which people deem to be British. This doesn't apply to my humorous novels, such as *Fang, the Gnome* and *King of the Sceptre'd Isle*, where I made no pretense of authenticity and instead had fun with wild anachronisms. And my current crop of humorous short stories such as "Werewolves in Sheep's Clothing," although using both British and American idioms, are set in Southwest England.

On the other hand, the answers may lie in my inability to write Canadian stories as such. The truth is: I don't really know what a Canadian story is. When I wrote a series of stories for *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* set on Vancouver Island I thought they were Canadian. But no: I was told they were British stories set in Canada. Currently I have a story in *Tesseracts 5* called "Belinda's Mother." It has snow, Indians, possibly even caribou, and it was deliberately written to sound Canadian. We'll see what people think of that.

But then I've just completed a novel titled *I Remember Phallahaxi*. It's set in Southwest England, thinly disguised as an alien world, and why not? It's the story that counts, and current political boundaries and cultures have nothing to do with science fiction, to my mind.

van Belkom: Your work seems to have had a particularly receptive audience in the UK. Do you have any explanation for that, other than you being born and raised there?

Coney: Yes, my stuff goes over well in the UK, but my biggest market has always been France. I don't think it has anything to do with my place of birth. It's simply that I established a name in those countries before I was published in North America — and when I was published in the States, I was lost among a few hundred other SF writers.

van Belkom: You've said that you don't do more than a brief two-page outline of your novels before you begin. Is the process for short stories the same, and have you ever written yourself into a corner, truly not knowing what happens next, or how to get your characters out of a certain predicament?

Coney: I've prepared a much more extensive outline for my last few novels. The difference is the computer. I used to find the typewriter incredibly tedious, so I was reluctant to alter anything once it was down on paper. And above all, I couldn't be bothered to type out any kind of extensive synopsis. Now, with word processing, I can write my outline, expand it without having to retype, and shuffle the events and characters around until I've got them the way I want them. Large sections of the synopsis eventually become part of the story itself, without having to key it all in again. I'd have given up writing long

ago if the PC hadn't been invented.

I always construct the ending of a novel or short story first. Since the characters are always progressing toward this ending, they don't get boxed in. Take "Werewolves" as an example. I already knew the characters; I'd used them before. The story's climax would contain a rationale for the werewolves and a chase scene. Obviously that had to be written first; if it didn't work, then the whole story would be a dud. So naturally I planned out the climax, then went back and wrote the beginning and the middle. It all comes of reading a lot of detective stories.

van Belkom: So you tend to equate writing to an exploration or an adventure. Has that always been the case?

Coney: Yes, it has, particularly with my earlier two-page outlines. Even now, as the outline is expanding into a novel, I find myself contemplating adventurous refinements along the way to entertain the reader. *I Remember Phallahaxi* has a gigantic mining machine bursting from a cliff face and devastating the primitive village on the beach below. Exciting stuff, but how to make it plausible, and necessary to the plot? Well, I'd planned to kill off a character and to show the grief of his son, and to have the hero discover something about them both. All I needed was the setting. And there it was. Rather than have the guy die in bed with black-clad mourners grouped around, boring as hell, why not make it an action scene? The mining machine was due to run amok anyway; I was getting tired of it.

But I never know *all* that is going to happen when I sit down to write the novel. Small refinements and additions occur to me along the way, and I keep a note of these to incorporate in the final version; I'm sure most writers do the same. It all comes in the plotting: the shuffling around of characters and their motivations, and the potential for excitement in the world you've built.

van Belkom: Have you tried your hand at other genres besides, SF and fantasy? Mystery or romance, perhaps?

Coney: I've written a mystery novel without finding a publisher. I don't blame the publishers for that; maybe it was a lousy story. I had a story in the May 1996 *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* called "Catnap." It's dark humour with a new twist on an old problem; just a one-off thing. My SF stories always have a strong mystery element, so if I removed the SF content from my planning stage I'd feel there was something missing.

Likewise romance: I wrote a Harlequin-style novel but they told me my heroine was "too tough." Well, I thought they wanted them tough these days; they always say so in their instructions. Where the novel really failed was in the use of the familiar Harlequin trigger phrases: the strong square chins and the fluttering hearts. I'd decided to write the real story first and sprinkle all that stuff on later, like garnish. But I didn't sprinkle enough; I felt it was wrecking the story and insulting the readers' intelligence. And Harlequin spotted me for a faker, and they were right.

I once wrote a romantic short story about the jealous reaction of a wife to a husband's memory of an old flame. The point of the story was that the wife had nothing to be jealous of; it was simply a beautiful memory, irrelevant to her husband's present situation. Three women's magazines rejected it with cruel abandon. I loved that story because it had happened to me in real life. So I rewrote it, introducing an SF element. It took on a new dimension which — dare I say it? — convinced me of the richness of SF's potential compared with any other genre — as if I needed convincing. *F&SF* bought the story, called "Sophie's Spyglass."

van Belkom: What was it about SF that made you want to write it, and how did you get started?

Coney: I started writing SF because it was what I read, back then. So far back, in fact, that I didn't know it *was* SF. I only knew that my favourite Conan Doyle story was "The Lost World," and I enjoyed Rider Haggard and H. G. Wells, and so on. They didn't call those

books SF, so how was I to know? Much later I was subscribing to the British magazine *New Worlds*, at the time of the New Wave. One month they sent a questionnaire asking readers what they thought of the stories. I wrote in to say I hated the stories — those that I could understand at all — and what had happened to good old SF like Wyndham and Asimov wrote, and who was this J. G. Ballard anyway? And I told them I could do better myself.

Having said that, I gave it a try. I dashed off garbage for two years, then sold a story. It was no less garbage than the others, but it proved to me that *it could be done*. I took a great deal more care with my writing after that, and sold most of what I wrote.

van Belkom: In 1986, you published a story in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* called “Memories of Gwyneth” under the name Jennifer Black. Why the pseudonym?

Coney: Jennifer Black never wrote anything else. I was experimenting with different points of view in my characters at the time, and it occurred to me to try a different writer’s point of view. So I tried to write from a woman’s point of view — not an easy thing for me because I’m not sure how it differs from a man’s, except when it comes to buying clothes. When I’d finished the story I somehow shrank from putting my name on it. And when “Memories of Gwyneth” appeared in *F&SF*, I challenged a friend — who knows my writing almost better than I do — to identify my story in that issue. She failed after several attempts.

But that didn’t mean the story read as though it was written by a woman. It means, I suppose, that it read as though it wasn’t written by me.

van Belkom: You managed a pub in England and a hotel in Antigua. How did this experience help or hinder your early writing efforts?

Coney: Running a pub is not conducive to writing. There’s too much to do and too much to worry about. In our days at the Maltster’s Arms, profit margins were low and we could only afford assistance on Friday and Saturday nights. All kind of weird things happen when you run a village pub, but before you’ve had time to incorporate them in a story, the next crisis looms.

