DIFFERENT

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BACKGROUND OF A STORY

By Sam Moskowitz

One of the most common misconceptions of science fiction readers, a heavy proportion of whom are back-seat editors, is that putting out a science fiction magazine (or almost any other magazine, for that matter) is a simple matter of selecting the appropriate stories by Robert A. Heinlein, Ray Bradbury, Theodore Sturgeon, Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, A. E. van Vogt, or Philip Jose Farmer, which arrive in every morning's mail, in a variety of lengths to make balancing an issue easy and already marked up for the printer. It never was that way, and it never will be that way.

With a few exceptions, the editor who gets good stories must go out and work for each one of them, frequently supplying the plot, nursing the writer through mental blocks, breaking company rules on payment, and making sure that when all the work is completed the author doesn't have a lapse of memory and ship it off to a competitor by mistake.

When I was editing Science-Fiction Plus, possibly the best story we published was "Death of a Sensitive," by Harry Bates, which led off our May 1953 number and was later anthologized in a somewhat revised form in Editor's Choice in Science Fiction (The McBride Co., 1954). Harry Bates was the first eiitor of Astounding Stories of Super Science (January 1930 to March 1933), co-author of the popular Hawk Carse series under the pen name of Anthony Gilmore in that same magazine, author of "Farewell to the Master" (Astounding Science Fiction, October 1940), from which the motion picture "The Day the Earth Stood Still" (Fox, 1951) was derived, and the author of a small but extremely effective number of science fiction stories, including "A Matter of Size," "Alas, All Thinking," and "The Triggered Dimension."

I am presenting here the correspondence between myself and Harry Bates which led to the writing and publishing of "Death of a Sensitive." I might say that the reason for selecting this example was that it was one of the simplest cases of the lot. My files on most of the others show an unbelievable exchange per story, frequently more wordage in correspondence than in story. Not shown here are the luncheons, special visits, office conferences which accompanied these letters. Another reason is that there is virtually nothing of a personal nature involved. Nevertheless, reading between the lines, the sciencefictioneer may discern a good deal of special information, not only about the problems involved in getting a story, but sidelights on running a magazine, the background of Harry Bates, and publishing methodology.

Sam Moskowitz
127 Shephard Ave.
Newark 8, N. J.
Oct. 1, 1952

Mr. Harry Bates
207 Eighth Ave.
N. Y. 11, N. Y.

Dear Mr. Bates:-

To refresh your memory, I last wrote you on Jan. 19, 1952, c/o Greenberg: Publishers to invite you down to a meeting of The Eastern Science Fiction Association. I am writing you again for a reason as strongly scientifictional but more business-like.

I have recently interested a publisher in producing a science fiction publication of a high-type in format and story policy. I am sworn to secrecy on even the matter of the publisher's name, for the time being. It seems that this is standard procedure among publishers in a field where ideas are often "copied" prematurely. However, our title has been registered, our cover painted, our format designed, and we are ready to go on all but stories. Due to the need for secrecy I am contacting relatively few authors for stories, and hoping for a high percentage of usable work. I emphasize the fact that our magazine will be a "prestige" publication because I realize that you do not have to write for a living and that other factors besides money (important as it is) would be a consideration to you.

I do not have to proceed to any length to repeat in what high regard I hold the mean-average quality of the science fiction that you have done. You will recall from my past letter that I remember every one of your stories as stand-outs. You may not be prolific, but you are certainly one of the most proficient writers to ever dabble in the science fiction field. For this reason I would greatly like to have something by you in our pages. If you have done or are doing something I would certainly like to see it. If you have something on hand I would be interested in seeing it, and I would certainly be enthusiastic if this letter could inspire you to sit down and write something for us.

Our minimum rate is two cents a word. This means that we pay an automatic bonus rate for stories we consider outstanding, ranging up to three cents a word and promptly upon acceptance. We buy only magazine rights; all other rights are retained by the author.

For the time being, send any manuscripts to my home address above. I would greatly appreciate it if you would keep the matter confidential as well.

We will probably go to press fast, not too many weeks from now. I hope I shall see something from you by then.

Best regards,

/s/ Sam Moskowitz

207 Eighth Avenue
New York 11, N. Y.
October 5, 1952

Sam Moskowitz
127 Shephard Avenue
Newark 8, N. J.

Dear Mr. Moskowitz:

You of course know about the amazing results of the work of Rhine and others, but perhaps too, you are something of a sensitive (medium), as I seem to be. For you write me your letter only a day or two after I started to write a story (for the first time in ten years), and one on the psi effect (telepathy, etc.) at that!