The Antigua hotel was different. We had outside funding and an efficient staff. I wrote several novels and short stories in our three years there.

van Belkom: When you left Antigua, you could have settled anywhere in the world. Why Canada? Why British Columbia?

Coney: A fellow can go crazy living on an island only twenty-four miles across. There’s no intellectual or literary stimulation. By the time my contract with the owners was up, I was desperate to get away. But I didn’t want to go back to England; it was to escape the problems of the Old Country that we’d gone to Antigua.

A lot of the hotel guests were Canadian, and they painted a glowing picture of their homeland. We’d already visited Toronto and the Muskoka area a couple of times — in the winter, to get away from the endless goddamned sunshine and palm-fringed beaches. So when the time came, Canada seemed to be the place to try next.

We stayed with friends in New Jersey and Vermont, made our way to Toronto, then flew west because we figured we’d seen enough of the east, pleasant though it was. We bought a car and trailer in Calgary, drove over the Rockies and down through B.C. to Vancouver, where we went through the immigration process. It was quite simple in those days. It was raining in Vancouver as usual, so we took the ferry to Victoria, and stayed.

That’s why we’re here. There was no conscious decision. It was just the end of the road, literally.

van Belkom: Do you prefer writing novels to short stories, and do you have a preference between SF and fantasy?

Coney: For many years I preferred writing novels because of the

broader canvas. Then a couple of years ago I started writing short stories again because I had this sudden fear that I’d lost the knack. But they sold well, and I enjoyed writing them. I’ve even managed to write a couple of short stories to order, something I’d always refused to do before. Now, with confidence regained, I have no particular preference.

I much prefer SF to fantasy. I find it almost impossible to write fantasy because, for me, everything must have a rational explanation. Even my two Arthurian novels were science fiction: I invented scientific explanations — albeit far-fetched — for every fantastic aspect of the myths. I have to do that, otherwise I’d be disbelieving my own stories while in the throes of writing them.

I suspect that real fantasy writers believe in God, or at the very least, acupuncture. Nothing wrong with that, but it’s not for me.

van Belkom: Your books have some of the most interesting titles in SF. *Friends Come in Boxes* and *The Jaws That Bite*, *The Claws That Catch* are classics. Have you had trouble getting your titles into print, and, if so, what are some of the more outrageous titles that didn’t make it?

Coney: The titles you mention were dreamed up by Don Wollheim. He rejected my own titles every single time. And he was right of course. Except that his original title for my *Girl with a Symphony in her Fingers* (the title used in England) was *The Jaws that Bite, the Claws that SNATCH*. It took a frantic call from me to get it corrected just before it went to print and branded me forever as a Philistine. I think Don was thinking of the Bandersnatch.

Since Don dropped me, my titles went into decline — because subsequent publishers always used my original titles. I rather liked *The Celestial Steam Locomotive* and *Cat Karina*, and possibly *Fang, the Gnome*, but as for the others . . . well, I could have done with some suggestions from dear old Don.

van Belkom: Several years ago you changed your name from Michael G. Coney to Michael Greatrex Coney. First of all, is that really what the G. stands for? And second, why the change?

Coney: My full name is Michael Greatrex Coney, to my everlasting shame. It’s worse for my sister, who also bears that wretched middle name that caused me so much trouble at school. It’s not easy to assure virginal schoolgirls of your honourable intentions when the boys are yelling “Sexy Rex” after you.

My writing name is Michael Coney; the initial G. should not be there. I don’t know how it started, but it keeps creeping onto book covers and unbalancing the composition. I’ve learned to make it a big issue when publishers get into cover design.

Okay, so I used Greatrex for *Fang* and *King*. That was because I saw them as a completely different kind of book from my usual SF, and I wanted to distinguish them in some way. Added to which, Greatrex struck me as the kind of name an Arthurian writer might have. So, just the once. Never again.

van Belkom: You’ve established your own publishing company, Porthole Press. What was the reason for that, and what can you say about the experience of publishing in Canada?

Coney: Porthole Press was initially formed for the publication of my local boat-history book, *Forest Ranger, Ahoy!*, over which I wanted full control. The company went on to publish a number of local-history and child-safety books until I sold it in 1995. What can I say about it all? Well, it was fun for ten years, and I enjoyed designing and putting other people’s books together. Distribution was the big problem; it always is for small outfits. Financially, I did no more than okay; as with writing, there are much easier ways of making money. The company never had the kind of regular publishing schedule to qualify for government grants; I just published books when something came up that interested me. Now that the company is sold, I feel some minor regret but mostly relief. It was an interesting experience, like the pub and the hotel — but it was time to move on. *

MEMBER NEWS

On Winning the Nebula Award

by Robert J. Sawyer

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My life changed forever on Saturday, April 27, 1996, at 10:15 in the evening. That's the moment at which Sheila Finch, the designated presenter of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America's Nebula Award for Best Novel of 1995, opened the envelope and announced, "And the winner is *The Terminal Experiment* by Robert J. Sawyer."

Frankly, I was stunned to win the "Academy Award" of SF. When my name was called, I was sitting at the *Analog* table in the ballroom aboard the HMS *Queen Mary*, moored off Long Beach, California. We'd sat through a surprisingly good banquet (choice of filet mignon, swordfish, or pasta primavera), then a long, boring speech by a NASA scientist (you could tell it was boring because even at the *Analog* table, where you'd expect to find people particularly interested in the space program, one by one each person gave up listening and instead turned to reading the program book), and we'd applauded the winners of the short story, novelette, and novella Nebula Awards (Esther Friesner, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Elizabeth Hand, respectively). Everything was being covered by a TV crew from The Sci-Fi Channel.

On my right was my wife, Carolyn Clink; on my left, Dr. Stanley Schmidt, the editor of *Analog*. Stan, who had serialized *The Terminal Experiment* before its book publication, grabbed my hand and started pumping furiously. "Let me be the first to congratulate you!" Carolyn had to wait her turn . . .

I'd honestly thought I was going to lose. In many ways, the odds were stacked against me. *The Terminal Experiment*, which I'd written on spec without a contract, had turned out to be a very difficult sell: many publishers were nervous about its discussion of the abortion issue (for all its creative virtues, SF in the United States is a business, and books have to sell in the Bible Belt as well as in the North).

The Terminal Experiment ended up as a May 1995 mass-market paperback original from HarperPrism, the only American publisher willing to do the book as I had written it. All the other Nebula nominees that year were hardcovers, a fact that gave them greater apparent prestige (I had turned down a hardcover offer from another publisher that had been contingent on my removing the discussion of abortion from my book, something I refused to do). Even worse: HarperPrism USA had sent out no advance galleys or review copies of *The Terminal Experiment*, so the book, although it had been getting rave reviews in Canada, had received no reviews at all in the United States, even in the SF press.

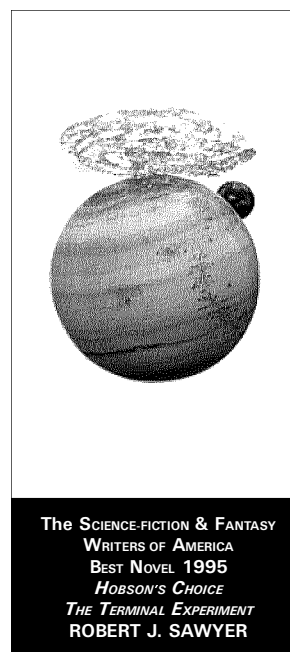
Of the six finalists, four were published by Tor Books — and, in an effort to garner Nebula votes, Tor had sent free copies of all four titles to every one of the 900 active members of SFWA. The other two nominated books — mine, and Walter Jon Williams's *Metropolitan* — were both published by HarperPrism. HarperPrism cooperated with Walter's agent in sending out copies of his hardcover novel to voters. I, on the other hand, was no longer a HarperPrism author, and they were doing nothing whatsoever to enhance my chances of winning.

In previous years, *Analog* had sent voters copies of issues containing nominated stories, including serials. This year, though, in a cost-cutting move, *Analog*'s publisher decided not to send out the issues containing serial installments, meaning I was the only nominee to have no publisher-sponsored mailing of his novel. When I discovered this, on January 31, 1996, I told my wife my chances of winning had dropped to zero. This was a view widely shared: according to one person who was sitting at Tor's table during the Nebula banquet, Tor's

staff felt sure one of their four titles was bound to be the winner.

Still, in retrospect, perhaps I *should* have expected to win. Even without publisher support, there had been unprecedented grassroots enthusiasm for *The Terminal Experiment*. As most of you know, getting nominated for a Nebula is a two-stage process. First, you have to get on the Preliminary Ballot by receiving at least ten signed, public recommendations from other writers. Then all the works on the Preliminary Ballot (for 1995, it contained 22 novels) are voted on by the entire SFWA membership, and the top five, plus one additional work chosen by a jury, become the final nominees, which again are voted on by the whole membership.

Well, prior to 1995, the all-time record for number of Nebula recommendations was 27 (which, as it happens, was set by my 1994 novel *End of an Era*). But *The Terminal Experiment* just kept getting more and more recommendations as the year went on. Indeed, it broke SFWA's database when it exceeded forty, the maximum number that could be recorded; the actual tally, I'm told, was considerably higher. My next closest competitor on the Preliminary Ballot had nineteen recommendations, less than half what I did.



But having large numbers of recommendations usually doesn't correlate with being the winner, or even getting on the Final Ballot. The work with nineteen recommendations — Catherine Asaro's *Primary Inversion* — didn't make it to the Final Ballot; in its year, *End of an Era* didn't make it, either. Indeed, of the other books that did make it to the Final Ballot for 1995, the number of recommendations only ranged from ten (the minimum required) to fifteen.

The final nominees were announced online in the official SFWA area on GENie on the morning of February 21, 1996. Final Ballots were mailed out immediately thereafter, and were due back on April 3. Voter turnout was the highest percentage this decade, with 344 out of 930 Final Ballots returned. No one except the award administrators knew in advance who the winners were; Carolyn and I flew out to California (at our own expense), hoping for the best.

And then my name was called. Once Stan Schmidt released my hand, I kissed my wife and made my way up to the podium to accept the award: *The Terminal Experiment* had just become the thirty-second book ever to win a Nebula Award, and I was the twenty-sixth author in history (and only the second Canadian resident) to take home a Best Novel Nebula. (Orson Scott Card, Arthur C. Clarke, and Samuel R. Delany have each won two Best Novel Nebulas, and Ursula K. Le Guin has won three, which is why there are more award-winning books than there are award-winning authors.)

I began my speech, which was probably too long, by quipping that

the only man in the room happier than me was David Hartwell of Tor Books, because we'd just concluded a new two-book hardcover deal three days earlier, back when my price was lower.

I then wanted to acknowledge the other nominees; it had, after all, been a real honour just to be mentioned in the same breath as such fine writers. But on my little crib sheet I'd only written down their first names: Nancy, Gene, Walter, John, and Paul. I filled in the last names as I spoke: "Nancy Kress, Gene Wolfe, Walter Jon Williams—" and then I froze. I looked at the scrawled names "John" and "Paul" and was only able to think of "George" and "Ringo." I recovered after a moment — "John Barnes and Paul Park" — and went on to thank editors Stanley Schmidt at *Analog* and John Silber-sack and Christopher Schelling at HarperPrism, and agent Richard Curtis. I then commented that although the room was filled with authors, agents, and editors, the hardest job in all of publishing is being the spouse of a writer (an observation that got a big round of applause), and so I closed by thanking my wife, Carolyn Clink.

My Nebula trophy is a surprisingly heavy block of Lucite nine inches tall, four inches wide, and four inches deep (like Arthur C. Clarke's monolith, the ratio of its width to its height is two-squared to three-squared). Embedded in the Lucite is a swirling galaxy of glitter and two polished spherical stones. One of the stones — a large banded agate — looks like a Jovian planet, and the other, smaller stone, orbits it like a too-close moon, reminiscent of the setting of my novel *Far-Seer*. William Rotsler, the artist who hand-crafts the Nebula trophies each year is famous for making them appropriate for the recipients (the previous year's best-novel trophy, which went to Greg Bear for *Moving Mars*, contained a polished sphere of red sandstone).

The base of the trophy is black, and says in gold letters:

The Science-fiction & Fantasy
Writers of America
Best Novel 1995
Hobson's Choice
The Terminal Experiment
ROBERT J. SAWYER

Hobson's Choice is the title under which *Analog* serialized the novel; that this alternative (and, I think, much better) title was included pleased both Stanley Schmidt and me greatly. Nowhere on the trophy does it actually say "Nebula Award" — a fact that prompted writer David Nickle to quip "What are you trying to pull, Rob?" when he first saw it.

Although the award carries no cash prize, I soon discovered that many foreign publishers immediately snap up Nebula-winning novels: within weeks, *The Terminal Experiment* had sold to France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Japan, Poland, Russia, and Spain (and, as one small example of the value of a Nebula, *The Terminal Experiment* sold to Japan for an advance US\$12,000 greater than what my last book got in that country). And my agent says the win will doubtless substantially increase my advance on the next book I sell in the States.

More than that, though, it means, as one of my editors observed, that *The Terminal Experiment*, a book I care about very much, will now likely be in print forever. Winning the Nebula is the biggest thing that's ever happened to me professionally, and I'm grateful beyond words to all the writers who rallied around my book. *

AWARDS

What's Wrong with the Aurora Awards?

by Robert J. Sawyer

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The Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Awards ("the Auroras") have existed in one form or another since 1980. They have become a valuable, internationally recognized way of raising the profile of Canadian speculative fiction.