I think for a time I shall have to write a series of short stories, one every two months or thereabouts. There are two markets with 3 cent minimums, at least one of which I should nearly always hit, and no doubt there are others at which I could arrange that rate to start. I think it would be a small break for the editor who used my first story after this long interval. I had intended to show the first story elsewhere, but you have been so enterprising and flattering that I intend to send it to you. Note, however, that I will not sell it for less than 3 cents per.

I have always hated to write, and never have written anything under my name except in considerable haste and need of money; and I have never worked on any other stories except in haste to fill up a recurring monthly vacuum in the old AS /Astounding Stories/. (In the beginning, AS had to get along without any choice from a group of competent writers; there just weren't any writers; I had to rewrite or drastically edit everything that was used.) The stories under my own name I made just good enough to be certain of sale; I was surprised to find the shorter ones appear in anthologies. Usually I made sure the story line was good -- but the individual sentences! Woo! Now, as a result of that, I feel somewhat self-conscious about returning to new writing, so I'll have to put in more time on each story.

I expect to have the current short finished in a week. I keep being interrupted.

Regards,

/s/ Harry Bates

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Sam Moskowitz
127 Shephard Ave.
Newark 8, New Jersey
Oct. 7, 1952

Dear Mr. Bates:

I was indeed pleased to learn that you were not alone considering, but had actually started work on, a new science fiction story. I find

it hard to believe, however, that such stories as "Alas, All Thinking," "Farewell to the Master," and "A Matter of Size" were written without effort. They were simply too good.

As you seem to realize, subsidiary rights today can sometimes be more important financially than the initial sale of the story, since there is so much reprinting going on. I wish to emphasize that we buy magazine rights only, and that all other rights are retained by you. This is financially very important to the writer in these days.

I will be glad to pay three cents a word for a story up to the customary Harry Bates standard. I hope you will find the time to complete your story soon, and for the time being send it to the above address. If suitable, you will be paid promptly upon acceptance. Our need will be particularly urgent in the next few weeks since, as I may have mentioned, our first issue will probably go to press in a rush.

Again, I would like to emphasize, though for the time being I cannot give you the details, that you will be proud to see your story in the slick, class publication we plan to produce.

I can well imagine that the writers you had to work with in the old Clayton Astounding were far from being polished craftsmen. Quality of writing was certainly not stressed in those days.

A question: In the last issue of Clayton Astounding, you announced a story which was never published, entitled "The Man in the Bottle," by Le Grand Traverse. I understand this is a pen name of some well-known author. I know it is asking a lot of your memory, but do you, at this late date, recall who the author really was, and whether or not it was, as you stated, an outstanding story. The title has always intrigued me, and it is one of my secret ambitions to get a chance to read it.*

Will be looking forward to your story.

Best regards,

/s/ Sam Moskowitz

* * *

Sam Moskowitz
127 Shephard Ave.
Newark 8, N. J.
Oct. 23, 1952

Dear Mr. Bates:-

Just a note of inquiry to check on the progress of your yarn. Though a regular Iron Curtain of secrecy is being maintained on this project, I am now working full-time in a New York office, though receiving and sending my mail from my home address. Not even other members of

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* "Le Grand Traverse" turned out to be a pen name of Victor Rousseau. The story would have been a reprint, first appearing in Harper's, March 1911.

the office staff have the slightest conception of what is going on in the office. I am the immediate wonder, the man of mystery around the office.

If you should want to reach me quickly, my New York phone number is WOrth 4-7518. I am in the office from 9:00 A.M. to 1:00 P.M. and from 2:00 P.M. to 5:00 P.M. every weekday, with the exception of Friday, where for the purposes of office employee-employer conferences I take my lunch hour from 12:00 to 1:00 P.M. I am in the rest of the time, and if this magazine goes to bed soon it wouldn't surprise me to find myself here on Saturdays, as well as taking work home with me.

So far I haven't received a deadline, but I've already bought a number of yarns, and the printer is ready to go, so I am expecting an ultimatum from the powers-that-be at any time.

I'll be looking forward to seeing your yarn.

Best always,

/s/ Sam Moskowitz

* * *

Sam Moskowitz
127 Shephard Ave.
Newark 8, N. J.
Dec. 3, 1952

Dear Mr. Bates:-

Just a bit to let you know that I'm still very much interested in seeing a Bates yarn. I know you've probably been sidetracked by more important factors, but sometimes a note can be the little extra that permits a man to shake himself free.

Our publication will start as a monthly. I have just received our publication schedule, and the first issue should be on general distribution throughout the country on Feb. 9, 1953. I will try to get a copy of the first issue to you well in advance.

Getting suitable material seems to be a problem these days of boom in science fiction. Authors have been trained to a certain school of writing where all they can think about is setting up dictatorship and monarchies encompassing several thousand worlds throughout the galaxy. Galactic empires. There is nothing wrong with that except all they see for the future are cloak-and-daggar intrigues and set-ups which might much more effectively be written into a modern-day story.

With all the great latitude that science fiction offers a writer with imagination, they have grown oblivious to the "wonder" of the elements in science fiction. Everything bores the characters, alien worlds, faster-than-light drive, energy transmission of humans -- all is written into the story between the drinking of cocktails and sophisticated asides. Maybe I'm old-fashioned, but if I want a good western, detective or cloak-and-daggar tale, I still like to read them straight.

Hope I may see something from you soon.

Best regards,

/s/ Sam Moskowitz

* * *

207 Eighth Avenue
New York 11, New York
December 14, 1952

Dear Mr. Moskowitz:

You are very patient. I received about two letters (no, three, I think) which required no answer; but their demand was cumulative, so now I have to write. Since my first contact with you I have written one single hour's worth of junk. That's all. I have enormous resistances to writing this stuff, as I have told you. Now, after a vacation of ten years, it seems to be even worse. In this matter I have no will power at all.

You will be pleased to hear, however, that my financial position, desperate a month or two ago, is now doubly desperate, so that I have to write something. That means beginning tomorrow. And then I'll have to write a second story right away. I know from experience -- thank God -- that when I have a draft on paper the rest is not too bad.

I'm glad to hear you're starting out as a monthly. I don't believe I've congratulated you on promoting yourself this magazine, and I do so now. You must be quite a salesman. There must be ten thousand people in the field who will envy you.

It must be specially hard to start a magazine so secretly. I haven't said a word, as you asked; I haven't even seen a writer since you asked.

There is a social club -- the Hydra Club -- here in New York, composed of editors and writers of sf -- almost all who live hereabouts. They meet once or twice a month. I belong, but rarely go, though the meetings are lively. If you care to, I'll take you sometime.

How right you are in the last two paragraphs of your letter of Dec. 3! It is exactly the way I talked 20 years ago. Naturally I think you are on the right editorial trail. I am a little surprised, I confess. On the strength of your attitude I am going to invite you to stop in and see me sometime any afternoon or night when you have an hour to spare. I'm usually here, but of course you'd better phone first. WA9-2941; it's in the book. Perhaps I can tell you something that may be helpful.

Cordially,

/s/ Harry Bates

The following form requires a bit of explanation. The average story that came in was read by a first reader and then the best of those were forwarded to me. However, in the case of stories by well-known authors or sent as a result of personal solicitation, I performed the first reading. Stories I thought were worth buying or at least considering were forwarded by me to M. Harvey Gernsback, Hugo Gernsback's son, who was Executive Editor. We had a form on which the story was graded and checked for six major considerations. The story was then sent to Hugo Gernsback who read it and rendered a final decision. If I and Harvey Gernsback were in accord, Hugo Gernsback would usually (but not always) give in, generally providing certain changes were made, even if he did not like the story.

In this case, instead of marking the form, Hugo Gernsback dictated a separate letter to his secretary.

Most of his suggestions were not accepted by Harry Bates, though they were discussed at a luncheon at Miller's Restaurant beneath the Woolworth Building. Harry Bates had intended to turn "Death of a Sensitive" into a novel by writing a trilogy. However, the magazine collapsed and without me keeping after him constantly, the sequels were never written. Hugo Gernsback liked this story tremendously.

Harry Bates went on to write another story for Science-Fiction Plus: "The Triggered Dimension" (December 1953). This story, initially entitled "Not Understanding," was much slower paced than "Death of a Sensitive" and was not as good a story. Nevertheless I felt that it was worth publishing, and with an author as difficult to keep writing as Harry Bates, it would have been unwise to reject anything out of hand. Every device had to be employed to encourage him to keep writing. The correspondence on "The Triggered Dimension" was extended and violent between him and Hugo Gernsback, and the diplomacy required on my part to get the story into print transcended the call of duty, but somehow was managed.

On "Death of a Sensitive," I agreed with Gernsback that the title should be changed. I felt the concept was so highly original that Bates was unfairly hurting the story by giving it a derivitive title.

Phelps was the man who copyedited our material for the printer. The manuscript would then go back to me for checking and whatever further editing was required.