No SFWAN in his or her right mind would suggest tinkering with the Nebula Award rules again, but at last year's CanVention, ConVersion XIII in Calgary (where the Auroras were presented), a bunch of writers got to talking about what was wrong with the Aurora Awards.

I've been mulling over the issues since then; here's my take on what's wrong with the Auroras, and how they could be fixed. Of course, neither SFWA nor SF Canada has any role in the administration of the Auroras — so chalk what follows up as random musings on the topic. Still, I hope it provides some food for thought.

THE PHYSICAL TROPHY

The design of the Aurora Award is distinctive, standardized, attractive, and appropriate. The only real complaint ever raised about it is that the trophies take up physical space, which becomes a problem when one person has six or more of them. However, that awards go repeatedly to the same people in certain categories is surely indicative of a problem with those categories and not with the trophies themselves. I believe the pro community should wholeheartedly endorse the current Aurora trophy design.

THE FAN AURORA AWARDS

Periodically, there have been suggestions from members of the pro community that the fan Aurora Awards be abolished. However, the Auroras are fan-administered awards, and surely it would be inappropriate, as well as unnecessarily belligerent, to suggest to the fans that the categories that recognize their own valuable contributions to Canadian SF be eliminated. Indeed, I believe that pro writers should publicly endorse the existence of the fan awards.

However, it is also true that many publications which might give publicity to the professional award winners will be confused, daunted, or simply turned off by the fan awards. Every year, the Aurora committee sends a press release to many places listing all the winners; every year it is ignored except by *Locus*. Last year, I sent a press release on my own listing only the pro winners; *The Globe and Mail* gave it prominent coverage, and it was also mentioned in *The Toronto Star* and *Maclean's*.

So, while the fan awards should continue, I do believe that the pro community — perhaps through SF Canada — should undertake to send out its own press releases to media outlets that specialize in books, listing only the professional-category nominees and winners.

THE "OTHER" CATEGORY

The "Other" category has caused a great deal of consternation because of the inability to meaningfully compare the disparate works in this category. There's also a problem with the underlying assumption that every work, no matter how unusual or offbeat, should be eligible to compete for an award.

For instance, while it's true that "Out of this World" was the best exhibition ever at the National Library of Canada on the topic of Canadian SF, it's also equally true that it was the worst exhibition ever at the National Library of Canada on the topic of Canadian SF. Does a unique event deserve an award? How can it possibly compete for one, if it's the only event of its kind?

I believe the "Other" category should be confined to works that

collect short fiction and/or poetry: chapbooks, anthologies, single-author collections, and magazines. These forms are all sufficiently similar to make reasonable comparison possible.

LIMITING NOMINATIONS

In 1996, it took just three nominations to become a finalist for the “Best Long-Form Work in French” and “Best Short-Form Work in French” categories, and just two — perhaps the nominee and his/her significant other — to become a finalist in the “Best Other Work in French” category. Indeed, one of the works that made it to the ballot with only two nominations had two authors — it’s entirely possible that the authors themselves, and no one else in all of Canada, were the only ones to nominate it. These paltry numbers cheapen the Aurora awards, and bespeak an indifference on the part of Francophone voters to the Auroras.

An aggressive stance would be to recommend that the French Auroras be abolished; after all, there already exists a separate series of French-Canadian SF awards, the *Prix Boreal*.

A more conciliatory stance might be to suggest that a minimum number of nominators, and a minimum number of nominations, be required for an Aurora to be presented in any given category. I feel that an Aurora category be declared vacant if fewer than 20 nominating ballots (from 20 different people) contain at least one nomination in that category.

In addition, I suggest that a minimum of ten nominations be required to be named an Aurora finalist, and that any category with fewer than three finalists be declared vacant for the current year. Finally, any category that has been declared vacant for three consecutive years should be removed permanently from the Aurora ballot, only to be reinstated by the normal CSFFA process for adding new categories.

To further reinforce the special significance of Aurora nominations, only two-way ties for last place on the final ballot should be accepted. If there’s a tie for fifth place on the final ballot between three or more works or individuals, none of the works should be included on the final ballot. It should be a real honour to be an Aurora finalist, not something that practically everyone working in that category receives.

TERMINOLOGY AND CATEGORIZATION

The professional Aurora Awards are currently awarded as follows:

Best Long-Form Work in English
Best Short-Form in English
Best Other Work in English
Best Long-Form Work in French
Best Short-Form in French
Best Other Work in French

These arcane names are awkward and unmemorable. Never has the “long-form work” winner been anything other than a novel; the long-form category should be renamed “Best Novel.”

Poetry should still be allowed to compete in the “short-form work” category, but this category should be renamed to simply “Best Short Work in English/French.”

And, assuming the suggestion I made earlier is adopted, the best “Other” category should be renamed “Best Collective Work.”

NEW CATEGORIES

Periodically, new Aurora categories are suggested. Among those put forth recently include best graphic novel, best TV show or movie, best poem, and best web site — many presumably with separate French and English trophies to be presented. I believe there already are too many Aurora Awards; adding more simply cheapens the value

of each one. However, when a new category is proposed, I believe the proposer should be required to put forth mock ballots listing full slates of credible nominees for the previous three years in the suggested category: if five truly award-calibre works cannot be found in each of the preceding three years in a proposed award category, clearly there is insufficient quality work being done in that area in Canada to justify an annual competitive award for it.

THE TWO-YEAR ELIGIBILITY RULE FOR NOVELS

Currently, novels are eligible for two years. However, there’s a proposal that may be ratified this year that will prohibit any work from making the final ballot in two different years.

Although, at first blush, not letting works be on the ballot twice seems reasonable, it in fact invites strategic nominating: an author of a 1998 paperback original knowing that he might have to compete against the 1998 paperback reprint of a 1997 hardcover bestseller might encourage friends to nominate the competing work in 1997 so that it gets on the ballot then, thus eliminating it from competition the following year. There’s already enough manipulation going on as is; this proposal simply invites more.

Further, as Aurora Awards official Dennis Mullin points out, the proposed amendment takes the crazy position that the sixth-best novel of 1997 should get another chance in 1998 (because only the top five novels made the 1997 ballot), but the second-best novel of 1997 doesn’t deserve another chance in 1998 (because it lost in 1997).

Although the current unrestricted two-year eligibility system has its flaws, I believe it should be retained *as is* or eliminated altogether.

RESIDENCY REQUIREMENTS

I believe only Canadian-resident authors should be eligible for the Aurora Awards; the idea of California’s William Shatner winning one for a Tek novel strikes me as madness, and the list of eligible works is already long enough without padding it with books by Joel Rosenberg or Gordon Dickson. Residency should be defined as at least six months of living in Canada in the two years preceding publication of the work in question. As Dave Duncan points out, giving an Aurora to an American resident who wrote his or her book in the States is as silly as giving Dave a Scottish Award.

TIMING OF THE AWARDS CEREMONY

The Aurora Awards have been presented at various times throughout the year. Because of the need for reasonable nominating and voting periods, and to give works published in December a fair chance, it seems to me that the Auroras should never be presented earlier than April 15.

FOUNDATION AWARDS

The Aurora Awards have achieved major national and international recognition. This has been hard-fought, over a period of sixteen years. No other country has two major SF awards (the assertion that the United States has both the Hugo and the Nebula is spurious: the Hugo is an international award, presented by the members of the annual World Science Fiction Convention, which in this decade has been or will be held in locales as diverse as Winnipeg, Manitoba; Glasgow, Scotland; and Melbourne, Australia; and which in all years has broadly based international voting).

The Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Foundation proposes creating a second, juried English-Canadian award. This will undermine the credibility of the Auroras and confuse the public. I believe writers should at the very least refrain from supporting the effort to establish a second Canadian SF award, and I would prefer to see an outright condemnation of this well-intentioned but misguided idea. *

SCIENCE

On Androids, Cloning, and the Afterlife

by J. Brian Clarke

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These are subjects close to my heart. Not only are they controversial and therefore interesting, they add infinite grist to the writer's mill.

The recent news about the cloned sheep Dolly, and the possibility even human beings can be duplicated by other than "natural" means, has raised issues many people would rather not consider, although for some it confirms the atheistic dogma that there is no God, life is just a chemical accident, and the universe is nothing but a humongous clock running down toward oblivion.

All I can say about that depressing philosophy, is that it is another example of not being able to see the forest for the trees — a kind of intellectual myopia.

OK, so our bodies are biological machines. We have a pretty good idea how they work, what wears out, what can be replaced and what can be fixed. At the same time we still know very little about the brain — that infinitely complex colloidal computer which houses the mysterious entity defined by the all-encompassing statement: "I think. Therefore I am." Whatever that entity is; soul, sense of self or whatever, it seems to exist apart from the brain as a computer operator exists apart from his machine, and — like the operator — continues to exist after the computer is junked. Many writers have tackled this possibility in a strict secular fashion, most recently Robert J. Sawyer in his award-winning novel *The Terminal Experiment*.

So if we build a computer as complex as the human brain, can that computer become aware of itself — in effect hosting its own "ghost in the machine"? This again has attracted the attention of writers, who have great fun asking "what is a person?", and then answering it. A favourite of many *Star Trek* fans is the Next Generation episode "The Measure of a Man," in which a scientist seeks to have Lieutenant Commander Data declared "property," so our favourite android can become subject to experimentation and ultimate disassembly. That futuristic episode is in many ways a reminder of our not-so-distant historical past, in which slaves and even women were considered property.

In written fiction, this is far from being a new idea. *Tales of Hoffmann* tells of a poet who is seduced by a female simulacrum. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is almost a literary cliché. Less known but equally as important is Karel Capek's 1920 play *R.U.R.* (Rossum's Universal Robots), which not only tells how artificial beings ultimately supplant mankind, but introduced the word "robot" into the language.

In the real world, computers have been created to serve mankind. In the foreseeable future, the descendants of those computers may be self-aware entities who are more our partners than servants. So what is so illogical about mankind itself being "created" by a higher form of intelligence? It is a scenario which is certainly not exclusive to the Book of Genesis. In Robert Heinlein's *Job: A Comedy of Justice*, for instance, there is a hierarchy of universes in which the Creator is subject to an even higher being — and so on, ad infinitum. A subclass of that genre postulates an infinite series of parallel universes in which all possibilities co-exist (this is my favourite).

Dogma imposes a straitjacket on the imagination. Although it may be comforting to subscribe to a belief system which lays out everything in black and white — how to live, who is wrong and who is right, what books to read and what books to ban, what you must do to enter Heaven and avoid eternal damnation, etc., etc. — these are rules which impose such a joyless existence, it is small wonder there are fanatics who are willing to sacrifice themselves and their victims so

they can enter a better, less-restrictive world. In the eleventh century, Hasan ibn-al-Sabbath supposedly created a beautiful garden staffed by gorgeous willing females. After a brief sojourn in what they were told was a true vision of the afterlife, men were willing to die as members of Hasan's infamous sect of "Assassins."

Yet whatever the next world is or is not, we live in *this* world and should make the most of it. A writer's function is to hold up a mirror to our world, enabling a reader to examine it as it is, as it was, as it could be, or as it may be. And if the writer still wants to tackle what is beyond, why not? Because no one (apparently) has returned to describe the afterlife, perhaps any work on the subject deserves a title before it is written —

The Last Adventure. *

CONVENTION NEWS

1997 CanVention

Primedia '97 in Toronto has been designated the 1997 Canadian National Science Fiction and Fantasy Convention ("the CanVention"). This year's Aurora Awards will be presented at this convention, and the 1997 Annual General Meeting of SF Canada will take place there.

Primedia will be held October 31 to November 2, 1997, at the Holiday Inn Markham (note new hotel), 7095 Woodbine Ave., just north of Toronto. Rooms are \$85 per night (single or double). For reservations, call 1-800-HOLIDAY or (905) 474-0444.

Although Primedia has a large film and TV component, it has always included considerable literary programming, as well. Author Guests of Honour this year are Garfield and Judith Reeves-Stevens.

The Auroras will be presented at 8:00 p.m. Saturday, November 1, following a banquet in honour of the nominees.

Convention memberships are \$25 until September 30; \$35 at the door. Cheques payable to Primedia, 1403-33 King Street, Suite 1403, Weston, ON M9N 3R7; include SASE for reply. Phone: (905) 820-3844. Web site: <http://www.interlog.com/~kcozens/primedia/>. *

FICTION SHOWCASE

Post Toast

by Spider Robinson

Copyright © 1996 by Spider Robinson

First ever print publication!

Originally posted to alt.callahans on 24 March 1996
Forthcoming in The Callahan Chronicles (Tor)

Jake Stonebender, proprietor of Mary's Place (spiritual successor to Callahan's Place), has been making music with Zoey and Fast Eddie for over an hour, and his fingers are shot. "Tom," he calls out to the man behind the stick, "Bring me a double!"

Tom Hauptman grins. "Sure thing, Boss," he says. Then, oddly, he turns on his heel and leaves the room, walks through the bead curtain into the back — into Jake and Zoey's living quarters. Jake stares after him in puzzlement.

A moment later Tom emerges with a companion. Tall, unreasonably thin, long of hair and reasonably sanitary of beard, thick glasses, Beatle boots, otherwise clad in an odd mixture of L.L. Bean and The Gap, with long fingers, a splendid guitar around his neck and a vaguely alarming gleam in his eye. He is, in short, a reasonable facsimile of Jake.