TITLE "DEATH OF A SENSITIVE" REC'D Jan. 28, 1953

( ) ACCEPTED _____ (DATE OF LETTER)

AUTHOR Harry Bates (Address on file) ( ) REJECTED _____ (DATE OF LETTER)

NO. OF WORDS 14,900 SUGGESTED RATE PER WORD 3¢

MOSKOWITZ		HARVEY		H.GERNSBACK	
GRADE	A	GRADE	A	ACCEPTED	
ACCEPT	Yes	ACCEPT	X	REJECTED	
REJECT		REJECT		TO PHELPS	

ADDITIONAL ROUTING _____ EDITED BY PHELPS _____ (Date)

EDITORIAL COMMENTS	SM	MHG
(1) Is the story entertaining?	X	Yes
(2) Is its science sound?	?	X
(3) Is it well-written?	extremely	Yes
(4) Is it educational?	?	
(5) Will it make reader think?	Yes	Yes
(6) Does it have original idea?	Yes	Yes

GRADE: (A) B C D

This is so unusual and off-trail a story that it will take guts to run it. I'm sure it would be a smash hit with readers. This is author of "The Day the Earth Stood Still" -- great promotion possibilities.
-- Sam Moskowitz

* * *

M E M O R A N D U M February 2, 1953

TO: Sam Moskowitz
RE: "Death of a Sensitive," by Harry Bates

This is a good story and we can use it. There are, however, a few points which require attention.

First of all, I believe the name, "Death of a Sensitive," is not in keeping with the high level of the story and in any event it's not a good science fiction title. It comes too close to "Death of a Salesman," and the story certainly will not gain by this title.

The story held my interest continuously, but I felt badly let down at the abrupt ending. I appreciate the author's reasons for terminating the story in this manner, but the reaction is wholly negative and will be negative with all readers. I let several other people read the story and in every instance the reaction was exactly the same. As it is now, the story carries no message and leaves too many questions unanswered, all things which irritate the average reader.

I would suggest that the ending be amended, without making any changes whatever in the text itself. The story starts with "I bring you a most urgent message"; the story ends without a real message. Two vague references are made to some other beings -- one right at the start of the story, one at the end -- but nothing is said about what they are, what their purpose is, and why they should not be killed. If, on the other hand, the humans kill them, what happens?

I suggest the following: The reader is aware of the fact that birds wheel around as if by a single intelligence; so do insects. There seems, in other words, to be a communal multiple intelligence which pervades all of the swarm. I would suggest that you use such a swarm, let us say, of microscopic organisms sent to Earth with the purpose of stopping war

wherever it occurs. This message could then be given by the dying man. These micro-organisms normally are invisible, as are virus, but can be seen when a strong sun lights them up, as sun's rays do when falling on dust particles. Thus for pictorial purposes the swarm could be seen, which could be in the form of a disk or some other shape. The message of not killing still would go because conceivably humans could eradicate such swarms by means of deadly gas, flames, etc. The message to the humans would be that whoever starts a war on the planet, the swarm would immediately attack the aggressors, infecting them and putting all combatants out of action for weeks at a time. If the humans knew that such a threat existed, no one would be likely to start a war.

Of course the author could embellish this as desired, and the story would not have to be increased by more than two or three pages at the utmost. This would then give the story a real ending with a purpose, rather than terminating it on a question.

/s/ Hugo Gernsback

Whatever Became

of MARIUS?

December 28, 1952

Mr. Hugo Gernsback

Dear Sir:

You were kind enough to send me a Spanish-issue copy of Sexology, Enero (Jan.) 1953, for which many thanks. However, as I can read but little Spanish, and was interested in Prof. Marc Lanval's article on Ilsa Koch (p. 14), I take the liberty of asking you if there is an English version of this same article. If so, past or yet to come? If past, which issue? I'd like to read it in English. Was proud to see my little piece on incest in the January issue, and may do one soon on pedophilia or necrophilia....

Say, weren't you once editor of the old Amazing Stories? Maybe you will recall the long yarn you published of mine back around 1928-9: "Sixth Glacier," under pen name of Marius (a pen name my father used in Hungarian articles eons ago -- it seems). I still do a bit of fantasy and scientifiction. Had one in Astounding in January issue /"Stamp from Moscow"/.

I used to do a lot without benefit of byline for the now unhappily defunct Haldeman-Julius American Freeman (there'll never be another!) In fact, for the last two years or so of its existence I did one-third to one-half, mostly, however, edited by the inimitable EHJ -- poor soul!

.....

/s/ Steve Benedict
148 Tenth St., Apt. 205
Oakland 7, California