"You *did* ask for a double," Tom says, straightfaced, and the bar bursts into thunderous laughter and applause.

"Spider Robinson!" Jake cries. "By da t'underin' Jesus, it's good to see you, mate!"

"Right back at you, bro," says Spider. "Hi, Zoey. Hi, Eddy — Doc — Drink — everybody . . ."

There is a merry rumble of welcome. "What brings you back to Long Island, pal?" Long-Drink McGonnigle calls out. "If you don't mind my asking," he adds hastily, as Fast Eddie stirs on his piano stool.

"I came to give you all a speech, and a toast, and a song," Spider says solemnly, and a respectful silence falls. Tom Hauptman is already pouring the Bushmill's 1608. Spider takes it, walks around the bar and strides up to the chalk line on the floor, faces the crackling hearth. He holds up his shot and looks through it at the fire for a long moment, seems lost in thought. Then he lowers it, untasted, and turns to the assembled witnesses.

"As most of you know," he says, "I come from what Admiral Bob calls a different 'fiction' — a different dimension, a different reality — than this one. My reality is adjacent to and congruent to and very similar to yours, but different. For example, in the 1996 that I come from, the Beatles just put out two new singles."

(rumbles of astonishment and profound envy from all sides)

"With help from Mike Callahan, I visit this fiction once every few years, and get Jake there stoned, and transmute what he tells me about you into stories that I publish as science fiction back in my own fiction. I get to support a family without owning a necktie, and Jake gets the free reefer and someone to listen to him talk: like breastfeeding, the relationship is mutually satisfactory, so much that it has endured for two dozen years.

"So in my fiction, there are a lot of people who have the preposterous idea that I *invented* all of you, that you are all just figments and figwoments of my imagination. To be honest, I haven't done much to dissuade them — because anybody who could think up people like *you* rummies would have to be one hell of a story-teller."

(sounds of raucous agreement from the patrons)

"Well, I recently learned that, to humble me, God created yet another fiction, which is adjacent and congruent and similar to my own, yet different — called USENET — and in *that* fiction, some people seem to have the idea that Spider Robinson is a fictional character *they* invented. They're apparently engaged in rewriting me as I speak, patting me into shape. I only recently got the word: some of them hipped me, and kept it up 'til I finally heard them.

"I'm not complaining: it serves me right. Talk about poetic justice! And they're not even doing a bad job, so far, if you ask me: they actually make me sound pretty interesting. Did you know, for instance, that Robert Heinlein once saved my life? I hadn't . . ."

"But I didn't come here to boast. I came here to tell you all that the seed you used me to plant in my fiction has metastasized . . . to another.

"The denizens of this world called USENET, see, were kind of like Jubal Harshaw's proverbial editor and his soup. Having invented a sci-fi writer named Spider, they decided they liked some of his stories enough to make them real. So, 7 or 8 years ago, they did.

"That's right, jadies and lentilmen: they whipped up their own Callahan's Place, out of thin air! It's called alt.callahans . . ."

(a *roar* of astonishment and confusion and glee and outrage and disbelief . . . which finally morphs into a long rolling wave of laughter . . . followed by another . . . and another)

"Now, I know what many of you want to hear about. You want me to tell you all the countless little ways their Callahan's Place is different from the one you lot used to drink in, and from Mary's Place here. And there are a lot of differences, and maybe we can talk about them another time. But the things I want to tell you first — the most important things — are the ways their Callahan's Place is *like* yours."

"Do they make rotten puns there?" Doc Webster calls.

"Do dey make music dere?" Fast Eddie asks.

"Do they drink there?" Long-Drink bellows.

"Do they smash their glasses in the fireplace?" Tommy Janssen asks, and the rumble of the crowd indicates that he has come closest so

far to a good question.

"None of that is really important," Jake Stonebender says, meeting Spider's eye. "What about the *important* stuff, Spider? Did they get *that* right?"

The room falls silent.

Slowly, enjoying the suspense, Spider lets his poker face relax into a crooked smile.

"As far as I can tell, they *did*, Jake. At alt.callahans they believe that shared pain is diminished, and that shared joy is increased, just like here. They believe that a snoopy question merits a mild concussion. They help the ones that hurt and make merry with the ones that don't."

(stunned silence in Mary's Place)

"They care about one another, there, 24-7. They don't make any magical claims, but they seem to have compassion by the carload, and they value kindness over hipness. And they use a system of communication that's startlingly like the telepathy you folks are shooting for here. Oh, there's a social disease rampant in their world with a horrid symptom called 'flaming' — but they suffer far less from it than just about anywhere else in their fiction. First-time visitors are not called the 'n-word' there, for instance, as is customary elsewhere. Just like here, alt.callahans seems to be a place where it's All Right To Be Bright, where it's All Right To Be Dull, where it's all right to be any damn thing at all except a pain in the ass. You know the Invisible Protective Shield around this place? The magic force field that keeps out the bikers and dealers and predators and drinking alcoholics and kids looking to raise hell? Well, they've got one too, called a Sysop.

"And yes, they make exceedingly rotten puns there. And some splendid music. And they tell toxic jokes. Don't tell anybody, but I've already pinched a couple."

Doc Webster clears his throat. "Uh . . . how big a joint are we talking about, Spiderman?"

Spider grins. "Nobody knows. This USENET fiction is a truly weird universe, a snake's orgy of nodes and channels and webs and threads, and as far as I know there is no truly accurate census, and alt.callahans runs all through it like kudzu . . . and branches off from there to *another* fiction called — you won't believe this one! — The Web. But the best guess I heard was, well in excess of 61,000 people are regular patrons. It's said to be in the top one percent of bars there, by size, and furthermore to be damn near the only one in the top two percent that doesn't have topless bottomless waitresses and a live donkey show. *This* Callahan's Place probably couldn't be destroyed by *fifty* nukes, all going off at once."

(a vast collective intake of breath nearly extinguishes the fire in the hearth)

"Put it this way," Spider says. "In January of 1995 — their 1995 — these people exchanged more words than I have written about you bozos in two dozen years of doing so for my living. Six and a half *megabytes*."

"What kind of words?" Jake asks.

Spider nods. "Good question. I reached into a pile of their traffic at random and pulled out a message. Someone I didn't know was talking to someone else I didn't know, who was in the end stage of leukemia. He said, 'You are about to go on a wonderful journey through space and time with Mike Callahan and the gang.' He said, 'I envy you the trip.' He said, 'Save me a seat by the hearth, my friend . . .' He . . . I . . . it was . . ." Spider falls silent. His jaw muscles ripple, and he pokes around behind his glasses with a knuckle. "Five deaths, so far," he manages. "And some births . . . and God knows how many weddings . . ." He shakes his head. "And some of the *worst* goddam jokes I ever . . ."

"Hully fuckin' Jesus Christ, *we done it!*" Fast Eddie cries.

"We broke the membrane," Suzy Maser murmurs, thunderstruck.

"Through the Looking Glass . . ." her co-wife Suzi breathes.

"Spider's right," Doc Webster rumbles. "We've metastasized."

"We're loose among the fictions," Long-Drink McGonnigle says with most uncharacteristic sobriety. "We're fucking literally out of this world!"

"All that pain diminishing," Zoey says softly.

"All dat joy increasin'," Fast Eddie adds just as softly.

Jake, with the air of someone quoting scripture, says, “‘God,’ he cries, dying on Mars, ‘we made it!’ . . .” and everyone in the room (recognizing the tagline of a Theodore Sturgeon story famous in nearly every fiction) nods.

Suddenly a spontaneous ovation occurs, a consensual roar of joy and glee and hope and pride that rocks the rafters, shakes the walls, rattles the glasses behind the bar and makes a cloud of sawdust rise from the floor. People fall on each other and hug and laugh and sob and pound each other’s back and pour beer over one another. Jake and Tom were off the mark the instant it began, from sheer instinct, and barely in time: as the blizzard of empty glasses begins to fall on the fireplace, they are busy passing out full ones.

Which reminds everybody that Spider said he has a toast to make. Which reminds them that maybe Spider has more on his mind than just making them feel good. Slowly, hesitantly, the noise dwindles, until the room is more or less silent again.

“So,” Zoey says, “how do *you* feel about all this, Spider? If you don’t mind my asking?”

“Well,” Spider says slowly, “I came here tonight because I didn’t know the answer to that myself. I figured one of you would probably ask me sooner or later, and I know I can’t lie to one of you, so I expected to get my answer here . . . and I have. The answer is, it beats the living shit out of me.”

“What do you *think* of the joint?” Long-Drink asks.

“Dunno, Drink. I’ve never been there in my life.”

“Jump back!” the Drink says. “Why not?”

“Well, basically, you need a good Ficton-Twister to get there. A Ficton-Twister is a highly evolved descendant of the typewriter, and the one I own after twenty-three years of writing science fiction for a living, a Mac II, just isn’t powerful enough to pierce the membrane, as the Doc puts it. I couldn’t get to USENET if I walked all day. The data I was given about alt.callahans amount to a time-lapse film of a couple of years that takes half an hour to watch: you can’t evaluate a place on evidence like that.”

“But what’s your first impression?” Zoey prods. “How does it make you *feel*?”

Spider is slow to answer. Slowly it dawns on those present that for the first time in memory, Spider Robinson is having difficulty finding the right words.

“I feel,” he says finally, “like a man who’s just learned that he has a grown son he never knew existed, by a lady long-forgotten . . . no, a whole *herd* of grown children, with grown grandchildren with kids of their own. He can’t claim the privileges of paternity, because he only meant to entertain the lady, and he wasn’t there when the diapers were full, or the tuition was due — but nonetheless he feels warm and proud, whether he has any real right to or not.” Jake and Zoey exchange a glance. “I . . . put it this way: I feel less useless than usual, lately.”

“Does it bother you that some of them don’t seem to know you from Adam’s off ox — or care?” Merry Moore asks.

Spider grins. “That part fucking *delights* me. The only kind of church I’d be willing to duck into to get out of a driving rain would be one where some of the congregation are a little vague on the Prophet’s actual name, and it’s all right to call him an asshole out loud, but the goddam *doctrine* itself somehow got preserved. I would rather those people remember ‘Shared pain is lessened; shared joy is increased; thus do we refute entropy’ than remember the name of the first idiot to say it. My interest in being worshipped approaches zero . . . from *beneath*.” He looks thoughtful, and sighs through his untouched drink at the dancing flames again. “I admit I do feel just a tad like Moses, camped outside a suburb of the Promised Land, watching his name get misspelled in the history books.” Suddenly he giggles and lowers his glass, rescued as always by his sense of humour. “Then again, that happens in my *own* books, sometimes.”

“Hell, Spider,” Jake says, “I got an idea. You say somebody there hipped you to the place. So you can send them a letter, right?”

“Yeah, sort of. I can e-mail folks who can pass the file through the membrane.”

“So why don’t you write and tell them all about your next Tor Books hardcover about us, *Callahan’s Legacy*? You know, the one

about the night Buck Rogers walked in and started setting hundred dollar bills on fire. Or tell ’em about the hardcover omnibus of your first three Callahan books that Tor will bring out shortly after that. Hell, tell them about the complete list of your books posted in the Compuserve SFLit Forum. If that many people bought a book or two apiece, you could afford a better Ficton-Twister, right?”

Spider shrugs. “I’d like to, Jake. For one thing, I hear there’s some confusion over there about the NON-Callahanian book that just came out, the Baen paperback called *Deathkiller*; I’d like to tell them it’s a combined reissue of 2 related out-of-print novels called *Mindkiller* and *Time Pressure*, slightly revised and updated; and I’d love to explain to them how the story “God Is An Iron” originally grew to become the former of those, and why both books *belong* together; and I’d like to let them know that I’m presently working on a third novel in that fiction called *Lifehouse*. I could mention the computer-game version of Callahan’s Place coming soon from Legend Entertainment, too. I might even remind them that anyone in the world who wants to bother can, for less than the cost of a single hardcover, become a nonattending member of the World SF Convention, and nominate and vote for the annual Hugo Award, thereby strongly influencing the course of modern sf and the income of the winning writers . . . and that even a man with three Hugos could always use a few more. (Ask my friend Harlan.) But there are two problems . . .

“First, they might take all that for an attempt to ‘post a commercial message on USENET.’ This violates a stringent fiction-wide taboo, roughly equivalent to defecating in public after ingesting a prune stew, and punishable by ‘public flaming’ (which I will not describe, but I hear it’s worse than public phlegming) and ‘spamming’ (enough said).

“And second of all, even if they *want* to hear about that stuff . . . suppose I *did* clear enough to buy myself a Ficton-Twister that’ll run System 7, and a whole new whack of compatible software . . . pardon me, I mean, ‘enough magic’ . . . why, if that happened, I’d feel obliged to visit alt.callahans with my new rig and say thanks, and then they’d all know my interworld address. Have you ever tried to answer mail from 61,000 people?”

(a rumble of apprehension as the magnitude of Spider’s problem begins to dawn)

“Even if one percent of ’em were interested enough to bother,” he goes on, “that’s enough man-hours to eat up all the profit 61,000 sales would bring in, right there. Say I only hear from one *tenth* of one percent, and not one of those is a chump: 61 interesting letters a day. The nicest form-response I could design would disappoint or offend many of them — and that’s not even the problem.

“The problem is that I would *love* to answer each one personally and at length, spend every waking minute of every working day chatting with friendly strangers who believe that shared pain is lessened and shared joy is increased, who like to swap compassion and villainous puns, who tolerate the weird, who help each other through real life and real death . . . and who in many cases happen to be familiar with and/or friendly toward my lifework. I had a friend once named Milligram Mulligan — surely dead, by now — who said that the first time he heard the *term* ‘speed freak,’ before he had any idea what that lifestyle entailed, he knew It Was Him. Well, the drug alt.callahans was designed to mate perfectly with my own endorphin receptors. I can easily see myself disappearing up my own anus, (virtually) partying away the hours . . .

“ . . . and never publishing another fucking word. Not the Callahan/Lady Sally/Mary’s Place stuff, and not the other fifty percent of what I write, alone and with Jeanne, which is just as good and just as important to me — and hopefully to some percentage of the literate public.

“Even worse, the problem is not limited to USENET. My sister-in-law Dolly tells me *another* Callahan’s Place, smaller but just as cool, recently coalesced in a fiction called AOL . . .

“I hear the Siren call, and my heart aches to heed it . . . but I have a family to feed, and rent to pay, and debt to service, and a deep primordial completely eco-irresponsible compulsion not to rest until the last tree on my earth has been hacked down, sliced into strips, and stained with graffiti of my composition. Gaea forgive me . . .”

"I'm a vegetarian, myself," Long-Drink remarks. "I don't give a damn about animals." He grins sadiistically. "But *I hate* plants . . ."

Ignoring him magnificently, Jake says, "Then there's only one thing to do, Spider."

Spider looks alert. (One of his better impressions.)

Zoey says it for her old man. "You gotta write them one long letter, with no return address. You gotta tell 'em that you love 'em and that you're grateful to 'em and that you wish 'em all well. Tell 'em they make you feel proud and humble and awed and gratified all at the same time, and make sure they know they're never gonna be far from your thoughts as long as you live . . . and maybe ask 'em while they're busy rewriting you to remember that you always tried to be kind to your characters."

(sustained rumble of agreement, at which Spider blushes)

"And you gotta tell them," Tanya Latimer says, "that *we* love them, too, and that we thank them for making us all feel just a little bit less superfluous . . . for making us feel that all our struggles and trials have been *worth* something, have *meant* something . . . even if it's only to people in another world. I don't know about anybody else here, but I —" She catches herself. "No, I *do* know about everybody else here. We're all gonna sleep *good* tonight . . ."

(louder rumble of agreement)

"You have to tell them everything you just told us," Doc Webster said, "and make them a quick toast or two . . . and then tap-dance out the door and go back to work."

(rumble graduates to table-thumping)

"He's right," Jake calls. "Hell, you don't visit US more than every other year or so, and you're always gone as soon as you fill up a floppy. And God knows you're always welcome when you do show. You're the kind of pal, it's okay if a few years slip by."

(thumping becomes cheer)

Spider stands a little straighter, and for a moment looks both older and younger than 47. "Thank you, Jake. Thank you all. As it happens, your advice is exactly my plan." He produces a tape recorder from thin air. "All this is going to be transcribed and sent to alt.callahans, along with a sample chapter from *Callahan's Legacy*. I just felt like it was time I connected you both, this fiction and that one, directly — if only by proxy. Well, anyway, the job is done, so the only thing left to do is make my toast, and then — by way of thanking you and them for letting me pull on your coat-tail so long — to play you all out with a song."

For the first time, he lifts his glass of Bushmill's, and every glass, mug, flask and jelly jar in the room rises in unison with it. The silence is total.

"To all the Callahan's Places there ever were or ever will be,"

Spider Robinson says, "whatever they may be called — and to all the merry maniacs and happy fools who are fortunate enough to stumble into one: may none of them arrive too late!" And he drains his 1608 in a single draught, and hurls his glass into the precise centre of the hearth, where it explodes with a sound rather like a Macintosh booting up.

"*To all the Callahan's Places!*" everyone in the room choruses, and the fireplace begins to feel like Jupiter did when Shoemaker-Levy came to visit . . .

"Wait, one more," Spider calls. "To the guy who found a manuscript called 'The Guy With The Eyes' in the *Analog* slushpile back in 1972, and decided to buy it, and mentor its author — to one of the best sf writers working today: Ben Bova, without whom all of this would not have been necessary . . ."

And another roar goes up from the throng. "*To Ben Bova!*"

And Spider, his hands both free now, slings his guitar back up into combat configuration. "Now I'll just sing you this quick one and go. Jeanne was out of town for a few weeks, and I missed her, so I wanted to write her a love song. The problem was, we've been married twenty years now: there just *isn't* any way to say 'I love you' that I haven't used already, often. So I produced a song called 'Belaboring The Obvious.'

He hits a bluesy A6 chord, and begins to sing . . . and one can't help but sense the words are more than a little apropos to Spider's situation in all *three* fictions:

BELABORING THE OBVIOUS

by Spider Robinson

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I want to tell you how I feel, love
But it ain't exactly news
Got no secrets to reveal love
But I'm gonna say it anyway,
'cause I'm alone and you're away
I haven't got a blessed thing to lose . . .

(so here goes:)

Water ain't dry, the sky goes up high,
And a booger makes pretty poor glue
You can't herd cats, bacteria don't wear hats
— and I love you

Sugar ain't sour, bread's good with flour
And murder's a mean thing to do
Trees got wood, and fuckin' is pretty good
— and I love you

Yeah, I'm belaboring the obvious:
You will have noticed all the good times
This is as practical an exercise
As taping twenty cents to my transmission
so that any time I want to
I can shift my pair o' dimes . . .

(but God knows:)

Goats don't vote, and iron don't float
And a hippy don't turn down boo
Dog bites man, the teacher don't understand
— and I love you

Sickness sucks, it's nice to have bucks
And the player on first base is Who
Kids grow up, most fellows pee standing up
— and I love you
Guess I didn't need to say it
Just a message that my heart sent
And I kinda like the way it's
More redundant than is absolutely
necessary thanks to the Department
of Redundancy Department . . .
(Division of Unnecessary Repetition and
Pointless Redundancy Division)

(I must close:)

Fun is nice, you can't fry ice,
And the money will always be due
Bullshit stinks, and no one outsits the Sphinx
— and I love you

Livin' ain't bad, and dyin' is sad
And little we know is true
But that's our karma — baby, you can bet the farm
On this: *I do* love you.

And with that, weeping with joy and giggling with sorrow, Spider vanishes back to what he calls reality (what a kidder, that guy), and to his best friend and co-author and oh yes, wife, Jeanne, and their sweet daughter Terri, and life goes on at Mary's Place.

And at alt.callahans, may their shadows be always bent at the elbow . . .

And in

— Vancouver, B.C.

✱